

## V. Catharsis

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We have grown used to feeling—again vaguely—that serious literature is hardly respectable unless it performs some ‘catharsis.’ ‘Catharsis’ has come, for reasons that are not entirely clear, to be one of the biggest of the ‘big’ ideas in the field of aesthetics and criticism, the Mt. Everest or Kilimanjaro that looms on all literary horizons. But all this may be nothing but a self-propagating mirage. Aristotle does not *tell* us that catharsis is so important, that it is the ‘biggest’ idea about tragedy. If it were, we should expect it to be at least mentioned again by name somewhere in the discussion of tragedy. As it is, pity and fear are mentioned repeatedly, and the tragic pleasure three times; catharsis never appears again, by name, after its sudden appearance in chapter 6.<sup>1</sup>

Thus skillfully and boldly Professor Else challenges the traditional position which the term “catharsis” has held in the history of literary criticism. His perceptive remarks compel us to refocus our attention on this critical term in Aristotle’s definition of tragedy.

As Professor Else points out in his analysis, catharsis as one of the “big” ideas in literary criticism has been interpreted in two major ways. The term has been taken to mean either the “purgation” of the emotions of pity and fear from the consciousness of the audience that witnesses the tragedy or as the “purification” in a moral or ethical sense of these emotions.<sup>2</sup> Else shows that both of these views have no basis in the text of the

<sup>1</sup> G. F. Else, *Aristotle’s Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge [Mass] 1957) 443–44.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed survey and evaluation of the various interpretations of catharsis that have been advanced previously by scholars see Else (above, note 1) 225–32, 439–43. Else refers to two works by Heinrich Otte in which are found perceptive discussions of the catharsis question. They are *Kennt Aristoteles die sogenannte tragische Katharsis?* (Berlin 1912) 45–63 and *Neue Beiträge zur Aristotelischen Begriffsbestimmung der Tragödie* (Berlin 1928) 62–78. In pages 64–67 of the latter work evidence for various Platonic interpretations of catharsis is cited. Several of these Platonic usages lend support to the interpretation of catharsis that is presented in this paper.

*Poetics*, but are derived from the use of catharsis in other Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian contexts. Else, intelligently insisting that the *Poetics* should first and foremost be interpreted out of itself, advances the following new interpretation of catharsis:

Thus the catharsis is not a change or end-product in the spectator's soul, or in the fear and pity (i.e., the dispositions to them) in his soul, but a process carried forward in the emotional material of the play by its structural elements, above all by the recognition. For the recognition is the pay-off, to use a vulgar but expressive modernism; or, in more conventional figure, it is the hinge on which the emotional structure of the play turns. The catharsis, that is, the purification of the tragic act by the demonstration that its motive was not *μιαρόν*, is accomplished by the whole structure of the drama, but above all by the recognition.<sup>3</sup>

Else, then, makes catharsis an "operational factor within the tragic structure" rather than the "be-all and end-all of tragedy itself."

We now have three major interpretations of catharsis: "purgation" of emotions;<sup>4</sup> "purification" of emotions; and that process by which the criminal and sinful acts committed by the tragic hero are shown to be pure of guilt, and which thus establishes the conditions under which the emotion of pity may be shown the hero. However, if the term is taken in this last sense, then it also, as Else notes in the case of the interpretations of "purgation" and "purification," would not have been prepared for by the previous development of the argument in the *Poetics*. It is the thesis of this paper that another interpretation of catharsis is possible which will bring it organically into connection with the argument of the *Poetics* that leads up to the use of the term in chapter 6 and will place it in a more effective and intimate relationship with other statements in the *Poetics*.

In our analysis we shall follow Else's sound principle that the *Poetics* should be interpreted out of the *Poetics*, for he has cogently shown the difficulties that arise when we rely on external sources for an interpretation of this term.<sup>5</sup> However, in following the

<sup>3</sup> Else (above, note 1) 439.

<sup>4</sup> The current influence of the "purgation" theory of catharsis may be seen in the papers of Mr. A. M. Quinton and Miss R. Meager in *The Aristotelian Society*, suppl. vol. 34 (1960) 156, 177.

<sup>5</sup> Else (above, note 1) 440-41.

spirit of this requirement, an interpretation of catharsis will be offered in this paper which differs radically both from Else's view and the traditional interpretations of this term.

As Else points out, all of the elements of the formal definition of tragedy which Aristotle gives in chapter 6 have been treated or hinted at previously in the *Poetics*.<sup>6</sup> This is true because all of the elements of the definition which lead up to the final catharsis clause are concerned with what has traditionally been translated as the "object" (ἔτερα), "manner" (ἐτέρως), and "means" (ἐτέροις) of imitation; and these three factors have been discussed in detail in chapters 1-5. Now the catharsis clause comes at the end of the definition, forms its climax, and is clearly distinguished from the discussion of the object, manner and means of imitation. Thus its most logical function in the definition is to indicate some end, purpose or goal of the particular form of imitation which we call "tragedy."<sup>7</sup>

If the catharsis clause indicates, in some sense, the "final cause" of tragedy, we may well make the attempt to determine whether or not elsewhere in the *Poetics* such a final cause is discussed or suggested and then, if this turns out to be the case, to see if it can be brought into harmony with the term "catharsis."

In chapter 1 Aristotle tells us that all poetry is a form of imitation. In chapter 4 he notes that the origin of poetry as well as the reason that mankind values it lies in its character as imitation. For imitation, he indicates, is the way men most naturally learn and learning is naturally pleasant to all men. Aristotle tells us in chapter 4 exactly what this learning consists in: διὰ γὰρ τοῦτο χαίρουσι τὰς εἰκόνας ὁρῶντες, ὅτι συμβαίνει θεωροῦντας μανθάνειν καὶ συλλογίζεσθαι τί ἕκαστον, οἷον ὅτι οὗτος ἐκεῖνος. The act of learning which Aristotle refers to can be most clearly understood to mean the act of inferring, from the particular act witnessed in the artistic presentation, the universal class to which

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of this point see Else (above, note 1) 224.

<sup>7</sup> Else (above, note 1) 439-40 is strongly opposed to taking catharsis as the end or goal of tragedy. He says, "Bernays' own explanation, for all the revolution it brought in the assessment of Aristotle's doctrine as a whole, was at one with the rest in assuming that catharsis is the 'work' or end, the τέλος of tragedy. But Aristotle nowhere says or implies this, even in the definition in chapter 6. He speaks repeatedly of the need for tragedy to arouse pity and fear, and he alludes three times (14. 53b12; 23. 59a21; 26. 62b14) to the special pleasure it is to give; but nowhere is catharsis said or implied to be the τέλος." My reasons for taking a contrary view are presented in the text.

this act belongs.<sup>8</sup> The artist so organizes his work that the spectator is able to infer, from the individual circumstances pictured before him, the universal law which subsumes them. This movement from the particular to the universal involves a learning process in that it renders clearer and more distinct the significance of the events presented in the work of art. For this reason, Aristotle tells us in chapter 4, men take pleasure even in witnessing the representation of unpleasant things such as the forms of the lowest animals and of corpses (we may add also the unpleasant events portrayed in tragedy), since learning and the consequent pleasure of learning occur under these circumstances also. Thus learning is the essential goal of poetry in general. This learning process takes place, we may repeat, when those who view the artistic presentation perceive *ὅτι οὗτος ἐκεῖνος*. This definition of the nature of poetry is extended further in chapter 9 where Aristotle tells us that:

*φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον πόησις ἱστορίας ἐστίν· ἡ μὲν γὰρ πόησις μᾶλλον τὰ καθόλου, ἡ δ' ἱστορία τὰ καθ' ἕκαστον λέγει. ἔστιν δὲ καθόλου μὲν, τῷ ποίῳ τὰ ποῖα ἅττα συμβαίνει λέγειν ἢ πράττειν κατὰ τὸ εἶκος ἢ το ἀναγκαῖον, οὗ στοχάζεται ἡ πόησις ὀνόματα ἐπιτιθεμένη.*

Here we have an explicit statement that the nature of the learning process involved in poetry is that of seeing the relationship between the individual act and the universal law it illustrates. It is clearly indicated that the aim of poetry is to express what is universal in the form of particular or "historical" events. This process of observing or inferring the universal character implied in the individual is the process of learning and is by nature a source of pleasure to mankind. Now in chapter 14 Aristotle tells us that we must not expect every kind of pleasure from tragedy but only that which is appropriate for it:

*οὐ γὰρ πᾶσαν δεῖ ζητεῖν ἡδονὴν ἀπὸ τραγωδίας ἀλλὰ τὴν οἰκείαν. ἐπεὶ δὲ τὴν ἀπὸ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου διὰ μιμήσεως δεῖ ἡδονὴν παρασκευάζειν τὸν ποιητὴν, φανερόν ὡς τοῦτο ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν ἐμποιητέον.*

However, we already know from chapter 4 that the pleasure of poetry in general consists of learning, that is, of proceeding from the particular to the universal. Thus the pleasure of tragedy as a

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of Aristotle's conception of learning see Else (above, note 1) 131-32.

species of poetry must also consist of learning. Tragedy, however, as a division of poetry is defined by Aristotle in both chapters 6 and 14 as concerned, specifically and appropriately, with the pleasure derived from pity and fear. Since tragedy as a species of poetry must involve learning<sup>9</sup> and since, according to Aristotle, it is specifically concerned with pitiful and fearful situations, we must assume that tragedy in some way involves learning about pity and fear. Since learning for Aristotle means proceeding from the particular to the universal, we must also assume that tragedy consists of the artistic representation of particular pitiful and fearful events in such a way that we are led to see the universal laws that make these particular events meaningful. This learning process by which we become aware of the universal law governing the particular pitiful and fearful events that have been presented is, then, the goal and end of tragedy as we can discover it in other sections of the *Poetics* that relate to the formal definition of tragedy given in chapter 6. We must now see how this end or goal relates to the end or goal set for tragedy in this formal definition which we recall is δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν. If either of the traditional views or Else's view of catharsis is accepted, then there is no relation between these two statements of end or goal in the *Poetics*, and the term "catharsis" has not been articulated with the arguments which precede and follow the formal definition of tragedy in chapter 6. The following interpretation of catharsis is presented as one which would organically unite it with the general argument of the *Poetics*.

κάθαρσις, like other nouns in Greek ending in -σις, signifies an activity and means the process of making something καθαρός. The word κάθαρσις itself is not a very common one and is used in a number of unique senses in the extant literature, ranging from the medical use of the term to denote a physical purgation to Socrates' use of the word to describe the separation of the soul from the body.<sup>10</sup> The previous interpreters of catharsis have

<sup>9</sup> Else (above, note 1) 447-50 recognizes that the pleasure of tragedy "is basically intellectual," but he also sees an emotional basis for it as well. My interpretation of catharsis stresses the intellectual aspect of tragic pleasure as primary and any other associated pleasures as secondary.

<sup>10</sup> On this latter usage see H. Skulsky, "Aristotle's *Poetics* Revisited," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 19 (1958) 147-60. He argues that Aristotle uses catharsis in the

limited themselves to two major meanings of the word *καθαρός* in defining the term either as the process of purification or that of purgation. However, there is another meaning of *καθαρός*, associated specifically with its adverbial form *καθαρῶς*, which does not seem to have been investigated in this context but which I would like to suggest is relevant to our understanding of the meaning of the term "catharsis." *LSJ* list under the heading of *καθαρός* a number of uses which are to be translated in the physical sense of "clean" or "clear." From the notion of a landscape being clear of obstruction or of a liquid being clear of admixture or something being free of dirt and thus "clean" it is easy to see how the metaphorical uses of the word to denote purification or purgation could be derived. *LSJ*, however, also list some significant uses of the term *καθαρός* in its adverbial form *καθαρῶς* which mean "clear" not in a physical sense or in any of the derived metaphorical senses that have been mentioned above, but "clear" in the intellectual sense. The following quotations are cited as evidence for this point:

εἰ μέλλομέν ποτε καθαρῶς τι εἶσεσθαι . . .

εἰ γὰρ μὴ οἷόν τε μετὰ τοῦ σώματος μηδὲν καθαρῶς γινῶναι . . .

(Plato, *Phaedo* 66D, E)

μηδὲ τὴν λέξιν ἐπαινεῖν ὡς ἀκριβῶς καὶ καθαρῶς ἔχουσιν . . .

(Isocrates, *Philip* 4)

οὐπώποθ' οὕτω καθαρῶς

οὐδενὸς ἠκούσαμεν . . .

same sense in which Plato used the term in the *Phaedo* and interprets it to mean a "supremely pleasant intuitive perception" or an "untainted perception." Now Plato defines catharsis in the *Phaedo* by having Socrates ask, *κάθαρους δὲ εἶναι ἄρα οὐ τοῦτο συμβαίνει, ὅπερ πάλα ἐν τῷ λόγῳ λέγεται, τὸ χωρίζειν ὅτι μάλιστα ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος τὴν ψυχὴν καὶ ἐθίσαι αὐτὴν καθ'* αὐτὴν πανταχόθεν ἐκ τοῦ σώματος συναγείρεσθαι τε καὶ ἀθροίζεισθαι, καὶ οἰκεῖν κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν καὶ ἐν τῷ νῦν παρόντι καὶ ἐν τῷ ἔπειτα μόνῃ καθ' αὐτὴν, ἐκλυομένην ὥσπερ ἐκ δεσμῶν ἐκ τοῦ σώματος; (67C, D) Catharsis, here, is clearly a purification process by which the soul is freed of the admixture of the body and thus becomes able to contemplate clearly. This process as described in the *Phaedo* is a difficult one, and its pursuit lies specifically in the province of the true philosopher. Catharsis, however, for Aristotle, in whatever way we ultimately interpret it, is an integral part of tragedy; and tragedy is, of course, a branch of poetry. Now poetry is a form of imitation; and imitation, Aristotle tells us, is natural and pleasant to all men and not only to philosophers (1448B, 12-15). Therefore it does not seem possible for catharsis to mean the same thing in the *Poetics* as it does in *Phaedo* 67. It will be argued in this paper that catharsis is a far more commonplace activity than that described by Plato in the terms quoted above.

ὡς ὑπὸ τοῦ μὴ γνῶναι καθαρῶς ὑμεῖς ἐποιήσατ' ἀναλδεῖς.

(Aristophanes, *Wasps* 631-32, 1045)

τὰ μὲν ἀγγέλλεις δείματ' ἀκούειν,

τὰ δὲ θαρσύνεις, κοῦδὲν καθαρῶς.

(Euripides, *Rhesus* 34-35)

In these references we see that the adverb *καθαρῶς* consistently bears an intellectual sense, and this meaning of the word is as easily derived and is as fully justified as the others which have been discussed above. Thus it becomes possible to translate *κάθαρσις*, on the basis of this evidence, as the act of "making clear" or the process of "clarification" by means of which something that is intellectually obscure is made clear to an observer. Indeed Butcher translates the term "catharsis" at one point in his analysis as the process of "clarifying," but he uses the word only as a synonym for purification or refinement and does not understand it in an intellectual sense.<sup>11</sup> I would like to suggest further that Aristotle has told us exactly what he means by the process of "clarification" when he says in chapter 4 that the pleasure we find in poetry derives from the spectator's ability *μανθάνειν καὶ συλλογίζεσθαι τί ἕκαστον, οἷον ὅτι οὗτος ἐκεῖνος*, and when he states in chapter 9 that *τῷ ποίῳ τὰ ποῖα ἅττα συμβαίνει λέγειν ἢ πράττειν κατὰ τὸ εἶκος ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον, οὐ στοχάζεται ἢ ποιήσις ὀνόματα ἐπιτιθεμένη*. The process of inference described by Aristotle "clarifies" the nature of the individual act by providing, through the medium of art, the means of ascending from the particular event witnessed to an understanding of its universal nature, and thus it permits us to understand the individual act more clearly and distinctly. This appears to be exactly what Aristotle has in mind by the process he describes as *μανθάνειν καὶ συλλογίζεσθαι τί ἕκαστον, οἷον ὅτι οὗτος ἐκεῖνος*.

<sup>11</sup> S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (New York 1951) 240-73. On this point see especially Butcher's remarks on 255 and 267. It must be admitted here that all of the uses of *καθαρῶς* that are cited above can be interpreted with reference to the word's root meanings of "pure" or "clean." However, in every case the purity involved must be discriminated by the intellect; and this, I argue, is ample justification for interpreting the term "catharsis" as an intellectual activity. I would, of course, agree with the anonymous referee of this paper who indicated that what we should really like to have here is an example of this special sense of catharsis in Aristotle's own usage. In the absence of such evidence, the answer to the riddle of catharsis must be pursued on the basis of probability and internal consistency.

Thus in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* the particular facts relate to the personal story of Oedipus' attempt to escape the fate destined for him and his involvement in a series of events which force him to commit the very acts he has sought to escape. These particular pitiful and fearful events have been so skillfully arranged and presented by the poet that we are led to see that there lies behind them a universal condition of human existence that is responsible for these particular pitiful and fearful events. This universal condition is the fundamental limitation of the human intellect in dealing with the unfathomable mystery that surrounds divine purpose. The particular events which happened to Oedipus, pitiful and fearful in their character, and the emotions we feel in response to them are related by the skill of the poet in constructing his plot and defining his characters to their source in this universal cause of pity and fear in human existence. By seeing that the particular events which have befallen Oedipus can be understood as an individual manifestation of this universal condition, we come to understand more clearly and distinctly the nature of these events, i.e. we come to see *ὅτι οὗτος ἐκεῖνος*. Through this process of perceiving that the source of the particular pitiful and fearful events of the play is a universal condition of existence, our understanding of the nature of pity and fear, as they relate to the human situation, has been "clarified."

We must now see how this interpretation of catharsis fits into the complete structure of the *Poetics*. If catharsis is understood as "clarification" in the intellectual sense of the word, then the final clause of the definition of tragedy in chapter 6 may be translated as, "achieving, through the representation of pitiful and fearful situations, the clarification of such incidents."<sup>12</sup>

If catharsis is interpreted in this way, then it would fulfill the important requirement which Else set forth that the terms of the *Poetics* should be interpreted out of the *Poetics*, for then catharsis would become nothing more, but nothing less, than a synonym for the process of inference which Aristotle described in chapter 4 as *μανθάνειν καὶ συλλογίζεσθαι τί ἕκαστον, οἶον ὅτι οὗτος ἐκεῖνος*. The inference *ὅτι οὗτος ἐκεῖνος* is the act of clarification or the

<sup>12</sup> My justification for adding the term "representation" to this definition is taken from Aristotle's statement in chapter 14 that the poet should seek to produce pleasure *ἀπὸ ἔλεου καὶ φόβου διὰ μιμήσεως*. For arguments supporting the translation of *δι' ἔλεου καὶ φόβου* as "pitiful and fearful situations" and *παθημάτων* as "incidents" see Else's sound and perceptive analysis, (above, note 1) 228-29 and 231, note 36.



"catharsis." Such an interpretation of catharsis would have the advantage of being derived directly from Aristotle's previous argument and thus would justify Aristotle's statement in chapter 6 that his definition comes *ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων*. Furthermore, this interpretation would also unite the term "catharsis" organically with the statements made by Aristotle in chapter 9 about the universality of poetry and in chapter 14 concerning the nature of the particular pleasure found in tragedy.

If this view of catharsis is accepted, then we may well ask what is to be done with the traditional interpretations which have had such an important place in critical literature and have in many cases been used with success as interpretative instruments. It is not possible to deny that at the end of any tragedy the emotions that have been aroused are relieved; whether they have been "purified" in any moral sense is a more difficult question to settle. However, when we look at the whole realm of art we see that the emotions engendered by the work of art, whether they be those of pity and fear, or joy and exultation, are all "relieved" when the stimulus of the work of art is removed. This results not from the form of any particular art but from the essential character of art itself which is, as Aristotle perceptively tells us, the imitation of nature. We can see that it is art *qua* imitation of nature that insures this relief of emotion, for we know that in nature itself the emotions and their relief would take a very different course than they do when presented on the printed page or in the theater. We have argued, however, that this relief of emotions has nothing to do with the term "catharsis" that is introduced by Aristotle in the formal definition of tragedy in chapter 6 of the *Poetics*.

The history of attempts to explain and define catharsis is a long and tangled one, and any new interpretation must be viewed critically. In favor of the interpretation that I have presented in this paper, I have argued that, under it, catharsis becomes a far more meaningful part of Aristotle's complete analysis of poetry than when it is understood in any of the principal senses that have been accepted up to now. Moreover, this interpretation of catharsis takes on added significance when considered in connection with the Platonic view of art which must have loomed large in Aristotle's mind as he formulated his theory of poetry. In Book 10 of the *Republic* Plato charges that poetry is a distant

imitation of reality which hinders rather than aids the pursuit of truth. Under the interpretation I have presented, Aristotle counters this argument by claiming that the function of art is to bring about a clarification of reality. Thus art becomes a significant and respectable domain of philosophy. In addition, this interpretation of catharsis is consistent with Aristotle's regular procedure in attaching the highest significance to the intellectual value of any concept or activity.<sup>13</sup> Thus he defines god as νοῦ ἐνέργεια;<sup>14</sup> he indicates that a central argument in rhetoric is a form of syllogism, the enthymeme;<sup>15</sup> he argues that the highest virtue is wisdom;<sup>16</sup> he declares that the best life is the contemplative.<sup>17</sup> Because Aristotle holds the above views, I maintain that it is very appropriate for him to have conceived of catharsis as an intellectual climax to the artistic process. However, the most important argument in favor of this interpretation is that it conforms to a reality we all recognize. For what is the essential and most profound achievement of art if not the illumination of human experience?

<sup>13</sup> I am indebted to Prof. Benedict Einarson for a number of suggestions and specifically for calling my attention to examples of Aristotle's practice of emphasizing the intellectual aspect of any concept or activity. This does not imply that he accepts the conclusions drawn in this paper, which remain, of course, my sole responsibility.

<sup>14</sup> *Met.* 1072B, 25–29.

<sup>15</sup> *Rhet.* 1356A, 35 ff., 1393A, 23 ff.

<sup>16</sup> *Eth. Nic.* 1141A, 9–17, 1145A, 2–11.

<sup>17</sup> *Eth. Nic.* 1177A, 12 ff.