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Catharsis in Aristotle, the Renaissance, and Elsewhere

by

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In an essay on "Shakespeare and the Kinds of Drama," Stephen Orgel presents an appealing and sympathetic view of Renaissance dramatic-generic theory and practice as original, capacious, and flexible, concluding that, "like Scaliger, Shakespeare thought of genres not as sets of rules but as sets of expectations and possibilities." In relation to this finding, we should perhaps be content to be "unclear about tragic catharsis," because "at least we know it is there, convincing us that tragedy works—even if we do not know how or on whom" (p. 120). As the Renaissance read Aristotle, "tragedy achieved its end by purging the passions of its audience through pity and terror—catharsis was the particular kind of utility produced by tragedy," and Mr. Orgel's "point here is that the notion of tragedy as a genre defined by its therapeutic effect on the audience is a Renaissance one: Aristotle may have conceived of the form in that way, but he did not say so" (pp. 116, 117). In this view, there is a major difference between the Renaissance identification of catharsis as an effect or complex of effects experienced by an audience and as an effect that—according to Gerald Else's Aristotle—"takes place entirely within the play's action," so that "it is Thebes or Athens that is purified, not the audience. This may or may not be correct, but it fits the literal meaning of Aristotle's words, and it is disturbingly irrefutable" (p. 117). It is even more disturbingly unverifiable, and it remains doubtful whether Else's interpretation and translation do indeed fit the literal meaning of Aristotle's words.

Probably most interpreters continue to find something like "a catharsis of such emotions" as the most readily intelligible, likely, and compelling translation of a phrase seen as concerned with audience-effect, however they may vary in their emphasis on the cognitive and affective elements of this cathar-
sis. If they are right, then the critics and poets of the Renaissance were so far right with the rest, within the limits of their own experience, knowledge, and language, and the Renaissance did not invent or reinvent an “affective clause” in Chapter VI of the Poetics but took in its own way what it found there. In Milton’s version, which incorporates what is virtually a translation of the clause in Aristotle, “‘Tragedy, as it was anciantly composed, hath been even held the gravest, moraolest, and most profitable of all other poems: therefore said by Aristotle to be of power by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such-like passions, that is to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirred up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated.”

My concern here is to argue that the most defensible interpretation of the catharsis clause is not Else’s but Milton’s and the traditional one, and therefore that the originality of Renaissance theory consisted not in a significant if felicitous misunderstanding of Aristotle but in a variety of creative interpretations of catharsis enabled and even entailed by differences of time, culture, and language that were nevertheless consonant with and closely related to Aristotle’s conception of catharsis—as an audience-effect communicated by tragic mimesis. To paraphrase Pope, the conception, of old discovered or devised, was Aristotle still, but now Horatianized, and sometimes Christianized. The emotional effect of catharsis (along with the learning and pleasure noted by Aristotle elsewhere in the Poetics) was thus brought under a more general view that gave equal, often greater, even exclusive prominence to the dulce et utile, and to instructing and delighting, as such, by contrast with the therapeutic dimension.

The Aristotelian problem here centers on catharsis and hamartia. Mr. Orgel writes that “modern accounts...are far more concerned with hamartia, the ‘tragic flaw,’ and with the hero. Indeed, we even locate the flaw in the hero, whereas Aristotle says that it is to be found in the action” (p. 117). This is a useful corrective, but on the best evidence hamartia—error—is not, strictly speaking, to be found primarily in the action. As D. W. Lucas puts it, “the essence of hamartia is ignorance combined with the absence of wicked intent. . . .] hamartia is lack of the knowledge which is needed if right decisions are to be taken.” The tragic protagonist “acts under the influence of harmartia, not frailty as opposed to badness, but error as opposed to evil intent” (p. 302). Lucas notes earlier that “Aristotle prefers in general to give hamartema its natural meaning of a particular case of mistaken action...and to use hamartia for the erroneous belief likely to lead to particular mistaken actions.” Hamartia for this kind cannot be equated with the so-called “tragic flaw,” a mistranslation that retains whatever currency it has by virtue of a lingering Romantic-Victorian predilection for self-destructive individualism, and by courtesy of glossaries of literary terms.
The major issue is the catharsis clause, on which there is a voluminous literature. In rejecting the traditional interpretation and adopting Else's, Mr. Orgel writes: "tragic catharsis is mentioned only once in the Poetics in a sentence that says, literally, that 'drama effects through pity and terror purgation of the like'—that pitiable and terrible events (not the emotions of pity and terror but the things in the play that arouse these emotions) purge events of a similar nature" (p. 117, italics mine). The clause in Greek—the subject is "tragedy," not "drama"—is this (vi.2, 1449b.24-28):

\[ \text{δι} \text{ ἐλέου καὶ περάλνουσα τὴν τῶν τολούτων παθήματων κάθαρσιν.} \]

This does not translate "literally" as "drama effects through pity and terror purgation of the like," although the text is ambiguous. How complicated it is may be seen in the following representative recent translations. "Tragedy..." is the subject. 6

1 Butcher (1911): through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.

2 Dorsch (1965): by means of pity and fear bringing about the purgation of such emotions.

3 Hubbard (1972): effecting through pity and fear the catharsis of such emotions.

4 Else (1967): through a course of pity and fear completing the purification of tragic acts which have these emotional characteristics.

5 Golden (1968): achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis [i.e., 'clarification') of such pitiable and fearful incidents.

R. S. Crane gives a circumspect exposition of the traditional view of catharsis represented by translations 1-3:

"The catharsis through pity and fear which is the peculiar power of tragedy...is thus a function primarily not of cause in the audience...but of how the poet has constructed his tragic plot: it is what we experience—and this is the definition implied in Chapter 13—when a man like ourselves comes to undeserved misfortune through a completed sequence of probable or necessary actions. It is the formal cause of tragic structure in the most specific sense...." 7
Ambiguities in the Greek are compounded in English, and attempts at resolution are forced at last to center within the tight circle of interrelationships between three elusive terms and referents: τολούτων, meaning 'of such a kind' or 'these'; παθηματων, meaning either 'emotions' (Butcher, Dorsch, Hubbard) or 'incidents' (Else, Golden); and καθαρος, about which it is uncertain what and whose it is. The traditional (and Renaissance) reading continues to prevail in translations and commentaries. It has much to recommend it in Aristotle's use of the term catharsis elsewhere and also by the measure of Occam's razor, which may be tried on the translations quoted above.

At the end of the Politics (VIII.iv.3-vii.11; 1339a.10-1342b.35) Aristotle discusses at some length the pedagogical uses and abuses of music, and enquires into the question whether music can shape character as gymnastic exercises develop the body. Music is said to imitate (or represent) character, differently in different modes, with varying melodies and rhythms. It gives representations of anger and mildness, for example, and "when we listen to such representations we change in our soul."8 Again, pieces of music...do actually contain in themselves imitations of character" (v.8, 1340a.39). In his explicit uses of καθαρος, Aristotle remarks that the flute, the music of which is not "ethical" but "orgastic," should not be introduced into education but reserved for circumstances when catharsis rather than learning is the purpose (ἡ θεωρία καθαρος μᾶλλον δύναται ἡ μαθησιν. vi.5, 1341a.24). In VIII.vii.4 ff. he expresses general principles about the types of melodies (ethical, pragmatic, "enthusiastic") and the beneficial uses of music, which serves "the purpose both of education and of purgation [καθαρος]" a term that unfortunately Aristotle "use[s] for the present without explanation, but we will return to discuss the meaning that we give to it more explicitly in our treatise on poetry," from which any such discussion is of course missing (vii.4-5, 1341b.34 ff.); music has a third use as entertainment. There are persons particularly susceptible to "enthusiasm" who are so moved by religious music as to seem as if they had experienced a healing (κατελε γονιμος and a "purge" (catharsis); "the same experience then must come also to the compassionate [ελεήμονας] and the timid [φοβητρικος] and the other emotional people [παθητικος] generally in such a way as befalls each individual of these classes, and all must undergo a purgation [catharsis] and a pleasant feeling of relief [κομψίσθαι μεθ' ἰδιώνης; 'to be relieved by means of pleasure'; the passive verb is used by Hippocrates with ὀδύνης 'of pain']; and similarly also the purgative melodies [τὰ μελή τὰ καθαρτικά] afford harmless delight to people" (vii.6, 1342a.7-17).

The most reasonable application of what is said in the Politics of catharsis effected through music would involve spectators or readers and their emotional responses to tragic mimic.
with a process of catharsis "within" the musical mimesis (which would be the musical equivalent of tragic catharsis in Else, presumably). The case for interpreting the catharsis "of such παθηματων" as emotions experienced in response to tragic mimesis remains very strong, and to that extent Renaissance originality and felix error would seem to be somewhat different from what Mr. Orgel finds them to be, with the differences consisting more in degree and direction, perhaps, than in kind.

Replacing the catharsis in the audience where it was before its recent displacement does not solve the problem of what specifically is involved in catharsis, however, a question repeatedly controverted. The sorts of effects associated with catharsis may be identified approximately as (1) medico-physiological, (2) psychotherapeutic, (3) religious-purificatory, and (4) didactic pedagogical, or some combination of these. F. L. Lucas once announced that Aristotle's catharsis "is a definitely medical metaphor-a metaphor of an aperient," a somewhat constraining formulation of a tenable view that he airily dismissed with the witticism that "the theatre is not a hospital," which Humphrey House characterized accurately as a "summary and too memorable epigram."9 But these effects and orders of experience are not mutually exclusive and were not necessarily so in Aristotle's view. The first three, in particular, have many points of convergence that could be expressed under the inclusive heading, "psychobiological"; they are essentially affective "rather than" cognitive, but they may certainly cohere with cognition.

Furthermore, none of these is simple in itself. What was "religious-purificatory" for the Corybantian revellers was not so as it would have been for most contemporaries of Sir Philip Sidney, who wrote in A Defense of Poetry that man shows himself above God's created second nature "in nothing . . . so much as in poetry, when with the force of a divine breath he bringeth things forth surpassing her doings—with no small argument to the credulous of that first accursed fall of Adam, since our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it."10 For him, "the ending end of all earthly learning being virtuous action, those skills that most serve to bring forth that have a most just title to be princes over all the rest" (p. 83); and the poet is superior to both the historian and the philosopher in moving: "And that moving is of a higher degree than teaching, it may by this appear, that it is well nigh both the cause and the effect of teaching . . . . For, as Aristotle saith, it is not γνωσις but ταξις must be the fruit" (p. 91, citing Nichomachean Ethics, Liii.6-7, 1095a.6-7). And tragedy is formally, morally, and didactically a species of poetry, that "openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue; that maketh kings fear to be tyrants, and tyrants manifest their tyrannical humours; that, with stirring the affects of
admiration and commiseration, teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilden roofs are builded” (italics mine); Sidney adds an anecdote from Plutarch to show “how much it can move” (p. 96).

There are notable differences between Aristotle and Sidney, who was not the Renaissance—any more than Aristotle was classical antiquity—but is very much of it. They are found especially in Sidney’s explicitly moral and didactic emphasis (“with stirring the affects . . . teacheth,” end becoming means), and in the notion of poetry’s “moving” one toward “virtuous action.” The passage just quoted in fact affords several focal points of significant difference, including touches of post-medieval Christian contemptus mundi and Sidney’s reading “admiration” for Aristotle’s φόβος, ‘fear’; the difference may be neo-Aristotelian in part and due to the influence of ἡμαστός, the tragic element of the ‘wonderful’ in the Poetics, but admiration in context goes beyond the sense of wonder to the modern emphasis on approbation, esteem, and reverence, suggesting an impulse toward virtuous emulation (“moving,” in effect).

Ancient and Renaissance-modern perspectives were as different as comprehensive ontologies separated by nearly twenty centuries would have them, but there remain important likenesses, and the Oxford editors of the Defense seem not far from the mark in asserting that “Sidney’s only notable departure from the main (Aristotelian) trend in literary theory is his calling the affects (emotions) stirred by tragedy not ‘pity’ and ‘fear’ but admiration (awe) and commiseration” (p. 200). Yet there are important differences otherwise, and in some respects Sidney’s view of the comprehensive effects of poetry, including tragedy, is prominently behavioristic-imitative: monkey see, monkey do; or, rather less simplistically, poet show, man see, man move(d) to virtuous action. But then Sidney is not directly concerned with catharsis as such, even though he is paraphrasing the catharsis clause. Aristotle was so concerned, prominently, though not in isolation from other effects and corollaries of mimetic processes, including not only behavior modification (as through music) but general enlightenment: “to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general” (Poetics iv.4. 1448b12-14). Nevertheless, not every discernible effect is appropriately called “cathartic,” any more than the cathartic effect “proper” to tragedy is the same for other forms of drama.

On this last point it is appropriate to note that in “Three Types of Renaissance Catharsis” O. B. Hardison discusses “practical theories” of tragic effect that “were not even labeled ‘theories of catharsis’ by the writers who formulated them. If we define catharsis functionally as ‘the effect of tragedy,’ the most common Renaissance theories are in this category.... For convenience they can be labeled respectively as the moral, religious, and
literal theories of catharsis.” These “theories” are said in practical effect to involve such responses as a person’s being troubled by a guilty conscience and moved to confession (“moral,” pp. 4-5); being inspired by instances of poetic justice. “if poetic justice can be understood as an attempt to imitate or symbolize dramatically the ideal of perfect justice” (“religious,” p.10); and receiving “a clarification, an object lesson in ‘how these things came about’” (“literal,” p. 21). This interesting and provocative essay must be read and attended to on its own terms. For my purposes it is sufficient to observe that Hardison is concerned not with what was thought and said of catharsis as such, but with effects and designs in general, in which the stricter idea of catharsis need play little or no part at all.

In his detailed discussion of the Aristotelian possibilities, including religious purification, Lucas remarks of the homeopathic-medical explanation that “as an answer to Plato’s strictures the theory of katharsis is a triumphant success.” hence legitimately available to Milton and in fact used explicitly by him in the Preface to Samson Agonistes. But “its value for other purposes is more open to question” (p. 283). Lucas then suggests that catharsis as used by Aristotle should be understood also in specific relation to humors psychology: “an excess of bile involves an increase of emotional pressure. An emotional orgy brings release in the same way as blood-letting relieves the over-sanguine. . . . The Greek doctrine of humours implies that each man has an emotional capacity directly related to his physical make-up, and an excess of one humour can cause an undue generation of emotional pressure, which will need an outlet. If the imbalance of humours is marked, the emotional congestion can become serious, and the pleasure, when it is relieved, proportionately greater. So the release of accumulated pity and fear by pity and fear experienced in the theatre presents no problem” (p. 285).

If that is the explanation of catharsis as Aristotle used the term in the Poetics, and it is a well reasoned and persuasive explanation, then the use is more like than unlike that of Milton’s Renaissance Aristotelianism, by which similes similibus curantur still. For ourselves, there is little enough we can do with such a catharsis except set it apart as a concept of paleonoetic interest without modern applicability. Or we can adapt it for use with current psychobiological systems like psychoanalysis that are analogous to humors theory, or otherwise interpret the term and the process in accordance with what makes a more general sense in the context and a more empirical sense in relation to causes and effects observed in the design and working of tragedy, as O. B. Hardison does in his own way. Certainly it has had widely beneficial effects in catalyzing inquiries into the content and dynamics of dramatic cause and effect, and we are probably better off continuing to conjure with it, even if it must always bear the caveat, “handle with care.” In “The Tragedy of
Roland: An Aristotelian View," Tony Hunt has recently expressed a related sentiment: "Perhaps . . . the most important question is not what Aristotle meant in relation to actual Greek tragedy which he knew but whether what he said can be construed in such a way as to elucidate something of the tragic emotion as understood in subsequent ages" (italics mine).13

In any case, we should not find the Renaissance any the less wise, imaginative, ranging, or even original because Aristotle had explored some of the same territory earlier. The ground that time has altered is never again the same, as Heraclitus said, in effect, but the better for now makes none the less the good for then, and there is even a source of potential comfort as well as edification in the continuities.

NOTES

1 Critical Inquiry. 6 (1979), pp. 107-23.


4 See Horace, Ars Poetica, ll. 333-34 and 343-44.


6 The translations are listed alphabetically by translator at the end. Butcher's translation is not "recent," but it is solid, current, and still widely used. Other translations agreeing substantially with 1-3 here are those of Bywater (1909), Wheelwright (1935), Epps (1942), Fyfe (1953), Potts (1953), and Telford (1961). H. D. F. Kitto reads much like Else and Golden: "through pity and fear carrying through the catharsis [i.e. 'purification'] of corresponding sufferings [within the action]"; see "Catharsis," The Classical Tradition: Literary and Historical Studies in Honor of Harry Caplan, ed. L. Wallach (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 142.

7 The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), pp. 56-57; see also pp. 71-72 and 171-73.


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12 M. E., Hubbard emphasizes that Plato's "second charge" against poets (that they feed and water the passions) is answered "in the reference to catharsis." she adds in a note that "it certainly required a reply and in the Poetics gets no other. This is a main reason for rejecting the interpretation of catharsis recently proposed by L. Golden" (p.88).


Translations


