THE MEANING OF KATHARSIS

A Study in Aristotle's Canons of Tragedy

Note—In preparing this paper I am chiefly in debt to Butcher's edition of the *Poetics* and to his essays contained in the volume entitled, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*. I have also used Bywater's translation of the Poetics, and the translation with comments just published by Lane Cooper of Cornell University. I have made reference, also, to John Addington Symond's *Greek Poets,* Wilmer Cave Wright's *Greek Literature* and to the volume on Aristotle recently published by Professor W. D. Ross of Oxford.

I

When Aristotle, the Stagirite, pupil of Plato, teacher of Alexander, founder of the Peripetetic School, died at Colchis in Euboea in the year 322, he left to his disciples in the Athenian Lyceum a mass of lecture notes which have come down to us in a more or less mutilated form. Unlike Plato's dialogues, which are models of style, many of Aristotle's writings are devoid of literary form; they are mere outlines or syllabuses of the dogmatic discourses which he delivered to small groups of students, not the finished exercises prepared for private study by his great master.

Nevertheless, the literary legacy of few authors has exerted as wide an influence as have the writings of Aristotle. In medieval times Aristotle's was the dominating authority in the realm of reason as was St. Paul's in that of revelation. Roger Bacon asserts that "Aristotle has the same authority in philosophy that the Apostle Paul has in divinity." After the Renaissance the authority that Aristotle wielded in philosophy was extended to the whole field of literature. In fact, much has been sanctioned in Aristotle's name for which he is not responsible. Mistranslations and misinterpretations have created such mistaken traditions as that of the Three Dramatic Unities, an invention it would seem in the first instance of the Italians, perpetuated by Sydney, Corneille, Voltaire and other loyal Aristotelians until Lessing pointed out that the only unity that Aristotle actually prescribes is that of action. In the same way the French critics of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries took the term "spoudaioi," which refers to the elevated moral character of the ideal hero, to mean "a person of high rank" and hence developed the canon that tragedy deals with princes and comedy with the "polloi."

However, in spite of misrenderings of his original meaning, the canons of tragedy as laid down by Aristotle have stood the test of the centuries and are recognized as applying not only to ancient tragedy, but to modern dramatic method as well. So far as they go, they are, says Lessing, as infallible as the Elements of Euclid.[1] In his theory of the function of tragedy, Aristotle holds that the purpose of poetry is to delight, whereas Plato and practically all the other philosophers and teachers among the Ancients hold that the function of all the fine arts is to edify. So do Matthew Arnold and other moderns, who hold with Plato the classical view of art. In spite of these, however, Aristotle's philosophy of aesthetics presents the typically modern point of view. Indeed Aristotle's views on the method as well as the function of Fine Art in many points are prophetic of the more recent developments of the canons of tragedy. Says the late Dr. Butcher in his invaluable study of *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art:*

> Nevertheless, we can hardly claim as has been sometimes done for Aristotle that he rose above the traditions and limitations of the Hellenic mind, and took up the attitude of the purely human or cosmopolitan spectator. On some points, doubtless, he expresses opinions which contradict the current ideas of his age. He admits that in certain cases the tragic poet may take entirely fictitious subjects instead of the well-known legends. He holds that metre, which was popularly thought to be the most essential element of poetry, is in truth the least essential, if indeed essential at all. He leaves it at least an open question whether the drama may not still admit of new developments. But in general it remains true that Greek experience was the starting point and basis of his theory, though that experience had to be sifted, condensed, and interpreted before any coherent doctrine of poetry could be framed or judgment passed on individual authors. Aristotle does not accept even the greater tragedians as all of equal authority, or all their works as alike canons of art; and it is a mistake to assume that the precepts of the *Poetics* must, if there is no indication to the contrary, harmonize with the

[1]An interesting illustration of this point is Professor Lane Cooper's recently published edition of the *Poetics,* interspersed with notes and illustrations from English literature, a volume prepared primarily for students of English.

> practice of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. . . . His rules are based on a discriminating and selective principle, and imply some criterion for judging of artistic excellence.

Before passing to a detailed consideration of what in Aristotle's estimation are the canons of tragedy, I would like to review at just what point the tragic drama of Aristotle's day had arrived. In an essay on Greek and English Tragedy given some years ago at Oxford by Professor Gilbert Murray, after emphasizing the fact that, in contradistinction to English tragedy which is primarily entertainment, Greek tragedy is a religious ritual, he says:

> Aristotle observes, in speaking of the gradual development of tragedy, that "after passing through many changes it found its proper form and there stopped." The words have a curious truth. Its proper form was a very strange one, unlike that of any drama before or since. It never forgot its origin; it moved, as it were, in two planes, keeping always present, in the very heart of its action, the sacred chorus of fifteen shadowy persons, in part human creatures, in part the incarnate shapes of meditation and emotion. It kept its gigantic masked figures, its long, formal speeches, every speech beginning at the beginning of a verse and ending at the end of a verse. It kept its messengers, its prologues, and its divine epiphanies. And inside this grandiose shell, it created a peculiar kind of beauty, a rhythm of high yet intoxicating emotion, a religious and poignant sincerity, which no other form of drama has quite attained. At one period it looked as if tragedy was beginning to move away from its stiffness. When Sophocles reminds modern critics of Shakespeare, it is in part because he began, very cautiously and delicately, to do to tragedy just what we ourselves, nourished in the Elizabethan tradition, would naturally do. We should cut down the formal speeches. We should not compel every speaker to finish his verse. We should unhesitatingly drop the god and the prologue and sometimes do without the messenger. As for the Chorus, since we do not know how to use it, we should cut it out altogether, or if that were impossible, cut it down to narrow limits. We should work up the drama pure and simple and forget the fixed lines of ritual. We should get rid of the monotonous shadow of death. We should intermix tragedy and comedy. We should aim at entertainment, at variety, not at worship.

II.

With this sharp differentiation between Greek and modern tragedy fresh in our minds, let us now examine Aristotle's classic definition of tragedy. "Tragedy," he says in the sixth chapter of the *Poetics,* "is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."

Let us first pause over the phrase "Tragedy is an imitation of an action," for in an understanding of what the Greek meant by the term "imitation" lies the key to Aristotle's aesthetic theory. Our term "fine art" as differentiated from the useful arts was expressed by the Greeks in the term "imitative arts." We find the term first in Plato, not untouched by a tinge of disparagement. In the tenth book of the *Republic,* the outward world seems to be a weak imitation of the ideal archtype, and art, a further imitation of this. Plato would thus seem to intimate that art does not partake of true Beauty, the Idea (the Reality), and so is merely a copy. The sensuous, therefore, is dangerous, and must be kept subservient to the censorship of philosophy. Beauty itself can be known only by contemplation. The fine arts are but copies of a copy. Beauty "never was on land or sea"; it is the "pattern laid up in heaven." Things are beautiful, but no thing is Beauty. Beauty itself is that which constitutes or makes (ποιέω to make and hence *poet*) a thing beautiful. It is the Universal, the Idea, the Form; nevertheless it is never divorced from its particular manifestations. Yet these manifestations have neither meaning nor value except as they share in the ideal Beauty. The counterfeit world is the world which is truly ugly, physically or morally—devoid of moral worth. Evil in all its forms or appearances is false; the true, the beautiful, and the good alone have final value.

Aristotle, however, uses the term "imitation" with a different connotation, for to him the threefold objects of aesthetic imitation—character, emotion, and action—are set forth or imitated not as they are but as they ought to be. To quote Butcher again, "A work of art is a likeness or reproduction of an original—not a symbolic representation of it—whether from a model in the real world or from an unrealized ideal in the mind." A work of art, therefore, reproduces its original, not as it is in itself, but as it appears to the senses, glorified, exalted, raised from a base and earthly actual, to its ideal. "Art," Butcher continues, "does not attempt to embody the objective reality of things but only their sensible appearances. . . It severs itself from material reality and the corresponding wants," thereby emancipating us from the pressure of everyday life and releasing aesthetic emotion as an independent activity. Herein, we shall find later, is the secret of the katharsis or purifying and purging power of fine art as manifested in the drama.

The action that art seeks to reproduce is not merely outward activity. It is rather the outward manifestation of character and emotion, "deeds, incidents, events, situations, being included under it so far as these spring from an inward act of will," that is from the character, ἦθος and the emotions, πάθη of the subject. A work of art is therefore an idealized representation of human life, or character, emotion, action, under forms manifest to sense, the various elements being harmonized into an ideal unity of type, a purified image of nature's original.

In tragedy the imitation is produced, says Aristotle, through the medium of rhythm, language and harmony, either singly or combined; that is, through dancing, poetry or music, media all characterized by rhythm, the external movements of rhythm whether in the dance, in language clothed in verse form, or in melody, alike bearing close resemblance to the movement or "action" of the soul. Harmony, or melody apart from words, has an ethical significance; dancing, says Aristotle, imitates character, emotion, and action by rhythmical movement.

III.

Before passing to the consideration of the characteristics of tragedy *per se,* something should be said in regard to Aristotle's philosophy of art. Sculpture is the supreme and characteristic expression of Greek art, a fact that should be constantly borne in mind in the study of the Greek drama, since chiseled and complete as a statue, it bears the impress in its form and method of the preoccupation of the Greek with sculpture.

Aristotle's conception of fine art is entirely detached from any theory of the beautiful; a separation, Butcher says, that is characteristic of all ancient aesthetic criticism down to a late period. Beauty, to the Greek, is synonymous with Goodness. Beauty *is* the Good, the end and aim of life, the Harmony which is the keynote of Greek life, to be attained by joyous conformity to the great Greek principle of life—*μηδὲν ἄγαν*—nothing in excess.[2] Plato was intent upon the radiant idea of pure Being. Aristotle, on the other hand, founds his philosophy on the conception of Becoming. His theory of art is therefore intellectual, and based upon the principle of Becoming, the process of developing, of unfolding what is already in the germ; "an upward ascent," to quote Butcher again, "ending in Being which is the highest object of all knowledge."

"It is therefore evident," says Aristotle, "that it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen." For poetry expresses the universal. Its subject matter is higher than history. Its creations move on a higher plane; its characters present a more full humanity. Poetry presents a higher reality than life, a stricter and more logical order. And the nature of man dilates to respond to the characters of poetry. The characters of Sophocles, the ideal forms of Zeuxis, are unreal only in the sense that they surpass reality. They are not untrue to the principles of nature or to her ideal tendencies. "For," says Aristotle, "what has never anywhere come to pass, that alone never grows old." Physical improbability can therefore be condoned, but not moral improbability. "Poetry," so Butcher sums up his chapter on "Poetic Truth," "is not a mere reproduction of empirical fact . . . it is the presentation of permanent and eternal facts, free from the elements of unreason which disturb our comprehension of real events and human conduct." The poet may transcend nature; but he may not contradict her. Poetic truth passes the bounds of reality, but it does not wantonly violate the laws which make the real world rational. For the poet, while he seems to be concerned with the particular, is in reality concerned with the universal," *quod semper quod ubique;* while he reproduces a concrete fact, he transfigures it so that the higher truth, the idea of the universal, shines through it.

It is unexpected, with such a lofty conception of the univer-

[2]But it was left for Plotinus, an Egyptian of the third century A.D., the founder of Neo-Platonism, to formulate a philosophy of beauty.

sality of art, to find Aristotle, as I have already said, differing from Plato and the other Greeks of his time in his conception of the true end of art. For to Aristotle the end of art was a certain pleasurable impression produced upon the mind of the hearer or spectator, and not the strictly moral end characteristic of the classical philosophy of aesthetics. Each kind of art, each kind of poetry carries with it a distinctive pleasure. A tragic action has an inherent capacity for calling forth the emotions of pity and fear, and for purging them of all that is painful and distasteful in them by concentrating them upon an external and universal rather than a particular and personal object.

However, does not this very aesthetic enjoyment which Aristotle asserts as the end of art, bear within it a close relation to the attainment of that harmony of spirit which is the Greek idea of the Good? For is that not exactly what the much disputed term katharsis implies?—the expulsion of those elements of pain and strife in the emotions which prevent the serenity of the soul, or as modern psychologists would put it, which produce maladjustment. Aristotle defines wellbeing as εὐδαιμονία πῆς ψυχῆς and the English translation for εὐδαιμονία, wellbeing, carries out Aristotle's ethical idea. To the Greek, the end to be attained was always an ethical one, and all Greek philosophies were ethical in their character. Even the Epicureans, though selfish, calculating and prudent, were ethical; their reasoned philosophy of enjoyment was totally different from the lawless self-indulgence of the modern hedonist who has thrown philosophy and ethics alike to the winds. Hence the difference in spirit between the lofty tone of the Greek dramatist, and the cynical abandon of many modern novelists and playwrights.

At this point a word should be said regarding Aristotle's conception of the relation between art and morality. Although Aristotle diverged from the common Greek point of view that "poetry is the preparatory school of philosophy," and maintained that the object of poetry is to produce an emotional delight, a pure and elevated pleasure, he cannot conceive of pleasure produced by any but the loftiest ethical ideals. Hence, according to Aristotle, the characters portrayed by epic and tragic poetry have their basis in moral goodness. But that goodness, says Butcher, is of the heroic order. It is quite distinct from plain, unaspiring virtue. It has in it nothing common or mean. Whatever moral imperfections appear in the characters of tragedy, they are such as to impress our imagination and rouse our sense of grandeur. And here Aristotle is on the borderland of morals and aesthetics. He cannot conceive of a character morally depraved and yet aesthetically great. One can no more think of a Greek sculptor carving a deformed figure, than of Sophocles conceiving a Richard III. Nevertheless Aristotle, who is the first to separate the theory of aesthetics from that of morals, never allows the moral purpose of the poet to take the place of the artistic end. If the poet fails to produce the proper pleasure, he fails in the specific function of his art. In this connection I would like to quote an illuminating paragraph from Professor Lane Cooper's translation of the *Poetics,* to which I have already referred. Professor Cooper says:

> It must be added that pleasure to Aristotle signifies not a passive state of being, but a form of activity.
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> In his working definition he does not allude to the element of pleasure in the tragic relief. As he develops his thought we become aware that the relief is itself a form of pleasure; so that the characteristic effect of tragedy may be referred to as either one or the other. We discover too, that there are certain satisfactions contributory to the main effect; for example, the pleasure of discovery or recognition, when we learn the author of a deed or the upshot of an incident; the pleasure of astonishment when the outcome of a series of events is unexpected, yet is seen to be inevitable; and the pleasure derived from "embellished language," that is, from the rhythm and music of tragedy. Furthermore, the pleasure is explained negatively: the play must not offend us with effects that are revolting, or with events that run counter to our sense of what is reasonable and likely.

IV.

Let us now return, from the consideration of Aristotle's theory of art as illustrated in the Poetics, to a consideration of his idea of katharsis. Tragedy, we have seen, is in common with all the fine arts, imitation. It is differentiated from comedy as being an imitation of action that is grave and great; it is differentiated from epic poetry in that it is dramatic rather than narrative (Butcher somewhere speaks of the drama as the fusion of epic and lyric poetry); and finally, its specific purpose is the effecting of a katharsis or purgation of the emotions.

The consensus of opinion among the critics seems to be that the word katharsis is a medical metaphor, and denotes a pathological effect upon the soul analogous to the effect of medicine upon the body, an interpretation first put forth by Bernays. There are others, however, whose idea of katharsis is rather that of a release for pent-up emotion, of a sigh in which we relax the strain of pity and of fear. These critics find the idea of purgation inconsistent with Aristotle's dictum that tragedy should *delight,* and prefer to interpret katharsis as a pleasurable outlet that in means and result alike gives satisfaction.

> Tragedy, says BUTCHER, excites the emotions of pity and fear—kindred emotions that are in the breasts of all men—and by the act of excitation affords pleasurable relief. The feelings called forth by the tragic spectacle are not indeed permanently removed, but are quieted for the time so that the system can fall back upon its normal course. The stage, in fact, provides a harmless and pleasurable outlet for instincts which demand satisfaction, and which can be indulged here more fearlessly than in real life.

The origin of the medical theory is apparently to be found in the katharsis wrought by music upon those carried away by the enthusiasm of the Dionysiac mysteries. By applying wild and restless music, by applying movement to cure movement, the frenzied devotees were brought to their senses by a regularly prescribed treatment administered by the priests. (On the same principle evidently, says Butcher, Plato advises that an infant be kept in a state of perpetual motion, to live as though he were always tossing on the waves of the sea—in the arms, evidently, of nurses not trained in accordance with the ideas of modern pediatrics.) Be that as it may, the function of katharsis is to provide an outlet or release for pity and fear, and to purify and clarify them by passing them through the medium of art. Pity and fear, to Aristotle, are closely akin, for by pity he means not the selfless or other-regarding pity of Christian charity, but rather self-regarding or self-conscious pity that passes into fear. For the time, in tragedy, the spectator merges himself in the existence of his hero; he suffers the pain of pity and fear vicariously; and his emotions thus becoming universalized, become the delightful sensations of emotional release, freed from personal terrors, since for the time, the spectator has forgotten himself through his alliance with humankind. This carrying of man beyond himself is the distinctive tragic pleasure. By the removal of the taint of egoism, the pain of pity and fear is annihilated; the luxury of emotional pleasure remains.[3]

Professor Gilbert Murray in his introduction to Bywater's translation of the *Poetics* makes an interesting point which helps to throw light on the much debated meaning of katharsis. He reminds us that the Dionysiac ritual in which tragedy took its origin was primarily a katharsis or purification of the community from the taints and poisons of the past year, the old contagion of sin and death. According to the primitive ideas the mimic representation of pity and fear did act as a katharsis of passions and sufferings in real life. It is worthwhile, he further reminds us, to recall the fact that according to Livy Greek tragedy was introduced into Rome during Aristotle's lifetime, not on artistic but on superstitious grounds, as a katharmos or purification of the community against a pestilence. The terms Recognition and Reversal, or Discovery and Peripety, chief means for effecting tragic katharsis, Professor Murray also suggests may find their origin in the Dionysiac ritual which symbolized the sufferings of the god and probably involved the death or loss of the god, a search for him, a recognition, and a sudden reversal of sorrow into joy.

Supposing that these suggestions of Professor Murray's are true, is it not possible that origins, methods, canons for correct procedure, may have been less consciously followed by the dramatists themselves than by Aristotle, who in outlines and sylla-

[3]Will Durant in his *Story of Philosophy* summarizes Aristotle's theory of art in a rather suggestive way. "The noblest art appeals to the intellect," he says, "as well as to the feelings (as a symphony appeals to us not only by its harmonies and sequences but by its structure and development); and this intellectual pleasure is the highest form of joy to which a man can rise. Hence a work of art should aim at form, and above all at unity, which is the backbone of structure and the focus of form. A drama, e. g., should have unity of action: there should be no confusing sub-plots nor digressive episodes. But, above all, the function of art is catharsis, purification: emotions accumulated in us under the pressure of social restraints and liable to sudden issue in unsocial and destructive action, are touched off and sluiced away in the harmless form of theatrical excitement; so tragedy, 'through pity and fear, affects the proper purgations of these emotions.' Aristotle misses certain features of tragedy (e. g., the conflict of principles and personalities), but in this theory of catharsis he has made a suggestion endlessly fertile in the understanding of the almost mystic power of art."

buses was ever trying to classify and arrange the contents of the whole realm of knowledge? However that may be, such suggestions as those made by Professor Murray throw much light upon what was in Aristotle's mind when he wrote his discussion-provoking definition of tragedy.

Professor Ross in his recent work on Aristotle makes another interesting suggestion in regard to the meaning of katharsis. "The process hinted at," he says, "bears a strong resemblance to the 'abreaction,' the working off of strong emotion, to which the psycho-analysts attach importance. There is this difference, however, that what they try to bring about in abnormal cases, Aristotle describes as the effect of tragedy on the normal spectator." Again, Professor Lane Cooper reminds us:

> The effect of tragedy upon the emotions is not merely something that took place in a former age, or among the Greeks alone; it may be observed at all times, and in virtually all persons, including the reader of this sentence. However much the malign influence of a narrowly intellectual education may check the native motions of the heart, few indeed must be they who are hopelessly bereft of all pleasure in the tragic *catharsis*. For generations, it is true, there has been a debate over the precise meaning one should attach to Aristotle's phrase—a debate that frequently has turned upon the study of words apart from things, and on the whole has not been sufficiently concerned with the actual experience of audiences, or rather of specially qualified judges, during the presentation of good tragedy and immediately thereafter. But if the words of Aristotle describe an effect which really occurs, it must be that a person of intelligence and normal sympathies will undergo, and be able to mark, the experience, not only in witnessing the best tragedy, but even in reading it. The student of the *Poetics* might render his notion of the tragic catharsis more exact by an attempt to observe his own emotions when he reads, or re-reads, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* or Shakespeare's *Othello.*
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> Furthermore, one might collect and examine the utterances of poets and other men of unusual sensibility on the feelings which tragic stories have aroused in them;—not primarily such conscious explanation of the Aristotelian catharsis as that of Milton in his preface to *Samson Agonistes*. This, though important, is a different kind of evi-

dence from the lines in the first of Milton's Latin Elegies, thus translated by Cowper:

> I gaze and grieve, still cherishing my grief;
> At times, e'en bitter tears yield sweet relief.

Similar spontaneous illustrations of the tragic pleasure have come from other English poets; for example Wordsworth in the Dedication preceding *The White Doe of Rylestone:*

> Pleasing was the smart,
> And the tear precious in compassion shed;

and Coleridge in *Love:*

> She wept with pity and delight.

V.

The trial which Professor Cooper suggests is an interesting one, and opens up at once the whole question of the difference between modern and ancient drama; indeed, of the fundamental difference between romantic and classical art. After all, can the touchstone of katharsis, as Aristotle conceived it, be applied to modern tragedy? Do Aristotle's canons of tragedy hold good today? The answer to this question would seem to be both "yes" and "no": "yes" in so far as his fundamental criteria of art can be applied to art in all its forms and all its modes; "no" in so far as an unbridgeable gulf is fixed between the classical and the romantic modes, or as Hegel calls them, *types* of art. For in classical drama katharsis is effected in order to restore cosmic harmony, whereas romantic, or Faustian drama (although the universal element may be present), is concerned with individual salvation. The infinite worth of personality is characteristic of Faustian drama. For the logic of romantic art is, as Hegel says, inevitably Christian, though often unconsciously so. Classical drama is concerned with the objective life of the state, of the family, of civil society; modern drama deals with the inward soul-life, the subjectivity of the individual. The nemesis which overtakes the erring hero of the classic drama is a nemesis that with ruthless unconcern for the individual, vindicates the cosmic powers and thus restores the threatened harmony of society, both human and Olympian. The nemesis that, like the Hound of Heaven, pursues the Faustian hero, pursues to seek the lost, to reclaim the fallen, to save a soul that is infinitely precious and thus, through the reconciliation of the individual with his maker and redeemer, to establish the perfect harmony of that mystic union which is the kingdom of heaven among men. The katharsis of classical drama leads to cosmic repose; the katharsis of romantic drama strives toward eternal activity.

Hence the canons of art that Aristotle applies to *Oedipus Tyrannus* cannot be applied with like results to *Macbeth,* still less to the dramas of the present century. In Goethe's *Faust,* as in Shakespeare's tragedies and in Dante's epic, an answer is given to the problem raised, a purpose established which katharsis must effect. The more modern development of Faustian art is prone to end in a question mark and to leave the issue in the air. But all this, as I have suggested, raises the question of classical versus romantic art. Has Greek tragedy a message for today? Can the study of classical drama result in a katharsis of our modern emotions that will enable us to see life more steadily and with a more comprehensive view of its entirety and infinity? These are problems which must be left for another time, and for a further study of the canons of art as prescribed by Aristotle.

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