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ARISTOTLE'S CATHARSIS AND AESTHETIC PLEASURE

By Eva Schaper

Every theory of art either explicitly or by implication tries to describe and to explain the effects art works have on their audience or spectators, or to prescribe what the proper effect should be. Such accounts are usually claimed to follow from—or at least not be unconnected with—what can be said in the same theory's terms about art works in their formal aspects. Aesthetic experience, aesthetic pleasure or aesthetic enjoyment are modern concepts with the aid of which we handle the discussion of such topics. Aristotle used none of them, but dealt with the problems which they raise. His theory contains only a few remarks on the effects of tragic works, but these are not an external addition to his theory of poetic form. They are a very compressed statement of the view that a specific kind of pleasure, pleasure through catharsis, is producced by works of art which are well-made tragedies. Catharsis is the *telos* of tragedy, the end towards which the formal artefact is functionally directed. In Aristotle's theory catharsis is part of the definition of tragedy : an imitation of an action " with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions ".[1]

This is the only passage in the text of the *Poetics* as we have it which explicitly mentions " catharsis ". It has become the most widely debated passage of the whole work. Indirect allusions by Aristotle to the doctrine apparently involved here are scanty and ambiguous. There is anything but firm agreement among scholars on either the exact meaning of the term or the range of its application, let alone on the implications of Aristotle's views. A well-known passage in the *Politics* seems to amplify the brief reference to catharsis in the *Poetics*, and both the *Rhetoric* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* have been drawn upon for confirmation of specific interpretations of the *Poetics* passage.[2] Without going into too many of the detailed complexities of a debate which has exercised Aristotelian scholarship for centuries, I shall briefly outline some of the main points of the controversy. My aim is to arrive at a reading of the catharsis passage which is textually plausible, and confirmed by Aristotle's formal analysis of art, his analysis of artistic unity, and his proposals for a theory of fiction based on the conception of the mimetic function of poetic art. Only by considering these aspects of Aristotle's theory, it seems to me, can the thesis of the cathartic effect of tragedy be disentangled from both the unnecessarily trivializing

[1] 1449b27-28, Bywater's translation.

[2] *Politics*, VIII, 7. *Rhetoric*, II, 5 & 8 ; *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 6.

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and the unnecessarily complicated versions which tradition has handed down to us.

Two points have to be clarified. First, what exactly does ' catharsis ' mean ? Secondly, is this a theoretical issue strictly relevant only to tragedy, or are there aspects and implications which justify treating it as part of a general Aristotelian theory of poetic art ?

On the first issue, we have what are claimed to be two incompatible or at least only loosely connected meanings of the term in Greek usage prior to the *Poetics*. There is no consensus as to whether Aristotle in the *Poetics* intended either of them to the exclusion of the other, or attempted an uneasy compromise between them. In one sense—usually regarded as the more literal one—' catharsis ' means ' purgation ', and this meaning derives from the medical context of healing and curing through expulsion and evacuation of harmful elements ; it means getting rid of disturbances by removing their causes. In the second sense, ' catharsis ' is said to mean ' purification ', and this meaning derives from a religious context of cleansing the spirit and sublimating the emotions in order to prepare for or to achieve a state of exaltation. This meaning has obvious moral overtones, whilst the medical one can be said to be morally neutral. Now it is obvious that Aristotle uses the term not literally, but metaphorically. But the question remains which of the two possible analogies, the medical or the religious one, or even a combination of both, he had in mind. Many scholars have argued in favour of the medical analogy and have tried to show that the translation of ' catharsis ' by ' purification ' is unwarranted.[3] For if we base

[3]This is usually referred to as the Bernays-Weil theory. See J. Bernays, *Zwei Abhandlungen über die Aristotelische Theorie des Drama* (Berlin, 1880) ; H. Weil, *Über die Wirkung der Tragödie nach Aristoteles* (Basel, 1848). Both assert the medical context as alone determining Aristotle's usage, and Bernays in particular was responsible for interpreting catharsis as pleasurable relief from and discharge of emotions. Already familiar to Renaissance commentators, this view had suffered an eclipse by the accent on purification, and only with Bernays and Weil did it receive what looked like strong philological backing. It has remained the dominant view to date. ' Purgation ' is the usual English equivalent for ' catharsis ', though some translators have preferred to paraphrase it, as for instance D. S. Margoliouth, *The Poetics of Aristotle* (London, 1911) (" indirectly through pity and terror righting mental disorder of this type ") or John Warrington, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Everyman Edition) (" with incidents arousing pity and fear, whereby to provide an outlet for such emotions "). Most translations which retain ' catharsis ' as a technical term (all those based on Bywater) insist on the medical reading (or a reading in strict analogy with medical usage). Examples of the standard view are too numerous to be quoted, but see for instance Introduction to Hamilton Fyfe's translation in the Loeb Edition (pp. xiii-xiv) ; A. E. Taylor, *Aristotle* (revised edition, Dover Publications, New York, 1955, pp. 109-111) ; L. J. Potts, *Aristotle on the Art of Fiction* (Cambridge University Press, 1962, p. 64). S. H. Butcher, however, who translates ' catharsis ' by ' purgation ' and in principle accepts Bernays' theory, made an attempt to combine this reading with an insistence on the ' purification of the emotions so relieved ' (see *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, fourth edition, Dover Publications, New York, 1951, mainly pp. 240-273). He has been widely criticized for this apparent inconsistency. A notable contemporary dissenter from the standard view is G. F. Else, who has put forward an interesting interpretation of the catharsis clause from the context of the *Poetics*, recommending what might be called an " aesthetic " reading of it. (See " Aristotle on the Beauty of Tragedy ", *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* XLIX, 1938, pp. 179-204, and *Aristotle's Poetics : The Argument*, Harvard University Press, 1957, mainly pp. 224-232 & 423-452). For misgivings about the dominant view, and alternative proposals, see also J. G. Warry, *Greek Aesthetic Theory* (London, 1962, pp. 118-135), and E. P. Papanoutsos, " La catharsis aristotélicienne " (*Eranos* XLV, 1947, pp. 77-93).

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our reading on the medical analogy, ' catharsis of such emotions ' becomes ' purgation *from* such emotions ', whilst on the religious analogy, ' catharsis of such emotions ' is ' purification *of* such emotions '.

It is therefore claimed that we have to decide between the separative and the objective genitive in the grammatical construction of the ' of ' in the catharsis clause. Modern scholarship is almost unanimous in favouring the separative genitive and in reading ' catharsis of such emotions ' as ' purgation from such emotions '. The reasons advanced for this are not based on textual evidence internal to the *Poetics*. Rather, the main argument has been that tōn toioutōn pathēmatōn *must* be *genitivus separativus*, (1) because Aristotle in Book 8 of the *Politics* uses ' catharsis ' unambiguously in the sense which necessitates this construction, (2) because other writings of his confirm that he held definite views on purgation, and (3) because no mention of catharsis can be found in his work in which ' purification ' is intended and would allow the *genitivus objectivus*. But despite the weight of the evidence from Aristotle's writings and from other Greek medical writings, this argument does not prove what it claims. It only allows one to argue that *if* we think of ' purgation ', the clause must be constructed with the separative genitive ; it does *not* allow one to argue that *if* we have here a *genitivus separativus*, then purgation and not purification is meant. It is the latter conclusion which seems now to be generally accepted. It is apparently taken for granted that textual scholarship has established the separative genitive beyond reasonable doubt, and that therefore any reading of the passage with purificatory allusions must be wrong. The trouble is, however, that the question of the grammatical construction of the genitive cannot in principle be settled without a decision on the range of, or limitation of, the meaning of the term—and has not in fact been so settled by the most prominent defenders of the separative genitive.

But if the use Aristotle makes of the term is metaphorical, i.e., if he uses ' catharsis ' of emotions in analogy to ' catharsis ' in other contexts, then everything is still left to be argued for. All would now depend on showing that a use analogous to ' purgation ' is incompatible with any suggestion of an analogy with ' purification ', and this has not been shown. Most scholars arguing for the separative genitive seem to have overlooked that even on the assumption that this construction is grammatically correct, the use of the term is still in analogy to other uses. And although many of them retain ' catharsis ' as a technical term in their English rendering of the phrase, they make clear that it is understood in strict analogy to purgation only and not to purification. I would want to argue not only that the grammatical structure does not commit us to translating the term by ' purgation ' exclusive of any other allusion, but that the recognition of the metaphorical use debars us from both straight translation *and* interpretation of ' catharsis of emotions ' as ' freeing from emotions '.

First of all, it is not very helpful to translate ' catharsis ' at all, if its metaphoric character is admitted. Surely the point of a metaphor is that

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it can extend a literal meaning of a term so as to suggest a use for which it would be inappropriate to attempt a straight translation. Retaining 'catharsis' in any formulation of Aristotle's doctrine therefore recommends itself. Provided we know the possible literal meaning or meanings here drawn upon and metaphorically extended, no harm can be done by a Greek word.

The second point is more serious. If I am right that the argument from Aristotle's uses of the term elsewhere does not allow us to rule out one possible analogy in favour of the other, I can maintain that it is still at least feasible to believe that Aristotle might have both 'purgation' and 'purification' in mind when he introduced the term in a new context. Nothing he says in the *Poetics* goes against this, and the evidence we have from his other writings is not at all as conclusive as it is made out to be. In any case, in what does the alleged incompatibility of 'purgation' and 'purification' consist? Surely not in an incompatibility of the separative with the objective genitive, for that does not arise: we are given only one genitive, and that is attached to the metaphor, not to that to which the metaphor is analogous. The medical and religious functions referred to by 'catharsis' in general Greek usage are not all that remote from each other, if one remembers the Pythagorean merging of semi-religious and semi-scientific notions in the idea of purification, or the Orphic cult mysteries which preserve traces of pre-scientific, that is, pre-physiological, medical practice. 'Purifying' does not exclude partial purgation; in purification something may be ejected, as in distillation, though something remains. And medical purgation need not be thought of as evacuation only: the "purged" organism is usually understood as having been purified. The religious sense of 'catharsis' can in any case be held to be a metaphorical extension of a basically chemical sense of 'purification', and in such a metaphor allusion to purgation need not be denied.[4]

Nevertheless, I do not therefore wish to suggest that we can take the Aristotelian meaning of 'catharsis' in the *Poetics* to be a combination of 'purging' and 'purifying'. Rather, I wish to argue that this concept as it appears for the first time in the *Poetics* is neither a medical nor a religious concept, but an aesthetic one.

By an aesthetic concept I understand any concept which has been transposed from its native domain in a way which changes its function so that it can occur in an analysis of problems connected with art. The work which the concept of catharsis does in Aristotle's theory is essentially like that of his concept of *mimesis*; the latter is also intelligible only when its transposition from a non-aesthetic to an aesthetic plane is recognised. 'Catharsis' in the aesthetic sense means neither purgation nor purification of the emotions

[4]The strong disjunction of the medical and the religious analogy has come in for criticism by W. F. Trench, "The Place of Katharsis in Aristotle's Aesthetics" (*Hermathena* XXVI, 1938, pp. 110-134) and Humphry House, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London, 1956, p. 105). A number of scholars, whilst accepting the medical analogy, have argued that Bernays' reading as 'discharge' or 'relief through discharge' is unwarranted and misrepresents the *medical* view here alluded to. See mainly D. S. Margoliouth, *op. cit.* (p. 65), and also F. L. Lucas, *Tragedy* (revised edition, London, 1957, pp. 37-38).

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in any straightforward sense, but it indicates the peculiar effect which only works of poetic art have. Such a transposed meaning of catharsis, it seems to me, occurs in the *Poetics* alone ; the passage in the *Politics* is relevant and useful because it provides an untransposed sense of emotional purgation. It is significant that Aristotle refers from the discussion in the *Politics* to the account which is to be given in the *Poetics*, and not the other way round. This suggests that the context of the *Poetics* is to furnish the framework for the use of the concept in connection with poetic art, and not any non-artistic context of medicine, religion, general psychology, education, or social ethics—nor the specific context of the *Politics*, in which music figures as a means towards the achievement of mental and social health. The relevance of these other disciplines and their conceptual problems is by no means denied by insisting on the aesthetic sense of ' catharsis '. But a straight reading of the Aristotelian passage as either medical or religious, or as psychological, educational or social, makes very strange reading indeed. Is it very likely that Aristotle really wants to say no more than that the end of tragedy is to arouse emotions in us in order to purge us of them ? Or that tragedy has the effect of cleansing the emotions we do have ? Or that after witnessing a tragedy we feel better, and are more likely to consider our fellow men sympathetically ? In a way, no doubt, he had all this in mind, but only because these suggestions helped him to make his full point. He made it in the context of art and its analysis, and adapted the concept of catharsis for use within this context, drawing freely on other uses which made the conceptual transposition possible and intelligible. The reference to impact and audience reaction has to be read as an integral part of unpacking the implications of the analysis of art, of what it means for something to be a work of fiction, a product of *poiesis*.

The traditional interpretation of catharsis attributes to tragedy a therapeutic effectiveness. On this view, a release from unwanted and painful emotions or passions is achieved through stimulation of the same or similar emotions, bringing about an emotional climax unbearable for long, and therefore discharging itself when a certain pitch is reached. The resulting peace and calm is said to be pleasurable. Thus seen, ' catharsis ' is a psychological concept. There is enough evidence that Aristotle elsewhere held a theory of homeopathic healing of disturbances. Yet what makes this view so unsatisfactory in its extension to the *Poetics* is its lack of connection with the definition of tragedy, of which the catharsis clause forms, after all, an indispensable part. All other concepts and conceptual implications making up this definition are what can broadly be called structural concepts, concepts applicable to the analysis of art works, their nature and composition. In the catharsis clause itself, Aristotle deliberately introduces consideration of the *telos* of tragedy, and I suggest that it would be entirely un-Aristotelian to think of the *telos* of something in terms other than structural. But this is what the therapeutic interpretation forces us to do : to shift from a structural analysis to descriptive psychology, and to regard

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tragedy as a means to achieving a certain end—an end, moreover, for which other and often more effective means are available. Now I am not denying that tragedy can function as such a means for emotional discharge. All I am denying is that tragedy as an art form can possibly be defined or even significantly characterized by the fact that it often plays this role. Aristotle devised his definition as a collection of essential features ; the clause " with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions " is no exception. The therapeutic reading distorts this unnecessarily. If we adopt the suggested transposed reading, ' catharsis ' can be understood as a structural term, a term of art. With it Aristotle further unravels the intricate implications of his conception of poetic art, this time deliberately from the standpoint of what an art work, which fully comes up to the definition of a completely structured thing, does to an experiencing audience. Catharsis, then, and the enjoyment that goes with it, is the answer, and no amount of translating or transliterating the term will get us round the fact that this is something which can only be had in the experience of art ; it follows from the structure of the work in its essential nature.

In claiming a special role for ' catharsis ' as an aesthetic concept, I have already spoken of it in the context of poetic art generally, and not just of tragedy. If it has such a context, this reinforces to some extent the claim I am making for the special role of catharsis in Aristotle's discussion of tragedy. Can ' catharsis ', then, be placed in such a larger context, and are we justified in speaking of the cathartic effect of other art forms or of art in general ? This is the second of my original questions.

This issue, too, is difficult to settle beyond reasonable doubt. Aristotle's own words are so brief that conjecture about the application of the term ' catharsis ', as well as about its meaning, can hardly be avoided. The difficulties in this case arise from the compressed conjunction of ' pity and fear ' with ' catharsis of such emotions ' in the passage under discussion. We can break up this question into two. First, what does the passage say about catharsis in connection with tragedy ? And secondly, what, if anything, does the passage allow us to hold about catharsis in connection with other art forms ?

On the first question, there are a number of possible readings. (*a*) The only emotions aroused by tragedy are pity and fear, and the result is catharsis (whether in the sense of purgation or purification) of those emotions only. This severely restrictive reading has been largely discredited by its limited applicability even to the tragedies Aristotle mentions, let alone to tragedy in general. Most scholars now are prepared to admit that nothing in the text prevents a more liberal interpretation, namely (*b*) that other emotions besides pity and fear may be involved in tragic catharsis. They differ, however, in specifying this. One version of this view is (*b*1) that pity and fear are only striking examples of the kind of emotions tragedy arouses, as well as of the kind of emotions whose catharsis is achieved as a result. This

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version, however, is too weak, and it is made improbable by the emphasis Aristotle himself puts on pity and fear : they are the specifically tragic emotions, and " incidents arousing pity and fear " are not just examples of tragic incidents, but necessary to tragedy. The substitution of other incidents and other emotions would leave us with presumably dramatic works, but not tragedies. A more careful formulation of (*b*) is therefore needed : (*b*2) Tragedy may arouse various emotions, but among its incidents must be those arousing pity and fear through which catharsis of " such emotions " —passions in general including pity and fear—can be effected. This reading is textually unobjectionable, that is to say, the grammatical structure of Aristotle's sentence can bear this interpretation without distortion. Also, it makes excellent sense in the context of the *Poetics* as a theory of poetic art, with the theory of tragedy figuring in a prominent illustrative position.[5]

On the basis of this reading, one can take it that Aristotle maintains that tragedy achieves through and by means of pity and fear a catharsis of these and similar emotions, or just of emotions in general. The same reading, whilst not entailing the view that catharsis is not restricted to the effect of tragedy, does not prohibit such an inference. This brings me to the second part of my question : What, if anything, does the catharsis passage allow us to hold about catharsis in connection with other art forms ?

It can be argued now that the first part of Aristotle's catharsis clause, ' with incidents arousing pity and fear ', says something about tragedy and is restricted to it. Only in poetic works which are of the tragic nature are the imitated actions of a kind towards which we feel pity and fear. Pitiful and fearful events are the differentiae of the tragic from other poetic forms. But the second part of the clause, ' wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions ', then relates the specific nature of the tragic events to that which makes the effect of tragedy an aesthetic effect : that catharsis is achieved. Such an interpretation will only be fully intelligible when what I take to be the aesthetic or transposed sense of ' catharsis ' has been elucidated further. The adopted reading of the passage at least *allows* us to argue, that if pity and fear are necessary to tragedy for the accomplishment of catharsis, other art forms may bring about their catharsis of emotions through different emotions aroused as a result of different mimetic contents and structures. True, Aristotle only discusses tragic catharsis through pity and fear. But then, the definition of tragedy is the only fully formulated definition we get from the *Poetics*, though other poetic arts are in principle treated as definable along similar lines, and brought into the discussion by Aristotle on this assumption. Even from the *Poetics* as we have it, it seems

[5]For a survey of views on the connection between catharsis and pity and fear see Wolfgang Schadewaldt, " Furcht und Mitleid ? " (*Hermes* 83, 1955, pp. 129-171) ; also Max Kommerell, *Lessing und Aristoteles* (2nd edition, Frankfurt a.M., 1957, pp. 262-272). Both list also the main positions advocating either the objective or the separative genitive, Kommerell concentrating on theories from the Renaissance to Lessing, Schadewaldt considering contemporary alternatives. For good arguments for the inclusion of emotions other than pity and fear, see Rudolf Schottlaender, " Eine Fessel der Tragödiendeutung " (*Hermes* 81, 1953, pp. 22-29).

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implausible that Aristotle himself would have wished to reserve catharsis for tragedy. Whatever be the exact meaning of the difficult concept, something about the range of its application can be gathered from the indications Aristotle gave us of his treatment of comedy. It is easy to think of the enjoyment occasioned by comedy as related to an emotional transformation in a fashion similar to that in which tragic enjoyment comes about. Different emotions are involved, to be sure, but then the incidents of comedy are ludicrous, not terrible. But what happens to audiences stirred and excited by comedy is comparable to the experience of tragedy in that both give rise to integrated aesthetic experiences in their own way. Comedy might well be said to bring about release of tension, or to restore to proportion any excess of *Schadenfreude* and related emotions when laughter eventually supervenes. It would presumably have to be part of a formal definition of comedy along Aristotelian lines that its structure makes this possible.[6]

I come, then, to the transposed sense of ' catharsis ', and shall try to show the concept at work within a theory of poetic art which I believe to be implied in Aristotle's discussion of tragedy.

When Aristotle in Chapter 14 returns to the discussion of pity and fear, he does not mention catharsis. Instead, he speaks of the pleasure " proper to tragedy ". " The tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear, and the poet has to produce it by a work of imitation ".[7] If we are to take seriously what Aristotle said in Chapter 6 as part of the definition of tragedy, " tragic " pleasure must be the outcome of *catharsis* which is effected through pity and fear. Pleasure derived from tragedy has always been taken to pose a special problem, and to be a special case of enjoying art. What is it we enjoy when witnessing a tragedy on the stage ? Surely not the suffering portrayed, or the pain expressed or displayed ? Tragic events are horrible, and in themselves decidedly unpleasant. Are we then depraved enough to take pleasure in suffering provided it is not our own ? The popular view that tragic pleasure is the enjoyment of suffering from a safe distance does not seem to explain why we enjoy tragedy on the stage and usually do not enjoy hearing about some far-away terrible event in real life. On the other hand, the equally popular view that the pleasure involved is pleasure in the release from unwanted and troublesome emotions is even less satisfactory, since it leaves totally unexplained why Aristotle should want to call this " tragic " pleasure, or " pleasure proper to tragedy ".

Aristotle's suggestions need not lead to either of these views. He does not say that we enjoy tragic events ; or that we enjoy our own emotional states. He speaks of the pleasure produced by an imitation. That is to say, we take pleasure not in the terrible events as such, nor in our own emotional states, but in the tragedy in which tragic events are presented

[6]On comedy and tragedy, see Augusto Rostagni, *Aristotele* : *Poetica* (2nd edition, Turin, 1945, pp. XLVI-LIV) ; J. G. Warry, *op. cit.*, p. 119 ; W. D. Ross, *Aristotle* (4th edition, London, 1945, p. 290).

[7]1453b12-13.

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to us. An " imitation ", in Aristotle's usage, is no mere pretence ; *mimesis* is the presentation of a coherent action, made transparent and intelligible through artistic formulation. Tragic pleasure, then, is what results when the emotional impact of pitiful and fearful events is made in a work of tragic art. Tragic pleasure results from how these events appear in the work, how they form part of the probable chain of events integrated by all the devices of poetic art. Pleasure, though an audience reaction, must therefore be understood as directly connected with the formal structure of tragedy, its ways of unifying and presenting pitiful and terrible events, its particular art. That pleasure should be derived from tragedy appears strange only because of its apparent incongruity with the unpleasantness of the events presented.

Aristotle's insistence that a catharsis of emotions is requisite for tragic enjoyment stresses the difference between emotional reaction to life and emotional reaction to art. In the latter, the response is to something which, though terrible and painful and therefore deeply distressing, becomes transparent and articulate. The difference does not lie in a safe distance from what is happening, but in the understanding which a work affords whilst yet shaking us profoundly. Emotions alone involve us as sufferers of them. What Aristotle seems to say in the catharsis suggestion is that mimetic works so organize their material that we can recognize that towards which we feel so violently, thus setting us free to enjoy not pitiful and terrible events, but their adding up to more than just these events strung together. For in tragedy, they add up to intelligible chains of events, which illuminate human possibilities *in extremis*.

In contrast to purely intellectual understanding of a given situation, the enjoyment which tragedy affords emerges from emotional response to the events and completes itself in a grasp of their significance. The emotions are not superseded or left behind ; they are transformed into aesthetic emotions, that is, emotions in which being involved and being distanced through understanding are held in balance. In a sense, the result is " purgation " : purgation from emotions in the raw. The non-aesthetic usage of ' catharsis ' supplies this sense ; but the full sense is available only when we think of catharsis as the result of a work of imitation, the result of a deliberate construction in which something about human nature and life is made clear for us. When we transpose what ' purgation ' means in the context of physiology to the context of human beings witnessing not live events but artistic formulations of them, we arrive at the " aesthetic " meaning of the term.

Every tragedy which comes up to the requirement of being a fully articulated mimetic presentation of a concretely imagined situation is a challenge to the emotional life of the spectator. It challenges him to understand the mimetic presentation through feeling towards it. This is not a stance we take up completely at will, but something that the work itself brings about. The spectator of a tragedy *is* shaken by the terribleness and

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pitifulness of events, but he is also at the same time made to see what these events come to. In tragedy such events are not only presented as shorn of all irrelevancies, but also as " adding up ", and the spectator, by having his emotions transformed, can understand just what the work adds up to. He may never be able to formulate this in cognitive terms ; but he can feel it with peculiar intensity. We might say that when emotions are aroused towards that which is fully transparent, they are transformed through seeing how it all hangs together. Such a response is no longer purely emotional, nor is it purely intellectual. It is an aesthetic response, and it is in this sense that ' aesthetic emotion ' and ' aesthetic understanding ' indicate the same phenomenon. Catharsis can only happen to someone who in the presence of a work of art accepts the role of an aesthetic spectator. The context of Aristotle's few and apparently cryptic remarks suggests that the work which fulfils the requirements of being an internally well-structured tragedy, a mimetic work with illuminative power, will bring such an attitude about, that is to say, will result in the pleasure " proper to tragedy ".

A fusion of the emotional and intellectual has traditionally been regarded as a characteristic of the aesthetic mode of experience. I do not think it is fruitful to discuss this in terms of experiential modes, or to analyse the psychological ingredients in what is claimed to be an aesthetic attitude. We need not therefore give up speaking of the aesthetic character of such experiences, or refrain from discussing aesthetic pleasure. Aristotle, it seems to me, had the sounder insight when he mentioned catharsis only briefly, and took an understanding of the difficult concept almost for granted. For he introduced the notion when he was unravelling the conception of a work of poetic art and its *telos*. It is therefore at least highly probable that he wished it to be understood in the context he so amply provided for it.

This context is not that of tragedy alone, though only tragic catharsis is mentioned in the *Poetics*. Tragedy is treated as the most important and possibly highest form of poetic art. Catharsis through tragedy accounts for the transformation of what would be painful in real life to what is deeply enjoyable when embodied in the structure of a work of art. It accounts for emotional involvement of a different kind from that experienced in the emotional impact of real events. It focuses on the difference between life and fictional presentation from the angle of our reaction to it, and it focuses on the character of this reaction in relation to the work. In all these respects tragedy is not unique. Enjoyment derived from works of art of any kind exhibits a shift of levels, from the ordinary to the aesthetic. Considerations which hold in the explanation of tragic pleasure are needed to explain aesthetic pleasure in general. It is not only from tragedy that we derive the kind of enjoyment which is incommensurable with the emotions we would feel towards " the same " or " similar " situations in life.

Only in tragedy, however, is the catharsis which makes aesthetic enjoyment possible brought about by pity and fear. For what makes a dramatic work a tragedy is that its incidents are terrifying and pitiful events. But

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what makes it a work of art and explains our enjoyment of it, is the transformation of these events into coherent, meaningful, structured and intelligible events. And these we find only in works of art, in the fictitional entities whose form Aristotle's *Poetics* discusses at length. To treat tragic pleasure as an exemplification of aesthetic pleasure is not to ignore the uniqueness of the tragic form and its cathartic effect. Tragedy can move us to the limits of our capacities ; it can give us the recognition of humanity at its best, at its most precarious, at its most vulnerable, and yet as triumphant. This is because what is unified in tragedy is events which in life would crush us and leave us numb, but which, in the cosmos of a work, contribute to a mimetic whole. Tragic catharsis, catharsis through pity and fear, provides the most poignant instance of a cathartic effect. It shows in a very striking form what is at stake in the enjoyment of any work of art : that the emotions felt by audiences or spectators and the complex reactions to fiction are functions of the work *qua* work, that is to say, bound up with the formal nature of the artefact. In art forms other than tragedy, catharsis is effected through other emotions of response, for other art forms not only employ other devices, but in their fictional statements are concerned with other aspects of human life.

In all enjoyment of art we find a response to something which is presented to us and not actually lived through by us as agents. All aesthetic enjoyment involves us thus as spectators. For Aristotle, catharsis is the response to an imitation, to that which is presented as if it were real, to that which is convincing and probable despite not being fact, to that which is complete in itself by virtue of conforming to some formal principles of art. ' Catharsis ', then, is a term of aesthetics and not of psychology.

One can therefore say that aesthetic pleasure is enjoyment of the forms of fictional composition, taking ' form ' in the full Aristotelian sense. Aesthetically to enjoy an art work is not only " willingly to suspend our disbelief " ; it is also to accept something as a fiction, and this can occur in the confrontation with any artistic formulation, in works of all kinds. We are sceptical about the " aesthetic " enjoyment of the person who " enjoys " a play because he believes that he is watching an incident in his own life history ; of the reader who sends birthday greetings to a character in a novel which he " enjoyed " ; of people who, emulating Zeuxis' birds picking at painted fruit, " enjoy " a still-life because it makes a good dining-room picture or a kind of appetizer ; of someone who " enjoys " a piece of music because it soothes him to oblivion. In all such cases fiction is mistaken for fact, the art form is not allowed to become explicit in the partial experience it evokes, and no link—or only a very weak link—with the artistic structure is established. Nothing which could be described as catharsis at however low a level has been achieved. The question how far a work is to blame for inviting such attitudes rather than forcing us into its grip raises interesting problems. However, Aristotle is quite clear that we cannot rely on the failure or success of a work to achieve its *telos* (that is, the ends

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secured by its form) on any particular occasion, as a criterion of whether the work does in fact have this *telos* in virtue of its fully structured form.

The general doctrine that emerges from Aristotle's treatment of catharsis can now be seen in perspective as extending Aristotle's critical commentary on the problems Plato had raised for aesthetics. That emotions play an integral part in the experience of art works, Aristotle doubts as little as Plato did. But how the emotions are involved, what role exactly they play, how emotional concern is to be judged and evaluated—all this is seen entirely differently by the two thinkers. Plato condemned mimetic art because he saw in it an emotional display which called for, and usually achieved, imitative audience reaction. On his view, the emotional content of a work directly affected the emotional make-up of the spectator or listener, who, as it were, caught the emotions displayed in a work through infection. Aristotle does not deny that art works are emotionally effective, and those works which he singles out, namely tragedies, hardly allow of any doubt on this score. But there is no suggestion in his theory that the emotions aroused by mimetic art are the same as or even similar to those which may be expressed or presented in the work. In tragedy, for instance, emotions of grief, pain, sorrow, dejection and despair are usually displayed. The spectator, however, does not in any important sense continue these emotions as such : he responds to the whole tragedy with " pity and fear wherewith to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions ". That is to say, on the Aristotelian view, the aesthetically important emotions are response emotions, emotions towards something. Plato believed that the emotions felt in the presence of art were emotions shared and emotions imitated, emotions somehow handed over by the poem to the audience. For Aristotle the emotions which are undoubtedly felt are emotions created. According to him we do not simply take over or copy the emotions which are fictionally presented to us ; we respond to the total structure of fictional events with emotions of our own, not with emotions caught by infection. Such emotions bring about the cathartic transformation of felt involvement into aesthetic joy. We can describe this as " the thrill of recognition ", stressing the hybrid and yet unique character of aesthetic enjoyment, of felt understanding in which both passion and intelligence are transposed into the aesthetic key.

Plato had serious doubts on moral grounds about whether we should tolerate art which deeply affects us emotionally. Aristotle had no such misgivings. Art works can indeed be profoundly disturbing. Good art, however, does not require, and should not lead to, indulgence in emotional upheaval, but rather to constructive and creative responses, calling upon the entire person to transform emotions through understanding. Indulgence, if it occurs, is an irrelevancy. Crude emotions, emotions simply had and endured, could never justify the art work which stimulates them. They have only a transitory place in the experience of art as Aristotle sees it. They prepare for the enjoyment in aesthetic understanding. This is the

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enjoyment attendant upon getting something clear, the pleasure of seeing things fall into place. What is experienced in this way must be particularized in individual situations—only through these can our passions be engaged and our emotions affected. They are situations which we can grasp and understand because their structures are laid bare for us, in art works which mimetically present whatever they have to say in a whole connected "according to probability or necessity". Art works which succeed in being complete in themselves, which are fictional presentations of human possibilities in particular constellations, are directed not simply towards our emotional participation, or our capacity for make-belief, but also towards our potentiality for felt understanding through fiction.

The connection of art and the emotions, of art and enjoyment, first stated by Plato as a threatening and dangerous fact, emerges from Aristotle's theory—at least on the interpretation here attempted—as one of fiction and its aesthetic understanding. What Aristotle so briefly suggests in the catharsis clause and elaborates only indirectly through the context in which this clause appears, can be adapted to the need we still feel in our theories of art to explain the complex phenomena of the efficaciousness of art works by focusing on their structure. Such an interpretation of Aristotle's most puzzling remarks on catharsis firmly links these with his central views on the formal characteristics and structural principles of poetic art. Those aspects for which Aristotle has been called a formalist, those for which he has been claimed as the father of all organic theories of art, those which make the *Poetics* the basis for every classicist aesthetic, and those for which he is remembered as the great theoretician of tragedy, are then all part of the same undertaking : to show what it means for something to be a work of art.

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