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http://www.skenejournal.it
info@skenejournal.it

Brigitte Kappl*

Profit, Pleasure, and Purgation. Catharsis in Aristotle, Paolo Beni and Italian Late Renaissance Poetics

Abstract

The Cinquecento has seen an unprecedented flourishing of literary theory. While many other issues are disputed, nearly all critics agree that poetry should entertain and delight, but also produce some kind of moral benefit. When Aristotle's *Poetics* enters the debate, interpreters seek and find in his work a confirmation of their view. In his celebrated notorious catharsis clause, Aristotle seems to hint at the moral effect that should be obtained by tragedy. Since he does not explain the term in the transmitted *Poetics* text, interpreters fill in what they regard as its missing parts. The way in which they do this also reveals their own preconceptions of what should be classed as moral profit. This paper describes the range of the different meanings which are attached to Aristotelian catharsis in the secondo Cinquecento. After having explored the relationship between pleasure and profit in Aristotle, it deals with Renaissance theorists, using Paolo Beni's commentary on the *Poetics* as a starting point. Beni's commentary is the last substantial contribution to the Cinquecento debate, and his critical review of the different readings of catharsis that had been developed in the preceding decades provides us with a useful overview. Employing Beni's criticism as a guideline, the article further characterizes the various Renaissance approaches to catharsis and traces their origins.

1. Introduction – Ethics and Aesthetics in Aristotle

In times when cartoonists get gunned down for publishing offensive drawings and Capitoline Venus is covered up in order to spare the feelings of an Iranian politician, the autonomy of art, which appears to have been an essential part of our Western identity at least for the last century, is up for discussion again. To us, it seems unacceptable that art should enhance public morale and bow to the state authority. This sensitivity to external claims raised against art derives from a certain manner of looking for morals in works of art, which has flourished especially during the extensive debate on the arts in the Italian Renaissance. This debate, in turn, has inherited

* Philipps-Universität Marburg – kappl@staff.uni-marburg.de

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many patterns of thought from the antiquity onwards. In the field of literary theory, a major point of reference is Aristotle's *Poetics*. Since its 'rediscovery', it has massively influenced discussions on literature by providing topics and terminology, although already existing forms of discourse (such as the system of rhetoric and a concept of poetry based on Horace's *Ars poetica* and other ancient sources)[1] as well as the contemporary literary output in its diversity and novelty have often led to an adaptation of the text to the needs and expectations of its interpreters. Thus, in his ground-breaking *History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, Bernard Weinberg has argued that the interpretation of the *Poetics* is generally characterized by a tendency to rhetoricization and moralization.

Indeed, readers of Aristotle's *Poetics* will look in vain for a discussion of the moral benefits yielded by poetry. On the contrary, Aristotle repeatedly mentions the pleasure that the recipients draw from works of art. In the fourteenth chapter, for example, he insists on the notion that the emotional effect of tragedy should result from the composition of action as such. To create this effect by means of spectacle (*opsis*) would rather testify to a lack of poetic artistry (*atechnoteron*); those who use effects of staging only for the sake of the sensational or monstrous have nothing to do with tragedy:

> οὐ γὰρ πᾶσαν δεῖ ζητεῖν ἡδονὴν ἀπὸ τραγῳδίας, ἀλλὰ τὴν οἰκείαν. ἐπεὶ δὲ τὴν ἀπὸ ἐλέου καὶ φόβου διὰ μιμήσεως δεῖ ἡδονὴν παρασκευάζειν τὸν ποιητήν, φανερὸν ὡς τοῦτο ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν ἐμποιητέον. (Arist. *Poet.* 1453b10-14)
>
> [For one should not seek every kind of pleasure (*hedone*) from tragedy, but only the kind peculiar to it. And since the poet should create the pleasure which comes from pity and fear through imitation (*mimesis*), it is obvious that this should be built into the actions.]

In chapter 23, Aristotle remarks that, with regard to the composition of action, epic poetry has to conform to the same requirements as tragedy, "so that it will produce the pleasure particular to it, like an animal in its unity and integrity".[2]

Now, what is this 'specific pleasure' which Aristotle attributes to poetry? First of all, we have to keep in mind that, according to Aristotle, pleasure does not occur by itself but is always, broadly speaking, a concomitant of the soul's natural activity (*energeia*). In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle proposes the following definition of pleasure: "a certain movement of the soul and a sud-

[1] See Weinberg 1961; Herrick 1946.

[2] Arist. *Poet.* 1459a20f: ἵν' ὥσπερ ζῷον ἓν ὅλον ποιῇ τὴν οἰκείαν ἡδονήν. All translations from Greek and Latin are mine unless otherwise stated.

den and perceptible settling into the natural state (*physis*)".[3] Still in the same context he declares that this is also the reason why artistic representations, provided that they are well made, yield pleasure even if the object there represented is not pleasurable. Indeed, we do not derive pleasure from the object itself, but from the act of perceiving, that is, from learning. And in learning, Aristotle says, we experience a settling into our natural state. From these words we can infer that 'natural state' in this case is not an original state – the original state would in fact be lack of knowledge –, but a final state of perfection (*telos*), in which the respective entity has fulfilled its potential. For 'nature', in its proper sense, as is stated in the *Metaphysics*, is the essence (*ousia*) of a thing, and the essence is at the same time its perfection (Arist. *Metaph.* 1015a10-19).

Therefore, man reaches his distinctive nature when he fulfils his potential, primarily with regard to his mental abilities, in the best possible way. If he succeeds in doing so, his life will contain an optimum of pleasure. The best possible perfection of one's potential, or, more precisely, the activity of a soul which has reached its perfection, is called virtue (*arete*) by Aristotle, and in this activity resides human happiness (*eudaimonia*) (Arist. *EN* 1097b22-98a18).

The distinctive abilities of the human soul are first and foremost cognitive faculties, such as sense-perception or (even more specifically) discursive reasoning, faculties which allow us to discern something as a certain entity, whatever it is: colours, sounds, trees, refrigerators, equilateral triangles, justice and injustice, or ourselves. Depending on the quality of the perceived object, feelings of pleasure or pain are immediately connected with the act of perceiving; indirectly, desires and emotions are also involved. If I perceive, for instance, that somebody has wronged me, I immediately feel pain, and usually I also desire to get compensation or satisfaction, that is, according to Aristotle's definition, I feel anger. Rational activity has its delights too: solving a complicated mathematical problem can yield enormous pleasure. Thus, all kinds of perception, even the allegedly 'abstract' reasoning, imply (more or less intense) feelings. On the other hand, the quality and intensity of emotions depend on an act of cognition in spite of all physical factors implied in the process.

In certain contexts it is possible to approach the object of perception in such a way as to concentrate on the very perceiving, irrespective of whether the object perceived is beautiful or ugly, good or bad for us. This is exactly the case with works of art. As is well known, Aristotle generally defines art as imitation (*mimesis*): a work of art represents, it is not the 'thing' itself,

[3] Arist. *Rhet.* 1369b33-35: κίνησίν τινα τῆς ψυχῆς καὶ κατάστασιν ἀθρόαν καὶ αἰσθητὴν εἰς τὴν ὑπάρχουσαν φύσιν.

but something in something else (the medium). By re-presenting, art shows and discloses something without being the thing itself. Thus, it enables us to concentrate on the object as such. When, for example, Oedipus on the stage is heading towards disaster, the spectators can calmly remain seated and focus on the development of the tragic action. Insofar as we realise what is happening on stage, namely that a person similar to us who is basically a good character brings ruin upon himself to an extent he does not deserve, we feel pity and fear, but insofar as we 'learn' what this person does and why he fails, we derive pleasure from this act of cognition as such.

Accordingly, in the chapter of the *Rhetoric* cited above Aristotle says:

> ἐπεὶ δὲ τὸ μανθάνειν τε ἡδὺ καὶ τὸ θαυμάζειν, καὶ τὰ τοιάδε ἀνάγκη ἡδέα εἶναι, οἷον τό τε μιμούμενον, ὥσπερ γραφικὴ καὶ ἀνδριαντοποιία καὶ ποιητική, καὶ πᾶν ὃ ἂν εὖ μεμιμημένον ᾖ, κἂν ᾖ μὴ ἡδὺ αὐτὸ τὸ μεμιμημένον· οὐ γὰρ ἐπὶ τούτῳ χαίρει, ἀλλὰ συλλογισμὸς ἔστιν ὅτι τοῦτο ἐκεῖνο, ὥστε μανθάνειν τι συμβαίνει. (Arist. *Rhet.* 1371b4-20)

> [Since learning and wondering are pleasant, all things connected with them must also be pleasant; for instance, a work of imitation such as painting, sculpture, poetry, and all that is well imitated, even if the object of imitation is not pleasant; for it is not this that causes pleasure, but the inference that this is that, so that, as a result, we learn something.]

We find a strikingly similar statement in the fourth chapter of the *Poetics*:

> ἃ γὰρ αὐτὰ λυπηρῶς ὁρῶμεν, τούτων τὰς εἰκόνας τὰς μάλιστα ἠκριβωμένας χαίρομεν θεωροῦντες, οἷον θηρίων τε μορφὰς τῶν ἀτιμοτάτων καὶ νεκρῶν. αἴτιον δὲ καὶ τούτου, ὅτι μανθάνειν οὐ μόνον τοῖς φιλοσόφοις ἥδιστον ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ὁμοίως, ἀλλ' ἐπὶ βραχὺ κοινωνοῦσιν αὐτοῦ. διὰ γὰρ τοῦτο χαίρουσι τὰς εἰκόνας ὁρῶντες, ὅτι συμβαίνει θεωροῦντας μανθάνειν καὶ συλλογίζεσθαι τί ἕκαστον, οἷον ὅτι οὗτος ἐκεῖνος· (Arist. *Poet.* 1448b4-15)

> [We delight in contemplating the pictures of things we would not like to look at in real life, especially if the pictures are made with the greatest precision, for example the appearances of the vilest animals, or of corpses. The reason for this is that learning is most pleasurable not only to philosophers, but to the others as well (though they share in it only to a limited degree). For people delight in looking at the pictures for the very reason that they happen to learn and infer (*syllogizesthai*) what each thing is, for example: this is such-and-such a man.]

If we bring together the issues here mentioned, it becomes probable that the specific pleasure provided by tragedy consists in just that: the recipient (ideally) grasps the structure, the course, and the motivations of the tragic action, and in this cognitive-emotional activity of the soul he experiences pleasure.

So far we have heard nothing about moral profit – does that mean that Aristotle's approach is a purely 'aesthetic' one? A closer look at his ethical works will teach us otherwise: it is pleasure (and its opposite) which is at the core of his considerations: "ethical virtue is concerned with pleasures and pains",[4] and even, "the whole concern both of virtue and of political science is with pleasures and pains; for the man who 'practises' these well will be good, he who 'practices' them badly bad".[5] "It is by reason of pleasures and pains that men become bad, by pursuing and avoiding these – either the pleasures and pains they ought not or when they ought not or as they ought not, or by going wrong in one of the other similar ways that may be distinguished".[6] Therefore, it is essential for us to show feelings of pleasure and pain about the appropriate situations at the right things, for example, to pity someone who deserves it or to fear something that is a real threat. Since it is vital for our virtue and even for our happiness to have adequate emotions, it is clear that we should begin practising as early as possible: "Hence we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought to; for this is the right education".[7]

Considering Aristotle's preoccupation with appropriateness of feelings, it seems reasonable to interpret the well-known catharsis of the emotions along these lines, too. By presenting people who, for understandable reasons, fail in their pursuits and bring about their own misfortune, tragedy arouses pity in a manner that is adequate to its object. And insofar as the tragic characters are similar to us in their moral qualities, the fear we experience in the face of a real threat for the hero's life and happiness will be appropriate. Just as medical catharsis aims at restoring the right temper in the body, tragic catharsis may be conceived as a process in which, by the arousal of adequate emotions, the soul is brought into an adequate emotional state, thus (ideally) contributing in the long run to a habitus of adequate emotional response.[8]

[4] Arist. *EN* 1104b8f: περὶ ἡδονὰς γὰρ καὶ λύπας ἐστὶν ἡ ἠθικὴ ἀρετή. Translations of the quotes from *Nicomachean Ethics* are by W.D. Ross; some of them have been adapted.

[5] Arist. *EN* 1105a10-13: περὶ ἡδονὰς καὶ λύπας πᾶσα ἡ πραγματεία καὶ τῇ ἀρετῇ καὶ τῇ πολιτικῇ· ὁ μὲν γὰρ εὖ τούτοις χρώμενος ἀγαθὸς ἔσται, ὁ δὲ κακῶς κακός.

[6] Arist. *EN* 1104b21-3: δι' ἡδονὰς δὲ καὶ λύπας φαῦλοι γίνονται, τῷ διώκειν ταύτας καὶ φεύγειν, ἢ ἃς μὴ δεῖ ἢ ὅτε οὐ δεῖ ἢ ὡς οὐ δεῖ ἢ ὁσαχῶς ἄλλως ὑπὸ τοῦ λόγου διορίζεται τὰ τοιαῦτα.

[7] Arist. *EN* 1104b11-13: διὸ δεῖ ἦχθαί πως εὐθὺς ἐκ νέων, ὡς ὁ Πλάτων φησίν, ὥστε χαίρειν τε καὶ λυπεῖσθαι οἷς δεῖ· ἡ γὰρ ὀρθὴ παιδεία αὕτη ἐστίν.

[8] Though much ink has been spilled over Aristotelian catharsis, opinion on the matter is still divided. I would favour a view of catharsis which integrates both cognitive and emotional aspects. See Schmitt in Aristotle 2011: 333-48; 476-510; Schmitt 1994; Halliwell 1986: 184-201; and 2003. Further bibliographical references can be found in these works.

2.1 Profit and Delight in Late Renaissance Poetics

As we have seen, in Aristotle there is an intrinsic connection between ethics and aesthetics, pleasure and morals, so that they are substantially inseparable. Therefore, we should avoid any generalization intrinsic in the idea of a moralization of the *Poetics* in the Renaissance. Rather, we should ask what *kind* of morals comes into play here. This is what I will attempt to do in this paper by revealing some patterns of thought characteristic of literary theory of the late Italian Cinquecento and early Seicento, which play a decisive part in the discussions about the purpose of poetry, and of tragic poetry in particular. In this context *catharsis* will figure prominently, for the short hint at this phenomenon in chapter 6 of the *Poetics* fills in precisely the assumed gap in the treatise itself: here, at last, we seem to find the moral benefit otherwise absent in the transmitted text – and sorely missed.[9]

I will carry on my investigation by taking Paolo Beni's commentary on the *Poetics*, first published in 1613, as a guide. Beni's work completes the series of great commentaries on the *Poetics* produced in Italy during the late Renaissance, which had been started off by Robortello in 1548.[10] Beni is aware of this long line of tradition, and his approach indicates that he actually had the intention to bring to a conclusion as many issues of the scholarly debate as possible. The title page itself promises from the very start that "a hundred questions concerning poetics" ("centum poeticae controversiae") will be interspersed throughout the commentary and "explained at full length" ("copiosissime explicantur"). In fact, Beni rather exhaustingly dwells on pretty much every problem one may encounter in the *Poetics* (at times even raising

For recent research on the topic, see also Vöhler and Seidensticker 2007; Destrée 2009. Luserke 1991 presents various interpretations of catharsis developed in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Huss 2009 confronts modern discussions of Aristotelian catharsis with interpretations of the early modern period, especially Racine's.

[9] Renaissance interpretations of catharsis have repeatedly attracted scholarly attention. Major contributions are, among others, Toffanin's 1965, Della Volpe's 1954, Weinberg's 1961, and Hathaway's 1962. The latter provides a very useful comprehensive account of the range of discussion. This already broad picture has been completed, and partially reworked upon, by numerous studies on single authors; see, for instance, Mazzacurati 1985 and Ryan 1982. For further biographical detail, see also Kappl 2006. Recently, Lohse 2015 has attacked the still widely held view that literary theory in late Renaissance Italy is essentially Aristotelian. He purports the thesis that the main characteristics of this theory have their origin in late antiquity and medieval or humanist poetics and remain more or less immune to change in the course of the discussion. The present paper, which to a certain extent supports Lohse's claim, offers a short survey which attempts to shed further light on the kind of morality Cinquecento critics see at work in poetry (cf. also Kappl 2011).

[10] My references are to the second edition of 1624. For a thorough study of Beni's works and his role in the history of Renaissance criticism, see Diffley 1988.

unnecessary questions). Since in doing so he regularly discusses the opinions of his predecessors, he proves to be a good starting-point for my survey.

2.2 Wormwood and Honey

Beni's commentary proper is preceded by a speech on the usefulness and excellence of poetry. Like innumerable other specimens of this genre Beni's encomium abounds in topoi and quotations from the ancient tradition. As is the case with epideictic oratory in general, one probably should not take every word of these *encomia* on poetry too seriously, as they regularly indulge in hyperbolic and sweeping statements. Nevertheless, they reflect an old and persistently influential concept of poetry. One of its typical elements consists in the idea that poetry proves to be more ancient and just as useful – or even more useful – than the supposed 'queen of sciences', namely philosophy. Thus, Beni points out that because the first philosophers were actually poets (Democritus, Parmenides, etc. have philosophised in verses), it is generally assumed that there is an affinity between philosophy and poetry and that the two are somehow complementary. Therefore, he says, moral philosophy has been defined as a more austere form of poetry ("austerior poesis") and poetry a more alluring form of philosophy ("blandior philosophia") (Beni 1624: 1). Later on (ibid.: 27; see also 154), taking up this idea again Beni cites as principal witness Maximus of Tyre, a second-century rhetor. The relevant passage reads:

> . . . ποιητικὴν καὶ φιλοσοφίαν· χρῆμα διττὸν μὲν κατὰ τὸ ὄνομα, ἁπλοῦν δὲ κατὰ τὴν οὐσίαν . . . . καὶ γὰρ ποιητικὴ τί ἄλλο ἢ φιλοσοφία, τῷ μὲν χρόνῳ παλαιά, τῇ δὲ ἁρμονίᾳ ἔμμετρος, τῇ δὲ γνώμῃ μυθολογική; καὶ φιλοσοφία τί ἄλλο ἢ ποιητική, τῷ μὲν χρόνῳ νεωτέρα, τῇ δὲ ἁρμονίᾳ εὐζωνοτέρα, τῇ δὲ γνώμῃ σαφεστέρα; (Max. Tyr. 4.1)
>
> [. . . poetry and philosophy; a thing twofold, indeed, according to name, but simple according to essence. . . . For what else is poetry than philosophy, ancient by time, metrical from harmony, and mythological from design? And what else is philosophy rather than poetry, more recent in time, more unpretending in harmony, and clearer in its intention?]

Elsewhere Maximus illustrates the method of poetry in an especially vivid and memorable fashion:

> καθάπερ δὲ οἱ ἰατροὶ τοῖς κακοσίτοις τῶν καμνόντων τὰ πικρὰ τῶν φαρμάκων ἀναδεύσαντες προσηνεῖ τροφῇ ἀπέκρυψαν τὴν τοῦ ὠφελοῦντος ἀηδίαν, οὕτως καὶ ἡ παλαιὰ φιλοσοφία καταθεμένη τὴν αὑτῆς γνώμην εἰς μύθους καὶ μέτρα καὶ σχῆμα ᾠδῆς, ἔλαθεν τῇ περιβολῇ τῆς ψυχαγωγίας κεράσασα τὴν ἀηδίαν τῶν διδαγμάτων. (Max. Tyr. 4.6)

[And as physicians mingle bitter medicines with sweet nutriment for the sick when they loathe food, and thus conceal the unpleasantness of the remedy; in like manner, ancient philosophy, inserting its meaning in fables, and in the measures and form of verse, concealed by the vestment of delight the unpleasantness of its precepts.]

The simile of the physician already occurs in a similar form in Plato (*Leg.* 658e-60a), but has received its 'classic' expression in Lucretius: just as the physician renders the originally bitter medicine – i.e. the philosophical content – palatable by covering the rim of the cup with sweet honey, Lucretius says, he has translated his not exactly user-friendly subject matter into poetic form so that the reader, charmed by the poetic devices, takes in the profitable lessons without noticing:

Nam vel uti pueris absinthia taetra medentes
cum dare conantur, prius oras pocula circum
contingunt mellis dulci flavoque liquore,
ut puerorum aetas inprovida ludificetur
labrorum tenus, interea perpotet amarum
absinthi laticem deceptaque non capiatur,
sed potius tali facto recreata valescat,
sic ego nunc, quoniam haec ratio plerumque videtur
tristior esse quibus non est tractata, retroque
volgus abhorret ab hac, volui tibi suaviloquenti
carmine Pierio rationem exponere nostram
et quasi musaeo dulci contingere melle;
si tibi forte animum tali ratione tenere
versibus in nostris possem, dum percipis omnem
naturam rerum ac persentis utilitatem.
(Lucr. 4.11-25)

[For as physicians, when they seek to give / Young boys the nauseous wormwood, first do touch / The brim around the cup with the sweet juice / And yellow of the honey, in order that / The thoughtless age of boyhood be cajoled / As far as the lips, and meanwhile swallow down / The wormwood's bitter draught, and, though befooled, / Be yet not merely duped, but rather thus / Grow strong again with recreated health: / So now I too (since this my doctrine seems / In general somewhat woeful unto those / Who've had it not in hand, and since the crowd / Starts back from it in horror) have desired / To expound our doctrine unto thee in song / Soft-speaking and Pierian, and, as 'twere, / To touch it with sweet honey of the Muse – / If by such method haply I might hold / The mind of thee upon these lines of ours, / Till thou dost learn the nature of all things / And understandest their utility. (Trans. by William Ellery Leonard, Lucretius 2004: 104)]

Beni deploys Lucretius's verses in his discussion about the purpose of poetry (Beni 1624: 155). There he insists that neither pleasure ("delectare" /

"dulce"), nor pleasure combined with profit ("prodesse", "utile"), as Horace (*Ars* 333-44) commends, can be the aim of poetry. Rather, pleasure must be restricted to a merely instrumental use. The simile implies first of all that the contents of poetry are derived from philosophy and therefore cannot be its distinguishing feature. What constitutes poetry is rather the form of the work, like style, verse, etc. Indeed we observe that the focus on poetic form is prominent in the literary theory of the time. While in Aristotle the defining characteristic of poetry is the condensed and intensified (re)presentation of human action (*mimesis praxeos*), that is, a specific content, most Renaissance interpreters hold that poetry without verse in inconceivable or at least deficient.[11] Furthermore, the simile suggests that the (philosophical) content as such is disgusting and becomes enjoyable only through additional ingredients – at least for the general public. As happens in the quotation from Lucretius, as the honey-trick is employed with children, whereas adults can be expected to cope with the bitter-tasting potion, so poetry becomes philosophy for the common people.

This is exactly the idea we find in one of the major sixteenth–century treatises on poetics, that is, Giangiorgio Trissino's treatise *De la poetica* (1529, Weinberg 1970-74: 1.23), as well as in many other authors, such as Minturno (1970: 44, referring to comedy), Partenio (1560, Weinberg 1970-74: 2.522), Bernardo Tasso (1562, Weinberg 1970-74: 578-9), Carriero (1582, Weinberg 1970-74: 3.280-1), Faustino Summo, a colleague of Beni's in Padua (Weinberg 1970-74: 4.164), and works, such as the anonymous *De re poetica libellus* (1588, Weinberg 1970-74: 456-7), and even in Alessandro Piccolomini's commentary to the *Poetics*. Piccolomini, too, refers to the Lucretian simile (1575: 372) and contends that not only comedy, but also tragic and epic poetry primarily aim at entertaining and instructing the illiterate crowd ("moltitudine"). The well-educated can do without the sweetening of philosophical tenets by means of poetic sugar-coating (ibid.: 415). The most extensive exploitation of this simile is to be found in Scipione Ammirato's treatise *Il Dedalione o ver del poeta* (1560, Weinberg 1970-74: 3: 477-512). Ammirato also clearly states what the notion of poetry conveyed by the simile means for the purpose of poetry: as the physician aims at restoring the health of the body, Ammirato says, so the philosopher generally attempts to reestablish the soul's health; but if he does so in a pleasurable manner, he becomes a poet. The "primary and absolute" goal always remains profit, that is, health. Pleasure has an auxiliary function only (ibid.: 498).

[11] For Beni, dramatic poetry is an exception to this rule. In drama the use of prose is appropriate for the sake of verisimility (see Weinberg 1970-74: 4.348-93).

2.3 The End(s) of Poetry

Having commented on the first five chapters of the *Poetics*, Beni wonders what an Aristotelian definition of poetry in general should look like, since Aristotle himself does not offer one. After several attempts, he arrives at the following result: "poetry is a speech ("oratio") of not too short length, imitating action, motivating men to virtue not without great delight, and guiding them to a good and happy life".[12] In Beni's opinion, this definition is satisfying because it contains all the explanatory factors (i.e. 'causes') which, according to Aristotle, are required in the investigation of natural entities or artefacts in order to gain proper knowledge. Since poems also rank among artefacts and Aristotle compares them several times with living beings, it is certainly not out of place to apply the doctrine of the four causes when dealing with poetry. In order to explain the entities of the empirical world, one has to consider four 'causes' (*aitiai*), as Aristotle says: 1) the material cause, in the case of a house, for example, stone, wood or the like, in the case of a living being, the bodily organs and the materials of which they consist; 2) the efficient cause, e.g. the architect and the craftsmen, and the parents, respectively; 3) the formal cause, which can also be described as the inner form (*eidos*), function (*ergon*), or "what it is to be this thing" (*to ti en einai*) or its "substance" (*ousia*), e.g. shelter against bad weather, cold, etc. In the case of a living being the third cause would correspond to the (activities of the) soul. The *eidos* is responsible for the way in which the materials are arranged so as to fulfil their proper function. As such, it is also 4) "the for-the-sake-of-which" (*to hou heneka*), the purpose or end (*telos*) that the craftsmen have in mind when they put together the building materials, and the final outcome in the generation of a living being. Since things are what they are (a house, or a dog) only when they have reached this point and are able to fulfil their function, the formal and final cause are in fact identical.[13] If we apply this model to poetry, by virtue of his craft the poet will be the "causa efficiens", while language and music will be the material. The formal cause, the one that makes poetry poetry, just like the soul in a living being, will be the *mythos*, that is, the plot *qua* imitation of action. "Principle and, as it

[12] "Poesis est oratio non exiguae magnitudinis actionem imitans, qua non sine magna iucunditate ad virtutem excitentur et ad bene beateque vivendum dirigantur mortales" (Beni 1624: 148).

[13] This eventually holds true also for the efficient cause. Since the builder has to have in mind the *eidos* of the house in order to build it, and since living beings which procreate offspring also have to have in themselves the *eidos* they pass on, in some way also formal cause and efficient cause are identical. Therefore the principal causes are form and matter. See Arist. *Ph.* 2.3; 194b16-95a3; *Metaph.* 7.7-8.

were, the soul of tragedy is the plot (*mythos*)".[14] If we assume that the "causa formalis" and the "causa finalis" coincide, poetry has reached its end and perfection (*telos*) when it imitates human action in the best possible way. We get an idea of what this is supposed to mean in the already mentioned chapter 4 of the *Poetics*: a fine work of imitation (*mimema*) is obviously one that succeeds in making clear who a man is and what he does (and why he fails), a representation of human action whereby the action as such is elucidated so as to become comprehensible.

It is clear that a *mimema* of this kind has an effect on the recipient: insofar as, when following the tragic action, the spectator or reader comprehends what he sees or reads, the *mimema* will have a specific emotional effect on him: it will stir adequate fear and adequate pity, and, at the same time, produce delight by enabling the recipient to gain a certain kind of knowledge.

If we take seriously what Aristotle says about the emotions in his ethical works, we can hardly doubt that this effect has moral relevance. That is, after all, the reason why art can and should be part of education. However, this effect is not something the poet aims at *qua* poet, since, as a poet, he only strives to create the perfect *mimema*.

For his part, Beni makes a different classification (apart from the "causa efficiens"); he identifies the factual actions of real men as the material cause of poetry, since, in his opinion, this is the raw material the poet reshapes through the means available to him. The formal cause is assumed to be imitation, the final cause is interpreted as incitement to virtue. Beni adds pleasure ("voluptas") as an "instrument" ("instrumentum"). Contrary to his usual effort to employ the right Aristotelian terminology,[15] this passage reveals the emergence of a long-lasting tradition of schematizing, which could already be found in fourteenth-century "accessus" literature.[16] There "materia" traditionally denotes the subject matter, and "causa formalis" the mode of representation, not its specific object. Beni's remarks on the Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* make clear that he also primarily conceives "imitatio" as a formal poetic device (1624: 45-50). The "causa finalis" is equated with the author's intention ("intentio") or the work's moral benefit ("utilitas"), and not, as in Aristotle, with its intrinsic goal which consists in the perfection of the work itself.

This procedure here adopted by Beni is symptomatic of his way of pro-

[14] Arist. *Poet.* 1450a38f: ἀρχὴ μὲν οὖν καὶ οἷον ψυχὴ ὁ μῦθος τῆς τραγῳδίας.

[15] In defining "action" (*praxis*), for example, Beni underscores that it has to be understood in the sense expounded in Aristotle's ethics as human action originating in choice and deliberation (Beni 1624: 149).

[16] See, for instance, Nicholas Trevet's "expositio" to Seneca's *Hercules furens*, cited in Scott and Minnis 1988: 346.

ceeding. In the contemporary endless debates about whether the purpose of poetry is to delight ("dilettare", "delectare"), to benefit ("giovare", "prodesse"), or both, the idea that the best possible composition of action itself is the inherent goal of poetry somehow gets almost completely lost. Antonio Riccoboni, Beni's predecessor in Padua, is one of the few exceptions. In the first chapter ("on the nature of poetry") of his *Poetics*, he explicitly states that "fabula", or *mythos*, is the *telos* of poetry (Riccoboni 1970: 4). Also Lorenzo Giacomini, in his *De la purgazione de la tragedia* (1586), argues for regarding the poem itself – which he defines as the imitation of human action in an embellished language – as *telos*; the possible effects may vary, depending on the different genres and the respective condition of the recipients (Weinberg 1970-74: 3.352).

Beni, by contrast, like the majority of interpreters, declares that moral profit is necessarily the only purpose of poetry – necessity, however, is not an intrinsic one, which derives from the thing itself, but originates from a superior authority, namely politics. This becomes quite clear in the following consideration taken from Beni:

> Quamquam non est dissimulandum poesim, cum primo appareret inter mortales, voluptatis causa exceptam, quaesitam, cultam, retentam: ita ut eius tum ortum et incrementa, tum in primis usum reputanti, voluptas fere illius finis videri possit. (1624: 153-4)
>
> [It cannot be denied that poetry, when it made its first appearance among men, was accepted, sought after, cultivated, and maintained for the sake of pleasure ("voluptatis causa"). Therefore, when you consider the origin of poetry, its development, and above all its use, pleasure can pretty much seem to be its purpose.]

Even so, Beni says, it is true that man is a political animal ("civile animal") and can achieve happiness only in society, and that is why poetry, like everything else, has to be directed to the appropriate end, which is "honorable profit" ("honesta utilitas"). Later on this idea comes into sharper relief:

> Quod si prisci illi mortales, qui primi fabulis operam dedere, de huiusmodi poematum ideis non cogitarunt et voluptatem verius quam utilitatem spectarunt, cogitarunt procedente tempore philosophi et legislarores . . . ; qui quemadmodum ex Aristotele satis constat, poesim humaenae utilitati et publico bono referendam statuerunt. (ibid.: 234)
>
> [If people in ancient times who first dealt with telling stories have not thought about these literary forms (*sc.* epic, tragedy, and comedy, which, according to Beni, are useful for different sections of society) and rather paid attention to pleasure than to benefit, still in the course of time philosophers and legislators . . . *did* think about it. As becomes clear from Aristotle, they have decreed

that poetry should be orientated towards human benefit and public welfare. (Emphasis added)]

Of course, even though Beni abides by the moral function of poetry, in his argumentation the separation of ethics and aesthetics has already been accomplished: history itself suggests that there *may* be poetry without a moral function, simply because, *de facto*, poetry originally *did* not have such a function.

3. Catharsis

Since Aristotle has nothing to say about moral benefit in the *Poetics*, interpreters hustle to define tragedy. In a definition, as we have seen, you expect that a purpose ("finis", *telos*) is mentioned, and the purpose ought to be moral benefit. Aristotle's definition mentions catharsis – so this cannot be anything else but the moral benefit we desire. The definition is:

> ἔστιν οὖν τραγῳδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης, ἡδυσμένῳ λόγῳ χωρὶς ἑκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι' ἀπαγγελίας, δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν. (Arist. *Poet.* 1449b24-28)

> [Tragedy is mimesis of a serious, complete action which has a certain magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements [used] separately in the (various) parts (of the play); (represented) by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by means of pity and fear a catharsis of these emotions.]

Up to this day, scholars have not come to terms with the last words of this famous sentence. In Beni's time, the debate about it was already so difficult to be reconstructed, that our commentator needs several pages to review even the most important contributions to this question. He dedicates a separate extensive "controversia" to this question (Beni 1624: 166-74). Although many other issues are doubtful, Beni is confident that in mentioning catharsis Aristotle has delineated the purpose of tragedy, that is a kind of moral benefit ("utilitas") (ibid.: 165-6).

3.1 "Tranquillitas animi" and "Praemeditatio"

Problems start with Aristotle's wording: "accomplishing by means of pity and fear a catharsis of these emotions / emotions of this kind". With regard to the phrase *katharsin ton . . . pathematon*, the Greek genitive *pathematon* generally indicates separation as well as an object. In the first case, the soul would be purged *from* affects, in the second, the affects themselves would be purged.

According to Beni, there is no doubt that catharsis cannot simply mean an elimination of emotions, since Platonists as well as Aristotelians reject the notion of complete freedom from passions (*apatheia*) (ibid.: 166). Beni just states this without giving any reasons. And indeed, in chapter 2.3 of the *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle himself points out with gratifying clarity that virtue is not to be identified with *apatheia*:

> διὸ καὶ ὁρίζονται τὰς ἀρετὰς ἀπαθείας τινὰς καὶ ἠρεμίας· οὐκ εὖ δέ, ὅτι ἁπλῶς λέγουσιν, ἀλλ' οὐχ ὡς δεῖ καὶ ὡς οὐ δεῖ καὶ ὅτε, καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα προστίθεται. (Arist. *EN* 1104b23-26)
>
> [This is why some thinkers define the virtues as states of impassivity (*apatheia*) or tranquillity, though they make a mistake in using these terms absolutely, without adding: in the right or wrong manner, and at the right or wrong time and the other qualifications.]

Almost all commentators agree on this, at least if we go by their choice of words. Therefore, Beni concludes, purgation here can only be used in the sense of moderation. Beni's short hint touches on a problem with which quite a few interpretations of catharsis in the Renaissance are tainted; starting from the tranquillity of mind ("tranquillitas animi") as an ideal of life, transmitted to them mainly by the writings of Cicero, many interpreters tend to mistrust emotions to a certain degree, even if they consider a complete eradication of emotions as undesirable or impossible.[17] This is also suggested by the common translation of the Greek term *pathos* as "perturbatio" – Cicero remarked that this term denotes something vicious in itself (Cic. *Fin.* 3.35). In the introduction to his treatise on poetics, Trissino points out that "a tranquil and pleasant life without any perturbation" ("un vivere tranquillo e soave senza alcuna perturbazione") is the supreme good to be achieved in life – and of course poetry helps us to obtain it (Weinberg 1970-74: 1.23). Even in the writings of commentators who argue against *apatheia*, this ideal lurks in the background. A typical example is Robortello's interpretation of catharsis. His *Commentarii* are the first full-fledged commentary to Aristotle's *Poetics* in the Cinquecento and, as such, it sets the scene for further discussion. On the one hand, Robortello, starting from a passage of *Politics* ,[18] declares that:

[17] Hathaway (1962: 209) thus describes Cicero's role: "He was the undercover man, the power behind the throne, for there can be little doubt that the image of the tranquil man, the man above passion, came to the Renaissance through Cicero, whatever its origin was". See also ibid.: 215.

[18] Ar. *Pol.* 1340a14-18: ἐπεὶ δὲ συμβέβηκεν εἶναι τὴν μουσικὴν τῶν ἡδέων, τὴν δ' ἀρετὴν περὶ τὸ χαίρειν ὀρθῶς καὶ φιλεῖν καὶ μισεῖν, δεῖ δηλονότι μανθάνειν καὶ συνεθίζεσθαι μηθὲν οὕτως ὡς τὸ κρίνειν ὀρθῶς καὶ τὸ χαίρειν τοῖς ἐπιεικέσιν ἤθεσι καὶ ταῖς καλαῖς πράξεσιν· ("Since it is the case that music is one of the things that give pleasure, and that virtue has to do with feeling delight and love and hatred in the right

> virtutem in nulla alia re consistere, quam ut homines discant laetari recte, amare, odisse, nullaque in re magis oportere homines exerceri, quam ut assuescant iudicare recte et laetari mansuetis ac probis moribus laudatisque actionibus. (Robortello 1968: 53)
>
> [virtue consists in nothing else but in learning to feel delight, love, hate in the right manner, and that men have to practice nothing more than getting used to judge correctly and to delight in gentle and virtuous characters and praiseworthy actions].

To this he adds that tragedy presents people whom we have every right to pity and things that everyone, even the wise man, fears with good reason. All this seems to point towards an arousal of appropriate emotions and insofar comply with the basic tenets of Aristotelian ethics. On the other hand, in a subsequent passage we finds what Robortello advertises as tragedy's "greatest benefit":

> cum enim communis sit omnium mortalium fortuna, nullusque sit, qui calamitatibus non sit subiectus, facilius ferunt homines, si quid adversi acciderit, eoque se solacio plane firmissimo sustentant, quod aliis etiam idem accidisse meminerint. (Ibid.)
>
> [Since fortune is common to all men and since there is nobody who is not subject to calamities, people bear it more easily when they experience something adverse, and console themselves by remembering that others have already suffered the same.]

Fortune, being blind, may strike anybody – and indeed has already stricken many people, also better people than us. By becoming aware of this time and again, we will not be overcome by grief if some thing bad befalls us. Preparing yourself in advance by imagining all kinds of adverse events that may happen to you – the so-called "premeditation of future evils" ("praemeditatio futurorum malorum") – is a spiritual exercise, especially practised by the Stoics. It is part of the resources that the would-be "sapiens", the wise man, employs to brace himself against the perils of the outside world so as not to lose his peace of mind.

Whereas in Robortello this tranquil man is only hinted at, Alessandro Piccolomini is very outspoken about what kind of goal he has in mind: tragedy, he says, like every form of poetry, aims at moral profit – and this profit is described as follows:

> non potendo l'huomo gustare, et conseguir maggior'utilità, che in posseder'una vera tranquillità dell'animo, da cui non può star separata la virtuosa

way, there is obviously nothing that is more important to learn and get used to than to judge correctly and to delight in virtuous characters and noble actions").

> vita sua; et d'altronde non potendo ricever macchia questa tranquillità, se non per colpa delle passioni dell'animo; di quì è, ch'in cosa alcuna non si son tanto affatigati i Filosofi per render tranquillo l'animo, quanto in cercar di purgarlo da quegli affetti. (Piccolomini 1575: 101)
>
> [One cannot enjoy and gain a greater benefit than possessing a true tranquillity of mind, from which virtuous life cannot be separated. This tranquillity can only be tarnished by passions of the soul. This is the reason why philosophers have made the greatest efforts to render the mind tranquil by trying to purge it from those emotions.]

But while the Stoics believed that emotions have to be eradicated root and branch, if man wants to be happy, the followers of Aristotle realized that the emotions, provided they stay within their confines, are natural and necessary to human life, and that, in order to obtain a tranquil life, one does not have to extirpate them (nature would not allow this anyway). It is sufficient to purge ("purgare"), moderate ("moderare"), and, all in all, reduce them to a certain good measure ("ridurre ad un certo buono temperamento") which is prescribed by reason (Piccolomini 1575: 101-2). Thus, on the one hand, Piccolomini pleads in favour of emotions remaining within certain boundaries and, on the other, he sticks to the ideal of the tranquillity of mind.

Premeditation theory also reappears in Piccolomini, though in a slightly different version: as Robortello before him, he also points out that we would experience less pain, if we realized how easily every man is subject to it. Besides, there is yet another wholesome effect one may obtain: seeing how even the ones who most favoured by fortune may instantly fall into misery, we curb our own hopes and mitigate our joys, thinking about their fragility (ibid.: 102). Not only is tranquillity of mind disturbed by wrong assumptions about present or future evils, but also about present or future goods. Tragedy should therefore guard against the latter too.

Stoic traits become even more clearly visible in Antonio Sebastiano Minturno's dialogue *De poeta* (1559). In the first book a comprehensive therapy against the Platonic 'trauma' – i.e. that poetry corrupts the citizens – is performed. In words similar to Robortello, Vopiscus, who in Minturno's work plays the role of an "advocatus Aristotelis", declares:

> Age vero adversis rebus assuescere ad humanarum casus miseriarum perferendos plurimum valet. . . . Itaque tantum abest, ut ea consuetudine permotiones animi augeamus, ut si quid accidat, quod vehementius perturbet, id levius ferre possimus. Fit enim ut qui non semel Oedipodis, Orestae, Aiacis, Hecubae, Niobes, Iocastae gravi fortuna fuerit concitatus, ei si quid incommodi evenerit, hoc improvisum non sit. At *praemeditatio futurorum malorum lenit eorum adventum, quae venientia longe ante videris.* (Minturno 1970: 64-5, emphasis added; see also 179)

> [Besides, getting used to misfortune makes a huge contribution to enduring the vicissitudes of human existence. . . . Hence this habituation by no means fosters the perturbations in our souls – rather, we can bear it more easily when something happens that is apt to throw us into disarray. For to anybody who has become upset not only once by the terrible fate of Oedipus, Orestes, Ajax, Hecuba, Niobe or Iocasta, misfortune will not come unexpected. But *the consideration of evils beforehand* ("praemeditatio futurorum malorum") *mitigates the approach of evils whose coming one has long foreseen.*]

The key phrase, "praemeditatio futurorum malorum", unmistakably reveals the provenance of Vopiscus/Minturno's notion of tragedy. In fact, the section here emphazised is a literal quote from Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* (Cic. *Tusc.* 3.29). As he carries on his discussion, Minturno borrows from his model on a even larger scale:

> Mihi vero nulla disciplina, nullaque ratio videtur, quae *tam obtundat elevetque aegritudinem quam* Tragica poesis, cum sit subiectio quaedam sub oculos, nihil esse, quod accidere non possit, atque spectatio *conditionis humanae. . . . Neque enim qui rerum naturam, qui vitae varietatem, qui imbecillitatem generis humani* in ea, tanquam in speculo, cernit, *moeret, cum haec cogitat. Sed tum vel maxime sapientis fungitur munere.* Nam *adversis casibus triplici consolatione* medetur. *Primum quod posse accidere diu cogitaverit; quae cogitatio una maxime molestias omnes extenuat et diluit. Deinde quod humana ferenda intelligit. Postremo quod videt nullum malum nisi culpam. Culpam autem nullam esse, cum id, quod ab homine praestari non* possit*, evenerit.* (Minturno 1970: 65, emphasis added)

> [In my view, there is no doctrine and no method *so well fitted to deaden and alleviate distress as* tragic poetry, because it brings, as it were, before our eyes *that there is no event which may not happen*, and a spectacle *of our state as human beings. . . . For the man who* – like in a mirror – discerns in it *nature, the diversity of life and the weakness of humanity, is not saddened by reflecting upon these things, but in doing so he fulfils most completely the function of wisdom. For in adversity he finds a threefold relief to aid his restoration; first because he has long since reflected on the possibility of mishap, and this is by far the best method of lessening and weakening all vexation; secondly because he understands that the lot of man must be endured in the spirit of a man; lastly because he sees that there is no evil but guilt, but that there is no guilt when the issue is one against which a man can give no guarantee.* (trans. from Cicero by J. E. King, Cicero 1927: 267-9, emphasis added)]

Indeed, Minturno's alleged words, which have been marked as an especially significant statement (Hathaway 1962: 228), derive from Cicero (see emphases in the quotations above)! Of course, Cicero is not speaking about tragedy at this point (Cic. *Tusc.* 3.34), but is defending the utility of "praemeditatio" against Epicurus. Whereas Cicero writes that there is nothing so well

suited to soothe anguish as considering the human condition ("meditatio condicionis humanae"), Minturno boldly replaces "contemplation of human condition" with "tragic poetry". Thus, catharsis suddenly becomes an exercise in Stoic equanimity. Not only does tragedy assist us against the impositions of blind Fortuna, which can befall even the completely innocent, but, as Minturno further explains, educates us to exercise more caution ("prudentia") against harmful passions. For example, seeing how Priam plunges into deep misery on account of royal arrogance or indulgence towards his children, or Oedipus on account of foolishness or imperiousness, we will strive to be free from any disease ("morbus") of this kind (Minturno 1970: 63-4). In this momentous reading, tragedy turns out to be the presentation of deterring examples. By making us visualize the dire consequences of passions or other mental defects, it exhorts us to improve our mental health.[19]

3.2 "Prudentia" and "Ratio", not "Purgatio"

Concerning the just mentioned forms of purgation, Beni is less worried about their Stoic origins. Rather, he disapproves of them because purgation is not accomplished directly by the tragic emotions (fear and pity), but results from thinking. This means that they do not take Aristotle' s phrase "by means of pity and fear" seriously enough. First of all Beni (1624: 168) quotes some lines taken from the comic poet Timocles, transmitted by Athenaeus (6.223b4-d6), on the benefits of tragedy – lines which have been employed by several of Beni's predecessors, for example Robortello (1968: 53-4) and Minturno (1970: 179). The Timocles-fragment tells us that, at the end of a performance, we leave the theatre "instructed" (*paideutheis*):

ὁ μὲν ὢν γὰρ πένης
πτωχότερον αὑτοῦ καταμαθὼν τὸν Τήλεφον
γενόμενον ἤδη τὴν πενίαν ῥᾷον φέρει.
. . .
ἅπαντα γὰρ τὰ μείζον' ἢ πέπονθέ τις
ἀτυχήματ' ἄλλοις γεγονότ' ἐννοούμενος

[19] Minturno's use of the term "morbus" may also be be traced back to the *Tusculan Disputations*, see Cic. *Tusc.* 3.7: "Haec enim fere sunt eius modi quae Graeci πάθη appellant; ego poteram 'morbos', et id verbum esset e verbo, sed in consuetudinem nostram non caderet. Nam misereri, invidere, gestire, laetari, haec omnia morbos Graeci appellant, motus animi rationi non obtemperantes" ["These belong, speaking generally, to the class of emotions which the Greeks term *pathe*: I might have called them 'diseases' (morbi), and this would be a word-for-word rendering: but it would not fit in with Latin usage. For pity, envy, exultation, joy, all these the Greeks term diseases, movements that is of the soul which are not obedient to reason". (Trans. by J. E. King, Cicero 1927: 233)].

> τὰς αὐτὸς αὑτοῦ συμφορὰς ῥᾷον φέρει.
> (Timocles fr. 6.9-11, 17-19 Kock = Athenaeus 6.223c-d)

> [The poor man, for instance, learns that Telephus was more beggarly than himself, and from that time on he bears his poverty more easily . . . For he is reminded that all his calamities, which are greater than mortal man has ever borne, have happened to others, and so he bears his own trials more easily. (Trans. by Charles B. Gulick, Atheneus 1927-41: 7)]

This, Beni concedes, is comforting and yet of little avail in attempting to understand catharsis. Firstly, the effect is achieved not by fear and pity but by rational deliberation ("ratio", "prudentia"). Secondly, it is not specific to tragedy: historiography may have the same impact, or even be more effective, since it offers a vast number of examples, and real ones ("exempla et plurima et vera"); eventually, everyday experience ("quotidiani casus") may be sufficient to bring home the same message (Beni 1624: 168). Piccolomini's interpretation of catharsis, according to which we moderate our vain hopes and pleasures and are less afraid of future adversities realising the fragility of all worldly things, is especially liable to the same criticism. Minturno's assertion that we seek to avoid those vices or passions which lead to the downfall of the tragic protagonists has the same flaw.

Beni's reproach concerning this issue is directed against Maggi who, in his commentary on catharsis, also supports the view that fear induced by tragedy helps us avoid the vices ("vitia") of the protagonists (Maggi 1969: 97). In the context of his interpretation of tragic *hamartia* as error committed through ignorance, he states that tragedy through this kind of *hamartia* makes us more circumspect ("prudentiore*s*", ibid.: 154); however, for Maggi, the idea that fear and pity drive out other harmful emotions is more prominent in his section on catharsis (see below 3.4).

Beni's criticism had already been voiced elsewhere. In his treatise on catharsis, Lorenzo Giacomini had addressed exactly the same problem (Weinberg 1970-74: 3.347-71). His treatise, which ranks among the most interesting documents of the time dealing with catharsis, seems to have met little response with the contemporaries (see Hathaway 1962: 258-9). Still, in the medical interpretation of catharsis, which has become current since Bernays, Giacomini is still widely remembered, whereas Beni and others have sunk into oblivion. Giacomini acutely observes that

> quelle utilità non nascon semplicemente da la vista o da l´udita de le tragiche sciagure, ma dal discorso de l´intelletto, il quale può discorrere e non discorrere e trarne quei giovamenti e non trarne. Onde saranno incerti e stranieri a la tragedia, a cui il suo proprio ufizio conviene assegnare; oltre che ammaestramento e purgazione sono tra sé molto differenti. (Weinberg 1970-74: 3.350)

[those forms of utility do not arise from just watching or hearing tragic poetry but by an activity of reason; and reason may be active, but it may be inactive as well, and it may draw this profit from tragedy but not necessarily. Therefore, they are alien to tragedy; but we have to attribute to tragedy the task particular to it. Apart from that, there is a major difference between instruction and purgation.]

3.3 Habituation and 'Hardening'

We are left with interpretations which locate purgation in the realm of the emotions proper. In this regard, a very popular theory, which postulates an effect of emotional habituation or hardening and can be already found in Robortello's commentary, has to be considered. On the one hand, by seeing on the stage persons and actions very similar to real persons and actions, we get used to feel pain, fear and pity, so that we become impervious to pain and fear when in real life some misfortune happens to us. On the other, a person who has never grieved some misfortune will feel much more pain, in case he or she has to face some unexpected hardship (Robortello 1968: 53). Beni reprehends Robortello primarily for tacitly shifting from pity to pain ("dolor"). It is not plausible, he remarks, that getting used to sympathizing with others results in feeling less pain at one's own misery (Beni 1624: 169). At best, pity is reduced, but that is not what Aristotle intended.

Habituation leading to a deadening of emotions is also an element we find in Piccolomini's explanation of catharsis. He refers to experiences in times of war or pestilence when people are upset by their fellows' death, yet, while initially suffering, they later cease to feel pity and fear. Piccolomini illustrates this phenomenon by pointing out that by being exposed to calamities frequently enough we end up by the judging ("giudicare") them as not entirely bad. Consequently, Beni criticises again the idea that this effect originates from reason ("ratio", "iudicium") and does not directly result from the emotional experience as such.

The habituation theory lies at the core of Lodovico Castelvetro's reading of Aristotelian catharsis. If spectators in the theatre frequently have to face events arousing pity and fear, their emotions will eventually wear out; thus people become high-spirited instead of abject, confident instead of timid, and severe instead of compassionate. Like Piccolomini, Castelvetro cites the increasing deadening of emotions in times of war or disease, but his argument has a different thrust. He assumes Aristotle to mean that the force of the emotions is weakened by diffusion to many objects, just like wine, which loses its strength when watered down, or like a father of few children, who loves them more than if he had a numerous progeny (Castelvetro 1978-79: 1.161).

However, Castelvetro himself (whose commentary in many ways breaks out of the mainstream) does not regard this theory as very convincing – and generally attaches little value to the concept of catharsis. In his opinion, it must be understood as a retort to Plato, with little bearing on his own theory of poetry (ibid.: 162; 19; 359; 2.367). Castelvetro asserts that poetry is in principle oriented towards pleasure ("diletto"). Catharsis, by contrast, has to be classified as benefit ("utilità") since it is not associated with pleasure. Therefore it can only be taken into account as a by-product – tragedy, in his opinion, purges only accidentally ("per accidente"), that is, the purgative effect does not belong to its essence (ibid.: 2.112; 1.391). In the sphere of pleasure, in turn, which is also the proper sphere of tragedy, we find a familiar concept: the realization that we cannot put our trust in the calm course of events, that is, good old "praemeditatio". The delight we take in this realization, Castelvetro says, is especially great because we learn our lesson by ourselves, instead of being lectured by a teacher, the latter occurrence always implying a confession of our own ignorance and a debt of gratitude towards the teacher. Thus, "praemeditatio" is dissociated from catharsis; what is left is the deadening of emotions.[20] According to Beni, the opinion that affects can be thinned out in the way Castelvetro conceives of is so out of place that he does not even deem it worthy of further discussion.

3.4 Purgation from Vices, not from Emotions

With special regard to Maggi, Beni reveals a further deficiency in some interpretations of catharsis, insofar as they do not conform to Aristotle's phrase "purgation of those/such *emotions*" (my emphasis). While Robortello had assumed a purgation, in the sense of attenuation, of fear and pity themselves, Maggi rejects this reading of catharsis by arguing that fear and especially pity are useful emotions. And since it is logically impossible that means and object of purgation be identical, catharsis has to be understood as a process in which, by means of pity provoked by tragedy, other (harmful) affects are driven out of the soul. Maggi especially cites anger, avarice, and lust ("ira", "avaritia", and "luxuria"):

> Melius est misericordiae et terroris interventu expurgare animum ab ira, qua tot neces fiunt, ab avaritia, quae infinitorum paene malorum est causa, a luxuria, cuius gratia nefandissima scelera saepissime patrantur. His itaque rationibus haudquaquam dubito, Aristotelem nolle Tragoediae finem esse animam humanam a terrore misericordiave expurgare; sed his uti ad alias perturbationes ab animo

[20] The most extreme form of this reading of catharsis, suggested by Giason Denores, is that tragedy served to prepare the citizens of Athens for battle. In Rome, he says, gladiatorial games served the same purpose (Weinberg 1970-74: 3.388-9).

> removendas: ex quarum remotione animus virtutibus exornatur. nam ira, verbi gratia, depulsa, succedit mansuetudo. (Maggi 1969: 98)

> [It is better that by intervention of pity and terror the soul is purged from anger resulting in so many deaths, from avarice, the root of nearly infinite evils, from lust responsible for such heinous crimes. For these reasons I have no doubt that Aristotle did not want tragedy to aim at purging our souls from terror or pity; rather it uses pity and fear to remove other perturbations from the soul. And because of this removal the soul becomes adorned with virtues, for when anger, for example, is driven away, gentleness follows.]

The same idea, with more rhetorical splendour, is suggested by Minturno's Vopiscus (Minturno 1970: 63). Beni finds fault with this theory of replacement, too, asserting that in this case the soul is not really purged from pernicious affects, but from vices ("vitia"), for avarice and lust are not affects (Beni 1624: 169). This objection seems a bit feeble, and it appears so not without reason: after Beni's extensive criticism of his predecessors, which is partially quite harsh, we eagerly wait for Beni's own solution to the problem of catharsis. Yet, considering what he actually come to say about it, Horace's line (*Ars* 139) inevitably comes to mind: "The mountain laboured and brought forth a mouse". Indeed, Beni offers Maggi's own reading of catharsis: by stirring fear and pity in a high degree, tragedy expels harmful passions – and also vices! – from the soul. Additionally, it trains us to eschew the mistakes of the tragic heroes (Beni 1624: 172, 174). Of course, Beni is fully aware that this manoeuvre puts him into a weak position, therefore he hastens to dissociate himself from Maggi. For one thing, he complains, Maggi does not expound why he lists not only passions but also vices among the objects of catharsis. Beni himself presents a rather awkward explanation: only immoderate affects, and not moderate ones, not need purgation, as they happen to be vices or lead to vices. Besides, Maggi supposes that catharsis operates on all recipients indiscriminately. But that is not the case, as Beni emphazises. According to him, in the course of time poetry has adapted itself to the social conditions and needs so that different genres of poetry address different sections of society and benefit each of them in a different way. Epic poetry provides good rulers with ideal examples of leadership so as to incite them even more to virtue, tragedy addresses potentates not yet advanced in virtue, and comedy the common people, although everybody can draw profit from all genres to a certain extent (Beni 1624: 172). This orientation towards a particular audience is the reason why, of all emotions, pity and fear should be stirred by tragic poetry:

> Iam facile erit animadvertere, cur dixerit Aristoteles tragicam imitationem per misericoridam et metum (id quod hactenus tantopere torsit interpretes) huiusmodi perpurgari. Tragicis enim infortuniis excitandae sunt in tyranno-

> rum regumque ac potetntum pectore hae duae affectiones maxime, misericordia scilicet et metus, ut hinc affectiones et vitia corrigantur, quibus reges quique caeteris authoritate praestant, laborare solent. (Beni 1624: 172)
>
> [Now it will be easy to understand why Aristotle says that tragic imitation *by means of pity and fear* – and this is what has haunted interpreters so much – purges perturbations of this kind. For the tragic misfortunes should excite in the hearts of tyrants, kings, and potentates these two emotions, pity and fear, in the highest degree, and in this way emotions and vices which typically befall kings and people of high authority are corrected. (Emphasis added)]

Pity leads them to abandon ferocity, cruelty, avarice, rapacity, irascibility and embrace kindness, gentleness, generosity instead, and to treat their subjects with paternal love. By means of fear and horror they are discouraged from cherishing vain joys, revelling in pleasures, indulging in vices. They will keep a tight rein on lust, ambition and similar perturbations. Thus, pity and fear contribute to their being moderate in office and governing with gentleness. Therefore, when a king sees how another king loses his wealth and power and falls into misery because of arrogance, rapacity, lechery and intemperance ("superbia", "rapacitas", "libido", "intemperantia"), he fears that similar things may happen to him too and resolves to avoid vices of this kind and to curb his passions.

3.5 Medical Catharsis

Beni's catharsis leaves us somewhat baffled since it eventually does not meet his own criteria. Despite his protestations to the contrary, he does not succeed in going beyond Maggi; his assertion that potentates will become more circumspect in their own behaviour by watching tragedies presupposes exactly what he blames in others – that is, the idea that by reasoning you become aware of a general moral maxim (such as "pride comes before a fall").

However, there have indeed been interpretations of catharsis in the secondo Cinquecento which, as Beni requests, describe an emotional process,[21] first and foremost the theory proposed by Giacomini (1586). As Beni, he initially surveys the existing interpretations acknowledging serious shortcomings in all of them. Subsequently, he sets forth some basic principles which have to be taken into account in an adequate account of catharsis. The most important for us concerns the concept of emotion. Although Gia-

[21] Beni himself mentions Guarini, in whose interpretation of catharsis a wrong kind of fear is replaced by a right kind of fear: fear of physical death is superseded by fear of death of the soul (the same applies correspondingly to pity). Beni regards this theory as preposterous (1624: 171).

comini allows for a certain cognitive element in the formation of emotion, he focuses completely on the bodily processes involved. If the bodily substrate, which he also called "mother of the emotions" ("madre degli affetti") (Weinberg 1970-74: 3.357), is disposed in a certain way, the soul will be inclined to certain emotions – or, again, disinclined. It is on this level of physical disposition that catharsis operates, analogously to medical catharsis in the proper sense. There, excessive humours are drawn out of the body by means of a drug that is similar to the humour, i.e. the purgative (ibid.: 354-5). Similarly, in tragic catharsis depressions of the soul are eliminated by the pity and the fear elicited by tragedy. This takes place in the following manner: we fear for the tragic protagonist and pity him or her; and by indulging in these artificially induced emotions and letting them out we are liberated from despondence, depression and other emotions of this kind (ibid.: 362). The tragic emotions of pity and fear are the purgatives which draw similar nocuous emotions out of the soul. Whoever has wept and lamented for a while, is saturated and less disposed to cry and moan, the 'breeding ground' for negative emotions being removed (ibid.: 358-9, 366). Since the soul thus obtains relief, the process is associated with pleasure (ibid.: 363-4).

The restriction of the concept of catharsis to physical release does not mean, however, that Giacomini is willing to ignore other benefits with regard to tragedy. Tragedy, he says, affords multiple pleasures, some resulting directly from poetry, some from external factors. In the first group, Giacomini includes: 1) pleasure in "learning" the plot – this obviously means that we get to know the story; 2) pleasure in "learning" that something we would not have thought possible is happening, which in turn creates wonder ("meraviglia"); 3) pleasure in relating the represented object to reality, for instance, "this man in the picture is Socrates", and 4) delight in poetic form, images, metaphors, verse, dancing, scenery, costumes, and finally in the poet's ingenuity in constructing the plot as well as in similar features. The second group comprises: 1) sympathizing with others, which, being natural, is also pleasurable; 2) recognizing that we have not been hit as hard by fate as others; and 3) realizing that true happiness does not depend on external goods, but consists solely in living a virtuous life (ibid.: 365).

Like Castelvetro, Giacomini confines catharsis to a purely emotional process. In doing this he is, however, more radical than Castelvetro – and he has better arguments. Castelvetro, as we have seen, was after all not really interested in the subject. The mechanism of action of Giacomini's catharsis works on the physiological level of the emotions, and Aristotle has also quite a lot to say about the physiology of affects. Besides, Giacomini refers to the eighth book of the *Politics*, where Aristotle, speaking about musical catharsis, distinguishes between melodies suited for education and those employed for cathartic purposes – a distinction which seems to provide further grist

for the mill of all those who argue for purgation as a primarily bodily mechanism with no ethical relevance. Therefore it is hardly surprising that Giacomini's reading of catharsis, though hardly appreciated in its own times, has gained wide acceptance in modern times. Whether it fully meets the requirements of Aristotle's theory of emotions is, however, still open to debate.

4. Purgation and Instruction, Concrete and Abstract – A Conclusion

If poetry is *mimesis* of human action and if this *mimesis* is to lead us to a certain knowledge of human action, then we should admit that poetry has a specific object: it (re)presents human action in an intensified form. In case of tragedy, it shows how and why a basically good individual utterly fails – or nearly fails – in his pursuits. By focusing on the unfolding of the events and on grasping its causes, the recipient gains a certain kind of knowledge, he 'learns' something.[22] Learning here is obviously neither a simple increase of information, nor the result of reasoning, by which a general lesson is drawn after the curtain has fallen. Rather, it is an immediate perception of the concrete individual case and therefore an empirical knowledge, which cannot be substituted by reading treatises on ethics. "Acting (*praxis*) is about individual cases" is one of Aristotle's fundamental maxims in ethics (ἡ δὲ πρᾶξις περὶ τὰ καθ' ἕκαστα, Arist. *EN* 1141b16).

Since this process of concentrating and learning is an activity through which humans realize their distinctive potentials, it is immediately accompanied by pleasure. And since tragedy represents the failure of somebody who are in some respects similar to us and who do not deserve the suffering they experience, in realizing what happens we do feel emotions, and in particular fear and pity. These emotions arise from the very composition of the actions. Staging, poetic language, and music also contribute to the emotional experience, but they play only a subordinate role. Finally, if the plot is skillfully built, tragedy arouses "adequate" emotions. This emotional experience has moral relevance as such, insofar as appropriate emotional responses, as we have seen, are an essential part of a good and happy life. In short, it is a concrete experience in which cognitive and emotional aspects are closely interwoven and which is, if we choose to employ these categories, at the same time "utile" and "dulce".

If what we have maintained so far is correct, in the interpretations of Ar-

[22] This of course only holds true on the assumption that the respective poem meets Aristotle's standards and that the respective recipient is able and willing to get involved and to appreciate it (and does not go to the theatre to parade his new clothes).

istotle's *Poetics* in the Cinquecento we can observe a quite different notion of the moral impact of poetry. Evidence for this is the widely held belief that poetry is moral philosophy in different clothing: it conveys the very same messages, but through different methods. This conviction finds expression in the simile of the physician: philosopher and poet administer the same bitter medicine, but the poet succeeds in sweetening its substrate to such an extent that we swallow the potion without tasting its bitterness. The simile is intended to legitimize and lend authority to poetry, but eventually has fatal consequences. Not only does it disrupt the tie between "utile" and "dulce", but also deprives poetry of its peculiar object. Thus, the qualities specific to poetry are being transferred to the area of form, e.g. verse, elaborate disposition of episodes etc. Imitation becomes a poetical method among others. What remains of the content is the marvellous ("mirabile", "meraviglioso"): by showing us things unheard of, poetry surprises and amazes us. This truly poetic area is at the same time the sphere of pleasure ("diletto"). The main benefit provided by poetry is often conceived of as tranquillity of mind. This belief has an impact on the interpretation of catharsis in various ways: (1) sometimes we are told that by exhibiting deterrent examples, tragedy demonstrates the disastrous consequences resulting from vices and passions. Thus we learn to stay away from these moral dangers. (2) More frequently catharsis is interpreted as an exercise in premeditation of future evils. Watching even the most powerful and fortunate ones suddenly fall into disgrace, we learn equanimity, so that we will not be thrown into turmoil or be overwhelmed by sorrow, if something adverse should befall us. The experience of the impermanence of worldly things conveyed by tragedy shifts our focus on the internal goods. (3) Habituation theory, according to which the affect wears out by being frequently stirred, dispenses with the discursive ingredient which features prominently in premeditation theory. Ultimately, however, it is the same method at visceral level, so to speak: a 'pre-sensation' of future evils. (4) The reading of catharsis which supposes that by arousing fear and pity opposite emotions like anger are cast out of the soul is based on the argument that pity, being not harmful, cannot be the object of purgation. In this theoretical context, "fear" is fear of undue self-confidence, of excessive delight in material things external goods, and generally fear of the vices ("vitia") responsible for the protagonist's downfall – which brings us back to (1).

All these interpretations, together with Giacomini's 'medical catharsis', share an abstraction from the concrete work of art and the individual experience of it. The individual case always triggers the same mechanism, be it on the emotional or on the rational level. In a physiological perspective, catharsis is always an outburst of crying and sobbing that brings about relief, irrespective of the quality of the stimulus: the quality of the object of fear

and pity, that is, of the concrete action of an individual character in a play, fades into the background. With the 'rationalists', the 'moral of the story' always assumes the same shape of abstract maxims, warning us to beware of haughtiness, anger etc., and generally not to trust Fortune and her passing favours. It is hardly surprising that such a curtailment of the complex experience made possible by tragic art will sooner or later be regarded as unsatisfactory and abandoned, leaving in its wake a general resentment against morals in poetry.

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