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‘Catharsis’. From Lessing’s Moral Purification to Goethe’s Purity of Form

Abstract

The present essay addresses Goethe’s interpretation of ‘catharsis’. Goethe reacted to a moral interpretation of catharsis (propounded by a long line of critics from Brumoy to Lessing) by maintaining that Aristotle understood catharsis as an artistic process only. In his opinion, catharsis was a kind of ultimate effect that, while not acting on the spectators’ morality, certainly affected their satisfaction and contentment and was, in fact, the necessary fulfilment of any well-structured and consistent tragedy. In addition, Goethe conceived the act of writing poetry itself as a cathartic process; this entails that a “purged” work of art is also the outcome of an ideal Classicism. Indeed, the attainment of “pure” poetic forms is the main topic over which Goethe and Schiller debated in their correspondence.

Introduction

Interpreting Aristotle’s *Poetics* in the eighteenth century also entails an investigation of both emotions (“Empfindungen”) and their nature, insofar as the philosopher regarded the arousal of passions (“Leidenschaften”) – pity and fear in particular – as the main aim of tragedy (Alt 1994; Schulz 1998). In chapters 74-83 of his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (Alt 1994, 135-50; cf. Chiarini 1956, XLIII-XLVII) Lessing offers a ground-breaking analysis of the inner workings of tragic effects; in particular, he examines the way the spectators sympathize with the hero and are purged by his own passions. In fact, Lessing’s approach to Aristotle hinges on his own ideas on drama and tragedy (Fick 2000: 291): he elicits from the *Poetics* only what may be functional to his analysis of tragedy as a genre and of its effects on the spectators’ emotions and psychology, thus placing himself in open opposition to Corneille in particular. Before Lessing, many theatre theorists and practitioners strove to bring together the contents of tragedy and their resulting emotional effects (cf. Meid 2008). The issues they had to deal with can be summarised as follows: can pity and fear simultaneously affect the spectators? Should the spectators keep aloof from tragic heroes the moment their passions are

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sensed as moral defects? Can aesthetic pleasure turn into a pedagogical tool? Lessing's rejection of rational, abstract teaching as the aim of tragedy leads him to envisage the emotion ("Rührung") provoked by the events onstage as an alternative. Far from discarding Aristotelian tradition as a whole, Lessing renders it modern (Kommerell 1984) by adapting Aristotelian tenets to his own view on tragedy, centring, as we will see, on man's moral improvement (Dreßler 1996). Lessing's psychological and moral paradigm stands as an example for subsequent scholars; Schiller, for instance, drew on it in his *On Tragic Art (Ueber die tragische Kunst, 1792)* (Fick 2000, 297). Conversely, Goethe promoted the autonomy of art from morality, thus marking a significant shift from Lessing's paradigm and aesthetics of emotions. Nonetheless, he formulated his interpretation of 'catharsis' only later, after a thorough reading of Aristotle's text.

Goethe: Catharsis as "Reconciliatory Conclusion" ("aussöhnende Abrundung")

In fact, Goethe expounded on the meaning of the word 'catharsis' only in his "Nachlese zur Aristoteles Poetik" ("On Interpreting Aristotle's Poetics"), published in *Ueber Kunst und Altertum* in 1827 (1988a).¹ Focusing on a well-known passage of the *Poetics* which has given much trouble to commentators, Goethe assumes that Aristotle seems to assert that tragedy must purge ("reinigen", *ibid.*: 342) the spectators' mind of the emotions of pity and fear evoked by the actions and events represented on the stage.² Yet, this is what "seems" ("scheint", *ibid.*) and what critics in fact have accepted. To Goethe, this effect appears both unlikely and unattainable. He clarifies his own position in his translation of Aristotle's passage, where he renders the term *katharsis* as "Ausgleichung", "balancing": after pity and fear have been aroused, their balancing out forms the conclusion ("die Vollendung") of the purpose ("Geschäft") of tragedy (*ibid.*). Goethe argues that Aristotle meant to discuss the formal structure of tragedy ("Construction des Trauerspiels") and not the delayed effect ("entfernte Wirkung") that a tragedy might have

¹ On the translations and editions of Aristotle's *Poetics* that Goethe owned, see Hans Joachim Schimpf's remarks in Goethe 1988: 714-7, including main bibliographical references. For a clear-cut summary of Goethe's view compared to Schiller's, of its reception prior to Jacob Bernays's pivotal essay, and of his responses in his correspondence with Carl Friedrich Zelter, see Ugolini 2012: 54-8. On the circumstances under which Goethe wrote his *Nachlese* and on its relevance for *Faust II*, cf. Schillemeit 1981.

² Whether Goethe did misinterpret Aristotle or – unprecedentedly – did grasp his meaning properly, as Wittkowski has provocatively argued (1987: 113-27), is not relevant in this context.

on the spectator (ibid.). Similarly, he affirms that the philosopher's focus was only on what happened onstage and not what followed the performance, offstage; it follows that, once the emotions aroused by the tragic action have run their course ("Verlauf"), catharsis is accomplished and tragedy has fulfilled its purpose. Thus, Goethe assumes that by catharsis Aristotle meant a "reconciliatory conclusion" ("aussöhnende Abrundung", ibid.), that is to say, a mitigation or the metaphorical restoration of balance which is actually expected of drama as well as of any other poetic work. Hence, the spectators are merely passively involved in the cathartic process, which, like any aesthetic process, is sought, provoked and accomplished by the artist in general and by the playwright in particular.

Ethic and Aesthetic Dimensions

Insofar as the tragedy's content is concerned, Goethe affirms that the final reconciliation is accomplished through some kind of human sacrifice that may be replaced "by a surrogate" ("durch ein Surrogat", ibid.) through divine intervention, as is the case with Abraham's and Agamemnon's immolation of Isaac and Iphigenia, respectively. As the only possible solution, sacrifice establishes the denouement and settles all dramatic conflicts. Goethe adheres to the eighteenth-century tragic tradition that attaches great importance to human sacrifice and clears the gods of any responsibility for this atrocious deed by fostering their intervention to rescue the victim. In eighteenth-century tragedies, in fact, only human beings are accountable for cruel acts because sacrifice is necessary both to the exercise of power and to religion that operates in compliance with it. Myth thus turns into a political metaphor and tragedy is reduced to a sort of pedagogical performance for rulers. Although Goethe hints at this rationalistic handling of tragic myths on stage, his main aim is to provide a definition of tragedy as a genre. As a matter of fact, Goethe continues, Alcestis's return attests the existence of an "intermediary genre" ("Mittelgattung", ibid.), devising for drama a happy conclusion not pivoting on human sacrifice. In comedies, instead, it is usually marriage which brings the action to some sort of conclusion, marking out a crucial, if not definitive, turning point in life. Nobody wants to die and everybody wants to get married: Goethe affirms that this half-facetious maxim illustrates the difference between tragedy and comedy. In Goethe's view, Greek tragedians conceived trilogies with the purpose of achieving catharsis in the very last play; hence, the most powerful example of catharsis is to be found in *Oedipus at Colonus*, where the half-guilty ("halbschuldiger", ibid.) Oedipus is exalted as the guardian spirit of the land and is deemed worthy of worship as well as of sacrificial ceremonies, after enduring numberless

vicissitudes and plunging himself and his family into utter misery. Thus, the hero of a tragedy must be portrayed as neither completely guilty, nor as totally innocent, since in either case catharsis could not be achieved. In the first case, the result would merely point out a failure of court justice; in the second, reconciliation would not be possible since the innocent hero could not bear to be unjustly charged with guilt either by his fellows or by fate. Finally, Goethe rejects an identical use of the word ‘catharsis’ in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and *Politics*. Aristotle referred to different arts in the two cases: in the *Politics*, he reflected on the effects of music, similar to those that Goethe observed when Händel’s *Alexanderfest* was played or during dances driving young people into a “Bacchic frenzy” (“bacchischem Wahnsinn”, *ibid.*: 344). In fact, neither music nor other arts can affect one’s morality. This effect can be accomplished by philosophy and religion only through a rekindling of one’s sense of duty and pity. On the contrary, whenever the arts affect morality, they eventually weaken the spirit, unsettling “what we call the heart” (“was wir das Herz nennen”, *ibid.*: 345). This occurs to young people who are excessively fond of reading novels, plunging into a vague, uncertain mood. According to Goethe, Aristotle addressed the *poiesis* of a tragedy and how it should be conceived in order to be appealing, i.e. pleasing to the eyes and ears. No moral improvement takes place in the spectators; in fact, even if they were accustomed to interior ascesis, that is, even if they were philosophers, once at home, they would see themselves exactly as they were before, with all their virtues and vices.

Brumoy and Catharsis as Homeopathic Process

Although Goethe does not intend to provoke controversy (“kontrovertieren”), he is quite firm in maintaining that he reached his own conclusion, disregarding any other definition of ‘catharsis’.³ First of all, he argues against the widespread moral interpretation of catharsis, authoritatively propounded by Lessing among others. Major interpretations of ‘catharsis’ prior to those of Goethe are worth mentioning. The pedagogic and moral effect of ancient tragedies had already been investigated by Pierre Brumoy in *A Discourse Upon the Original of Tragedy* (*Discours sur l’origine de la tragédie*), the introductory essay to his monumental *The Greek Theatre* (*Théâtre des Grecs*), first published in 1730 (Brumoy 1730: xxix-xcviii; see de Senarclens 2008). Among the topics it touches on, the *Discourse* offers a detailed analysis of the emotions aroused by tragedy. Brumoy affirms that pity and fear are the most dangerous passions, though they are also the most common; they up-

³ See Goethe’s letter to Zelter of 31 December 1829, in Goethe-Zelter 1833-34: 5.354.

set men, depriving them of the necessary firmness to face life's hardships.⁴ Philosophy teaches men how to "purge" ("purger", *ibid.*: 76) these passions, that is how to preserve what is useful in them while eliminating what may be detrimental. However, art achieves greater success than philosophy in teaching how to 'purge' passions, since it instructs one's reason through the power of poetic images. It is surprising then, Brumoy continues, that poetry succeeds in correcting fear by fear and pity by pity: indeed, the human heart loves its own weaknesses and is healed by the very pleasure it takes in being seduced by passions.⁵ That is to say, remedy springs from the evil we love. Thus, in Brumoy's view catharsis is a homeopathic process. On the one hand, the representation of passions helps the spectators become sweeter and more humane; on the other, it teaches them that they must moderate passions in real life. In the second half of the eighteenth century, Brumoy's *Discourse* emerged as a canonical text in Germany; his French translations of ancient texts allowed prominent scholars – from Herder to Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller – to approach Greek tragedies. Moreover, Brumoy attached a moral – or, to put it better, a philosophical – value to aesthetic catharsis for the first time. The fierce opposition of German intellectuals to French classicism and its rigid set of rules borrowed from Aristotle's *Poetics* may seem peculiar, especially if we allow for the fact that they never argued against French scholars' moral interpretation of catharsis. Conversely, they elaborated on it, making it the primary aim of tragedy. In fact, German scholars did not assign a prescriptive value to Aristotle's work. Nonetheless, if the play's structure does really spring naturally from the play itself and is not the result of an *a posteriori* set of precepts, then it follows that to excite passions is essential to 'tragedy' as a literary genre, even though this effect implies ignoring or transgressing all poetic principles. For this reason, as Herder points out, even if the passions he evokes are not different from those aroused by Greek tragedies, and even though these passions are far larger in number, Shakespeare's plays cannot be appreciated in the light of French classicism's Aristotelian criteria.⁶

⁴ I am paraphrasing Roul-Rochette's edition of *Théâtre des Grecs* (Brumoy 1826: 1.72ff.).

⁵ Brumoy 1826: 74: "Ce qu'il y a de particulier et de surprenant en cette matière, c'est que la poésie corrige la crainte par la crainte, et la pitié par la pitié; chose d'autant plus agréable, que le cœur humain aime ses sentiments et ses faiblesses" ["What appears most particular and surprising in this matter is, that poetry corrects fear by fear, and pity by pity. This circumstance is the more agreeable, because the human heart loves its own sentiments, and its own weaknesses", trans. by Lennox (Brumoy 1759:1.xxxix)].

⁶ Herder 1993: esp. 505.

Lessing: Grief, Pity and Moral Education

As stated above, Lessing unprecedentedly inscribed the idea of catharsis within a wider anthropological framework involving human beings well beyond the temporary tragic event of a dramatic performance. The upsetting effect of tragedy on the aesthetic level, as well as its power both to prompt and to mould affections in the human soul are pointed out by Friedrich Nicolai (*Abhandlung vom Trauerspiel*, 1757).⁷ In his discussions with Nicolai and Moses Mendelsohn, Lessing connected the objective moment of the reception to the subjective moment of the effect. All passions aroused in the spectator's soul (aesthetic reception) cannot be separated from their catharsis (moral effect), i.e. from their metamorphosis into virtues. 'Pity' and 'fear' are closely linked, insofar as 'fear' is nothing but 'pity' for ourselves. Lessing's observations were influenced by Rousseau; his *Mitleid*, for instance, was modelled on Rousseau's "pitié naturelle".⁸ Displaying one's passions is indeed symptomatic of one's own closeness to Nature. Rather than being the outward show of inner weakness – as it may appear to the moderns, to whom courtesy and decency forbid cries and tears, as Lessing ironically wrote in his *Laocoon* –, it reveals one's own humanity. The core of Rousseau's criticism to civilization is that men's detachment from Nature has created a society where artificial human beings and inauthentic passions prevail. Hence, it is necessary to return to Nature and to its authentic passions, that is, to a context in which "pity" (*pitié*) proves to be man's quintessential feature. Thus, as Lessing summed up in a well-known truism, "the most compassionate man is also the best" (see Korzeniewski 2003).⁹ Rather than indicating one's own weakness, the exhibition of passions is to be considered as an emblem of nobility of soul. "Decency", the main component of French classical drama, must not determine tragedy. As Denis Diderot wrote in his *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel* (1760), hearing Sophocles's Philoctetes crying would pierce the audience; not only is Clytemnestra's desperation for Iphigenia dignified, it also provides a broader, truthful account of maternal love. Following Diderot – whose essays on drama he had translated into German – Lessing distinguished an active bourgeois heroism from an inhuman heroism. The former pertains to the Greeks, it never weavers, even when a duty has to be performed, and it exercises no control over both passions and

⁷ Nicolai's essay is included in Schulte-Sasse 1972: 11-44.

⁸ See Kronauer 1995: 23-45; Schings 1980.

⁹ "Der mitleidigste Mensch . . . der beste Mensch [ist], zu allen gesellschaftlichen Tugenden, zu allen Arten der Großmut der aufgelegteste", Gotthold Ephraim Lessing to Friedrich Nicolai, November 1756 (Lessing 1973: 163) ["the most compassionate man . . . [is] the best man, the most disposed to all social virtues, to all kinds of magnanimity", qtd in Becker-Cantarino 2005: 167].

the expression of physical suffering; the latter restrains all passions and is a form of destructive aristocratic heroism. The representation of suffering turns into a vehicle for moral education, as is the case with Philoctetes himself and with Heracles in *The Women of Trachis*. The cold, statuesque stoicism of French tragic heroes proves particularly ineffective on the audience, who have to sympathize with the character onstage and the more complete and unresolvable the character's suffering, the stronger is the audience's sympathy. Conversely, the sentimental denouements French tragedies offer are quite different.¹⁰ To Lessing, aesthetic analysis corresponds to a moral agenda: his own view of catharsis as the conversion of passions into virtues stands as a secular response to those interpretations of Aristotle's catharsis as a Christian mortification of passions. This explains why, in chapters 74-83 of his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, Lessing ascribed a moral value to Aristotle's catharsis, at the same time maintaining the emotional element.¹¹

Schiller: Catharsis as Resistance

Together with his view of catharsis, Goethe's *Nachlese* is not to be taken only as a direct response to Lessing and to his French antecedents. Rather, the essay sums up his thirty-year long reflections on drama and on the difference between ancient and modern tragedy, which always cohere with his actual poetic production. Goethe's friendship with Friedrich Schiller proved crucial in developing and refining his reflection. The *Nachlese* can be also read in the light of Schiller's work on Greek tragedy, that was inaugurated in Weimar, while Goethe was in Italy, developed through translations and rewritings, confronted with Goethe's *Iphigenia in Tauris* – which Schiller reviewed in 1788 – and culminated in his correspondence with Goethe and in the composition of *Braut von Messina* (*Bride of Messina*, 1802).¹² Schiller does not proceed from Aristotle's *Poetics*, which, as we will see, he began studying only in 1797. Like Lessing, he particularly follows Moses Mendelssohn and his theory of mixed sensations: a mixed sensation combines both pleasure and grief and arouses whenever a performance has something pleasant about it as a "determination of the soul", while it is accompanied by disapproval and a feeling of repugnance as a "picture of the object". Whereas Lessing points

¹⁰ Lessing delves into the topic in his *Laocoon* in particular, touching on Sophocles's *Philoctetes*; the stages of the debate on suffering in Sophocles are discussed in Fornaro 2006.

¹¹ For a concise analysis of Lessing's *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* chapters, which are not addressed in the present essay, see Fick 2000: 291-3.

¹² See Schwinge 2008: 15-48; Latacz 1997: 235-57.

out the role of 'Mitleid', a mixed sensation of sympathy and fear, Schiller concentrates on 'emotion' ('Rührung') that, like the 'sublime' ('Erhabene'), is a mixed sensation, composed by two elements: grief and pleasure-within-grief. Like his fellow writers, Schiller takes into account the moment of tragic reception, which (as Lessing also assumed) awakens passions through the representation of suffering, leading to an involuntary affection. However, Schiller wonders, why does this vision generate pleasure?¹³ This is possible because the representation of passions unleashes the spectators' awareness of being free to choose, i.e. of being endowed with a reason ('Vernunft') that allows them to resist any form of suffering caused by unpredictable forces (either the gods or fate). This is a cathartic process, since resistance to suffering favours the development and the realization of freedom of the soul ('Gemüthfreyheit'). Though not becoming "better" in Lessing's moral sense, men change and become different from what they previously were: that is to say, they become self-aware. We can infer that Schiller regards catharsis not as the 'removal' of passions but as a 'detachment' from them.¹⁴ Passions still act and play their part, and yet, painful as they may be, they do not affect men's inner freedom. On the contrary, since men are aware of being free, they can find pleasure in looking at tragic events and are thus allowed a sort of reconciliation with suffering. Schiller operates a fundamental shift in the conception of catharsis: his case is that tragedy has a sublime effect, insofar as through catharsis itself – that is, through the artificial suffering on stage – men's inner, spiritual resistance to suffering is revealed. Schiller assimilates previous remarks on the pity ('Mitleid') aroused by tragedy; he even deems this moral catharsis as both the prerequisite and the source of pleasure (cf. Meier 1992). However, he amplifies the cathartic effect to include a change involving the human being as a whole, since tragedy exposes "a conceptualization of *resistance* to the suffering, in order to call the inner freedom of the heart to consciousness".¹⁵ This view creates an unbridgeable gap between ancient and modern tragedy; the former, in fact, is realistic, insofar as it assumes fatal suffering as an essential element in human life, whereas the latter allows the pleasure of the awareness of one's own freedom to triumph, and thus generates the sublime. As Schiller wrote in letter 22 of his *Letters on the Aesthetical Education of Man*, the spectators' and the auditors' spirit preserves its freedom and is not touched by the passions aroused by tragedy; at the same time, it issues "pure and entire" ("rein und vollkommen") from the magic circle that artists draw. However, this is the effect of what could

¹³ Nonetheless, Schiller is not the first to ask this question. See Seidensticker 2005.

¹⁴ See also Pinna 1996: 20-3.

¹⁵ "Vorstellung des Widerstandes gegen das Leiden, um die innere Gemüthsfreyheit ins Bewußtseyen zu rufen" (Schiller 1962: 195. Trans. by Daniel Platt).

be termed an ideal catharsis: as a matter of fact, the events staged by Greek tragedies prove to be always "afflicting" and "humiliating" for those who think to be self-determined. Thus, in Greek plays there is always a "knot that cannot be unravelled" ("ein unaufgelöster Knoten") by reason, which always longs to transcend necessity and outstrip fate. The chorus alone, giving "calm" to the action through the introduction of an element for reflection, enables the audience to maintain its freedom, that is, to remain untouched (as it should be) by passions and to keep its reason unaffected. The chorus is given the function of "purifying" tragic poetry, while separating reflection from the tragic action and endowing reflection itself with poetical power.¹⁶ Far from rejecting it, Schiller broadens the scope of the cathartic effect that eighteenth-century appropriations of Aristotle's theory sought for: his focus is not on the attainment of a temporary catharsis of passions resulting from emotion and pity, but on the impulse towards a definitive catharsis, that is to say, towards the permanent awareness of one's own moral freedom. This process can be carried out exclusively by modern tragedy and not by Greek plays (Wilm 2010). Schiller's awareness of the unbridgeable gap between the ancients and the moderns, along with his view of Greek tragedy as the specific outcome of a specific age that cannot be reasonably used as a model in modern times, result in a new perception of catharsis that does not comply with Aristotle's interpretation.

Aristotle: the Form and the Rules

A core element of Greek tragedy and of its interpretation in Aristotle's *Poetics* is nonetheless preserved: form. In studying the *Poetics* thoroughly for the first time, Schiller in fact increased his knowledge of the "form" ("Form") of Greek tragedy, as he wrote to Goethe on 5 May 1797 (Goethe-Schiller 1881: 1.250-2). He complied with this form in creating his *Braut von Messina* between 1802 and 1803, focusing on a simple action, employing few characters and a small number of changes of scene, reducing the time of the action to one night and one day only, and, in particular, relying on the presence

¹⁶ "Der Chor reinigt also das tragische Gedicht, indem er die Reflexion von der Handlung absondert und eben durch diese Absonderung sie selbst mit poetischer Kraft ausrüstet; ebenso, wie der bildende Künstler die gemeine Notdurft der Bekleidung durch eine reiche Draperie in einen Reiz und in eine Schönheit verwandelt" (Schiller 2004: 2.821) ["The chorus thus purifies tragic poetry, while separating reflection from the action, and, by means of this separation, supplies reflection with poetical power, – just as the artist transforms the ordinary necessity of clothing into charm and beauty by means of a rich drapery", trans. by Avezzù, Schiller 2015: 155].

of the chorus that – as in a Greek play – is charged with the main effect (“die Hauptwirkung”) of tragedy, as he revealed to Iffland on 24 February 1803 (Schiller 1984: 32.15). On 4 February 1803, Schiller presented his play at a public reading in Weimar; significantly, the following day he wrote to Goethe about its successful reception: “Fear and terror manifested themselves in their full force, and the more tender emotions were evinced in beautiful expressions; the chorus delighted all by its naive motives, and created enthusiasm by its lyrical sublimity”.¹⁷ Thus, the aesthetic effect of tragedy – here described in Aristotelian terms – differs from the cathartic effect, whose value is not temporary and which resides in the awareness of one’s own freedom and of one’s own ability to resist suffering through the use of reason. Still, tragedy’s effect depends on its form, thus allowing Aristotle’s *Poetics* to maintain its value: Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy – conducted on a larger corpus than the one available to the moderns – points out that this genre “is embodied in a permanent form” (“in einer bleibenden Form ruht”). It follows that a tragedy is a closed work of art and, as such, it is subject to a more exhaustive critical and aesthetic analysis, as Schiller added in his letter to Goethe of 5 May 1797 (Goethe-Schiller 1881: 1.251).

In the same letter, Schiller revealed to have approached the *Poetics* for the first time and affirmed that, far from being a disadvantage, this proved fruitful; as he explained, only when the “fundamental ideas” (“Grundbegriffe”, *ibid.*: 250) are clearly understood, one can read Aristotle with profit. In fact, to Schiller, Aristotle’s explanation of the “outward form” (“äußere Form”, *ibid.*: 251) of tragedy does not proceed from and rely on a sterile set of rules – as the French understand it – but it points to the essence (“das Wesen”, *ibid.*: 250) of the work of art. Therefore, Aristotle would have fared better with Shakespeare, who did not adopt any rules or precepts, than with the whole lot of French tragedians. Aristotle’s rules proceed from an empiric observation of tragedy; as a consequence, we owe his ‘laws’ from the lucky accident that, at the time, several works of art realised an idea through the fact (“durch das Factum”, *ibid.*: 251) of their existence. Goethe and Schiller’s shared reading of Aristotle’s work, together with their conclusions, laid the foundations for Goethe’s later remarks on the *Poetics* which pointed to a reassessment of the value of Aristotle’s ‘rules’ as pertaining to the nature of tragedy, discarding previous interpretations that ascribed them to a precise historical stage of the genre’s evolution. Rules are valid only insofar as they are not considered as outward, artificial forms but as the expression

¹⁷ “Die Furcht und der Schrecken erwiesen sich in ihrer ganzen Kraft, auch die sanftere Rührung gab sich durch schöne Aeußerungen kund – der Chor erfreute allgemein durch seine naiven Motive und begeisterte durch seinen lyrischen Schwung” (Goethe-Schiller 1881: 2.331). Trans. by Schmitz, Goethe-Schiller 1877-90: 2.442.

of the very idea of the tragic genre. The most difficult issue with which the Goethe-Schiller correspondence confronted was the classification of literary genres according to their nature, origin and function, in contrast with the idea of art as nature's mimesis. In fact, art is nature and, like nature, it sticks to its own internal rules; yet, if one should know how to discover those rules, one should also be able to understand what presides over art. If Aristotle's *Poetics* retains its value as a treaty on the morphology of tragedy, one might hardly come across a definition of catharsis which refers to any other different genre. As early as 1797, Goethe detected this contradiction, though he explicitly dealt with it in the *Nachlese* thirty years later.

The 'Tragic' as an Aesthetic Category

The Goethe-Schiller correspondence is known to have resulted in only one collaborative essay: the clear-cut *On Epic and Dramatic Poetry* (*Ueber epische und dramatische Dichtung*, 1797), and it is no coincidence that Goethe published it in the same journal as the *Nachlese* thirty years later, along with passages from the letters (cf. Fornaro 1998). Goethe's responses to these combined efforts towards a definition of tragedy and of other poetic genres also include his well-known adamant refusal to write a tragedy (letter of 9 December 1797; Goethe-Schiller 1881: 1.337-9), because merely attempting it would have destroyed him. This claim matches his later assertion that he "was not born to be a tragic poet" ("nicht zum tragischen Dichter geboren"), because his "nature is conciliatory" ("da meine Natur konziliant ist").¹⁸ In Erich Heller's words, "Goethe's genius is in communion with nature"; therefore, "there can be no catharsis for him, only metamorphosis" (Heller 1952: 47).

As a consequence, he explained that the purely tragic incident remained alien to him, since it allowed no reconciliation. Goethe did not bring into question his own ability or possibility to create tragedies; rather, he doubted that the effect his tragedies attained could be the very emancipation of the individual's awareness propounded by Schiller and by German idealists after him (Most 1993; Billings 2014). In Goethe's view, the 'tragic' is an aesthetic category that relates to a dramatic performance, thus following the meaning Aristotle himself attached to the adjective *tragikos*. His main concern is the aesthetic judgment only; any other feature does not match his own nature, which is not 'tragic', as in Schiller's or Schelling's sense. Moreover, the ultimate catharsis Schiller contemplated, involving man as a whole, remains an ideal, and the tragic form Aristotle delineated does reveal that several Greek

¹⁸ Letter to Zelter of 31 October 1831 (Goethe-Zelter 1833-34: 6.328).

plays left no 'knot' unravelled – as Schiller would posit –, implying an artistically effected development that made them a worthy subject for critical analysis.

'Pure Form' and the Detachment from Reality

Goethe's entire correspondence with Schiller, as well as his essay *On Epic and Dramatic Poetry* are concerned with the structure of literary genres, in that they deal with the morphology of all living forms and strive to identify the objective, natural laws that explain the origin and the essence of poetry, while disregarding the subject itself. From his earliest years, Goethe strove after pure form, that is, after what causes a work of art to become coherent, self-contained and perfect. He attempted to define those laws, rules and classifications to which the work of art should adhere in order to attain formal perfection. In opposition to the chaos of contemporary art, to the "barbaric tendencies" ("barbarischen ... Tendenzen")¹⁹ of mixing genres, to the aesthetic bewilderment deriving from a misinterpretation of the significance of the creative impulse, Goethe drew an impassable magic circle that contained poetry within its territory and established the absoluteness of form as a bulwark. Hence, his anachronistic classicism that does not dismiss life and its numberless contradictions but assumes to absorb and master it through the creation of a work of art in which all opposition is resolved. The Ancients only have the authority to provide a model for this formal research. Nonetheless, the process leading to a purified work of art – one which is not touched by confusion and by the pathological element, i.e. by "fashion" that attracts the public and directs modern aesthetic enjoyment – is arduous. As one of the audience's favourite genre, drama particularly suffers from corruption on part of the pathological element: the spectators identify with the characters on stage and identification results in a mingling of real life and performance that is consuming for both the audience and the poet.²⁰ Rejecting all kind of realism, in Goethe's view the poet should aspire to be immune to passions and never blend art with life. Thus, emotional detachment is necessary to handle even those subjects which arouse a "lively pathological interest" ("lebhaftes pathologische Interesse"),²¹ like the dramatic ones; as a consequence, the poet should spurn any kind of identification. Only by distancing, that is, by detaching from reality, art might aspire to aesthetic perfection.

¹⁹ See his letter to Schiller of 23 December 1797 (Goethe-Schiller 1881: 1.344) which includes the essay *On Epic and Dramatic Poetry*.

²⁰ See Schiller's letter to Goethe of 8 December 1797 (Goethe-Schiller 1881: 1.336-7).

²¹ Goethe's letter to Schiller of 9 December 1797 (Goethe-Schiller 1881: 1.338).

Catharsis as an Aesthetic Phenomenon

While endorsing a view of catharsis that is fully contained within the making of poetry, in his "Nachlese zu Aristoteles Poetik", Goethe does not dismiss the 'tragic' as a dramatic event: the final sacrifice is tragic, inasmuch as it responds to the general structure of a tragedy and represents a suitable denouement, i.e. one that excites strong emotions through the exhibition of death (in Goethe's words, no one wants to die). In brief, in opposition to his early approaches to Aristotle's text, Goethe does not reject tragedy's power to awaken passions and emotions; however, he implies that the essence of the dramatic form does not reside in this effect, rather in the aesthetic catharsis it stimulates. Aesthetic catharsis is the balance that form imposes between a tragic subject affecting our emotions and the poetic structuring framework of a play (cf. Wilm 2006). A tragedy cannot be judged from its conclusion only but from its entire progress: in order to achieve excellence, the poet has to keep aloof from the play and observe it as an "object" ("... als Objekt aufstellend", Goethe 1827: 345). Hence, the poet has to remove everything subjective and pathological from his research and keep himself at an objective distance which allows him to control form. Taken by itself, tragic conflict would remain unresolvable; on the contrary, within a play – that is, through the distance imposed by the performance – conflict is made relative, though preserving its unique tragic quality. The Ancients function once again as a model since they succeed in rendering "the highest pathos" ("das höchste Pathetische") a pure "aesthetic play" ("ästhetisches Spiel");²² that is to say, ancient tragic poets are not emotionally involved in what they create. On the other hand, the spectators do not experience any moral improvement once they get back home after the performance, and yet the resolution of the conflict on stage does offer them a sort of relief. This is possible because the aesthetic play, leading to a solution, conveys an impression of conclusiveness and balance, as if everything closed full-circle. After having experienced aesthetic catharsis, the spectators return to their real life and are able to look at it with clearer eyes. Accordingly, as Goethe pointed out in his enthusiastic early essay *Zum Shakespears Tag* (1771), Shakespeare's plays teach readers to 'see' the world aesthetically. Aesthetic catharsis does not offer redemption but it provides a kind of deliverance which is different from the ideal, philosophical freedom Schiller postulated and which enables the spectators to penetrate and enjoy the world.

²² Letter to Schiller of 9 December 1797 (Goethe-Schiller 1881: 1.338).

Tragic and Epic Poetry

Goethe's discussion on catharsis embeds a solution to one of the main issues in his poetics, that is, the role art plays in real life and, similarly, the role life plays within art. To Goethe, modern aesthetics is characterized by a tendency towards mingling, which is a form of corruption involving mainly art and nature, but touching the various literary genres as well. This mingling generates confusion, misunderstanding and poetic sterility. The modern poet's main difficulty, as well as the main challenge for classicism, is to overcome the pathological condition that attracts the audience and involves him directly at the same time. From his earliest years, Goethe attempted to grasp the peculiar traits of tragic subjects, sometimes extracting them from epic poetry. However, his *Nausicaa*, conceived as a play after Goethe had lived the *Odyssey* as a living word in Sicily, is a tentative fragment (cf. Fornaro 1994). Similarly, his *Achilleid*, the epic poem built around a tragic subject that he meant as a continuation of the *Iliad*, does not go beyond the first canto. The play does not progress partly because the dialogue takes on a philosophical turn within the epic discourse, and delays the action, almost annihilating it to stasis. Goethe tried to achieve purity of form as he was himself contaminated with life and with art at the same time: like his contemporaries, he was imbued with the cult of Nature and had succumbed to the widespread trend of identifying Shakespeare with nature itself. Conversely, the artist must fight the "surge" of history. If impurity pervades modern poetry, the artist must become immune to it by striving to create a formally perfect (i.e. classic) work of art in which all emotions fade away. Nonetheless, the process is painful even on a physical level, since the "pathological" triumphs in moments of creative and personal crisis; in order to regenerate itself, art has to go through exhausting healing processes just like Wilhelm Meister's life.²³

Catharsis and *Wilhelm Meister*

Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*) stands as a symbolic narrative of the aesthetic process of catharsis which Goethe would later theorize in the *Nachlese* (cf. Zumbusch 2011: 278 ff.). It is well-known that the novel was first conceived as *Wilhelm Meister teatralische Sendung* in 1777.²⁴ A complete revised version was published as *Wilhelm Meister's*

²³ This has been recently demonstrated by Cornelia Zumbusch (2011), with whose introductory remarks and some analyses I agree in the present essay.

²⁴ It would be impossible to refer to the complete corpus of critical writings on the novel; Morpurgo Tagliabue 1991 is relevant in the present context for its analysis of *Wilhelm Meister's* importance for Goethe's aesthetic and personal development.

Apprenticeship in 1796, after Goethe had encountered a series of crucial biographical, emotional and historical events, such as the failure of the Revolution, his correspondence with Schiller and his journey to Italy. Though the Romantic generation acclaimed *Wilhelm Meister* as the epitome of modern novel and a revolutionary text, the novel illustrates Goethe's own detachment from his contemporaries' aesthetics, that is, his own purification, his catharsis, from everything he deemed "diseased", as he explained in his famous definition of "romantic" as an antithesis to "classic". The protagonist progressively abandons the view of art merging with life which has infected aesthetics as a disease. Goethe attaches a symbolical value to the wounds and the sicknesses inflicted to Wilhelm by the contagion; the ensuing healing processes he is subjected to stand for the steps he takes to escape the aesthetic epidemic of his time. The protagonist's diseases and wounds are to be interpreted as caused by a pernicious confusion between art and life; such is his first unconditional love for a woman, the actress Mariane, a feeling which inexorably blends together the naïve protagonist's taste for theatricality with his first erotic interest and makes him vulnerable. The hero is the special victim of the theatre's aesthetic infection, which contaminates him through the contact with the characters he meets, like Philine, for example, or the pretty countess who introduces him to Shakespeare. Each of them establishes a constant exchange between art and life, illusion and reality, that threatens Wilhelm and damages both his very existence and his creative impulse. Clearly, the aesthetic infection bears diseased fruits. This is exemplified by unhappy Aurelie, who, like Ophelia, suffers from an excess of imagination ("Einbildungskraft") and who models her life on Shakespeare's tragedy.²⁵ If, on the one hand, Aurelie avails herself of her painful experiences to bestow life and naturalness to the characters she brings on stage, on the other, she measures the depth of her own feelings against the dramatic roles she interprets. Aurelie lets art infect her when the "dramatic shadows" ("Schattenbilder")²⁶ awaken a deep grief in her, as when she talks with Wilhelm about *Hamlet*; besides, she is not able to conceive passions outside a

²⁵ "Ihre Einbildungskraft ist angesteckt" (Goethe 2005: 247) ["Her imagination is infected", trans. by Blackall, Goethe 1989: 147].

²⁶ "Wilhelm hatte nicht bemerkt, mit welchem Ausdruck Aurelie die letzten Worte aussprach. Nur auf das Kunstwerk, dessen Zusammenhang und Vollkommenheit gerichtet, ahnete er nicht, daß seine Freundin eine ganz andere Wirkung empfand; nicht, daß ein eigener tiefer Schmerz durch diese dramatischen Schattenbilder in ihr lebhaft erregt ward." (Goethe 2005: 247) ["Wilhelm had not noticed the intensity of expression with which Aurelie was speaking. His attention had been entirely concentrated on the perfect structure of the work of art, and he had no idea of the totally different way Aurelie was reacting to the character, or that some deep grief of her own was being awakened by this shadow play", trans. by Blackall, *ibid.*].

performance. Aurelie's unhappy love is a mere theatrical display; and yet, Wilhelm yields to it and shares the torments of the girl's unhappy, anxious soul. His mind is distracted, his blood excited by a sort of fever.²⁷ Before Aurelie cuts Wilhelm's hand with a dagger, he has already become her accomplice in passion. The inability to keep art and life separated is thus part of the repertoire of tragic effects. As Wilhelm declares the moment his enthusiasm for the theatre reaches its peak, the effect the actor produces is a form of electric shock which inflames, stirs and stimulates the spectator: briefly, the actor infects the spectator with the feelings he represents on stage.²⁸ Aurelie and Wilhelm delineate a physiology of the aesthetic contagion from which it is necessary, though painful, to be healed.

Catharsis and Classicism

Similarly, Mignon and the harper personify both the pathological in tragedy and its infectious aesthetics which calls for catharsis. The harper holds himself the victim of an authoritarian and unfathomable fate, like a character in some games involving those very heavenly powers on which his songs focus. In perfect compliance with the classical doctrine of dramatic poetry

²⁷ "Der entsetzliche, halb natürliche, halb erzwungene Zustand seiner Freundin peinigte ihn nur zu sehr. Er empfand die Foltern der unglücklichen Anspannung mit: sein Gehirn zerrüttete sich, und sein Blut war in einer fieberhaften Bewegung". (Goethe 2005: 279) ["The terrifying, half-natural and half-forced state of this woman tormented him too much for that. He shared the tortures that wracked her unhappy self; his mind was distraught, his feelings in a state of feverish excitement", trans. by Blackall, *ibid.*].

²⁸ "Welcher Schauspieler, welcher Schriftsteller, ja welcher Mensch überhaupt würde sich nicht auf dem Gipfel seiner Wünsche sehen, wenn er durch irgendein edles Wort oder eine gute Tat einen so allgemeinen Eindruck hervorbrächte? Welche köstliche Empfindung müßte es sein, wenn man gute, edle, der Menschheit würdige Gefühle ebenso schnell durch einen elektrischen Schlag ausbreiten, ein solches Entzücken unter dem Volke erregen könnte, als diese Leute durch ihre körperliche Geschicklichkeit getan haben; wenn man der Menge das Mitgefühl alles Menschlichen geben, wenn man sie mit der Vorstellung des Glücks und Unglücks, der Weisheit und Torheit, ja des Unsinns und der Albernheit entzünden, erschüttern und ihr stockendes Innere in freie, lebhaft und reine Bewegung setzen könnte!" (Goethe 2005: 106) ["What actor, writer, or indeed what human being would not feel he has reached the summit of his desires when, by some noble word or deed, he produced such a universal impression? What a rich experience it would be to disseminate worthy human feelings so quickly – like electricity – through the ranks of the common people, such as these people did by the display of their bodily skill – to impart a sense of common humanity to the masses, inflame and disturb them with a display of all our pleasures and misfortunes, wisdom and follies, stupidity and idiocy, and release their sullen minds into a state of active, vigorous, unimpeded freedom!"] trans. by Blackall, *ibid.*: 58-9].

and following Schelling's assumption ("schuldlos schuldig werden") (Schelling 1859: 695), the man is the protagonist of a personal tragedy which has caused him, innocent as he was, to become guilty. Mignon, the offspring of his undeliberate incestuous love, stands as a constant reminder of his condition. And Mignon tries to keep Wilhelm away from the theatre, though she herself reveals her peculiar affinity with tragedy. During the revels that follow the premiere, the girl plunges into a wild dance around the table, holding a tambourine in her hand. Her hair loose, her head tilted back, her limbs flung into the air, she becomes like one of those maenads whose wild postures are portrayed on ancient monuments and who amaze the viewer.²⁹ Here, Mignon explicitly evokes the tragedy's Dionysian origins. After the frenzied dance, Mignon bites Wilhelm's arm, thus symbolically infecting him with the tragic, i.e. with the disease of the passion for the theatre. Hence, catharsis consists in an aesthetic process that aims at making the work of art complete and independent by allowing its detachment from all kinds of emotions and, as a consequence, from life and its vices. Through the aesthetic ideal that the Society of the Tower creates as a bulwark against the aesthetics of contamination molded on Shakespeare, Goethe anticipates his later interpretation of Aristotle. The activities of the Tower, culminating in Mignon's funeral, coincide with the artistic agenda of the *Propylaea* (*Die Propyläen*), pointing out to a withdrawal within the domain of purity and of assuaging moderation. In opposition to the pathological mingling of art and life which infected Goethe, the Hall of the Past turns into a hall of art, purified by its very remoteness from real life. In this symbolic space, as Schiller wrote to Goethe (2 July 1796), Mignon's funeral emerges as a tribute to art's eternal youth, preserved from the corruption of time just like Mignon's own youth (Goethe-Schiller 1881: 133-6). Art, in fact, strives hard to preserve the body against transience and, in doing so, it works a miracle. In contrast to eighteenth-century poetics of nature, art takes the place of nature, it freezes life into an artwork – as Mignon's body is frozen by death – and disrupts

²⁹ "Mignon ward bis zur Wut lustig, und die Gesellschaft, sosehr sie anfangs über den Scherz gelacht hatte, mußte zuletzt Einhalt tun. Aber wenig half das Zureden, denn nun sprang sie auf und raste, die Schellentrommel in der Hand, um den Tisch herum. Ihre Haare flogen, und indem sie den Kopf zurück und alle ihre Glieder gleichsam in die Luft warf, schien sie einer Mänade ähnlich, deren wilde und beinahe unmögliche Stellungen uns auf alten Monumenten noch oft in Erstaunen setzen" (Goethe 2005: 326) ["Mignon was almost frenetically excited and, amusing as this had been in the beginning, it became such that it had to be curbed. But admonishing her seemed to have little effect, for she now began hysterically to rush around the table, tambourine in hand, hair flying, head thrown back and her body flung into the air like one of those maenads whose wild and well-nigh impossible postures still delight us on ancient monuments", trans. by Blackall, *ibid.*: 197-8].

the pathological bond it has tied with nature. Suspended in eternity, the kind of art that Mignon's everlasting youth symbolizes is not subdued to taste, to fashion or to the spectators' volatile emotions anymore. Once it becomes free and independent from life, art's beauty is revealed in its purest – or, to say it better, purified – form. Thus in Goethe's view, a perfect artistic form is the result of 'catharsis': unlike the infected pathological art, what grows out of catharsis makes man immune to grief. During Mignon's funeral, while a number of children are singing in chorus, the participants suspend their emotions. Their absorption prevents them from grieving; and yet, when the singing has died away, grief overcomes them again, more bitter and biting, and consideration, reflection, curiosity – that is, all feelings and affections that normally upset the spirit – are restored along with it, so that everybody longs to be taken back to the element ("Element") of art.³⁰ Art's perfection achieves its catharsis as long as it is displayed, just like tragedy accomplishes catharsis during the interval of a performance. Once back to their lives, the participants are also back to themselves and, consequently, forget art. For instance, the choir-boys have to leave Mignon's funeral to return to real life, where they will wait for love. Death and life must be kept apart just like art and real life must be separated. Only by reason of this separation could art serve as a safeguard against life's incidents. Medicine thus stands as a model for art and not only because of its power to transfigure life into eternity – as it happens to Mignon – but also because it can nurture apathy and balance passions. Far from causing suffering, art mitigates it; far from arousing passions, it placates them. However, Mignon must die so that her body could turn into a symbol of art's eternizing power. Hence, at the end of the funeral, the underlying aporia of pure art is explained: art really preserves life only the very moment it discards life.

Life within Art and Real Life

One of the most influential voices in Goethe's criticism has noted that the author's classicism is mournful, a funerary monument erected to glorify the memory of Greek classicism's prominent figures (Mittner 1964: 556). How-

³⁰ "Der Abbé und Natalie führten den Marchese, Wilhelmen Therese und Lothario hinaus, und erst als der Gesang ihnen völlig verhallte, fielen die Schmerzen, die Betrachtungen, die Gedanken, die Neugierde sie mit aller Gewalt wieder an, und sehnlich wünschten sie sich in jenes Element wieder zurück" (Goethe 2005: 578) ["The Abbé and Natalie walked out with the Marchese; Therese and Lothario followed with Wilhelm. Only when the singing had completely died away, were they once more overcome with sorrow, reflection, consideration and curiosity, and longed to be back in the peace of what they had just left", trans. by Blackall, *ibid.*: 354].

ever, this monument is clearly a visionary, idealized construction, since the characters it exalts are not real living beings but aesthetic idols. Yet, taking into account Goethe's interpretation of catharsis, this kind of classicism stands as a definite rejection both of death and of funerary and museological archaeology. The validation of a work of art resides in the work of art itself: in addition to Mignon's grave, one might think of the palace Hephaestus builds for the gods "according to the divine measure of the Muses' most sublime song" ("Nach dem göttlichen Maß des herrlichsten Musengesanges", Goethe 1981: 517) in the *Achilleid*. The palace stands uncorrupted by time, perfect, invulnerable to decay; every artwork is gathered there, like Zeus's gold male attendants or Hephaestus's bronze maiden helpers: all of them are lifeless masterpieces, deprived of the Charites' gift which only has the power to bestow breath and light to shallow simulacra. Similar to these figures are Prometheus's dull, beautiful maidens – their creator's pride and joy – in Goethe's dramatic fragment. The artist builds his own fortress within the work of art, so as to protect himself against life's infection. Ultimately, he protects himself from grief. If achieved, aesthetic catharsis solves all tragic conflicts that real life cannot settle. Living in a work of art thus provides a valid alternative to life in the real world; within art, emotions, passions and feeling are elevated, purged and made eternal. However, even those who make art a shelter against life's passions and control emotions through form can attain both purity and immunity; thus, they will be protected from life's tides and surges during their metaphorical sailing against the wind. Once rejected, not only is life properly reintegrated into art, it also infects and galvanizes art. All through his life, the artist has to cope constantly with the logic of art on one side and the logic of life on the other. Instead, everybody who enjoys a work of art is granted his/her share of balance and reconciliation which is temporary and limited to the aesthetic moment, but on which depends the liberty to take a fresh look at the world where everyone must and wants to return.

Conclusion

As early as 1788, in his short essay "Einfache Nachahmung der Natur, Manier und Styl" ("Simple Imitation of Nature, Manner, Style"), Goethe praised 'style' as the highest level art could ever reach (1988c). Touching either tragedy as a genre or life's tragic incidents, the emotional distancing created by style – that is, by formal perfection – removes grief and suffering, while rendering them bearable. Style – and, as a consequence, art's autonomy – offered Goethe the only possible catharsis that his 'epic' nature could conceive. As Friedrich Nietzsche affirmed in a posthumous fragment dated 1878:

Was Goethe bei H. Kleist empfand, war sein Gefühl des *Tragischen*, von dem er sich abwandte: es war die unheilbare Seite der Natur. Er selbst war conciliant und heilbar. Das Tragische hat mit unheilbaren, die Kom<ödie> mit heilbaren Leiden zu thun. (fr. 29[1], Nietzsche 1988: 513).

[What Goethe perceived in H. Kleist was his feeling for the *tragic*, from which he turned away: it was the incurable side of nature. He was himself was conciliatory and curable. The tragic has to do with incurable, com<edy> with curable suffering. (Nietzsche 2013: 322)]

English translation by Emanuela Zirzotti

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