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Introduction

The meaning of catharsis and, particularly, its Aristotelian use in his celebrated formal definition of tragedy that can be found in *Poetics* (1449b24-28) have been debated for centuries, prompting a wide range of interpretations. In fact, the exegetic history of Aristotle's treatise shows peculiar features, including its having been recurrently assumed as the point of reference and the foundation of both aesthetic and dramaturgical theories. Also owing to the incompleteness of the transmitted text, the interpretation of different passages has been bent to fit diverse aesthetic needs. This issue gets even more complicated when one comes to consider catharsis, also because over time it has undergone a double de-contextualization. On the one hand, the whole treatise on poetic art has been taken out of both its original cultural milieu and the Aristotelian corpus, and, on the other, the formal definition of tragedy has been isolated from the rest of *Poetics*. This has inevitably favoured the overlapping of religious-spiritual and psychological (atonement/redemption of the soul and sublimation/ennoblement respectively) categories.

As a consequence, many scholars have concentrated precisely on that definition – despite its unfinished and rather fragmentary formulation – and taken it as a starting point in order to interpret Greek tragedy and the 'tragic' as an aesthetic and existential category. Besides, the *Katharsis-Frage*, that is, the 'catharsis question' as the German scholars call it, did not embrace only philological and classical studies, but also literary ones in a broad sense, as well as dramaturgical practices and aesthetic and philosophical interpretations. Thus, catharsis has eventually become "the most famous word of Aristotle's *Poetics*, intended as immediately self-evident mostly by those that know least about its complexity".[1] In a sense, it has been turned into an

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[1] "[L]a parola forse più conosciuta della *Poetica*, citata come immediatamente evidente tanto più quanto meno si è a conto della sua problematicità" (Lanza 1987: 61).

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"antonomastic and all-embracing term"[2] for the entire Aristotelian dramatic theory. However, none of the many exegetic models proposed can be said to be free from difficulties or inconsistencies, so that still today the issue is far from being settled.[3]

To summarize the main points of this problem it is worth quoting the crucial passage (1449b24-28) as cited in Rudolf Kassel's (1965) edition:

> 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.
>
> [Tragedy, then, is mimesis of an action which is elevated, complete, and of magnitude; in language embellished by distinct forms in its sections; employing the mode of enactment, not narrative; and through pity and fear accomplishing the catharsis of such emotions. (Trans. by Halliwell 1999: 47-9)].

As already mentioned, a centuries-old hermeneutical tradition has loaded these few lines with meanings that certainly go beyond what Aristotle actually meant; at times scholars believed they could find in them not only a description of tragedy, understood as the historical phenomenon of ancient Greece, but also a formula to determine the essence and character of artistic production in general. Aristotle does concentrate in them some pivotal concepts of his poetological lexicon, including terms such as *mimesis* and *logos*, which indicate essential elements of poetry, as he discussed at length in his treatise. Catharsis only – which seems to indicate tragedy's main target – lacks further elucidation in *Poetics*.

An unquestionable aspect is that tragedy works through emotional means to produce that kind of "pleasure" (ἡδονή) which is peculiar to it (1453b11). It is in any case a pleasure deeply connected with the emotional sphere. Plato deemed poetry to be dangerous for the stability of the soul (*Resp.* 3, 387b-c), since it provokes *eleos* and *phobos*, and, at the same time, lamented the fact that tragedy "feeds and waters" (τρέφει . . . ἄρδουσα) the low instincts of the human soul instead of "drying them up" (αὐχμεῖν).[4] On the contrary, Ar-

[2] "[T]ermine antonomastico e onnicomprensivo" (Tesi 1994: 117).

[3] Suggestions have also been made to remove the passage on catharsis as a false annotation, a textual interpolation (cf. Scott 2003; Veloso 2007). However, cutting a passage that makes interpretation difficult looks like a shortcut rather than a solution. Cf. Halliwell 2011: 260-5.

[4] Cfr. Plat. *Resp.* 10, 606d: Καὶ περὶ ἀφροδισίων δὴ καὶ θυμοῦ καὶ περὶ πάντων τῶν ἐπιθυμητικῶν τε καὶ λυπηρῶν καὶ ἡδέων ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ, ἃ δή φαμεν πάσῃ πράξει ἡμῖν ἕπεσθαι, ὅτι τοιαῦτα ἡμᾶς ἡ ποιητικὴ μίμησις ἐργάζεται· τρέφει γὰρ ταῦτα ἄρδουσα, δέον αὐχμεῖν, καὶ ἄρχοντα ἡμῖν καθίστησιν, δέον ἄρχεσθαι αὐτὰ ἵνα βελτίους τε καὶ εὐδαιμονέστεροι ἀντὶ χειρόνων καὶ ἀθλιωτέρων γιγνώμεθα. ["And the same is true of

istotle considered *eleos* and *phobos* as the two typically tragic passions and, as they are instruments of catharsis, they must not be repressed, but rather fully deployed.

It is well known that what just cited is the only passage in *Poetics* where Aristotle uses the term catharsis in a poetological sense. The other instance occurring in the treatise (1455b15) refers to the meaning of ritual purification with reference to the myth of Orestes and his "rescue by purification" (σωτηρία διὰ τῆς καθάρσεως). It is rather in the eighth book of *Politics*, in the outline of an educational programme to be adopted in a well-governed ideal city, that we find an important occurrence of the term catharsis with reference to art and, therefore, comparable to the term used in *Poetics*, which Aristotle explicitly refers to for a full discussion of this concept (*Pol.* 8, 1341b38-40). Many scholars have called attention to this passage as the basis for an understanding of the concept of tragic catharsis, although the context of *Politics* is different in some respects. In fact, in it the Aristotelian presentation pivots on the issue of the possible utility of music for education. The Stagirite starts with a distinction among different types of melodies: "ethical" (τὰ μὲν ἠθικὰ), which affect the character and are useful in education; "practical" (τὰ δὲ πρακτικὰ), suitable to accompany the action for recreation and relaxation; and those he calls "enthusiastic" (τὰ δ' ἐνθουσιαστικὰ), fit to excite emotions with particular strength.[5] This tripartite schema overlaps with a tendential bipartition which distinguishes between music to be listened to (coinciding with character music, which has an educational goal) and music to be performed (action music, more suitable for excitation and leisure).[6]

sex and passion and all the painful and enjoyable emotions in the soul which we indeed say accompany us in all our activities, because poetical imitation produces such effects in us. You see it feeds and waters these things when they should be made wither, and makes them control us when they should be controlled in order for us to become better, happier people instead of worse and more wretched". (Trans. by Emlyn-Jones and Preddy 2013: 435-7)].

[5] Arist. *Pol.* 8, 1341b32-36: ἐπεὶ δὲ τὴν διαίρεσιν ἀποδεχόμεθα τῶν μελῶν ὡς διαιροῦσί τινες τῶν ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ, τὰ μὲν ἠθικὰ τὰ δὲ πρακτικὰ τὰ δ' ἐνθουσιαστικὰ τιθέντες, καὶ τῶν ἁρμονιῶν τὴν φύσιν <τὴν> πρὸς ἕκαστα τούτων οἰκείαν, ἄλλην πρὸς ἄλλο μέλος, τιθέασι . . . ["And since we accept the classification of melodies made by some philosophers, as ethical melodies, melodies of action, and passionate melodies, distributing the various harmonies among these classes as being in nature akin to one or the other". (Trans. by Rackham 1932: 669)].

[6] Ibid. 1341a36-41: φαμὲν δ' οὐ μιᾶς ἕνεκεν ὠφελείας τῇ μουσικῇ χρῆσθαι δεῖν ἀλλὰ καὶ πλειόνων χάριν (καὶ γὰρ παιδείας ἕνεκεν καὶ καθάρσεως – τί δὲ λέγομεν τὴν κάθαρσιν, νῦν μὲν ἁπλῶς, πάλιν δ' ἐν τοῖς περὶ ποιητικῆς ἐροῦμεν σαφέστερον – τρίτον δὲ πρὸς διαγωγὴν πρὸς ἄνεσίν τε καὶ πρὸς τὴν τῆς συντονίας ἀνάπαυσιν) [and as we say that music ought to be employed not for the purpose of one benefit that it confers but on account of several (for it serves the purpose both of education and of purgation – the

The term catharsis is used precisely to indicate the functionality of "enthusiastic" music (τὰ δ' ἐνθουσιαστικὰ), exemplified through what he calls "sacred melodies" (ἐκ τῶν δ' ἱερῶν μελῶν), capable of producing a state of possession and ecstasy in responsive listeners.[7] However, Aristotle does not provide an explanation of this concept and rather refers to his own "writings on poetics" (ἐν τοῖς περὶ ποιητικῆς, ibid.: 1341b39-40) for a fuller discussion. All the same, his description of the cathartic process remains interesting: the enthusiastic or "sacred" music performed on the aulos[8] triggers emotions (fear or pity, but also ecstatic rapture) that everyone can feel to various degrees of intensity, but towards which some are more inclined than others. After the delirium has reached its climax while listening to tunes that violently arouse the soul, the more inclined ones, who are particularly prone to possession, calm down "as if they had received some medicinal treatment and a catharsis" (ὥσπερ ἰατρείας τυχόντας καὶ καθάρσεως, ibid.: 1342a10-11). The ensuing effect is characterized by relief accompanied by a sense of pleasure (κουφίζεσθαι μεθ' ἡδονῆς, ibid.: 1342a14-15).

Therefore, Aristotle knows of melodies capable of inducing the catharsis of terrifying and soothing passions that have been at first intensified by music. Among them, however, he only focuses on the musical catharsis taking place in the theatre and specifically directed towards a simple public made up of ordinary men and women with little culture. Thus, in the Aristotelian conception, music can serve several purposes, such as education, amusement, and intellectual recreation. However, an important question remains open: does the purely musical catharsis spoken of in the eighth book of *Politics* coincide with the one mentioned in *Poetics*, or are they two differently premised phenomena working differently? Scholars are divided on this issue: on the one hand, the formal definition of tragedy given in *Poetics* (1449b24-28) seems to point to catharsis as a phenomenon exclusively linked to tragedy, without any involvement of musical aspects. On the other hand,

term purgation we use for the present without explanation, but we will return to discuss the meaning that we give to it more explicitly in our treatise on poetry – and thirdly it serves for amusement, serving to relax our tension and to give rest from it". (Trans. by Rackham 1932: 669-71)].

[7] Ibid. 1342a 7-11: καὶ γὰρ ὑπὸ ταύτης τῆς κινήσεως κατοκώχιμοί τινές εἰσιν, ἐκ τῶν δ' ἱερῶν μελῶν ὁρῶμεν τούτους, ὅταν χρήσωνται τοῖς ἐξοργιάζουσι τὴν ψυχὴν μέλεσι, καθισταμένους ὥσπερ ἰατρείας τυχόντας καὶ καθάρσεως· ["for some persons are very liable to this form of emotion, and under the influence of sacred music we see these people, when they use tunes that violently arouse the soul, being thrown into a state as if they had received medicinal treatment and taken a purge". (Trans. by Rackham 1932: 671)].

[8] On the function of the aulos in producing the cathartic effect, both in musical catharsis and – as trigger of *phobos* – in tragic catharsis, cf. Provenza 2009.

the poetic catharsis could be simply a peculiar interpretation of the more general musical catharsis.[9]

Aristotle appears to have been the first to use catharsis as a category of poetic creation. Before him, the term – connected with the verb καθαίρω ('purge', 'purify', 'expiate') – belonged to the medical-biological, ritual-religious and philosophical spheres, and covered a whole semantic spectrum that included several acceptations of the idea of "purification" both in material and spiritual sense.[10] The term catharsis, for example, could refer to physical hygiene (washing one's hands before eating, before performing sacrifices, before praying; washing oneself after a journey) that had both a ritual and a profane meaning. In religion, forms of catharsis are attested that combine physical and psychic aspects having the general aim of restoring an order that has been disrupted (for example, the removal of a "stain" that makes a person ἀκάθαρτος, "impure"). In the medical field (see, for instance, the works of the Hippocratic corpus) the term is used to indicate either the external cleansing of a wound (removing its pus), or the removal of liquids from inside the body (for example depurating the stomach through emetics, from the intestines through enemas, from the skin through perspiration, etc.).[11] The concept of catharsis likely to have originally belonged to the ritual-religious sphere (indicating a decontamination ritual through which culprits could rid themselves of the stain that had made them dangerous to society) and then spread to lay medicine. The fact that, alongside categories already long established within the poetological field (*mimesis*, *phobos*, *eleos*), Aristotle chose to use a category like catharsis, up to then not included among them, might be understood as his answer to Plato's reserves on the dangerous effects of tragedy on the spectators (Seidensticker 2009: 7). The passions aroused by the tragic performance, in fact, would be subsequently removed through the cathartic process, thus producing "harmless pleasure" (χαρὰν ἀβλαβῆ is indeed the syntagma utilized in *Politics* 8, 1342a16).

An age-old question, on which the interpreters of tragic catharsis have always been divided, is the issue of the two *pathemata* (*eleos* and *phobos*) produced by tragedy – according to the Aristotelian definition – 'of which' or 'through which' catharsis takes place. Why are only those two passions

[9] On the two types of catharsis cf. Flashar 2007. A famous interpretation based on the substantial identity of musical and tragic catharsis is given by Dirlmeier 1940. The question of a possible catharsis of comedy remains open, as Aristotle is supposed to have spoken of it in the lost second book of *Poetics*. Especially on this cf. Janko 1984; 1992; Sutton 1994 and Matt Cohn's article included in the present issue of *Skenè. JTDS.*

[10] On the meanings of catharsis in ancient Greek, see Pfister 1935. On contexts of use of the term in pre-Aristotelian times cf. in particular Moulinier (1952: 152-76), Hoessly 2001, and the essays collected in Vöhler and Seidensticker 2007.

[11] A collection of numerous attestations of this can be found in Craik 2006.

mentioned and not any others? As a matter of fact, pity and fear are mentioned exactly because they are typically tragic passions, different for instance from those aroused by comedy or other artistic genres. The question is further complicated by τῶν τοιούτων which is found in the definition: "the catharsis of such emotions" (τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν). Should we posit the existence of other passions, besides fear and pity, that are somehow connected with tragedy, but about which Aristotle did not wish to say anything? Light was shed on this by Jacob Bernays in his celebrated essay *Grundzüge der verlorenen Abhandlung des Aristoteles über Wirkung der Tragödie* [*Outlines of Aristotle's Lost Work on the Effect of Tragedy*] (Bernays 1857: 150-4). The Greek word τοιοῦτος is semantically equal to the German *solcher* and to the English *such* and can have two meanings: a) in a strict sense, it indicates persons or things identical to those mentioned, thus meaning "this"; b) in a broader sense, it indicates persons or things which are "similar" or "akin" to those mentioned.[12]

After all, one only needs to read the *Poetics* to see that Aristotle normally uses the pair of nouns ἔλεος/φόβος ('pity', 'compassion'/'fear', 'terror') and the corresponding adjectives ἐλεεινόν/φοβερὸν ('moving pity', 'piteous'/'causing fear', 'terrible'), or some synonyms. Only in one point (1456a33-b8) does he include also ὀργή, 'anger'; but his discourse here is general and not specifically directed to tragic poetry. Therefore, in the definition Aristotle refers solely to *eleos* and *phobos*, without considering other qualitatively different passions (such as anger). If anything, his use of *toiutos* suggests that there may be quantitative differences in tragic emotions (Seidensticker 2009: 10). In fact, next to ἔλεος and φόβος there are synonyms that indicate greater or lesser intensity: as regards pity, we can find, for example, οἶκτος ('lamentation', 'piteous wailing'), συγγνώμη ('forbearance'), ὀδυρμός ('lamentation'), and as concerns fear there are δέος ('fear'), φρίκη ('shuddering'), ἔκπληξις ('consternation'), ταραχή ('upheaval'), all terms implying a different degree of intensity.

The fact that Aristotle takes only *eleos* and *phobos* into account as tragic emotions is confirmed in chapter 1 of *Poetics*, where he intends to define "the most beautiful tragedy" (1452b31: τῆς καλλίστης τραγῳδίας). Here he mentions the pair *eleos* and *phobos* in contraposition to other possible emotional reactions. In particular, he identifies three models combining a certain hero with a certain action which are not suitable to produce the desired effect of tragedy. The case of the blameless hero who falls into misfortune without making any errors (ἁμαρτία) is "repugnant" (μιαρόν), because it does not excite *eleos* or *phobos*, but rather a sense of distress and indignation (1452b34-

[12] Cf. Lucas 1968: 97. It must not be forgotten that the pair *eleos*/*phobos* have been part of the poetological tradition at least since the time of sophistry (cf. Gorgias, *DK* 82B11, 9):

6: πρῶτον μὲν δῆλον ὅτι οὔτε τοὺς ἐπιεικεῖς ἄνδρας δεῖ μεταβάλλοντας φαίνεσθαι ἐξ εὐτυχίας εἰς δυστυχίαν, οὐ γὰρ φοβερὸν οὐδὲ ἐλεεινὸν τοῦτο ἀλλὰ μιαρόν ἐστιν·).[13] Likewise, the case of an evil character who falls into misfortune rouses no *eleos* and *phobos*, but only a certain feeling of philanthropic sympathy (φιλάνθρωπον), which cannot be denied even to those who seem to deserve whatever destiny they get (1453a1-7: οὐδ' αὖ τὸν σφόδρα πονηρὸν ἐξ εὐτυχίας εἰς δυστυχίαν μεταπίπτειν· τὸ μὲν γὰρ φιλάνθρωπον ἔχοι ἂν ἡ τοιαύτη σύστασις ἀλλ' οὔτε ἔλεον οὔτε φόβον, ὁ μὲν γὰρ περὶ τὸν ἀνάξιόν ἐστιν δυστυχοῦντα, ὁ δὲ περὶ τὸν ὅμοιον, ἔλεος μὲν περὶ τὸν ἀνάξιον, φόβος δὲ περὶ τὸν ὅμοιον, ὥστε οὔτε ἐλεεινὸν οὔτε φοβερὸν ἔσται τὸ συμβαῖνον).[14] Finally, the case of an evil character who meets with success appears as "the least tragic of all" (ἀτραγῳδότατον), since it does not achieve the necessary effect (1452b36-1453a1: οὔτε τοὺς μοχθηροὺς ἐξ ἀτυχίας εἰς εὐτυχίαν, ἀτραγῳδότατον γὰρ τοῦτ'ἐστὶ πάντων, οὐδὲν γὰρ ἔχει ὧν δεῖ, οὔτε γὰρ φιλάνθρωπον οὔτε ἐλεεινὸν οὔτε φοβερόν ἐστιν).[15] Thus, μιαρόν is a non-specific *pathos* of the tragic effect, while φιλάνθρωπον is a *pathos* insufficient fully to achieve the tragic effect. Some specific conditions have to occur for the tragic emotions to develop to the right degree. In particular, in order to arouse fear (*phobos*) the hero must be the same as, or similar (ὅμοιος), to the spectator; in order to excite pity (*eleos*) he must suffer some underserved misfortune.

In the second book of *Rhetoric*, Aristotle examines *eleos* and *phobos* separately, and underlines the close relationship between them as well as, consequently, their intrinsic reciprocity. In defining *phobos*, he says that we feel it for something that arouses our pity, when it befalls others (1382b25-26). Similarly, we feel *eleos* towards someone when we think that what has befallen him/her has also befallen someone in our family, or when we fear that it could happen to us or to someone in our family. Both *eleos* and *phobos* are aroused by the same type of event (or by the person who suffers the event): an agonizing and devastating pain.[16] Another requisite taken into account

[13] "[C]lear that neither should decent men be shown changing from prosperity to adversity, as this is not fearful nor yet pitiable but repugnant". (Trans. by Halliwell 1999: 69).

[14] "Nor, again, should tragedy show the very wicked person falling from prosperity to adversity: such a pattern might arouse fellow-feeling, but not pity or fear, since the one is felt for the underserving victim of adversity, the other for one like ourselves (pity for the underserving, fear for one like ourselves); so the outcome will be neither pitiable nor fearful". (Trans. by Halliwell 1999: 69-71).

[15] "[N]or the depraved changing from adversity to prosperity, because this is the least tragic of all, possessing none of the necessary qualities since it arouses neither fellow-feeling nor pity nor fear". (Trans. by Halliwell 1999: 69).

[16] Arist. *Rhet.* 2, 1382a22: ἔστω δὴ φόβος λύπη τις ἢ ταραχὴ ἐκ φαντασίας μέλλοντος κακοῦ φθαρτικοῦ ἢ λυπηροῦ ["let fear be defined as a painful or troubled feeling caused

by Aristotle is the 'closeness' of the evil that we fear or of the victim that we feel pity for, a closeness not only in time and space, but also emotional (the person hurt must be akin to us).

The nature that passions acquire in Aristotle's aesthetic theory is an element of crucial importance on which scholars are divided. On the one hand, some believe that fear and pity are psycho-physical "elementary passions, indomitable by nature" ("naturhaft ungebrochene Elementaraffekte") which overwhelm the spectator (Schadewaldt 1955: 137). These scholars tend to accept Bernays's interpretation, according to which catharsis is a process of removal to be understood mainly at a physiological body level. Other scholars attach great importance to Aristotle's discourse on passions in the second book of *Rhetoric* and in some of his other works (*On the Soul*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Eudemian Ethics*), and maintain that – especially as regards pity – it is also necessary to consider the cognitive processes and moral judgements which are essential to enable the spectator to judge whether a character has or has not deserved his destiny. The basic idea of such exegesis is that the spectator of a tragedy faces the experience of the overthrow of an individual, who does not deserve the severity of his downfall and whose failure to gain success is due to an understandable mistake. The spectators observing the aspects of such failure are made to feel compassion for the protagonist in so far as they understand that he does not deserve it and they will be afraid for themselves in so far as they will realize that they could make the same error too. In other words, the spectator learns how to experience the correct feelings in accordance with what characters and events deserve. In this perspective, catharsis operates a 'sanitization' of feelings, as it were. The German philologist Arbogast Schmitt is today the first advocate of this interpretation, which largely recalls Lessing's formulation and to which we will return shortly.[17]

One of the most complex points, on which generations of scholars (especially German ones) have been divided, is related to the object of catharsis. As regards grammar, three different interpretations are possible:

a) catharsis of fear and pity (objective genitive): through pity and fear tragedy achieves the catharsis of those passions;

by the impression of an imminent evil that causes destruction or pain"]; 1385b13: ἔστω δὴ ἔλεος λύπη τις ἐπὶ φαινομένῳ κακῷ φθαρτικῷ ἢ λυπηρῷ τοῦ ἀναξίου τυγχάνειν ["let pity then be a kind of pain excited by the sight of evil, deadly or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it" (Trans. by Freese 1926: 201, 225)].

[17] Cf. Schmitt 1994: 331-45; 2008: 334-48, 486-518. Cf. also Cessi 1987: 250ff. For an interesting attempt to analyse Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* and Aeschylus's *Oresteia* in the light of this model, in which emotional, ethical and cognitive elements are present at the same time, see Zierl 1994.

b) catharsis from fear and pity (separative genitive): the cathartic process frees the spectator from pity and fear;
c) catharsis produced by fear and pity (subjective genitive): through pity and fear tragedy achieves the catharsis typical of those passions. In this case fear and pity act as active agents of the cathartic process.

Thus, these grammatical interpretations seem to suggest that the process of catharsis may concern either the passions, or the spectators (who are freed from passions), or, finally, the passions themselves may be said to achieve a catharsis.[18] Making a necessary simplification, we can identify the following prevailing interpretative models:[19]

1) Catharsis as 'ennoblement' of passions, as *purificatio*, that is, quantitative and qualitative purification of tragic passions. The genitive τῶν παθημάτων is understood as objective genitive and the cathartic process is framed within a global conception that considers the theatre as an institution with educational aims. Purification from passions can be understood in two different ways: quantitatively (the excess of passions is removed) and qualitatively (passions are cleansed of the impure elements). In either case, from the observation of the exemplary events on the stage the spectators learn to use passions in an appropriate and balanced way, that is, in the right situation and for the right person. They learn to harness them and thus avoid falling into the unpleasant consequences that such passions can determine. Those who accept this interpretation relate the theory of tragic catharsis more or less explicitly to the Aristotelian doctrine of *mesotes* (the ideal happy medium between extremes as a guiding principle).

This reading (which could be defined as 'moralistic' or 'educational') has a long list of advocates dating back to Pier Vettori, Alessandro Piccolomini, Pierre Corneille, Daniel Heinsius, up to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Among the modern scholars who can be ascribed to this group, in spite of their specific positions, we can mention Stephen Halliwell and the previously recalled Arbogast Schmitt, since both of them agree on the merging of the cognitive-philosophical component with the emotional one, thus realigning passions and reason.[20] Along the same lines, Carlo Diano has proposed that the tragic catharsis be included in the broader Greek doctrine of the so-called

[18] See Stephen Halliwell's thorough overview of possible interpretations of catharsis (1986: 350-6). Cf. also Lucas 1968: 273-90; Belfiore 1992: 257-90; Lear 1988; Schrier 1998: 300; Zanatta 2011. For the historical reconstruction of the interpretations of the concept cf. Matthias Luserke's edited collection of texts (1991).

[19] I am following Seidensticker's summary outline (2009: 15ff).

[20] Halliwell defines tragic catharsis as the benefit that results from "the conversion and integration of ostherwise painful emotions into the pleasurable experience of mimetic art" (2011: 253).

τέχνη ἀλυπίας (the art of freeing the soul from pain) theorized by Antiphon, comprising also the *praemeditatio futurorum malorum* already practiced by Anaxagoras. Basically, this would be a technique of 'apprenticeship of misfortune', aimed at training the spectators to learn how to bear the evils and misfortunes that might befall them.[21]

The weak point of this hermeneutical model is that the brief definition of tragedy given by Aristotle in his *Poetics* does not actually contain any reference to the moral aspects of passions and of human behaviour. Indeed, in the eighth book of *Politics* the effect of catharsis connected with music explicitly excludes any connection with education, rather referring to the sphere of amusement and relaxation.[22] Moreover, if the aim was really the 'purification' of passions, it is not clear why such pre-eminence is given to fear and pity and not to other passions such as anger, ambition, envy.

2) Catharsis as 'removal' of passions, *purgatio*, that is, a process that frees one from the passions triggered by tragedy with an ensuing sense of relief and ease. In this model, the genitive is understood as separative and the Aristotelian sentence can therefore be explained as "catharsis from such passions", with the conception of theatre as a therapeutic institution in the background. This is the medical interpretation of catharsis, whose most famous proponent – its "patron-saint",s as Halliwell has it (1986: 353) – is Jacob Bernays, who explicitly spoke of a "pathological point of view" ("ein pathologischer Gesichtspunkt", 1857: 141). As a matter of fact, in the Renaissance this path had already been followed, notably by Lorenzo Giacomini in his 1586 *Dialogo de la purgazione de la tragedia* [*Dialogue on the purgation of tragedy*]. Therefore, the analogy with medicine had been discovered long before Bernays, but, if acknowledged, that kind of interpretation was usually combined with ethical and didactic ones.[23] In the twentieth century, it was especially Wolfgang Schadewaldt and Hellmut Flashar who proposed again the hermeneutical tradition, openly referring to Bernays's work. The former

[21] Cf. Diano 1968. Diano's interpretation moves from Francesco Robortello's sixteenth-century commentary on *Poetics* (1548); cf. Diano 1960. On the stoic matrix of that exegesis, cf. Donadi 2007: 118-21.

[22] See the extract of *Politics* 8, 1341a17-24 where Aristotle explicitly contrasts *mathesis* ("learning") with catharsis and argued that the aulos should not be used in school because, among other reasons, "it is not moralizing but rather orgiastic, so that it ought to be used for occasions of the kind at which attendance has the effect of catharsis rather than instruction." (Trans. by Rackham 1932: 665, adapted); (ἔτι δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ αὐλὸς ἠθικὸν ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ὀργιαστικόν, ὥστε πρὸς τοὺς τοιούτους αὐτῷ καιροὺς χρηστέον ἐν οἷς ἡ θεωρία κάθαρσιν μᾶλλον δύναται ἢ μάθησιν). On the conception of music in the eighth book of *Politics* and in particular on Aristotle not assigning music any function of moral education cf. Ford 2004.

[23] On the medical interpretation of catharsis before Bernays, see Ugolini 2011: 80-8.

concentrated his attention on the pair *phobos* and *eleos*, and suggested that the usual translation "fear" ("Furcht") and "pity" ("Mitleid") – which had become canonical with Lessing – should be dropped in favour of the more appropriate "terror" ("Schrecken") and "misery" ("Jammer") (Schadewaldt 1955). The Greek terms *phobos* and *eleos* would then indicate basic emotional dispositions, such as the tendency to weep and wail or to get suddenly scared. Schadewaldt maintains that, once the validity of Bernays's discovery has been recognized, we should resolutely leave aside all the Christian and moralistic implications that have often undermined the studies on the topic, and accept what to most is highly unacceptable: catharsis simply indicates a "crudely elementary" ("Roh-Elementares") procedure that occurs at a psychosomatic level, as "purge" ("Purgierung") or "evacuation" ("Fortschaffen") (ibid.: 152-3). By using this typically medical term, Aristotle simply meant to indicate the features of the specific pleasure of tragedy, without any pedagogic objectives, and without aiming at the moral improvement of the spectator (ibid.: 156). As an art theorist, Aristotle confined himself to stating this, while as a political theorist he meant to contradict the Platonic educational model by developing a refined "public hygiene" ("Staatshygiene"): entertainment acts as a medical therapy (ibid.: 162).[24]

For his part, Flashar confirmed and endorsed Schadewaldt's interpretation, showing that not only the term catharsis, but also the terms *eleos* and *phobos* – exactly in this combination – take on a specific meaning both in the poetic tradition and in the medical field (Flashar 1956). In Hippocratic terminology, as well as in Aristotle's biological writings, *eleos* and *phobos* indicate tendentially pathological physical states caused either by an excess of humidity and heat, or by a chilling and excessive dryness of the cerebral tissues. Specific physical symptoms are generally associated with them: shivers, tremors, heart palpitations, hair standing on end are associated with *phobos*, while weeping and tearful eyes are associated with *eleos*. According to the principles of the Hippocratic tradition, diseases proceed from humoral dysfunction in the body, and the doctor's therapeutic action consists in provoking a *krisis*, leading up to the expulsion of the harmful humours. This is exactly the type of process that Aristotle imagined should take place during the performance of a tragedy (elimination of excessive cold and humidity from the body).[25]

[24] Another eminent German scholar, Max Pohlenz (1956), responded to Schadewaldt's essay by challenging not so much the physiological explanation of tragic catharsis, but rather its supposed purely conclusive and instantaneous effect. He underlined, instead, the nature of the constant exercise guaranteed by the theatrical experience, a perspective irreconcilable with a purely hedonistic exegesis of the tragic effect. Cf. Condello 2009.

[25] A physiological case that can be used as an example to explain the mechanism of catharsis is the one mentioned in *Problemata* 4, 30 (a work of the Peripatetic school), where a

The hermeneutical perspective moving from Bernays is based on what Aristotle states in the eighth book of *Politics*, as well as on the assumption that the tragic and the musical catharsis coincide. In addition, this explanation leads us to understand Aristotle's *Poetics* as his attempt to respond to Plato's proposal to exclude tragic performances from the public educational programmes on account of their capacity to satisfy the most elementary needs of the spectator, thus feeding the irrational part of their soul. Thus, Aristotle would have formulated the theory of tragic catharsis in order, on the one hand, to confirm that the specific pleasure of tragedy lies in arousing fear and pity, and, on the other, to prove that during the performance the spectators free themselves from such passions. Consequently, the tragedy not only does not represent a destabilizing threat to the functioning of the state, but, on the contrary, provides healthy and harmless entertainment.

In support of this interpretation, we can refer to the common experience whereby through weeping and wailing we reach both physical and mental appeasement, a form of emotional regulation that is well-known and practiced in the funeral rites of many cultures (cf. Seidensticker 2009: 199). Many scholars, however, deem it unacceptable that Aristotle could have conceived the unburdening of emotions as the aim of the masterpieces of Greek tragedy. Here also a classicistic legacy is likely to come into play: if the medical interpretation were accepted, and catharsis were therefore conceived as "a mechanism of visceral emptying of the soul from toxins", it would follow that "a very large chunk of metaphysical lucubrations on poetry would disappear and leave in despair a whole series of thinkers or would-be thinkers who could no longer find the consolation of mirroring themselves in Aristotle".[26] Furthermore, it must not be forgotten that – apart from catharsis – *Poetics* also refers to other aims of tragedy, such as the philosophical quality of poetry (ch. 9), or the pleasure of learning, which is connected with tragic mimesis (ch. 4). Aristotle may have intended to focus, in the definition, on the specific aim of tragedy only (that is, catharsis), without mentioning the further aims common to the other literary genres.

reason is given for the greater sexual propensity of individuals with a melancholic disposition. The cause lies in the presence of excess air in the body, which the individual tends to get rid of (ἀποκαθαίρεται) by expelling sperm (tantamount to releasing air). This mechanism is connected to a feeling of relief (κουφίζονται). The similarity between this example and tragic catharsis is recalled, among others, by Dirlmeier (1949: 91) and Gentili (1994: 130).

[26] "[Se si dovesse infatti concordare che la *katharsis* aristotelica non è altro che] un meccanismo di svuotamento viscerale dell'anima da alcune tossine . . . una fetta grossissima di elucubrazioni metafisiche sulla poesia scomparirebbe e lascerebbe in crisi una serie di pensatori o di aspiranti tali che non troverebbero più la consolazione di potersi rispecchiare in Aristotele" (Lanza 2002: 62).

3) Catharsis as *clarificatio*, that is, intellectual clarification, explanation of tragic events: during the performance, the spectator comes to understand the general and existential meaning of the plot, moving from the specific (the cases of pity and fear on the stage) to the universal (the general meaning of the cases performed on the stage). The specific pleasure of tragedy would therefore be cognitive. The best known supporters of this interpretation are Samuel Henry Butcher (1895) and, above all, Leon Golden (1962; 1976), to whom we owe the happy concise formula of catharsis as "intellectual clarification". Clearly, this perspective gives great importance to the cognitive state of mimetic arts, as emerges from the fourth chapter of *Poetics*. By and large, those who follow this interpretation deny any identity between the musical catharsis of the eighth chapter of *Politics* and that of *Poetics*.

Following the same interpretative path, other scholars have tried to combine the cognitive dimension with the emotional one. One example is Pier Luigi Donini, who powerfully summarizes what, according to him, should have been the effect of tragedy on the spectator:

> [T]hanks to the skilful reconstruction and the uninterrupted consequentiality of the narration, he [the spectator] will recognize the causes that explain the story being told and take it to a certain end, he will understand the final cause of the action, the efficient cause, the factor that intervenes at the crucial time of the story to bring about either misfortune or salvation for the character; and this understanding will produce a pleasure in him, a pleasing emotion that can rightly be said – as in chapter 9 – to "proceed from pity and fear", because pity and fear are, in turn, excited by the well-woven facts presented by the poet, those same facts that, once understood in their causal determination, are also at the basis of the cognitive pleasure. (Donini 2008: CIV-V)[27]

[27] "[G]razie alla sapiente ricostruzione e alla consequenzialità ininterrotta del racconto riconoscerà (*scil.* lo spettatore) le cause che spiegano la vicenda narrata e la conducono a quel certo fine, capirà quale sia la causa finale dell'azione, quale quella efficiente, quale il fattore che nel momento decisivo della vicenda interviene a produrre la svolta verso il disastro o la salvezza del personaggio; e questa comprensione produrrà in lui un piacere, un'emozione piacevole che può giustamente essere detta – come appunto dice il cap. IX – 'provenire da pietà e paura', perché pietà e paura sono a loro volta suscitate dai fatti bene intrecciati dal poeta, gli stessi fatti che, una volta compresi nella loro determinazione casuale, sono all'origine anche del piacere cognitivo". Donini's interpretation, based on the meaning of the participle περαίνουσα ('leading to achievement', 'crowning'), tends to diminish the import of catharsis as the principal effect of tragedy. Tragic performances, then, would be a 'crowning' of the *paideia* process, reserved to adults with a well-educated character who have already purified their passions through suitable musical education (as prescribed in *Politics* 8). These individuals learn to substitute pity and fear with "the cognitive pleasure of a lesson of practical wisdom on the meaning of life, on why things in life must necessarily, or at least plausibly, go in a certain way, given a certain aim of the actions and a certain character of the agents" [Il piacere cognitivo di

4) Catharsis as intellectual *purificatio*, that is, as purification of tragic events by showing that the hero is innocent and his actions are not repugnant. This thesis – which can be defined as 'structural' or 'dramatic' – has been argued mainly by Gerald F. Else in his commentary on *Poetics* (1957: 225-31). Therefore, catharsis would not indicate an effect of the tragedy on the spectators, but the resolution of the dramatic tension within the story performed. In other words, the playwright stages events and situations that arouse pity and fear for the protagonist and, during the action, resolves the greatest part of the conflicts by steering the story towards a foreseeable logical conclusion. Else defines catharsis as "a process operated by the poet through his 'structure of events'" (ibid.: 230). *Pathemata*, then, are not understood as 'passions' or 'emotions' at all, but rather as 'incidents' or 'actions'. From this perspective, catharsis is a process totally intrinsic to dramatic action and refers to the way in which the play illuminates the tragic qualities of the events, and through such cognitive 'clarification' produces a type of pleasure which is appropriate to the tragic genre, a pleasure that consists in subordinating the emotional excitement to the intellectual understanding.[28]

The interpretations illustrated under points 3 and 4 diverge from those under points 1 and 2 first and foremost for the different semantic value given to the term *pathemata*, understood as 'sufferings', that is, the 'painful events' performed on the stage, and not 'passions' or 'emotions', as generally intended by the supporters of the moral or medical catharsis. However, this meaning appears considerably problematic, not to say debatable, and it seems likewise arduous to understand catharsis as equivalent to the cognitive experience achieved through mimesis.

From the ancient times, down to Renaissance treatises and, finally, modern interpretations, the hermeneutical tradition has built many exegetical models around Aristotle's text. They are numerous and often in contrast with one another and none of them is wholly satisfactory and devoid of internal contradictions. The nine contributions collected in this issue of *Skené.*

una lezione di saggezza pratica sul senso della vita, sul perché le cose nella vita vadano in un certo modo necessariamente, o quanto meno plausibilmente, dati un certo fine delle azioni e un certo carattere degli agenti." (Donini 2008: CIX)]. Cf. also Donini 1998.

[28] For a recent revival of this thesis, cf. Loscalzo 2003. Charles Segal's interpretation is possibly attuned to this position, in that he considers catharsis from a ritual and performative perspective and sees it as a solution to the emotional conflicts that emerge during the performance through rituals which are either alluded or carried out on the stage (Segal 1996). For her part, Elizabeth S. Belfiore has purported the identification of catharsis with the specific pleasure deriving from tragic poetry by interpreting the cathartic process as an allopathic phenomenon: the catharsis of different passions, such as irascibility, insolence, ruthlessness, takes place through fear and pity (1992: 337ff.).

JTDS do not intend to compare these models, nor to introduce new ones. The aim is to investigate some specific themes that are especially related to the way in which the concept of "catharsis" has continued to be productive over time as regards both the hermeneutics of the Aristotelian text and the dramaturgical theory and praxis that through time and in different places have interrogated the meaning of that category and raised questions on how to adapt it (or reject it).

The first three articles are devoted to the ancient theory of tragic catharsis and examine specific themes and aspects that have not received scant attention in traditional studies. Original and stimulating is Andrew Ford's attempt, in "Catharsis, Music and the Mysteries in Aristotle", to relate Aristotle's theory of tragedy to one of the meanings that catharsis could have had in the ancient Greek culture, that is, the ecstatic release provided by certain mystery cults (the so-called 'telestic catharsis' or 'ritual catharsis'). No doubt, there are significant analogies between theatrical praxis and the mystery initiations that intended to alleviate the fear and anxiety of the initiated (Dionysian and Corybantic rituals), and, indeed, Aristotle himself mentions it in the eighth book of *Politics*. Besides, the parallelism between 'dramatic catharsis' and 'telestic catharsis' perfectly connects with Aristotle's strictly anthropological approach to the poetic arts.

Matt Cohn takes up again and injects new ideas into a subject that has been discussed for centuries, that is, the possibility to identify the features typical of a 'comic' catharsis symmetrical to the 'tragic' one. Relying on previous studies by Richard Janko and Stephen Halliwell, in his essay "Comedy, Catharsis, and the Emotions: From Aristotle to Proclus", the author suggests that for Aristotle comedy should elicit not only pleasurable emotions, such as the emotion associated with laughter, but also certain painful ones. In Aristotle's philosophical theory, such emotions have to do with pity and fear, and the cathartic process occurring in comedy is parallel, and complementary, to that of tragedy. The late ancient sources available to us (*Tractatus Coislinianus*, Iamblichus and Proclus), although tending to distort Aristotle's conception, do agree that comedy produced real emotions, and that they too needed a catharsis.

The 'ancient' section closes with an article by Elisabetta Matelli, "Theophrastus on Catharsis and the Need for Release from the Evils Due to Emotions", which focuses on the way Aristotle's theory on catharsis was received by his philosophical school and, more precisely, by his successor Theophrastus. The author presents a detailed outline of the uses and meanings that the term catharsis takes in Theophrastus's writings by underlining the analogies and specificities that can be found in different fields: medical, botanical, religious and musical. If, on the one hand, Theophrastus's originality and autonomy from his Master's conceptions are self-evident, on the other,

the locution ἀπόλυσις τῶν κακῶν, "release from evils", emerges as central: it was adopted mainly to define the nature and the ultimate aim of music, although it seems to substitute the term 'catharsis' in the ethical contexts where Theophrastus elaborates his original take on this theme.

On the way from antiquity to modernity, a moment of crucial importance for the centrality of the notion of catharsis is represented by the Renaissance. The sixteenth-century treatises focusing on the poetic art (translations, paraphrases, commentaries of Aristotle's *Poetics*, but also original and creative elaborations of it) absorbed the category of catharsis in different ways and with different approaches, overlapping levels (dramaturgical, ethical, musical, psychological) and aims (educational, purgative, hedonistic, moralistic, etc.). In "Profit, Pleasure, and Purgation – Catharsis in Aristotle, Paolo Beni and Italian Late Renaissance Poetics", Brigitte Kappl concentrates her analysis on Paolo Beni's *Commentari* on Aristotle's *Poetics* (published in Padua in 1613), the last great Italian commentary that concludes the series begun with Robortello in 1548. Within an instrumental conception of poetry, which is endowed with an educational function prevailing over hedonistic uses, Beni sees a form of moral 'utilitas' in catharsis. However, the most interesting aspect is Beni's exhaustive discussion of his predecessors' ideas about the ultimate aim of poetry (from Trissino to Robortello, Piccolomini, Minturno, and Giacomini). Those pages allow us to understand and appreciate the variety and wealth of the Renaissance hermeneutical tradition in all its nuances. This question, in any case, does not involve Italian culture only. Although Aristotle's *Poetics* was not published in England until 1623, there are traces of 'cathartic thinking' in the English early modern literary theory. This issue is addressed by Thomas Rist in his article "Miraculous Organ: Shakespeare and 'Catharsis'", in which he focuses his attention on Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* (written in 1583), which is unquestionably the most significant expression of that theory at the time. Rist shows that Sidney's *Defence* is not a sufficient cause of Shakespearean cathartic thinking, but that there are other references to purgation in the English literary, medical and Christian traditions, that have offered the 'purgative basis' of Shakespeare's theatre.

Proceeding diachronically, the issue of catharsis becomes crucial in the German literary culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the merging of two fundamental hermeneutical models: on the one hand, the model elaborated by Lessing in *Hamburg Dramaturgy* (1767-69), based on a moralistic-edifying conception (tragedy makes the spectator ethically better), and, on the other, the one put forward by Goethe in his "Nachlese zu Aristoteles' *Poetik*", according to which the effect of tragic poetry begins and ends in the aesthetic dimension. In "'Catharsis'. From Lessing's Moral Purification to Goethe's Purity of Form", Sotera Fornaro re-examines these three authors' positions by retracing their theoretical assumptions, specific

characteristics, and implications with reference to their own dramatic production. Furthermore, as suggested by Goethe's and Schiller's epistolary exchanges, a primary function in the enhancement of the tragic effect is played by the poetic form. Drawing on Aristotle, the two masters of Weimarian classicism aim at redefining the value of the rules governing the poetic creation: these norms ignore both topic and historical time and refer to a criterion of absolute form. Only a form which is absolute, timeless, universal and detached from reality, can guarantee aesthetic perfection.

A significant caesura in the history of the studies on tragic catharsis is marked by the publication in 1857 of Jacob Bernays's study *Grundzüge der verlorenen Abhandlung des Aristoteles über Wirkung der Tragödie*, in which, in a new philologically-founded form, he proposed the idea that catharsis is a phenomenon to be linked mainly to the medical field and that the appropriate way to understand the concept is "*Entladung*" ("discharge", "unloading"). Focused on Bernays's hermeneutical model is Martin Vöhler's "The Pathological Interpretation of Catharsis", where the author re-examines the main theoretical steps of the question by studying the way Bernays elaborated his theory based on ancient and late ancient sources, but also through a continuous dialogue with the hermeneutical models closer to him in time (Lessing and Goethe).

Friedrich Nietzsche, in his own way a revolutionary interpreter of Greek tragedy, formulated a theory of the tragic in which the "Dionysian" effect of the ecstatic dissolution seems to replace the traditional effect of purification and sublimation of emotions. Nietzsche rarely uses the term catharsis in his *Birth of Tragedy* or elsewhere, and when he does, he is rather dismissive, seemingly rejecting out of hand the Aristotelian-inspired theory of tragic catharsis in its ancient or modern forms. In "Nietzsche, Tragedy, and the Theory of Catharsis", James I. Porter investigates the notion of catharsis in Nietzsche, showing that the catharsis theory – contrary to what is usually thought – has a central role both in the *Birth of Tragedy* and in other later writings on tragedy. In particular, in Nietzsche's view catharsis acts in the form of pity or co-suffering ("Mitleid"), identificatory fear and horror ("Furcht", "Schrecken"), and redemptive discharge ("Erlösung", "Entladung"). Thus, the way Nietzsche understands catharsis proves to be much closer to classicism's reading of tragedy than one might suppose.

This issue of *Skenè. JTDS* closes with Daniela Schönle's article, entitled "Theatrical Catharsis and its Therapeutic Effect. Catharsis in Vienna at the Turn of the Century". It concentrates on the so-called "discourse on catharsis", which developed in Vienna between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Schönle underlines that the debate was based on the reception of Bernays's 'pathological' interpretation of catharsis and on the activism of the Hellenist Theodor Gomperz, who not only spread the posi-

tion of Bernays amongst philologists, but was also able to stir interest in the topic in non-academic settings. The influence of those conceptions can be perceived in many fields such as, for instance, the nascent psychoanalysis, when, not coincidentally, Sigmund Freud and Josef Bauer called their new therapy to treat hysteria "cathartic method". As regards the theatre, Schönle focuses upon Arthur Schnitzler's one-acter *Paracelsus* and on Hermann Barr's theoretical contributions (*Dialog vom Tragischen*) in which the theatrical performance is conceived of as a therapeutic form precisely because of its "cathartic" effects.

English translation by Giovanna Stornati

Abbreviations

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