CHAPTER 4

THE THEORY OF CRAMER'S
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THE THEORY OF CATHARSIS

In this Chapter, the study of the theory of Catharsis is proposed. As said before, the last clause of the definition is not explained anywhere in the 'Poetics'. It is believed from Aristotle's promise in the 'Politics' that perhaps this term was explained in the second part of the 'Poetics'. In the 'Politics', Aristotle says,

"There are three benefits which it can give. One is education; a second is release of emotion (the sense of that term will be explained more dozily in our lectures on 'Poetics', but may be left to speak for itself at the moment')."

Unfortunately, Aristotle could not keep the promise or the portion is "irrevocably" lost in the second book of the 'Poetics'.

From this circumstances, the controversy revolving round 'Catharsis' has continued even upto this day and has brought forth various strange and imaginative interpretations and speculations. The term 'Catharsis' has intrigued and interested commentators and critics throughout

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ages. The ease of writing about it is almost in inverse proportion to the extent of given material in the 'Poetics'. A full survey of the literature on the subject would require a volume in itself. It would be, however, my effort to understand and interpret what exactly Aristotle means by Catharsis from the evidence of the 'Poetics' itself, and from his own other works. It must try to understand the 'Poetics' with the help of the 'Poetics' and not with fancy observations and speculations, assumptions and hypotheses. The 'Poetics', ought to be interpreted out of itself and the consideration of cross-references in his other works, and of other contemporary references.

Many critics forget this and base their views and interpretations, not on what Aristotle has actually said, but on assumptions and speculations. F.L. Lucas takes a note of such critics with - "Such modern criticism is maddening when read critically, because it persistently reads into dead writers, subtleties, complications, and implications which anyone historically-minded must regard with the most suspicious scepticism". Lucas is anxious not to do that with Aristotle but at the same time he confesses that the fragmentary and incomplete nature (its second part being lost) of the 'Poetics' itself forces us back on conjecture. It is

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the aim of this study, also to interpret the concept of Catharsis and resulting tragic effect on the evidence of the historical facts — on what Aristotle has actually said and written.

The last clause of the definition of Tragedy is, "with incidents arousing pity and fear, where with to accomplish its Catharsis of such emotions". 3

This much debated clause, gives rise to three problems of much psychological interest. First what was really Aristotle's view? Secondly, how far is it true? Thirdly, what led him to adopt it?

First, we shall see what Aristotle means by the term Catharsis. In the Greece at that time, the term Catharsis meant 'purgation' or cleaning away. It was a medical term — a 'purging'. Aristotle seems to have adopted this term from medical science to explain a literary experience. He uses this term as a medical metaphor. But what he wants to convey by this term in the context of tragic experience is not specified by him.

However, in his other work the 'politics', he has explained the term Catharsis. We can gather his meaning from

3 Foot, 6, 1943b 27.
a passage in the 'Politics' where he uses the term 'Catharsis'. While discussing the nature of instruments to be used for the study of music, Aristotle says that flute should not be used in musical education as "It does not express a state of character, but rather a mood of religious excitement; and it should therefore be used on those occasions when the effect to be produced on the audience is the release of emotions ['Katharsis'] and not instruction".4

Then, describing the three benefits of music, Aristotle says,

"There are three benefits which it can give. One is education, a second is release of emotion (the sense of that term will be explained more clearly in our lectures on poetics, but may be left to speak for itself at the moment), a third is the benefit of cultivation, with which may be linked that of recreation and relaxation of strain".5

The next passage, after this promise, in the 'Politics', makes clearer the general idea. "Any affection which strongly moves the souls of several persons will move the souls of all, and will only differ from person to person with a difference of degree. Pity, fear and inspiration are such affections. The feeling of being possessed by some sort of inspiration is one to which a number of persons are

4 Politics, 3,6, 1341b 9.
5 Politics, 3,7, 1341b 3.
particularly liable. These persons as we can observe for ourselves, are affected by religious melodies, and when they come under the influence of melodies which fill the soul with religious excitement they are calmed and restored as if they had undergone a medical treatment and purging. The same sort of effect will also be produced (i.e. by appropriate music) on those who are specially subject to feelings of fear and pity, or to feelings of any kind; indeed it will also be produced on the rest of us, in proportion as each is liable to some degree of feeling, and the result will be that all alike will experience some sort of purging and the same release of emotion accompanied by pleasure.⁶

From this passage, it becomes quite clear that Cathartic is, a medical metaphor 'purgation' and denotes a pathological effect on the soul analogous to the effect of medicine on the body. It tells us that the Cathartic music first excites or arouses emotions or feelings, and by the act of excitation or arousal purges them and affords a pleasurable relief. Sir Ernest Barker makes this point clear in his translation of this passage with a Footnote:

"Aristotle uses the same word (Katharsis) for what has before been translated as 'release of emotions' and for

⁶ Politics, 8.7, 1342a 4-5.
what is here translated as 'purging'. The release of the
bowels by purging is analogous in his view, to the release
of feelings by listening to some form of music — or by
listening to tragedy".  

The same concept of Catharsis seems to be applied
to explain the tragic effect by Aristotle. It was very
natural for him to use this medical term to explain a
literary experience. As we have noted before he was a son
of physician, and his family was concerned with the healing
arts for generations, so he was very much familiar with the
term Catharsis. So when he used the term Catharsis with
reference to tragedy, he means that tragedy excites the emo-
tions of pity and fear — kindred emotions that are in the
breast of all men — and by the act of excitation affords a
pleasurable relief. The point to be noted is that this
'purging' is achieved first through the excitement of emotions.
The medical Catharsis implies relief, following upon previous
excitation. It is curing emotion by means of an emotion like
in kind.

This medical concept of purgation was quite common
in Aristotle's time. Plato also uses the term Catharsis,
meaning harmful thing purged away in this phrase of 'Phaedo' —
69C — "Katharsis tis ton toixutõn pantõn (i.e. hédonon kai
phobon) — Truth is in fact a kind of purgation of all such

7 Politics, Barker, p.412, m. 3.
Next in Plato's dialogue on 'Laws' (vii 700d) we have a similar idea when Plato is laying down rules for the management of infants. He says,

"You know, when mothers want to put frowzy babies to sleep, the remedy they exhibit is not stillness, but its very opposite, movement — they regularly rock the infants in their arms — and not silence, a tune of some kind; in fact they, so to say, put a spell on their babies just as the priestess does on the distract­ed in the Dionysiac treat­ment, by this com­bination of the movement of dance and song".  

From this passage, it seems that the homeopathic cure of morbid emotions by means of music was also known to Plato.

In 'Republic' (vii, 360a) certain religious rites 10 produce an effect on the soul analogous to that of cathartic
medicine on the body. The passage is: "and when they have emptied and purged of all those the soul of the youth that they have thus possessed and occupied, and when they are initiating with these magnificent and costly rites they proceed to lead home from exile insolence and anarchy and prodigality and shamelessness resplendent in a great attendant choir and crowned with garlands." 11

In 'Cratylos' (405b), doctors and soothsayers both use 'Katharsis mai oi athermoi'. "In the first place, the purgations and purifications which doctors and diviners use, and their fumigations with drugs magical or medicinal, as well as their washings and lustral sprinklings, have all one and the same object which is to make a man pure both in body and soul". 12

In 'Timaeus' (89b) Plato says,

"Therefore of all modes of purifying and reuniting the body the best is gymnastics; the next best is a surging motion, as in sailing or any other major mode of conveyance which is not fatiguing the third sort of motion may be of use in a case of extreme necessity, but in any other will be adopted by no man of sense - I mean the purgative treatment of physicians, for diseases". 13

12 Ibid., p.442.
13 Ibid., p.1203.
Thus Plato seems to have used the word 'Katharsis' in the sense of purgation, which results in purification of disquieting elements either in body or in soul or in both.

This idea of purgation was also known earlier than Plato. Hippocrates (Circa 460 B.C.) the celebrated physician uses this idea in his theory of humours. "There is in Hippocratic language a preparatory process of slow digestion (popsis), produced by the body's heat wherein the bodily elements are recombined and fused in such a way that waste products are generated ready for discharge at the proper time; and when this discharge has, or Catharsis taken place, the result is a new balance or proportion of bodily elements which is health".14

From all these references, one can understand that Aristotle must have had this idea of medical Catharsis — of driving out or clearing away in his mind what he described the effect of tragedy, by the term 'Catharsis'.

Considering all these, it is not difficult, to recover the outlines of Aristotle's theory of Catharsis — or the

cathartic effect of tragedy. Pity and Fear are elements in human nature, and in some men, they are present in a disquieting degree. With these latter, the tragic excitement is a necessity, but it is also in a certain sense, good for all. It serves as a sort of medicine, producing a Catharsis to lighten and relieve the soul of the accumulated emotion within it, and as the relief is wanted, there is always a harmless pleasure, attending the process of relief.

The legitimacy of this pleasure\textsuperscript{15} is assumed throughout the 'Poetics', but its precise nature is not explained, either in the existing book or elsewhere by Aristotle. "It falls naturally enough, however, into its place in the classification of pleasures in the Nicomachean Ethics, which recognises the existence of a class of things as pleasures, not directly and in themselves, but through their effect, as being of the nature of cures or remedies to remove the disquietude, arising from an unsatisfied want, and restores us to a normal condition of body or mind.\textsuperscript{16}

While enumerating kinds of pleasures, Aristotle says,

"While others are not even pleasures but seem to be so, viz., all those which involve pain and

\textsuperscript{15} Pp. 1453 b 11 - "The tragic pleasure is that of pity and fear and the poet has to produce it by a work of imitation."

whose end is curative, *e.g.* the process that
go on in sick persons.\(^1\)

No further consideration was given to this point.

"By things pleasant incidently I mean those
that act as cures (for because as a result
people are cured, through some action of
the part that remains healthy). For this
reason the process is thought pleasant.\(^1\)"

The tragic excitement which in the language of
the 'politics' acts as a 'remedy' or 'purification' is
clearly a pleasure of this kind. The nature of pleasure
with its association of a purpose that we get from tragedy,
gives it a moral meaning. The pleasure of tragedy has a
purpose. It is good for us because it relieves us of accumu-
lated emotions of pity and fear and restores a healthy
balance. This gives a direct moral aim to poetry — or to
tragedy — as though the theatre were a school and the tragic
poet a teacher of morality.

Why Aristotle took such a view of the aim of
tragedy can perhaps be understood by us if we understand
the Greek view of life in general and of his teacher's in
particular.

It is well-known that the Greeks tried to evaluate

\(^{17}\) Aristotle, *Ethics: Nicomachea*, The *Works of
Aristotle*, ed. W. D. Ross (London: Oxford University Press,
1934), Vol. I, 7, 13, 1152b 34.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 7, 15, 1154b 17.
everything from the metaphysical and the moral points of view. They judged everything by reality and utility. For them the beautiful was not distinguished from the true and the good. Their metaphysical assumption is to the effect that artistic imitation or representation is no more than a kind of commonplace-reality of reality, that is, as presented to normal sense perception and feeling and that it is related precisely as the ordinary objects of perception are related to man and his purposes. Hence they named what we say the liberal arts as mimetic or imitative arts. Their metaphysical principle made them believe that art is only a reproduction of nature (perceptible world) which is also a reproduction of the reality - the universal ideal. It was this prevalent idea that dictated the philosophical treatment of art, which presented only images of things and not the useful realities. And such imitation must be judged morally, in respect of their content by the same moral criteria as in real life. as Prof. Boeque produced only images of things and not the useful realities. And such imitation must be judged morally, in respect of their content by the same moral criteria as in real life, as Prof. Boequepoints out, "The moral and practical judgment in the first intellectual outcome of organized social life, and is inevitably turned upon the world of beauty in the Hellenic times."19 For them the purpose of art is not pleasure - giving, by its sheer expressive effect or aesthetic appearance, but it has a real purpose of moral improvement.

In this atmosphere comes the great philosopher, Plato, a supreme artist denouncing art as immoral. "He was unable to distinguish the pleasure of expressiveness from the practical interest of morality." Is art, mimesis, a rational or an irrational fact? Does it belong to the noble region of the soul, where philosophy and virtue are found or does it dwell in that base lower sphere, with sensibility and crude passionality? These questions are answered in the Republic (x, 603b) thus. "This, then was what I wished to have agreed upon when I said that poetry and in general the mimetic art, produces a product that is far removed from truth in the accomplishments of its task, and associates with the part in us that is remote from intelligence, and is its companion and friend for no sound and true purpose."

The answer that he gives, is well-known. Mimesis does not realise the ideas, that is to say the truth of things, but reproduces natural or artificial things, which are pale shadows of them; it is a diminution of a diminution a third hand work. Art, then, does not belong to the lofty and rational region of the soul but to the sensual, it is not a strengthening but a corruption of the mind. It can serve only sensual pleasure, which troubles and obscures. Plato further (Republic, 606a) says,

20 Ibid., p.53.
If you would reflect that the part of the soul that in the former case, in our own misfortune, was sorely restrained, and that has hungered for tears and a good cry and satisfaction, because it is its nature to desire those things, in the element in us that the poet satisfy and delight, and that the best element in our nature, since it has never been properly educated by reason or even by habit, then reflects its guard over the plaintive art, inasmuch as this in contemplating the woes of others and it is no shame to it to praise and pity another who, claiming to be a good man, abandons himself to excess in his grief, but it thinks this vicarious pleasure is so much clear gain, and would not consent to forfeit it by disclaiming the pain altogether. That is, I think, because few are capable of reflecting that what we enjoy in others will inevitably react upon ourselves. For after feeding on the emotion of pity there, it is no cry to restrain it in our own sufferings. 22

Plato further adds,

"For it (poetry) not only feeds and fosters these feelings when what we ought to do is to dry them up. For this reason poetry and poets must be excluded from the perfect Republic. Plato gives a challenge, to the lovers of poetry thus: "And we would allow her advocates who are not poets but lovers of poetry to plead her cause in prose without author, and show that she is not only delightful but beneficial to orderly government and all the life of men. And we shall listen benevolently for it will be much gain for us, if it can be shown that she brings not only pleasure but benefit." 23

22 Ibid., p.331.

Aristotle's theory of Catharsis justifiably appears to be an answer to Plato's polemic and the challenge. Aristotle is here probably concerned to answer, though without ever mentioning the name, his master's attitude to poetry. Aristotle counters Plato's extremist ethics by his own middle-of-the-way theory, most characteristic of the Greek Mind. "The poet Plato had argued in his Ion, creates in an inspired ecstasy, but of his sober senses. It is vain therefore to trust the fuddled judgements of this divine drunkard. Trust only the philosopher. Art Plato had continued in the idle shadow of a shadow, twice removed from true reality. Poetry retorts Aristotle is something more philosophic and serious than history (Poetica, IX 3). Poetry said Plato, makes men cowardly by its pictures of the afterworld. No, replied Aristotle it can purge men's fears. Poetry said Plato, encouraged men to be hysterical and uncontrolled. On the contrary, answers his pupil, it makes them less, not more, emotional by giving a periodic and healthy outlet to their feelings. Tragedy says Aristotle, by stirring pent up feelings, throws their excess out by the process of purgation. In short Aristotle's theory of Catharsis is a defence against the Platonic polemic." 24

Thus from Aristotle himself we gather that when he used the term Catharsis to explain the effect of tragic emotions of pity and fear, he had this medical metaphor or 'purification' and its pathological effect in his mind. Afterwards the Aristotelian exegetes have explained the term Catharsis with many different interpretations, its meaning has been keenly disputed. As T.J. Ross says,

"A whole library has been written on this famous doctrine of Catharsis."25

We shall review some of these later interpretations in the next chapter.

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