EPIC, TRAGEDY, AND CATHARSIS

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In a recent article in this journal, James Hogan perceptively discusses Aristotle's use of Homer in the *Poetics*.[1] In the course of his discussion, he raises the question of the relevance of catharsis to epic, and in so doing he refers to an interpretation of catharsis which I have presented in which this key term is rendered as "intellectual clarification."[2] He sees that such an interpretation would "serve epic and drama equally well" and thus would meet a fundamental requirement of his own analysis. However, Hogan interprets my view in such a way as to make it indicate that epic should be more effective than tragedy in achieving their common pleasure, and, since such a position would directly contradict Aristotle's explicit statement on this issue, he rejects my interpretation. He does add the proviso ". . . if I have correctly interpreted Golden" to his analysis; since I think that he has not correctly understood my position and also that the matter is of some importance, it will be useful to clarify the issue here.

Hogan refers to my illustration of catharsis, interpreted as clarification, in the action of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. There I identified catharsis with that illumination of Oedipus' fate which occurs when we relate the particular events of the play to the universal condition of human existence, which sets a fundamental limitation to the human intellect in dealing with the unfathomable mystery that surrounds divine purpose. Hogan suggests that this process of illumination which I term catharsis would take place more effectively in epic than in tragedy, since epic provides more time and material in which to contemplate the insight offered by the work of art and thus would enrich the learning process involved in catharsis. Because Aristotle clearly states that tragedy is more effective than epic in achieving their common pleasure, Hogan argues that the clarification theory of catharsis cannot be valid. Now it is not true either that Aristotle holds that epic achieves its ultimate goal more effectively than tragedy or that I ascribe that view to him. Hogan, himself, has identified with precision the Aristotelian position on this matter which serves as a major source of support for my interpretation. He writes (p. 103):

> Second, tragedy is preferred for its concentration; epic is diluted by its extension, which I take to refer primarily to the time lapse in perception of the whole. But concentration also pertains to vividness because the shorter work can more readily hold the attention continuously, without interruption of the imaginative experience of the whole; at this point we may recall the earlier emphasis on clarity and perspicuity.

This tribute is offered, in Greek coin, to the sensitive critic and inspiring teacher who first disclosed to me the rich culture of Latin poetry.

1. "Aristotle's Criticism of Homer in the *Poetics*," *CP* 68 (1973): 95–108.
2. L. Golden, "Catharsis," *TAPA* 93 (1962): 51–60.

Here Hogan's own words indicate why tragedy is more effective than epic in achieving clarification. The more concentrated structure of tragedy permits the attention to be fixed securely on the essential point of the work as the plot is developed from beginning to middle to end under the laws of necessity and probability. The more rambling structure of epic provides many opportunities for the essential point of the work to be obscured by the development of subsidiary themes and plots.

Thus Hogan is incorrect in assuming that epic's fuller structure enhances its ability to provide an illumination of its action. The very opposite of this is true; the concentrated structure of tragedy leads more swiftly and surely to a clarifying insight. My argument, therefore, is in full harmony with Aristotle's statement that tragedy is more effective than epic in achieving their common goal and pleasure, and Hogan's specific objection to my interpretation is removed.

In a footnote Hogan indicates, however, that he holds additional reservations about the clarification theory of catharsis, although he does not specify their nature. Nevertheless, we will be able to develop a further argument in favor of the intellectual interpretation of catharsis by making use of aspects of his own often perceptive analysis. Hogan accurately and concisely describes Aristotle's understanding of the relationship between epic and tragedy as follows (p. 104):

> Nowhere in the *Poetics* does Aristotle suggest that the two genres have their different respective pleasures. Since he defines tragic pleasure (53b10–13), closely identifies the structure and mode of imitation of the two genres, and nowhere distinguishes a pleasure peculiar to epic, it is very probable that the one definition covers both epic and tragedy. Though both aim at a catharsis of emotion through pity and fear, the succinctness and direct mimesis of drama give it an intrinsic advantage.

The passage, 1453b10–13, to which Hogan refers as containing a definition of tragic pleasure states that "since the poet should provide pleasure from pity and fear through imitation, it is apparent that this function must be worked into the incidents." This is an important statement by Aristotle and Hogan is to be commended for calling attention to it. We must try now to bring out its full implications. Aristotle clearly states here that the pleasure associated with tragedy is derived *from* pity and fear *through* imitation (italics mine). Note that Aristotle does not say that the pleasure of tragedy comes from the removal of pity and fear but, we repeat, *from* pity and fear *through* imitation. No concept of purgation or purification is stated or implied here; rather, an explicit indication is given that tragic pleasure arises from the process of artistic representation of pity and fear. Now the nature of artistic representation or *mimesis* has been very clearly stated for us by Aristotle at *Poetics* 1448b4–17. He tells us:

> Speaking generally, the origin of the art of poetry is to be found in two natural causes. For the process of imitation is natural to mankind from childhood on: Man is differentiated from other animals because he is the most imitative of them, and he learns his first lessons through imitation, and we observe that all

> men find pleasure in imitations. The proof of this point is what actually happens in life. For there are some things that distress us when we see them in reality, but the most accurate representations of these same things we view with pleasure—as, for example, the forms of the most despised animals and corpses. The cause of this is that the act of learning is not only most pleasant to philosophers but, in a similar way, to other men as well, only they have an abbreviated share in this pleasure. Thus men find pleasure in viewing representations because it turns out that they learn and infer what each thing is—for example, that this particular object is that kind of object [literally, "that this is that"].

Thus there can be no doubt that the pleasure which Aristotle attributes here to all *mimesis* is the pleasure of learning and inference (*manthanein kai syllogizesthai*). All forms of *mimesis*, including epic and tragedy, must manifest this essential pleasure of imitation. Now in regard to tragedy we have seen that Aristotle explicitly tells us that this essential intellectual pleasure arises from pity and fear, and so we understand that the insights afforded by tragedy are directed at the pitiable and fearful dimensions of human existence. Hogan has argued, correctly in my view, that Aristotle has attributed the same pleasure to both epic and tragedy but has indicated that tragedy, because of its greater succinctness and concentration, is more effective in achieving this pleasure than epic. The essential goal of both epic and tragedy, then, is an intellectually pleasant learning experience achieved *through* imitation *from* pity and fear.

It remains for us to relate the above discussion to the question of the proper interpretation of catharsis. We have seen that the essential pleasure of tragedy is that which arises *from* pity and fear *through* imitation (1453b12), and we have also seen that the essential pleasure of imitation is learning (1448b4–17). Since *katharsis* can mean "clarification" as well as "purgation" or "purification," we have argued elsewhere that the adoption of the intellectual interpretation of this term would unify the argument of the *Poetics* in a way that is not possible under any other existing interpretation. For it is only when we translate catharsis as "clarification" that we are able to attribute to tragic *mimesis* the *telos* which Aristotle attributes to *mimesis* in general. This would be a principal argument that I would direct at Hogan's remaining unspecified reservations concerning the intellectual interpretation of catharsis.

In regard to the validation of the clarification theory of catharsis, we may note here two other recent challenges to the acceptance of this interpretation. Margaret Hubbard has argued that a main reason for not accepting my view is that catharsis in the sense of clarification would not answer the second of two objections against art made by Plato.[3] She notes that Plato's first criticism of art, that it fails to express the truth, is answered by Aristotle's connection of *mimesis* with *mathesis*. She then notes that Plato's second attack on art, that it stimulates emotions which a good man tries to suppress, requires a reply in the *Poetics* but gets none, unless that reply is implicit in the concept of catharsis. I have answered Miss Hubbard's

3. See the introduction to her translation of the *Poetics* in D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom, eds., *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 86–87.

objection elsewhere by showing that the intellectual interpretation of catharsis can provide the precise answer to Plato's criticism of art that she desires.[4] I cited Eduard Zeller's perceptive analysis of the mechanism of the cathartic process: ". . . unsere persönlichen Klagen in der Anschauung des gemeinsamen Schicksals verstummen, werden wir von dem Drucke, der auf uns lag, befreit, und unsere Gemüthsbewegung kommt schliesslich in der Ahnung der ewigen Gesetze, welche sich uns in dem Verlaufe des Kunstwerks offenbaren, zur Ruhe."[5] Thus Zeller indicates that it is an insight into universal laws which effects relief from the troubling emotions of tragedy. Such a view would allow the intellectual interpretation of catharsis to be a direct answer to Plato's judgment that art stimulates emotions that a good man tries to suppress and would also answer Miss Hubbard's objection to my thesis.

The type of mechanism Zeller identified in catharsis has also been observed by Pedro Laín Entralgo.[6] He points out that most contemporary interpretations of catharsis exclusively consider the physical aspects of the cathartic process, the "thermal and humoral processes, changes in the black bile, horripilation, tears" (p. 202). Granting the existence of these effects, Laín Entralgo urges that the words and meaning of tragedy must trigger them and he asks the important question: "Between the ear and the skin of the listener, what happens to the tragic word?" (p. 202). He proceeds to argue that the tragic experience arouses in the audience a "tense and confused disorientation," which is relieved by an illumination of the tragic action that is brought about by the *anagnorisis* or recognition. In Laín Entralgo's view it is through the *anagnorisis* that the original confusion engendered by the tragic *mimesis* is replaced by a clearly understandable order. He writes (p. 230):

> The original confusion of life is transformed into order, a sorrowful or happy order, depending upon the denouement of the tragic action, but at length crystal clear. Only because the *anagnorisis* permits it can there be a denouement, fatal or fortunate, in the course of the tragedy. Only by virtue of the recognition do the truth, the inner coherence and the meaning of the plot—a superhuman meaning almost always—become evident in the mind of the spectator. The *anagnorisis* represents, in short, the triumph of that deep demand for expression and clarification of the human destiny—a figurative, verbal expression and clarification—that in the face of every possible purely musical and Dionysiac interpretation beats deep within the breast of Attic tragedy. The *Poetics* calls this "resolution" of the affective state of the spectator *katharsis*.

Laín Entralgo goes on to argue that the impulse which generates the cathartic process arises not from the viscera and humors but "from above, from the dianoetic enlightenment elicited by the *logos* of the poem" (p. 234). He concludes that the physical purging associated with tragedy arises only

4. See my note "*Katharsis* as Clarification: An Objection Answered," in *CQ* 23 (1973): 45–46.

5. See his full discussion of the catharsis question in *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, vol. 2.2: *Aristoteles, alte Peripatetiker*[4] (Leipzig, 1921; repr. Hildesheim, 1963), pp. 779–84.

6. See *The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity* (New Haven, 1970).

as a consequence and effect of a prior clarification achieved by the intellect.

Kurt von Fritz also argues that any concept of catharsis that is restricted to the purgation of emotions is inadequate.[7] Citing Aristotle's remark that poetry is more philosophical than history, Von Fritz correctly sees that this means that poetry leads to a deeper insight than history offers. He perceptively concludes in regard to catharsis that "ihre Erkenntnisfunktion ist also ebenso wichtig wie ihre emotionale Wirkung. Beide sind in Wirklichkeit voneinander untrennbar." In thus stressing the importance of the "Erkenntnisfunktion" of catharsis, Von Fritz also affirms the existence of a significant intellectual dimension of this key term.

It is thus strange to read the emphatic denial by a third scholar that evidence exists to support an intellectual interpretation of catharsis, no matter how attractive such a view may be. In his edition of the *Poetics* D. W. Lucas writes (p. 278):[8]

> On this foundation might be raised a theory of tragedy which would be acceptable to many; pity and fear are cleansed of their pain because the tragic situation is made comprehensible (Aristotle's pleasure in learning: see Ch. 4), and the poet's philosophic insight leads to a calm and passionless, or acquiescent, contemplation of the human condition. But Aristotle gives no encouragement towards adopting such a conclusion, and it is hard to believe that, had he meant it, he would have said anything so clumsy as that pity and fear purify pity and fear.

Here Lucas argues by fiat and fails to confront a growing body of literature in which the intellectual interpretation of catharsis is affirmed and defended. It is especially strange that Lucas takes this position since he elsewhere quotes with approval J. H. Newman's view that tragedy "bounds and finishes off the confused luxuriance of real nature" and "brings into sight the connexion of cause and effect." Some such process as this is intimately involved in the clarification which we attribute to the process of catharsis.

In the argumentation presented by scholars until now in support of the intellectual interpretation of catharsis, one line of evidence has not, to my knowledge, been cited. It will be fitting to develop this evidence now, as our final response to the reservations of Hogan, Hubbard, and Lucas.

At 1449b22–24 Aristotle clearly states that he is about to embark on his specific discussion of tragedy by "bringing together the definition of its essence that has emerged from what we have already said." The key point here is the phrase "from what we have already said." This clear statement precedes the introduction of the term *katharsis* at 1449b28 by a mere four lines. Now unless Aristotle was guilty of a fantastic failure of memory or judgment, it is impossible to believe that he was unaware, when he introduced the concept of *katharsis* at b28, that he had asserted at b24 that his definition emerged from what already had been said. On the principle that Aristotle should be considered innocent until proved guilty, we must assume that he knew what he was talking about at this point and that he believed that he had prepared for catharsis and all other terms of his definition in the argu-

7. See *Antike und moderne Tragödie* (Berlin, 1962), p. xxvi.
8. See his commentary, *Aristotle: "Poetics"* (Oxford, 1968).

ment of the *Poetics* that precedes chapter 6. Only if all efforts fail at justifying this thesis in terms of the argument of the *Poetics* itself, are we justified in abandoning it. In the history of the interpretation of the *Poetics* this procedure has not been followed. Rather, evidence from the *Politics* or the *Nicomachean Ethics* has been preferred to the serious entertaining of the possibility that Aristotle has actually fulfilled his intention of deriving his definition of tragedy from the argument of the *Poetics* that precedes chapter 6.

We propose now to test the hypothesis that in chapters 1–5 of the *Poetics* Aristotle has prepared, in some way, for the introduction of each of the terms of his definition of tragedy in chapter 6. For purposes of reference we give below Aristotle's definition:

> Tragedy is, then, an imitation of a noble and complete action having magnitude; it employs language that has been artistically enhanced by each of the kinds of linguistic adornment, applied separately in the various parts of the play; it is presented in dramatic, not narrative, form, and achieves, through pity and fear, the catharsis of such incidents [i.e., pitiable and fearful incidents].

We identify here seven principal terms: (1) imitation, (2) noble and complete action, (3) magnitude, (4) artistically enhanced language, (5) dramatic manner of presentation, (6) pity and fear, and (7) catharsis. We shall argue that five of these terms are explicitly defined in chapters 1–5 of the *Poetics*, that a sixth term is foreshadowed in chapters 1–5 and explicitly defined in a later chapter, and that a seventh term is indirectly but rigorously defined in chapters 1–5.

The first term, imitation (*mimesis*), is discussed in detail in chapters 1–3. We are told in chapter 1 that tragedy and comedy and a number of other literary and musical forms are all imitations which can be differentiated from each other in terms of the means they use, the objects which they represent, and the manner in which they are presented. Chapter 1 is basically concerned with the means used by the various imitative arts, such as color, form, words, rhythm, song, and meter. In chapter 2 we have a discussion of the objects which the imitative arts represent. These turn out to be states of character, i.e., human beings who are either better than, worse than, or like, the norm. In chapter 3 the narrative manner of epic is differentiated from the manner of drama, in which actors portray the story on stage. Thus imitation is dealt with quite explicitly by Aristotle.

The second term, noble and complete action (*prakseōs spoudaias kai teleias*), is dealt with in chapters 2 and 4. At 1448a1–2 we are told that imitators imitate "human beings in action" (*prattontas*) and that these must either be "noble" (*spoudaious*) or "ignoble" (*phaulous*). Since Aristotle later tells us that tragedy deals with noble characters and comedy with ignoble characters, we can see here the basis for the introduction of the idea of "noble action" (i.e., action concerned with noble figures) into the definition of tragedy. Some scholars translate *prakseōs spoudaias* as "serious action" and they may find a basis for this rendition in the distinctions made between tragedy and comedy in chapter 5. In regard to the requirement that the action be complete (*teleias*), we note that in chapter 7 Aristotle defines the

wholeness and completeness of an action as residing in its having a beginning, middle, and end. In chapter 4, 1449a9–15, Aristotle traces the development of tragedy from its beginnings in improvisations to the point at which it fulfilled its own nature. Since this entails a movement away from improvisations and the short plots of satyr plays to a fully developed form which requires a plot with a beginning, middle, and end, we have here, in chapter 4, the basis for the requirement of completeness we find in the definition of tragedy.

The third term, magnitude (*megethos*), is prepared for in chapter 4, 1449a9–21. In chapter 7 Aristotle tells us that magnitude refers to the amount of material that is included in the plot. In regard to the proper magnitude for tragedy he says: "The limit, however, that is set in regard to magnitude by the very nature of the subject itself is that whatever is longer (provided it remains quite clear) is always more beautiful." In the passage cited we have a discussion, as we noted above, of the development of tragedy away from improvisations and the short plots of satyr plays to its proper magnitude.

A discussion of the fourth term, artistically enhanced language (*hēdysmenō logō*), takes place in chapter 1, where the means of imitation are discussed. The specific enhancements that are mentioned here are rhythm, song, and meter. The fifth term, dramatic manner of presentation (*drōntōn*), is explicitly differentiated from the narrative manner of epic in chapter 3, 1448a20–24.

Thus in the case of the first five terms of the definition of tragedy, we have found references in chapters 1–5 of the *Poetics* that justify Aristotle's assertion in chapter 6 that his definition has been derived from what has already been said. In regard to the sixth term, expressed by the phrase "through pity and fear" (*di' eleou kai phobou*), we have an explicit treatment of the term in chapter 13 and an indirect preparation for it in the discussion of the character of tragic heroes in chapters 2–4. In chapter 13 certain types of characters and plots are ruled out as not being appropriate for evoking the tragic emotions of pity and fear. These inappropriate characters and plots include those in which an extremely good human being falls from happiness to misery, an extremely evil human being moves from bad fortune to good fortune, and an extremely evil human being falls from good fortune to bad fortune. The reason that such actions fail to evoke pity and fear can be seen from Aristotle's definition of these terms: ". . . for pity is aroused by someone who undeservedly falls into misfortune, and fear is evoked by our recognizing that it is someone like ourselves who encounters this misfortune (pity, as I say, arising for the former reason, fear for the latter)." Aristotle determines that a situation arises involving undeserved misfortune which can pose a threat to the audience ("someone like ourselves") only when the tragic hero is presented as someone who is neither a paragon of virtue nor a depraved human being, bur rather someone between these extremes. The hero must fall into misfortune not because of some great vice but because of an intellectual error, and he must be an individual who justifiably enjoys great reputation and respect. It is this kind of action which alone evokes the specific tragic emotions of pity and fear.

Now in chapters 2–4 of the *Poetics* we are told at various places that the

tragic hero must be noble (*spoudaios*), and it is this *spoudaios* figure whom we identify with the requisite hero of tragedy. It is only when we have such a *spoudaios* hero involved in a fall from happiness to misery that we find an action that manifests undeserved misfortune to which an audience will feel itself vulnerable. Since pity and fear are direct functions of the character of the tragic hero, I suggest that they are indirectly treated wherever the character of the tragic hero is described in chapters 1–5 of the *Poetics*. Thus in regard to the sixth term of the definition of tragedy, pity and fear, we have an explicit treatment of it in chapter 13 and an implied reference to it in chapters 2–4, where discussion takes place concerning the *spoudaios* hero who alone, as we know from chapter 13, can evoke the appropriate tragic emotions.

So far, then, we see that Aristotle has been fully justified in asserting that his definition of tragedy in chapter 6 emerges "from what we have already said." Five of the terms are explicitly dealt with in chapters 1–5 and the sixth one is a function of the *spoudaios* nature of the tragic hero which is discussed in the same section. Moreover, every single one of these first six terms is clearly defined by Aristotle at some point in the *Poetics*. We come then to the seventh, very critical term, *katharsis*. Nearly all scholars treat this term as the most important one in the definition and yet, when it is commonly rendered as "purgation" or "purification," it is the only term which has not in any way been prepared for in chapters 1–5 or defined elsewhere in the *Poetics*. Adoption of the intellectual interpretation of catharsis saves us from having to accept such an unlikely possibility.

Now we recall that in chapter 1 tragedy was defined as a form of imitation and that also in that chapter a discussion takes place of the linguistic means by which tragic *mimesis* is carried out. In chapter 2 we remember that the object of imitation is defined as "human beings in action" and in chapter 3 that the distinction is made between the dramatic and epic manner of presenting imitations. If we now restate Aristotle's definition of tragedy we see that major concepts from chapters 1–3 have been summarized in the initial sequence of terms introduced in the definition:

> Tragedy is, then, an imitation (chap. 1) of a noble and complete action (chaps. 2, 4) having magnitude (chap. 4); it employs language that has been artistically enhanced by each of the kinds of linguistic adornment (chap. 1), applied separately in the various parts of the play; it is presented in dramatic, not narrative, form (chap. 3). . . .

The ideas of completeness and magnitude of action are dealt with in chapter 4, but otherwise the first part of the definition of tragedy utilizes major concepts developed in chapters 1–3 of the *Poetics*. These major concepts are concerned with the categories of object, means, and manner of imitation by which, Aristotle asserts, an exhaustive analysis of all imitations can be made.

Aside from phenomena associated with the object, means, and manner of imitation, there is one other major concept which Aristotle introduces into his discussion, and that is the extremely important concept of the pleasure

associated with imitation. We recall that earlier we cited with approval Hogan's judgment that Aristotle attributes the same pleasure to both epic and tragedy and Hogan's reference to 1453b10–13 where Aristotle discusses tragic pleasure. In that passage we remember that Aristotle says, "Since the poet should provide pleasure from pity and fear through imitation, it is apparent that this function must be worked into the incidents." Thus tragic pleasure, as we have seen, is the pleasure that arises *through* imitation *from* pity and fear. Now there is one place in the *Poetics* where the pleasure of imitation is fully discussed and that is in chapter 4. There we are told that men take pleasure in viewing *representations* of phenomena which would be painful if they were confronted in reality. We quote again Aristotle's explanation of this situation (1448b12–17):

> The cause of this is that the act of learning is not only most pleasant to philosophers but, in a similar way, to other men as well, only they have an abbreviated share in this pleasure. Thus men find pleasure in viewing representations because it turns out that they learn and infer what each thing is—for example, that this particular object is that kind of object [literally "that this is that"].

Now since pity and fear are painful experiences, the representation of these qualities that takes place in tragedy can be pleasant only insofar as the mimetic process provides intellectual insight into them. Thus the essential pleasure of tragedy must consist in a learning experience, a change from ignorance to knowledge, a movement from confusion to understanding.

It is now necessary to see if this intellectual pleasure can be related to Aristotle's definition of tragedy. Nearly all scholars have seen a reference to tragic pleasure in the final clause of the definition of tragedy, which reads, ". . . and achieves, through pity and fear, the catharsis of such incidents [i.e., pitiable and fearful incidents]." We agree with this judgment but we do not relate this pleasure, as they do, to processes of medical purgation or moral purification (which are not mentioned anywhere in the *Poetics*), but to the pleasure of learning and intellectual insight which is explicitly discussed in chapter 4.[9] When we make this connection between catharsis and the intellectual pleasure of *mimesis* that is discussed in chapter 4, we establish two important points: (1) we attribute the pleasure inherent in imitation, in general, to tragic imitation, in particular (a circumstance which does not occur under the purgation and purification theories); and (2) we vindicate Aristotle's statement that his definition is derived "from what we have already said," since all major terms of that definition will have been prepared for by the argument of chapters 1–5 of the *Poetics*.

Finally, that Aristotle should have conceived of the essential pleasure of tragedy as intellectual rather than physical or moral should not be surprising. After all, he did not say that poetry is more therapeutic or morally edifying than history; he did affirm that it was more philosophical.

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9. For a discussion of some of the weaknesses in the dominant purgation theory, see G. F. Else, *Aristotle's "Poetics": The Argument* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957) p. 440, n. 2; and L. Golden, "The Purgation Theory of Catharsis," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31 (1973): 473–79.