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LEON GOLDEN

# *The Purgation Theory of Catharsis*

THE VIEW that Aristotle's concept of catharsis represents a process of purgation in which the emotions of pity and fear are aroused by tragic dramas and then somehow eliminated from the psyche of the audience has dominated scholarly discussion of the *Poetics* since Bernays first published his highly influential analysis of the catharsis question in 1857.<sup>1</sup>

Opposition to the purgation theory has, however, never been quelled. It continues to exist today in three forms which see Aristotelian catharsis either as (a) a form of moral purification through which a proper discipline is placed on the audience's reaction to pity and fear, or as (b) a form of structural purification in which the development of the plot purifies the tragic deed of its moral pollution and thus allows the audience to experience the emotions of pity and fear, or as (c) a form of intellectual clarification in which the concepts of pity and fear are clarified by the artistic representation of them.<sup>2</sup>

The widespread popularity of Bernays's views has, however, made it difficult for some to entertain the possibility of a different interpretation of catharsis. Nevertheless, a close study of Bernays's arguments reveals serious weaknesses which, to my knowledge, have never been discussed in the scholarly literature. It is my purpose in

the present paper to challenge the general acceptance which has long been accorded Bernays's views and to call into question the legitimacy of the purgation theory of catharsis. This theory had a history, of which Bernays was not fully aware, which went back to the sixteenth century, and it is important for us to observe the status of the theory prior to the time that Bernays published his influential work on catharsis.

The first known statement of this theory appears in 1559 in the *De Poeta* of A.S. Minturno. In this work Minturno argues that the principles of the homeopathic theory of medicine (which require for the elimination of a disease the application of a therapeutic agent similar in nature to that disease) are also applicable to mental afflictions. In his *Arte Poetica* in 1563 he explicitly connects the purgation achieved by tragedy to the medical treatment of illness in the body.<sup>3</sup>

In the preface to Milton's *Samson Agonistes* this theory is expressed as follows:

Tragedy is . . . said by Aristotle to be of power, by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such-like passions. . . . Nor is Nature wanting in her own effects to make good his assertion; for so in physic things of melancholic hue and quality are used against melancholy, sour against sour, salt to remove salt humours.

In the nineteenth century two scholars preceded Bernays as advocates of a purgation theory of catharsis. In 1806 Tyrwhitt published an edition of the *Poetics* in which he argued that the essential task of tragedy is to purge the emotions of pity and

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fear from the audience,<sup>4</sup> and in 1847 H. Weil, citing among other evidence Aristotle's discussion of music in the *Politics*, affirmed a relationship between the process of tragic catharsis and that of medical purgation.<sup>5</sup>

Thus we see that the purgation theory of catharsis had a long history which preceded the well-known work of Bernays, but we must also recognize that none of the statements of that theory from Minturno to Weil remotely approach the comprehensiveness and authority of Bernays's work. Indeed, one may doubt if the purgation theory would have gained its current prominence if Bernays had not defended it as powerfully as he did. Any attempt to evaluate the validity of the purgation theory must therefore come to terms with the specific arguments Bernays presented in favor of it. It is my contention that Bernays made three significant errors of fact or procedure which call into question the validity of his interpretation of catharsis as purgation.

First, Bernays emphatically declared that the Greek term *katharsis* could have only two meanings, moral purification or medical purgation.<sup>6</sup> Bernays is unaware of the use of *katharsis* by Epicurus and Philodemus to signify "intellectual clarification." None of the editions of the lexica of Stephanus, Passow, and Liddell and Scott, which Bernays would have had at his disposal, make reference to this meaning of *katharsis*. The connotation "intellectual clarification" is first noted in the ninth edition of Liddell-Scott-Jones which appeared in 1940. Also Bernays does not explore evidence from the use of the adjective *katharos* and the adverb *katharôs* which could have led him to observe an intellectual nuance in the noun *katharsis*.<sup>7</sup> Bernays's failure to come to terms with all of the meanings inherent in the concept of *katharsis* must be considered a serious error because it arbitrarily restricted the scope of his investigation into this difficult term.

Second, Bernays argues that the key to our understanding the term *katharsis* in the *Poetics* lies in the use of this term in the *Politics*. Bernays states that since *katharsis* in the *Politics* describes the process of purg-

ing emotional excitement through the use of wild and passionate melodies, the same purgative process must be involved in the *katharsis* that is attributed to tragedy in the *Poetics*. Bernays assumes, without justifying argument, that evidence from the *Politics* can be used directly and immediately to interpret the meaning of a word in the *Poetics*. I wish now to challenge as completely invalid this important assumption by Bernays.

We must note first of all that the only justification for using evidence from one work to interpret the meaning of a term in another work is that there is a demonstrable relationship between the contexts of the two passages involved. The mere fact that the same word is used both in the *Politics* and the *Poetics* is no guarantee by itself that the word has an identical meaning in both works. Only an analysis of the contexts in which the word occurs can indicate whether or not it is reasonable to expect a relationship to exist between the separate uses of the single word. Aristotle himself cautions us about the difficulties inherent in such a procedure when he calls our attention to the fact that "there is not the same standard of correctness for politics and poetry, nor for any other art and poetry."<sup>8</sup> Aristotle is not, of course, speaking directly of the problems confronting us here, but his words have a useful relevance for us as we attempt to find the justification for using evidence from a treatise on politics to understand the meaning of a difficult term in a treatise on poetry.

Bernays's procedure in assuming a complete equivalency between the use of catharsis in the *Politics* and the *Poetics* is more directly challenged by Richard McKeon who writes:

To cite what is said concerning art in the *Politics* in refutation or in expansion of what is said on the same subject in the *Poetics*, without recognizing that the one is a political utterance, the other an aesthetic utterance, would be an error comparable to looking for evolution or refutation between the statements of the *Republic* and the *Laws*, without recognizing that the one has reference to a perfect state, the other to a state possible to men as they are.<sup>9</sup>

McKeon shows himself sensitive here to a

point that eluded Bernays: namely, that there is an essential difference in the subject matter and ultimate goals of the *Politics* and the *Poetics*. This difference in orientation of the two treatises results in their differing radically in their treatment of art. The *Politics* considers art as an *instrument* of the educational process through which the political leader can render his subjects obedient to the law of the state while the *Poetics* discusses art in terms of its *essential nature*. Thus, not only is there no compelling justification for holding that the purgative effect of certain melodies described in the *Politics* is also the ultimate goal of art as that goal is defined in the *Poetics*; there is every reason to believe that the two discussions of art have nothing to do with each other. Bernays simply ignored the great differences in the first principles on which the *Politics* and the *Poetics* are based and in so doing he committed the grave methodological error that McKeon warns us to avoid. Thus we argue that the mere appearance of the term catharsis in the *Politics* in the sense of “purgation” has no automatic influence on our view of the meaning of that term as it appears in the *Poetics*. A proper interpretation of that term in each work requires that we be obedient to the demands of the contexts in which it appears.

Having shown that Bernays failed to note the difference in orientation of the *Politics* and the *Poetics* and consequently failed to perceive that the attitude toward art and the meaning of the term *katharsis* could significantly differ in both works, I now intend to argue that serious contradictions, which Bernays failed to notice, exist between the treatment of art in the *Politics* and in the *Poetics* and that these contradictions indicate that the process of interpreting the *Poetics* by means of the *Politics* is in error.<sup>10</sup> The assumption under which Bernays operated—that the meaning of catharsis in the *Politics* could be directly imported into the *Poetics*—is thus subjected to serious challenge.

The first of the two important contradictions appears in the following statements: *Politics*, 1340 a 22–27

Our custom of feeling pain and pleasure in regard to representations has the same character as in regard to reality. For example, if someone feels pleasure when viewing the image of something for no other reason than because of the form itself, then it is necessary for that person to feel pleasure at the sight of the very thing itself whose image he is looking at.

*Poetics*, 1448 b 10–12

... 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 of corpses.

In the *Politics* Aristotle tells us explicitly that whatever attitude of pleasure or pain we manifest toward the representation of an object, we will also express toward the object itself provided the pleasure or pain is felt solely because of the form (*morphê*) of the object. The proviso which Aristotle introduces here requires interpretation and we shall discuss it shortly but it is important for us now to observe that the passage from the *Poetics* cited above directly contradicts the one from the *Politics* with which it is coupled. For in this passage we are told not that we feel the same emotion, pleasure or pain, toward the representation of an object and the object itself but that we feel pleasure toward the representations of objects when the objects themselves cause us pain.

We must now return to the problems raised by the requirement Aristotle makes in the passage from the *Politics*: that the emotions of pleasure or pain must be experienced solely because of the form (*morphê*) of the object. We need to understand precisely what Aristotle means by form here and to what other entity the concept of form is being contrasted. Barker in his edition of the *Politics* suggests that taking pleasure or feeling pain because of the form itself is contrasted here with taking pleasure or feeling pain “on the ground of its [an object’s] material, or the beauty and cost of that material. . . .”<sup>11</sup> Another possibility is suggested by a passage in the *Poetics* at 1448 b 17–19. There Aristotle, after

having told us that the essential pleasure derived from witnessing imitations is the pleasure of learning, explains that this learning arises from inferring that the object imitated is representative of a universal type. The experiencing of this pleasure is only possible if we have previously seen the object and can recognize its form. If we had not previously seen the object, Aristotle argues, then the pleasure of learning deriving from the recognition of the form could not take place, and any pleasure we felt could only arise from the "workmanship or coloring or something similar." The pleasure, under these circumstances, would not be the intellectual pleasure which Aristotle identifies as the essential pleasure of artistic representation.

Aristotle thus seems to suggest both in the *Politics* and the *Poetics* that there are two types of pleasure which one can obtain from a work of art. In the *Politics* he distinguishes between appreciating a work of art on the basis of its form alone or because of other considerations that are unspecified there. In the passage from the *Poetics* cited above, he distinguishes between the intellectual pleasure derived from recognition in the work of art of an object or form which one has some previous knowledge of and the pleasure derived from workmanship or coloring which alone is possible when such previous knowledge is lacking. Although, as I have noted above, we must be very careful about using evidence in one work of Aristotle to prove a point in another work, the contexts here indicate that it is at least reasonable to assume that the coloring and workmanship mentioned by Aristotle in the *Poetics* represent the unspecified elements which contrast with form and which are cited in the passage from the *Politics*. Whether we accept Barker's interpretation of this question or the one I have just suggested, there remains in Aristotle's thought here a strong opposition between essential form and external, non-essential characteristics of a work of art.

Thus we see that the *Politics* tells us that when we feel pleasure or pain in an object because of its essential form and not for any non-essential reason, we will have exactly

the same feeling in regard to an imitation of that object. The *Poetics* directly contradicts this position when it says that we take pleasure in the most accurate representations of objects which cause us pain when we view them in reality.

We may suggest a reason for this wide discrepancy between the *Politics* and the *Poetics* in the treatment of art. In the *Politics* Aristotle is discussing the way in which art and specifically music fits in with the educational program of the state. His discussion here is from the lawgiver's point of view and his argument is that it is the function of the educational process to place models of virtue before the young for them to imitate. Aristotle accepts the view that different kinds of musical melodies are representations of different kinds of moral states, and he insists that only the virtuous melodies be used for the education of the young since these melodies will condition them to pursue the appropriate virtues. Thus Aristotle's treatment of art in the *Politics* is, as we would expect, completely governed by the higher claims of political and social order. All purely aesthetic considerations are subordinated to the requirements of this order.

In the passage from the *Poetics*, however, we find ourselves in a discussion of the essential nature of art. Here Aristotle asserts that the mimetic function is the essential aspect of artistic activity and that this mimetic function reaches its climax in a learning experience which is a source of pleasure to all men. Because the essential pleasure of art is an intellectual one derived from learning about human existence through the medium of art, it follows that all artistic endeavors which achieve the illumination of human experience will be pleasant whether their objects are, in reality, pleasant or painful. Aristotle specifically mentions representations of corpses and despised animals as examples of situations where the objects in reality are painful to us but the artistic representations of them pleasant. Here in the *Poetics* Aristotle is dealing with purely aesthetic considerations and not with social, ethical, and political questions. We now see the reason for the



strong contradiction between the treatment of art in the passages from the *Politics* and the *Poetics* which we have been discussing.

We now turn to the second contradiction I have noted in the treatment of art in the *Politics* and the *Poetics*. This is concerned with the analysis given in each work of the nature of the audience for artistic representations. In the *Politics* 1342 a 18–22 Aristotle says:

But since the audience consists of two parts, one free and educated and the other vulgar and consisting of mechanics and serfs and others of this type, we must also provide contests and festivals for the recreation of this latter group.

However, in the *Poetics* 1448 b 9–17 we have already seen that Aristotle makes the following statement:

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 of 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.

Now quite clearly we see that in the *Politics* Aristotle has posited a double audience for whom different kinds of artistic experience are appropriate depending on that audience's intellectual status. In the *Poetics*, however, Aristotle insists on a single type of artistic experience which results in an intellectual clarification which all men find pleasant. The reason for the major discrepancy between the two works on this point is the same as in the case of the first contradiction we have discussed. In the *Politics* Aristotle, writing from the point of view of the lawgiver, must provide for the adjustment of all segments of the population to the requirements of the social order. Art is treated here as an influential instrument for bringing about this adjustment and is considered to function as a subsidiary handmaiden of the governing discipline of politics. Thus, since the social order is characterized by two distinct kinds of people, one

group educated and the other not, so too must art, as a servant of the political process, be characterized by two distinct divisions which direct themselves to the moral conditioning of the two different types of citizens who have been mentioned.

In the *Poetics* Aristotle proceeds as a philosopher of art and finds its essential nature to be its role in intellectually clarifying aspects of human existence. Viewed as a discipline by itself, and not as the handmaiden of another science, art can have only a single form that is consistent with its essential nature. Thus Aristotle argues in the *Poetics* that there is only one audience for art consisting of all men who find some degree of intellectual pleasure in works of art.

Our analysis of Bernays's treatment of the catharsis question has led to the following conclusions. First, Bernays was factually mistaken when he asserted that catharsis could mean only purgation or purification and his lack of awareness that the term could also legitimately mean "intellectual clarification" prevented him from coming to terms with the full range of possible solutions to the catharsis problem. Second, Bernays's failure to note important contradictions between the treatment of art in the *Politics* and the *Poetics* opened the way for him to commit the serious methodological error to which McKeon calls our attention: namely, the attempt to interpret the *Poetics* by means of another work that is based on totally different principles. For these reasons Bernays's long and widely accepted view that tragic catharsis represents a process of purgation must be challenged.

If the analysis given above is accepted as valid, then we must be eager to find a more acceptable interpretation for catharsis. I have argued elsewhere that the internal argument of the *Poetics* itself requires that we interpret catharsis to mean "intellectual clarification" and I have cited work done by S. O. Haupt and H. D. F. Kitto in support of this view.<sup>12</sup> Recently an impressive analysis of the entire catharsis question by the Spanish scholar Pedro Laín-Entralgo has become available to a wider audience, and his perceptive analysis adds further weight to our view that catharsis in Aris-

totle's definition of tragedy means clarification. Laín-Entralgo writes:

Thanks to the *anagnorisis* the spectator knows and recognizes what really is occurring on stage and therefore is his own possible fate; and he knows it in a specific way, arranged in orderly fashion, in fair words, in credible actions, and in precise sensory images. 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 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*.<sup>18</sup>

Although the purgation theory of catharsis has dominated our thought on the subject since the time of Bernays, we hope that the weaknesses in that theory that have been cited in this paper will encourage a thorough and objective review of the entire catharsis question. When this review has been completed, there is good reason to believe that tragic catharsis will emerge, convincingly, as that moment of insight and clarification toward which it is the essential nature of art to strive.

<sup>1</sup> J. Bernays, *Zwei Abhandlungen über die aristotelische Theorie des Drama* (Berlin, 1880, originally published 1857).

<sup>2</sup> The most famous advocate of the view that catharsis means “moral purification” is Lessing whose interpretation is discussed by I. Bywater, *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry* (London and New York, 1909, pp. 160–61). For the view that catharsis is an element in the structure of the plot, see G. F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), pp. 224–32, 423–47. For the interpretation of catharsis as “intellectual clarification,” see my “Catharsis,” *TAPA* 93 (1962): 51–60, and “*Mimesis and Katharsis*,” *CP* 64 (1969): 145–53; S. O. Haupt, *Wirkt die Tragödie auf das Gemüt oder den Verstand oder die Moralität der Zuschauer?* (Berlin, 1915), and *Die Lösung der Katharsis Theorie des Aristoteles* (Znaim, 1911); and H. D. F. Kitto, “Catharsis,” in *The Classical Tradition: Literary and Historical Studies in Honor of Harry Caplan*, ed. L. Wallach (Ithaca, N. Y., 1966), pp.

133–47. For a discussion of the way in which the intellectual interpretation of catharsis articulates with other aspects of Aristotle's theory of tragedy, see O. B. Hardison, “Epilogue: On Aristotelian Imitation,” in L. Golden and O. B. Hardison, Jr., *Aristotle's Poetics: A Translation and Commentary for Students of Literature* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1968), pp. 281–96.

<sup>3</sup> J. E. Spingarn, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance* (New York, 1924), p. 80, quotes from the *Arte Poetica* as follows: “As a physician eradicates, by means of poisonous medicine, the perfervid poison of disease which affects the body, so tragedy purges the mind of its impetuous perturbations by the force of these emotions beautifully expressed in verse.”

<sup>4</sup> Bywater, pp. 152–53, n. 2, gives the text of Tyrwhitt's comment as follows: “Ex his quae de Musica dicuntur [i.e., in Pol. 8. 7], colligere licet, opinor, Aristotelem similem quandam ratiocinationem de poesi etiam tragica instituisse, qua scilicet probaret affectus misericordiae et metus, qui in tragoediis vehementissime excitantur, non ex eo nutriri et validiores effici, quod Plato criminabatur, sed contra levare et exhaustiri; et proinde affectuum horum purgationem opus esse proprium et quasi finem Tragoediae; cum caeterae Poesis species vel ad doctrinam, vel ad delectationem magis aptae sint.”

<sup>5</sup> H. Weil, “Ueber die Wirkung der Tragödie nach Aristoteles,” *Verhandlungen der zehnten Versammlung deutscher Philologen, Schulmänner und Orientalisten in Basel* (Basel, 1848), pp. 131–41.

<sup>6</sup> Bernays, p. 12, n. 1, writes: “. . . concret also gefasst heisst *katharsis* in griechischer Sprache nur zweierlei: entweder eine durch bestimmte priesterliche Ceremonien bewirkte Sühnung der Schuld, eine Lustration, oder eine durch ärztliche erleichternde Mittel bewirkte Hebung oder Linderung der Krankheit.”

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the evidence on this point, see my “Catharsis,” pp. 55–57, n. 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Poetics*, 1460 b 13–15.

<sup>9</sup> R. McKeon, “Literary Criticism and the Concept of Imitation in Antiquity,” in *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern*, ed. R. S. Crane (Chicago, 1952), p. 166.

<sup>10</sup> Else, p. 440, n. 2, has clearly noted the logical and methodological errors in Bernays's procedure in interpreting the *Poetics* by means of the *Politics*. He writes: “But what we have to explain before everything else is the *Poetics*; and neither Bernays' explanation nor any of the others has ever shed any light on the *Poetics* itself or linked catharsis with any other crucial part of Aristotle's theory. And there is another objection to Bernays' interpretation, which would long since have been recognized as fatal if the authority of the *Politics* passage had not been accepted as beyond dispute. His interpretation, no matter how adapted or refined, is inherently and indefeasibly *therapeutic*. It presupposes that we come to the tragic drama (unconsciously, if you will) as patients to be cured, relieved, restored to psychic health. But there is not a word

to support this in the *Poetics*, not a hint that the end of the drama is to cure or alleviate pathological states. On the contrary it is evident in every line of the work that Aristotle is presupposing *normal* auditors, normal states of mind and feeling, normal emotional and aesthetic experience."

<sup>11</sup> E. Barker, *The Politics of Aristotle* (Oxford, 1948), p. 344.

<sup>12</sup> See note 2.

<sup>13</sup> P. Lain-Entralgo, *The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity* (New Haven, Conn., 1970), p. 230.