

ARISTOTLE'S CATHARSIS IN RENAISSANCE POETICS

Perhaps the most difficult problem in the whole history of critical thought is the passing remark in Aristotle's *Poetics* concerning the tragic catharsis. Some critics hold that it is still open to question whether and how near even we today have approached the real meaning which the Stagirite attached to his tragic purgation. From the earliest times the interpretations of the catharsis have been a reflection of the immediate cultural set up which produced them rather than satisfactory explanations of this vexed problem. This, however, does not diminish the usefulness of the studies of the catharsis in different periods. On the contrary, it enhances their utility, for, apart from the fact that, lacking as we do any more specific hints from Aristotle himself, we cannot attain to any comprehensive understanding of the problem without knowing its historical growth, such studies throw some light on the question what people of a particular age thought of literature in general, and of drama in particular, what they expected of tragedy and what tragedy in its turn was trying to give them. In short they can be elements of some value in an effort to reconstruct the theoretic and critical attitude towards literature in a particular age.

The Renaissance interpretations of the catharsis, in particular, gain additional significance from the fact, deplorable in itself, that they are the first we have. Historically they thus represent material of first rate importance. Now that it has been generally recognized that the roots of modern criticism lie in the Renaissance and that no systematic study of a critical problem can be made without taking into consideration what the Renaissance critic had to say on the point, a thorough investigation of the Renaissance explanations of the catharsis may be a preliminary step towards a fuller understanding of the modern conception of tragedy.

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Contrary to what one might expect, the Renaissance was rather slow to realize the value and importance of Aristotle's *Poetics*. The first Latin translation of the book, by Giorgio Valla, appeared in Italy in 1498. Almost forty years elapsed before a second, also Latin translation was called on (Alessandro de' Pazzi, 1536). About ten years later the first commentary on the *Poetics* (together with a Latin trans-

lation) was published by Robortelli (1548). The following year F. Segni published his Italian translation — the first version of the *Poetics* in a modern European language. Only after that the authority of Aristotle as a literary critic can be said to have become fully established in the Renaissance. The *Poetics* became the source of a very lively critical activity and by the end of the sixteenth century there appeared a very large number of editions, commentaries and paraphrases of the treatise in Italy.

Apart from G. Valla, who only translated the *Poetics*, Trissino was the first critic in Italy to make use of Aristotle's ideas. His *Poetica*, published in 1563 but partly written by 1529, is largely a paraphrase of Aristotle. Trissino expounds the theory of the drama in the fifth section of his book, but on the question of the catharsis he has no interpretation of his own to offer and prefers merely to repeat Aristotle's passage in Italian.¹⁾ Thus the first real attempt at an explanation of the catharsis we find in Robortelli's commentary on his Latin translation of the *Poetics*.²⁾

Robortelli's idea of tragedy is a comparatively simple one. Tragedy, he says, contains sorrowful and terrible events (*res lugubres et atroces*) the purpose of which is to produce compassion and fear, the same as comedy, being a representation of events full of mirth, causes laughter and cheerfulness. The effect of the catharsis itself, as Robortelli understands it, is not exactly a purgation; rather it is a certain emancipation from the susceptibility to fear, a kind of emotional training. By being present at the performance of a tragedy, the spectator sees a verisimile representation of tragic events, experiences himself the passions which move the tragic characters, and thus becomes accustomed to fear, pain and pity. If the spectator comes to face himself a tragic situation in real life, it will be less painful and fearful to him than to a person whose emotions have never been perturbed by some calamity.³⁾

Robortelli's interpretation of the catharsis, it will be noticed, is not so openly didactic as that of the later critics of the *Cinquecento*, but it does ultimately derive from the prevalent Renaissance conception of the edifying nature of literature, and the exaggerated idea which the sixteenth century critics had of the powerful and direct influence of literary representations on other people's conduct and emotional life. Robortelli's comment is important not only because it is the first Renaissance exposition of the meaning of Aristotle's passage, but also because it establishes the conception of the catharsis as a means of

¹⁾ G. G. Trissino, *Tutte le opere*, 2 Vols., Verona, 1729, 2. 96.

²⁾ F. Robortelli, *De arte poetica*, Florentiae, 1548.

³⁾ "... Dum enim homines intersunt recitacionibus; audiuntque & cernunt personas loquentes & agentes ea, quae multum accedunt ad veritatem ipsam; assuescunt dolere, timere; commiserari; quo fit, vt cum aliquid ipsis humanitus acciderit, minus doleant, & timeant, necesse est enim prorsus, vt qui nunquam indoluerit ad aliquam calamitatem, vehementius postea doleat, siquid aduersi praeter spem acciderit." *De arte poetica*, pp. 52—36.

achieving emotional fortitude. This was an idea which was to appear in a more or less elaborate form in almost every Renaissance discussion of the problem.

Bernardo Segni sees the catharsis, as most Renaissance critics do, in the light of the conception that the function of literature is to teach. For him the tragic purgation mentioned in Aristotle's book is not a separate critical problem but merely one of the means by which the didactic task of literature is accomplished. The immediate result of such an interpretation in Segni is that the cathartic effect and moral teaching become interchangeable terms applicable almost indiscriminately to the whole province of serious literature. Thus we have in Segni the first mention of the cathartic effect of epic poetry — an idea which was later echoed by Vettori, Giraldi and Pigna.⁴⁾

In explaining the meaning of the catharsis Segni starts from the ground prepared by Robortelli: by seeing misfortunes or events which arouse pity happen to distinguished persons, we learn to bear our own misfortunes easier. However, Segni does not stop here; he feels that a conception of the catharsis limited to the feelings of pity and fear only does not bring out sufficiently the ethic function of tragedy. Therefore he extends the scope of the tragic purgation so that it includes various vices, such as wrath and intemperance.⁵⁾ Thus his reasoning marks the beginning of that stretching of Aristotle's meaning and deviation from his text to which the members of the 'didactic' school almost invariably resort.

The contradiction which arises from putting the catharsis on a moral basis, that is, considering the state of being free from pity and fear, both in a sense desirable emotions from the ethical point of view, as a moral improvement was perceived by Maggi. It is characteristic that this discovery does not lead Maggi to abandon the didactic conception of the catharsis; on the contrary, it makes him go even further along the way indicated by Segni and disregard almost completely Aristotle's text. Would it not be extraordinary, asks Maggi, if the aim of tragic writers was to purge the minds of the spectators from fear and pity which are so necessary to mankind? How could we succor the poor and needy if we lacked pity? If the representation of tragic events purged our minds from terror, which mainly results from our apprehension that we ourselves might be involved in such vicious deeds, tragedy would make us very liable to commit crimes. It is far better, maintains Maggi, to understand by the catharsis a removal of vices, such as wrath, avarice, luxury and others which are the cause of in-

⁴⁾ Cf. Giraldi Cintio, *Scritti estetici*, 2 Vols., Biblioteca rara, Milano, 1864 1.66; Minturno ((Sebastiani), *L'arte poetica*, Vinegia, 1563, p. 9.

⁵⁾ '... nel considerare simili imitationi, oue succedono casi terribili, o compassionevoli, noi purghiam' l'animo... ueggendo noi simili casi auenuti in persone eccellenti, piu ageuolmente comportiamo le calamità nostre, o uero impariamo a sopportarle. Et in tal modo se noi siamo iracundi, o intemperati, uenghiamo a purgar' l'animo di tali affetti; considerando quei pericoli, & quei mali, che incontrano a chi è ne uitij rinuolto...' *Rettorica et poetica d'Aristotele*, Vinegia, 1551, f. 173 verso,

numerable ill deeds. Under the influence of the tragic action, says Maggi, vices are removed and the mind adorns itself with the corresponding virtues. — avarice yields to generosity, wrath to good temper, etc. In this process of moral improvement the terror and pity of Aristotle's passage are only the channels through which the moral message of the tragedy is conveyed and are themselves neither purged nor removed. Maggi tries to support his thesis by the argument, developed in the true scholastic spirit, that pity and fear, being the cause of the tragic purgation cannot be its end at one and the same time.⁶⁾ This part of Maggi's comment is of special interest as an explicit denial of the 'homoeopathic' effect of the catharsis — an idea which otherwise plays an important role in the Renaissance discussions of the problem.

Giraldi's general idea that literature ought to direct its public to moral living⁷⁾ is faithfully reflected in his conception of the catharsis. Unlike other 'didactic' critics who more or less clearly imply that the tragic characters are vicious people whose fate and final destruction ought to demonstrate to the spectators the inevitable consequences of evil behaviour, Giraldi in his exposition of the catharsis starts from Aristotle's conception of the tragic hero. The characters of a tragedy, says Giraldi, are distinguished persons who are neither good nor bad. When tragic events happen to them, we feel that they deserve some punishment, but not such a cruel one. The awareness that justice has been carried out becomes mixed with the feeling that the punishment has been too severe and gives rise to the emotions of pity and fear which are necessary in a tragedy.⁸⁾ Having reached this stage in his reasoning Giraldi gives a twist to Aristotle's meaning and

⁶⁾ 'Ex hac Tragoediae definitione quis sit eiusdem finis elicitur, qui actiones sanè nō est animum à terrore ac misericordia purgare. Tragicas enim actiones (quae quidem scelera sunt per ignorantiam patrata) si spectatores in scena videant, misericordia terrorem mouentur, ne illud idem sibi accidat uerentes. Itaque si Tragoedia spectatores à terrore liberaret, cum terror ille sit, ne in id genus flagitia incidant & ipsi, Tragoedia sceleribus patrandis promptissimos homines efficeret: quod prorsus absurdum est. Id praeterea, quod aliis ratio, atque causa purgandi est, se ipsum haudquaquam expurgat, alioquin idem in se ipsum ageret, & eiusdem ratione esset in actu & potentia: quod prorsus incongruum est. cum igitur Tragoedia interuentu terroris & misericordiae animum à perturbationibus expurget, si per perturbationibus terrorem & misericordiam intelligeremus, sensus esset, Tragoedia interuentu misericordiae & terroris, animum expurgat à misericordia & terrore; & ita idem esset causa se ipsum destruendi; & terrorem misericordiamque; indicendo, utraque remoueremus: quod intellectus capere non potest. Non ne & id mirum esset, tragicos uelle animam humanam à terrore & misericordia expurgare, quibus si careret humanum genus, multa pateretur incommoda? nam si misericordia careremus, quomodo indigentibus opem praestaremus? longè igitur melius est misericordiae & terroris interuentu expurgare animum ab Ira, qua tot necesse fiunt: à Luxuria, cuius gratia nefandissima scelera saepissime patrantur; ab Auaritia, quae infinitorum penè malorum est causa...' *Vincenzii Madii brixiani et Bartholomaei Lombardi in Aristotelis librum De poetica communes explanationes*, Venetijs, 1550, pp. 97—8.

⁷⁾ Cf. *Scritti estetici*, 1.19—20.

⁸⁾ 'Le persone adunque d'alto grado (le quali sono mezze tra i buoni e gli scelerati) destano maravigliosa compassione se loro avviene cosa orribile, e la cagione

proceeds to give an account of the beneficent effects of pity and fear on the spectator's moral attitude. The gist of his argument is as follows: the principal cause of pity and fear is the tragic character's ignorance of the ill deeds he commits; the emotions of pity and fear aroused in this way purge the minds of the spectators of such errors as were those which induced the tragic characters to commit the crimes which constitute the tragic action. Since the tragic characters suffer so much because of a sin they were ignorant of, the spectator realizes that if he himself knowingly committed the same crime he would suffer incomparably more.⁹) Thus Giralaldi interprets the catharsis as purgation neither of pity and fear only, nor of pity, fear and other passions, but as a purgation of the causes of pity and fear. This, of course, is an ingenious simplification of Aristotle's meaning and represents little more than a restatement of the current idea that literature ought to show by examples that evil is to be avoided and good is to be followed.¹⁰)

At this time when critical speculation concerning the catharsis was drifting farther and farther from Aristotle's meaning, Vettori's commentary comes as a pleasant surprise.¹¹) Vettori was the first critic to perceive that Aristotle's catharsis was a part of that philosopher's tacit refutation of Plato's hostile doctrine of poetry. Vettori begins by expounding the principle of the catharsis and extends it, as Segni has done before him, to epic poetry as well. This widened application of the cathartic effect has a different origin in Vettori because he does not see in it a specific aspect of moral instruction, as Segni does, but a weapon in the defence of imaginative literature in general. This is clearly shown in the passage in which Vettori explains the purpose of the catharsis. He stresses that Aristotle was particularly anxious to ascribe a healing effect to tragedy because Plato, his master, had expelled poets from his ideal state as persons who stirred morbid emotions in their audience. Having grasped this essential fact and placed Aristotle in his historic context, Vettori proceeds to give a strikingly 'modern' interpretation of the catharsis: 'Non mirum autem est Ari-

di cio è che pare allo spettatore che ad ogni modo fosse degna di qualche pena la persona che soffre il male, ma non già di così grave. E questa giustizia, mescolata colla gravetza del supplizio, induce quell'orrore e quella compassione, la quale è necessaria alla tragedia.' ib. p. 27.

⁹) '...l'ignoranza del male commesso è principalissima cagione... di grandissimo orrore e di grandissima compassione. E questo purga maravigliosamente gli animi di tali errori. Perché lo spettatore con tacita conseguenza seco dice: se questi per errore commesso non volontariamente tanto male ha sofferto quanto vedo io ora, che sarebbe di me se forse volontariamente commettesti questo peccato?' ib. pp. 28—9.

¹⁰) Cf. also the prologue for Giralaldi's tragedy *Cleopatra*: '... la Tragedia... Purga dei vitiij gli animi mortali/E lor face bñamar sol la virtute/Veggendo che fin facciano coloro,/Che in tutto buon non sono e in tutto rei. (Quoted by A. Buck, *Italianische Dichtungslehren vom Mittelalter bis zum Ausgang der Renaissance*, Tübingen, 1952, p. 161).

¹¹) *Petri Victorii Commentarii, in primum librum Aristotelis de Arte Poetarum* Florentiae, 1560.

stotelem omnes neruos in hac re explicanda contendisse, cum de ipsa longe aliter ac magister ipsius existimaret: ille namque hac de causa in ciuitatem bene institutam non recipiendos putabat poetas, quia motus hos animi turbidos excitarent, impellerentq̃; saepe homines ita correptos ad ea sentienda, gerendaq̃, quae non oporteret: contra vero Aristoteles indicat motus hos temperatos esse utiles; verumtamen quia aliquando ita effunderentur, vt nulla vi reprimi possent, opus esse huic modo remediū adhibere: remedium autem esse, si quis antea ipsos purget, ac quod nimium importunumq̃; est in illis, tollat. Hoc uero praeclare facere tragoediam, quae modum adhibet omnibus perturbationibus: docetq̃; quatenus progrediendum sit: ipsa enim incumbit huic rei, & curat impetum exultantiamq̃; perturbationū omnium ope duarum, quas factis, quae in scenam inducit, excitat, moderaturq̃; id est misericordiae & metus.¹²⁾ Thus Vettori with the help of a keen sense of the continuity of Greek critical thought and of an enquiry into the meaning for the term 'catharsis' in a different context¹³⁾ emancipates himself from the didactic preoccupations of his contemporary fellowcritics and formulates an interpretation of the tragic purgation as an emotional release to which three centuries of critical speculation have had little substantial to add.

Minturno has not much original thought to contribute to the Renaissance interpretations of the catharsis, but he is apparently well read in the works of his contemporaries. The passage in which he discusses the function of tragedy is studded with bits and hints from almost all critics who have preceded him. What is new in it is the application of Minturno's idea of the threefold function of poetry to tragedy. The aim of tragedy, says Minturno, is to teach, to delight and to move. Tragedy teaches by showing us by examples that nothing is stable in this world and that fortune is fickle. The second aim of tragedy — to give delight — is achieved by means of rhetorical ornaments, songs, dances, and the scenic apparatus. The third function, which is Minturno's addition to the Renaissance '*docere — delectare*' idea of the function of literature (in fact carried over from rhetorical treatises) is especially conveniently linked with the catharsis because it denotes the capacity of a literary work to arouse emotions. The charge of sentiments in a tragedy arouses emotions in the spectators, frightening them and moving them to pity. These two emotions, pity and fear, purge the minds of the spectators in a delightful way. As regards the passions which are purged, Minturno follows Giraldi in saying that the object of the catharsis is the emotions which were the causes of the tragic events.¹⁴⁾ Besides, Minturno goes on to say, the

¹²⁾ *Op. cit.* p. 56.

¹³⁾ A discussion of the use of the term in Aristotle's *Politics* immediately precedes the above quoted passage.

¹⁴⁾ Minturno, *Arte Poetica*, p. 76: '... con empito di parole, e con graue peso di sentimento (il poeta) desta nell'animo passione, & inducelo à meraviglia, così spauentando, come à pietà mouendo... questo spavēto, e questa pietà di simili passioni diletteuolmente ci purga: perche nulla piu raffrena lo'ndomito furor della

remembrance of the tragic events makes it easier for us to support our own misfortunes and to avoid similar errors — an idea which he borrows from Segni. Minturno illustrates this idea with a simile of a doctor administering homoeopathic treatment to his patient.¹⁵⁾ At the end of his discussion of this problem Minturno gives an elaborate version of Robortelli's explanation of the catharsis as 'emotional training'. As constant bodily exercise renders us fit to endure physical strains without fatigue, so frequent watching of tragic events which move us deeply enables us to sustain easily the blows of fortune.¹⁶⁾

By 1570 the idea of the didactic function of literature has become so firmly established that L. Castelvetro, the sturdiest champion of the hedonistic conception, finds it difficult to get away from an ethical interpretation of the catharsis. Why does Aristotle want tragedy to offer profit, — asks Castelvetro — if poetry has been invented to give pleasure in the first place? Why do we not aim at delight in the first place without paying any attention to the profit which should not be given any consideration or, at least, which should not be observed so strictly as to make us discard all tragedies which do not offer this profit? Castelvetro is obviously at a loss here and in an attempt to solve the problem he devotes over thirty pages¹⁷⁾ to a discussion of various elements which contribute to the effect of tragedy. It is a long scholastic treatise with diagrams, divisions, subdivisions, etc. introducing various psychological categories such as direct pleasure and oblique pleasure, different types of pity and fear, as, for instance, pity engendered by the plot itself and pity caused by the visual perception of a tragic action. With the help of all this complicated apparatus Castelvetro avoids a directly didactic explanation of the catharsis and concludes that the tragic purgation has in the first place a healing effect. According to his explanation, tragedy administers small and frequent doses of fear and pity and thus gradually liberates the mind from susceptibility to these emotions. Thus we have in Castelvetro another representative of the 'homoeopathic' conception. Castelvetro emphasises the parallel between the doctor's and the tragedian's art by calling the effect which tragedy produces 'the state of spiritual health achieved by means of a very bitter medicine'.¹⁸⁾

Although the homoeopathic effect of the tragic purgation represents the principal element in Castelvetro's interpretation, he feels

nostra mente. Percioche niuno è sì unito da gli sfrenati appetiti, che, se dalla paura, e dala pietà dell'altrui infelicità si muoua, non purghi l'animo da gli affetti: i quali di quello infelice stato sono cagione . . .'

¹⁵⁾ *Ivi*.

¹⁶⁾ '... se' l'esercitarsi alle fatiche ci rende i corpi piu atti à sofferirle senza affanno . . . sarà fuori di ragione, che udendo, & mirando noi souente ne' Theatri quel, che forte ci perturba, e spauenta; l'animo nostro impari di sostener lieueamente i colpi dela fortuna?' *ib.* p. 77.

¹⁷⁾ Pp. 267—301 in the 1576 edition of the *Poetica* (Basilea). The first edition was published in 1570.

¹⁸⁾ 'sanità d'anima acquistata per medicina assai amara', p. 299 in the 1576 edition.

obliged to incorporate in some way the didactic effect as well. So he admits that tragedy gives some instruction by showing us how great misfortunes happen to people similar to us, how we are subject to many vagaries of fortune and how we should not repose our trust in the tranquil course of worldly things. However, Castelvetro does not surrender completely to the prevalent ethical interpretation of the catharsis and maintains that the instruction which tragedy offers is in itself a kind of delight because we discover it in a pleasant way, by means of our own effort, without being openly taught.¹⁹⁾

Piccolomini²⁰⁾ starts from premises which are opposed to those of Castelvetro. The purpose of all kinds of poetry, says Piccolomini, is not to please but to give profit.²¹⁾ And of all profits which literature can offer the greatest is that which produces a genuine peace of mind (*'una vera tranquillità dell' animo'*). Various philosophic schools had different opinions about the best way in which this perfect spiritual peace could be obtained. The Stoics thought that this end could be achieved only by totally extirpating all passions (*'totalmente stirpar gli affetti dalle radici tutti'*); the Peripatetics, on the other hand, knew that passions, if kept within proper bounds, were not harmful but natural and necessary to the man. Therefore they were not of the opinion that passions should be eradicated, but only purged, that is, moderated. Thus Piccolomini understands the catharsis as a reduction of excessive passions to that just measure, that 'golden medium' of the Aristotelian ethics. In a tragedy we see how the mighty ones fall and this serves to temperate our hopes, we see other people afflicted with distress, and our own unhappiness is mitigated, we get accustomed to the sights of pain and suffering and consequently we fear less, in the same way as a soldier is less afraid of death because he has so often seen its ravages. Thus tragedy moderates all emotions, including those of pity and fear.²²⁾ Piccolomini is important because he is the first Renaissance critic to relate explicitly the catharsis to the Peripatetic system in general and to insist that no proper understanding of it is possible without a study of the problem in a wider context of Aristotle's thought.²³⁾

Jason de Nore (*Poetica*, 1588) does not seem to have a very clear idea of Aristotle's passage. He seems to think that pity and fear, mentioned by Aristotle in connection with the catharsis are the subject

¹⁹⁾ This is the method to which Castelvetro also resorted when he attempted to make the contemporary exaltation of the educational value of allegorical representations fit into his anti-didactic system. *Chiose intorno al Protagora al Platone*, in *Opere critiche*, Berna, 1727, p. 247.

²⁰⁾ *Annotationi nel libro della poetica d'Aristotele*, Vinegia, 1575, p. 101—3.

²¹⁾ '(Il fine) di tutte le spetie di poesia . . . non sia il diletto, come vogliono alcuni, ma l'utile', p. 101.

²²⁾ Pp. 103—5.

²³⁾ Piccolomini was to a certain extent anticipated by Sperone Speroni, who writes in a letter: '. . . non vuole Aristotile che ci liberiamo dalli affetti, ma che li regoliamo, perchè da se non sono cattivi.' *Opere*, 5 Vols., Venezia, 1740, 5. 175.

rather than the result of the tragic action.²⁴⁾ His explanation of the catharsis is very meagre, but it is nevertheless evident that he makes a clumsy effort to apply mechanically the *docere delectando* formula to the function of tragedy: 'E dunque la Tragedia imitation . . . per purgar gli spettatori col diletto, che nasce dalla imitatione, & dalla rappresentatione dal terrore, & dalla misericordia, & per fargli abhorir la uita de' tirani'.²⁵⁾

The last Italian critical treatise of the century is also the most extravagant one. Faustino Summo (*Discorsi poetici*, 1600) bases his interpretation of the catharsis on some kind of Platonic-Christian dualism, and makes a rather confused job of it. According to him, man has two lives, one intellectual and one corporal²⁶⁾; consequently there are two kinds of deaths and two kinds of the fear of death. Although his meaning is not quite clear, Summo seems to base his explanation on the Christian denial of worldly life and the Neoplatonic theory of the correspondences between the intellectual world (*il mondo intellettuale*) and the 'sublunar' world (*il mondo sublunare*), or the world we live in. The events which constitute the plot of a tragedy are a representation of the tragic action in the intellectual world, and the watching of it helps us to put our own worldly ('sublunar') calamities into perspective; this brings about a purgation and removal of our fear of the death of the body, as not significant when compared to that of the death of the soul. This applies in the same way to pity, which can also be 'o del corpo o dell' animo'²⁷⁾

This brings us to the end of the discussion of Italian Renaissance interpretations of the catharsis. Other Italian critics of the sixteenth century either base their works on Horace and Roman rhetorics and do not mention the catharsis at all, or, if they follow Aristotle, they give only a paraphrase of his passage without making any noteworthy attempt at its explanation. But generally speaking, Italian criticism is by far the most important body of Renaissance criticism; not only did the critical activity begin to develop in Italy for the first time, but the critics from other countries were in most cases content to follow Italian models.

Moreover, outside Italy we find very little interest in the catharsis at that time. In neighbouring France there is not a single passage devoted to the explanation of the catharsis until the advent of classicism. French critics of the time are either Horation and consequently do not mention the catharsis at all, or, like the writers of the *Pleïade* mention only the healing effect of music and art in general without making any specific reference to tragedy²⁸⁾ — an idea which comes from the

²⁴⁾ *Poetica*, Padova, 1588, pp. 4—5, 7.

²⁵⁾ *ib.* p. 6.

²⁶⁾ *Discorsi poetici*, f. 23 v: 'l'huom ha due uite, l'una dell'intelletto, l'altra del senso'.

²⁷⁾ *Ivi.*

²⁸⁾ Cf. W. F. Patterson, *Three Centuries of French Poetic Theory*, Univ. of Michigan. Publications in Language and Literature, Vols. XIV—XV, 1935, 2 Vols., 1.945.

Politics rather than from the *Poetics*. Vauquelin is probably the only critic of the time who mentions the purgation by pity and fear at all, but even he does not go any further than a vague paraphrase of Aristotle.²⁹⁾

This complete lack of interest in the catharsis is probably due to the fact that French dramatic criticism of the time was dominated by different ideas from those which were prevalent in Italy. The majority of French critics lay stress on the horrible as the most important requisite of a tragedy.³⁰⁾ This tendency, together with the insistence of French critics and writers on sensational scenic effects, a pointed, aphoristic style and rhetoric ornaments indicates the predominant influence of the Senecan drama. W. F. Patterson is probably right in attributing the fact that the Aristotelian catharsis never really, established itself in French criticism before Racine to the strong vogue of Seneca.³¹⁾

Neither did Spanish dramatic criticism prove a more hospitable ground for Aristotle's ideas. Peripatetic treatises in Spain had hard luck. Waging war, as they were, against the enormously strong and popular national theatre, they incurred the wrath of mighty men of letters and as a result very few of them survived. Today we know of only two classicistic treatises dating from the Golden Age of Spanish literature. One of them, the *Spongia*, is probably irrevocably lost and we can form only a general idea of its contents from a controversial work, the *Expostulatio Spongiae*, which quotes some passages from the work it sets out to refute. The *Expostulatio Spongiae*, however, makes no reference to the catharsis, so that we cannot infer what interpretation of this problem, if any, was given in the *Spongia* itself.³²⁾ The other classicistic treatise, Pinciano's *Filosofia antigua poetica* (1596), has been preserved, but it is so scarce that it is, I believe, accessible outside Spain only in the form of fragments which Menendez y Pelayo reproduces in his indispensable *Historia de las ideas estéticas en España*³³⁾.

Pinciano's interpretation of the catharsis is based on a variation of the 'emotional training' idea. As in some other sections of his treatise, Pinciano starts from the ground cleared by Italian critics and then develops his argument in a partly original way.

By watching a Priam, a Hecuba, a Hector and a Ulysses cruelly tormented by fate, says Pinciano, we fear that similar misfortunes might happen to us, and at the same time we are moved with pity to see these misfortunes happen to other people. Thus we are moved with pity and fear while we are present at the performance of a tra-

²⁹⁾ Cf. J. E. Spingarn, *Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*, New York, 1954, p. 203.

³⁰⁾ The most outstanding representative of this trend was Jacques Pelletier whose *Art Poétique* was published in 1554.

³¹⁾ Cf. Patterson, *op. cit.*, 1.946.

³²⁾ Substantial parts from the *Expostulatio Spongiae* are reproduced in Joaquin de Entrambasaguas, *Estudios sobre Lope de Vega*, 2 Vols., Madrid, 1946.

³³⁾ 1st edition Madrid, 1893.

gedy; afterwards, however, this fear and dread disappear with the experience that we have seen such horrid deeds, and we begin to reflect upon them in such a way that we praise and extoll him who has ventured and suffered, and blame him who was cowardly and feeble-hearted. Thus tragedy elicits an active moral response from us and stimulates us unawares to follow the better way. The spectator remains spiritually a far stronger man than he was before the performance. Man should be vigorous and not too compassionate, concludes Pinciano, and this fortitude is achieved by means of tragedy.³⁴⁾

In England the situation, as far as the Senecan influence is concerned, is very much the same as in France. A good tragedy, according to the prevalent conception, should be 'full of stately speeches and well sounding Phrases, clyming to the height of *Seneca* his stile.'³⁵⁾ Besides, serious critical activity begins comparatively late in England — only in the last quarter of the century — and even then it is mainly derivative. In no critical work of the time do we find a full exposition of Aristotle's dramatic theory, still less a detailed interpretation of the catharsis; the attitude of the Elizabethan critics was largely influenced by the idea persisting from the Middle Ages that tragedy ought to be a representation of 'the dolefull falles of infortunate and afflicted Princes'³⁶⁾, and Aristotle's subtle analysis of tragic causes and effects does not arouse much interest. The best proof of the slight appeal the tragic purgation had on Elizabethan critics is to be found in the fact that it plays no part in the defence of literature from the puritan attacks (one of the most important tasks of English Renaissance criticism), although it might have been a valuable weapon in a work such as Thomas Lodge's *Defence of Poetry, Music, or Stage Plays* (1579) or Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* (written in 1583).

Sidney's *Apology*, the most complete exposition of critical ideas in Elizabethan England, makes only a vague reference to Aristotle's tragic purgation. Sidney does not seem to have a very clear idea of the catharsis, but it is obvious that he attaches a didactic function to tragedy; tragedy, he says, 'with stirring the affects of admiration and commiseration, teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weake foundations guilden roofes are builded.'³⁷⁾

³⁴⁾ '... con ver un Priamo, y una Hécuba, y un Hector, y un Ulysses, tan fatigados de la fortuna, viene el hombre en temor que no lo acontezcan semejantes cosas y desastres, y aunque por la compasion de mirarles con sus ojos en otros, se compadece y teme mientras esta presente la tal accion, mas después pierde el miedo y temor con la experiencia del haber mirado tan horrendos actos, y hace reflexion con el animo, de manera que alabando y magnificando al que fué osado y sufrido, y vituperando al que fué cobarde y pusilánime, queda hecho mucho más fuerte que antes... Entero y no muy compassivo conviene sea el hombre, y esta entereza se gana con la tragedia.' Menéndez y Pelayo, *op. cit.* 2.355.

³⁵⁾ Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 2 vols., ed. G. G. Smith, 2 Vols., London, 1950, 1.196.

³⁶⁾ G. Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, *Eliz. Crit. Ess.*, 2.27.

³⁷⁾ *Eliz. Crit. Ess.*, 1.177.

One of the most interesting accounts of the cathartic effect of literature is given in George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589), although, strangely enough, the passage in which it appears deals with non-dramatic 'poetical lamentations' and not with tragedy. This seems to indicate that Puttenham did not get this idea from Aristotle directly but from some intermediary source. Puttenham's passage is an unusually explicit exposition of the cathartic effect as the emotional release brought about by a homoeopathic treatment:

Lamenting is altogether contrary to reioising; euery man saith so, and yet is it a peece of ioy to be able to lament with ease, and freely to poure forth a mans inward sorrowes and the greefs wherewith his minde is surcharged. This was a very necessary deuise of the Poet and a fine, besides his poetrie to play also the Phisitian, and not onely by applying a medicine to the ordinary sicknes of mankind, but by making the very greef it selfe (in part) cure of the disease.³⁸⁾

Towards the end of the chapter Puttenham returns to the same idea once again:

'Therefore of death and burials, of th'aduersities by warres, and of true loue lost or ill bestowed areth'onely sorrowes that the noble Poets sought by their arte to remoue or appease, not with any medicament of a contrary temper, as the *Galenistes* vse to cure *contraria contrariis*, but as the *Paracelsians*, who cure *similia similibus*, making one dolour to expell another, and, in this case, one short sorrowing the remedie of a long and grieuous sorrow.'³⁹⁾

In Milton's preface for his classicistic tragedy *Samson Agonistes* we have the only specific interpretation of the tragic catharsis in early English criticism. Although Spingarn thinks that Milton derived his ideas from Minturno⁴⁰⁾, it is highly probable that he had also in mind the above quoted passages from Puttenham.

'Tragedy, as it was anciently composed, hath been ever held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other poems; therefore said by Aristotle to be of power, by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such-like passions; that is, to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirred up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated. 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'⁴¹⁾.

A far more effective description of the effect of the tragic purgation, however, we find in the concluding lines of *Samson Agonistes* itself:

'All is best, though we oft doubt
What th'unserchable dispose
Or Highest Wisdom brings about,
And ever best found in the close.
Oft he seems to hide his face,

³⁸⁾ *Eliz. Crit. Ess.*, 2.49.

³⁹⁾ *ib.*, 2.50.

⁴⁰⁾ Cf. Spingarn, *Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*, pp. 80—81.

⁴¹⁾ I quote from *The World's Classics* edition of Milton's poems (London, 1951).

But unexpectedly returns,
 And to his faithful champion hath in place
 Bore witness gloriously; whence Gaza mourns,
 And all that band them to resist
 His uncontrollable intent:
 His servants, he, *with new acquist*
Of true experience from this great event,
With peace and consolation hath dismissed,
*And calm of mind, all passion spent*⁴².

The above survey of the Renaissance interpretations of the catharsis shows that the opinions of individual critics differed to a considerable extent; indeed, in the otherwise fairly uniform body of Renaissance peripatetic criticism it was the catharsis which probably passed through greatest metamorphoses. This indicates in the first place the importance which some Renaissance critics attached to the tragic purgation. Some of the variations, no doubt, arose owing to the unsatisfactory state of textual criticism at that time, and, perhaps even more, to the faulty knowledge, not infrequently ignorance, of Greek of some critics.

Nevertheless, all these interpretations can be classified into a few fairly distinguished groups. There is in the first place the didactic trend represented by critics who think that 'to purge the passions by example is... the particular instruction which belongs to tragedy'.⁴²) In this group, which includes Segni, Maggi, Giraldis, de Nores, Pinciano, Sidney and others, we find the greatest deviations from Aristotle's text and boldest adaptations of his meaning. Another conception, which in Robortelli stands alone, and reappears in a great number of subsequent works, as an element in more complex interpretations usually of a didactic import, is the 'emotional training' idea. Summo has rather specific ideas which do not quite fit into either of these categories. All these theories are today mainly of historic interest — they represent the first chapter in the history of critical thought centred round the Aristotelian catharsis, but they do not bear much on the modern conception of the function of tragedy.

It is generally considered that the modern conception of the catharsis was first formulated in 1857 in Jacob Bernays' treatise *Grundzüge der verlorenen Abhandlung des Aristoteles über Wirkung der Tragödie*⁴³). Bernays put forward a theory according to which Aristotle did not mean by the catharsis any kind of moral instruction, but employed the word as a medical metaphor. Aristotle meant, Bernays maintained, that tragedy had a healing effect on its spectators providing relief for their accumulated emotions of pity and fear. Bernays also pointed out that Aristotle used the catharsis to refute Plato's idea of the harmful effects of imaginative literature. This theory, with various minor qualifications, has held up to the present day.

⁴²) Dryden, Preface to *Troilus and Cressida*.

⁴³) Breslau, 1857, reprinted in *Zwei Abhandlungen über die Aristotelische Theorie des Dramas*, Berlin, 1880.

The roots of this conception, however, reach much further back. Besides passing remarks in H. Weil (1847) and Burke⁴⁴⁾ Bernays himself called attention to Milton's preface for *Samson Agonistes* as an important anticipation of this conception.⁴⁵⁾ Later Spingarn pointed out that Milton borrowed the idea of the parallel between tragedy and medicine from Minturno, and ever since Minturno has been regarded as the first precursor of the modern conception of the catharsis. It appears, however, that Minturno got the credit undeservedly. Examined in the light of other sixteenth century works Minturno's passage proves to be little more than an incoherent compilation. The parallel with medicine upon which he hit looking for a convenient illustration is without known precedent, it is true, but apart from that there is nothing in his discussion of the problem to justify his claim.

The critic who should be considered as the founder of the modern conception of the catharsis is Vettori rather than Minturno. Not only does Vettori precede Minturno⁴⁶⁾ but he shows an original mind, sound learning and good judgement — qualities which Minturno can hardly lay a claim to. Vettori was the first critic who had the critical insight to see what Aristotle was really aiming at and who perceived that a proper understanding of the problem cannot be achieved without relating the catharsis to Plato's theory of literature. The idea which lies in the foundations of Bernays' and most subsequent interpretations — the idea that tragedy not only does not cause morbid emotional states, as Plato asserted, but has a healing, therapeutic effect providing relief for excessive emotions — was first formulated by Vettori.

Whereas Vettori indicated the basic approach to the problem, another very important element was supplied by Speroni and Piccolomini who showed that for a fuller understanding of the catharsis it is necessary to study the problem not in the context of the *Poetic* alone, but in the light of the whole Peripatetic system — an idea which, witness among others Butcher's excellent book, is still yielding fruits in the present century.⁴⁷⁾

Thus although the majority of Renaissance critics interpret the catharsis, in conformity with the prevalent conception of the didactic function of literature, as moral instruction, we find in some writers, especially in Vettori and Piccolomini, already sketched the main lines along which modern critical thought was to develop. The germs of what we are accustomed to consider as a modern contribution to the elucidation of the Aristotelian thought are already contained in the works of sixteenth century critics.

Belgrade.

V. Kostić.

⁴⁴⁾ Cf. S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, 4th ed. London, 1911, p. 244, and M. Đurić, *Jedan nov pokušaj objašnjenja Aristotelove katarze*, Beograd, 1933, p. 8.

⁴⁵⁾ Butcher, *op.cit.*, p. 247.

⁴⁶⁾ Minturno's Italian treatise, in which the passage in question appears, was published in 1564; his Latin work, *De Poeta*, appeared in 1559.

⁴⁷⁾ Cf. esp. pp. VII ff.