Catharsis

Aristotle offered a different and quite original theory of the audience's response to tragic literature. Why, he asks, does a viewer or reader experience pleasure at the artistic representation of tragic events that would horrify him in real life? Plato issued a rather blunt answer to this question: human beings have, among their many psychic appetites, the desire to weep, feel anger, and express strong emotions. They long to experience these emotions, and take pleasure in tragedy because it satisfies their appetite for emotional indulgence. Tragedy represents characters experiencing intense sorrows and emotions, and it encourages the audience to feel the same feelings as the characters (i.e. to sympathize, or 'feel with' them). Tragedy does not bring a healthy release of pent-up emotions; rather, it leads the reader or viewer to be more emotional in everyday life and less able to act rationally.

Plato, of course, believes that people should not engage in highly emotional and self-indulgent behaviour, and thus considers tragic drama an especially harmful literary genre. Aristotle strenuously disagrees. He argues that people feel pleasure when reading tragic literature not because they want to experience the exact same emotions as the fictional characters. We don't read or watch a tragedy because we enjoy tears, rage, and manic emotions. The pleasure we take in tragedy is aesthetic: we enjoy the representation of tragic events because it offers an 'artistic taming of the horrible' (as the German philosopher Nietzsche put it). According to Aristotle, tragic literature arouses a very specific set of emotions—pity and fear—and brings about a healthy and pleasurable experience called *catharsis*.

Aristotle's use of the word *catharsis* makes it difficult to translate. The Greek word most commonly means 'purgation' or 'purification', but Aristotle uses the word as a technical term (which may depart, to some extent, from common usage). What does he mean by *catharsis*, and how does tragic literature bring this about? According to Aristotle, tragic plots and characters are designed to arouse pity and fear in the audience. The audience does not experience the exact same feelings as the fictional characters; indeed, it experiences a very different set of emotions. When reading or seeing a tragedy, we feel pity for the characters who suffer, but we do not feel *their* pain. In fact, the emotion of pity depends on a certain distance between the viewer and the sufferer: we feel pity when we are *not* personally involved in another's suffering but, rather, watching from an external vantage-point. Aristotle makes it clear that we feel pity only for people who are good: no one feels sorry for an evil man if he comes to harm. The tragic hero, then, must be a good man or woman who does not deserve misfortune. But this character must not be a perfect paragon of virtue. He or she must have some sort of flaw that contributes to the tragic events. This flaw does not render the character a bad or unworthy person; rather, he or she is humanly good, rather than superhumanly perfect. Tragedy, in short, deals with *human* life and limitations.

In the course of a tragedy, the hero must experience a reversal of fortune, a fall from happiness to misery. When we witness a good character experience a serious reversal, we feel pity for that individual. But we also feel fear. As Aristotle puts it, we pity the character and *fear for ourselves*. Why do we experience this fear? Since the fictional characters are good but not perfect individuals, they are in some sense like us: they are human beings, and suffer losses and calamities that happen to people in real life. Whereas we, as readers, maintain a degree of distance from the characters, we none the less identify with them as human beings. When we encounter tragic characters and events in literature, we are led to experience our own humanity and the extraordinary vulnerability that characterizes every human life. When reading a tragic text, we therefore experience 'fear for ourselves': we fear that we too will (at some point) suffer misfortune, loss, and death. We do not, of course, fear that some calamity will befall us as we read or view the tragedy; rather, we fear for our mortality and vulnerability in general.

Tragic literature, then, is designed to arouse these two emotions—pity and fear—to a high pitch. But it also brings about a catharsis of these emotions. The audience does not end up becoming weaker, more emotional, and more irrational, as Plato suggests, but rather undergoes a pleasurable and healthy emotional experience. What exactly is the nature of catharsis? Scholars have offered many different interpretations of catharsis. Some argue that it is an intellectual 'clarification': the audience learns something about humanity, and learning produces pleasure. According to this view, catharsis is a fundamentally cognitive experience: we gain a clearer and better sense of the world, and thus end up feeling better and wiser when the tragedy draws to a close. Other scholars argue that catharsis is a 'purgation' of the emotions, a release of strong feelings that leaves us feeling drained but also relieved. While reading or viewing a tragedy does involve cognition, they claim, catharsis itself is an emotional rather than a cognitive experience. On this view, the tragic plot and characters arouse our pity and fear to a very high degree, but end up releasing and purging these very emotions, thus producing pleasure.

Because Aristotle does not really define or explain the nature of catharsis, the term is open to many interpretations. Although I favour the latter view, I believe that the notion of catharsis does not fully explain Aristotle's conception of tragic pleasure. For we do not feel pleasure simply because our emotions are purged: we also enjoy the artistry of tragic literature. Part of tragic pleasure must surely involve a response to the beauty of (well-written) tragic texts: amazingly, some writers do indeed artistically 'tame the horrible', creating beauty out of ugly and horrible events. Aristotle makes this point explicitly in a (little-read) treatise called the *Parts of Animals*: as he claims, the technical and artistic arrangement of ugly materials makes things that are ugly in life beautiful in art. Aesthetic beauty brings pleasure to the reader or viewer regardless of its subject-matter.

Aristotle's approach to literature anticipates modern formalistic approaches. Turning his back on cultural and ideological issues, he focuses primarily on the formal and technical aspects of literature. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle offers a detailed typology of literary plots, character, and styles. In effect, he was the first to offer a systematic analysis of the *art* of literature: the *Poetics* is, in the literal sense, a technical study (note that *technē* is the

Greek word for 'art' or 'craft'). Aristotle thus develops an aesthetic approach that stands in stark contrast to the historicist approach of Plato. Aristotle rescues literature from Plato's attacks, claiming that the power and pleasure of fiction actually benefit the audience. As we have seen, Aristotle also discusses (although rather briefly) the ways in which particular plots and characters target and arouse specific emotions. In this part of the *Poetics*, he goes beyond formalism to consider issues of reader response. He takes this inquiry further in the *Politics*, where he separates literature that has an educative function (which should be used in schools) from genres that provide pleasure and cathartic release (which are good for adults). Aristotle thus shares with Plato a concern with the readers' and viewers' response to literary texts; but he argues that good literature has a positive effect on the psyche, whereas Plato believed that almost all literature damaged the health of the soul.

In sum, in spite of his claim that traditional literature promulgates false ideas, Plato inaugurated an approach to literary criticism that is now very much in vogue: the examination of literary texts in their cultural, socio-political context (though Plato used this mode of criticism to serve a very different agenda, and his tendentious interpretations of individual texts conceal the true merits of the historicist approach). Aristotle, as we have seen, offered a completely different conception of literary texts. Literature, he claimed, should be judged by artistic criteria rather than in moral or ideological terms. Aristotle separated literary texts from their socio-political context, and analysed them in aesthetic, formalistic terms. In fact, he explicitly encouraged the critic to ignore issues of the performance and popular reception of literary works: one should read literature in private, rather than analyse its operations in the public realm. Aristotle thus anticipates the formalistic approach to literature developed in the twentieth century.

Ironically, Aristotle rescued literature by writing a dry philosophical treatise; Plato attacks literary texts while producing some of the most complex pieces of literature ever written.