

A G R E E K O N A R T

WHAT follows is no more than some annotations on the very suggestive phrases towards a theory of art, thrown out almost casually by Aristotle in the course of his *Poetics*. All of these phrases must be taken together, as each may be seen to imply the other at almost every point: and taken together they help to clarify Aristotle's position with regard to the nature of the aesthetic experience, its nature as an intellectual experience felt as physical or as a physical experience with strong intellectual overtones.

For the Platonic school the artist was a creator of myths, a pseudo-thinker who merely mirrored the mutable world of sense which in turn merely mirrored the world of Ideas, so that the poet's creation was distant from life by two removes. 'Aesthetic distance' for Plato meant deliberate withdrawal from the pressing and fundamental issues of life, the moral issues. We shall examine later how to put an Aristotelian complexion on the term. Aristotle, however, makes art an affair of language, and language whose adequacy can be tested by the closeness of its approximation to an experience, by its vividness in reproducing the experience for us. That is what he implies when he says that art imitates not merely the world of sense, but the world of man's mind, his character, his emotions, his actions: and this world it presents with an almost physical vividness. He calls this artistic reproduction *mimesis*: ideas are suggested through physical things, just as mime (in the bodies of Greek maskers or Balinese dancers) reproduces emotion in the language of gesture. The master of mime proportions his gestures to the directives of the emotion he wants us to feel: and the lack of this proportion is evidence that the work of art is not under full artistic control.

History is different from poetry because it is not interested in this proportion between one event and another: things happen and are recorded as they happen: chance intervenes and the evolution from cause to effect is made less obvious. There is no necessary order about history: it has a beginning and no end. Poetry, however, like philosophy, seeks the beginning and the end, finds order in the flux of events, invests every event with its sense of destiny. A poetic creation is a whole thing, it has no loose ends like history. The knot of events in the tragedy (or, as in a lyric, of images) is completely untied with the *denouement*: even character is plot potentially, and plot is character-in-action.

The elements of tragedy, *catharsis*—meaning ‘purging,’ *hamartia*—meaning ‘error of judgment,’ *anagnorisis*—meaning ‘recognition,’ *peripeteia*—meaning ‘reversal,’ are mutually interacting elements and are only understood together: they give poetic significance to the dramatic action and afford the key to the cardinal assumptions of Aristotle’s poetic theory.

Catharsis is a term of much-debated significance. The most reliable explanation makes it a crude medical metaphor: but it does suggest, and very strikingly, the physical accent (one might say), the strong physical colouring of the aesthetic experience: a certain acute sense of physical lightness is part of all aesthetic delight (even in its most rarefied varieties, as Marcel de Corte shows in his brilliant study of Plotinus). But the word need not be confined to its primary meaning: it is evident that catharsis also restores emotional equilibrium, brings the emotions to rest, by nullifying the corrosive effect of the emotions of pity and fear. Greek tragedy was more than a spectacle: it had almost the tradition of a liturgical performance. The audience were both spectators and participants: as spectators they experienced pity for the tragic hero’s nemesis and followed with loving understanding the continuous tide of his misfortunes: as participants a mass terror must have seized them according as they followed in the story their own lives writ large. After crescendo, diminuendo; after arsis, thesis; after a shadowy oppressiveness, cool happy release: these are the implications of catharsis.

Anagnorisis (recognition) is a sort of intellectual catharsis, a purification of purpose, and the recognition itself is only dramatic because it is the recognition of issues which the hero, and to some extent the spectator-participants have been concealing from themselves or which nemesis has been concealing from them—hence an admission of intellectual error, of *hamartia*. But the term is patient of broader secondary interpretations. For the mental release the audience feel is as much due to a clear intellectual acceptance of the situation, a certain resignation to nemesis, a shattering intuitive vision of the beauty of order implicit in the Hellenistic notion of fate. The human hero might find in nemesis only the slow plotting down of his particular catastrophe. The audience, remembering the mysteries, would discover there the extra-human glory of a divine pattern. Aristotle might, had he known the term, have described their attitude as one of ‘aesthetic distance’: their thoughts were larger than themselves, and, in this, poetry was more philosophical than history. They saw the significance of the whole situation in a single clear intuition. There has occurred *peripeteia* (re-

versal), a complete overturning of their intentions, of their values even. They reject their own limited experience, they go beyond the immediacy of their own and the hero's emotional reactions, in a sense they go beyond emotion: and they do this to embrace the pattern of nemesis, which, in spite of its incalculable potentialities of human disaster, is still aesthetically preferable, because it is the pattern of the gods. Nemesis besides being the pattern of disaster was also the pattern of glory: to oppose it as the heroic in their arrogant hubris were tempted to do was to grapple with a dark unknown in fear and trembling, but to accept it was to rediscover the divine meaning of our existence, to probe to a lucid and luminous order behind the mask of a dark and crushing necessity.

When Aristotle points out that a work of art should have a beginning, middle and end, he is considered often to be either naive or uninspired and obvious. But how otherwise can we be presented with the revelation of character actualised unless there is some such movement towards greater intensities of meaning; nemesis being the alpha and omega of the action? The aesthetic moment for Aristotle is not an inexplicable interlude in a boring existence: a temporary happy aberration in the procession of successive ennuis that make up the stream-of-consciousness. Already in adumbration there were present in his theory of art those key qualities that St. Thomas, with his infallible instinct for a phrase, was to sum up under familiar headings: wholeness (*integritas*), proportion in the events (*proportio*), a luminously limpid arrangement (*claritas*), and a sense of glory informing the pattern of events (*splendor ordinis*).

JOHN DURKAN.

FROM ST. AUGUSTINE'S SERMONS

BETTER a cripple limping on to God,
 Than swiftest runner on perdition's road.
 Yet cripple be not proud, the runner may
 Repent, return, and pass you on the Way.

JOHN SEARLE.