

REVIEW

VELOSO, CLAUDIO WILLIAM. *POURQUOI LA POÉTIQUE D'ARISTOTE? DIAGOGÈ*. PRÉFACE DE MARWAN RASHED. PARIS: LIBRAIRIE PHILOSOPHIQUE J. VRIN, 2018. [HISTOIRE DES DOCTRINES DE L'ANTIQUITÉ CLASSIQUE, 50]. 432 PP. ISBN 978-2-7116-2767-7. PRICE: 49€.

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Aristotle probably wrote his *Poetics* to indicate what would be the noblest form of intellectual pastime (*diagōgè*) to those who do not devote their lives to philosophy, and not as a medical prescription of poetry in general, and of tragedy in particular, as an element capable of purifying or purging passions noxious to the individual and to the polis. In fact, the (only) passage in it in which the Stagirite advocates the cathartic function of tragedy seems to be unauthentic, a marginal gloss inadvertently incorporated into a text transmitted by three independent testimonia.

This is in short the bold thesis defended by Veloso in the book *Pourquoi la Poétique d'Aristote? Diagogè (PPA)*, a thesis already defended, with variants, for some decades by Veloso and other scholars.¹

¹ See the articles by M. D. Petruševski ("Παθημάτων κάθαρσιν ου bien πραγμάτων σύσταρσιν?", in *Ziva Antika / Antiquité Vivante* 4, 1954, pp. 209-50), A. Freire ("A Catarse em Aristóteles", in *APPACDM*, Braga, 1982, ²1996), and G. Scott ("Purging the Poetics", in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 25, 2003, pp. 233-63). The article by Veloso is "Aristotle's *Poetics* without *Katharsis*, Fear, or Pity", in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 33 (2007), pp. 255-84.

Over the centuries the cathartic aspect of poetry has generated endless debates among the exegetes of the *Poetics*, who advanced the most varied and contradictory hypotheses about it and its function. Much of this perplexity is in fact due to the brevity with which *kátharsis* (“purgation” or “purification”) is treated in the transmitted text, in contrast with the expository technique of Aristotle, an author at all times concerned with the definition and clarification of the terms employed. The absence of an explanation of the meaning of catharsis is even stranger once we recall that the philosopher promised elsewhere to discuss the term in the *Poetics*.²

The complexity of assigning each of the texts of the *Corpus Aristotelicum* to Aristotle is a problem well known to anyone who has ever approached it, even briefly. Some consensus exists that he probably limited himself in some works to the role of supervisor (e.g. *Atheniensium Respublica*), and even that some texts were probably written after his death by his disciples (e.g. *De Coloribus*) or by late authors such as Nicholas of Damascus (e.g. *De Plantis*). There are besides the fragments, considered spurious by many since V. Rose (1863). The discussion of Aristotle’s ideas is further complicated by the existence of obvious (and probably extensive) gaps in the texts passed down to us. The *Poetics* itself seems to lack an entire final chapter, devoted to iambic poetry and comedy,³ where perhaps Aristotle would discuss catharsis as promised.

² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1341b.38: “τί δὲ λέγομεν τὴν κάθαρσιν, νῦν μὲν ἀπλῶς, πάλιν δ’ ἐν τοῖς περὶ ποιητικῆς ἐροῦμεν σαφέστερον”.

³ That is inferred from the “*vestigia obscura*” at the end of ms. *Laurentianus Riccardianus* 46, that may be deciphered as the introduction to a new topic (“περὶ δὲ λάμβων(?) καὶ κωμωδίας ...”). In an interesting and short appendix to *PPA* (pp.401-3), Veloso notes, however, that the belief in the original existence of a missing final passage depends on our acceptance of the authenticity of the above expression, and even then there is nothing indicating the loss of a whole book.

Veloso rebels against this and other alternatives that defend the authenticity of the passage highlighted below, and accepts Scott's suggestion to dismiss it as spurious:

περὶ μὲν οὖν τῆς ἐν ἑξαμέτροις μιμητικῆς καὶ περὶ | κωμωδίας
ὑστερον ἐροῦμεν· περὶ δὲ τραγωδίας λέγωμεν | ἀναλαβόντες
αὐτῆς ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων τὸν γινόμενον ὄρον | τῆς οὐσίας. ἔστιν
οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας | καὶ τελείας μέγεθος
ἐχούσης, ἡδυσμένῳ λόγῳ χωρὶς ἐκά|στῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς
μορίοις, δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι' ἀπαγγε|λίας, **δι' ἑλέου καὶ φόβου**
περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων | παθημάτων κάθαρσιν. λέγω
δὲ ἡδυσμένον μὲν λόγον τὸν | ἔχοντα ῥυθμὸν καὶ ἁρμονίαν {καὶ
μέλος}, (del. Tyrwhitt) τὸ δὲ χωρὶς τοῖς | εἶδεσι τὸ διὰ μέτρων ἕνια
μόνον περαίνεσθαι καὶ πάλιν ἕτερα | διὰ μέλους. (1449b 21-31)⁴

Transmitted by three independent testimonia of the *Poetics* — the manuscripts *Parisinus graecus* 1741 (10th century) and *Laurentianus Riccardianus* 46 (14th century), and the Arabic translation by Mattā Ibn Yūnus (10th century) —, this mention of catharsis could not in fact be marked as interpolated without generating controversy. Veloso, however, is not averse to controversy.

His main arguments for discarding the passage are two, summarized by Rashed already in the preface to *PPA* (p. 10). The first, theoretical and positive, ponders that, once we accept that the aim of art is imitation, it could not be also, as a logical conclusion, to purge our emotions. The second

⁴ In Halliwell's translation (bolding by me): "We shall later discuss the art of mimesis in hexameters, as well as comedy. But let us now discuss tragedy, taking up the definition of its essence which emerges from what has already been said. Tragedy, then, is mimesis of an action which is elevated, complete, and of magnitude; in language embellished by distinct forms in its sections; employing the mode of enactment, not narrative; **and through pity and fear accomplishing the catharsis of such emotions.** I use 'embellished' for language with rhythm and melody, and 'distinct forms' for the fact that some parts are conveyed through metrical speech alone, others again through song."

argument, philological and negative, notes that there is nothing in the rest of the text that makes the slightest allusion to the cathartic function of poetry. As explained by Rashed, neither of the two arguments is sufficient alone, but the convergence of both “is implacable” (ibid.). Aristotle could of course have developed a theory of catharsis parallel to that of imitation, and also he could have remained silent about a point he did not consider “capital,” but here “the silence [would be] far too *dissonant*” (Rashed’s italics) to be Aristotle’s.

Besides, although recognizing the emotional effect of the tragedies, Veloso also argues (pp. 49-50) — from a passage in Herodotus (6.21.2) in which the tragediographer Phrynichus is penalized for bringing his audience to tears with the stage representation of the capture of Miletus by the Persians — that the Athenians did not attend the theater to purge their emotions, nor did they seem likely to accept the “idea of learning by suffering” stated by Croesus in another passage of the *History* (1.207.1). The Athenians would instead watch the plays in search of a purely intellectual pleasure, derived from the recognition of the mimicked thing.

It is possible to answer some of the above objections in different ways, without suppressing the catharsis from the *textus receptus*. An alternative, synthesized by N. Pappas,⁵ considers that *παθημάτων* perhaps referred not to the “passions” or “emotions” of the audience, but to the dramatic incidents responsible for them. In other words, the *kátharsis* should be understood as the resolution of the plot, and the goal of tragedy as to present a coherent and significant narrative structure. Petruševski (*art.cit.*, p. 237), for his part, chose a middle ground and proposed *πραγμάτων σύσταρσιν* as an amendment of *παθημάτων κάθαρσιν*, but his suggestion was not well accepted because it does not suit the context very much.

⁵ N. Pappas, “Aristotle”, in B. Gaut & D. Mc. Lopes (edd.), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, London and New York, ³2013, pp. 13-24.

The scholars dedicated to Aristotle have reacted to Veloso's thesis with varying virulence, and in *ad hominem* arguments the author has already been labeled “terrorist,” “megalomaniac,” and “excessive.”⁶ His arguments, however, are well-structured and minute, often scrutinizing the syntactic and lexical details of the transmitted Aristotelian text, without ignoring its many variants. Some of the objections raised against him — such as P. Destrée's, for whom “the ancients showed themselves to be generally faithful and honest copyists” (apud *PPA*, p. 11) — can be easily overturned: in this particular case, it is enough to list the numerous known examples of marginal glosses incorporated into ancient texts, including the New Testament (e.g. John 7:53—8:12).⁷

Referring to the articles by Petruševski, Scott, and Veloso,⁸ N. Pappas (*op.cit.*, p. 16) ponders that the exclusion of a difficult passage must always be the last resort of philologists, but also, given the insurmountable difficulty of defining here *kátharsis*, that the time to adopt this last resort may have come. This passage will obviously not disappear from future editions of the *Poetics*, although a growing number of scholars seems willing to accept the marginal-gloss thesis, largely because, whether or not written by Aristotle, the concept of catharsis in the narrative and dramatic arts enjoys a centuries-old critical fortune. At most, some editions may print it in brackets (as *καὶ μέλος* in line 1449b 29, above).

The reader who approaches the book without a pre-defined opinion about the subject will be convinced of its validity, although not necessarily of its truth (how could he?). And even the most inflexible advocate of the

⁶ As informed by M. Rashed in his preface to *PPA*, p. 10, with note 2.

⁷ See Bart D. Ehrman, *O que Jesus Disse? O que Jesus Não Disse* [= *Misquoting Jesus*], transl. by M. Marcionilo, Rio de Janeiro, 2015, pp. 73-5.

⁸ See note 1, above.

permanence of the catharsis in Aristotle must finally acknowledge how disappointing the numerous theories suggested to explain it are, no matter how subtle the listed arguments are.

To be regretted is the lack of an index of names and terms that would assist in the search for specific topics within the book. Finally, as few students and scholars seem to know French in our universities nowadays, and considering the author's nationality, I take the opportunity to recommend the urgent translation of the present work into Portuguese.⁹

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⁹ I must thank Sue Taylor and Ricardo Zappa for kindly reading the English version of this review.