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TWO NOTES ON GREEK TRAGEDY  
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I. On Aristotle and κάθαρσις

We are singularly lucky, nowadays, in that we possess two excellent and detailed critical surveys of the immense bibliography concerning the problem of Aristotle's theory on κάθαρσις, namely Prof. M. Kokolakis' paper "Οἱ παράγοντες τοῦ τραγικοῦ ἐλέου" (in Ἄπὸ τὸν Ὀμηρο στὴν Αεύτερη Σοφιστικὴ, Athens 2004, page 74 ff.) and Prof. G. Xanthakis-Karamanos' article "Ἐκλεκτικὴ πραγμάτευση τῆς τραγωδίας στὴν Ποιητικὴ" (in *Dramatica: Studies In Classical And Post-Classical Dramatic Poetry*, Athens 2002, page 271 ff.). I refer the reader to these two veritable lode-stars for every detail on which he might like to be enlightened.

The meaning of κάθαρσις, in Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449 b 28 – δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν, is generally thought to be (Kokolakis, *op. cit.*, page 74) either "purification resulting in elimination", or "purification resulting in attenuation"; the genitive παθημάτων is of course objective, not subjective, the sense being "purification resulting in elimination (or: "purification resulting in attenuation") endured by the παθήματα", i.e. by the "passions". The exact nature of the said purification is much debated ("medical", or "intellectual": cf. Kokolakis, *op. cit.*, p. 84 ff.; Xanthakis-Karamanos, *op. cit.*, 277 f., with notes 43, 45, 46, 47). The above interpretation, however, presents two problems. On the one hand, several scholars (cf. Kokolakis, *op. cit.*, p. 95-102) have cast doubts on the contextual validity of the mss. reading παθημάτων κάθαρσιν in the sense "purification of the passions": this *vexata quaestio* is far from settled, but in any case is rendered unnecessary by my interpretation (see below). The second problem, which so far scholars have overlooked because they have concentrated their attention on the examination of the phrase παθημάτων κάθαρσιν, concerns the meaning of περαίνουσα. It is commonly believed that this participle means "completing"<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Else tries to force into the text a semantically imposible meaning, cf. Kokolakis, *op. cit.*, p. 74, note 2. Cf. Bernardakis as quoted by Kokolakis, *op. cit.*, p. 94, note 90: "qui par la pitié et

However, such a meaning does not fit in with the words δι' ἑλέου καὶ φόβου. Goethe and Lessing tried to reconcile περαίνουσα and δι' ἑλέου καὶ φόβου by suggesting that the phrase meant “completing (περαίνουσα) the process of κάθαρσις after such a process was initiated by φόβος and ἔλεος”: cf. Kokolakis, *op. cit.*, p. 93: “nach einem Verlauf von Mitleid und Furcht... ihr Geschäft abschliesst”), but, as Bernays objected, (Kokolakis, *ibid.*), δι' ἑλέου καὶ φόβου cannot possibly mean, in Greek, “nach einem Verlauf”.

The participle περαίνουσα, in sum, if it meant “completing”, would be contextually inexplicable: one can “complete” a process only after it has been initiated, but nothing in the context indicates what began the process of κάθαρσις in the sense “elimination” or “attenuation”. Since such a process has not been started, this leads us to re-examine not only the accepted meaning of περαίνουσα, but also the accepted meaning of κάθαρσις (“elimination” or “attenuation”). Sense can be made of the phrase under discussion if we remember three facts. First of all, περαίνω can mean, in Greek, not only “bring to an end” (*LSJ*, s. v; “ad finem perduco” *Thes.*, s.v.) but also “limit” (this sense is attested in Aristotle, cf. *LSJ*, s.v., 2). Secondly, the word κάθαρσις can mean not only “purification”, but also “verbal clarification”, “verbal explanation” (this sense is attested in Epicure and Philodemus: cf. *LSJ*, s.v., 2).

Thirty: it is well known that Tragedy, although it deals with horrific and often disgusting events, nevertheless limits any verbal clarification of the gruesome details concerning how a person was killed, and mentions such details only in an evasive and blurred way: Athenaeus, for instance (66A) states that Euripides<sup>2</sup> avoided describing the “repulsive”. Thus at *Troades* 1177 Hecuba’s description of her child’s smashed skull is very brief: ἴν’ αἰσχρὰ μὴ λέγω: cf. Epicur., *Ep.* II, p. 36 Usener: τοῖς (λόγοις) κατὰ τὴν κάθαρσιν.

The upshot of all this is that the sense of the phrase under discussion is: “limiting (περαίνουσα), on account of pity and fear (δι' ἑλέου καὶ φόβου)<sup>3</sup> any verbal clarification (κάθαρσιν) of such painful events (τοιούτων παθημάτων).” The word παθήματα, in the sentence, means “painful events”, cf. Kokolakis, *op. cit.*, p. 97, note 103, and *LSJ*, s.v. πάθημα, III (in plur.).

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la crainte mène à sa fin...”; cf. Else as quoted by Kokolakis, p. 98, note 108 “carrying to completion” (ὀλοκληρώνει Kokolakis); Kokolakis, *op. cit.*, p. 93 διαπεραιώνει.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Myrtia* 15, 2000, p. 62 f. For Sophocles, cf. e.g. *El.* 414 f. , where the poet does not dilate on how Clytemnestra was murdered. Cf. also Euripides, *T.G.F.* 68 (Nauck) βραχὺς λόγος.

<sup>3</sup> I. e. taking into account the feelings of pity and fear that such events might engender in the spectators: cf. Xanthakis-Karamanos, *op. cit.*, p. 278, ἑλέου τῶν θεατῶν.

Since the usual sense of κάθαρσις is “purification” (not “discussion”), no wonder later critics (Iamblichus, Proclus) took Aristotle’s παθημάτων κάθαρσιν to mean “purification”<sup>4</sup> (cf. Kokolakis, *op. cit.*, p. 87 ff.), of course not bothering to account for περιίνουσα.

## II. On Horace and Thespis

At *Ars Poetica* 275 ff. Horace mentions Thespis:

*Ignotum tragicæ genus invenisse Camenæ  
dicitur et plaustris vexisse poemata Thespis,  
quæ canerent agerentque peruncti faecibus ora.*

Scholars<sup>5</sup> have been puzzled by the meaning of these lines. Fairclough noted that Horace seems to confuse Tragedy with Comedy in this passage. He explains that “jesting from wagons (τὰ ἐξ ἀμάξης σκώμματα), in the procession which formed a feature of the vintage celebration” is associated with Comedy, and that the words *peruncti faecibus ora* are an allusion to τρυγωδία, a term used of Comedy and derived from τρύζ, “wine-lees”.

I would like to suggest, however, that Horace has not confused Tragedy with Comedy. Thespis is said to have invented Tragedy and to have conveyed his poems in triumph on a wagon. Horace is referring to the fact that Thespis<sup>6</sup> was victorious in a dramatic contest. Tragedy was serious and employed heavy<sup>7</sup> words. Thus Thespis is said to have conveyed his poems in triumph on a wagon<sup>8</sup> rather than on a chariot, since the words of his tragedies formed a heavy load.

<sup>4</sup> For an instructively analogous ancient misinterpretation of *dulce* in Horace, *Odes*, III, 2, 13 cf. G. Giangrande, *G.I.F.* 2004, p. 314 f. Cf. Kokolakis, *op. cit.*, p. 99, n. 112, on Else’s doubts concerning the views of Proclus and Iamblichus.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. H.R. Fairclough, *Horace, Satires, Epistles and Ars Poetica*, Loeb edition, London 1970, reprint, page 473. Cf. also C.O. Brink, *Horace on Poetry* (Cambridge 1971), page 312 f.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. A. Lesky, *A History of Greek Literature*, London 1966, page 229.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ovid, *Amores* 3, 1, 11 ff. Cf. line 35 where Tragedy is personified and speaks with heavy words (*gravibus verbis*).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *LSJ* s.v. ἀμαξιαῖος: “large enough to load a wagon...: metaph., ἄ. ῥῆμα of big words, *Com. Adesp.* 836”. Cf. moreover, *Ars Poetica* line 97 where tragic heroes are said to use long words (*sesquipedalia verba*).

Thespis<sup>9</sup> is said, moreover, to have painted his face with white lead. Hence Horace states that men whose faces were smeared with paint (*faecibus*)<sup>10</sup> acted his plays.

We should therefore translate as follows:

“Thespis is said to have discovered the Tragic Muse, unknown before, and to have conveyed (*vexisse*)<sup>11</sup> on a wagon (*plaustris*)<sup>12</sup> his poems, which were sung and acted by players with faces smeared with paint (*faecibus*).”

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Lesky, *loc. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Lewis And Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *faex* B, 4: “Paint or wash for the face, rouge, Ov. A.A. 3, 211”.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Lewis and Short, *op. cit.*, s.v. *veho: cum triumphantem (Camillum) albi per urbem vexerant equi*, Livy, 5, 28, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Note that Horace has employed a poetic plural: cf. my *Studies in the Text of Propertius* (Athens 2002), page 14.