

Scholarly and literary reconstructions of the second part of Aristotle's 'Poetics', the chance discovery by Umberto Eco of a trace of a medieval debate hitherto unknown to him, and issues of the Christian tradition of translation

Part 1: Scholarly reconstruction

The current conception of the second part of Aristotle's 'Poetics' is based on a manuscript sent in 1643 by Athanasius Rhetor from Cyprus to Séguier de Coislin, which was later given the name *Tractatus Coislinianus*. In 1839 the classicist Cramer discovered it in the collection of Henri Charles and published it assuming that he had found a text written by a commentator on Aristotle's *Poetics*. This idea did not prove popular at the time, but it was revived in the twentieth century by Richard Janko, who argued that this text is a collection of extracts 'concerning comedy' from the lost part of Aristotle's *Poetics*. (Janko, Richard, trans. 1987. Aristotle. *Poetics*. With the Tractatus Coislinianus, Reconstruction of Poetics II, and the Fragments of the On Poets. Cambridge: Hackett). Some researchers say that this is a late text ascribed to Theophrastus (Nesselrath, Heinz-Günther. 1990. *Die attische mittlere Komödie: ihre Stellung in der antiken Literaturkritik und Literaturgeschichte*. Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte Vol. 36. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter).

This interpretation was also shared by Umberto Eco, who, in 'The Name of the Rose', linked the second part of the *Poetics* to the definition of the comedy, as the source of laughter and to the claim of the importance of laughter and to the unacceptability of this point of view for the monastic ideology of medieval Europe.

Let us look at this text and compare it to well-known passages in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Janko's translation: The definition of comedy in *Tractatus Coislinianus*: Comedy is a representation of action that is laughable and lacking in magnitude, complete, [in embellished speech], with each of its parts [used] separately in the [various] elements [of the play]; [represented] by people acting and [not] by means of narration; accomplishing by means of pleasure and laughter the catharsis of such emotions. It has laughter [so to speak,], as its mother.

(*A hypothetical reconstruction of Poetics II, based on the Tractatus Coislinianus and the fragments of Poetics II.*) (Janko, Richard, trans. 1987. Aristotle. *Poetics*. With the Tractatus Coislinianus, Reconstruction of Poetics II, and the Fragments of the On Poets. Cambridge: Hackett).

Losev's Russian translation of the *Tractatus Coislinianus* reads: 'Комедия есть подражание действию смешному и неудачному определённого размера, в каждой из своих частей в образах разыгрываемое, а не рассказываемое, через удовольствие и смех осуществляющее очищение (др.-греч. κάθαρσις) подобных аффектов. Она имеет своей матерью смех'. (Лосев А. Ф. Аристотель и поздняя классика. — История античной эстетики. — Л.: Искусство, 1975).

Let us look at the definition of tragedy in Aristotle's *Poetics*. *Poetics*, Chapter 6: two versions of English translation:

1. 'A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.'

2. Tragedy is a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude, in embellished speech, with each of its elements [used] separately in the [various] parts [of the play] and [represented] by people acting and not by narration, accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions.

S. H. Butcher's translation is cited in Janko (1987: 7): In Butcher's translation, this passage reads: 'Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play, in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper catharsis of these emotions.'

The classical Russian translation is: Итак, трагедия есть воспроизведение действия серьезного и законченного, имеющего определенный объем, речью украшенной, различными ее видами отдельно в различных частях, – воспроизведение действием, а не рассказом, совершающее посредством сострадания и страха очищение подобных чувств.

Let us look at the Greek text of the *Poetics*: περι δὲ τραγωδίας λέγωμεν ἀναλαβόντες αὐτῆς ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων τὸν γινόμενον ὄρον τῆς οὐσίας. ἔστιν οὖν τραγωδία μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας [25] καὶ τελείας μέγεθος ἐχούσης, ἡδυσμένῳ λόγῳ χωρὶς ἐκάστῳ τῶν εἰδῶν ἐν τοῖς μορίοις, δρώντων καὶ οὐ δι' ἀπαγγελίας, δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν (Aristotle. *Poetics*. 1449b21-28).

The question we should raise on comparing these translations with the Greek original is concerned with the last section of this passage: τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν. What does this passage mean? 'A cleansing from such feelings' or 'A cleansing of such feelings'?

There is a long-running debate over the translation of this passage. Sergi Danelia, prominent Georgian classicist, whose translation of the *Poetics* I can be consider as one of the best, translated this passage in Georgian as follows: '... which by means of arousing pity and fear attains a cleansing from such feelings' (Aristotle. *Poetics*. Ganatleba Publishing House, 1979, p. 153). However in an accompanying remark he writes that there is also a second possible translation of this fragment as 'a cleaning of feelings' and indicates on Eduard Zeller (Eduard Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen*, 774,4; Friedrich Ueberweg, *Geschichte der Philosophie*, 423). Danelia's substantiation for the correctness of this translation is interesting:

'He [Aristotle – G.T.] clearly wrote that tragedy cleans the spectator from his fits of passion by means of rousing only two feelings (namely, compassion and fear). According to these words of Aristotle, only by arousing compassion and fear does tragedy cleanse [that is to say 'extinguish' – G.T.] vanity, jealousy, ingratitude, stubbornness and all other strong emotions that distance us from kindness. That is to say, the artistic portrayal of vanity given in tragedy does not cleanse the real feeling of vanity in the character of the spectator (this was what Corneille thought, in whose opinion, like was cleaned by like...), but by watching tragedy the real emotions of compassion and fear roused in the spectator cleanse ['extinguish' – G.T.] the spectator's vainglory, jealousy, ingratitude, stubbornness and other real feelings. That is to say, in Aristotle's opinion, tragedy must rouse in the spectator true emotions of compassion and fear: if not, it cannot bring about catharsis or cleansing. And, consequently, not all portrayals of vanity staged by a playwright may be of use in cleansing the spectator from vanity, but only such an artistic

portrayal of vanity which could rouse real emotions of compassion and fear in the spectator' (Aristotle. *Poetics*. Ganatleba Publishing House, 1979, p. 100).

However, while keeping within this translation framework of Danelia, a slightly differing interpretation is possible: tragedy empties us from feelings by means of and as a result of experiencing and having empathy for the action happening on the stage. As a result, we are “retuning” in life purged from emotions and cleansed.

That in this fragment of the *Poetics* there is more mention of catharsis as a purged from feelings and less as a cleansing of feelings points to that fragment of Aristotle's *Politics* where he mentions catharsis: 'For every feeling that affects some souls violently affects all souls more or less; the difference is only one of degree. Take pity and fear, for example, or again enthusiasm. Some people are liable to become possessed by the latter emotion, but we see that, when they have made use of the melodies which fill the soul with orgiastic feeling, they are brought back by these sacred melodies to a normal condition as if they had been medically treated and undergone a purge [catharsis]. Those who are subject to the emotions of pity and fear and the feelings generally will necessarily be affected in the same way; and so will other men in exact proportion to their susceptibility to such emotions. **All experience a certain purge [catharsis]** and pleasant relief. In the same manner cathartic melodies give innocent joy to men' (Aristotle, *Politics* VIII:7; 1341b 35-1342a 8).

In Greek: γὰρ περὶ ἐνίας συμβαίνει πάθος ψυχᾶς ἰσχυρῶς, τοῦτο ἐν πάσαις ὑπάρχει, τῷ δὲ ἥττον διαφέρει καὶ τῷ μᾶλλον, οἷον ἔλεος καὶ φόβος, ἔτι δ' ἐνθουσιασμός: καὶ γὰρ ὑπὸ ταύτης τῆς κινήσεως κατοκώχιμοί τινές εἰσιν, ἐκ τῶν δ' ἱερῶν μελῶν ὀρῶμεν τούτους, ὅταν χρήσωνται τοῖς ἐξοργιάζουσι [10] τὴν ψυχὴν μέλεσι, καθισταμένους ὥσπερ ἰατρείας τυχόντας καὶ καθάρσεως: ταῦτό δὴ τοῦτο ἀναγκαῖον πάσχειν καὶ τοὺς ἐλεήμονας καὶ τοὺς φοβητικούς καὶ τοὺς ὄλως παθητικούς, τοὺς ἄλλους καθ' ὅσον ἐπιβάλλει τῶν τοιούτων ἐκάστῳ, καὶ πᾶσι γίγνεσθαί τινα κάθαρσιν καὶ κουφίζεσθαι [15] μεθ' ἡδονῆς.

I think that the English translation is once more inexact when καὶ τοὺς ὄλως παθητικούς is translated as 'and the feelings generally'. It is clear that Aristotle is again talking of about passions and being seized by passions.

In the same way, I think it is clear that in this case catharsis means being purged from [orgiastic] passions, and not the ennoblement of passions. Aristotle here compares purging from passions to the treatment of a patient (naturally, curing from a disease means purging from a disease and not curing a disease).

I think from now it will gradually become comprehensible what we are dealing with in the form of the *Tractatus Coislinianus*: Let us compare Aristotle's *Poetics* to the part of the *Tractatus Coislinianus* that is of interest to us:

κωμωδία ἐστὶν μίμησις πράξεως γελοίας καὶ ἀμοίρου μέγεθος, τελείας [ἡδυσμένῳ λόγῳ] χωρὶς ἐκάστῳ τῶν μορίων ἐν τοῖς εἶδεσι, δρώντων καὶ [οὐ] δι' ἀπαγγελίας, δι' ἡδονῆς καὶ γέλωτος περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν (Fernando Báez. *El Tractatus Coislinianus. La obra que salvo el contenido del segundo libro de la Poética de Aristoteles.* Universidad de Los Andes. 2000. p. 36.).

As we see, in the text of the *Tractatus Coislinianus* the definition of comedy follows the text of definition of the tragedy exactly, ignoring a few word transpositions, to end as follows:

δι' ἡδονῆς καὶ γέλωτος περαίνουσα τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν. 'By means of pleasure and laughter it carries out a cleansing from such feelings (or 'a cleansing of such feelings)'.
'

As we see, instead of the **sympathy and fear** (ἐλέου καὶ φόβου) of the *Poetics*, in the *Tractatus Coislinianus* we have **pleasure and laughter** (ἡδονῆς καὶ γέλωτος). The remainder of the text is the same.

I think that the decisive word here is πάθημα. If we translate this as simply 'feeling', then everything is fine and these two fragments simply refer to a cleansing/refining of feelings: in the case of the *Poetics*, how the cleansing and raising of compassion and of fear happens through tragedy, while the *Tractatus Coislinianus* tells us about the raising and cleansing of the feelings of laughter and pleasure by means of comedy.

But, in classical texts, πάθημα fundamentally meant torture or passion (<http://biblesuite.com/greek/3804.htm>). The difference is that in the Middle Ages the connotation of this word, owing to a conception of Christianity, tilted towards the positive.

Only an expert in the Greek Biblical tradition, where πάθημα means 'passion/torment' and, correspondingly, a religiously positive phenomenon, could read πάθημα in Aristotle's *Poetics* as

'feeling' and write this concrete passage in *Tractatus Coislinianus* as its mirror reflection. Thus the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, I think, is only a medieval imitation and so could have no connection with either Aristotle or any of his pupils.

The basis of this error/falsity is in itself interesting: torment and passion in Christianity are positive feelings that lead us to God. For this reason it needs to be asked whether the change in the meaning of πάθημα, due Christian tradition, made possible the translation of Aristotelian definition of the tragedy, where the emphasis was not on being emptied/cleansed from feelings, but on the cleansing of these feelings?

However, from the perspective of medieval Christian theology, the content of this passage from the *Tractatus Coislinianus* is satisfactory: 'Through pleasure and laughter it carries out a cleansing of such feelings'. That is to say, the author of the *Tractatus Coislinianus* attempts to give laughter and pleasure the same place in the Christian tradition as sadness, compassion and fear have.

It is not to be excluded that the tradition of translating the passage of the *Poetics* that reads 'τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν' as 'a cleansing of such feelings' also came from the Middle Ages, since it stresses the cleanliness/filthiness of feelings.

Also, it is possible that the *Tractatus Coislinianus* is a reflection of a discussion unknown to us, in which a group of theologians attempted to pursue pleasure and laughter as ways to God and gave these the very same sacral connotation as fear and compassion had.

Thus it is possible that Umberto Eco erred when he unconditionally trusted the *Tractatus Coislinianus* as a reflection of the second part of the *Poetics*. However, I think he has come across an interesting, hitherto unknown discussion, an echo of which would be the burning of similar texts to the *Tractatus Coislinianus* by protagonists like the librarian Jorge.

Besides this, I think it would not be relevant to ascribe the same influence (cleansing, purging) to comedy and tragedy in the structure of a dichotomous discourse established and frequently used by Aristotle: if things have the same influence they are the same things and not different. The following dichotomy would be more relevant for Aristotle: tragedy – emptying, comedy – filling.

Part 2: Literary reconstruction

Scientific research space ends here. It is true, we have cleared a significant space for the reconstruction of the second part of the *Poetics*, but reasoning based on a scientific analysis will no longer come in useful later on this path. A reconstruction is possible, but it is creative, based on suppositions and intuition, in which the justification of the final picture is more in its beauty and elegance, more in its relevance for the intuition of the readers than in a discussion based on hard facts.

The text given below is part of my 'Unknown Books' published in 2010. 'Unknown Books' are reviews and essays on twenty non-existent books. The chapter given below is a review of the book 'Real Cinema', whose author (Konstantine Tavadze) attempts through a reconstruction of Aristotle's *Poetics* to establish a new aesthetic paradigm. Thus, the first part of this text, cited above as part of a scholarly reconstruction, is a post-justification of a literary reconstruction below.

'Real Cinema'

(Konstantine Tavadze. 'Real Cinema', Arturi Publishing House, Tbilisi. 2004).

There are many books on the semiotics of cinema and on the semantic fields created by cinema. Tavadze's book is not about the semantics of cinema nor about its semiotics. Neither is it about the sociology of the cinema nor about its economics. 'Real Cinema' belongs more to the literary genre than to research.

But it is precisely through its being literature that it is very interesting and offers us, if not new knowledge, at least a new point of view. However, this point of view is not at all to our liking as cinema-goers and cinema lovers.

Tavadze begins with a discussion of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Let me remind the reader that there are two parts to Aristotle's *Aesthetics*: *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*. The first part of the *Poetics* describes a form of drama, tragedy, and says that the task of tragedy is the cleansing (κάθαρσις 'catharsis' in Greek) people from strong emotions, for example, from those such as grief and

fear. This cleansing is attained by the sharing and fellow feeling by the viewer of the strong emotions staged by the actor.

The second part of the *Poetics* which dealt with the second form of drama – comedy – is lost. Over the centuries this was an unfound treasure and a source of inspiration to writers (for example, the plot of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* develops around the second part of the *Poetics* hidden by Jorge [whose prototype is Borges], the librarian in an abbey library).

Tavadze says that he can restore the second part of Aristotle's *Poetics*. If tragedy on the viewer's part is oriented on fellow feeling and, as a result, on cleansing from strong emotions, comedy must be aimed at a distancing from emotions laid bare on the stage and at a filling by a new experience, at enrichment, at enestotas (here Tavadze attempts to introduce a word corresponding to catharsis, but with an opposite connotation: the Greek *ενεστώτας* ('filling')).

'Distancing from emotions' because in comedy the action laid bare on the stage is shown in such a way that it evokes alienation from those emotions manifested by the characters: because the characters and emotions are laughable. And filling by new emotions happens because the spectator recognises himself in the character present on the stage and, especially, in his experiences, he looks with greater attention at his own self in everyday life and he attempts not to be like the character seen on the stage. As a result, his primitive feeling and perception of the universe becomes complex, and what is superficial and received uncritically from tradition becomes deep and considered. Consequently, Tavadze concludes that in the second part of Aristotle's *Poetics* he must have said that comedy is oriented toward alienation of the viewer from feelings presenting in the plot and thus, toward filling (enestotas) viewer with new and deep emotions and correspondingly, toward emotional and intellectual enrichment (enestotas) of spectator.

After this Tavadze begins to discuss cinema as a new art phenomenon: all art while presenting themselves uses the same space, in which the viewers exist. Painting in this case is no exception: one dimension of a canvas or of a wall in reality is not such, as by working on the three dimensions of the surface painter gets needed effects. So, paintings are staying in spectators' space. Cinema is different: it makes use of our dimensions for projection and, correspondingly, it creates an alienation between the viewer and the action taking place on the screen. You cannot enter the film from the stage. You can touch a painting, damage it and

change it. You can interfere in the stage. But if you tear off a piece of the screen, the film continues to be projected onto your hand.

For this reason, says Tavadze, cinema is the only art which technically comprises a structure of alienation and distancing. Correspondingly, it is in its essence what Aristotle [in Tavadze's opinion] would have said about comedy: the cinema in its structure and in its rule of presentation is ready to behave as [Tavadze's Aristotelian] comedy: to alienate the viewer from his own feelings and make him think about them and, as a result, we get a wiser and deeper viewer having feelings without ambiguity or superficiality.

But, of course, not all films and film directors make use of this possibility given by the cinema, and producing by a classical, Aristotelian opinion, a tragedy. Tavadze argues that the majority of films and directors are orientated towards the fellow feeling of the viewer and towards catharsis. At first glance, film comedy is an exception, but there are very few such film comedies [in Tavadze's view, Woody Allen's films are a very important exception], in which the viewer can experience enestotas: to see himself and his feelings in a film and for this reason be alienated from the actions on the screen and from his own feelings, which he sees on the screen.

Tavadze argues that up to the creation of the cinema tragedy carried out the function of catharsis, and comedy that of enestotas. Following the Lumière brothers' invention, after it became possible to distance the viewer technically 'from the stage': enestotas became cinema's technical [and consequently exclusive] characteristic.

This discussion is conveyed in the first eighty pages. It is followed by a narrative of Tavadze's theory of 'Real Cinema': real cinema is only that which compels the viewer to distance himself from his own feelings and ideas, or in other words, the kind of film which shows what stands on the other side of prejudices, everyday ideas and feelings, histories, hysterias and relationships. In Tavadze's opinion, such films are few because most films show traditional, tragic, and cleansing themes on the screen (the so-called action movies fall into this classification). The maximum that such film production attains is catharsis, or in other words, an emptying from passions and the experience of emotions and leaving them behind. Something that most films cannot attain is enestotas: revaluing feelings and ideas found in one's

own head by means of cinema and filling it with new, richer and multi-dimensional ideas and experiences.

Attaining enestotas is only possible for those films that not only depict on the screen those feelings and ideas in which the viewer recognizes himself, but also which 'anatomize' these feelings and ideas. That, as Tavadze says, is attainment by irony. By irony, which, as Kierkegaard said, is alienation from actuality and watching it from the side. As Tavadze says, quite a few directors have made at least one film provoking enestotas. Tavadze lists these directors and selects their films from the viewpoint of catharsis / enestotas: This list of directors includes Orson Wells ('Citizen Kane': the clearest of example of enestotas, possibly already a little vulgar, says Tavadze), Alfred Hitchcock ('Psycho', 'The Birds': in which the feeling of fear is anatomized), Mike Leigh ('Vera Drake': the differing understanding of kindness and good deeds in different social classes and the inevitable tragic consequences of the failure to overcome this insurmountability [of various kinds, but nonetheless there] for both sides), Michael Haneke ('The White Ribbon': the risibility of 'Protestant' strictness and insistence on high standards, the inadequacy that leads those with this strictness, respected members of society, towards turning a blind eye to crime and towards covering it up), Clint Eastwood ('Flags of Our Fathers', 'Letters from Iwo Jima': what lies behind the official acknowledgement of heroism and to what extent is it possible to acknowledge heroism, Pedro Almodóvar ('All About My Mother', 'Broken Embraces': the social convention of love and its engagement in the mechanism of leading an everyday life), Federico Fellini ('8½', 'Orchestra Rehearsal', 'The Nights of Cabiria': dangerous consequences when pure, childish wishes, yearning and dreams come true) Besides these famous directors and their films, Tavadze names several other directors unknown to film lovers from among the general public.

Tavadze's book gets a little tedious towards the end as he so scrupulously analyses various films. He finally reaches the conclusion that there are very few films about which we can say that by watching them we might reach enestotas. Most films are located on a scale stretched between catharsis and enestotas.

The reader is alerted when he reaches the last chapter of the book. The title of this chapter is 'How do directors treat viewers ironically and how do they make it look as if they are producers of catharsis'. In this chapter, Tavadze returns to Aristotle once again and says that as

the part of the *Poetics* dedicated to comedy has been lost, enestotasic art, unlike cathartic art, could in no way be established or get a footing in world society. As a result, enestotasic art is still (especially after the creation of the cinema) semi-legal and, as a result of our society's ethos, its pursuit is covered up by directors: some of these consciously, some unknowingly, attempt to hide their own enestotasic art. To support this idea, Tavadze cites interviews with these directors and their public appearances which, in his opinion, produce enestotasic art. I shall not begin to analyse this fully: it is quite sharp-witted and is worth reading, even if you don't read the whole book. I only wish to dwell on two examples.

The first is an interview with Federico Fellini about 'Orchestra Rehearsal'. Fellini says that he chose the person with the greatest non-spiritual and anti-spiritual visual looks and low emotions for the role of the conductor, so that the place and role of dictators in society would become clear. Actually, writes Tavadze, 'Orchestra Rehearsal' is extremely enestotasic: it shows how it is possible for an ordinary, routine relationship, which developed ordinarily against a background of feelings and passions, to turn into destruction, on the one hand, and into total subjugation to one person on the other. In the same way as nothing defends us – not status, or education, or spirituality, or intellectuality – from knowingly make a choice that we must subordinate others to ourselves and govern them.

The second story concerns Pedro Almodóvar's 'Broken Embraces' (2009). This film, like most of Almodóvar's, is radical and ironic to the point of cynicism: the film tells us of a blind director who, in spite of everything (the death of his lover, blindness, the disappearance of his filmed material, etc.) completes the editing of his own film and is victorious over his own 'fate'. It is a completely cathartic film, if not in its prologue: at the beginning of the film the main hero says that his role is blindness and in the first shots of the film to behave as an absolutely fully-sighted person. His sight is clear in the following shots, but the director easily 'wraps' this sight in ambiguity. In an interview at 2009 Cannes Festival about 'Broken Embraces', Almodóvar said that he had made this film to overcome his fears, that he fears blindness and by this he is attempting to surmount himself. Almodóvar made an enestotasic film but [probably even today] he claims that his film is cathartic.

This last chapter is so full of astute conclusions. It really is worth reading this book. But I still think that two books are combined in this book: the first concerns the reconstruction of the

comedy section of the *Poetics*, while the other deals with film's role in modern man's system of perception and life. I would have preferred to have read two books (e.g., 'A Complete Reconstruction of Aristotle's 'Comedy'' and 'About the Irony of Film Directors'). However, I'm not convinced as to what extent I would have read the first after the second, or the other way around.

Translated from the Georgian by PJ Hillery.