Chapter Ten  
Mythos, Katharsis, and the Paradox of Tragedy  

John P. Anton

...καὶ ὁ φιλόμυθος φιλόσοφος πώς ἔστιν.  
ὁ γὰρ μῦθος σύγκειται ἐκ θαυμάσιων.  
Aristotle, Metaphysics I, 2. 982b17-19

I. Introduction.

Myth occupies a central position in Aristotle's theory of tragedy. Anyone who wishes to examine any part of the theory must inevitably look into the meaning of myth, examine Aristotle's treatment in some detail and distinguish what he says from what modern aesthetic theories introduce in their analyses of the art of tragedy and the meaning of the tragic.

A great deal has been written on the subject of mythical thought, how it originates, how it functions in preliterary conditions and how it works in literature. The findings are still open to further debate. What I say in this paper is not so much about the nature or mythos or the kind of thinking it is and what it does. My remarks are intended primarily to focus on how mythos is related to certain basic concepts we find in Aristotle's Poetics as a treatise on the theory of literary production and tragedy, in particular. The emphasis is on the concepts of mythos, katharsis and on the problem referred to as the "paradox of tragedy." The last is discussed mainly because it has received considerable attention in modern theory as an issue that was initially raised by Aristotle.
The thesis I defend tries to tie the effects of the tragic experience to the over-arching political quest for the good life and the common good, and also to show that catharsis is irreplaceable as a means for the refinement of political conduct.

My paper is not another survey of the vast literature on the concepts of catharsis and the tragic emotions in Aristotle. This has already been done by competent scholars, and with the publication of Gerald Else's monumental study of Aristotle's Poetics in 1957 one has an excellent guide to recent controversies.1

One of my central purposes here is to rejoin the Poetics and the Politics, but not by means of a re-interpretation of Bernays' view which sought to illumine the meaning of the tragic catharsis in the Poetics by using the celebrated passage of Bk. 8 in the Politics to construct the inclusive sense of medical and therapeutic purging. Actually my goal is to connect tragedy to the broader doctrines of practical knowledge and productive knowledge. To put it differently, I will try to restore the continuity which Nietzsche said in his The Birth of Tragedy is not to be found in these two treatises, the continuity Aristotle "the moralist" had carelessly cast asunder.

The approach to Aristotle's Poetics I present in this paper was first worked out in rough form many years ago. My circumstances at that time did not permit its development in detail. When G. Else published his study of the Poetics, I found myself closely agreeing with his interpretation, especially the part that makes catharsis "a feature of the structure of tragedy rather than an emotional end-effect upon the spectator."2 It is essential to my own thesis to say that what the plays do, when presented, is built into the intention of the play, and should be regarded as an element of the total experience that involves the perceiver, whether viewer or reader. The effects of the play constitute what is in essence the communication or didaskalia. We can, I believe,

2. Ibid., Preface, p. xi.