

# THE PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW.

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## THE ARISTOTELIAN CATHARSIS.

ONE of the most annoying of the imperfections of Aristotle's treatise on poetry as it has come down to us is that on the subject of the catharsis of tragic emotions he does not speak *σαφέστερον* according to the promise in the *Politics* (1341 b 40). It is mentioned but once in the *Poetics*, in the definition of tragedy in the sixth chapter as (to follow Butcher) "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 purgation of these emotions."<sup>1</sup> Gudeman translates the latter part: "durch die Erregung von Mitleid und Furcht die Reinigung (Katharsis) von derartigen Gemütsstimmungen bewirkend."<sup>2</sup> Bywater goes somewhat farther: "with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions."<sup>3</sup> They agree in thinking that Aristotle means that the catharsis of the emotions of pity and fear is brought about by means of pity and fear, or through incidents arousing these emotions. Pity and fear are to drive themselves out.

But to explain what this means is no easy task. There is no need to review here the long discussion of the catharsis; it is enough that no explanation as yet given seems to have received general approval. In such a state of opinion, a natural thing is

<sup>1</sup> *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, p. 23 (1449 b 24-8).

<sup>2</sup> *Aristoteles über die Dichtkunst*, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry*, p. 17.