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## Catharsis in Poetry Therapy

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### Abstract:

I. 1. How poetry arises; I. 2. How poetry heals – catharsis ; II. Catharsis in Poetry Therapy oriented toward therapeutic effect; III. Catharsis in Poetry Therapy oriented toward moral ‘purification’; IV. Catharsis in Poetry Therapy oriented toward mystical experience; V. Catharsis in Poetry Therapy oriented toward strictly aesthetic experience; VI. Catharsis in Poetry Therapy oriented toward strictly hedonistic pleasure; VII. Ending.

**Keywords:** poetry, Poetry Therapy, catharsis, moral ‘purification’, aesthetic experience.

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### Streszczenie:

I. 1. Jak poezja powstaje; I. 2. Jak poezja leczy – katharsis; II. Katharsis w poezjoterapii nastawionej na efekt terapeutyczny; III. Katharsis w poezjoterapii nastawionej na „oczyszczenie” moralne; IV. Katharsis w poezjoterapii nastawionej na doświadczenie mistyczne; V. Katharsis w poezjoterapii nastawionej na przeżycie o charakterze czysto estetycznym; VI. Katharsis w poezjoterapii nastawionej na hedonistyczne zadowolenie; VII. Zakończenie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** poezja, poezjo terapia, katharsis, oczyszczenie, doświadczenie estetyczne.

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### I. 1. How poetry arises

Psychologically a poem arises from the unconscious, which, according to Freud, was discovered by a poet (Longo, 2002). According to Jung, the soul (*psyche*)

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which is in communion with the unconscious, precedes a poem (Jung, 1997). Subsequently, a poem is finally created by the mind, since poetry is its language: it is content in the form of words, which often express the mind and psychic tribulation, thus influencing the emotions. The form safely imagines the content (image, sound) and a specified organization of words (rhythm, metaphor, style). The content can be presented by deep experiences reflected in the above-mentioned specified and safe form as an expressive act, after which emotions are usually de-escalated and relief and happiness appear. Additionally, this act can bring into being a sense of community as creative experience (Longo, 2002). This is the way in which poetry arises. The term 'Poetry Therapy' consists of two words: 'poetry', which is represented by a poem with its specifically organized utterance (Głowiński, Kostkiewiczowa, Okopień-Sławińska, Sławiński, 1976), and 'therapy' derived from the Greek '*therapeia*', which means healing through the expressive arts like poetry, singing or the dance. In ancient Greek mythology Asclepius, the *god* of medicine and healing, was the son of Apollo, god of poetry, healing and the arts; these two areas reflect that connection (Longo, 2002).

Firstly, in both history and literature, poetry as well as all artistic works originated in Ancient Greece. Actually, they can be divided into two main types: expressive and constructive, in which many subparts could be distinguished. The first type, expressive artistry, consists of poetry, music and dance; these interfuse with each other and make a whole. On the other hand, the second type of artistry consists of architecture, sculpture and painting (Tatarkiewicz, 1962).

Therefore, an inseparable part of expressive art is dance, accompanied with its words and sound, thus making one art. This art focuses on expressing human feelings and drives by means of sound, movements, words, melody and rhythm (Tatarkiewicz, 1962). In this early art people expected that emotional release would provide them relief. This art, therefore, was commonly used for 'soul cleansing', in Greece called 'catharsis'. The term 'catharsis' appeared initially in relation to their art, and has remained unchanged (Tatarkiewicz, 1962). In this way poetry started to heal and '*therapeia*' arose, which was perceived by the Greeks not as a skill but as a poet's divine afflatus. Therefore, thanks to divine intervention, poetry provides access to the highest knowledge: it leads souls, moralizes about people, and even tries to make them better than they currently are (Tatarkiewicz, 1962).

## **I. 2. How poetry heals – catharsis**

The term 'catharsis' was introduced by Aristotle (in his work *Poetics*, chapter 4) in his famous definition of tragedy, in which a spectator is influenced by tragic action: he experiences pity and fear as well being 'purified' and released from

such feelings. Aristotle claims that 'by means of pity (*éleos*) and fear (*phóbos*) emotional cleansing is achieved (*kátharsis*), which purifies and purges these emotions'(Sinko, 2006). Throughout the ages Aristotle's lapidary statement has been a topic of many variously interpreted disputes. One interpretation is that catharsis was understood not as ennobling spectators' feelings but as their disenchantment from these feelings. The plot and history of a tragic hero awakened a spectators' emotions and led them to an intensive experience of pity and fear, which helped them to reach inner peace. In this way 'catharsis' started to be perceived psychologically (it was probably inspired by Greek medical theories) (Głowiński, Kostkiewiczowa, Okopień-Sławińska, Sławiński, 1976). This particular benefit was defined by Aristotle as 'catharsis', which was also explained by Plato in a text about poetry and its recipients (said by the hero in Socratic dialogue 'Gorgias'): 'They are full of fear and pity; through successes and failures in personal and public issues, the soul experiences something new, something on its own. Poetry and the word (logos) were generally compared by Plato to medicines which could cleanse and detoxify the body' (Sinko, 2006).

Therefore catharsis means removal of affects from the soul, and is conducted similarly to the detoxification of the body by cathartic medicines. Unfortunately this soul purification does not last forever; it exists only until another disturbance of inner harmony appears (Sinko, 2006).

When we focus on particular aspects, catharsis can be currently perceived as well as it was perceived variously throughout through the ages:

- 1/ as therapeutic
- 2/ as moral purification
- 3/ as a mystical experience
- 4/ as a strictly aesthetic experience
- 5/ as strictly hedonistic pleasure (Głowiński, Kostkiewiczowa, Okopień-Sławińska, Sławiński, 1976).

The dominant forms of Poetry Therapy will be presented and discussed (i.e. creative and literary) exactly in the same sequence as provided above.

## **II. Catharsis in Poetry Therapy oriented towards its therapeutic effect**

The essence of a lyrical work is its need for expression. Apparently, poetry is the most visible reflection of this need (Stupin-Rzońca, 1997). On the other hand, as it is widely believed, this expression is self-expressed artistry in which the poet's particular inner reality, inner space and psyche are exteriorized. That is why

thematic lyrical domains are inner experiences, sensations, emotions, and beliefs. These domains are usually conveyed as subjectively marked monologues that are therapeutically subservient to this particular poetic expression.

According to many researchers and theorists, creative expression has gained value as a self-concept as well as gaining therapeutic and cathartic values (Stupin-Rzońca, 1997). It can be exemplified by many opinions of disabled poets' about their own poetic works: '[...] I write in affective moments of, sadness, pain or regret that many things have inevitably elapsed. I consider writing as an escape from reality into a fabulous land of dreams, where everything is possible.' (Stupin-Rzońca, 1997). 'These poems are a form of autopsychotherapy, which enable me to share my opinions and hopes, which make life easier.' (Stupin-Rzońca, 1997). 'My poems arise from the needs of my heart. I include in them my longing for beauty and warmth. I travel in them. They contain everything I can not experience in my life. I write what I feel and how I feel it' (Stupin-Rzońca, 1997).

Therefore the central part of a lyric is oriented towards its therapeutic effect (the 'lyrical I'), whose feelings or thoughts, considered as a lyrical confession, are dominant in the composition.

For example:

Pain gobbles up my thoughts  
Swallows hope  
Its nestlings  
Hatch out in my mind  
Caring birds  
Flunk out for aliment

In the cocoon of pain  
I count high  
And ebb tides  
The storm-tossed sea of suffering (Stupin-Rzońca, 1997).

In Poetry Therapy, the main domain of works is undoubtedly an individual's personal experiences, which is comparable to the author's real inner experiences. Equality between the lyrical I and the poet is usually present. What is more, this equality is mainly significant since it is the essential element of poetry's therapeutic effect.

This effect released the poems' authors of from torrid emotions as well as from upsetting experiences. In this way the expressed idea became the core postulate

of a specified lyrical module in Poetry Therapy, which is a literary codification and makes the expression valuable to the other individual.

According to researchers who deal with Poetry Therapy oriented toward the therapeutic effect (especially Teresa Stańczyk), poetry healing developed initially in the United States as a separate branch of Bibliotherapy. In 1959 in New York, the Poetry Therapy Association was founded. This association published its own magazine and organized conferences annually (Stańczak, 1979).

In the United States in 1969 the psychiatrist Jacky J. Leedy (1921-2004), published the first monograph on poetry therapy, aptly titled 'Poetry Therapy', in which works of many pioneers in that field were collected. Leedy also authored the famous saying (Longo, 2002): 'Poetry is the royal road to the unconscious'. Apparently, though hard to believe, this simple statement conveys the essence of Poetry Therapy. This pithy insight is rather veiled due to its poetic metaphors: 'poetry' is the metaphor for all types of poetic work, both in reading and writing these works; 'royal road' is a metaphor of the aesthetic experience, which enables therapy execution; 'to the unconscious' is a metaphor for poems themselves, which focus, often unconsciously, on human thoughts, emotions, and problems; the auxiliary verb 'be' is a metaphor for poetry's therapeutic power arising from its beauty. All in all, Leedy's famous sentence can be explained in the following way (i.e., how we understand it intuitively and how we feel it):

'Poetic work, thanks to its beauty, in which therapeutic power resides, as well as through deep and torrid aesthetic emotions caused by reading or writing the poetry, leads to self-understanding as well as understanding of other people and subsequently enables autopsychotherapy.'

### **III. Catharsis in Poetry Therapy oriented toward moral 'purification'**

Morality is usually perceived as the only right and correct system of behavioral norms, assessments and patterns. According to this assumption not all systems of norms and assessments can be accepted as morality, because the constitutional feature of morality is its rightness and 'reality'. I assume that morality functions here as a valuation of human attitudes, intentions and actions which can be good or evil (Dębowski, Drabarek, Gawor, Jedynek, Klimowicz, Kosior, Dybel, 1994). Therefore, morality generally is a set of principles (norms), which defines what is good (proper and harmless) as well as what is evil (wrong and harmful). Accordingly I interpret moral 'purification' as behavior which strives to realise its own good. Additionally, I interpret moral 'purification' as transgression, which means surpassing that sphere: it is a movement from evil to good precisely. This mysteri-

ous relation between evil and good, sin and sanctity, is a significant issue in therapeutic poetry, because it gives consideration to human nature.

Because these two spheres are strikingly different, reaching one sphere excludes being in the second sphere. In order to reach the goodness sphere, one needs to get rid of features and properties of the evil sphere. The sacrum or sphere of sanctity is the exact opposite of profanum, which represents the secular sphere with its everyday duties and experiences. These two worlds as concepts are connected with creative and literal 'purifying rituals' in Poetry Therapy.

Thematic fields in Poetry Therapy, in which 'purifying rituals' appear, are collections of sacral motifs, strands, topics, and poetic prayer poems -- continually present in this kind of work.

As catharsis is very broad and multifaceted, the opposed 'sacral' matters of sin and sanctity do not exhaust this concept in lyrical works oriented toward moral 'purification. This opposition is only a kind of approximation.

Religiousness in poetry seems to be understood ambiguously. First of all, all aspects which can be categorized as sacral perception of a human being and contemplation of God's presence can be found primarily in religious poetry. Secondly, religious poetry can be a way of experiencing God, usually as a prayer poem.

The therapeutic power of prayer (also called poetic prayer) comes from concentrating on it, which can be perceived as equality between a human's and God's will (Czernianin, 2008).

Moreover, in order to reveal prayer's therapeutic power a particular condition needs to be fulfilled. The believer must have an honest inner attitude, which is considered to be a constitutional part of the prayer as well as an indicator of its moral value.

Throughout the ages, religious books were commonly used and were highly recommended in healing 'sick souls'. This fact is widely known in bibliotherapy and was used as a main postulate by its pioneers from the very beginning. That is why reading religious poetry is inevitable: it can cause moral 'purification' in order to heal a 'sick soul'. On the other hand, not all prayers in poetic form and assessed as religiously valuable are able to bring about a particular aesthetic reaction in their recipients. What is more, not all poetic prayers are acceptable religiously, mainly because religiousness is polysemic (Jastrzębski, Podsiad, 1955).

This point can be illustrated by the religiousness of the controversial 19<sup>th</sup> century French poet, Charles Baudelaire, who can be characterized as extremely individualistic and egocentric in his touching poetic prayer poems, for example 'Oh! Lord! Give me the strength and courage. To contemplate my heart and body without loathing!'



'Flowers of evil' treats prayer as 'soul hygiene', in which prayer is only utilitarian, not transcendental.

On the other hand, one of the best Polish religious poets, Cyprian Kamil Norwid, perceived both poetry and prayer as *sacrum*. Actually, he perceived the whole world as a sacrality (sf. Sawicki, 1981). In Norwid's poetry, the human being is present as a person who possesses 'holy dignity', so highly esteemed by the author.

All in all, reading this type of poetry, which constantly focuses on the *sacrum*, awakes emotions and enables us to experience moral 'purification'.

Simultaneously, it specifies the spatial borders of Poetry Therapy, which is spread between *profanum* and *sacrum*, in order to assess moral attitudes.

#### **IV. Catharsis in Poetry Therapy oriented toward mystical experience**

Mystical experience as ecstatic inner experience in direct connection with God or Absolute reality can be most adequately expressed through poetry. Only poetry is able to transfer to some extent the magnitude and depth of mystical experiences these 'inner worlds', which cannot be conveyed by discursive language (Łączkowski, 1997). According to *St. John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century Spanish mystic*, 'There are issues so deep and spiritual, which cannot be expressed by words only. Spiritual issues transcend the senses' (St Joseph of the Cross, 2003).

Mystical experience records are frequently characterized by high literary value, and often figure in poetic form as mystical poetry.

Extensive commentaries, as the commentary of St. John of the Cross, uncloud mystical poetry and its amusing metaphors of amorous unification, which shocks recipients with its unselfconsciousness. These commentaries also explain that the unexpected 'purification' can be achieved through enhanced semantic power and incisiveness entwined with metaphors of fire and light, which jointly preponderate the limited set of conventional signs (Sawicki, 1981).

Therapeutic power is conveyed through ecstasy. Ecstasy itself was man's highest level of initiation as well as his main aim in science, for example for Plotinus, a third-century Greek philosopher and major representative of Neoplatonism and philosophical mysticism: 'Plotinus defined ecstasy by means of mystical phrases and comparisons. According to him the sensual beauty awakened the ego from a state of bodily latency and caused its deep affection towards the soul, mind and Absolute in order to become itself soul, mind and Absolute' (Krokiewicz, 1959).

Such ecstatic experience is also illustrated by a poem of Kazimierz Przerwa-Tetmajer: *'I experienced the moments of delight and trance...'* Below, part of this poem is presented:

‘I experienced the moments of delight and trance  
In which I stopped being a part of existence...’  
[...]

I forgot about human feeling and emotion,  
When I touched Thy robe with devotion,  
From human memories illusively deprived  
For a moment I was delighted and rapt...’ (Jastrzębski, Podsiad, 1966).

Among various poetical records, many do not convey literary value and can be categorized as didactic literature.

In Poetry Therapy there must be a close relation between the poetical value of the record and the spiritual value of the experience, because only through this connection does poetical experience become analogous to mystical experience as its reflection.

#### **V. Catharsis in Poetry Therapy oriented toward strictly aesthetic experience**

Abraham Maslov claims that mystical (culminant) experiences can appear variously in human life and activity: they can be related to religious experiences, but also to experiences connected with sexuality, creative works, aesthetic impressions, deep friendship, parenthood or nature. Consequences of such culminant experiences are unconsciously accepted as natural and widely expected by artists, art teachers, didacticians, religion theorists and philosophers, lovers, mothers, therapists and others (Maslov, 1986). I would like to focus on one such experience connected with aesthetic sensations in poetic readings.

In the aspect of aesthetics and experience of unity and equality among young people, the strongest emotions, also catharsis, appear frequently while listening to poetical texts as well as to popular music.

Aesthetic experiences connected with the texts and music of pop songs subjectively narrow the scope of perspective connected with the image of aesthetic attitudes. Thanks to intimate contact with the beauty of music and poetry, catharsis is possible and often present. Helen L. Bonny (a Music Therapist) claims that all therapeutic or healing issues related to contact with music are more easily characterised as awareness than as particular direct behavior (Bonny, 1975).

Let’s see how this theory applies to the artistic works of Czesław Niemien (1939-2004), born Czesław Julisz Wydrzycki, who was a twentieth century youth idol in Poland in the sixties and seventies.



Unfortunately, the influence of his artistic work is only partially documented ('described in the sphere of awareness') in his fans' letters, which were written after this vocalist's death and attached to the music album '*Our Niemen*' (List do Niemena, 2009).

Marek Niedźwiedzki, a famous music journalist, wrote that Niemen's 'songs are strongly connected with our lives' and it is difficult to disagree with him (List do Niemena, 2009). The feelings which arise while listening to his music at first are affection and enthrallment. These feelings are the first stage of an aesthetic experience (Czernianin, 2008). Such experience could also be found in fan letters: 'I was thirteen when you sang the song 'Strange is this world' during the National Festival of Polish Song in Opole, but I was sure that something important was happening. I was sure that I was facing a historical event, which also influenced my life' (List do Niemena, 2009). Enthrallment was also mentioned by others: 'I did not expect that a song "Strange is this World" can be listened to many times, one after the other. The day in which I had first heard this song was a breakthrough in my life' (List do Niemena, 2009). Niemen's fans found in this song extreme excitement, energy and faith in goodness.

Actually, there is a strong need to conduct detailed research in Artetherapy and popular music in Poland; currently it is *terra incognita* in our Music Therapy (Szulc, 2005).

In the second stage (Czernianin, 2008), the aesthetic experience of Niemen's listeners is still emotional and dynamic, but additionally can be characterized by a more active attitude, which is a concentrated and more touching receipt of quality from the initial one.

This musical quality is not only crucial, but starts to become more distinctive from the initial impression and then detaches itself by creating its own entity. ('It must be a hit!'). In other words, the previously mentioned recipients recreate the order among the song's components, in music as well as in the lyrics. That is why everything created in this way subsequently is observed as a whole by the recipient: he experiences the music and does not ignore these observed issues but also reacts to them emotionally. Therefore an emotional communion arises which connects the recipient with the beauty of the word-music-vocal components in the music. On this communion the therapeutic action is based. It can be illustrated by another quotation from the letters: 'I am really grateful for your unusual ability to connect in one my three biggest ardencies [in the song *Mournful Rhapsody In Memoriam of Bem*]: 1. Patriotism with an insurrection hero, Józef Bem; 2. C.K. Norwid's poetry 3. Music of the soul, of which you are the best representative. I owe you my undying gratitude' (List do Niemena, 2009). When the music album with this song *Mournful Rhapsody In Memoriam of Bem* appeared in 1969, we organized Norwid's Poetry

Event accompanied by Niemen's music. The room was filled with burning candles and looked exactly as the room on the cover of Niemen's album. We listened to this particular song many times; it sent shivers up and down our spines. Wojtek, my classmate, was struck by Norwid's poetry and he handed this fascination on to the whole class and school, which, after our Secondary School Examination in 1972, was named after C.K. Norwid.' (List do Niemena, 2009). Niemen caused my generation to start to be interested in art, literature and, at the top of everything, the poetry of Norwid, Leśmian, Tuwim and others. Thanks to him, we learned how to distinguish good from evil.' (List do Niemena, 2009). 'I really miss his voice, which had healing power.' (List do Niemena, 2009).

In the aesthetic experiences of recipients of Niemen's artistic works, a third stage can be distinguished: emotional calmness and passivity, which is contrary to the active ones from the two previous stages. In stage three the recipient is exposed to a contemplative pleasure arising as a superstructure of the aesthetic experience (Czernianin, 2008). This positive response to value is formed as an emotional appreciation towards the author and his artistic works: 'In my opinion, Niemen and his music are the most beautiful things which could have happened in my youth' (List do Niemena, 2009). 'My memories connected with Niemen are still vivid and continuous. Time has not deprived them of their colours. This is Someone Special. A Great Man and Wizard' (List do Niemena, 2009). 'He showed me and opened the gates to poetry, word beauty and the innocence of sound' (List do Niemena, 2009).

Undoubtedly, there are plenty of connections between aesthetic experience caused by music and therapy. It is strictly connected with song quality both musically and poetically as well as vocally. The artistic value of Niemen's works was assessed as very high and provided strong emotions to its listeners, who were greatly influenced (often therapeutically influenced) by his music throughout their whole lives: 'Dear Mr. Czesław, you are Czesław the Great, you are still alive in our minds and hearts' (List do Niemena, 2009). The striking fact that the medium of his popularity was not only aesthetic but also ideologically ethical made him an ethical authority.

## **VI. Catharsis in Poetry Therapy oriented toward strictly hedonistic pleasure**

Naturalistic hedonism seems to be obvious and can be illustrated by Freud: people aim for lack of suffering and resentment; on the other hand, they desire torrid pleasurable experiences. [...]. The rule of delight then is a main life goal (Freud, 1967). It is worth pointing out that philosophical hedonism defines pleasure as the highest or solitary good, which additionally is a moral criterion for behavioural

assessment (Krajewski, Banajski, 1996). Hedonistic erotic poetry is strongly connected with extreme hedonism, which was represented by Aristippus of Cyrene (a Plato contemporary) and emphasized the importance and value of sensual delight. Apparently noticeable associations related to *Freudian psychoanalysis* and Epicurus' philosophy attach importance to this delight (Nysler, 1996). Aristippus of Cyrene founded the ethical doctrine known as hedonism, which since his time has become one of the most important fields of ethics. The term 'hedonism' derives from the Greek word 'hedone', which means 'pleasure' (Krokiewicz, 1960).

The powerful sex drive undoubtedly escalated historical hedonism to declare that the deepest desire of human emotionality and will is pleasure. The pleasure connected with sexuality is deeply rooted in the human soul, a fact known already by the ancients.

Eroticism written by disabled people is escalated to therapeutic value, because their reality has always been worse.

The poetic image of the disabled's sensual love conveyed in his erotic lyric poetry is very often a manifestation of rebellion. It arises as a remonstrance against incapacity with all its spiritual and bodily resentment.

One reason why human sexuality is executed this way is the disabled's sexual marginalization, which is reflected by seeking normal love through poetry. Collision between imagination and social reality results in the above-mentioned drama. This colliding is specifically exteriorized in poetry -- and in erotic poetry where hedonistic pleasure becomes therapeutic.

## **VII. Ending**

Poetry is a stimulus priming the spiritual development of the human being. The term 'spirituality' also conveys the following states of mind as well as actions: creates individual and social identity, aids evaluations, underpins moral-behaviour, faith, and religiousness - as well as developing various sides of one's consciousness and personality (Socha, 2000).

To sum up poetry as therapy, its authors (especially the disabled) achieve catharsis by writing their own poems. Their works usually can be characterized as direct lyrical confessions, which present moving inner world accounts. Undoubtedly, the issue connecting all these lyrical poems is the importance of expression and personality creation.

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