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Aristotle's *Poetics*

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1. Introduction

Aristotle (384-322 BC) was a disciple of Plato and the teacher of Alexander the Great. Plato's view of literature is heavily conditioned by the atmosphere of political concern which pervaded Athens at the time. Aristotle belongs to a later age, in which the role of Athens as a secondary minor power seems definitely settled. His view of literature does not answer to any immediate political theory, and consequently his critical approach is more intrinsic.

Aristotle's work on the theory of literature is the treatise *Peri poietikés*, usually called the *Poetics* (ca. 330 BC). Only part of it has survived, and that in the form of notes for a course, and not as a developed theoretical treatise. Aristotle's theory of literature may be considered to be the answer to Plato's. Of course, he does much more than merely answer. He develops a whole theory of his own which is opposed to Plato's much as their whole philosophical systems are opposed to each other. For Aristotle as for Plato, the theory of literature is only a part of a general theory of reality. This means that an adequate reading of the *Poetics*¹ must take into account the context of Aristotelian theory which is defined above all by the *Metaphysics*, the *Ethics*, the *Politics* and the *Rhetoric*. Plato's theory of literature may be said to rest on the metaphysical basis of his theory of ideas. Aristotle reacts against Platonism in all areas of knowledge. He does not believe that the world of appearances is an ephemeral copy of changeless ideas; rather, he believes that the essence of things is not in the transcendent world of ideas, but rather in the things themselves. Change does not imply falsity: things have a nature, a vital principle of unity through change, the passage from potentiality to act. Change is a fundamental process of Nature, which is regarded by Aristotle as a creative force with a direction in itself.

Similarly, every element in Nature has its own place and its own internal purpose, including poetry. It is therefore wrong to deny poetry its proper purpose, as Plato had done in *Ion*, where he tried to reduce the object and end of poetry to the objects and ends of the crafts it imitates. With Aristotle, we are not so much concerned with what poetry *says* as we are with what poetry *is*. Aristotle's main contribution to criticism may well be the idea that poetry is after all an art with an object of its own, that it can be rationally understood and reduced to an intelligible set of rules (that is, it is an "art," according to the definition in the *Ethics*). The main concern of the rules of the *Poetics*, however, is not with the composition of literary works; it is rather with their critical evaluation. Consequently, criticism can be a science, and not a mass of random principles and intuitions.

Poetry finds a place in Aristotle's general scheme of human activity. He divides human activity into three areas: thought (*theoría*), action (*práxis*)

¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*. In *Critical Theory since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 47-66.

and production (*poíesis*).² Poetry and the arts he includes under the head of imitation (*mimesis*) which is one of the divisions of production. In Book VIII of the *Politics*, Aristotle speaks of the educative value of visual, musical and verbal arts. Both the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics* can be considered to be expansions of this view. Poetry may have its own internal laws, but "for Aristotle as much as for Plato, it is an art to be praised or blamed, only in its relation to the whole human being of whom it is both the instrument and the reflection."³ We might say that Aristotle sets literature free from Plato's radical moralism and didacticism, while he still expects it to be conformable to a moral understanding of the world. That is what Aristotle does with "teaching". As to "pleasure," he doesn't accept it at face value either. He rather makes an organic combination of the two theories: pleasure in literature is not to be understood as an hedonistic satisfaction, but rather as the result of an underlying intellectual activity or experience. He avoids facile and rigid assertions on the matter, but one thing is clear: for him, literature is a rational and beneficial activity, and not an irrational and dangerous one, as it was for Plato.

² Cf. the difference between philosophy, history, and poetry, the three disciplines which are opposed in chapter VI of the *Poetics*.

³ W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 24.

2. The Origins of Literature

Aristotle's approach to literature is mainly philosophical: he is more concerned with the nature and the structure of poetry than with its origin. However, Aristotelian philosophy has also an interest in the development of objects or sciences; after all one of the main conceptual tools of Aristotelianism is the pair *potentiality / act*, and this is necessarily concerned with the study of objects as processes. Not as historical processes, though. Aristotle's approach, like the Greek approach in general, seems to us too categorical, essentialist and ahistorical.

Let us remember Aristotle's table of all possible causes of a phenomenon, as expounded in his *Metaphysics*. We must take into account the *agent*, the *matter*, the *form*, the and also the *final* cause, the end to which a process is directed. This is to be taken not only in the sense of "intention", but also in the sense of an intrinsic development of natural phenomena towards their greatest possible perfection. Here Aristotle is in strong opposition to the sophistic conception of cultural phenomena. For the sophists, they were conventional (grounded on *nomos*, mere custom), while for him they are natural, grounded on *physis*, a driving force within natural phenomena, which encompasses and goes beyond human will. This view of natural and cultural processes as having an end inherent in their nature we call *teleology*. The main body of the *Poetics* is concerned with the material and above all the formal causes of literature. There is very little to be found in it about the agentive or efficient causes of literature, very little about the poets themselves or the history of literature. Whatever views we find on that matter are teleologically rather than historically oriented; Aristotle explains how the different poetical genres have developed toward the highest point in the discipline of poetry, which is tragedy.

The origins of poetry had been grounded on the instinct of imitation which is natural to man. The first poetical works were spontaneous improvisations. The origins of the different genres is justified by Aristotle thus:

poetry soon branched into two channels, according to the temperaments of individual poets. The more serious-minded among them represented noble actions and the doings of noble persons, while the more trivial wrote about the meaner sort of people; thus, while the one type wrote hymns and panegyrics, these others began by writing invectives. (*Poetics* II)

The development goes through serious or comic epic poems such as those written by Homer to comedy and tragedy; "these new forms were both grander and more highly regarded than the earlier" (*Poetics* II). Aristotle does not, however, decide on whether tragedy (and by implication, literature) has already developed as far as it can; but he does assert that it has come to an standstill. The undertone in the *Poetics* seems to point to the work of Sophocles as representing the highest point in literary achievement:

later tragedians, such as Euripides and Agathon, are sometimes criticised. The standstill has sometimes the aspect of a decadence in Aristotle's account, and a kind of past classicism is therefore established as a critical norm. Aristotle makes a brief outline of the history of tragedy, from its origins in the dithyramb,⁴ through the work of Aeschylus, to that of Sophocles and Euripides:

Aeschylus was the first to increase the number of actors from one to two, cut down the role of the chorus, and give the first place to the dialogue. Sophocles introduced three actors and painted scenery At first the poets had used the tetrameter because they were writing satyr-poetry, which was more closely related to the dance; but once dialogue had been introduced, by its very nature it hit upon the right measure, for the iambic is of all measures the one best suited to speech Another change was the increased number of episodes, or acts. (*Poetics* II)

Aristotle also deals briefly with the rise of comedy:

the early history of comedy. . . is obscure, because it was not taken seriously. It was a long time before the archon granted a chorus to comedies; until then the performers were volunteers. Comedy had already acquired certain clear-cut forms before there is any mention of those who are named as its poets. Nor is it known who introduced masks, or prologues, or a plurality of actors, and other things of that kind. Properly worked out plots originated in Sicily with Epicharmus and Phormis; of Athenian poets Crates was the first to discard the lampoon pattern and to adopt stories and plots of a more general nature. (*Poetics* II)

As with tragedy, we can observe that Aristotle's interest lies in the development of form till it reaches its proper nature. Here that "proper nature of poetry" is defined as the adoption of plots which have a general value, as opposed to mere lampooning against individuals; as in tragedy, the direction goes from mere particularity to a (cognitive) generality. Comedy is then a more developed and more perfect genre than lampoon.

The history of the literary genres had already been dealt with before Aristotle by Glaucus of Rhegium, of whose work only fragments have survived. Aristotle's approach, however, is original and of a piece with the rest of his philosophical system in its concern with essence and teleology. We will now proceed to deal with the essence of poetry, which is Aristotle's main interest and, in his view, the only possible explanation of the history of poetry.

⁴ The dithyramb was a kind of sung narrative telling of a mythological subject.

3. The Nature of Poetry

- 3.1. Learning through poetry
- 3.2. Poetry and pleasure
- 3.3. The poet

3.1. Learning through Poetry

Aristotle sees poetry as something which has sprung from two causes, both lying deep in the nature of man. The first is the instinct of imitation, and the second is the instinct of harmony and rhythm.

The instinct of imitation is basic to all processes of learning. Imitation and recognition of imitations provide an intellectual pleasure:

We have evidence of this in the facts of experience. Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. The cause of this again is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general, whose capacity of learning, however, is more limited. (*Poetics* IV)

There is an important principle involved here. Plato believed that art as such had no object of its own: its effects and its sole substance were those of the object of which it was an imitation. Here we see that an imitation can provoke reactions entirely different from those caused by its object on its own: this implies that there is a substance peculiar to imitations which does not belong to their object, a substance of an intellectual nature.

But what is exactly the intellectual value of poetry? Since much of it is fiction, it could be argued whether it does exist after all in those cases where the poet is not portraying actual events. So, we must determine what is the relationship of poetry to factual truth; we must define its essence as opposed to that of history. On the other hand, if the discipline of poetry is of an intellectual nature, we must also determine its role and nature as distinguished from that of the intellectual discipline par excellence, philosophy. Plato's position is well known to us: poets are liars whenever they go beyond factual truth; poetry is not a science (art, craft) in the sense that it does not provide us with a rational knowledge of its object. Aristotle's view is completely opposed to this low estimation of poetry. He distinguishes the proper function of the poet from that of the historian. While the latter must tell things as they have happened,

it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. (*Poetics* IX)

Here we have a conception of *mimesis* different from Plato's; its objects need not be actual, they may be ideal without the pejorative connotations of

phantastiké. "Things as they ought to be" reminds us Sophocles' comment on the difference between his own works and those of Euripides: according to Sophocles, the plays of Euripides showed men as they are, while his own plays showed men as they ought to be. Aristotle's point is related but not quite the same:

The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. . . . The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. . . .

It clearly follows that the poet or "maker"⁵ should be a maker of plots rather than of verses; since he is a poet because he imitates, and what he imitates are actions. And even if he chances to take a historical subject, he is none the less a poet; for there is no reason why some events that have actually happened should not conform to the law of the probable and possible, and in virtue of that quality in them he is their poet or maker. (*Poetics* IX)

For Aristotle the fact that some kinds of literature deal with real persons is not relevant to their status as poetical works. They may portray the universal and use real names to increase the illusion of reality, or they may fail to rise to the level of the universal because they aim at particular individuals. Such are the respective cases of tragedy and lampoon.

Poetry is not subjected to the rules of normal speech, or to the rules of logic and science. It is a discipline in itself, and it establishes its own rules to some extent. If possible, a poem ought to be faultless in all respects, even according to the laws of logic and science. But there are faults intrinsic to poetry, and faults external to this art. This rule may be applied to the arts in general: "For example, not to know that a hind has no horns is a less serious matter than to paint it inartistically" (*Poetics* XXV). This principle is widely accepted in general terms even today: for instance, a historical novel is said to be successful if it is a good novel, though not necessarily if it is accurate history. Aristotle says that in case of conflict between art and science, the rules of art must take precedence over those of logic: "the poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities" (*Poetics* XXIV). And one of the rules of probability, or opinion, is that art is not concerned with a mere imitation of nature, but rather with an universalization or idealization which is based on nature but may go far beyond it. To some degree Aristotle's theory preserves the Platonic impulse to idealization.

All this is a justification of fiction: were we still dealing with a Platonic theory, we would have opened a new access to the realm of ideas or universals, which could be added to those of the philosopher and the lover: that of the artist. But there is no place for this kind of mysticism in Aristotle. He has brought the ideas down to earth: to him they represent the inherent nature of physical things; they are not heavenly beings, but the essence of physical beings. The access to ideas is not a mystical one, but a cognitive

⁵ "Poet" and "poetry" are Greek words derived from the verb "poiéo", to make.

one. Through submission to the laws of necessity or probability, poetry elevates human action to a higher degree of intelligibility.

We are meeting again and again the terms "possibility" and "probability" as alternatives to one another. Logical *necessity* is an ideal: literature would be here nearest to philosophy. It is not, however a necessary requirement. Probability is. Literature may deal with both: the stress is on the fact that it need not deal with logical possibilities; its understanding is of a cognitive nature, but it need not be based on the syllogisms of factual truth. The reasonings we make while understanding a literary work may be based instead on *enthymemes*, or syllogisms whose premises are just probable, and not logically true. This distinction is made by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric*. Poetry may be a mode of knowledge, but it is a minor one, below the rank of philosophy.

3.2. Poetry and Pleasure

There is not a sharp division in Aristotle of a double function of poetry, teaching and providing pleasure. The two are rather integrated. The references to pleasure coming from art in the *Poetics* come under one or another of these heads:

- The inessential pleasure of spectacle (setting, special effects, dress, machinery, etc), which must be used to reinforce the intrinsically dramatic effect of plot.
- The pleasure found in mimetic works which does not arise from their mimetic status (pleasure of rhythm, melody, colour). This pleasure does not involve the full use of our cognitive capacity.
- The pleasure of learning through mimesis and the pleasure of pity and fear. They are essentially mimetic, and they are two aspects of the highest aesthetic pleasure, which is cognitive in nature (Halliwell 63).

It is this last form of aesthetic pleasure which is most characteristic of Aristotle and that which will be less influential, when later theoreticians come back to the old dichotomy in which *utile* and *dulce* are juxtaposed, or opposed to one another, rather than organically related. For Aristotle, aesthetic pleasure is not distinct from human activity in general; it is related to natural human instincts and to philosophy. We should remember here that, according to the *Ethics*, the intellectual pleasure of contemplation is the highest and most proper to human beings.

3.3. The Poet

Aristotle qualifies the traditional view of the poet as a divine madman. In his discussion on composition, Aristotle speaks of the imagination needed to create characters and situations convincingly. The imagination which this requires belongs to two kinds of persons:

poetry implies either a happy gift of nature or a strain of madness. In the one case, a man can take the mold of any character; in the other, he is lifted out of his proper self. (*Poetics* XVII)

In any case, it is through an understanding of human nature, be it intuitive or rational, that poetic creation is possible. And let us note that it is Aristotle who adds this rational view of creation to earlier theories of inspiration as represented by Plato, for instance. Literature is, then, a cognitive activity. It is a capacity rather than an instinct, and it can be rationally judged. Poetry is intelligible and teachable. Aristotle ignores inspiration in his discussion of poetry, to insist on the technical, rational side of poetry. "Yet . . . then it seems that from this larger perspective, the artist may once again come to be seen as a medium through which the operations of natural and greater forces are channelled. Inspiration, it could be argued, has been naturalized within the Aristotelian view of art" (Halliwell 92).

The poet should not speak in his own voice, Aristotle tells us at one point, because in doing so he is not a mimetic artist. But this is contradictory with his own theory of genre if taken at face value. However, it is clear that Aristotle likes the imitative mode best and does not like to hear the direct voice of the author. In this, as in nearly everything else, his opinions are opposed to those of Plato. Plato liked Homer in spite of his style, which was too mimetic for him. Aristotle praises Homer precisely because of this mimetic quality.

4. Theory of Genres

- 4.1. Media
- 4.2. Objects
- 4.3. Mode

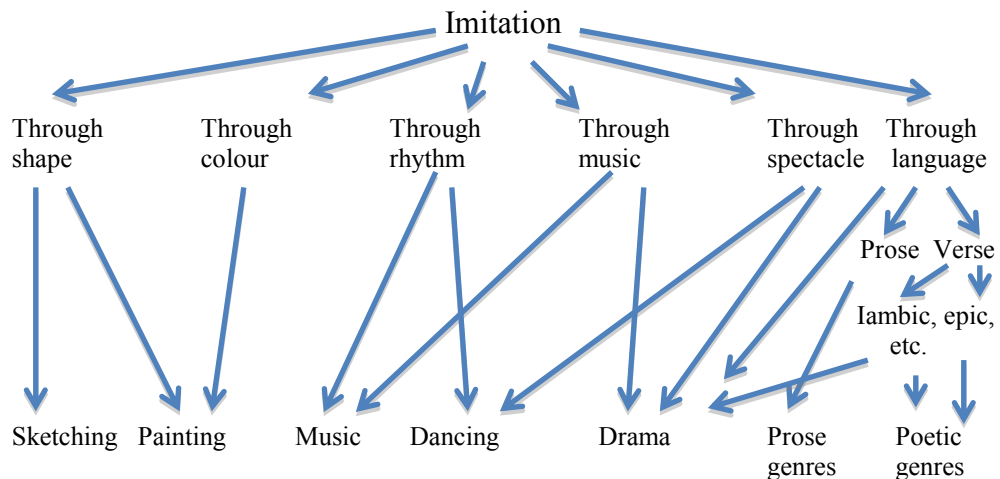
We noticed while dealing with Plato that there was no specific word for "art" in the Greek language. There were of course words which included that meaning, but they were more general, and comprised the notion of "craft" or ability in general. One of the first things Aristotle tries to do in the *Poetics* is to define the characteristics which are common to painting, drama, poetry, music, etc.; that is, to define art. He is the first to attempt such a definition. There is therefore a danger of misunderstanding this first chapter. Aristotle is not saying that "art" is imitation, but that there are certain *crafts* which are imitative. Those we call now arts, and we take them for granted, but this has not always been so. Let us now watch Aristotle attempting a further analysis of imitation:

Epic and tragic poetry, comedy too, dithyrambic poetry, and most music composed for the flute and the lyre, can all be described in general terms as forms of imitation or representation. However, they differ from one another in three respects: either in using different media for the representation, or in representing different things, or in representing them in entirely different ways. (*Poetics* I)

So, we have three criteria for the study of imitation in the different arts. Aristotle is going to deal systematically with each of them. He starts with the study of the media of imitation in general, and of poetic imitation in particular

4.1. The Media of Poetic Imitation

The first criterion for a study of imitation in the different arts is the medium or instrument through which imitation is carried out. Today we would call it (referring to Jakobson's diagram of communication), the code, or the semiotic material of the primary systems, in a more general semiotic theory. Of course, Aristotle does not say it in so many words. He merely points out that in painting, representation is achieved through imitation of the colours and shapes of things, whereas in poetry "the imitation is produced by rhythm, language, or "harmony," either singly or combined" (*Poetics* I). We must remember that music played an important role in lyric poetry, and also in tragedies. Nevertheless, Aristotle goes on to distinguish "the form of art that uses language alone, whether in prose or verse" (*Poetics* I) and complains that there is no common name to comprise all genres (that is, no name for "literature." However, there are names for the specific poetic genres, according to the form of metre they use, which is a further distinction as to the medium of imitation. So, we might draw a table of the media of imitation and the arts and genres which use them:



The classification of poetic genres according to metre is then a further specification of the medium used for imitation, a subdivision of Aristotle's first criterion. But Aristotle warns that medium is not sufficient in itself to determine the poetic nature of a work, as is shown by the existence of didactic verse:

People do, indeed, add the word *maker* or *poet* to the name of the meter, and speak of elegiac poets, or epic (that is, hexameter) poets, as if it were not the imitation that makes the poet, but the verse that entitles them all indiscriminately to the name. . . . Even when a treatise on medicine or natural science is brought out in verse, the name of poet is by custom given to the author; and yet Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common but the meter, so that it would be right to call the one poet, the other physicist rather than poet. (*Poetics* I)

We should compare this text to the one in chapter VI where he defines the poet as a maker of *plots*, not of verses. So, metre alone is not a sufficient condition to declare a work literary, and *medium* is not a sufficient criterion to classify literary genres. But is it a necessary condition? Aristotle has just distinguished poetry from non-literary verse. But what about prose? Is there a possibility of literary prose? Aristotle only deals with it implicitly, when he later mentions Socratic dialogues as one form of imitation which uses prose. But at this point, he does not set a contrast between prose and poetry. It is a pity, since the discussion on whether verse is a necessary element in poetry or in literature will go on unresolved for centuries. Here Aristotle opposes instead to metre a bad use of metre, such as is to be found in his opinion in Chaerephon's *Centaur*. Here he also seems to make a basic point: the criterion of medium is not one of quality, but of structure. Even if poetry is bad, it is still (from a structural viewpoint) poetry.

One further specification is made by Aristotle with reference to medium:

there are some arts which make use of all the media I have mentioned, that is, rhythm, music, and formal metre; such are dithyrambic and nomic poetry, tragedy and comedy. They differ, however, in that the first two use

all these media together, while the last two use them separately, one after another. (*Poetics* I)

4.2. The Objects of Poetic Imitation

This is the second criterion used by Aristotle in his discussion of imitation. Let us point out that it is a more decisive one with a view to characterising what is to be considered literature. Aristotle may seem to be biased from the very start:

Since the objects of imitation are men in action, and these men must be either of a higher or a lower type (for moral character mainly answers to these divisions, goodness and badness being the distinguishing marks of moral differences), it follows that we must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are. It is the same in painting. Polygnotus depicted men as nobler than they are, Pauson as less noble, Dionysus drew them true to life. (*Poetics* II)

Here the classical doctrine of the three "styles" of poetry (high, medium, and low) is introduced, though at this point it refers only to subject matter, not to language. We may disagree as to what is the proper object of imitation. To define it as "men in action"⁶ implies a value judgement: genres with a story to tell will belong to the core of poetry, while lyrical poetry, for instance, will be peripheral in such an approach. Aristotle does indeed value tragedy, comedy, and epic poetry more than all the other genres; he also diminishes the importance of non-realistic elements in tragedy, such as the chorus.

We may notice in the text just quoted some hesitation between a twofold and a threefold scale of excellence. Three degrees are considered while dealing with painting, dancing, nomic and dithyrambic poetry, as well as with epic poetry:

Homer, for example, makes men better than they are; Cleophon as they are, Hegemon the Thasian, the inventor of parodies, and Nicochares, the author of the *Deiliad*, worse than they are. (*Poetics* II)

We may assume that the audience imagined by Aristotle sits comfortably in an *aurea mediocritas*, belonging neither to the better nor to the worse types of men. Considerations of social rank are mixed with moral considerations of excellence. So, there would seem to be three degrees of excellence in all genres. But when it comes to drama, we find a dichotomy instead: "comedy aims at representing men as worse, tragedy as better than in actual life" (*Poetics* II). Here the objective standard for comparison is thrown away from the stage into the pit: there is no dramatic genre which represents men "as they are."

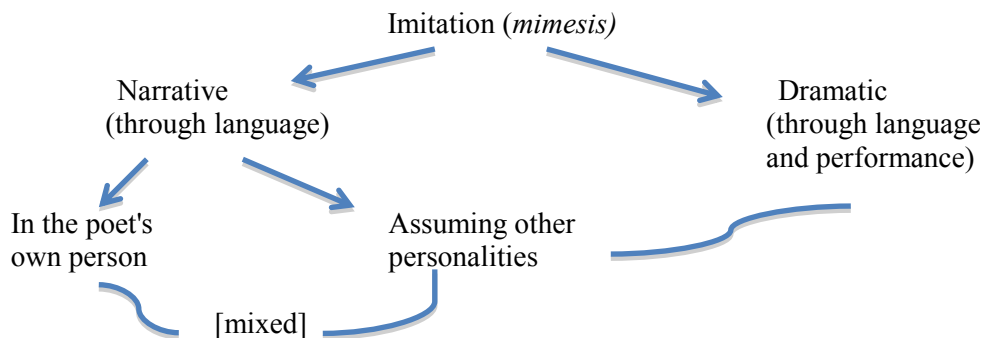
⁶ Actually, the Greek text says "actants" —and is therefore less specific about the sex of the participants.

4.3. The Modes of Poetic Imitation

We have already met one theory of poetic mode, that of Plato (see Figure 5). Aristotle's account is significantly indebted to it, but there are important differences:

the medium being the same, and the objects being the same, the poet may imitate by narration—in which case he can either take another personality, as Homer does, or speak in his own person, unchanged—or he may present all his characters as living and moving before us. (*Poetics* III)

Schematically:



There is only an implication of the relationships expressed by the curved lines in Aristotle's theory; some of them rest on different interpretations of the Greek text. We may ask ourselves why *mimesis* is the common term in Aristotle's theory of mode, while Plato used *diégesis* as the common term. The answer might be that Aristotle is taking into account all aspects of literature, and he includes the non-verbal elements of drama, while Plato is only attempting a classification of discourses, of ways of imitating through speech. So, both classifications take narration as a the common term at one point or other. Besides, if we have a look at Figure 6, which represents the different uses of the concept of *mimesis* in Platonic thought, we will see that *mimesis*, or imitation, was also the ground of the Platonic theory of art. The fact that Aristotle has defined the proper object of imitation as "men in action" is already a major breakthrough against the Platonic notion of art as a third-degree *mimesis*.

Aristotle shows that his three criteria help us to understand better the relationship between the different literary genres:

So that from one point of view, Sophocles is an imitator of the same kind as Homer—for both imitate higher types of characters; from another point of view, of the same kind as Aristophanes—for both imitate persons acting and doing. (*Poetics* III)

This table shows how Aristotle's criteria work together to define four major genres, all with a story to tell (*action* genres):

	Better men	Worse men
Through narration	Epic poetry	Iambic poetry ⁷
Through dramatic action	Tragedy	Comedy

⁷ Iambic poetry seems to have been a parody of epic.

5. Tragedy

- 5.1. Definition
- 5.2. Plot
- 5.3. Character
- 5.4. Thought
- 5.5. Diction
- 5.6. Spectacle
- 5.7. Song
- 5.8. Kinds of tragedies

5.1. Definition

Aristotle's definition of tragedy is a noteworthy attempt at analysing the features of a literary genre taking into account the system of literature as a whole, which includes other genres which may share some common traits with each other but must be differentiated in a logical way:

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 purgation of these emotions. . . .

Every tragedy has six constituents, which will determine its quality. They are plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song. (*Poetics* VI)

Spectacle is the *mode* of representation, diction and music are relative to the *medium*, and plot, character and thought are connected with the *objects* of the representation. Aristotle will deal with each of these elements in a systematic way. This systematic and precise definition is in sharp contrast with the hazy definitions we find for many centuries afterwards; the concept of tragedy itself is simplified and confused in those definitions: Chaucer's in the prologue to *The Monk's Tale* is a good example:

Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,
As olde bookes maken us memorie,
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,
And is yfallen out of heigh degree
Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.
And thy ben versified communely
Of six feet, which men clepen *exametron*.
In prose eek been endited many oon,
And eek in meetre, in many a sondry wyse.
Lo, this declaryng oghte ynogh suffise.

But this evolution of the concept of tragedy will in the long run lead to the birth of the concept of "the tragic" as an aesthetic category which can be present in genres other than stage tragedies.⁸

5.2. Plot (*mythos*)

- 5.2.1. Definition
- 5.2.2. Unity of plot
- 5.2.3. Kinds of plots
- 5.2.4. Contents of the tragic action
- 5.2.5. Effects of the tragic action: catharsis
- 5.2.6. Sections of tragedies. Sections of plots

5.2.1. Definition

The *mythos*, "plot," or "structure of the incidents" is for Aristotle the main part of the tragedy:

But most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character; character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. . . . Besides which, the most powerful elements of emotional interest in tragedy—peripeteia or reversal of the situation, and recognition scenes—are parts of the plot.⁹

We may misunderstand Aristotle here if we forget his teleological and essentialist view of literature. He is not disparaging the portrayal of character; he is simply saying that the essence of tragedy does not consist in the portrayal of character. Epigram, for instance, can portray character, and it is a "lower" genre than tragedy. The essence of tragedy and its greatness lies in that it allows the portrayal of an action, which an epigram could not do. That ability is what defines a tragedy as a tragedy; it is appropriate that the making of good plots is more difficult than the portrayal of good characters, belonging as it does to a higher degree of the teleological development of literature; Aristotle sees the proof of this both in the achievements of early poets and in the difficulty which beginners have to

⁸ See Albin Lesky, *Die Griechische Tragödie* (Spanish trans.: *La tragedia griega*; Barcelona: Labor, 1966), chapter 1.

⁹ *Poetics* VI. This conception is contrary to that of Henry James in *The Art of Fiction*. James considers that plot is indissociable from character, and in any case would privilege character over plot. In a literary work, character is the determination of the incidents of the plot, and the incidents are the illustration of character.

build good plots: ¹⁰ "The plot, then, is the first principle and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy: character holds the second place" (*Poetics* VI).

But there are other reasons apart from purely literary or generic ones which determine why plot should be more important than character. In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* we also find the view that in actual life, and not merely in literature, character is subordinated to action because it is the product of action; it is developed in particular directions by the nature of our actions from our earliest days, and a man's bent of character can be manifested only in his actions. Similarly, in drama 'character' in its full sense can be manifested only in action, and must therefore play a subordinate part to plot. The superiority of tragedy to other genres is no doubt partly due to this coincidence of the relation between action and character in real life and in the dramatic genres.

Aristotle compares portrayal of character without a structuring action to the difference in painting between patches of colour and random and the superior organization of a sketch which represents something, even if it is colourless. "Thus tragedy is the imitation of an action, and of the agents mainly with a view to the action" (*Poetics* VI). Strictly speaking, it is the *mythos*, the plot of the tragedy, which is a the representation of an action. Aristotle speaks of "a plot giving an ordered combination of incidents", of plot being "the arrangement of the incidents" or "the imitation of the action" (*Poetics* VI).

So, we have two possible ways of looking at a tragedy, two possible levels of analysis of the story which is being represented. On the one hand, it is an *action* (*práxis*), just as our daily activities may be described as actions. On the other hand, it is a *plot* (*mythos*), an artistic structure which the poet builds out of the action; on the one hand we find mere incidents, on the other, the *disposition* of incidents. This sense of *mythos* as something which is *made* by the poet, as opposed to the action or story, which is inherited by him (although he may invent it as well) is something new in Aristotle. It did not exist in the Greek language before he defined it. The poet is the maker not of verses or of stories, but of this important intermediate structure whose presence had not been identified before Aristotle: plots.

This distinction of Aristotle's will remain largely undeveloped until the twentieth century, when it is rediscovered by the Russian Formalists and developed by the Structuralists. Aristotle himself did not pay much attention to it; we may note that he did not include *action* as a separate constituent of tragedy; probably he felt that the presence of *plot* in that list accounted for both of them; the action would only be seen through the plot.

There is an important difference, however, between Aristotle's *mythos* and the Formalist equivalent, which will be called *siuzhet*, and that is the abstract quality of the *mythos*. The difference between the *siuzhet* and the actual literary text is never clearly defined. But Aristotle clearly

¹⁰ Individual achievement would therefore seem to maintain a phylogenetic relationship to the development of literature—a curious by-product of Aristotle's teleological conception.

conceives his *mythos* or plot as an abstraction to deal with the narrative aspect of tragedy, and other aspects of the text are comprised under the heads of *thought* and *diction*.

We have said that this distinction between action and plot remains undeveloped in Aristotle's theory. He deals with many of the elements of action as belonging to the plot, for instance: "Plots are simple or complex, for the actions in real life, of which the plots are an imitation, obviously show a similar distinction" (*Poetics* X). Sometimes he even uses the terms interchangeably. So it may be convenient not to elaborate too much on this distinction; we will study actions combined with plots, as Aristotle himself does. But we will keep the distinction in mind, because at some points it does become significant. For instance, in chapter 18, when there is talk of the incidents of an action which lie outside the plot, for instance, past incidents which have a bearing on it but do not appear on stage.

5.2.2. Unity of Plot

There was during the Renaissance and the Neo-classical age an important debate on the three Aristotelian unities of drama. Aristotle was supposed to have established three rules which every play ought to follow: unity of action, of place and of time. Aristotle does give some indications on these matters, but no absolute rules. He is much more tolerant than many of his later commentators, who were responsible for the strict formulation of the rules.

To begin with, he says that a plot ought to be proportionate, not too long and not too short. He is concerned above all with the correct understanding of the whole, so this "rule" of the length of the plot should be contemplated together with his observations on unity of plot and on catharsis: "in the plot, a certain length is necessary, and a length which can be easily embraced by the memory" (*Poetics* VII). The nature of the action must also be taken into account:

the limit as fixed by the nature of the drama itself is this: the greater the length, the more beautiful will the piece be by reason of its size, provided that the whole be perspicuous. And to define the matter roughly, we may say that the proper magnitude is comprised within such limits, that the sequence of events, according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit of a change from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad. (*Poetics* VII)

As to the length of the action itself, Aristotle advises that it should not go much beyond one complete day. It must be pointed out that this was the practice of the major Greek tragedians. The same might be argued about the unity of place. There is no reference in the *Poetics* to such a unity, apart from an observation of the fact that epic poetry has not the limitations set by the stage to the presentation of different places. The works of Aeschylus,

Sophocles and Euripides, however, are usually as strict in this respect as any Neoclassical critic might wish .

These supposed unities, or rather, these observations of Aristotle's are wholly coherent with his main requirement for the plot of a tragedy, and also subservient to it. This requirement is our third unity, unity of action. "Unity of plot," Aristotle says, "does not, as some persons think, consist in the unity of the hero" (*Poetics* VIII). The actions of a man do not necessarily build up a single pattern, a unified action which makes a coherent whole with a sense. And the action must be a whole:

A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles. (*Poetics* VII)

This definition of beginning, middle and end derives from Plato's *Phaedrus*. It is not wholly truistic: "the acceptance of the statement that a story must have a beginning would seem to be that the story must start more or less with where its antecedents may be taken for granted, that is, where they are generic rather than specifically relevant" (Wimsatt and Brooks 30). The distinction is especially relevant in Greek tragedy, which relied for its plots on stories which were well known to the public. Aristotle draws this conclusion from the requirement of unity:

As therefore, in the other imitative arts, the imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the whole. (*Poetics* VIII)

Aristotle sees the whole as more than the sum of its parts, if only in that it includes the relations among the parts. Defined in this way, the unity of action has a much more general and comprehensive nature than will be allowed by later interpretations. We may notice that it is not too much to say that this is a structural definition of unity: its abstraction allows us to account for any kind of unity we may find in a plot, and in this respect it is difficult to go beyond it.

Aristotle compares the unity of the plot to the unity of a living being. It is only a comparison, but it has its importance. As Humphrey House has pointed out,¹¹ the comparison of the unity of a literary work with that of a living organism refutes the charge that Aristotle is describing a formal, dead, mechanical kind of unity. This is "unity" in a sense similar to that used in modern structuralist poetics.

¹¹ Humphrey House, *Aristotle's POETICS* (1956).

However, it has an obvious shortcoming: being a structural definition of the *plot*, which is only one of the constituent elements of a tragedy, it fails to account for the whole of the tragedy. This we have already seen; Aristotle's theory of tragedy and indeed the whole of his *Poetics* is plot-centered, and so it fails to account for many literary phenomena. It is the *work* that we might wish to define as a whole and as a structure, and not merely the plot. But we had better wait until the twentieth century, and be content in the meantime with Aristotle's theory of plots.

5.2.3. Kinds of Plots

Aristotle discards plots which do not keep this rule of unity as the worst. These plots he calls *episodic*: "I call a plot 'episodic' in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence" (*Poetics* IX). He then divides plots into *simple* and *complex*:

By a simple action I refer to one which is single and continuous in the sense of my earlier definition, and in which the change of fortune comes about without a reversal or discovery. A complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by a discovery or reversal, or both. (*Poetics* X)

We must be careful not to confuse this classification of Aristotle's with another one which he will use immediately, the one which divides plots into *single* and *double* (*Poetics* XIII). Here the criterion of classification is similar to the one used in defining episodic plots: we are considering whether there is a single focus of interest in the action. But from the examples set by Aristotle, double plots are not to be confused with episodic plots. In episodic plots, one focus of interest follows the other and the connection between them is not necessary; in double plots, both actions are developed simultaneously (f.i., in the *Odyssey*).

5.2.4. The Contents of the Tragic Action

But it remains to define those terms which are to serve as the basis of the first classification, *reversal* (*peripeteia*) and *recognition* (*anagnorisis*). To them we might add *calamity* (*pathos*). These are aspects of content.

Reversal of the situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity.... Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with a reversal of the situation, as in the Oedipus. (*Poetics* XI)

The difference between *reversal* and *recognition* may seem obscure at first, but becomes clearer when we notice that reversal concerns above all the

expectations of the audience, and discovery those of the characters. Besides, reversal is related to the fortune of the characters, and recognition is relative to their identity: there is a mistaken identity or a double identity in the case of one or several characters, and the discovery unravels the plot. In reversal, the intention of the character produces results opposite to the desired ones; whereas there is not a specific intention in the case of recognition. Reversal is intimately connected with the requirement set by Aristotle for the best tragic plots, which involve a passage from happiness to unhappiness. Reversal has also a suggestion of sudden change from good to bad or bad to good. The key moment of reversal is the *turning point* (*metabasis*) where the downfall of the protagonist begins. Maybe the two meanings are not consciously divided by Aristotle. It is important to note that the reversal must be *both* intelligible and paradoxical. This is the key to Aristotle's conception of plot as integrating pleasure and instruction. We may note that these criteria (reversal and recognition) are even today a key element in the functioning of plots, especially in the cinema.

The definition of recognition, on the other hand, is related to the requirement that the tragic action must involve friends or next of kin (e.g. in *Oedipus Rex*), because only these relationships can bring about the greatest suffering on scene, and only they are capable of causing pity and fear, which are the objective proper to tragedy. There is a potential for dramatic irony here, although Aristotle does not use that word to refer to the superior knowledge of the audience: the character's deeds or words escape his intention, as he is not in knowledge of all the facts, and they are charged with another meaning by the situation. At the turning-point, "action is confronted by its own unintended outcome".¹² So, both peripeteia and anagnorisis are developments and complements of the basic ignorance or error (*hamartia*) of the character.

The best effects of pity and fear are obtained by the means of calamity, pathos: "The scene of suffering (*pathos*) is a destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds, and the like" (*Poetics* XI). The popular notion of tragedy today is associated to the idea of physical and moral suffering.

The conditions set by Aristotle on these key elements of tragedy are strict: they must not be gratuitous, and the unity of the plot must be preserved. Reversal and recognition "should arise from the internal structure of the plot, so that what follows should be the necessary or probable result of the preceding action. It makes all the difference whether any given event is a case of *propter hoc* [causal relationship] or *post hoc* [mere succession]" (*Poetics* X). Succession does not equal causality; *post hoc non ergo propter hoc*. The disaster of the tragical hero must be a logical disaster, or at least must seem inevitable to the audience. Aristotle bans supernatural or irrational solutions from the tragedy.

¹² Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's POETICS* (London: Duckworth, 1986), 208

It is therefore evident that the unraveling of the plot, no less than the complication, must arise out of the plot itself, it must not be brought about by the *deus ex machina*. (*Poetics* XV)

Here and elsewhere Aristotle is not describing actual Greek practice; he is rather defining his own ideal of poetry, one in which there is no place for the irrational except in peripheral areas of the work.

The formal requirements of unity, causality, and the element of surprise and point of view represented by recognition and reversal are integrated in Aristotle's remark that pity and fear are heightened when things happen unexpectedly as well as logically, for then they will be more remarkable than if they seem merely mechanical or accidental: "The tragic wonder will then be greater than if they happened of themselves or by accident; for even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design" (*Poetics* IX).

5.2.5. The Effects of Tragic Action: Catharsis of Pity and Fear

(See the definition of tragedy in *Poetics* VI).

Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. (*Poetics* XIV)

Aristotle has defined tragedy as the representation of a complete serious action through artistic language and dramatic representation which by means of pity and fear will bring about the purgation of such emotions. The original Greek term for "purgation" is *catharsis*. Catharsis is, then, a theory of the effects of literature on the receiver, in this case the audience of the tragedy. Nor the actual audience, which Aristotle seems to despise at times; rather an abstract audience. The theory of catharsis presupposes that there is an integral connection between some aspects of the structure of the work and the response of the audience. So we look at that response through the structure of the work.

It is not a theory of the immediate pleasure to which Aristotle makes reference at times. It is a theory which tries to find which are the ultimate effects of literature, the better to assess its role. But unfortunately Aristotle's account of catharsis is short and ambiguous. It seems to suggest, however, that pity and fear have a homeopathic function, that they are used to drive out pity and fear.

This notion of catharsis has been interpreted in wildly different ways. Some theories we might call the "vaccine" theories: pity and fear are raised up where they did not exist before, and are then released. This produces a kind of emotional education which will prevent them from overpowering the spectator in the circumstances of his real life.

Other theories we might call the "safety valve" theories: pity and fear which have been dangerously pent up or repressed in the mind of the audience are excited by the means of pathetic and violent action, and are then released; this would seem to be closer to some related medical senses of the word *catharsis*.

Still other interpretations, mainly neoclassical, are moralising: speak of an education of virtue, warning against pride through fear and teaching pity. This seems to be out of the question, since Aristotle speaks of both pity and fear as of passions which must be cast away. Tragedy has positive ethical effects, but it is essential to recognize that this is not to be interpreted in a narrowly didactic sense. Tragedy does not give data on how to behave: rather, it acts through its effect on the emotions. The obvious effect of tragedy, the raising of emotions, is the very reverse of its actual effect, their being cast out. If tragedy teaches, Aristotle seems to say, it is only in a hidden and indirect way. Poetry helps men to be rational, but it is not necessarily concerned with any more specific teaching. Aristotle is in favour of the best form of catharsis, which is an indirect way of teaching, but he is against poetic justice (the *deus ex machina*) which is an instance of carrying tragedy towards an end which is not its own, and trying to transform it into direct moralizing, without the essential requirements of pity and fear.

A further ambiguity is the precise nature of this being cast away, this purification, which may be given a mystical or a psychological sense. The word was used in religion as well as in medicine. Taking into account the general drift of Aristotelianism, it is more likely that Aristotle is referring to some kind of medical purification, to something that today we would call a psychological effect, rather than to a religious phenomenon.

A mimetic interpretation is also possible. We might relate the idea of catharsis to Aristotle's conception of art as imitation. Just as the action on the stage is only the imitation of an action, the effects of pity and fear caused in the audience may be thought to be only the imitation of real emotions, which produce a sense of well-being as they are set against their real counterparts.

Yet another theory¹³ stands in opposition to all these previous ones. According to this theory, the cathartic effect is not located in the audience, but inside the play—it is fabulaic. Tragedy would require then *scenes* representing pity and fear. It is the hero who is purified through pity and fear when he realizes the failing that has brought about his downfall. But even this last theory recognizes that the audience is presented with a moral progress in the hero, a spectacle which cannot but be beneficial to its morals. In fact, Aristotle seems to consider that the capacity to elicit pity and fear is an objective attribute of the poetic material as handled by the playwright: "fearful and pitiful events". The homoeopathic overtones of the theory of catharsis suggest that these fearful and pitiful events are such for both

¹³

G. F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (1957).

characters and audience: the emotions involved are both the means and the object of the experience.

In any case, it is evident that Aristotle's theory is the very reverse of Plato's (there are, however, some suggestions of homoeopathic catharsis in the *Laws*, on the subject of Korybantic dancers). Plato saw in this kind of artistic imitations a kind of surrender to the passions. Both agree on the fact that tragedy excites the passions, but for Plato they remain so, while Aristotle insists that raising them is merely a means of casting them out. There are also different interpretations of "casting out". Probably he means the restoration of these passions to their right proportions, to the desirable "mean" which is the basis of his discussion of human qualities in the *Ethics*. Some theorists believe that this purification is carried out through a reciprocal effect of the two emotions, pity and fear. Pity draws us nearer to the object we pity, while fear drives us away from it. Catharsis would be some kind of equilibrium, of seeing things in a reasonable way, once both emotions have staved each other off. If Aristotle did not mean that, at least he did relate in an organic way the two emotions, pity and fear, in the *Ethics*. These emotions had been identified as essentials of the tragic experience before Aristotle (*catharsis*, on the other hand, is uniquely Aristotelian). Common Greek attitudes of the time link pity to *metabasis* or change of fortune. Pity is felt, Aristotle argues, when the spectator perceives an analogy between himself and the sufferer. Pity for others derives from fear for oneself; pity and fear are essentially linked. This very definition exemplifies Aristotle's refusal to sever thought from emotions, in his ethics as well as in his poetics. Tragic fear differs from ordinary fear because it is focussed on the experience of others. There may be a suggestion that it derives too from our own experience of fear, by analogy and reasoning.

It remains to determine which is the best way to arouse the emotions of pity and fear. We have seen it must be done through elements present in the plot, and not through spectacle. But not everything may be included in the plot. Monstrous characters or deeds, for instance, must be ruled out, as they will be in later classicist periods because of decorum. Aristotle's idea of decorum, however, is not the same: he is not concerned with indecency, but with generic propriety: "we must not demand of tragedy any and every kind of pleasure, but only that which is proper to it" (*Poetics* XIV).

Tragedy then must involve some calamity which befalls people who are friends or next of kin and which is caused by one of them. Aristotle classifies tragic plots using two criteria:

- whether the calamitous act is carried out or not.
- whether the agent knows that it is a calamitous act, that is, whether the recognition precedes or follows the act.

So, we have four possibilities, and, as Aristotle himself says, "These are the only possible ways. For the deed must either be done or not done—and that wittingly or unwittingly" (*Poetics* XIV):

- "to be about to act knowing the persons and then not to act, is the worst. It is shocking without being tragic, for no disaster follows."
- "The next and better way is that the deed should be perpetrated."
- "Still better, that it should be perpetrated in ignorance, and the discovery made afterwards."
- "The last case is the best, as when in the *Cresphontes* Merope is about to slay her son, but recognizing who he is, spares his life." (*Poetics* XIV)

Let us notice that Aristotle seeks a logical ground for his classifications, and that he wants to exhaust all the possibilities. The relevant criteria in this classification are the following structural pairs:

knowledge	/	ignorance
intention	/	lack of intention
action	/	lack of action

Another similar attempt at structural classification is to be found in chapter 16, dealing with the different types of discovery, but we will not enter into it.

5.2.6. Sections of Tragedies. Sections of Plots

We have seen an abstractive classification of the constituent elements of tragedy into plot, character, thought, diction, spectacle and song. These we might call "parts of quality" in the sense that they are present more or less simultaneously at every moment of the play. Our concern now is with the "parts of quantity", those parts into which the dramatic representation can be divided, as it were, longitudinally. They are "prologue, episode, exode, and choral song, this last being divided into parode and stasimon" (*Poetics* XII). These are not very important for our purposes, since they belong specifically to Greek tragedy, and modern drama uses a division into acts, but it is important to notice that Aristotle made a difference between parts of quantity, parts of quality and parts of the action.

Now we go for the parts of the action:

Every tragedy falls into two parts—complication and unraveling or dénouement. Incidents extraneous to the plot are frequently combined with a portion of the plot proper, to form the complication; the rest is the unraveling. By the complication I mean all that extends from the beginning of the action to the part which marks the turning-point to good and bad fortune. The unraveling is that which extends from the beginning of the change to the end. (*Poetics* XVIII)

The first part of this definition is peculiar to Greek tragedies, but the second has a more general value; it is more useful for us.

5.3. Character (*ethos*)

Character is the second constituent element of a tragedy. We have already seen some opinions of Aristotle concerning the place of character and its relationship with plot. Character is not clearly defined in the *Poetics*, but at one point Aristotle says that "character refers to men's qualities" (*Poetics* VII). Character, then, is not to be taken in the sense of "human being" (*personaje*) but rather in the sense of "personality", "disposition" (*carácter*). Character is bound to action, since it determines the possibility of acting in one way or other: choice and intention are its main defining traits. It is not the whole of the personality, but rather the disposition to act virtuously or otherwise, as manifested in deliberate ethical intention (*proairesis*). This intention is manifested both through action and speech: thence the importance of "thought". There is no place in Aristotle's theory for an unconscious revelation of character. Character is made evident only in conscious and deliberate moral choice.

"In respect of character there are four things to be aimed at. First, and most important, it must be good" (*Poetics* XV). Aristotle means here moral goodness, but later he will qualify this requirement. There is a place in his theory for evil characters, of course, and also for not so good characters. Moreover, he does not identify virtue and happiness, as Socrates and Plato had done. Tragedy deals for Aristotle with the vulnerability of external conditions of happiness, vulnerability of fortune and prosperity, and not of virtue. And anyway, he does not mean any kind of absolute moral goodness, but rather a fulfilment of the possibilities of each character:

This rule is relative to each class. Even a woman may be good, and also a slave; though the woman may be said to be an inferior being, and the slave quite worthless. The second thing to aim at is propriety Thirdly, character must be true to life The fourth point is consistency: for though the subject of the imitation, who suggested the type, be inconsistent, still he must be consistently inconsistent. (*Poetics* XV)

With these rules, Aristotle sets the foundations of the doctrine of *decorum* in characterization, and its slippery requirement that characters in literary works must be both like characters in life *and* like characters in other literary works.

The last of the four requirements seems to lead us to a *regressus in infinitum*, but it becomes clearer from what follows that Aristotle is here demanding a certain idealization of character, in the sense of universalization, that is, of an interpretation of the way a character would act "according to the laws of necessity or probability":

So too, the poet, in representing men who are irascible or indolent, or have other defects of character, should preserve the type and yet ennoble it. In this way Achilles is portrayed by Agathon and Homer. (*Poetics* XV)

The poet should then preserve the type with its defects, and at the same time ennoble it. Let us point out that this is a theory of character *in tragedy*.

We may also add here some requirements for tragedy taking "character" in our modern sense (*personaje*). Aristotle speaks in this respect not of "characters", but of *actors* (in the sense of actants or participants in a plot, not in the sense of the professional comedians). We see that the very name makes them subservient to the action. Besides, it has a connotation of activity which does not accommodate very well with the element of passivity and suffering which seems so strongly linked to many of the Greek tragedies. For Aristotle, tragedy must be centered on an active figure, the hero.

Besides the general requirements of character, we have already seen some specific indications on the actors of tragedy. They must be men better than the average. They must also be friends or relatives. Aristotle observes that the fact that they belong to a small group of mythical families is convenient, even though it is not a necessary condition. The poet is free to invent his characters, provided that they fulfil the basic requirements.

The best way of producing pity and fear, according to Aristotle, is through a complex action (one with recognition, or reversal, or both) in which a man not eminently good or just falls into misfortune because of some error or frailty (*hamartia*). The character must not be too bad, because his downfall would not bring about terror or pity, and not too good because then the result would be disgust, and not pity. So, *hamartia* does not necessarily mean "sin", but rather "error" or "unskillfulness" in current Greek usage. In Aristotle's *Ethics*, it may include sin and crime, but the main sense is something like "rash and culpable negligence". The kind which seems favoured by Aristotle is man's blundering against the supernatural, such as we find in *Oedipus Rex*. We may note that the requirement that tragedy must present men as better than they are is somewhat relaxed: the hero in tragedy seems to be closer to human limitations.

However, and most surprisingly, Aristotle ignores the religious significance of tragedy. Aristotle has insisted on the conscious action of the characters, so there is not much place left for their being victims of fate; this Aristotle would consider an irrational element, alien to the plot itself. This attitude is another link between his theory of poetics and the whole of his philosophy, in which there is not much place for the traditional beliefs. Although Aristotle never attacks traditional beliefs, we can't help thinking that for him, the stories about the gods are significant only inasmuch as they show what men think about the gods (in this he followed Xenophanes' dictum). This neglect of the religious side of tragedy impairs very seriously the value of his theory for an understanding of Greek tragedy, though its originality as a purposive and ideological theory is enhanced. "At the centre of the *Poetics*," according to Stephen Halliwell, "we see the results of a confrontation between a confident rationalism and the tragic vision of the poets" (Halliwell, *Aristotle's POETICS*, 237).

The chorus, Aristotle says, must be regarded as one of the actors. Choral songs must not be lyrical interludes; they should instead be relevant to the plot. He prefers Sophocles' way to that of Euripides or Agathon. The chorus must get involved in the action.

5.4. Thought (*dianoia*)

By "thought" Aristotle means the rhetorical element of poetry, and above all the construction of the speeches of the characters.

Thought includes all the effects that have to be produced by means of language; among these are proof and refutation, the awakening of emotions such as pity, fear, anger, and the like, and also exaggeration and depreciation. (*Poetics* XIX)

These effects, Aristotle says, are similar to those that can be achieved by means of action. But even though action is to be preferred whenever possible, sometimes speech is required to produce these effects.

Note that with "thought" Aristotle is referring to the speech acts of the character, the speech acts which are a part of the story, and not to the speech act of the author, the whole of the work, its ultimate meaning or general effect. But he seems to draw an opposition between thought and character which we may find unacceptable today:

Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids. Speeches, therefore, which do not make this manifest, or in which the speaker does not choose or avoid anything whatever, are not expressive of character. Thought, on the other hand, is found where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated. (*Poetics* VI)

Aristotle does not dwell long on thought in the *Poetics* because this area is not specifically literary: "Concerning thought, we may assume what is said in the rhetoric, to which inquiry the subject more strictly belongs" (*Poetics* XIX).

5.5. Diction (*lexis*)

- 5.5.1. Definition
- 5.5.2. Metaphor
- 5.5.3. Diction and style

5.5.1. Definition

By "diction" Aristotle refers to "the expression of the meaning in words" (*Poetics* VI), that is, to the expressive use of words, the poetic side of language, or the verbal element in literature. Diction "has the same force in verse and in prose" (*Poetics* VI).

The study of diction has several aspects, among them what today we would call the **pragmatic** or speech act approach to language and literature, which, as Aristotle says, is also not specific to poetics, but of a more generally rhetorical nature:

One branch of the inquiry treats of the modes of utterance. But this province of knowledge belongs to the art of delivery and to the masters of that science. It includes, for instance—what is a command, a prayer, a statement, a threat, a question, an answer, and so forth. (*Poetics* XIX)

This is Aristotle's speech act theory, which follows the lines laid down by Protagoras and other sophists before him. We noted that they did not distinguish any specific categories to deal with literature: neither does Aristotle. Instead, he refers us to the general theory of action through speech laid out in his *Rhetoric*. But a special treatment for literature is found implicitly in his very refusal to include this kind of study in the *Poetics*: "To know or not to know these things involves no serious censure upon the poet's art" (*Poetics* XIX). The poet has some privileges when it comes to the use of language, and a degree of freedom with what is not specifically poetic must be given him.

This amounts to an assertion that poetry is not commensurable with the categories of rhetoric as expounded by Aristotle himself. In other words, literature is a speech act of a different kind from those used to analyse ordinary language, and the rhetoric of literature is called poetics.

But there are other aspects of diction apart from speech acts, and these we might call Aristotle's **linguistic** study of literature. Aristotle devotes three whole chapters to poetic diction. Here he develops a brief theory of linguistics, which has an enormous interest but which does not concern us in an immediate manner. In spite of appearances, his observations have a systematic nature, and they provide a wider frame to the study of literary language which will be our main concern. For instance, he begins with this definition of the parts of language: "Language in general includes the following parts: letter, syllable, connecting word, noun, verb, inflection or case, sentence or phrase" (*Poetics* XX). It was Castelvetro who noted that this definition starts at the pole of the non-significative and indivisible elements, and ascends a scale towards those which have meaning and can be divided. Another example of this systematic concern of Aristotle: he defines first language at large, ordinary language. Then he goes on to define metaphor and other phenomena of discourse. Metaphor is defined as a kind of deviation from ordinary language, so the order of the argument is to some extent a logical one.

We will note some interesting observations which have a bearing on the theory of literature.

The first seems to foreshadow the development of textual grammar in our century. The *Iliad*, and, by implication, any literary work, is defined as a phrase or proposition, a composite of sounds with a meaning, some parts of it having a meaning of their own. Furthermore,

A sentence or phrase may form a unity in two ways—either as signifying one thing, or as consisting of several parts linked together. Thus the *Iliad* is one by the linking together of parts, the definition of man by the unity of the thing signified. (*Poetics* XX)

There seems to be an implication that of the two kinds of unity, the second is the more fundamental. Unity in the thing signified, and not in the discourse which signifies it, or simple versus complex unity. This would be an important qualification to the theory of the unity of action in tragedy or epic poetry: unity of action would not exist in the world by itself, it would rather be a product of the discourse which contains the action, of its rearrangement into a *mythos*.¹⁴ But even if this is so, and discursive unity is of a lesser metaphysical value, there is also a place for its study in Aristotle's system; it has some value in itself.

Aristotle also studies lexis in our modern sense. He classifies words into current, strange, metaphorical, ornamental, newly coined, lengthened, contracted, altered, etc. At first sight, this may seem one of those Chinese classifications invented by Borges (dividing animals into dogs, painted animals, animals which run fast in circles and animals belonging to the Emperor), but it makes more sense if we bother to examine it more closely. We will only dwell on the theory of metaphor, which has a crucial significance for literary studies.

5.5.2. Metaphor

Metaphor is the application of an alien name by transference either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or by analogy, that is, proportion Analogy or proportion is when the second term is to the first as the fourth to the third. We may then use the fourth for the second, or the second for the fourth. (*Poetics* XXI)

The examples given by Aristotle are:

1- " 'Here lies my ship', for lying at anchor is a species of lying."

2- " 'Odysseus has indeed performed ten thousand noble deeds' , for 'ten thousand' . . . is used here instead of the word 'many'."

¹⁴ This is at present a favourite subject of debate for deconstructive theories of narrative.

3- " 'Draining off the life with the bronze' . . . ; here 'draining off' is used for 'severing' . . . , and both are species of 'taking away' ."

4- "old age is to life as evening is to day, and so one may call the evening the old age of the day . . . and one may call old age the evening of life."

Schematically,



In this fourth case, we may add to the metaphor a qualification appropriate to the term which has been replaced. Aristotle also points out that "in some cases there is no name for some of the terms of the analogy, but the metaphor can be used just the same." Also, "having called an object by the name of something else, one can deny it one of its attributes—for example, call the shield not Ares' cup, but a wineless cup" (*Poetics* XXI). We may complain that our classifications of tropes are more precise, and that some of Aristotle's metaphors are rather metonymies or synecdoches. But there exists an enormous confusion in the current usage of all these terms (in part because there is no way of drawing clear-cut categories). We include under metaphor several of the different types listed by Aristotle, without any further thought; and besides, there seems to be no general agreement on the difference between metonymy and synecdoche, though it seems advisable to use the term "metonymy" for relationships of cause-effect and "synecdoche" for those of logical inclusion.¹⁵ There is some advantage in a clear vocabulary, but the most important thing is a clear underlying conceptual system, and there is no doubt that Aristotle did much in this respect for the theory of metaphor.

Nevertheless, Aristotle's view of metaphor remains a limited one. Even though he stresses that metaphor may be important in grasping a new idea while learning, its function is always auxiliary. It is always an exception, a deviation, an addition to ordinary language, whereas modern linguistics (and indeed critical thought since the Romantics) sees metaphoric processes as the basic instrument for creating meaning. "Oddly perhaps to a modern mind, Aristotle seems unable to extend this view of the capacities of metaphor to his concept of the nature of language at large."¹⁶ This conception of metaphor as something extraneous may explain why the term "metaphor" is used not only for the whole relationship between the two terms of the metaphor, but also for the substituted term on its own. But it remains that Aristotle's account is good enough if we restrict it to "living"

¹⁵ See Peter Schofer and Donald Rice. "Metaphor, Metonymy and Synecdoche Revisited". *Semiotics* 21.1-2 (1977): 121-149.

¹⁶ Terence Hawkes, *Metaphor* (London: Methuen, 1972), 11.

metaphors, metaphors which are perceived as such, as a deviant phenomenon—those used in poetry, for instance.

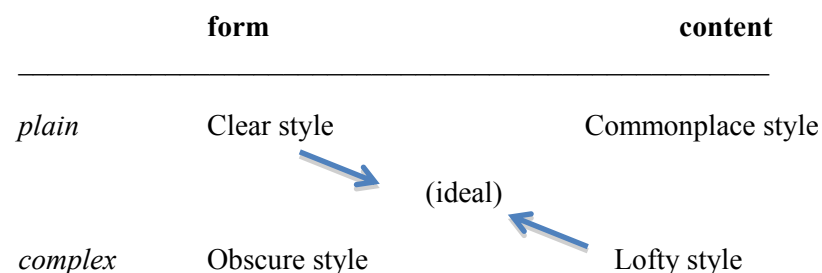
Aristotle's closing statement on metaphor may seem a surprising one, coming from him:

It is great matter to observe propriety in these several modes of expression as also in compound words, strange (or rare) words, and so forth. But the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances. (*Poetics* XXII)

This is one of the rare statements in the *Poetics* which present poetry as a special gift, and not as a technique which may be learnt by anybody.

5.5.3. Diction and Style

"The perfection of style is to be clear without being mean" (*Poetics* XXII). Simplicity is a virtue, but there is the danger of falling into the commonplace. A lofty style, abounding in metaphor, coinages, foreign words, etc. has dignity, and is raised above the everyday level, but it may be obscure, resulting in riddle, if too metaphorical, or barbarism, if there are too many foreign words. Schematically,



Aristotle favours moderate alterations of words as a means to be both dignified and clear. He also distinguished what is right for some kinds of speech and what is right for others:

Ariphrades ridiculed the tragedians for using phrases which no one would employ in ordinary speech It is precisely because such phrases are not part of the current idiom that they give distinction to the style. This, however, he failed to see. (*Poetics* XXII)

Also, not all genres have the same requirements. All resources may be used in heroic verse, which is intended for epic poetry,

but in iambic verse, which reproduces, as far as may be, familiar speech, the most appropriate words are those which are found even in prose. These are—the current or proper, the metaphorical, the ornamental. (*Poetics* XXII)

Aristotle breaches here the issue of the proper language for the drama and its difference from other poetic genres and from ordinary speech. This was a subject of lively debate in the neoclassical age (Dryden).

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle underlines the importance of rhythm in diction. He defines rhythm as the repetition of similar elements, which works through the expectation arised in the hearer: the hearer knows that such and such elements will recur. Later critics (Coleridge, Lotman) will develop further this approach to rhythm and poetic language which takes into account the expectations of the reader.

5.6. Spectacle (*opsis*)

Aristotle does not value very highly the representational aspect of tragedy. He recognizes that it is a source of pleasure, but it is an inessential kind of pleasure. Pity and fear, the ends of tragedy, must be achieved by means of the construction of the plot, and not be dependent on the spectacle. This attitude of Aristotle is an aspect of the general shift we find in the *Poetics* from the sensuous to the cognitive. Art is not directed to the eyes, but to the higher abilities of the mind. The art of spectacle, moreover, is not properly the poet's, but rather the stage director's.

5.7. Song (*melopoeia*)

Song is the sixth and last component part of tragedy. It includes not only music, but lyrical compositions as well. Aristotle considers both elements as rather peripheral to the art of poetry. For him, lyrical poetry is an ornament; he does not perceive its wider agreement with the plot in an expanded sense of "unity". He considers the development of plot against the musical origin of tragedy as an improvement, and insists that the chorus must not have a lyrical function, but rather get involved in the action.

This is one more instance of the way in which Aristotle's theory of tragedy is sometimes at odds with actual Greek practice. The lyrical potential of drama was exploited to the full by the poets, but it is ignored by the philosopher.

5.8. Kinds of Tragedies

We have distinguished several elements which make up a tragedy. We can make a classification of tragedies (which is not to be confused with the classification of *plots*) according to the element which predominates in them. Aristotle distinguishes *complex* tragedies, in which reversal and recognition are the most important elements, *pathetic* tragedies, in which

passion, pathos or suffering is predominant, *ethical* tragedies, where character is foremost,¹⁷ and... here the text is corrupted. Anyway, "Concerning tragedy and imitation by means of action this may suffice" (*Poetics* XXIII).

¹⁷ These distinctions foreshadow current classifications of novels into novels of action (adventure, detective novels, etc.) and novels of character (novel of manners, psychological novels).

6. Other Genres

- 6.1. Epic poetry
- 6.2. Comedy
- 6.3. Lyric poetry and other poetic genres

6.1. Epic Poetry

- 6.1.1. Definition
- 6.1.2. Plot
- 6.1.3. Character, diction and thought
- 5.1.4. Tragedy and epic poetry

6.1.1. Definition

Epic poetry agrees with tragedy insofar as it is an imitation in verse of characters of a higher type. They differ, in that epic poetry admits but one kind of meter, and is narrative in form. . . .

Of their constituent parts some are common to both, some peculiar to tragedy. Whoever, therefore, knows what is good or bad in tragedy, knows also about epic poetry. All the elements of an epic poem are found in tragedy, but the elements of a tragedy are not all found in the epic poem. (*Poetics* V)

It may be as Aristotle says, but still we would be better off if he had been a little more explicit on which were the elements common to both tragedy and epic. We may include in this list the first four component parts of tragedy: plot, character, thought and diction. Spectacle and music belong to tragedy alone. But then Aristotle goes on to qualify this general statement for each of the common elements.

6.1.2. Plot

In general, the requirements for the plot of epic poems are similar to those of tragedies: they may be organically unified, or episodic, if there is not one central action but a series of unconnected happenings, etc. There are, however, some differences between the two genres. We have already mentioned that the length of the story in epic poetry is not subjected to the limits of time and place which dramatic representation requires. The narrative nature of epic poetry also favours the use of the marvellous and even the inexplicable without any sense of incoherence. Also, more episodes may be included in an epic poem, so that most epic poems contain enough matter for several tragedies. The epic poem must have a limited length, but unlimited fictional time may be covered by it. This is the remote Aristotelian origin of the neoclassical "unity of time":

tragedy endeavors, as far as possible, to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun, whereas the epic action has no limits of time. (*Poetics* V)

Let us note that the tone is descriptive, not prescriptive, and moreover the rule is heavily qualified.

Besides a greater length of the action, we have a further temporal possibility peculiar to epic poetry. This is Aristotle's sole and very vague reference to something like a "unity of space" in drama:

In tragedy we cannot imitate several lines of actions carried on at one and the same time; we must confine ourselves to the action on the stage and the part taken by the players. But in epic poetry, owing to the narrative form, many events simultaneously transacted can be presented; and these, if relevant to the subject, add mass and dignity to the poem. (*Poetics* XXIV)¹⁸

But Aristotle is unwilling to abandon the rule of the unity of action, even though he relaxes it, and he requires that the episodes be relevant to the plot. He praises Homer in this respect, for the concentrated action of his poems as compared to the rambling of other epic poets. Indeed, Homer is far superior to them in all respects.

Again, epic poetry must have as many kinds as tragedy: it must be simple, or complex, or "ethical," or pathetic. . . . In all these respects Homer is our earliest and sufficient model. Indeed each of his poems has a twofold character. The *Iliad* is at once simple and "pathetic," and the *Odyssey* complex (for recognition scenes run through it), and at the same time "ethical." (*Poetics* XXIV)

There is no indication in the *Poetics* about the possible role of catharsis in epic poetry. In dealing with tragedy, Aristotle pointed out that it was the effect of plot and characters, so it may seem reasonable to suppose that it plays a part in epic poetry inasmuch as the epic plot and characters are similar to the tragic plot and characters. However, Aristotle seems to consider the concentration of the tragic plot as the best means to achieve catharsis; epic catharsis must be supposed to be a downgraded, or rather, an undeveloped form of tragic catharsis.

6.1.3. Character, Diction and Thought

Aristotle does not say anything specific on the **characters** of epic poetry. We may suppose them to be submitted to the same requirements as those of tragedy, though the preference for sad endings and for flawed characters is not mentioned in the case of epic. This shadow of a difference in Aristotle will be expanded later on by Neoclassical epic theory: the epic genre becomes celebratory; the heroes are triumphant and idealized, and an opposition with respect to tragic heroes and plots is drawn.

¹⁸ We may note that here Aristotle is ignoring the role of the messenger-speech which is a constant device in Greek tragedy.

Diction and **thought** must be "of good quality". We have already mentioned Aristotle's idea that diction admits more elaboration in epic poetry than in tragedy. But, even within the epic poem,

the diction should be elaborated in the pauses of the action, where there is no expression of character or thought. For, conversely, character and thought are merely obscured by a diction that is over-brilliant. (*Poetics* XXIV)

Neoclassical theory will specify that it is in descriptive passages that the language must be ornamented and elaborated without interfering with character or narrative: these passages will become set pieces of florid speech.

6.1.4. Tragedy and Epic Poetry

Aristotle devotes the last chapter of the *Poetics* to a comparison of the relative merits of tragedy and epic poetry. From this comparison it becomes clear that he does not value much the dramatic character of tragedy in itself, in the sense of performance on stage. What he values is the greater concentration which this dramatic quality gives to tragedies, and the more intense effect which results. He concludes that "tragedy is the higher art, as attaining its end more perfectly" (*Poetics* XXVI). This was predictable from his perfunctory treatment of epic poetry, and his willingness to ascribe to the section on tragedy all the elements which are common to both. He is measuring epic poetry with dramatic standards, which is unfair. He neglects those elements which belong exclusively to narrative, and therefore it is not surprising that he concludes that drama is the better genre. Also, we should not forget that from Aristotle's historical perspective, tragedy was a fairly recent formal development (and therefore an "improvement" as opposed to the much older Homeric poems.

6.2. Comedy

Aristotle fails to deal with two of the genres with a story which emerge from the classification in Figure 9. He speaks about tragedy and serious epic poetry, but he barely mentions comic epic poetry. As for comedy itself, there is an almost general agreement that a second book of the *Poetics*, which has been lost, developed a theory of comedy. It may have dealt with comic epic poetry, too. There are nevertheless some references to comedy in the extant section of the *Poetics*. There is no definition comparable to that of tragedy, so that we do not know how far can the parallel with tragedy be pushed.

Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type (not, however, in the full sense of the word *bad*, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists of some defect of ugliness which is not painful or destructive. To take an obvious example, the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain. (*Poetics* V)

This qualification that comedy does not deal with the painful or injurious is a further response to Plato. In his dialogue *Philebus*, Plato had spoken of the comic response as some kind of malicious joy or emotion of self-enhancement at the spectacle of obnoxious or harmful characters, those who in real life could hurt us, made innocuous on the stage. As in the case of tragedy, Aristotle is then asserting that the effect produced by comedy is not as direct and one-sided as Plato would have it.

It is evident that Aristotle would define comedy as a dramatic genre; it is probable that he should submit it to requirements of organic unity and concentration similar to the ones applied to tragedy, and that he would ascribe to it colloquial speech and metre. It is also probable that some form of catharsis should be included in the definition. It is to be noted that Aristotle is aware of a convergence of tragedy and comedy in the works of Euripides —the first sign of something like tragicomedies dissolving the rigid generical barriers.

The second book of the *Poetics* (if it ever existed) may be lost for good, but it is not altogether impossible that it has left some traces. Teophrastus, Aristotle's most important disciple, made some remarks on comedy and wrote a work on *Characters*, which was influential on the conception of comic types. We have also an anonymous Aristotelian treatise, date unknown, called the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, which develops a theory of comedy. Its definition of comedy includes a cathartic effect, and it runs thus:

Comedy is an imitation of an action that is ludicrous and imperfect (...) through pleasure and laughter effecting the purgation of the like emotions.¹⁹

Some theorists find that this is a plausible Aristotelian theory; certainly it is a response to Plato and it is symmetrical with the definition of tragedy. Others really do not see why pleasure and laughter ought to be driven out; we might nevertheless relate this to the Aristotelian theory of control over the emotions. The *Tractatus Coislinianus* also contrasts comedy, which is subject to the law of probability and deals with universals, and lampoon, which deals with particulars. The most evident relationship of this theory and Greek comedy is the tendency to a characterization based on clearly defined, conceptualized types. The *Tractatus Coislinianus* makes some references to three specific types of comic characters: the impostor (*alazon*), the self-deprecating man (*iron*) and the buffoon (*bomolochos*). Teophrastus and Aristotle himself in his *Ethics* also favour this tendency to define clear-cut types.

Butcher has pointed out that the relationship of comedy and tragedy to the universal is not the same in Greek comedy (although this is not to be found in Greek theory). "Whereas comedy tends to merge the individual in

¹⁹

Qtd. in Wimsatt and Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, 46.

the type, tragedy manifests the type through the individual".²⁰ Tragedies told traditional stories featuring well-known individual characters. Comedies, on the other hand, had the double characteristic of using invented (though predictable) plots and *typical* characters. We shall see in the work of later critics how typicality and predictability are indissociable from comedy.

6.3. Lyric Poetry and Other Poetic Genres

Aristotle does not speak of lyrical poetry as a whole in the sense we use the word at present. Rather, he distinguishes several genres: nomic songs, dithyrambs, elegies, etc. But he does not deal with any of them. He seems to think that lyrical poetry is an inferior genre not worth his attention. This we might relate to a similar dismissal of the lyrical elements in the tragedies of Euripides and Agathon. There is another possibility: a part of the *Poetics* dealing with lyrical genres might have been lost. But from the general tone of the rest, this seems very unlikely.

In the same way he omits to deal with epigrammatic, elegiac, and didactic poetry, among other genres. None of these fit comfortably into his definition of poetry as "mimesis of men in action". This restrictive definition is of course a shortcoming, and we may say with justice that Aristotle is insensitive to these genres. But it has a justification: Aristotle sees poetry as a whole, a human activity which evolves spontaneously toward the state of maximum development of its possibilities, and therefore he is not afraid to rate genres against one another, discussing their specific virtues and their degree of development. His ultimate intent is to deal not with the different varieties of poetry, but with the essence of the art of poetry, which he sees embodied in tragedy.

7. Criticism

Chapter 25 of the *Poetics* is devoted to criticism. It is a *metacritical* study, since it attempts to study the criteria used by criticism. Most of it may seem trivial, as it consists in a refutation of current critical attitudes to poetry, a refutation which looks like plain common sense to us, but which is in fact the result of the theory of poetry which has been expounded in the previous chapters of the *Poetics*.

Aristotle sums up this chapter with a metacritical classification of possible grounds for a negative criticism of poetry:

Thus, there are five sources from which critical objections are drawn. Things are censured either as impossible, or irrational, or morally hurtful, or contradictory, or contrary to artistic correctness. The answers should be sought under the twelve heads above mentioned. (*Poetics* XXV)

²⁰ S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (4th ed., London: Macmillan, 1932) 388.

These answers are: the artistic requirement of universalization, the legitimacy of using received opinion, foreign usage, metaphor, etc. This chapter may be considered to be the answer of *literary theory* to *criticism*, or , at least, to some kinds of criticism which do not have a sound theoretical basis.

The work of Aristotle as a whole may be considered to be an attempt to develop a structural and metalinguistic approach to literature. Although it preserves a concern with valuation, its main thrust is towards the definition of theoretical possibilities and general laws. Some critics have spoken of Aristotle's sin of omission in relationship with lyric poetry and the inspirational element in literature. This is a fact. But it does not seem so important when we look at what Aristotle does say and the principles he establishes. We can barely recognize the aspect of criticism after Aristotle's work, if we compare it to its previous state. His is the most important single contribution to criticism in the whole history of the discipline.

8. The Aristotelian Heritage²¹

The *Poetics* does not seem to have been widely known during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, but some of its material reached Horace through Neoptolemus. Horace's approach to poetry is vastly different: tragedy had virtually disappeared as a genre, and Horace sharply divides style from content. His formula "aut prodesse aut delectare" contrasts with Aristotle's refusal to force into a dichotomy the question of the ethical significance of poetry.

The *Poetics* was known to the Middle Ages mostly in the form of a commentary by the Muslim philosopher Averroes. Averroes' approach was even more alien than Horace's to the spirit of the *Poetics*. The original text barely survives and is not widely known until in the XVIth century it is printed, commented and translated by Italian humanists like Scaliger and Castelvetro. It was they who developed the so-called "Aristotelian" rules, which often simplified and trivialized the concepts of the *Poetics*, giving them a normative and moralizing tone.

There is a strong reaction against Aristotle and his commentators at the end of the eighteenth century, with the Romantic movement. Longinus is then seen as the Classical forerunner of the new tendencies, which stress the active role of the artists. But several critical schools in the twentieth century have favoured a more impersonal, systematic and structural approach to literature and criticism which is strongly indebted to Aristotle's idea of a poetics. The Chicago school of critics (R.S. Crane, Wayne C. Booth), one of the most influential critical schools in the English-speaking world from the thirties on, presents itself as overtly neo-Aristotelian. And the structuralist movement in literature rescues the Aristotelian idea of poetics as a systematic study of the form of literature. The analytical concepts used by the structuralists often are developments and refinements of ideas originally stated in the *Poetics*.

—oOo—

²¹ On this subject, see Halliwell, *Aristotle's POETICS*, chapter 10.