

ARISTOTLE

little book known to us as Aristotle's *Poetics* probably written about 347-42 B.C.
 But revised some time later by Aristotle himself or an apt pupil
 its influence and authority in succeeding centuries all out of proportion to its length
 neither in this work or any other where he touches on aesthetics is there anything that can be
 called a system of aesthetics

gives us one splendid model of what it is to give a theory of a literary genre
 we can draw out some valuable suggestions toward fundamental aesthetic theories
 no work in the entire history of aesthetics has presented so many problems in interpretation
 so pondered over and disputed
 even if we cannot be certain of what Aristotle himself meant
 we know what he has been construed to mean
 and which ideas have been powerfully influential in the later history of aesthetics and literary
 criticism

highly characteristic of Aristotle that, in opening up a new field of inquiry
 he begins by mapping it as exactly as he can in terms of a system of classification
 his general way at getting at the thing itself, its essential features
 when he turns to the art of poetry, he sets out to mark its boundaries
 and study its nature independent of its moral and political connections
 contrast with Plato who thought he should not make such a distinction
 Aristotle thinks it is indispensable to a satisfactory understanding

general question for Aristotle:

what is the *genus* to which the poetic art belongs?

and, in turn, what are its *species*?

Genus: the general family to which it belongs (imitative arts)

Species: the types within it (drama—either tragedy or comedy & epic poetry)

Makes use of a very fundamental distinction between three kinds of “thought”

1. knowing (*theoria*): metaphysics, mathematics, philosophy of nature
2. doing (*praxis*) ethics, politics
3. making (*poiesis*) actions whose purpose is apart from the action itself [cf. *Techne*]

this distinction allows for more “self-determination” for each activity

the aesthetic can thus be evaluated primarily as aesthetics vs moral and political for Plato

Poietike is productive art in general

but in the *Poetics* is taken in the narrower sense

some, but not all, making is imitation, or representation of objects and events

imitative art itself falls into two divisions:

- 1.) The art of imitating visual appearances by means of color and drawing
- 2.) The art of imitating human actions through verse, song and dance

this second category is the art of poetry

art of poetry is distinguished from painting in terms of its medium (words, melody, rhythm) and from versified philosophy (cf. Empedocles) by virtue of the object it imitates

Aristotle primarily concerned with two species of poetry:

drama (tragic or comic)

epic poetry

tragedy and epic are distinguished from comedy by the seriousness or gravity of their actions from each other by their mode (dramatic vs narrative)

when Aristotle inquires into the “nature” of something

his inquiry is likely to have two distinct aspects

which we find distinct, but which Aristotle sees as inherently connected

he asks: what is the nature of the poetic art?

answer is both normative and descriptive

involves a set of categories that play a fundamental role in all his thinking:

the four causes

though he does not mention these in the *Poetics*

it is interesting that when he explains them in the *Metaphysics* his example is from the arts

1. *Material cause* is that from which things are made of—the matter: “the bronze of the statue”
2. *Formal cause* is the form—the essence of the thing that is has in common with all the other examples of its kind “the pattern” or “formula of the essence”
3. *Efficient cause* is the origin, the productive agent (e.g. the sculptor and his activity)
4. *Final cause* is the purpose, the “end, i.e., that for the sake of which a thing is”

to understand the poetic art will then require not only an objective investigation into the actual features of existing tragedies, for example, but also a conclusion about what makes a *good* tragedy

Aristotle is thus interested in the basis of critical judgment

the reasons that can be given in support of comparative evaluations

why, for instance, he is justified as regarding Homer’s epics and Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* as the greatest of masterpieces

The Proper Pleasure of Tragedy

after giving a full empirical study of existing tragedies
catalogued their various characteristics, those common to all, and those that vary
still need, in order to give an adequate definition of the species we are after
the final cause, its function or end

people go to see tragedies not because they have to, but because they want to
evidently derive enjoyment from this experience
and because the institution of tragic performances endures
it affords a unique sort of enjoyment
study of tragedy should show what the nature of this enjoyment is like
what is its “proper pleasure” (*oikeia hedonē*)
when we can identify the proper pleasure of tragedy we can say that it is the function of tragedy
to produce this particular sort of pleasure and thus evaluate different tragedies according to how
well they accomplish this end (final cause)

this idea of Aristotle’s on critical evaluation is important
seems capable of empirical investigation

what is it that draws us toward serious drama?

what is the impulse that leads to the production of serious drama?

Aristotle answers the second question, but evidently thinks of his answer as bearing on the first
makes two suggestions

- 1) imitation is natural to man, and recognition of imitation is pleasurable
- 2) “melody and rhythm” also come naturally, and so are presumably enjoyable

each of these suggestions leads to significant lines of thought

1) as rational animals we take pleasure in imitation

because seeing an imitation and recognizing it as such is a special case of learning

And since learning and admiring are pleasant, all things connected with them must also be pleasant; for instance, a work of imitation, such as painting, sculpture, poetry, and all that is well imitated, even if the object of imitation is not pleasant; for it is not this that causes pleasure or the reverse, but the inference that the imitation and the object imitated are identical, so that the result is that we learn something (*Rhetoric* I, xi, 1371b; trans. Freese).

inherits basic idea of copying or imitation from Plato

but since reinterprets the theory of ideas, he also views art as imitation differently from Plato

For Aristotle, the ‘forms’ are *in* particular things

the perceptible things thus have a higher status (in relation to the forms) than for Plato

Art as the copying of perceptible things is therefore of more worth for Aristotle

Aristotle also has a more democratic view of the insight that is needed to guide society and to live a virtuous life

thus Aristotle has a more positive evaluation of the various forms of art

the view of art as copying is connected to the notion that human beings by nature have a desire to learn and experience joy in learning and perception

Aesthetics comes from the Greek word *aisthanesthai* which means to perceive
the imitations of the real teach us to perceive things in a special way
as Aristotle redeems the senses and perception vs Plato
he allows for art to have a cognitive dimension denied by Plato

Contrasts starkly with Plato's denigration of the cognitive status of art

Aristotle and Plato agree that genuine knowledge is not of particulars but of universals
for Plato, universals are thought of as transcendental forms, and thus remote from works of art
but when they are thought of in Aristotle's sense

as existing only in substances

when the draftman, who abstracts and reproduces in another medium certain dog-universals

he is not doing something poles apart from the taxonomist

art is thus knowledge

at least the pleasure that it gives is of the same pleasure of coming to know

even if tragedy pleases us as an imitation

it shares this value with other imitations, and so we do not have yet a *proper*, peculiar pleasure
the differentia is to be sought in the object of imitation, that which is peculiar to tragedy

the proper pleasure of tragedy "is the pleasure that comes from pity and fear by means of imitation"

the meaning of this statement is not completely clear

perhaps Aristotle means: this pleasure is the pleasure we derive from recognizing an imitation

when imitation happens to be of fearful and pitiable events

thus, as pleasure in imitation it belongs to a certain genus of pleasures

but there are different species of imitation-pleasures

defined by the object imitated—the subject matter

as matters of human behavior are of greater moment to us than other actions

and the serious actions of tragedy are most important of all

thus the pleasure of seeing an imitation of them

might be the most intense of all imitation-pleasures

this is a possible view, but leads immediately to a problem

Aristotle does not say only that the events of the tragedy are fearful and pitiable

he says they arouse emotions of fear and pity in the audience

not only the theater audience but those who read the story or hear it told

this combination, or pair, of emotions is unique to serious poetry, both tragedy and epic

both tragedy and epic poetry have the same effect, according to Aristotle

but he thinks tragedy is capable of achieving it more fully

But fear and pity are unpleasant emotions to feel, one would think

they are species of pain:

pity is “a kind of pain excited by the sight of evil, deadly or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it”

Thus, the question arises, How *can* there be a pleasure that “comes from pity and fear,” even “by means of imitation”?

Perhaps Aristotle could have gone on to show that emotions that are ordinarily painful can become pleasurable through imitation in tragic drama but he doesn't, and, indeed, his emphasis is on the importance of intensifying the fear and pity of the audience the closest Aristotle comes to resolving this paradox of the tragic pleasure is this casual remark

“There are things we find painful to look at themselves, but of which we view the most accurate reproductions with pleasure: for example, replicas of the most unprepossessing animals, or of cadavers” (*Poetics* 4)

perhaps the point is that the painfulness of the emotions aroused does not destroy the pleasure that comes simply because it is an imitation it is perhaps doubtful to work out a more specific solution to the tragic paradox one other suggestion has to do with the natural order of fear and pity in the play in *Oedipus Rex* the events leading up to the climatic recognition scene are increasingly fearful but when the climax comes, afterwards we feel only pity for Oedipus thus, the tragic movement transforms fear into pity

2) now the second suggestion Aristotle makes about the pleasure of tragedy that we enjoy melody and rhythm it is tempting to ask: what about melody and rhythm that makes them intrinsically pleasurable? One possible answer for Aristotle: their *beauty*

as a possible connection between the two parts of the *Poetics* consider Aristotle's most famous account of pleasure (*Nicomachean Ethics* X) pleasures differ in kind according to the activity which they “complete” when the object experienced is “best” or “worthiest” the pleasure is greatest because the experience is most active this would describe the tragic experience above all

for Aristotle the chief forms of beauty are order, symmetry and definiteness applies this to tragedy— but there is a certain mystery in Aristotle's remarks about beauty in some places, the term *kalliste* seems to be another name for “best” or “finest” or “artistically most excellent”

it may be that “beautiful tragedy” and “artistically good tragedy” are synonymous for them but *kalliste* is clearly an aesthetic predicate he wants to point out that a good tragedy does have “orderly arrangement” this organic unity and order is something that the art of imitation can claim to offer something the art of serious poetry shares with the art of painting (Aristotle here brings these arts closer together than Plato was able or willing to do)

Aristotle's answer to Plato

from these conclusions about the end, or function, of tragedy Aristotle derives his critical criteria identifies those features of tragedy that enable it to fulfill that function most effectively

since the wholeness of tragedy is the curve of its movement to consummation
the plot, or course of events, is basic and most important to get right
Aristotle's analyzes those features of the complex plot that contribute most tellingly to the effect of fear and pity
the play must be unified to have a single condensed impact
must proceed with the greatest possible sense of inevitability
the development of the plot must arise out of the very structure of the plot

it is in this context that we must understand some of Aristotle's most often quoted and puzzling remarks about probability and necessity
he says "it is clear that the poet's job is not to tell what has happened but the kind of things that *can* happen"
this is why the writing of poetry is more philosophical than the writing of history
poetry tells of universals, history of particulars
Aristotle has here a narrow, simple, view of history as simply a chronicle of events
the poet must show how actions grow out of motives and motives out of circumstances
poetry thus involves psychological knowledge

clear that Aristotle is making an important point here about the intellectual content of poetry implicitly answering Plato's main objection to it
though the poet can plausibly pretend to knowledge of shipbuilding or military strategy which he does not have
he cannot fake psychological knowledge, he must understand human nature
he must have true genuine knowledge of psychological mechanisms in order to make a good play
there is thus an important cognitive element in Aristotle's critical theory

thus basically Aristotle is a structural critic, analyzing aspects of structure (*formalism*)
also a textual critic, and shows the way to the close and careful analysis of the text
in his intense interest in both structure and verbal texture, Aristotle's influence on the rhetoricians and critics of the Renaissance and the early modern period was to be enormous

One line of thought still to be considered—the most difficult of all
the famous concept of "catharsis"
this term appears only once in Aristotle's account of tragedy
over the centuries commentators have worked out an interesting theory that has been attributed to Aristotle, though in recent years it has been challenged in a most fundamental way

1) traditional interpretation
by arousing these emotions, tragedy has some sort of therapeutic effect upon the audience
giving a pleasurable sense of relief

by experiencing a drama we can find release for suppressed passions and uncontrollable feelings so that we can recover our harmony

there are different interpretations of this cathartic effect:

medical: a purgation of the toxic effects in the body

religious: a kind of spiritual-bloodletting

2) art is catharsis in the sense that we are purified and educated through our encounter with art the point is not that we rid ourselves of certain emotions but that we, through our experiences, *ennoble* our mind

3) structural interpretation

the purgation is a purification but does not take place in the spectator at all but something that takes place in the play

these tragic acts evoke moral horror, acts that were felt to require a “purification”

Oedipus becomes pitiable, he is freed from pollution through his own horror at the discovery of his actions

according to this interpretation, the concept of catharsis is a structural one

belongs to the formal analysis of the drama itself

One of the strongest temptations to the traditional interpretation of the *Poetics* is that it imputes to Aristotle a direct answer to Plato’s second main objection to poetry—that it could only feed and water the passions, and thus disrupt the harmony of the soul and rationality of the citizen

according to this interpretation Aristotle has an impressive rebuttal:

“If we look only at the immediate frenzy, the audience’s terror and weeping, it may seem that way, but if we look at the later and deeper psychological effects of going through the experience, the playgoer is like the religious enthusiast who feels cleansed and lightened and brightened by his emotional release. The playgoing citizen, in the long run, is probably the calmest and the wisest, for he gets rid from time to time of those festering emotional irritations that poison the temperament and the mind” (66-67).

Even if Aristotle did not have such a theory about the indirect beneficial effects of tragedy he still could be proposing a reply to part of Plato’s objection

Plato feared most as a bad example for Athenian youth the suggestion that good men are unhappy and bad men prosper

Aristotle might be taken to respond:

there is no need to have a moral censorship of plays, but only an aesthetic one

for the play about the good man who becomes unhappy

or the bad man who becomes happy will simply not be a very good tragedy

other things being equal, morality and justice will coincide with aesthetic excellence

For Aristotle, art is a good in itself for the person who is experiencing the work of art

the creative process may also be good in itself for the artist

Aesthetics: From Classical Greece to the Present, Monroe C. Beardsley, 1966. The Macmillan Company, New York.