

ARISTOTLE POETICS (c. 335 - c. 322 BCE)

Aristotle. "On the Art of Poetry." Trans. T. S. Dorsch. Classical Literary Criticism. Ed. T. S. Dorsch. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965. 29-76.

Aristotle's desire here to understand the human artefact which we have come to call 'literature' (what the Greeks most often called 'poetry') is part of his larger quest to understand the nature of all phenomena (both natural and man-made) in, given his *metaphysical* views, purely materialist terms alone (i.e. without reference to some putative non-physical world). His effort to grasp the nature of literature in general and drama in particular is predicated upon an *empiricist* approach to knowledge (his views are based on actual plays by Sophocles, etc. that he himself witnessed with his own two eyes) that applies the method of the *four causes* to the phenomenon under investigation (the nature of drama and, more specifically, tragedy) and deploys an *inductive* argument to draw certain conclusions about the nature of this artform. Many commentators believe that Aristotle's goal here is to address each issue raised by Plato in Book X of The Republic, most often coming to very different conclusions from his teacher for the simple reason that their philosophical world views are so very different.

Aristotle's argument in the Poetics, it should be noted, is in reverse order to the process by which he would have arrived at these conclusions. He begins by presenting us with his conclusions (his larger claims about literature in general) and works his way down to piece-meal observations concerning aspects of the form of drama and tragedy in particular. Of course, the actual process by which he came to such conclusions would have arguably occurred in reverse, starting with an acknowledgement of his emotional reaction to and observations culled from the performance of actual plays and leading through a process of reasoned induction to more general conclusions.

Aristotle begins by discussing the nature of art in general (Aristotle is discussing the *genus* here) and literature in particular (a *species* of art). What is art? What is its relation to life? Aristotle's answer: it is not life itself but a reflection of life. Aristotle's theory of literature is, thus, at least in part mimetic. Aristotle is interested here in the 'material cause' of poetry, that is, the very 'stuff' of which poetry is made: life, the actions of men of which it is a reflection or imitation. Whether it ultimately imitates something beyond that, unlike Plato, Aristotle does not speculate arguably because he does not share his teacher's metaphysics (theory of reality). Where Plato is an *idealist*, Aristotle is a *materialist*. This definition leads him to consider the following related issues:

- Poetic vs. Historical Truth: it is the poet's function to describe not what has actually happened, but the "kinds of things that could happen because they are, in the circumstances, either probable or necessary" (43). Where History deals with "particular facts" (44) that have already occurred, Poetry is concerned with "universal truths" i.e. "the kinds of things a certain type of person will probably or necessarily say or do in a given situation" (44).
- The Natural Propensity for Imitation: Imitation comes naturally to humans: in childhood, the child first learns by imitating. Man gets great pleasure from imitations. The artistically-produced likenesses of things that would repel in real life [e.g. corpses] afford great pleasure. The greatest enjoyment is gained by looking at things and recognising them for what they are. If one cannot recognise the original, the very colours or shapes per se may give the pleasure.
- The Evolution of Poetry: Aristotle undertakes what is arguably the first foray into the area of *literary history*. He argues that from the natural propensity for imitation shared by humans, poetry evolved by improvisation, gradually becoming more sophisticated and leaving behind its primitive roots.

Having discussed the nature of art in general (art is an imitation of reality), Aristotle turns his attention to what distinguishes 'poetry' (i.e. literature) from other forms of imitation such as dance or the visual arts and what distinguishes different kinds of poetry. What distinguishes one representation from another, for example, poetry from dance or different kinds of poetry from each other, is their respective forms. Where Plato dismisses the form of the artwork as something superfluous to the content, the part responsible for art's seductive wiles, Aristotle is keen to underline the importance of form. His is, therefore, at least in part also an *objective* theory of literature in that his focus is also on the form, shape or structure of the work.

The various art forms are distinguished from each other, Aristotle argues, by the medium of representation: poetry uses *words* rather than colours and shapes (the visual arts) or movement (dance). Aristotle then considers what distinguishes different *kinds* of poetry. If literature is a species of the genus art, then different kinds of poetry would each be *species* of the *genus* literature. He posits that there are three basic kinds of poetry differentiated by the use of three specific manners of representation: lyric poetry (poetry uttered *in the first person* and focussing on the person speaking), epic or narrative poetry (poetry uttered *in the third person* in which a tale is narrated by someone about the actions of other persons), and dramatic poetry or drama (poetry in which there is *no narrator* and the characters do all their own talking and acting without recourse, seemingly, to authorial intervention).

Aristotle then turns his attention to the further division of each of these basic kinds of poetry into the *genres* of tragedy and comedy. In other words, for example, some dramatic poetry (drama) is tragic while some is comic. Like Plato, Aristotle is of the view that the difference between tragedy and comedy centres at least in part on a difference in the object of representation. The object of all poetic representation is "men in action" (33). However, tragedy represents actions that lead to unhappiness and suffering while comedy represents the opposite. Men being necessarily "either of good or bad character" (33), they must therefore be represented "either as better than we are, or worse, or as the same kind of people as we are" (33). Comedy "represents the worse types of men" (37). It deals, however, not with the worse types of badness but with protagonists guilty of "ridiculous" (37) or trivial faults, i.e. "some form of error or ugliness that is not painful or injurious" (37). By contrast, tragic poets are more serious-minded and represent the "noble actions and the doings of noble persons" (35), that is, they portray the better sort of men who, usually through error, meet an unhappy ending.

Aristotle argues that tragedy and comedy are distinguished not only by their content but also by virtue of the fact that each is possessed of a "characteristic function" (31) or "power" (*dynamis*), that is, a particular kind of emotional effect or impact upon the audience that is peculiar to the genre in question: scorn and laughter in the case of comedy, pity and fear in the case of tragedy. Aristotle's focus in this regard is on the 'final cause' of poetry, that is, on the effect which it has on the audience. Plato had suggested in The Republic that because poetry caters to the emotions rather than the reason, it ought to be banished from his ideal state. Aristotle agrees that art has an emotional impact but does not address its moral value. He merely notes in an almost purely empirical way, without judgement, that pity and fear are emotions inevitably inspired by the particular form taken by tragedy just as comedy, by implication, inspires the opposite emotions. However, he does not conclude whether this effect is good or bad for the human being. He merely acknowledges the impact, for good or for bad, and seeks to understand its cause. Importantly, the precise manner in which this characteristic effect or function is achieved is derived from the form peculiar to the genre in question which thus cannot be overlooked. To put all this another way, the function of a particular genre, its characteristic effect on the audience, is a product of a particular set of formal features. Hence, his concern with the 'formal cause' of poetry,

the pre-existent forms (not to be confused with Plato's 'ideal forms') or models or patterns available to and utilised by the poet according to the demands of his subject-matter and as a result of which the mould of comedy would be quite inappropriate to depict unhappiness and to achieve the necessary emotional impact (indeed, it simply would not be comedy). For Aristotle, the 'formal cause' of all material phenomena, including art, is extremely important. The depiction on stage of suffering and unhappiness, for example, necessitates a particular form which differentiates it from other kinds of plays (e.g. comedies).

The importance of formal differences between art forms can be glimpsed in his brief overview of the evolution of the respective genres. At least initially, he suggests, trivial poets used iambic verse to write phallic songs about the ridiculous actions of the meaner sorts of people, leading ultimately to comedy. Similarly, tragedy evolved out of the dithyramb, advancing little by little until it reached its natural form, acquiring its "characteristic stateliness" (37) and discarding "slight plots and comic diction" (37). It should be obvious that, although he mentions writers like Sophocles, Aristotle is not too concerned with the 'efficient cause' of poetry as it does not matter who the writer is. In order to achieve a desired emotional effect, the artist, regardless of personal inclination, must utilise the pre-existing form appropriate to the treatment of particular subjects.

It is important to recall in this respect Aristotle's model of human identity and the difference between his conception of the 'soul' and Plato's. For Plato, the soul is a transcendental entity that is only temporarily imprisoned in the dungeon of the flesh. For Aristotle, however, the soul is the form which biological matter takes and which makes human beings different from other animate creatures. Just like an eye and an elbow may both be made from biological material but are differentiated by the different functions which they serve, so too what distinguishes humans from chickens, axes from spoons, tragedy from comedy, is their function or effect. This characteristic function is the product of a particular material form. Aristotle concludes on a similar note that what distinguishes the arts from sciences is less the object of representation, i.e. what they write about, than the form of representation deployed. Homer may have been a poet while Empedocles was a scientist, but both are interested in understanding 'life' or reality. What distinguishes them is the precise form of their output, the deployment of methods peculiar to literature such as a plot, in the case of the former, and methods peculiar to the sciences in the case of the latter.

Aristotle is keen to understand the precise form peculiar to dramatic poetry (drama) in general, as opposed to lyric or epic poetry, noting the constituent elements that make up any play. He observes that each play consists of six constituent elements: plot (action), character, thought (these two being the "natural causes" (39) of action), diction, spectacle and song / music. Aristotle defines plot (*mythos*) as "the representation of the action . . . the ordered arrangement of incidents" (39) which comprise a play. He stresses that plot is the most important feature of a play (he calls it the "life-blood" [40] of any play). He defines character (*ethos*) as "that which enables us to define the nature of the participants" (39). Character is that "which reveals personal choice . . . there is no revelation of character in speeches in which the speaker shows no preferences or aversions whatsoever" (41). He maintains that characters should be good (*spoudaios*) (that is, they should always reveal a preference for good), appropriate (e.g. men should be manly), lifelike, and consistent. Aristotle defines thought (*dianoia*) as that which "comes out in what they [characters] say when they are proving a point or expressing an opinion" (39). Thought is the "ability to say what is possible or appropriate in any given circumstances" (40) and is related to the "arts of politics and rhetoric" (40). Aristotle defines diction as the "expressive use of words" (41) spoken by a character. He stresses that both a character's words and actions should arise probably or necessarily from his character. The two other constituent elements are less important. He defines spectacle as "stage-effect" (41), i.e. the

performance itself of the play which is beyond the control of the playwright's craft and divorced from the art of poetry per se (the "power [*dynamis*] of tragedy is independent both of performances and of actors" [41], he writes), while the meaning of music / song ought to be self-evident.

Aristotle is particularly interested in how, through its form, drama achieves its characteristic effect: in the case of tragedy, the inspiration of pity and fear in the audience. Of particular importance is the nature of the best plot-structure necessary to this end. He stresses that plot is more important than character in that art is a "representation, not of men, but of action and life, of happiness and unhappiness" (39) which are necessarily "bound up with action" (39). It is "chiefly on account of the action" (40) that tragedy is "also a representation of persons" (41). In other words, the main function of a play is not to reveal character and thus to enter the realm of moral debate. A play is first and foremost a representation of the actions chosen by men and the consequences which these entail: good or bad fortune. The study of character (that is, of what the choices made by men reveal about their nature) emerges out of the representation of action but it is not the primary purpose of the representation of action. Aristotle argues that the reason for this is that the purpose of living is an end which is a kind of activity, not a quality; it is their characters . . . that make men what they are, but it is by reason of their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Tragedies are not performed, therefore, in order to represent character, although character is involved for the sake of the action. Thus the incidents and the plot are the end aimed at in tragedy. (40)

There "could not be a tragedy without action, but there could be without character" (40), he speculates without explaining how this might be achieved.

Aristotle is also particularly interested in tragic drama. He offers this famous definition of tragedy: it is the "representation of an action that is worth serious attention, complete in itself, and of some amplitude; in language enriched by a variety of artistic devices" (39) and "presented in the form of action not narration; by means of *pity* and *fear* bringing about the *catharsis* [purgation/purification/clarification] of such emotions" (my emphases; 39). Fear (which is inspired by the spectacle of someone's undeserved suffering) and pity (we feel this because we too could find ourselves in that position of suffering) arise, Aristotle maintains, "from the very structure of the action" (49). The plot "should so be ordered that even without seeing it performed anyone merely hearing what is afoot will shudder with pity and fear as a result of what is happening" (49). Effects of pity and fear may also be produced by diction, as opposed to plot, i.e. "by means of language coming from the lips of a speaker" (58), but a particular structuring of the plot remains the most effective means.

Aristotle argues that the following plot-elements are the most conducive to the emotional effect of pity and fear proper to tragedy. Firstly, the most fearful and pitiable incidents are those inflicted by those who are near and dear to each other, either with or without knowledge of what they have done. (Less acceptable, he says, is when someone in possession of the facts is "on the point of acting but fails to do so, for this merely shocks us, and, since no suffering is involved, it is not tragic" (50). Even less acceptable is when the deed is actually done by someone in possession of the facts.) Secondly, the most important means by which tragedy inspires feelings of pity and fear are the *plot devices* of sudden "reversals" (40) of fortune (*peripeteia*), "recognitions" (40) or discoveries (*anagnorisis*), and *calamity* or suffering. A reversal of fortune is a sudden and unexpected "change from one state of affairs to its opposite" (46), for example from happiness to misery. Recognition or discovery is a "change from ignorance to knowledge" (46), a realization (as, for example, in the case of Oedipus) on the part of the protagonist of what exactly he did in his ignorance. Discovery may take several forms: "by means of visible signs and tokens" (53), "those

which are manufactured by the poet" (53), those "due to memory, when the sight of something leads to the required understanding" (53), and those that are the "result of reasoning" (53). The best form of discovery is that which is "brought about by the incidents themselves, when the startling disclosure results from events that are probable" (54). The representation of calamity or suffering on stage (or, preferably, its description in the speech of a character) also inspires pity and fear.

Aristotle draws a distinction in this regard between *simple* and *complex* plots. In *simple* plots, the "change of fortune comes about without a reversal or discovery" (45). *Complex* plots, on the other hand, are accompanied by either or both of these. Aristotle stresses that the most effective form of discovery occurs in conjunction with a reversal. Together, they produce the tragic emotions of pity and fear. He warns that utterly good men should not be shown passing from good fortune to misery (this does not provoke pity and fear, he claims, as it merely disgusts us), nor should evil men be portrayed moving from misery to happiness. Rather, the "sort of man who is not conspicuous for virtue and justice, and whose fall into misery is not due to vice and depravity, but rather to some error (*hamartia*), a man who enjoys prosperity and a high reputation" (48) ought to be shown moving from prosperity to misery, rather than the other way around. This is the most effective way, he argues, to ensure the creation of the "pleasure that is proper to tragedy" (49) (i.e. pity and fear) for "not every kind of pleasure should be demanded of tragedy, but only that which is proper to it" (49).

Thirdly, pity and fear are especially heightened when events develop logically, one event leading to the next, rather than merely unexpectedly, for "then they will be more remarkable than if they seem merely mechanical or accidental. . . . Even chance occurrences seem most remarkable when they have the appearance of having been brought about by design" (45). Hence, the events of the plot must be connected by *probability* or *necessity*. Plots must not be constructed in a haphazard way but must be "properly ordered" (42). Tragedy, he writes, is the "representation of an action that is complete and whole and of a certain amplitude" (41). A whole is "that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end" (41), that is, the incidents portrayed must be seen to have a causal connection and not to follow a merely chronological order. When the plot is arranged in such a way that any incident is "differently placed or taken away" (42), then the "effect of wholeness will be seriously disrupted" (42). As a result, he argues, *episodic* plots, in which the "sequence of the episodes is neither probable or necessary" (45), are the worst kind of plot.

Aristotle gives us some useful terms for conceptualising the various stages of the plot. The *complication* is that "part of the story from the beginning to the point immediately preceding the change to good or bad fortune" (56). This is that part of the play where events become increasingly more confused and entangled. The *denouement* (literally, an 'unravelling' of a knot) is that part "from the onset of this change to the end" (56) where things tend to work themselves out and, as some have argued, catharsis takes place: it is that part of the play which allows the pity and fear built up by the preceding events to be dispelled before the audience leaves. The plot must also possess *unity*. A plot does not possess unity, Aristotle argues, because it centres on one man. Unity is, rather, a function of the fact that all incidents portrayed must relate in some way to the main action (to wit, the particular movement from happiness to misery) being pursued. An "epic structure" (57) (i.e. one where there is a "multiplicity of stories" [57]) is not appropriate for a play where compression, directness and a single focus are essential. Lastly, the plot must be of a certain *length*: plots must also be of "an appropriate size, for beauty is bound up with size and order" (42). Plots that are too long cannot be properly held in memory by the audience. The proper length is that which "as a matter either of probability or necessity, allows of a change from misery to happiness or from happiness to misery" (42).

Aristotle's Legacy:

It is a historical fact that Aristotle's views (both philosophical and critical) were 'lost' to Europeans for many centuries. When he was 'rediscovered' in the late Middle Ages / early Renaissance (his theories had been fortunately preserved by Arabic scholars who then were responsible for reintroducing him to Europeans), his ideas on plot were quickly and enthusiastically embraced by theorists during the Renaissance. However, the elements of plot-structure in general as well as those elements most conducive to producing the tragic emotions of pity and fear also quickly became prescriptive in the hands of rigid theorists of literature. Hence, the interminable discussions of such restrictive concepts as the three unities (e.g. the view that a play of about an hour and a half should represent a similar amount of time on stage, otherwise it would be unrealistic) and the tendency to dismiss the work of writers such as Shakespeare for not following the traditional, timeless, and universally binding rules.

Aristotle's importance is felt today in another way. Aristotle's detailed conception of the basic principles of the plot-structure of the plays produced in fifth-century Athens influenced centuries of critical approaches to the study of drama. However, in the twentieth century (to be precise during the 1950's), a school of critics located at the University of Chicago, who called themselves *Neo-Aristotelians* and included such notable names as R. S. Crane and Wayne Booth, undertook to apply Aristotle's concept of dramatic plot to the study of prose narrative (e.g. novels like Tom Jones by Henry Fielding). *Narratology* is the term that has come to be applied since then to the study of the plot-structure (sometimes called just plot) of poetic and prose narratives. Contemporary narratologists, not least in France, building on the foundation set by Aristotle, have taken narratology in directions not envisaged by him but which would have been impossible without his pioneering work.