

ARISTOTLE'S POETICS

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THOUGH known to the classical and Arab world—Horace, for example, shows familiarity with it in his *Ars Poetica*—Aristotle's *Poetics* came into its own with the classical revival of the Renaissance. Scholars of Western Europe vied with one another in editing the text and writing voluminous commentaries, usually showing more zeal than judgment; critics, from the pedantic Vida to the ever readable Sidney and the clear-minded Boileau, took it as a model for their own treatises and unfortunately confused the wisdom of Aristotle with the Roman matter-of-factness of Horace and the pedantry of commentators; poets with more desire than native endowment to be dramatists followed the adulterated precepts and turned out still born closet drama. With the waning of neoclassicism and its moronic sister pseudoclassicism, the *Poetics* lost caste, except in academic circles, where during the 19th century some first-rate editions were produced. To-day probably few people read, much less ponder on, this, the first comprehensive attempt in Europe at literary criticism. It may be well, then, for us to spend a little time examining the work, which no student of literature since the Renaissance can afford to ignore. We will approach the work not with adulation or with scorn, but rather in an objective spirit.

I

What was the immediate occasion of the work? Why did Aristotle write it? Frankly we do not know. From the condition of the text some have surmised that we have only Aristotle's notes for a series of lectures to his students in the walks of the Lyceum at Athens. That is a fate few professors would want to face. More frightening still, however, is the suggestion that we have not Aristotle's notes, but those of an indifferent student whose mind on a warm afternoon frequently wandered to the banks of the Ilissus. Such a theory would explain the inconsistencies in the text, the sudden transitions, the fragmentary discussion of certain topics. A friend of the present writer has suggested that the analytical Aristotle, running short of subjects to treat and specimens to classify, suddenly bethought him of poetry and immediately began to gather specimens, classi-

fy them, and mount them with sturdy pins. This theory, while it is in keeping with Aristotle's seeming resolution to take all knowledge to be his province and while it finds some support in the obvious influence of his biological studies on his theories of poetry, is on the whole unfair to the real insight that the *Poetics* shows.

The present writer would like to advance—very tentatively, of course—his own theory of origins. Perhaps there was an Athenian Authors' Association; if there was, we can be certain that it held an annual dinner, and it is equally certain that the committee in charge looked round for a suitable "guest" speaker for the occasion. Who would be a better candidate, or victim, than Aristotle, the well known founder of the Peripatetic School? And what poor professor would not accept an invitation to a good dinner at the leading inn of ancient Athens, even if it meant recasting one or two of his regular lectures into more palatable form? Then, too, what professor, accustomed to the indifference of his students to his best academic jokes, would not look forward to the rapturous, uncomprehending thanks of the women members of the organization? Few professors, then or now, I fancy, could resist such temptations.

Nor is this theory so far-fetched as it might at first seem. A reading of the text shows clearly that the *Poetics* was addressed to an audience much concerned about technique. Now some one may object that only candidates for an academic degree are interested in a study of technique—did not Bernard Shaw once remark that those who can, do; those who cannot, teach?—and that poets are too busy writing to be bothered with lectures on how to write poetry. The objection, however, is not valid: we are postulating a dinner given, not by the great Greek writers—they were all dead—but by the Athenian Authors' Association. Again, in chapter 15, Aristotle writes:—*we in our way should follow the example of good portrait-painters.*¹ Now the greatest admirer of the world's most universal scholar would hardly call Aristotle a poet, nor can one imagine such a wise person as Aristotle calling himself a poet before a group of skeptical undergraduates. On the other hand, Greek wine, though sweet and seemingly innocuous, really has a powerful, if somewhat delayed², reaction, and under its subtle influence—the wine would be free to the guest speaker—Aristotle might

1 The Italics are not in the original.

2 It is highly significant from our point of view that this strange claim is made somewhat more than half way through the address.

have been temporarily carried away and foggily identified himself with his audience. He was not, however, too far gone to remember the book business, for two or three times he aroused the audience's curiosity, only to say that a complete discussion was to be found in his published work on that subject. That is the masterly touch of the professorial after-dinner speaker with an eye to sales, autographed if desired. Note, too, the skilful touch in the last sentence of the *Poetics*: "So much for Tragedy and Epic poetry." How can we interpret that but as a subtle hint that he would appreciate another dinner and plenty of wine the next year, after which he would discuss comedy? Indeed, with all the branches into which literature can be divided—and as his other works prove, Aristotle had the classifying instinct—we can see this needy and wily professor dining sumptuously once a year for many years. We contend that the more carefully the reader ponders the *Poetics* the more he will be convinced of the reasonableness of our theory. There can be only one possible objection: the length of the work. That is not, however, insuperable. As any member of a service club knows, once a professor warms to his subject he forgets the twenty-minute limit set for him by the exigencies of club business and horse-play between Brother Bill and Brother Joe, and continues talking to the shuffle of feet stealing more or less quietly to the exit. Moreover, club secretaries pride themselves on their complete reporting of addresses and inspiring messages. It is time, however, for us to turn to another phase of our subject.

II

Too often as we read the *Poetics* we forget that when Aristotle wrote, the great age of Athenian culture had passed. Aeschylus had died in 456, Sophocles and Euripides in 406, Socrates in 399, and Aristophanes in 380. Aristotle was born in 384; in other words, he was only four years old when the last of the great writers had died at the age of sixty-five. In some ways this was a great advantage for Aristotle, for, like Samuel Johnson, he could look back over the whole school of literature with which he was most in sympathy and, against that background, could judge the shortcomings of his contemporaries. On the other hand, it places the modern reader at a great disadvantage, for we know almost nothing of the literature of the 4th century. Presumably nothing worthy of the name of tragedy was being written—at least none has come down to us—and though we

know there were about fifty-seven practitioners of the Middle Comedy and we have references to, and quotations from, some six hundred plays, we should do well to remember the remark of Professor H. J. Rose in his *Handbook of Greek Literature*: "In trying to judge these writers we must remember that our fragments are largely due to Athenaios, who was looking mostly for facts concerning eating and drinking; Pollus, whose interest was lexicographical; and Stabaios, who was on the watch for moral sayings. No ancient who has come down to us ever made a selection of passages to illustrate the wit or the capabilities of the 'Middle' comedians." The *Poetics* would make one think there was good reason for the omission.

We have suggested above a comparison with Dr. Johnson. Let us examine it from a slightly different point of view. Suppose that we had only the *Lives of the Poets* and none of the works that Johnson discusses, save for a few quotations chosen on any but literary grounds. What could we make of Johnson's criticisms? Reading the *Poetics*, we are in almost that dilemma. We can, however, gather something of the literary discussions and quarrels of the day. It is obvious that epics were shorter than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but, paradoxically, much less unified in matter, being broken with double plotting and episodes too loosely related to the main theme. Tragedy was also suffering from lack of unity; the Chorus was now, not an integral part of the action or an ideal commentator, but a mere *divertissement* to mark off the episodes; indeed, Aristotle suggests that dramatists introduced into their own plays choral odes from other dramas. Moreover, dramatists were prone to cater to the vulgar tastes of their audiences—to those of the Athenian counterpart of the modern tired businessman and of those who liked poetic justice in their plays:

After this comes the construction of Plot which some rank first, one with a double story (like the *Odyssey*) and an opposite issue for the good and the bad personages. It is ranked as first only through the weakness of the audiences; the poets merely follow their public, writing as its wishes dictate. (cap. 13; Bywater's translation.)

Criticism, too, was seemingly in a parlous way. Critics were finding Homer old-fashioned and full of errors, and they delighted in exposing all sorts of real and imagined peccadilloes, but, like Shakespeare with Ben Johnson, Aristotle, especially in chapters 22 and 25, gives these Zoiluses a fine "purge". Finally we see that literary Athens was divided into two camps:

those (presumably the majority) who rated epic above tragedy, and the others, among whom was Aristotle, who championed tragedy as the higher form of art. So Aristotle in the *Poetics* is in the curious position of at one and the same time defending Homer against his critics and extolling tragedy above epic poetry.

More important, however, for an understanding of the main thesis of the *Poetics* is Plato's defence, in Book X of *The Republic*, of his banishment of poets from the ideal commonwealth. Plato—or, more correctly, Socrates, his Mrs. Harris—has two main objections to poetry. In the first place, since an artifact is only a copy of a universal and since the poet merely copies this copy, then a poem, or other work of art, is merely a copy of a copy of a universal and so cannot give us real knowledge:

"Very good," said I; "the producer of the product three removes from nature you call the imitator?" "By all means," he said. "This, then, will apply to the maker of tragedies also, if he is an imitator and is in his nature three removes from the truth, as are all other imitators." . . . "Consider, then, this very point. To which is painting directed in every case, to the imitation of reality as it is or of appearance as it appears? Is it an imitation of a phantasm or of the truth?" "Of a phantasm," he said. "Then the mimetic art is far removed from truth, and this, it seems, is the reason why it can produce everything, because it touches or lays hold of only a small part of the object and that a phantasm. . (Shorey's translation; Loeb edition).

Socrates proceeds to show that since Homer, the greatest of all imitators, had only the art of imitation and not real knowledge, he had never caused a city to be governed better, as Lycurgus had done, had never taught any general how to conduct a war, had never contributed any "ingenious inventions for the arts and business of life", had never advanced the art of education, or even made friends who looked after him in his old age.³ Then comes the second, and greater, charge against art:

"This, then, was what I wished to have agreed upon when I said that poetry, and in general the mimetic art, produces a product that is far removed from truth in the accomplishment of its task, and associates with the part in us that is remote from intelligence, and is its companion and friend for no sound and true purpose."

³ As one reads these charges one wonders sometimes whether or not Plato had his tongue in his cheek for some of them.

The attack continues in order to show that drama appeals mainly to two of the inferior elements in the human soul—our faculty for grief and our faculty for laughter—which it satisfies at the expense of reason and in so doing weakens the self-control presented by reason:

“And shall we not say that the part of us that leads us to dwell in memory on our suffering and impels us to lamentation, and cannot get enough of that sort of thing, is the irrational and idle part of us, the associate of cowardice? . . . And is it not obvious that the nature of the mimetic poet is not related to this better part of the soul and his cunning is not framed to please it, if he is to win favour with the multitude, but is devoted to the fretful and complicated type of character because it is easy to imitate? . . . And so we may say at last that we should be justified in not admitting him (the poet) into a well-ordered state, because he stimulates and fosters this element in the soul, and by strengthening it tends to destroy the rational part, just as when in a state one puts bad men in power and turns the city over to them and ruins the better sort. Precisely in the same way we shall say that the mimetic poet sets up in each individual soul a vicious constitution by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality, and by currying favour with the senseless element that one cannot distinguish the greater from the less, but calls the same thing now one, now the other.”

In other words, that part of us that should be restrained by reason is encouraged by art and so our characters suffer. Socrates, so he avers, has not come to such a conclusion without a painful struggle:

“But nevertheless let it be declared that, if the mimetic and dulcet poetry can show any reason for her existence in a well-governed state, we should gladly admit her, since we ourselves are very conscious of her spell. But all the same it would be impious to betray what we believe to be the truth.”

It was against such an attack that Aristotle, who obviously enjoyed great art, had to defend literature. So we find him stressing its naturalness to the human being, its ethical relations, its value as a purge for those very emotions that Plato feared.

IV

After this preliminary clearing of the way, let us now turn to our main purpose: the discovery of the permanent qualities

⁴ Ernst Cassirer (*The Myth of the State*, Yale Univ. Press, 1946, p. 67) argues that what Plato feared was the myth-making function of the poet, which would frustrate all philosophic efforts and undermine the very foundations of Plato's state. Plato would still allow myths in the education of small children much as many broadminded parents to-day have no objection to Sunday Schools for small children but they must be brought under a strict discipline and judged by the standard of the Idea of the Good.

in the *Poetics*. Scholars, especially of the Renaissance, are themselves to blame for the false emphasis placed on certain points, such as the so-called unities of time, place, and action, with only the last of which Aristotle was concerned; and the pedantic and centuries-long discussion of the meaning of "catharsis". When we brush aside such excrescences we find a very stimulating piece of criticism that, viewed aright, has a perennial freshness.

On first turning from the doctrinaire commentators, who can lay down a fixed rule for everything, one is delighted with the tentative, empiric tone of Aristotle: "This is the way Greek writers have always done", he seems to be saying, "but we cannot say that no other way is possible . . . These are the formative elements of tragedy, but whether or not there are any others, as yet unused, it would be impossible to say." Aristotle draws guiding principles from the practice of past Greek writers, but he never views them into fixed rules, or even into principles that may not have to be altered in the light of further developments in the art of tragedy. Then, too, one likes Aristotle's emphasis on the naturalness of artistic creation and appreciation to the human race; all of us like to imitate or to see imitations, for we recognize old pleasures and also acquire new information. Then for Aristotle imitation is not a mere copying of an object—a mere copy of a copy, as Plato had insisted—but an attempt to reveal the inner significance of an object or of an event; it is, to use Butcher's expression, "helping nature out".⁵ That is why Aristotle insists that an artist can produce an "imitation" better than the original. Nor was it Aristotle who said that the function of art was to teach with delight. One could easily find a score of casual remarks in the *Poetics* to show that for the author the ultimate end of art was to give pleasure. It is true that he stresses in his discussion of character the fact that our deepest moral and religious senses must not be shocked; but to recognize that there are certain ultimate ethical sanctions—a sort of universal law of nature in ethics—is a very different matter from saying that it is the business of the artist to inculcate these, or lesser and more dubiously valid ethical views. It is worth reading the *Poetics* through, merely noting the references to pleasure, which do not always catch the attention in an ordinary reading, for Aristotle more or less assumed the obviousness of this view of literature.

⁵ While Butcher in his Lectures on the *Poetics* doubtless philosophized too much, as his contemporaries in Shakespearean criticism were also doing to their hero, he certainly enriched our understanding of the *Poetics*, especially in his discussion of the term imitation.

Another fruitful principle discussed by Aristotle effects the unity of a work of art. One might say that the fundamental principle of his discussion of poetry is probability. How often the expression "the probable and the necessary" occurs! By this term Aristotle means that there is a casual relationship between the various incidents in a play; hence, the importance of the seemingly pedantic discussion of a beginning, a middle, and an end. From one point of view, every event from the beginning of the universe is linked by effect and cause to preceding and following events. Fortunately for art, however, a small group of links in this endless chain can be detached successfully and studied more closely to reveal the inner significance of this relation. That is why art is more philosophic than history: it can show how things ought to be—the logical, not the ethical *ought*—from the consideration of pure causality, whereas history, which for Aristotle was mere chronicling—can only show events as they happened. Yet Aristotle allows in chapter 25 for improbability (chance), for he knows that to mankind some things seem to happen merely by chance. This emphasis on probability (causal relationship) governs not merely the conception of plot but also of characters; hence, the insistence (chapter 15) that a character should be not inconsistent with goodness of disposition, not inconsistent with the *ethos* of the class to which it belongs, not inconsistent with the received idea of the particular personage, and finally not inconsistent with itself; and likewise the insistence that a character should not be degraded unless the action clearly demands such treatment. The emphasis on consistence of the character with itself brings us to the amusing discussion of a consistently inconsistent person in the same chapter, and the later advice that it is better to have a probable impossibility than an impossible probability; for example, fairies that act as fairies should are better artistically than men who do not act as men normally would act.

Too much attention has been paid to Aristotle's chance remark that we could have a play without characterization, but not without a plot. The subsequent discussion of character shows that here for some reason Aristotle was holding himself so straight that in a moment of exaggeration he leaned backwards. If we knew more about 4th century literary disputes we might see this remark in its proper perspective. We can, perhaps, get some light on it from the position of the arts in the present century. Forty years ago, in reaction against the well-made play of the 19th century, we heard much about drama's

being merely a "slice of life" (*une tranche de vie*), and many a critic and unsuccessful novelist told us that plot in a novel or play was quite unnecessary and terribly old-fashioned. Was such an attitude prevalent in 4th century Athens?

One other point we might mention before leaving the subject of plot: the cathartic effect of tragedy. This question has been vitiated by a fundamental error: failure to recognize that Aristotle was using a very loose analogy. Discussion has ranged from religious purificatory rites to medical practice, with the honours resting, temporarily at least with medicine. Surely the analogy, like most analogies, should not be pressed very far, for all analogies are merely indicative of the general direction in which a solution may be sought and are bound to break down sooner or later. Like most of us, Aristotle seems to have experienced in the presence of great art a feeling of freeing, refreshing, relaxing, cleansing, and exhilaration; in an attempt to impart this feeling he hit on an analogy drawn from contemporary medical theory and practice—he uses the same word in other works—and meant little more than this. (But how much that little is!) We might compare his analogy with the advertisements of a well known brand of fruit salts, which we are exhorted to try every morning on rising to give us a similar effect. The real point to remember is that Aristotle's experience in the contemplation of art was, and is, a fact, and to Aristotle it seemed the best refutation of Plato's attack on art in society, which we have noted above. A simple, suggestive analogy has been turned into a mare's nest by pedants.

Concerning that other mare's nest of criticism—the tragic flaw—we need say nothing more than that the now usually accepted interpretation of the word *hamartia* as an error of judgment due to insufficient knowledge on which to make a decision, rather than as an ethical fault or infirmity of character, dismisses the problem into thin air.⁶ Finally we might note that for Aristotle poetry is not mere form but is spirit; hence, his insistence that metre is not of the essence of poetry. A medical treatise in verse would still not be poetry—unlike his successors Aristotle wrote his treatise on poetry in prose, not in metre—

⁶ Perhaps the crazy hunt for the tragic flaw in the dramatic hero reached its ultimate in the German scholar who decided that there would have been no tragedy of *Othello* if the hero, remembering the duties of a recent bridegroom, had picked up and handed the handkerchief to Desdemona! Without being too frivolous about *hamartia*, we might suggest an analogy with the game of patience, or *solitaire*. A player has exposed a red Queen and two black Jacks. Which Jack will he move? He chooses one and loses the game, whereas if he had chosen the other he would have won. We can hardly blame his defeat on a flaw in his character, but rather on an error of judgment resulting from incomplete knowledge. Of course, often in drama, the hero's character may make him prone to hasty judgment, as with Oedipus.

and conversely, a great imaginative experience given in prose would be poetry. In English we lack a word to bring out this important fact; *literature*, our closest, is clumsy and vague. We need a word like the German *Dichtung*. For Aristotle, literature is a great aesthetic experience, the fruit of the imagination. And his conception of the imagination, when properly pieced together we shall find is not ignoble; in it for example, he finds room, despite his emphasis on causality, for the marvelous (chapter 25.) Many writers have considered his views on diction as pedestrian, but it would be difficult to find a more pregnant redefinition than "The perfection of diction is for it to be at once clear and not mean." His emphasis on the importance of metaphor is in line with critical thought to-day. In evaluating this part of the *Poetics* we should remember that no clear lines then marked off grammar and rhetoric from literary criticism as we know it, and that we know very little about the disputes over such matters in the 4th century.

We have tried to indicate the value of the *Poetics* to the present-day reader. We might close with a word of advice: he should very often pay more attention to the asides and the *obiter dicta* than to the elaborated discussions, for the latter represent quarrels with contemporary critics, whereas the former take us very close to the heart of Aristotle and his inner beliefs about the nature and value of art.
