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ARISTOTLE
POETICS



Translated with Introduction and Notes

Joe Sachs

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ISBN 10: 1-58510-187-7

ISBN 13: 978-1-58510-187-0

Cover image: Wendy Braithwaite

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Printed in the United States of America

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Introduction

Experiencing and Thinking

There are a great many English translations of Aristotle's *Poetics*, and there is a wealth of commentary on it. The translations vary in accuracy, and the commentary varies in quality, but many of the former are serviceable and much of the latter is instructive. I venture to add to this already considerable accumulation of material for two reasons. The first is that no translation or discussion I have seen handles all the disputed points of interpretation as I would; the second is that the whole topic is so much fun. Some of the most exhilarating things an educated person can think about come tumbling out of Aristotle's inquiry into the questions of what a tragedy is, what it does, and how it does it. In the *Poetics* a human achievement of rare power and a thinker of rare depth met, and the world has never stopped talking about their encounter. Much of this talk has been critical, to the point of denying that Aristotle had any business daring to speak of something so foreign to his own specialties. But since his only specialty was thinking hard about anything that matters to a human being, such a critic has to be claiming that tragedy is incomprehensible by thinking, or that the experience of it is destroyed or diminished when it is subjected to thought.

Such a position is certainly a respectable one, but it loses some of its plausibility when one notices that so many people who clearly love tragedies choose to enter into passionate discussion with Aristotle, and with one another, about them. It is not in the nature of human beings to let things that interest us go unthought about. "What is it?" and "Why?" are not just modes of speaking and thinking; they are living ways of standing in and toward the world. In the face of our most powerful experiences, those questions may not get fully answered, but it is intolerable for them to go entirely unanswered either, and impossible for them to go unasked. For good or ill, to be greatly and noticeably affected by anything, and not to seek the cause, is no part of life as we live it. If that were not so, if we refrained from all reflection, important things could happen to us without becoming part of our experience at all. Life would pass through us without being lived by us.

This difference between what merely happens and what forms human experience is not only Aristotle's reason for striving to understand tragedy, it is at the heart of his understanding of tragedy. Just as we must make our own contribution to the things that happen to us to take them into our experience, we must make the decisive contribution to the things we do to lift them to the level of action. When Aristotle says that a tragedy sets before us an action that is serious and complete (1449b 24-25), he points us to the conditions of responsible human action that he discusses in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in Chapters 2-5 of Book III. Action (*praxis*) is marked out there as dependent upon choice, and aimed at an end. It is for that reason that an action can have a completeness, despite the fact that the consequences of our deeds never end, and the totality of their causes could never be traced. The poet who shapes a work of art to disclose the unity of an action, as Homer shaped both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (1451a 12-30), has an eye for the same aspects of life that Aristotle looks to in his thinking about ethics. It is not surprising, then, that we talk about the people in a tragedy as seriously as about the people we know, or that a vast number of the examples of actions that Aristotle gives throughout his study of ethics come from tragedies. Nor is it surprising if, to do justice to the whole of our experience, we find contributions from both poets and philosophers appropriate and welcome.

Imitation

Some of the resistance to Aristotle's discussion of poetry stems from his characterization of that activity as imitation (*mimêsis*), as though the poets' work is thereby tainted as something fake, like imitation leather. This sort of resistance often links Aristotle with Plato, who is thought to have treated poets with disrespect. On that issue, it may be sufficient for us to notice that in Plato's *Sophist*, imitative art is said to be capable of disclosing the true proportions of things (235 C-E). Such imitations would be of no great use if we could simply read those proportions off the originals of which they are copies. But Socrates, in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* (III, x, 1-8), points to their true use, when he asks about the fact that paintings and sculptures can be imitations (*mimêta*) not only of the look of a face or a body but also of the character and acts of a soul. I can attest that a certain lump of broken stone on display at Olympia in the Greek Peloponnese can be recognized not only as a standing man and as Apollo, but as radiating a calm dignity that overpowers the violent passions of the figures on his two sides. No one would ever confuse the interior life visible there with that in another block of graven stone in a Roman church, that is recognizably a seated man, and Moses, and angry, and controlling his anger.

Action, in the full sense described in the previous section, may be one of the most important things we could ever turn our attention to, and anything that helps us see it as it is would be a high achievement. But the worth of poetry is even greater if action can become visible nowhere but in an image. An action is stretched out in time, so that even in life, we can comprehend it nowhere but in the imagination. And its origin, in the act of choice, is interior, and never available to us in another person except by an act of interpretation. Even our own choices are not always recognized when they are made, but only evident to us retrospectively. And the ends for which we and others act, by which the outcomes of our deeds must be measured, are present to us only as possibilities foreseen in imagination. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that an action (*prakton*) is known only by sense perception (1142a 25-27), and then immediately qualifies this by saying that this is not the perception of any or all of the five external senses, but the same sort by which we perceive that a mathematical figure can be divided into no figures simpler than triangles. Try it. You might begin by drawing pictures and looking at them, but you will not come to a conclusion until you turn to the imagination.

To be an image of an action, what we see and hear on a stage must display the same interior depth that an action itself does. It is not enough that the figures before us be recognizable as Oedipus, Jocasta, and Tiresias, and go through motions, though that is the material with which the poet's activity works. From within that lowest level emerges the image that matters, of the invisible motions of a soul, as choices are made for reasons and consequences are faced. If the image on that higher level is capable of disclosing the true proportions of things to us, as the ranking of images in Plato's *Sophist* suggests, those proportions will have to do with the worth of choices, the respect due to the ends at which they aim, and the dignity of people who adhere to such choices for the sake of such ends. The imitations the poets offer us may be on a higher level than any originals we have managed to discern on our own.

Stories

Just as the imitation of an action reflects action itself in its dimension of depth, so too does it reflect the coherence of an action in its temporal extent (*megethos*), as beginning with a choice and seeking an end. Hence the beginning, middle, and end of a tragedy (1450b 21-34) are not its first, intermediate, and last episodes, but the inherent connections that constitute a well-made story (*muthos*). Most translations of the *Poetics* prefer to call this the "plot" of the tragedy, in part to distinguish the particular constructions put together by the various poets from the old stories out of which they take

their material. But this makes a distinction of lesser importance overshadow a much more important point. Story-telling and our responses to it belong to a fundamental human experience that the tragic poets worked with just as much as they worked with known legends. The word “plot” may suggest a skeletal framework of events¹ onto which a poet can impose an illusion of life, but stories are genuine wholes that already have a life of their own; this is precisely what Aristotle means when he says that the story is like the soul of the tragedy (1450a 38-39).

An analogy to the role stories play in all fiction may be seen in the role melodies play in music. Victor Zuckerkandl begins his book *The Sense of Music* with the observation that we all know spontaneously when we have heard a melody that is not complete. The language of melody belongs to a human heritage that does not need to be taught or learned. Composers can work with or against this inherent grammar of melody in countless ways, but tones themselves are always active elements in any composition. In a melody, one tone feels central, and the rest are heard as pulling toward or away from it, establishing relations of tension and resolution. Likewise, in a story one or more characters become central in such a way that we anticipate events. Things that happen in a story are not neutral members of a series but arrive as things hoped for or feared, which, when they have happened, are met with feelings of satisfaction or regret.

Some people disdain stories as belonging to a shallow kind of literary sensibility, but the shallowness of such critics is greater. They are like people who, having seen that mere life is not enough for a human being, decide to give up breathing. The story is the soul of a tragedy not in the sense that it is the most important thing to be grasped about it, but in the sense that it is what breathes life into all the tragedy's parts, making them parts in the first place by giving them the internal references to one another that permits there to be a whole. Aristotle speaks of the parts of a tragedy sometimes in the sense of its qualitatively different forms of dramatic elements (Chap. 6), sometimes in the sense of its quantitative divisions into sections or scenes (Chap. 12), but it is only their coherence in a story that allows them all to be not just put together in a *sunthesis* but organized as a *sustasis*. Stories can be trivial as well as serious, manipulative as well as honest, but it is through the story that the poet makes his connection with the spectator; Aristotle not only calls the story the soul of the tragedy, he calls it the greatest of the means by which the poet draws our souls (1450a 33-34).

1 When Aristotle speaks of such a framework in Ch. 17, he calls it a *logos*.

Fear and Pity

The response of one who is drawn into the experience of a tragedy, according to Aristotle, is first of all to feel fear and pity (1449b 27). Some commentators think he meant these only as examples of a larger variety of emotional responses, and in the passage just cited he does subsequently refer to “feelings of that sort.” Some other commentators think he meant just those two, but was arbitrarily restrictive in doing so. I believe that by “feelings of that sort” he meant just fear and pity, the first of which is a range of feelings extending from mild apprehension to terror, and the second of which covers a span from distant sympathy to empathetic misery; I believe too that he was characteristically perceptive in singling out just these two kinds of response. A little reflection on what is involved in following a story will begin to make clear what is peculiarly appropriate about them.

A story is not a series of events isolated like data points, but an unfolding motion that is continuous and one (1452a 15), no matter how much it may change or even reverse its direction. Aristotle says that the story in a tragedy must be complex, in the sense of containing some change of direction, but simple in the sense that what unfolds is all related to a single central character (1453a 12-13). It is by relation to the happiness or misery of that one character that the story comes to have a direction. If we are drawn toward that character rather than repulsed by him or her, our absorption in the story will dispose us to anticipate unfolding events with hope or fear, and to experience what comes to pass with gladness or regret. Other responses will always be involved, but these are the ones that must be present if we are experiencing a story at all. To say that a tragedy evokes fear and pity amounts to saying that, in the course of the action it imitates, some sort of harm gradually threatens and eventually overtakes the person whose action it portrays.

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle discusses in some detail the feelings a public speaker needs to understand. Since a deliberative assembly may be persuaded to act on the grounds that some threat is worthy of fear, and a jury may be persuaded to excuse some offense for the sake of pity, these two feelings are among them. In Bk. II, Chapter 5 of that work, Aristotle defines fear as “a certain pain or distress from the imagining of an impending evil of a destructive or painful sort,” and concludes a description of its various causes by saying: “to put it simply, what is feared is whatever is pitied when it happens or is about to happen to others.” In Chapter 8 of the same book he defines pity as “a certain pain at an evil of a destructive or painful sort that appears to happen to someone who doesn’t deserve it,” and concludes, “here too, in general, one needs to grasp that whatever things people fear for themselves they pity when they happen to others.” The two kinds of

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Chapter 1

About the poetic art itself and the forms of it, what specific capacity each has, and how one ought to put together stories⁴ if the making of them is going to hold together beautifully, and also how many and what sort of parts stories are made of, and likewise about as many other things as belong to the inquiry into poetic art, let us speak once we have first started, in accord with nature, from the things that come first. 1447a
10

Now epic poetry and the making of tragedy, and also comedy and dithyrambic poetry, as well as most flute-playing and lyre-playing, are all as a whole just exactly imitations, but they are different from one another in three ways, for they differ either by making their imitations in different things, by imitating different things, or by imitating differently and not in the same way. For just as some people who make images imitate many things by means of both colors and shapes (some through art and others through habituation), and others by means of the voice, so too with the arts mentioned, all of them make imitations in rhythm, 20

4 The words for the poetic art (*hê poiêtikê*) and for poetry (*poiêsis*) are first of all general names for any art or process of making. This same usage is present in English in the title of the Scottish 15th or 16th century poem *Lament for the Makers* by William Dunbar. Aristotle's assumption is that poetic making is primarily a making of stories. The connection of stories with making is also present in English in the word fiction.

speech, and harmony,⁵ and with these either separate or mixed. For example, both flute-playing and lyre-playing, and any other arts there happen to be that are of that sort in their capacity, such as the art of the Pan-pipes, use only harmony and rhythm, while the art of dancers uses rhythm itself apart from harmony (for they too, through the rhythms of their gestures, imitate states of character, feelings, and actions). But the art that uses bare words and the one that
1447b uses meters, and the latter either mixing meters with one another or using one particular kind, happen to be nameless
10 up to now. For we have nothing to use as a name in common for the mimes of Sophron and Xenarchus and the Socratic dialogues, even if someone were to make the imitation with [iambic] trimeters or elegiac [couplets] or anything else of that sort. Instead, people connect the poetic making with the meter and name “elegiac poets,” or others “epic poets,” calling them poets not as a result of the imitation but as a result of the meter as what is common to them, for even when they bring out something medical or about nature in meter, people are accustomed to speak of them in that way. But nothing is common to Homer and Empedocles except the meter, and hence, while it is just to call the former a poet,
20 the latter is more a student of nature than a poet. By the same token, even if someone were to make an imitation by mixing all the meters, the very way Chaerephon made the *Centaur* as a patchwork mixture of all the meters, one would have to call him too a poet. As for these things,⁶ then, let them be distinguished in this way. And there are some arts that use

5 *Harmonia* could mean music in general, but had the primary meaning of a fitting or joining together of parts. The more musical forms of poetry joined more elements with metered speech, in some cases an instrumental accompaniment, in others dancing or an elaboration of metrical patterns. Dithyrambs combined song, dance, prologues spoken in meter, and flute ensembles, and sometimes even fitted in metrical dialogue. (See also footnote 7.)

6 Things having to do with the medium in which the imitation is made. Chapters 2 and 3 deal, respectively, with what is imitated and the manner in which it is imitated.

all the things mentioned—I mean, for instance, rhythm and melody and meter—as do the making of both dithyramb and nomes,⁷ and both tragedy and comedy.

Chapter 2

Since those doing the imitating imitate people acting, and it is necessary that the latter be people either of serious moral stature or of a low sort (for states of character pretty much always follow these sorts alone, since all people differentiate states of character by vice and virtue), they imitate either those better than we are or worse, or else of our sort, just as painters do. For Polygnotus used to make images of superior people, Pauson of inferior, and Dionysius of those like us. And it is clear too that each of the kinds of imitation mentioned will have these differences and will be different by imitating different things in this manner. For even in dance, in flute-playing, and in lyre-playing, it is possible for these dissimilarities to be brought into being, as well as in what involves speeches and meters bare of music, as Homer imitated better people, Cleophon people similar to us, and Hegemon the Thasian, who first made parodies, and Nicochares, who made the *Timidiad*, imitated worse people. And similarly as concerns dithyramb and nomes, one might make imitations in the same ways Timotheus and Philoxenus each made his *Cyclops*. And by this very difference tragedy stands apart in relation to comedy, for the latter intends to imitate those who are worse, and the former better, than people are now. 1448a
10

Chapter 3

Yet a third of these differences is how one might imitate each of these things. For it is also possible to imitate the same things, in the same things, sometimes by narrating— 20

7 In contrast to the wilder dithyramb involved in the worship of Dionysus, the nome was a more stately choral ode danced and sung in honor of Apollo.

either becoming a particular other, as Homer does, or as the same [narrative voice] and not changing—or with all those doing the imitating performing deeds and being in activity. So the imitation is present in these three differences, as we said at the beginning: the in which, the what, and the how. As a result, Sophocles is in one sense the same sort of imitator as Homer, since both imitate people of serious moral stature, but in another sense Sophocles is the same sort of imitator as Aristophanes, since they both imitate with people performing deeds and acting [*drôntas*]. And this is why some people say the latter are called dramas, because they imitate with people acting. For this reason too
30 the Dorians take credit for both tragedy and comedy (for the Megarians there take credit for comedy as having come into being at the time of their democracy, as do the Megarians in Sicily, since Epicharmus the poet was from there, being much earlier than Chionides and Magnes, and some of those in the Peloponnese take credit for tragedy). They make the names a sign of this, for they say they call their rural villages *cômai* while the Athenians call them *dêmoi*, and that comic actors were so called not from their reveling (*comazein*) but for their wandering from village to village, since they were
1448b banned in dishonor from the city. And they call performing an action *dran* while Athenians call it *prattein*. So about the differences among imitations, both how many and what they are, let these things have been said.

Chapter 4

And it is likely that two particular causes, and these natural ones, brought into being the poetic art as a whole. For imitating is co-natural with human beings from childhood, and in this they differ from the other animals because they are the most imitative and produce their first acts of understanding by means of imitation; also all human beings take delight in imitations. A sign of this is what happens
10 in our actions, for we delight in contemplating the most