ARISTOTLE'S AESTHETICS

Aristotle's theory of art is put forth in a small book called the *Poetics*, and as the title indicates, he was especially concerned with epic and dramatic poetry. In discussing poetry, and art in general, he was greatly influenced by Plato (who was Aristotle's teacher), but he didn't reach Plato's negative conclusions, and it is easy to read the *Poetics* as an "answer to Plato."

To begin with, in discussing art Aristotle is interested in the question of why we enjoy it, and he traces this enjoyment to certain basic characteristics of human nature. As he says:

> Imitation is natural to man from childhood, and one of his advantages over the lower animals is that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation. And it is also natural to delight in works of imitation. The truth of this second point is shown by experience: though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, for example the forms of the lowest animals and of dead bodies. The explanation is to be found in a further fact: to be learning something is the greatest of pleasures not only to the philosopher but also to the rest of mankind, however small their capacity for it; the reason for the delight in seeing the [artist's] picture is that one is at the same time learning—gathering the meaning of things, e.g., that the man there is so-and-so.

Thus Aristotle follows Plato in thinking of art as cognitive. A poem or a picture imparts information about something; it does this by conveying a likeness of some object. For this reason, again like Plato, Aristotle regarded "imitation" as the essential element in art.

But although he started with Plato's idea of art as imitation, Aristotle reinterpreted it in terms of his own revised theory of the Forms. Plato, it will be remembered, had held that all true knowledge is of Forms or essences which exist in a separate world; he thus concluded that poems and paintings, which are simply copies of particular things in the sensed world, cannot help us to gain knowledge of ultimate reality. But for Aristotle the Forms or essences of things do not exist in a separate and abstract realm; in other words, for Aristotle what is ultimately real is found in the world that we sense. Thus, although Aristotle held that art is imitative, he also held that it can show us what is ultimately real.

In discussing the cognitive function of artistic imitations, Aristotle compares poetry with history:

> ...it is not the poet's business to relate actual events, but such things as might or could happen in accordance with probability or necessity. A poet differs from a historian, not because one writes verse and the other prose (the work of Herodotus could be put into verse, but it would still remain a history, whether in verse or prose), but because the historian relates what happened, and the poet represents what might happen. That is why poetry is more akin to philosophy and is a better thing than history; poetry deals with general truths, history with specific events. The latter are, for example, what Alcibiades did or suffered, while general truths are the kind of thing which a certain type of person would probably or inevitably do or say. Poetry aims to do this by its choice of names; this is clearly seen in comedy, for when the

> writers of comedy have constructed their plots in accordance with probability, they give their characters typical names...and they are not...concerned with a particular individual.

History and poetic drama are both concerned with the lives and fortunes of individuals, but they treat this subject matter quite differently. Let us take as an example the actual career of Alcibiades, in which the necessary relation between excess (or insufficient) moderation and disaster was obscured by a hundred inconsequential details—details relevant to Alcibiades the man but irrelevant to the relationship between excess and disaster. Whereas the historian-biographer must attempt to report all these details, the tragic poet operates under no such restraints. He is free to emphasize omit, and modify—we might even say to "distort"—in order to bring the significant relationships into sharp focus. The historian's biography of Alcibiades' career can thus be transformed into a tragedy of ambition by the poet.

This is exactly what Euripides did, for instance, in his tragedy *Medea*. The raw material of this play was "history," an ancient myth, which Euripides altered to satisfy his poetic intention. Because he was under no compulsion to be faithful to the facts, he could construct a plot—a sequence of events—in which the relation between excessive ambition and ruin is dramatically revealed with clarity and precision and, above all, with a sense of its necessity.

Thus, although the historical Alcibiades may seem a victim of his circumstances and environment, we are convinced that Jason's tragic end in *Medea* was the inevitable consequence of his character. Poetry is therefore more scientific and philosophical than history for it displays relationships as necessary instead of accidental. In its own way it achieves the necessity that is the ideal of science and philosophy.
But, of course, the axioms of science and philosophy are generalized and abstract statements of necessary connections, whereas the relations revealed in art are displayed only in the concrete individuality of a particular life in a particular environment. Poetry gives us a universal generalization (as science and philosophy do), but it is one that is also particular; it gives us a particular case (as history does), but one that is also universal. Thus poetry is a "mean" between history and science and philosophy.

In making this point, Aristotle seems to be thinking of history as a mere chronicle of distinct events, without explaining their connection, and this is certainly a very narrow conception of history, but what he says about poetry is significant. Here his point is that in order to make a coherent and powerful plot the poet must show how actions grow out of motives and motives out of circumstances. But this can be done only in terms of universals or psychological laws (that a man under such-and-such circumstances would necessarily or probably act in such-and-such a way). Thus his main point is that dramatic poetry involves psychological knowledge (as, he thinks, history does not).

Here, then, Aristotle is answering one of Plato's objections to poetry. For though the poet can only plausibly pretend to knowledge of carpentry which he does not have, he cannot fake *psychological*

knowledge—he must understand human nature. He must have true general knowledge of certain psychological mechanisms; for without these he cannot even make a good play. And, other things being equal, the better the play the more profound and extensive must the poet's knowledge be, for both the beautiful pattern of plot and the successful imitation of action depend upon it. What makes *Oedipus the King* a masterpiece isn't divine inspiration, but rather Sophocles' deep understanding of human character. And it is this same understanding, or knowledge, which makes Oedipus a socially valuable play.

Art, however, is not merely a way of getting to know the world. It also has an emotive side, and here again Aristotle began with a Platonic thesis. Plato had held not only that artists are deceitful, but also that they are dangerous because they "water" violent passions. For this reason Plato thought the poet should face strict censorship, if he could not be totally eliminated. But when Aristotle turns to the emotive side of poetry, he sees no such danger, and for him art is essentially a quieter of passion, and therefore something which should be welcomed rather than banished. Thus, though he agreed with Plato in evaluating art on what are extra-aesthetic grounds (cognitive and moral), unlike Plato he held that art has a socially valuable function.

Specifically, according to Aristotle, tragic drama operates psychologically to relieve us of the oppressive emotions of pity and fear, just as a cathartic purges the body of some excessive "humor." Here you might think of art as a mental laxative that helps to bring about our emotional health, and for Aristotle it is the role of the tragic hero to work upon our emotions in this way. Here we should turn to several famous passages from the *Poetics*:

> A perfect tragedy should...imitate actions which excite pity and fear.... It follows that the change of fortune in a tragedy must not be the spectacle of a perfectly virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity: for this moves neither pity nor fear; it merely shocks us. Nor again should we see a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity.... Nor, again, should the downfall of an utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy our moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear—for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves. There remains, then, the character between these two extremes—a man who is neither perfectly virtuous, nor is it through wickedness and vice that he falls into misfortune, but through some flaw. He should also be famous or prosperous, like Oedipus, Thyestes and the noted men of such noble families.
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> A good plot must consist of a single and not a double story, for this unity will provide a single condensed impact; and it must proceed with the greatest possible sense of necessity or probability...The change of fortune should not be from misfortune to prosperity but, on the contrary, from prosperity to misfortune. This change should not be caused by outright wickedness but by a serious flaw in a character such as we have just described.... The plot should be constructed so that...he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place....

> Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action....; through pity and fear affecting the proper purgation of these emotions.

Thus, after watching the unfolding of a tragic drama, we leave the theater "calm of mind, all passion spent," and so in a state of better balance than before we saw the play. In other words, tragedy is socially valuable because, through a catharsis, it makes human beings more rational, and for Aristotle this means more moral.

But at this point it should he noted that the word "catharsis" is ambiguous: as discussed here, it is seen as a medical metaphor, and implies getting rid of noxious emotions in a way analogous to a physic. But it has also been taken in a religious sense, to refer to a kind of "purification" of the emotions, but not their elimination. In the *Poetics* Aristotle isn't clear about the precise meaning of catharsis, but in the *Politics* he is more specific when he discusses the place of music in education. Here he tells us that one of the benefits of music is "release of emotion," saying that certain people are:

> affected by religious melodies; and when they come under the influence of melodies which fill the soul with religious excitement they are calmed and restored as if they had undergone a medical treatment and purging (*katharsis*). The same sort of effect will also be produced by appropriate music on those who are specially subject to feelings of fear and pity, or to feelings of any kind.

In this passage Aristotle is talking about music, but most students of Aristotle have argued that he thought the same way about tragic drama, which means that he was totally rejecting Plato's criticisms of tragedy. Perhaps he would have summed up his rebuttal as follows: Yes, if we look at the audience's immediate frenzy, at its terror and weeping, it may seem that tragedy waters the emotions, but if we look at the 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 wisest, for he is able to get rid of those festering emotional irritations that poison the temperament and prevent a rational approach to the world.