

## ARISTOTLE ON POETRY AND IMITATION

In the opening sentence of the *Poetics*, Aristotle tells us that he is going to deal with poetry itself, its kinds and their powers, and so on. He then turns to a discussion of imitation or representation (**mimhsij**). Thereafter the treatise is an examination of imitation in general and in certain of its forms, namely tragedy and epic. We are thus given to believe that, for Aristotle, poetry is imitation, or that this is his answer to the question “what is poetry?”, and is meant to serve as a definition. This is indeed what scholars have thought.<sup>1</sup> Of course one needs to add the qualifications Aristotle suggests to distinguish poetry from painting, music and dancing which are also imitation. Poetry imitates using language (**l ogoj**) and rhythm (**r(uqmoj)**), and (usually) also harmony or song (**a(rmonia, mel oj)**). Use of language will distinguish poetry from dancing and music, and use of rhythm, or generally verse, will distinguish it from prose imitations like Socratic dialogues.

That this definition of poetry as imitation is an acceptable one has been held by many commentators. They have thought that ‘imitation’ can very easily be applied to all kinds of poetry and to the fine arts as well. But that this is at best problematic can be seen if one considers, on the one hand, attempts to do this, and, on the other, Aristotle’s actual use of the term ‘imitation’.

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<sup>1</sup> Ingemar Düring, *Aristoteles: Darstellung und Interpretation seines Denkens* (Winter, Heidelberg, 1966), p.164; D.W. Lucas, *Aristotle’s Poetics* (Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 53, note ad 47a8.

P. SOMVILLE in his *Essai sur la Poétique d'Aristote*<sup>2</sup> finds in 'imitation' a meaning like "stylisation". Imitation does not merely mean the copying of a thing, but the creating or refracting of it; it involves the taking up of things given in nature, in the real, and a transformation of them into something other by the creative genius of the artist.

Le produit mimétique est...un mixte issu de la perception de certains éléments de réalité et indissociablement de la réfraction de ces éléments, proportionnelle au façonnement et à l'invention de l'artiste. (p.51)

SOMVILLE calls on passages in the *Politics* in support of this, but he refers in particular to that passage in the *Poetics*<sup>3</sup> where Aristotle talks of the pleasure involved in recognizing, in a painting, the image of something real, even when that something is, in itself, repellent or painful.

Cardinal NEWMAN in his *Poetry with Reference to Aristotle's Poetics*<sup>4</sup> also sees in 'imitation' a transformation or stylization of the real, but he uses the word 'ideal' to express this and refers, not to the passage cited by SOMVILLE, but to the comparison of poetry with history in chapter 9.

Poetry, according to Aristotle, is a representation of the ideal. Biography and history represent individual characters and actual facts; poetry, on the contrary, generalizing from the phenomena of nature and life, supplies us with pictures

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<sup>2</sup> J. Vrin, Paris, 1975, pp. 43-54.

<sup>3</sup> ch.4, 1448b16-19.

<sup>4</sup> In *Aristotle's Poetics and English Literature. A Collection of Critical Essays*, Elder Olson, ed. (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1965).

drawn, not after an existing pattern, but after a creation of the mind... It delineates that perfection which the imagination suggests, and to which as a limit the present system of Divine Providence actually tends. (p.88)

Garry HAGBERG and Leon GOLDEN have recently offered other interpretations.<sup>5</sup>

HAGBERG argues that imitation means representing the abstract relations between things, and GOLDEN that it means a learning process, or a mechanism for the apprehension of truth, that culminates in “intellectual clarification” (what he says is meant by **kaḥarsij**). All these commentators try to show how their interpretations of ‘imitation’ have a universal application, either to all the fine arts, not just poetry, or to all kinds of poetry.

However there is plenty of evidence to show that in the *Poetics* ‘imitation’ cannot mean any of these, even though it may involve them. It is applied exclusively to the imitation of actions. In chapter 2, which is the one that deals with the division of imitations with respect to the objects imitated, we find that these are limited to “people in action” (**prattontaj**).<sup>6</sup> This remark is preceded by a “since” (**epei**) as if it were an evident and acknowledged fact. This evident fact is used both here in chapter 2 to divide the objects imitated into their kinds, and in chapters 4 and 5 to account for the rise of the different types of poetry. In chapter 9, it is said that the poet should be a poet of stories (**muqoi**) rather than of verses (**metra**), since a poet is a poet because of imitation, and

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<sup>5</sup> Hagberg, ‘Aristotle’s Mimesis and Abstract Art’, *Philosophy* 59 (1984): 365-371; Golden, ‘Mimesis and Katharsis’. *Classical Philology* 64 (1969): 145-153; ‘Toward a Definition of Tragedy’, *Classical Journal* 72 (1976-7): 21-33; ‘Aristotle on Comedy’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 42 (1983-4): 283-290.

<sup>6</sup> 1448a1.

what is imitated is actions (**prabeij**).<sup>7</sup> The importance of **muqoi** for Aristotle comes out, in fact, in the very first sentence, where, in listing the things his treatise on poetry is to deal with, he expressly mentions “how the stories (**muqoi**) must be put together if the poem is to be done well,” thereby implying that this is one of the integral parts of poetry as such. The concentration on imitation as an imitation of actions is revealed also by the fact that only those kinds of poetry are mentioned or dealt with in detail that concern some story, some telling of an action. This also appears in the case of music, for a passing remark in chapter 26<sup>8</sup> shows that when Aristotle mentions flute-playing in chapter 1 and classes it as imitation, what he has in mind is the flute-playing of musicians who imitate beings in action, discuss-throwers and Scylla, and who resort to vulgar additions to make their imitation more obvious.

Other remarks that are less explicit seem nevertheless to fit the same pattern. When Aristotle gives examples of the things painful in themselves but pleasant to see when painted, he mentions wild beasts and corpses, and this suggests that he had in mind scenes of hunts and battles (both actions), such as we find in surviving vase-paintings. Again children are said to learn by imitation,<sup>9</sup> and children typically imitate by doing what they see adults and other children do. Finally when dancers are said to imitate characters as well as sufferings and actions, characters seem to be introduced here in the same way as they are in tragedy, namely for the sake of, and as subservient to, the action.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> 1451b27-9.

<sup>8</sup> 1461b29-32.

<sup>9</sup> ch.4, 1448b5-8.

<sup>10</sup> ch.1, 1447a28; ch.6, 1450a20-22.

These references are clear enough, yet I am not the first to argue that they show that ‘imitation’ in the *Poetics* means ‘imitation of action’. This was done in the last century by T. TWINING in an essay included in the collection by OLSON.<sup>11</sup> But if ‘imitation’ is confined in this way, can it be extended to cover the whole range of fine art and poetry in general? Is not this range broader than that covered by ‘plot’ or ‘story’ or ‘imitation of action’? It is noteworthy that SOMVILLE, NEWMAN, HAGBERG and GOLDEN only succeed in making ‘imitation’ cover the whole of poetry or the fine arts generally by omitting any reference to actions. For while it may be true that imitation (even the imitation of an action) involves a stylizing and idealizing and a concentration on abstract relations as well as a learning, to make these the core of its meaning is to use ‘imitation’ in a way in which it is not used by Aristotle. For him the connection with actions is always present.

S. BUTCHER was aware of this point. He agreed that imitation for Aristotle is of actions, but he also argued that the word ‘actions’ must have a very broad sense as it is used in the *Poetics*.

An act viewed merely as an external process or result, one of a series of outward phenomena, is not the true object of aesthetic imitation. The **πραξις** that art seeks to reproduce is mainly an inward process, a psychical energy working outwards; ...everything that expresses the mental life, that reveals a rational personality, will fall within this larger sense of ‘action.’... The common original...from which all the arts draw is human life, — its mental processes, its spiritual movements, its

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<sup>11</sup> *op.cit.* pp.42-75, especially p.60.

outward acts issuing from deeper sources; in a word, all that constitutes the inward and essential activity of soul.<sup>12</sup>

One consequence of this, as BUTCHER himself points out, is that animals and landscapes or natural scenes cannot be objects of imitation. The explanation he offers for this is that Aristotle, following the practice of Greek poets and artists of the classical period, allows the introduction of “the external world only so far as it forms a background of action, and enters as an emotional element into man’s life and heightens the human interest.”<sup>13</sup>

All this may be true up to a point, but it cannot be simply correct. It is evident that for Aristotle actions, in the sense of plots and stories, are the primary or central object of imitation. Habits and emotions (or the “inward activity of soul”) are only introduced for the sake of the action or the story.<sup>14</sup> This would mean that, at least abstract forms of art, whether statuary, paintings or poetry, would not count as imitations for Aristotle (contrary to the argument, for instance, of HAGBERG and SOMVILLE). It would also mean that in those kinds of poetry that seem to concentrate on habits and emotions, or that are mainly descriptions of states of mind, there would still have to be a reference to action and this reference would have to be somehow central if such poetry was to count as imitation in Aristotle’s sense. But this would be a forced and unnatural position to adopt.

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<sup>12</sup> S.H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, with a Critical Text and a Translation of the Poetics*, 4th. ed., (Dover Publications, 1951), pp.123-4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> ch.1, 1447a28; ch.6, 1450a20-22.

LUCAS hints at an alternative explanation. The reason that Aristotle confined himself to the four kinds of poetry mentioned in chapter 1, and which are all imitation of actions, is that they were the most important at the time, either because they were still being composed or because, in the case of epic, one of its past exponents, Homer, remained so dominant.<sup>15</sup> But this, even if true, is irrelevant, for anyone who undertook to examine poetry generally would have to consider all the forms generally known to give a complete account of the phenomenon. And of course one of these forms was Greek lyric. Now one might say that Greek lyric poetry is as much an imitation of actions as epic or tragedy, unlike the sort of lyric poetry that we have become familiar with. But while some lyric poetry is an imitation of action, not all of it is.<sup>16</sup> Besides it is clearly not the case that to write poetry one must write about actions. Even if all extant poetry in Aristotle's day was imitation of actions, it is hard to believe that the possibility of there being other kinds would have entirely escaped his fertile and inquisitive mind.

It would seem from all this that we are reduced to saying either that Aristotle never intended to write about all poetry, or that if he did he took a far too narrow focus. Or is there any other possibility left that might do a better job of explaining Aristotle's remarks? I think there is, but it requires one to indulge in a fair amount of speculation. This is something that is always risky but, in the case of such a puzzling and fragmented text as the *Poetics*, it is perhaps more necessary and therefore more excusable than elsewhere in the Aristotelian corpus. Briefly, what I shall argue is that actions and the imitation of actions are somehow primary for all poetry, not just dramatic and narrative kinds. Primary, however, not in the sense of being what all kinds of poetry necessarily

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<sup>15</sup> op.cit., p.54 note ad 47a13; there is a good discussion of *mimhsij* in appendix I, pp.258-272.

<sup>16</sup> One might take some of the poems of Sappho (e.g. no.31, Bergk's numbering), or some of the choral odes in surviving tragedies.

must aim at and put first, but in the sense that the kind of poetry that does aim at action and put it first is somehow the first or highest kind of poetry. This is why Aristotle gives a decided preference to such poetry and treats it as somehow indicative of poetry as such, because it is indicative of poetry at its best.<sup>17</sup>

The suggestion I am making is not without precedent in Aristotle's work. In books Z and H of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle takes up the subject of being as divided through the ten categories. He does not deal with all ten, but only the first, substance, because he regards substance as holding a privileged position among them such that knowledge of it leads to knowledge of the rest.<sup>18</sup> One finds something similar to this in the *Poetics* itself. Such a position of privilege as substance holds over the other categories is held by tragedy over epic, and in general by tragedy and comedy over the other kinds Aristotle mentions. From the first five chapters it becomes clear that comedy and tragedy represent two peaks of development. They are imitation, first of all, in all three means, not in one or two, as are music, dancing, epic and Socratic dialogues. Secondly they are at a greater stage of advancement than other poetry that uses all three means, as dithyrambs, nomos and satyr plays. Chapters 4 and 5 present us with a historical development from lower to higher, from incomplete to complete, with tragedy and comedy at the respective ends of two diverging lines, for their forms (**σχηματα**) are greater and held in more honor (**μειζονα και ετιμωτερα**).<sup>19</sup> This appears more clearly

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<sup>17</sup> A similar view is put into the mouth of Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Definitive Text, New York, 1964), pp.214-215. Joyce clearly knew his Aristotle, but the reasons Dedalus gives for the superiority of dramatic poetry are not those I here attribute to Aristotle. Dedalus also says that literature is the highest art, and while Aristotle may also have believed that, there is no evidence that he did. Of course there is the further question in Joyce's case of how far he intended these remarks of Dedalus to be taken seriously—a question I will not attempt to answer.

<sup>18</sup> *Metaphysics* Z, ch.1.

<sup>19</sup> 14449a5-6.



in the case of tragedy and epic in particular. The more like tragedy epic is the better it is as epic,<sup>20</sup> and Homer is the best epic poet because he is the most dramatic.<sup>21</sup> Tragedy is to be treated before epic, because it contains epic but not vice versa, so that to know the former is also to know the latter.<sup>22</sup> That tragedy and comedy are thus last in time but first in perfection, and contain the other kinds as the complete contains the incomplete, explains another puzzle in the *Poetics*, namely why Aristotle does not deal, nor propose to deal, even with all the kinds of poetry he does mention in the opening chapters (he does not say anywhere that he is going to deal with dithyrambs, nomos and satyr plays).

This relationship of perfect and imperfect is shown most clearly between tragedy and epic. Aristotle says that tragedy is superior to epic because of function: tragedy achieves this better than epic does.<sup>23</sup> I assume that the function of tragedy and epic is the same, because although Aristotle does not expressly say what the function of epic is, he does say what the function of tragedy is and that epic is contained in tragedy. I take this to mean that what is omitted in the discussion of epic is to be supplied from what is said of tragedy (we are given no definition of epic; Aristotle leaves us to construct our own using the definition of tragedy in chapter 6 as a guide). This is backed up by chapters 23 and 24 where Aristotle says epic plots are to be like tragic ones, which implies the function is the same since the nature of a tragic plot is determined by the function of tragedy (chs.13 and 14). In chapter 6 the function of tragedy, and hence also of epic, is

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<sup>20</sup> chs.23, 24, 26.

<sup>21</sup> ch.23, 1459a18-21; ch.4, 1448b35-6.

<sup>22</sup> ch.5, 1449b17-20; ch.26, 1462a14-17. Carnes Lord has presented some arguments against the idea that Aristotle holds tragedy to be superior to epic, or at any rate the epic of Homer, in his 'Aristotle's History of Poetry', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 104 (1974): 195-229. He focuses, however, on what Aristotle says in chapter 4, and while his arguments do have a certain plausibility in that context, Aristotle's own remarks in chapter 26 make it very clear that he does hold tragedy to be superior, even to Homer.

<sup>23</sup> 1462b14-15.

said, or implied, to be the **kaḡarsij** (catharsis) of pity and fear through pity and fear.<sup>24</sup> What precisely is meant by **kaḡarsij** need not concern us at present; it will be raised again later.<sup>25</sup> It is sufficient, for the moment, to note two things: one, it is something pleasant, for the function of tragedy is also said to be the pleasure proper to it,<sup>26</sup> and it is an idea frequently expressed in the *Poetics* that tragedy is and should be pleasurable and enjoyable;<sup>27</sup> two, it is achieved by the excitation of the emotions of pity and fear. This is already stated in the definition of tragedy and is used in chapters 13 and 14 when the excellence of plots is examined, for that is said to be the better tragedy which is the more pitiable and fearful.<sup>28</sup> Tragedy is superior, then, to epic because of its greater effectiveness at excitation of the relevant emotions, and the greater concentration of the pleasure it causes.<sup>29</sup>

Might, then, the same be true of poetry in general, that while all have the function of the pleasurable excitation of the emotions (thereby achieving **kaḡarsij**), nevertheless those kinds that expressly or primarily imitate actions achieve this function better?

An initial approach to this question is to examine what it is that excites emotions. This is chiefly their objects, so that one feels fear when presented (either in fact or imagination) with some fearful object, and so with pity and all the others. All the objects of the emotions, according to Aristotle, are somehow connected with pleasure and pain<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> 1449b27-8. Aristotle does not expressly say that **kaḡarsij** is the function, but this is clearly implied by the structure of the definition.

<sup>25</sup> I agree with Golden that the meaning of **kaḡarsij** has something to do with learning (see the articles referred to above). But this learning is not exclusively intellectual as he seems to imply. **kaḡarsij** also involves teaching or training the emotions, as I suggest below.

<sup>26</sup> ch.26., 1462b12-15.

<sup>27</sup> ch.9, 1451b23; ch.13, 1453a35-6; ch.14, 1453b10-13.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. especially ch.13, 1452b30-33; ch.14, 1453b3-6.

<sup>29</sup> ch.26, 1462a14-17.

<sup>30</sup> *Rhetoric*, bk.2; *Ethics*, 1105b21-23.

so that one may say that each is something that is pleasant or painful in the relevant way. Fear, for example, is of some really or apparently destructive or painful evil that is about to befall one.<sup>31</sup> The painful and pleasant are also kinds of bad and good, and the bad and good are painful and pleasant. But that which is most comprehensively and most emphatically the good and the pleasant for us is happiness (**eudaimonia**), and conversely that which is bad or painful in this way is misery (**kakodaimonia**). Happiness and misery are, however, found in action: “it is according to characters that people are of such and such kind, but they are happy or the reverse in their actions (**praxeij**).”<sup>32</sup> If then emotions are stirred by the good and bad, the painful and pleasant, then the greatest good and greatest evil, happiness and misery, would seem fitted to do this in the most powerful way. As these are found in actions, it would seem to follow that it is by the representation or imitation of actions that poetry will most excite the emotions, actions in which, as Aristotle says in chapter 13, the characters are portrayed as happy or miserable or passing from one to the other.

If this argument is sound it clearly gives the superiority to poetry that imitates actions. But is it sound? I think not and principally because there is something unsatisfying about the conclusion. Surely other sorts of poetry can affect the emotions as much as a well-constructed tragedy, and even in the case of existing tragedies it is often something other than the action that is especially moving. There is much to agree with in NEWMAN's criticism of Aristotle for making the excellence of tragedies lie in their plots. Their poetic charm is found, he says, rather in the exquisite delineation of

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<sup>31</sup> *Rhetoric*, 1382a21-22.

<sup>32</sup> *Poetics*, ch.6, 1450a17-20.

character, in the expression of sentiment, and in the harmonious and majestic language.<sup>33</sup>

There is a sense, though, in which dramatic or narrative poems might be superior here, for it is difficult to imagine anything but the presentation of an action, performed before one's eyes, sustaining an emotion over time, and gradually increasing it as the plot unfolds, keeping one, as is said, 'on the edge of one's seat'. It is difficult, too, to imagine anything else creating the shudder of fear (**frittein**) or the astonished shock (**ekpl hciij**) that an action can create with a drastic discovery or sudden reversal of fortune.<sup>34</sup>

But this difference is not all that great. It certainly does not seem enough on its own to justify or explain Aristotle's preference for action-imitating poetry. Something else about imitation of actions seems to be needed.

At this stage, to pursue my argument further I must appeal beyond the *Poetics* to the *Politics*, and in particular to what Aristotle says in book 8 about music. There are two points I want specifically to notice, and the first concerns catharsis.<sup>35</sup> Since music has this in common with poetry in Aristotle's eyes and as his work on poetry is expressly referred to in the context, one is entitled to consider if the treatment of it here may throw some light on its place in the *Poetics*. As an example of the *cathartic* effect of music, Aristotle gives religious, orgiastic music, which, he says, restores some people who hear it as if they had received a cure and catharsis.<sup>36</sup> He adds that this is something universal and that all will feel the same effect in proportion as they are susceptible to the various emotions (among which pity and fear are mentioned by name); they will experience a catharsis and a pleasurable 'relief' or 'easing'. The word used means to lighten, to remove

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<sup>33</sup> Olson, *op.cit.*, pp.82-4.

<sup>34</sup> ch.14, 1453b5; ch.15, 1454a4; ch.16, 1455a16-18.

<sup>35</sup> *Politics*, 1341b32-1342a16.

<sup>36</sup> 1342a10-11.

a load or burden (**koufizesqai**);<sup>37</sup> we ourselves use this same idea in certain contexts, for we sometimes say to those who are suffering some grief or sorrow that a good cry will make them feel better, as if relieving or lightening the load of pain. It would be wrong to press these comments too far, but they suggest that catharsis is more thorough where the exercise of emotion is more vigorous and sensational and sustained at a higher pitch, as in the case of the frenzy caused by orgiastic music.

One can return here to the point just made about the power to excite emotion of the different kinds of poetry. I suggested that those that imitate actions are superior in their creating sudden surges of emotion as if by violent impact (I referred to the words **frittein** and **ekpl hci j**), and in their sustaining a high pitch of excitement. If, as the *Politics* passage suggests, catharsis is connected with the force and the sustaining of the emotional effect, then action-imitating poetry would be superior in this respect.

One need not object to this that Aristotle would oppose such violent exercise of emotion because it would be excessive and threaten the mean of virtue. The excessive is not the too much by way of quantity but the too much by way of not being how, when and about what it ought to be. Sometimes it may well be that some violent or intense emotional feeling is the mean, and this is what Aristotle does suggest is true of orgiastic music when it has a cathartic effect.

The second point I want to notice in the *Politics* concerns the moral effect of artistic imitations. But before this is developed some defense is required, for Aristotle's analysis of poetry in the *Poetics* ignores almost entirely its moral effect on the audience. There is no hint of any of Plato's strictures against poetry. When Aristotle talks about

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<sup>37</sup> 1342a14.

what the poet should or should not do, this “should” (*dei*) is a thoroughly artistic one; it is referred wholly to the requirements of the art, to what is required for a tragedy or epic to be good as a tragedy or epic, not to be good as tending to make people morally better or worse. Again the division in chapter 2 of the persons portrayed into better, worse and the same as us, is not used to make any moral prescriptions; on the contrary, the portrayal of the worse, far from being disapproved, constitutes a distinct and legitimate kind of poetry, namely comedy, and comedy is, for Aristotle, artistically one of the highest kinds of poetry. Even in chapter 25 where the criticisms of poetry are discussed, the criticism on the ground of immorality (that the portrayal may be harmful—*bl abera!*—or not fine—*mh\ka! wj*) is only upheld if the immorality or depravity (*moxqhria*) cannot be justified in terms of the needs of the poem.<sup>38</sup> It does not appear from this that, as far as Aristotle is concerned, it is any part of the task or intention of the poet or poetry to be morally good.

It is one thing, however, to consider what is required for a poem to be good as a poem of the appropriate type, and another to consider whether poems of this type, whether done well or badly, are desirable or good. Or to relate it specifically to the present topic, it is one thing to ask how a poem can be good at effecting catharsis of the emotions, and another to ask if such catharsis is good or bad. The first question is an artistic one, and since the *Poetics* is a treatise on art, it is confined to such artistic matters. The second, however, is a moral and political one, and therefore is to be raised and answered by the science of ethics and politics (and Aristotle does in fact raise and answer such questions about music in the *Politics*). There is a parallel here with the *Rhetoric*.

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<sup>38</sup> 1461a4-9; 1461b19-22.

Most of this treatise is concerned with purely artistic questions, how to make such and such a position plausible; whether some of these methods are reprehensible is not considered (though some clearly are). However an exception is made in the introductory chapter 1,<sup>39</sup> where Aristotle does raise the moral questions and defends rhetoric against criticisms on this score, showing that there is a difference between the art and its use, and that while it may be wrong to use such methods, it is not wrong but very useful to speculate on these methods and see how they can be used for wrong ends. But if Aristotle was ready to speak of moral as well as artistic questions in the case of rhetoric, there can be no reason to deny that he would be ready to do so also in the case of poetry.<sup>40</sup>

It does not follow then that if Aristotle has been silent about the moral worth of poetry in the *Poetics*, we must ignore it in asking if it is relevant in assessing the excellences of different kinds of poetry (just as Aristotle does not in fact ignore it in assessing the excellences of different kinds of music in the *Politics*). For it may well be that with respect to the order and attainment of human goods, and therefore with respect especially to political life, one kind is higher than another, and it may be because of this that Aristotle has a preference for it and desires to understand it and set in on a proper artistic footing, whereas he is less concerned to do this with respect to the other types.

How poetry may be morally beneficial can be seen from what Aristotle says about music in this respect,<sup>41</sup> namely that listening to it is going to affect one's character, one's moral habits. One reason given for this is that music is something pleasant and virtue

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<sup>39</sup> Especially 1355a19-b7; cf. *Physics*, 184b25-185a20.

<sup>40</sup> On this question of the moral significance of poetry I am in broad agreement with Carnes Lord; see his *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle* (Cornell, Ithaca, 1982), especially chapter four. His comments on the moral and political concern of the *Rhetoric* are also pertinent; see his 'The Intention of Aristotle's Rhetoric', *Hermes* 109 (1981): 326-339.

<sup>41</sup> *Politics*, 1340a5-14.

concerns enjoying, liking and disliking in the right way. So much are the pleasant and painful bound up with the virtues that it is a sign of virtue to feel pleasure and pain as one ought; and the right sort of education is one that accustoms one to judge rightly and, from one's youth, to be pleased by the fine and pained by the base.<sup>42</sup> All poetry will have an effect on character just like music, for poetry is pleasant and excites the emotions by presenting the painful and the pleasant, but action-imitating poetry appears to be likely to do this more beneficially. The reason for this lies in the fact that, unlike the other kinds, it affects the emotions in the context of an action, of a life or part of a life dramatically displayed before one's eyes. To feel an emotion consequent on the representation of an action that contains the object of that emotion, the fearful and pitiable for instance, is not to feel it simply, but to see, at the same time, those objects in their causes, to see how they follow, in all likelihood or of necessity, from certain actions that precede them. It is also, and this is important, to *feel* the emotion about the causes. In the case of tragedy, for instance, the causes of things pitiable and fearful are themselves made to appear pitiable and fearful, for what makes the tragic action, when constructed best, so pitiable and fearful, is that the fearful and pitiable things are shown arising out of something unexpected and apparently harmless, and to someone who is like us, neither extremely bad nor extremely good.<sup>43</sup> The fearfulness of the consequences is thrown back onto the cause, so that that too becomes fearful, and all the more so the more vividly this is done.

Action-imitating poetry thus has an important teaching function and it will be this teaching function of dramatic and narrative poetry (wherein, incidentally, the poet is

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<sup>42</sup> *Ethics*, 1104b12-13; 1105a10-12; *Politics*, 134014-18.

<sup>43</sup> ch.9, 1452a1-4, ch.13, 1453a5-10.



likened to the philosopher)<sup>44</sup> that will be at least part of what is meant by catharsis. This interpretation of catharsis will, interestingly, allow one to combine different theories about that much disputed term, namely the “intellectual clarification” theory and the “purification” theory.<sup>45</sup> This is because the teaching that goes on is of two sorts, both intellectual and emotional. The mind is instructed to recognize what things are truly and not just apparently fearful or pitiable, and the emotions are likewise instructed, or rather trained, to be exercised over the truly fearful and pitiable in the same way, and to be exercised over them to the right amount. Thus the mind is clarified so as to see what desirable or undesirable effects are likely to follow from what causes, and the emotions are purified so as to be felt over the things they ought to be felt over, and to the extent they ought to be felt over them.<sup>46</sup> This, at any rate, will be the effect of good dramatic and narrative poetry, I mean poetry that is done well and hence that does both display the causes of things, and powerfully excite the emotions about them as well.

The effectiveness of this way of teaching, of teaching by means of effects and of the emotions stimulated by those effects, becomes clear from the fact that those things that really are bad appear to be good because of some pleasure attached to them, and those things that really are good appear to be bad because of some pain attached to them, or, to quote Aristotle, we do the base because of pleasure and avoid the fine because of

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<sup>44</sup> ch.9, 1451b5-6.

<sup>45</sup> There are roughly three interpretations of catharsis: purgation, purification and clarification. Purgation is a medical theory, purification a moral one, and clarification an intellectual one. The first two, despite differences, are rather close to each other and can be treated as one. All have something to be said for them, as well as something against. A useful summary and discussion of all of them can be found in K.G. Srivastava, "A New Look at the 'Katharsis' Clause of Aristotle's Poetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 12 (1972): 258-275. Srivastava himself offers an aesthetic interpretation, which, in view of Aristotle's moral concern in the Politics, cannot be a complete account, though it may be partially true. Pierre Somville has followed him in this, though with some qualifications, *op.cit.*, ch.2. Leon Golden is the main proponent of the clarification theory (see the articles cited above). D.W. Lucas repeats the view of Bernays, which he regards as both purification and purgation, *op. cit.*, appendix II.

<sup>46</sup> Lucas' remarks on the idea of purification as applied to catharsis are to the point here, *op.cit.*, p.279ff.

pain.<sup>47</sup> One of the ways, if not the way, of getting around this (since we so instinctively associate the bad with pain and the good with pleasure) is to learn the badness of what is bad by seeing the painful consequences it issues in, and to learn the goodness of what is good by seeing the pleasant or desirable consequences it issues in. We must learn to look to the end of things. By seeing and being made to feel by an action that such and such qualities and such and such deeds are, while apparently desirable and good, in reality not so, one's understanding and emotions are being morally informed.

Both action-imitating and other sorts of poetry will have such an effect but the first will do so in a more obvious and emphatic way, for it will necessarily have to present the moral not in words only but in a concrete case, described or acted out before one's eyes. All of us and especially the 'many' are more impressed by the particular and concrete.<sup>48</sup> It follows that action-imitating poetry is of considerable value as a tool of moral education, especially for the many, and the more so the more vivid and emotionally stirring it is. Since the other kinds, insofar as they really differ from this kind, do not portray actions and their causal connections, they do not stand so high on the scale. They may have cathartic effects but not so powerfully nor so informatively; consequently they will not be as beneficial emotionally or morally.

In these two connected respects then, the force and sustaining of powerful emotional experiences, and the moral teaching of the mind and the emotions through the presentation of such emotionally charged actions in their concrete causal relations, dramatic and narrative poetry will be superior to the other kinds of poetry. This is the reason, or part of the reason, I maintain, why Aristotle should have preferred them and

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<sup>47</sup> *Ethics*, 1104b10-11.

<sup>48</sup> *Topics*, 105a13-18.

have devoted a treatise to them under the generic title of poetry while neglecting the other kinds.

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