Love Song for the Life of the Mind

AN ESSAY ON THE PURPOSE OF COMEDY

Gene Fendt

Love Song for the Life of the Mind

AN ESSAY ON THE PURPOSE OF COMEDY

Gene Fendt

THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA PRESS
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Copyright © 2007
The Catholic University of America Press
All rights reserved

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of
American National Standards for Information Science—Permanence of Paper
for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

∞

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Fendt, Gene, 1955–
Love song for the life of the mind : an essay on the purpose of comedy / Gene Fendt.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-0-8132-1485-6 (cloth : alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-8132-1485-8 (cloth : alk. paper) 1. Comic, The. 2. Comedy.
3. Aristotle. 4. Iphigenia (Greek mythology) 5. Tragedy. I. Title.
B105.C456F46 2007
809'.917—dc22
2006021105

CONTENTS

Preface ix
A Note on Key Words and References xix
Works and Editions of Aristotle xxiii
Acknowledgments xxv

Propylaia 1

1. The Problem of the *Iphigenia* and the Purposes of Tragedy 13
  - Backstage and the Wings: Of *Poetics* and Poetics 13
  - The Problem of Aristotle's Evaluation of *Iphigenia* 25
  - Some Attempted Solutions: The Fallacy of Aristotelian Formalism 27
  - Of Strong and Painful Passions 40
  - Catharsis 56
  - Thaumaturgy: *Hecuba* 68
    - The Problem and the Play 68
    - Catharsis and the Movement of Emotion 70
      - Catharsis of the Excessive and the Deficient 71
      - Catharsis and the Virtuous 80
        - *Mise en abyme:* The Hecuba of *Hamlet* 82
    - Catharsis and Intellectual Clarification 83
    - Other Concomitants of Catharsis 86
    - Conclusions on Some Recent Criticism of *Hecuba* 90
  - The Case of the *Iphigenia* 97
  - Resolving the Contradiction between *Poetics* 13 and 14 103

2. The Purpose of Comedy 108
  - Formal, Material, and Efficient Causes 108
    - *Mise en abyme:* The Socrates and Phaedrus of *Phaedrus* 111
  - The Problem of Comedy's Final Cause 121
  - Comic Catharsis 140
    - The Example of a Falling Comedy: *Hippias Major* 157
  - What Art Is Not For 170

3. The Exemplary Comic Fiction: Resolution, Catharsis, and Culture in *As You Like It* 178
  Resolution and Catharsis 178
  Comic Catharsis and Culture 196
  Emblematic Appendix on the Character of Audrey 205
  The Freedom of Aesthetic Judgment, or "Much Virtue in 'If'" 214

4. A Love Song for the Life of the Mind: *Arcadia* 236
  Happiness, Politics, and Art 236
    Eudaimonia and Politics: The Errors of Inclusivism 238
    Art and Eudaimonia: The Mimesis of Joy 256
  Arcadia: A Love Song for the Life of the Mind 261
    Plot 261
    Characters 264
    The Comedy as Love Song 268

Epilogue: "Still awake and drinking": *Symposium* 223c, d 284

Selected Bibliography 307
Index 317

PREFACE

"As I remember, Adam, it was upon this fashion bequeathed me by will . . ."

As You Like It 1.1.1

This is to be a book about the purposes of comedy, by which I mean in the first instance the dramatic art that the ordinary educated imagination unproblematically traces back from contemporary playwrights and movie makers (like Stoppard) through Shakespeare to Aristophanes. It is written in such a way as to open occasionally on to issues of high or scatological humor, jokes, and recreation, and, still at a distance, to adumbrate a parallel between the dramatic genre of comedy and what might be styled (against an author of my existentialist youth) the comic sense of life. There are voices in Kierkegaard who suggest that the comic or humorous borders the religious, and there is a long tradition that styles human life as a comedy, sometimes with the superscript "divine." Those latter filiations will be more frequent and obvious than the first sort, but all of them—scatological, recreational, cultural, and religious—are shadowy filiations outside the main focus of the present study. It is at least historically fitting that the traces of religious discourse should be more obvious in this discussion, since in both its ancient instantiation and its later medieval rebirth comedy had a place in religious festival and at the very least lived in close proximity to liturgy. It is possible to consider jokes as the last reduction of such liturgy, or perhaps the smallest crumb of its real presence.

To write a book in aesthetics has seldom been a clear-edged project, and it seems altogether more questionable these days, for there are critics who will argue against the very possibility of interpretation, as well as those who will question any particular's validity. The world of aesthetics seems to be one in which any presumed facts are overdetermined by theoretical (or practical, limited frequently to political)—perhaps even unconscious—prejudices,[1] the popularity of which change only slightly less quickly than Paris fashions, and the *terminus ad quem* of which is an ever receding hermeneutic horizon.[2] How, then, does one begin? And why?

I suppose it happens the way it happened to me: art does something. And some people, when that does happen, begin to wonder and to question: How did that happen? Or perhaps, What are the conditions for the possibility of that happening? And perhaps first of all, *What* happened *here*? Is this what the maker meant to happen? And that is how this book came into being. Though seeing and performing in *As You Like It* was not my first experience of art working, it set off and centered a long and very complicated assortment of feelings and reflections and that play is the true, if not the onlie, begetter of these insuing sonnets into philosophy. That beginning is now the middle of this book, the first two sections of "The Exemplary Comic Fiction: Resolution, Catharsis and Culture in *As You Like It*." Some readers may wish to read that part first, for it gives a complete emblematic picture of where this book is going and of the relation of plot, personal psychology, and culture it envisions and will attempt to defend in detail and with such exactness as I can presently muster. Shakespeare frequently has insets of his plays within the play that crystallize the action of the play, or are the play writ small to adapt an image of Plato's; the above mentioned sections on *As You Like It* are that for this book, just as several chapters have their own *mise en abyme*.

That old beginning, I realized even while writing it, presumed much. It presumed a story about the function of art, of comedy and tragedy particularly; it presumed, then, a conception of genre and a means of generic distinction; it presumed also a conception of the human being in society, and of human sociality, of ethos and psychology, the details of which in-

---

1. "Taste . . . you read as ideology." For a good overview of the difficulties of identifying "art" or "the aesthetic," see Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamps* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), chapter 1; the quote is from p. 32.

2. Again, Theirry de Duve:

> [The choices about what counts as art] force you to espouse a philosophy of history for which there is no definition of art except the historical process through which art negates itself and comes to terms with its own negation. This process does not have an essence for its ground; rather it has struggle for its motor. It never constitutes itself as a patrimony but projects the heritage of the past into the future in order to contradict it. When you call this process art, you mean that we, humans, don't need to agree about what art is. On the contrary, we need to struggle for what art should be. Some fight for one conception of art, others for another; yet we all stake a claim to what art ought to be for all of us. (21)

clude presumptions about affectivity, cognition, intention, and agency; it is not unfair to say it presumed a conception of spirituality and of the relation of philosophy and art to religion. All of that should not be in the least surprising, for that it touches, or invades, or is invaded by all these other *problemata* is what makes writing on aesthetics so complicated and fraught with intestine war. If it is the messiest part of philosophy, that is because all of Minerva's owls roost here on occasion.[3] In brief, that beginning in *As You Like It* had all the features of an emblem or coat of arms: it was clear, quickly readable, beautiful, and very presumptuous. This book, which is that earlier article's underwriting, will be less quickly readable, and is my attempt to become less presumptuous and considerably more perspicuous and detailed in its argument. Still, if it is not frequently beautiful, I shall have failed in an important aspect of comic philosophy. At times, at least, beauty itself is the reason, the cause, the purpose.

To write a serious book on comedy is not generally taken as a very serious venture, certainly not as serious a venture as writing a serious book on tragedy. And judging things by that serious democratic standard of counting noses, we will find that the number of serious studies of comedy in the last tragic century is far outweighed by the number of studies of tragedy. It's rather funny, in this circumstance, to remember that Plato (that most serious of ancient men, one shadowed by a figure known to history as Plato *comicus*, of whom, they say, no works survive) ends what is arguably his most comic dialogue (one whose *mise en scène* is the house of tragedy) with an argument that the same poet who composes fine tragedy should also be able to compose comedy.[4] Philosophy (Socrates), drinking from the same large bowl as Tragedy (Agathon) and Comedy (Aristophanes) at the end of

---

[3] That is the philosophers' view of the problem of art. The semiotician suggests that

> signs—and art-signs to a greater extent than those of ordinary exchange—have their own existence; they form a system among themselves, but this system is limitless and overwhelms humans who, thinking to serve themselves by working the system, in fact are worked by it. (de Duve, 25)

But how one picks out which signs are "art-signs" being the first question, the distinction de Duve attempts here between art-signs and signs is merely a white mythology, one that might easily lead to a more medieval understanding of everything in the world being an art-sign, and signed by the artist.

[4] If my argument about comedy is correct we might recognize *Symposium* as comic by the lightness of its action, which is perhaps built around this question: Can the young victor at the tragic festival throw a symposium in which there is no heavy drinking? More importantly, we should consider the dialogue's effects, which work through our concupiscent passions (of desire and sympathy)—inspiring some, mocking others—rather than through our irascible passions (fear and pity).

Symposium, sees their fellowship and puts them to sleep with an argument about it. It will take history about two thousand years to actualize the philosophical point—in the person of Shakespeare—which is perhaps an indication that history is slow in more than one sense of the word.[5] It may be true that the owl of Minerva flies only at night, but she seems to reach places that have not yet seen the dawn. At least, it was true in former days.

If Plato's Socrates is right—and that he is right, history, eventually, showed—then there is something seriously wrong with a century more serious about tragedy than comedy. The century would exhibit the same failing as the poet who could only do tragedy—but the century writes its fault more largely. The double capacity Socrates says should be found in the man who writes should be true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the man whether he writes or not, and of the culture within which writing comes to be and those arts have a place. The zeitgeist must be suffering from hamartia, from a serious error of judgment, perhaps a lack of self-knowledge, perhaps hubris when it appears as a one-handed playwright. Even that most well balanced of modern critics, Northrop Frye, seems to feel the pull of zeitgeist gravity when he says,

> It is largely through the tragedies of Greek culture that the sense of the authentic natural basis of human character comes into literature. In romance the characters are still largely dream characters; in satire they tend to be caricatures; in comedy their actions are twisted to fit the demands of a happy ending. (*Anatomy*, 206)

But the symmetrical cosmological program Frye had earlier outlined for literature belies the seeming necessity of this asymmetrical connection between tragedy and authentic human character. According to that cosmological compass (162), where plots remain either within the (figuratively superior) world of romance or within the (figuratively inferior) world of experience, or move up from experience (the comic plot—to the East) or down from romance (the tragic plot—toward the West), there is no *necessary structural* difference between characters who inhabit, or move, in the "between" worlds of comedy and tragedy: the difference is in the world and the way it turns. Further, there is a structural symmetry between the characters of the two kinds of plot that Frye himself exhibits by his patterning of comic character types on tragic types (171–76; cf. 216–19). But if the characters in each genre are structurally similar and the upper and lower worlds between which they move are the same, then the only difference between comedy and tragedy is the movement. So, then, the idea that tragic characters are more "authentic" and "natural" must be a confession of the author's belief that movement into the world of "habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law"—the tragic world (169)—is more authentic and natural than movement into the world of freedom—comedy's world. The hamartia of the zeitgeist bends him—even him—so. But that world is not more natural; in fact, art is not possible to the soul in complete bondage. That is why art is always seen as a threat by one who would be a real tyrant. There is a deep joke in Socrates' association of tyrants and tragedians (*Rep*. 568), as deep and as wise as the Fool's shadowing of Lear. Art is only possible from freedom, and whatever shadow of that freedom remains is what art speaks to in its audience. Frye's supposal about character, then, is a confession of despair, a failure of faith—or perhaps he is playing the fool.

---

[5] There is a report of a poet in Hellenistic times who wrote sixty tragedies and thirty comedies, but none of his work survives. Aristotle (in *Poetics* 4) credits Homer (via the historical inaccuracy of imputing authorship of the *Margites* to him) with being the grandfather to both arts.

Already we have overshot our mark, coming to conclusions far beyond what little argument and less explication has so far been presented; but perhaps this illumines some of the more deeply involved problems—social, political, spiritual—that are tied up with any venture into philosophy of art. For clearly the hamartia that so valorizes tragedy over her more happy sister is both a personal and a social—or political—matter, and it is the task of philosophy to attempt to discover and exhibit it. Before daring to attempt such cultural criticism, however, a thinker has to have the concepts at his finger's ends. This book will undertake a smaller task than a critique of religion, art, and society in the twentieth century, but a task that is a necessary preliminary to them: the main aim of this book is to discover and exhibit the purposes of comedy.

Comedy's more well thought of sister must first be allowed her dance; the argument about comedy will then proceed by antistrophe. I suppose that Aristotle's original book on poetics was structured similarly, though *Poetics* now holds only half of the dance. My analysis starts from the aesthetically and critically problematic case of the *Iphigenia in Tauris*. This play is the decisive node and key to the dance of the sisters, for Aristotle said it contained the best kind of tragic pathos—one in which the deed of suffering that threatens *is avoided by recognition*. The modern critic is absolutely stymied by this statement. She thinks *Iphigenia* should be a comedy, or some middle form—tragicomedy.[6] There is no good reason to suspect Aristotle's text of corruption here (though, naturally, that has been done); the problem must be faced and solved. How could Aristotle consider a story with a happy ending tragic at all? I will argue that in order to understand Aristotle's position we must pay attention to the catharsis of the passions of the audience, for this personal and social effect is the final cause of the poem, and it is only by reference to the purposes of made things that we can judge whether or not those things are well made. The first chapter of this book will therefore lay out Aristotle's reasoning about tragedy and its catharsis, and show how *Iphigenia* is the best form of tragedy under this view.

The solution to the problem of the *Iphigenia in Tauris*—why Aristotle calls it a tragedy and why he is right to call it the best exemplar of the type—provides the clue to understanding what the purposes of comedy are. The second chapter of the book will then present and defend an Aristotelian view of comedy, using as its main example Aristophanes' *Acharnians*, and together the first two chapters will limn, I hope, at least the archway—the propylaia—to the argument Plato pretends took place at Agathon's house just before the dawn of a day so many centuries ago. The third and fourth chapters will concentrate on applying the understanding of comic catharsis to two exemplary fictions from other times and cultures: Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*. We will close by returning to the drinking party where these two sisters were first seen as twins born of the same genius. One might think of the whole book as a long pause in a porch, a thought before a symposium.

The whole book may be seen as defending a double thesis about comedy, namely, a purely philosophical thesis that comedy's purpose was and is catharsis of the passions of desire and sympathy, and a historical-philosophical thesis that this explication is most likely to have been Aristotle's. That comedy transhistorically and cross-culturally does aim at catharsis of desire and sympathy is due to the nature of the finite rational and mimetic creature, which—as finite—is given to suffer pleasure and pain, and—as rational and mimetic—is a maker of poems or, more generally, mimeses, and desires to know. It will be true under this Aristotelian view that insofar as our natural desires and sympathies are culturally shaped (which Aristotle presumes), there will be differences across societies. It is the similarity of human desire and sympathy, pity and fear that roots the experience of comedy or tragedy, however. A culture that considers the eating of its children an honorable thing, a great desideratum, will not be able to experience much of Greek tragedy as tragic; the action is, rather, to them, high comedy. Such a culture is not long for this world, though if there are immortal souls, one could imagine such feasting going on forever.

---

[6] See, e.g., Anne Pippin Burnett, *Catastrophe Survived: Euripides' Plays of Mixed Reversal*, and Kitto's "New Tragedy: Euripides' Tragi-comedies," chapter 11 in *Greek Tragedy*.

Because this human nature is the source of art, any argument about art proclaims (or hides) a thesis about human nature; this is as true of Nietzsche (a proclaimer) and Derrida (a disclaimer) as it is about Plato and Aristotle, who exhibit the problem perspicuously. So, this book's two arguments (historical about Aristotle and philosophical about comedy) are necessarily interwoven not only because Aristotle sets out the original terms of the discussion, but also because I think Aristotle is right about a large number of things in the areas we will touch upon. In other words, I think this interpretation of Aristotle is a reasonable view of Aristotle, and true about comedy and human beings—or perhaps I should say about the great comedy of being human. It is, of course, possible that readers of Aristotle will disagree with some of my ideas about Aristotle. Despite this, they may find themselves in agreement with the argument about comedy. Being less a historian of philosophy than a philosopher, my main interest is in the latter argument. I do not, however, agree with Harold Bloom that all of our creative thinking is misprision of our intellectual fathers, though that may happen on occasion.

This project's interdisciplinary and transhistorical nature may make the reading difficult in our overspecialized and decidedly historicised age. That the chapters are divided into various sorts of subparts is an attempt to make it less so. But it will perhaps be most helpful to say here why all the various things that are in this book have come to be in it, as a way of explaining how that division is to work. My original purpose was an investigation of comedy, by which I mean, in the first instance, the dramatic genre. But what counts, or ought to count, as a member of this generic category is part of the question at issue, and so one might well be puzzled about how to begin. If one begins with an a priori definition of comedy, nothing in art—like the existence of an *Iphigenia*—will call it into question, and the scholarly dialectic will merely be about diverging uses of terms (like *comedy*) among families of critics. Such a project rightly (*recte et juste*) names sublunary things only by accident or by lawyerly stipulation. Eschewing such nominalism, there is a smaller and more practical (if anything in literary criticism is to be counted "practical") way into the problem, which in fact became a troubling puzzle to me. That practical problem is the status of the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, a play with a discovery and recognition leading from dire threat of horror to a happy ending, which Aristotle calls the best kind of tragedy. The way into the problem of comedy and its purpose for me was to attempt to understand, in properly historical terms, why Aristotle should have considered this to be the case.

That particular investigation threw me (again) into the very deep and much stirred waters of Greek philology and poetry, as well as Aristotle's wider—particularly ethical and political—philosophical concerns, which are tied to his understanding of the nature and purpose of poetry. I cannot expect that every reader will be interested in swimming through all of that water in order to come up in the promised bejewelled and open cove of the comic catharsis to which I first attained by such hard swimming. I have therefore arranged the larger journey (of the book's chapters) after the basic pattern of my own journey of discovery, but broken each into discrete sections of relative independence, not all of which are equally necessary to achieve the final goal. The title and occasional short summary of each section should allow each reader to decide whether or not the section is necessary or interesting for the reader's own purpose. For example, someone interested only in literary criticism of comedy might skip all of Chapter 1; someone interested in both dances, but not in the esoterica of Aristotle's psychology, could easily skip section four of Chapter 1, as I have in giving that chapter as lectures to such audiences, without ill effect. On the other hand, a classicist who wants to know why I think the view I am espousing is Aristotelian will need to read it, but may be less interested in the modern problem about the relative freedom of aesthetic judgments raised at the end of Chapter 3.

Greek theater was part of a civic (political, in the Greek sense) religious festival. In the course of the argument there will be more and less glancing remarks in these regards to contemporary culture, but the serious issue of the relation between religion and drama—especially as it applies to contemporary culture—will be left to the side (or merely figured, as Dante's unnamed *Inferno* a bit above) for future investigation. I want the reader to keep in mind, however, the important question about the relationship of the comic and the tragic to the religious, and read this study under the dawning light of this historical—or better—dramatic question: Whether or not our loss of the civic and religious significance of comedy and tragedy is a comic, tragic, or religious *pathos*? Perhaps, even, a cultural hamartia.

Of course it could be that Plato was not serious about the consanguinity of the tragic and the comic—after all, his *eirōn* is speaking, everyone but he is drunk, the would-be reporter has fallen asleep, and Plato never lets on what the convincing argument is. That dialogue itself is a comedy, and perhaps we should not expect anything too serious to come out of a drinking party. Perhaps that ancient krater does not hold any secret of life, not even the lees of a secret; perhaps Plato did not mean anything by the fact that comedy and tragedy drink from the same large bowl as philosophy throughout the night after the festive communal ritual. In that case this book is only an imaginary gadfly in a real, but decaying, garden.

A NOTE ON KEY WORDS AND REFERENCES

It is difficult to trace what may or may not be intricacies of argument across languages, to say nothing of *tempora* and *mores*. It is particularly difficult if one is not a philologist. Nonetheless, philology is a useful tool for philosophical investigation, and so I have, throughout this text, taken note of where the interested reader may find more philological evidence or argument on disputed points. Most of this book will be in relatively standard English with the addition of several words which, instead of translating, I merely transliterate and leave (after this introduction) unitalicized, hoping that the significance of Aristotle's concepts (or my perversion of them) might become clear in their use. Though many scholars translate these words in various ways, I am of the opinion that the translations beg absolutely essential philosophical or poetic questions and stir up scholarly tempests merely by their presence. The first such word, the centrality of which has already been made obvious, is *mimēsis* (Greek plural, *mimēseis*); it is sometimes translated by representation, sometimes by imitation. It is the central term of art in *Poetics*, philologically absolutely distinct from that famous *eikōn* (515a) of the cave—which is (a representation? an imitation? an imaginary picture?) of our natural state.[1] Mimesis is almost a legitimate English word—it is listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter *OED*) as "not naturalized," though it should be in the field of aesthetics, since Aristotle uses the word to identify not only poetry and Socratic dialogue, but also dance, music, and painting. Stephen Halliwell's most recent book is (among other things) an extended argument against translating the word into the more impoverished term "imitation," or the more cognitively penumbraed "representation." In an effort to naturalize its citizenship in English, I will use the word as if it is so already, providing an English plural—mimeses—which follows the usual habitus of English theft and reclamation, simplifying the foreign orthography.

---

[1] It is not, I think, illicit to contrast the mimetic and iconic functions of language or, more generally, signs. The iconic works as reference or representation *of* something; the mimetic is immediate; we don't just mean things, we fall into patterns of rhythm and tone (as well as word choice) which allow Professor Higgins to tell within a space of six blocks what neighborhood we learned our mother tongue in. That is, he reads our mimetic nature as a sign—that's how science treats everything, but what those things are is the mimetic, not the iconic aspect of our speech. The Athenian Stranger, for example, seems to be trying to get Kleinias to pick up this distinction in what leads up to and away from his remark that "all the arts of the muses are iconic and mimetic" (εἰκαστικήν τε . . . καὶ μιμητικήν, *Laws* 668a). For the application of this distinction, see my "Intentionality and Mimesis."

Catharsis (katharsis) was, by all accounts, a term of several arts—religion, music, medicine—even before Plato's time. Its most common translations are purification, purgation, and clarification. To attempt to translate it by reference to one or another of these, however, is to limit the resources of the word—and every translation does so. Such limitation is thoroughly unjustified by the text of *Poetics*—where catharsis appears once—and stands against the multiple meanings available in *Politics* 8.[2] The *OED* treats this word also as not naturalized, and emphasizes its medical meaning—purgation; it traces the word's history in English to the mid-nineteenth century, around the time when Bernays (Freud's wife's uncle) published his influential work on the topic, a work that favored the purgative signification. Let us be suspicious of this Victorian constriction.

The third word I will not touch is *hamartia*—variously translated as sin, flaw, error, miscalculation (a rather large range of moral and nonmoral concepts).[3] It is not so frequently transliterated as mimesis, but as I was not sure when I began this investigation where it would lead in the moral and religious realm, I chose to leave it a Greek blank and see where I ended up. (Perhaps this is a confession of hamartia.) House describes in admirable brevity how this term is linked to discovery and peripety in his discussion (cf. 93–99): "the discovery of the truth . . . [is the] wakening from that state of ignorance [or error in judgment] which is the very essence of 'hamartia'" (98), from (or with) which awakening the peripety follows.

---

[2] Halliwell concludes his discussion of the term similarly; see his Loeb translation of *Poetics*, 198–201. See also House, 104–11.

[3] Adkins holds that *hamartia* is "not a technical term for any one of the three possible alternatives by which it is rendered in English" ("Aristotle," 82; see also 83, 87–90). Stinton seems to agree; he considers that all of its various meanings are plausible at different points in Aristotle's argument. John Jones gives a brief explanation of the problems engendered by taking the word as necessarily moral (15); Nussbaum argues for a wide range of meanings (*Fragility*, 282f). Golden's thorough review (*Tragic and Comic*, 80–89) argues in favor of a morally nonculpable error of judgment. This seems to be too narrowly specific in the nonmoral direction, after a century (the nineteenth) and more of narrow moralism.

The most famous example of hamartia is another word I wish to leave transliterated—*hubris*, sometimes spelled *hybris*. "Outrage" or "wanton insolence" are not unreasonable translations, but this one I prefer to leave untranslated for poetic reasons: I like its heft, the way it breathes its meaning. Curiously, my *OED* allows *hubristic*, but not the noun. For similar poetic reasons I will use *telos*—end, goal, purpose—as if it were English. It has, to me, always sounded like an arrow hitting its mark.

Philia and its cognates present other problems for translation. "Love" in English is too romantically colored, or too variable; "friendship" too weak—perhaps these problems are not merely linguistic, but cultural. Among other things. Philia is deep and natural to man; our *philoi* are the most important of external goods, and an aid to all the internal ones: the virtues. Gods and beasts may live without *philoi*, men only unhappily, if at all. Philia joins the family together, and friends together too, as well as the philosopher to wisdom. It is perhaps not too much to say that it is what makes a unity of any community, as Aristotle shows in *NE* 8. Several recent and important Aristotelian studies of literature by Belfiore and Nussbaum use the transliteration of these terms as a matter of course; I would be friends with them, though I do not agree with them on all other points.

The last word will cause greater difficulty because it is in all English dictionaries, though there is great debate about whether it means the same thing for Aristotle and in *Poetics* as it does in English. That word in Greek is *philanthrōpia* or τὸ φιλάνθρωπον—philanthropy or the philanthropic. It does not mean, for Aristotle, giving large sums of money to charitable work. Stephen Halliwell's translation of it as fellow-feeling strikes me as pretty good, but, as it may range from broad human sympathy even with sinners and the hamartemic to a more narrow basic sense of justice that discounts that latter group, I thought it best to mark the word here and leave it transliterated.[4]

In all those cases I henceforward leave the word in ordinary type, just as if it were ordinary English. Foreign words and phrases, the significance of which is sometimes technical (e.g., *eikōn*, *technē*, *poiēsis*, *pathos*) and some-

---

4. See, e.g., Halliwell's translation in the new Loeb edition. Gould discusses the term at xxii, 53f; see also Moles ("Philanthropia"), who tends toward the "moral feeling" or "sense of justice" interpretation of the word. Else opts for "relatively indiscriminate fellow feeling"; cf. *Argument*, 368–71.

times rhetorical (*tempora*, *mores*, *fait accompli*), I have anglicized in spelling and italicized. I hope their significance is either known to the reader or figurable from the context. With regard to other Greek words, where I have thought a reader might be helped to keep some things in Aristotle related or distinct, or where I (or another scholar) depend upon a change or continuity in Aristotle's terminology for part of an argument, I have placed the Greek word or phrase as near as practicable to the English word or phrase in question. I have used the universally available Greek version given in Stephen Halliwell's new Loeb edition of *Poetics* as my source in these cases, and the older Loeb editions for other texts in which I have made reference to the Greek.

All works referred to frequently are given abbreviated references after their title. All texts with standard reference (e.g., works of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Shakespeare, Kant, Nietzsche) are referred to according to the appropriate scholarly convention rather than page number of any edition. In the case of Aristophanes the line number of the Greek text (Loeb edition) is followed by the page in the translation of his complete plays edited by Hadas.

WORKS AND EDITIONS OF ARISTOTLE

De Anima (*DA*). Translated by J. A. Smith. In *Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon. New York: Random House, 1941.

———. Translated by W. S. Hett. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library), 1975.

De Motu Animalium (*DMA*). Translated with commentary and interpretive essays by Martha Craven Nussbaum. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978.

———. Translated by E. S. Forster, M.A. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library), 1983.

De Interpretatione (*De Int.*). Translated by E. M. Edghill. In *Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon. New York: Random House, 1941.

———. *Commentary by St. Thomas and Cajetan.* Translated by Jean T. Oesterle. Milwaukee, Minn.: Marquette University Press, 1962.

Eudemian Ethics (*EE*). Translated by H. Rackham. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library), 1952.

Nicomachean Ethics (*NE*). Translated by W. D. Ross. In *Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon. New York: Random House, 1941.

———. Translated by H. Rackham. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library), 1962.

———. Translated by Martin Ostwald. Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962.

Metaphysics (*Meta.*). Translated by W. D. Ross. In *Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon. New York: Random House, 1941.

Parva Naturalia (*PN*). Translated by W. S. Hett. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library), 1965.

Physics. Translated by R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye. In *Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon. New York: Random House, 1941.

———. Translated by Philip H. Wick Steed and Francis M. Cornford. London: William Heinemann Ltd. (Loeb Classical Library), 1970.

Poetics (*Po.*). Translated by Ingram Bywater. New York: Modern Library, 1984.

———. Translated by Leon Golden. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968.

———. Introduction, Commentary and Appendixes by D. W. Lucas. Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1968.

———. Translated by Stephen Halliwell. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library), 1995.

Politics (*Pol.*). Translated by Benjamin Jowett. In *Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon. New York: Random House, 1941.

———. Translated by H. Rackham. London: William Heinemann Ltd. (Loeb Classical Library), 1932.

Posterior Analytics (*An. Post.*). Translated by Hugh Tredennick. London: William Heinemann Ltd. (Loeb Classical Library), 1960.

Problems. Translated by W. S. Hett. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library), 1965.

Rhetoric (*Rh.*). Translated by W. Rhys Roberts. New York: Modern Library Editions, 1984.

———. Translated by John Henry Freese. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library), 1967.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Parts of this book have been delivered as lectures at various venues; among them are the Society of Ancient Greek Philosophy meetings at State University of New York at Binghamton and Fordham University as well as their meetings with the American Philosophical Association, the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain at Oxford University, and the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies at Orono, Maine. The greatest part of the research was done during a year's sabbatical granted by the University of Nebraska–Kearney Research Services Council for the academic year 1996–1997. Thanks to the audiences for their comments and to the University of Nebraska–Kearney for its funding of the sabbatical and for some of the travel to conferences.

Parts of the book have also been previously published, with some changes in this recension. Thanks to Johns Hopkins University Press, which originally published much of the first two sections of Chapter 3 as "Resolution, Catharsis, Culture: *As You Like It*" in *Philosophy and Literature* 19 (October 1995): 248–60. Thanks also to Blackwell Publishing which originally printed part of Chapter 2, section three, as "*Hippias Major, Version 1.0*: Software for Post-Colonial, Multicultural Technology Systems" in *Journal of the Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 1 (2003): 89–99.

As this book has been under construction for over a decade thanks are due to many readers of various parts and editions. Most helpful of all has been the last reader, Professor Stephen Halliwell of St. Andrew's University, who read a draft I thought finished and offered considerable constructive criticism and suggestions for a bit more research—and then reread the manuscript. I am sure they did not pay you enough! Thanks also to an unnamed reader at the Catholic University of America Press, who (among oth-

er things) made me become clear about what I did not want to be taken as doing and also explain why I was not doing it. Thanks to Allen Dunn who read and commented on the whole manuscript during a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar on Literature and Values in the summer immediately preceding my sending it to the Catholic University of America Press for its first reading. Thanks to Owen Goldin of Marquette University for helping me with the Greek, and to Fr. Dan Pekarske, H. L. Hix, and Paul Schollmeier for reading much of the book in early versions. I also owe a debt of gratitude to numerous students through the years who worked through many of the texts utilized in this study in courses on Shakespeare, the philosophy of tragedy, ancient philosophy, and aesthetics as well as the regular introductory courses in philosophy and in ethics; I hope that they found the work sufficiently cathartic and inspiring to our most proper love.

Love Song for the Life of the Mind

PROPYLAIA

In a recent book opening on to many of the issues this one will examine, Stephen Halliwell invokes the shade of Goethe, in particular his essay "Über Wahrheit und Wahrscheinlichkeit der Kunstwerke," as the propylaia for his reexamination of the concept of mimesis.[1] In setting up this propylaia Halliwell follows Goethe, who draws our mind from a simplistic view of mimetic art as "sheer illusionism—like the famous birds reputedly tricked into pecking at Zeuxis' painted grapes" to the mimetic as having "the psychological power to draw its audience into its world, to offer something that is wholly convincing and absorbing in its own terms" (3). Since it is clear that the grapes did achieve this also, at least for the birds, we can see that Halliwell is arguing for an expansion of the concept of "the mimetic" (*to mimētikon*) from the narrow product of representationalism and realism made by the kind of imagination Plato famously represented as a mirror, to something more like the creation of a (hetero-) cosmos by a more powerful demiurge (also called imagination by Plato)—into which cosmos the audience is drawn.[2] For Goethe, the expanded notion of mimesis was one that allowed insight into the "inner truth" of things (2, 4). Halliwell corrects the romantic tendency toward a solipsistic subjectivity this phrase might give rise to by precisely defining a point in the middle distance. He contends that mimesis "depict[s] and illuminate[s] a world that is (partly) accessible and knowable outside art, and by whose norms art can therefore, within limits, be tested and judged," even while admitting that mimesis is "the creator of an independent heterocosm . . . [which] may still purport to contain some kind of 'truth' about, or grasp of, reality as a whole" (5). This more complex view of mimesis is, he shows, "present in the tradition of thought about mimesis from a very early stage" (5). This ancient sense of mimesis precedes our popular division between realist and representationalist theories of art on the one side and romantic expressionist and emotivist theories on the other. The ancient word *mimesis* plays on both sides of our modern division.

---

[1] Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002). References to this book are by page number in the text of this propylaia.

[2] In "Two Views of the Imagination" I argue that Plato himself considers the imagination under two distinct metaphors: the mirror and the demiurge of images; for more on this distinction, see that article.

One might, in fact, write a whole history of the philosophy of art within the bounds of "mimesis" so broadly and anciently understood. Little would escape it. As the originally broader term is pruned radically back to "mere" imitation, other terms of art must develop to stake out the phenomena once included in the richer ancient concept. The metaphors of the mirror/depicts and the lamp/illuminates, which have been seen as distinguishing the classical and the romantic, find their air here in this newly pruned area, as does that of the romantic creative genius (a demiurge somewhat forgetful of its "demi" status). This last, we should remember, as the δημιουργὸς εἰδώλων (597d–99a), as well as the first (the mirror), can be traced explicitly to *Republic* 10. Exhibiting the presence and operation of that more complicated view of mimesis in Plato and Aristotle, and tracing it through philosophies of art "from Plato, as one might aptly put it, to Derrida" (6) is what Halliwell's book does.

With Halliwell's project, at once both historical and philosophical, my own efforts in this book have a large measure of agreement and community of purpose. Like his, this project aims to be historical: it aims to build up, from the extant corpus of Aristotle, what his famously missing theory of comedy might have been. It also aims to be philosophical (as Aristotle would have been), for it presents an argument about what the nature and function of that made thing—comedy—is, which, if true, provides grounds for judgment of better and worse forms (as Aristotle does for tragedy in *Poetics* 14 and and Plato famously does in *Republic* for art generally). Clearly, the historical and philosophical aims of my project are intrinsically interrelated for a considerable length. For any attempt to make a historical claim about Aristotle's view of comedy requires more than two steps back into the larger interpretation of Aristotle's philosophy generally. And any attempt to make a philosophical argument about comedy requires a non-question-begging delineation of which of the historically conditioned phenomena are to be accounted for. The interpretation of Aristotle built up in the course of this book (particularly the first half) is not likely to be in complete agreement with anyone else's, but I trust it is also not entirely disagreeable to all other Aristotle scholars; I have a similar expectation regarding literary critics and the view of comedy here espoused. The introduction and particular development of all these (sometimes extremely fraught) matters is always bent toward the explication and resolution of the problem of the nature and purpose of comic drama, which problem I find I cannot rightly set out or answer without taking them up in some detail.

While the manner of this investigation is like Halliwell's in being at once historical and philosophical, and shares some considerable agreement with it about both aesthetics and Aristotle, my scope is considerably more limited. More particularly, it is because of my more limited focus on Aristotle (not all ancient mimetic theorizing) and dramatic comedy (not all ancient arts) that I have been so bold as to appropriate his book as the propylaia for mine.[3] A *propylaia*, as he explains, is an entryway, an architectural portal; in particular, it is the entry into the acropolis at Athens, and also was the title of Goethe's aesthetic journal, in which his above-named essay first appeared. So, let us say I have set my sights on the (missing) temple of the goddess of comedy, and in order to get you to see where it was and how it was built, I set you on a particular step (Aristotle's) and turn your sight through a particular portal (the mimetic theory of art) and, by contrast, to a less catastrophically destroyed sister temple (tragedy) visible through the same portal from that step. That is the purpose of the first chapter. I may then be able to turn you to see how certain broken columns and fragmentary walls might well have fit together to support the missing light and airy temple that we seek (in Chapter 2). This ancient outline will be more particularly filled in by reference to works of Aristophanes (*Acharnians*) and Plato (*Hippias Major* and *Phaedrus*). Having done that, I will then try to show how several other works (Shakespeare's *As You Like It* in Chapter 3 and Stoppard's *Arcadia* in Chapter 4) accomplish, each in their way, the same function as that ancient temple. During the discussions of those particular works I will return to some wider aesthetic and cultural concerns, concerns that affiliate my project again with Halliwell's. I will close with a comic and philosophical reading of *Symposium*, which will show this Aristotelian philosophical project to perhaps have been instigated by (and go a long way to explaining the working of) that Platonic comedy (in the Epilogue). The limitation of scope to an Aristotelian theory of comedy means I will not have much to say about other theories, like Hobbes's or Bergson's. My choice to focus for considerable time on particular works of Aristophanes, Plato, Shakespeare, and Stoppard precludes a wide-ranging menagerie of examples from comic drama, and my focus (as Aristotle's) on drama leaves nondramatic genres of comedy largely on the side. I argue, however, that Aristotle picks drama as his subject in *Poetics* because it is the form of mimesis that includes the means of mimesis all the other arts only use some of, so what applies to tragedy/comedy in drama will apply *mutatis mutandis* (a very generous term, which should always be in Latin in order to mimic the specificity that it precisely avoids representing) to the more limited mimeses (e.g., dance, music, lyric).

---

[3] Halliwell's book was published while I was first looking for a publisher for this book. It is too important not to be taken account of, so I have rewritten all of the Propylaia and some additional matter in order to do so.

It is legitimate to ask, as anyone who has come upon an ancient propylaia in a rain forest or in the welter of a modern city built over the ruins of an older one, Why this particular propylaia? And also, Why is this one where it is? Halliwell shows that "mimesis gave antiquity something much closer to a unified conception of 'art'" than many modern thinkers have been willing to admit (7). He fills out the details of this conception to show that it includes both representational and expressive elements, which modern theories of art separate (7, 13–16, 21–23, 172–73, 188–90, et al.). And he points out how the mimetic conception extends through "a series of grades of imaginative absorption" on the part of the audience, from "quasi-participant . . . to the holding of an attitude of critical detachment" (80; cf., e.g., 88–93, 98–101, 238–39). His explication is more than sufficient to defend the importance and repossess the fullness of significance the mimetic theory of art has.

While that history provides sufficient reason for choosing the mimetic theory of art as one's propylaia for an understanding of comedy, I think Aristotle quite specifically, and the ancient thinkers generally, built this particular entryway because of the things themselves: mimesis is the real entryway into humanness; *homo mimeticus* is the way into *homo sapiens*. Mimesis opens the construction of culture. That the mimetic is not merely the basis for a theory of art, and of artistic importance, but of anthropological import and the root of humanity is stated most clearly by Aristotle: mimesis is natural to us (κατὰ φύσιν 1448b20; cf. 3–8); it is original, the most distinctive instinct of anthropos (σύμφυτον τοῖς ἀνθρώποις; 1448b5), though other animals have it to some degree. And ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny: mimesis is the way in which the individual first learns (1448b7);[4] it is because mimesis works, as Plato puts it, "before reason" that it is both so important and so potentially dangerous (*Rep*. 402a; cf. *Laws* 653b, c; Aristotle approvingly refers to this at *NE* 1104b10–13). It is through mimesis that we are set up for virtue or vice before judgment becomes active, just as one or another "natural virtue" might be found in a soul, but needs rational judgment to become virtue in the full sense (*NE* 1144b3–18).[5] The mimetic animal is shaped in accord with the fears, desires, pleasures, and pains of those around him, just as cognition is given its first objects by repeated perception; all learning seems to be founded on this (*An. Post*. 99b6–100a3).[6] So, this propylaia is far from an accidental cultural construction, or accidentally placed; it marks the birth canal of the human individual and of all culture. The development of individual arts recapitulates that of the individual: certain kinds of character improvised noble mimeses, certain others improvised in a more vulgar fashion (1448b23–27). Perhaps each artist chose which way he would improvise; it is far more likely he *found himself improvising* on what was going around the neighborhood or in the culture at large—and then became conscious of it—and when the neighborhood or culture liked the effects, or the effect was a solution or re-creation of the solution to what Girard calls the mimetic crisis, he continued in them. Having been formed by repetition he became like the things he repeated, and he improvised accordingly. The passivity of original mimesis, this "being taken up by" mimesis, rather than a more cognitivist "proposing to" imitate is important according to Aristotle, even for the seemingly active poet, for the art "demands a man with a special gift for it, or else one with a touch of madness in him; the former can easily assume the required mood, and the latter may be ecstatic" (*Po.* 1455a33–35).

---

[4] This point is made by Halvard Fossheim in "Mimesis in Aristotle's Ethics," in *Making Sense of Aristotle: Essays in Poetics*: "according to Aristotle, we take our first steps in understanding of the human good by the natural propensity, from childhood onwards, to be thoroughly engaged in and formed by the activity of 'being like'" (84). We take our first steps in evil this way too.

[5] Of interest in this regard is the question from the pseudo-Aristotelian *Problems* (30.6, 956a11–14):

> Why should one trust more in a human being than in another animal? Is it . . . because humans alone among animals know (ἐπίσταται) how to count? Or because humans alone believe (νομίζει) in the gods? Or because humans are the most mimetic of all animals? For this enables them to learn (μανθάνειν).

(Cf. S. Halliwell, who invokes this passage at the beginning of his "Aristotelian Mimesis and Human Understanding," in *Making Sense of Aristotle: Essays in Poetics*, 87). The usual structure of these problems is that the last sentence offers the (pseudo-) Aristotelian answer. If our learning and understanding grow out of mimesis (as Aristotle pretty clearly says in *Poetics* 4), and if our linguistic ability is one of those things we begin to learn and understand through mimesis, perhaps even counting finds its source there, as well as opinions about the gods, as this problem suggests. Rene Girard's thesis that the source of religion is mimesis ties belief in the gods directly to "being like the other" in passion and desire, without and before the direction of concept and rationality. Aristotle could go far along this Girardian line, holding that "mimesis has the potential to generate elaborate forms of cultural practice" (ibid., 88). If both religion and learning come through this gate, then the differential attributes of, and the differences between cultures within, the human arise from this fact: "man is the most mimetic of animals." This may not, however, be grounds for trust.

[6] Rene Girard claims that the mimetic crisis that is resolved in violence "creates a new degree of attention, the first non-instinctual attention" (*Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 99). Aristotle need not agree about the foundational violence at the origin of signification, but that the mimetic nature of human beings is what first focuses our attention "beyond the purely instinctual . . . , the alimentary or sexual object" (ibid.) he does share with Girard. This kind of attention and "learning"is necessary before anything like the learning *An. Post.* explicates is possible. It is, then, "before reason."

Even these brief lines from *Poetics* 4 suggest a wide range of complex problems in developmental psychology, anthropology, individual and social psychology, and perhaps even comparative biology, tied up with the expected difficulties in philosophy of art, art's relationship to ethics and politics, and philosophy of education for which Plato and Aristotle are still providing the root questions. These lines from *Poetics* suggest that Aristotle (as Plato) is aware of these deeper and seemingly more obscure relations and complexities. Mimesis is, I want to say, of deeper significance and greater import for the ancients than as even the central concept in the philosophy of art. It is the proylaia of all humanity; through it we enter into our city. (Each culture or epoch or city into its own.) In this matter I think that Halliwell does not go far enough, though I do not suppose that extending the import of the concept of mimesis beyond aesthetics is something with which he must necessarily disagree.

Raising the issue of the place and function of mimesis in anthropology and developmental psychology, however, also brings forward a critique of several philosophical distinctions that are presently taken for granted, as is the distinction in aesthetics between representative and emotivist theories of art. Two such distinctions that will be of importance in what follows are the distinction between cognitivist and conativist theories of human action, and the distinction between cognitivist and noncognitivist theories of emotion. Halliwell touches on the second of these areas in his discussion of musical mimesis (in chapters 5 and 8). There he argues that "the patterns of music have properties 'like' the emotional states" and so the experience of music "appears, for

Aristotle, to be a matter of experiencing emotions that are not just indicated or evoked . . . but are in some sense enacted by the qualities of the artwork" (159). This is exactly correct in my view, and correct about Aristotle. However, he interprets Aristotle's story as an iconic—in Pierce's sense of "denot[ing] merely by virtue of characters of its own" (160)—treatment of musical mimesis. Tellingly, this iconic explication of Aristotle is one that "we need to supplement" because of Aristotle's emphasis on the directness of the effect music has on us (160). The problem Halliwell's felt need for a supplement here touches upon is that for music to be seen as an iconic *sign*, and for it to function as such a sign *denoting*, say, some *kinēsis* of "emotional-cum-ethical feelings" (159) implies an altogether too well-developed cognitive and possessively individualist psychology for the immediacy, directness, and simplicity Aristotle presumes for musical mimeses's effects (which even are visible in animals). The mimetic *arts* do, I agree, "*embod*[*y*] or *enact* [their] 'likeness(es)' in [their] own organized form" (190), but their kinesis transfers in a way that is more mechanical (or biologically infectious) than cognitive: perception, pleasure, and pain are all that is necessary. Several of Aristotle's word choices and images will make this point. Socrates' demand in *Republic* for certain kinds of rhythm and tone patterns, and for the dismissal of others, is a recognition of this same mechanism.

So when Aristotle says we learn (μανθάνειν) *first* through mimesis, he must mean that kind of learning that underlies all of what we usually call learning. In *Posterior Analytics* 1.1, he explains that someone who is learning something (μανθάνειν) in a sense already knows (ἐπίστασθαι). But this means, he says, that some kind of learning (μανθάνειν) must already have taken place and preceded the kind of learning *Posterior Analytics* is discussing. Halliwell notes that "the spectrum of *manthanein* continues below the human (*Meta*. 980b21–5)"[7]—just as the mimetic does. These connections of mimesis and the earliest form of learning with the nonrational souls of animals is a good indication that Aristotle has in mind something more mechanical or infectious than rationally cognitivist. Feeling pleasure and pain, desire and fear, as those around us do, is something we "learn" before we know we are learning—indeed, before we are able to know at all, reason not yet functioning in the infant and young child.[8]

---

[7] See "Aristotelian Mimesis and Human Understanding," p. 107, n. 44.

[8] This natural mimetic noncognitivism may be hinted at also by Aristotle's remark that "it was not art but chance that made the poets discover how to produce such effects" (*Po.* 1454a10–12).

Thus much on how the mimetic works on the human being—the subjective effects of mimesis. On the other side of the work—as made things, or objects—musical and other mimetic works are admittedly an advance upon the original mimeses in which and through which human beings first learn. Clearly, the artist, as someone with a *technē*, puts the music together with knowledge of how the music works and (in many cases, like drama) the signs denote, but the music works of itself, not as "a sign" "denoting" (even "by virtue of characters of its own") some emotional-cum-ethical feeling. Mimesis understood from this more advanced side has "something like the factor of iconicity" (169) Pierce finds in certain signs, but my point is that the work of mimesis is essentially distinct from and precedes cognition of signs—of which the mimetic artist is well cognizant. The mimetic is that in which we have already participated, and by which we *have already been taken up* (the passive voice is essential here) before any recognitions of likeness—such as that between the movement of a certain piece of music and a certain feeling—take place. This is so much the case that it may even be true of the musician—the one making the mimetic thing, particularly in cultures that have no written music or for instruments (such as the gamelan orchestra) for which writing seems impossible. Aristotle considers that a better poet has this mimetic gift—even being ecstatic. Signs need cognition (and explicating Aristotle via Pierce takes Halliwell in a cognitivist direction), but the musical mimesis only requires that we be taken up into the musical thing itself, not that *we make* cognitive connections to the truth the likeness is like (a feeling, say), though we will point these likenesses out in any philosophical discussion. In fact, mimesis is that through which we first learn, and first become able to recognize, likenesses. If the mimetic learning Aristotle puts first implied the mimetic thing is "a 'likeness' in the sense of something we require an existing grasp of reality to comprehend" (192), it could not, ipso facto, be that through which we *first* learn.

Similarly, the pleasure in mimesis to which Aristotle refers in *Poetics* 4 is not first a pleasure in learning through mimesis, but a pleasure in mimesis itself, the pleasure in becoming like. Mimesis isn't a means, but a natural, and according to Aristotle, pleasant activity: it is a "for its own sake" of our nature, which can take us anywhere from hell to heaven. A similar point about the pleasure in mimetic activity and its nonrationality is made by Fossheim. He concludes in a way that is in line with the Girardian influenced manner of understanding mimesis I intend when he says that "practical reason is in ineradicable debt to something that isn't in itself entirely reasonable."[9] The rational *dunamis* of the human soul is led out by mimesis, a natural activity we share with animals.

It seems, then, that Aristotle focuses on music in taking up the effects of mimesis because music is, even among highly developed *Homo sapiens*, the art form in which the more anthropologically basic mimetic action of art is most clear. In it perception of rhythms and tones mechanically transfers to (or, more biologically—as Aristotle tended to think—infects) even the animals. One might, in an art form that uses language, get hung up on the representative and the intentional.[10] Aristotle's choice of music as the art form around which he discusses the catharses available in mimeses—purposefully, I say—keeps as far from that cognitivism and rationalism as possible. Mimesis is, anthropologically speaking, the *élan vital* that gives rise to such cognitions as representational likeness, and later, ideas. As Rene Girard says, it "precedes consciousness and language."[11] In this anthropological (rather than specifically aesthetic) sense, mimesis is

> prior to gestures, attitudes, manners, and everything to which mimesis is usually reduced when it is understood only as representation. This mode of imitation operates with a quasi-osmotic immediacy necessarily betrayed and lost in all the dualities of the modern problematics of desire, including the conscious and unconscious.[12]

The quasi-osmotic immediacy of primary mimesis is precisely what Aristotle is touching upon when he says that "our souls are changed" (*Pol.* 1340a22–23) as we listen to music, without needing to posit that the hearer "recognizes the emotion 'in' the music" as Halliwell's (161) more cognitivist explication requires. It by-passes (re)cognition; it effects us immediately. Plato's Ion says the same thing: "somehow you touch (ἅπτει) my soul with your words" (535a).[13] Aristotle particularly names rhythm and melody (*Pol.* 1340a19), not the words, as the mimeses that produce qualities of character "which hardly fall short of the actual affections" (1340a21–22); an almost mechanical mimesis and psychagogy seems to be the import of both views. The infection that creates a mob, culture's irrational other, presents itself here as well: the human individual is made—and lost—through mimesis.

---

[9] Fossheim; see esp. p. 82 and following; the quote is from p. 84.

[10] A more extensive discussion of the supplemental use of the mimetic vis-à-vis the intentional/representative in the history of philosophy is in my "Intentionality and Mimesis: Canonic Variations on an Ancient Grudge, Scored for New Mutinies," *Sub/Stance* 75 (1994): 46–74. See also note 13 below.

[11] "A conversation with Rene Girard," in *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroads, 1996), 277. Girard reads Aristotle's term *mimesis* (when he mentions Aristotle at all) in accord with the intellectualist translation of it as imitation or representation; this misreading is unfortunate.

[12] Rene Girard, *"To double business bound": Essays on Literature, Mimesis and Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 89.

[13] John Bremer notes that "the word touch (ἅπτει) strongly inclines the meaning toward a

On the other hand, when we *tell a story about* mimesis, as I am here, we make propositions about how it works and affirm or deny them, but mimesis itself does not require the propositionality or "quasi-propositions" of contemporary cognitivist theories of emotion (or action). In fact, Aristotle (and the truth about human beings) requires that mimesis be precognitive, prepropositional, and the attempt to explain mimesis as dispositional ascription of propositions (which does not presuppose awareness of the particular propositions or beliefs, but merely a tendency to act in accord with what those propositions would entail) is as heuristically valuable—and as true—as to say that two hydrogen atoms want to share their electrons with one of oxygen. It is the way we *think through* what is going on, but that is precisely what is not going on in original mimesis: thinking. Such dispositions or patterns (whether of oxygen or of infant mouthings) are clearly not necessarily cognitive, and to import cognitivity into them is to import a manner of understanding the mimetic that is not available to critical discernment for the matter at stake. We are, as it were, anthropomorphizing our infancy.

Generally, when we anthropomorphize, we are evading the specifically mimetic, substituting for it the cognitive: the mimetic soul is read as *ego cogito*. An explanation of mimeses even as iconic sign seems to presume too much upon the construction and definition of an (modern philosophical) individual and relatively cognitively developed psyche—a miniature Cartesian ego, as it were. That individuality is belied by the lack of individuation produced in, for example, those highly mimetic social occurrences we call panics, and clearly represented in such works as Euripides' *Bacchae*, which exhibits the mimetically induced loss of individuation. Such events must indeed be figured as loss if we *are already* such individualized and cognitively developed psyches as modern philosophy presumes, but the anthropological (and original developmental) import of mimesis goes the other way; it is a claim about how this individual spontaneity develops in a being that is originally neither individual nor spontaneous, but whose nature is mimetic at the

---

physical act, even though Ion refers, for the one and only time, to the soul" (*Plato's "Ion,"* 284). Socrates' analogy for the poet and rhapsode is the mechanically infective magnetic stone.

core. The creation of such literature as *Bacchae*, and the fact of such panics (or "group swoons") as occurred when the Beatles played in Yankee Stadium, indicates the continuing operation of the mimetic even in the more sapient, developed being. This almost mechanical, quasi-osmotic view of mimesis is brought out, I think, in the ancient references to mimesis as infectious; Halliwell notes some of these.[14] This is clearly a noncognitivist ancient metaphor; and infection can pass by touching, as something in the music touches our souls and affects everyone (*Pol.* 1340a5–25, 1342a9–16). By contrast, the propositional (or quasi-propositional, dispositional) belief ascription of contemporary cognitivist theories of emotion and action seems to require an always already thereness to a kind of cognition which in fact Aristotle and Plato clearly think *develops*—so isn't already there, and can be made to develop in particularly superior (or barbaric) ways by a culture's or neighborhood's particularly superior (or barbaric) actions, emotions, rhythms, manners of speech and dress—all of which are the stuff of infantile (and even animal; cf. *Rep.* 563c) mimesis. The cognition that "this is a that" (1448b17; cf. Halliwell, 187–93) is first possible *after* mimesis embodies or enacts its effect (the likeness) in us. In short, the modern distinctions and debate between cognitivism and noncognitivism of the emotions and in action theory are drawn within a philosophy of mind that is already too possessively individualistic;[15] that modern presumption is precisely what the anthropological import of mimesis in Plato and Aristotle denies.

So, my disagreement with Halliwell's interpretations of both mimesis and Aristotle will center around these points. I am arguing for what I would call a noncognitivist position in understanding mimesis and the emotions engendered by mimeses, but my point is not to plump for a modern understanding of noncognitivism, but to try to get at (and keep in mind) this more basic anthropological conception of mimesis as that *through which* cognition (and self-recognition) comes to be, and also is sometimes lost once it has begun to be. Mimesis exceeds cognition by working beneath it and before it. This excess is why Halliwell felt the immediate need for a supplement when discussing musical mimesis (160). Certainly, once cognition is active, it clearly can have a place in both the effecting of emotions and in the art of producing mimetic things, but because we are "the most mimetic of animals" (1448b6), we are still (even in our intellectual habits, tics, and desires) affected by this "quasi-osmotic," almost mechanical, possession by the power of something other:[16] an infection that is perhaps purifying, perhaps polluting.

---

[14] *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 60n, 77.

[15] See C. B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), for a discussion of how modern political theory implies and reinforces a much more individualistic idea of the person than ancient philosophers would have accepted as true.

---

[16] In the first chapter of his thorough, but finally overly cognitivist, recasting of Girard's work in *Models of Desire: Rene Girard and the Psychology of Mimesis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), Paisley Livingston rightly begins with Girard's consideration of "le désir selon l'Autre, 'desire according to the Other'" (1) which is contrasted to the more usual "romantic 'myths' of the individual's spontaneity" (2).

1

THE PROBLEM OF THE *IPHIGENIA* AND THE PURPOSES OF TRAGEDY

The perfect plot, accordingly, must have a single issue; . . . the change in fortune must not be from misery to happiness, but on the contrary from happiness to misery; and the cause of it must not lie in any depravity, but in some great hamartia (1453 a12–15).

But best of all is the last; what we have . . . in Iphigenia, where . . . [*one*] *meditating something irremediable in ignorance* [*of the relationship*] *makes the discovery* [*in time to draw back*] *(1454a5, 7; 1453b35–37).*

I. BACKSTAGE AND THE WINGS: OF *POETICS* AND POETICS

This section will lay out the place of the *Poetics* in criticism and show the filiation of poetry to natural living things on one side and tools on the other. That double analogy shows that constructing poetry is like constructing constitutions, and so criticism of poetry, like criticism of constitutions, will depend upon a correct understanding of final causality in a thing that is not simply a made thing of human choice, but one that also arises out of nature and so is inescapable: *that* mimeses and constitutions exist is natural, given man's existence; *how* they exist is made—but to the purpose.

* * *

Near the beginning of the last century, when Lane Cooper attempted a task similar to this book's, he claimed, referring to Aristotle's *Poetics*, that "we possess, all things considered, but a single adequate investigation of a literary type with regard to form and function."[1] Since then, there has been much in the way of war—not all of it bloodless. At the end of that century, having attempted to overcome the hegemony of the dead via the destruction of genre and the dissolution of final cause into grapheme, phoneme, and the shifting phantasms of *différance*, it may be more clear that the hegemony of the *Poetics* is neither accidental nor the political *fait accompli* of the white and the male and the dead. Both the art (e.g., Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter) and the criticism (Barthes, Derrida, deMan, Girard, et al.) of the last half century have aimed their creative powers and engines—directly and indirectly—at Aristotle's unfinished and elliptical, though discipline-founding, ramparts. Through it all some scholars have refused to give comfort to the popular front of the modern and postmodern, in favor of exploring and defending the less politically correct though half-destroyed ancient temple. From the broader community of literary critics, we might see Northrop Frye, Elder Olson, Martha Nussbaum, along with many continually rearguard professors of classics (the inimitable Nussbaum among these also) enlisted on this side. Stephen Halliwell's previously discussed book is the latest exemplar partaking of both natures. The bands of marauders have gone by many names. In all this, as full of sound and fury as this paragraph is of purposed bombast, our latest century has proven not much different from any of twenty others taken at random. It may be that any of these critics, or even Aristotle himself, got one or another support not quite plumb, and so there is a slight rake to the rampart or stage that any of them walk upon. It may even happen in this book, though I have the advantage of having all these fine predecessors, and so have less excuse, and am more to blame—as Aristotle himself says (*NE* 1113b30–1114a3)—for getting it wrong. Be that as it may, I hereby begin my inexcusable, impolitic, and possibly blameworthy project in understanding the poetics of comedy.

Given the constant discussion of Aristotle's *Poetics* in scholarly and literary circles, it would be surprising and indeed suspicious if any author at this late date were to disagree with everything everyone who has written on the topic before has said. Yet I do disagree with nearly everyone about something. Even this much disagreement may strike some people as an expression of bilious humours. For unlike Plato, who never appears in his own name and who is considered by many to have said (under his own name) that appearing in print under one's own name is the surest sign of a lack of seriousness a man can give, Aristotle's extant works are neither poetic, nor fictional. They do not fall under the broad category he calls mimeses (as Socratic dialogues most assuredly do), but into the category of enunciative speech (cf. *De Int.* 17a2–5): speech that makes truth claims. His are not doubly reflected, or indirect communications, but direct, and quite frequently openly demonstrative and systematic.[2] Aristotle's works make truth claims about our theoretical, practical, and productive knowledge, and it should have been possible to get these claims clear and see how they work in practice before the dawning of the present age. The only irony in or about Aristotle's texts is that his teacher for so long should have been such a Cheshire cat as Plato. But almost all of Aristotle's extant work looks to be unpolished lecture notes, frequently in need of emendation if not addition on merely grammatical grounds, and *Poetics* itself is particularly fragmented and all but indubitably missing its second half.[3] In the course of time Aristotle's corpus has suffered much more considerable corruption than that of his teacher. This is all well known. I mention it in order to avoid a preemptive dismissal for my coming disagreeableness. There is room for disagreement here.

---

[1] Cooper, *Comedy*, 3.

I have already set out my major disagreement about mimesis generally; I do not present a new idea about mimesis, but argue that Plato and Aristotle understood the concept as more basic and anthropologically central as well as less cognitive than most aestheticians have taken it to be. Their philosophies of art, and their criticism of the arts, follows from their deeper, anthropological sense of the source of art. Plato and Aristotle understand mimesis to be natural to human beings; aestheticians are interested in the rules for making the poetic things and generally overlook the natural aspects of poetry. The major disagreement I have with my predecessors in the more narrowly focused study of comedy is with their views of its particular function, telos, or final cause. While this is the most important aspect of anything, for a thing's nature is most clearly revealed by its telos, it is possible to get a large number of other things right about something (as many critics do about comic and tragic poetry) while not being clear on its fundamental purpose. That an error in such an important point can occur without concomitant and large errors in other matters might seem surprising, or argue against the importance of final causality *in toto* as modern sciences pretend. But Aristotle himself, early in *Metaphysics* (I.3 and I.4), tells a history of science that only by fits and starts gets to seeing the necessity of teleology as part of its explanation of a thing—"being forced," as he says, "by the truth itself to inquire into the next sort of cause" (984a18, b10). To give a specific instance, one might be able to say quite a lot about tragedy, and be largely correct, only by considering manner (dramatic, not narrative), means (language with pleasant accessories), and object (serious action). Such an explanation would not, however, be sufficient to allow for proper judgment—either aesthetic or moral and political—about the work. If we do not know what a piece of machinery is to do, we can have no correct judgment about whether or not it does it well: any Rube Goldberg device is as good as anything else; in fact, perhaps a Rube Goldberg device would be considered better than anything else just because it contains a wide variety of objects, manners, and means—that is, it is interesting. Many paths in contemporary criticism go down this general route.[4] Such a position merely hides a belief about the telos of art, but does not dispense with it. It says variety or complexity is not the spice, but the meat. But a very complicated crossword puzzle, which would take significant *technē* (art) to build and solve, would not count as a work of mimesis for Aristotle. Complexity and uselessness are insufficient characteristics for a definition of art.

---

[2] Insofar as he considers Aristotle to be indirect and poetic in *Poetics*, I think that Michael Davis (*Aristotle's "Poetics": The Poetry of Philosophy*) is merely incorrect. Many of his remarks on the relation between poetry and action, however, strike me as insightful, to the point, and even Aristotelian—just not what *Poetics* is directly about.

[3] *Rhetoric* 1372a1, e.g., refers to a discussion of the ludicrous in *Poetics*. It is not in the text of *Poetics* we have.

However one may feel about the use of final causality as an explanatory theme in the science of nature, the science of poetics is not the same kind of thing because poetics is not about the same *kind* of thing. For one thing, mimeses are developed, they are not self-subsistent, self-developing entities like the natural things science studies: it is a construction "like a single and whole animal" aimed to "produce the pleasure proper to it" (1459a17–20). As Aristotle makes clear early on, while it is natural for man to engage in mimesis and to enjoy mimetic things—so the existence of mimeses is natural to our kind of being (*Po.* 1448b5–8)—the specific forms (like comedy and tragedy) are gradual developments. Elder Olson tells a very reasonable story about these developments:

---

[4] That the search for, and love of, the interesting is a moral flaw should be considered demonstrated after *Either/Or*. That Aristotle did not suffer from the modern desire to erect an aesthetic theory independent of ethos and pathos is defended by House (100–111), among others. That he is right to view art this way will be taken up later. The interesting is not the category that delimits aesthetics. Some greater exposition of problems in modern aesthetics will appear in Chapter 3.

> [I]n the first phase, human instinct for imitation for the sake of the pleasure and knowledge . . . is the originating cause. . . . But instinct is perfectly uniform and consequently cannot account for variation in poetry; and in the second phase, in which poetry diversifies . . . , the cause of the diversification lies in the moral nature of the imitator himself. In the third phase, forms desirable in themselves are developed; here we have art proper.[5]

This story, based on *Poetics* 1448b24–1449a8, helps us see how Aristotle can place mimeses between natural living beings—to which both he (*NE* 1050a37, 1050b34–37) and Plato (*Phaedrus* 264c) compare poetry—and the tools human beings make, invent, design, and cause to exist for specific purposes. As *Physics* 2.1 explains, natural living things have an *internal* entelechy—for example, growth and reproduction; these are causes in accord with what the thing is (καθ' αὑτό), internal principles of motion and rest; mimesis is such a principle for anthropos. On the other hand, tools are made with a particular final cause—or set thereof—*in mind*, in some external agent. They are causes κατὰ συμβϵβηκός, in accord with what the thing happens to be—as the light above my desk allows me to read because of the way its stuff happens to be put together. The final cause of the tool, as well as its original formal and originating efficient causes, are external to the thing itself and even external to the *kind* of thing it is, for they are in a mind. The final cause preexists the tool in a different kind of being than the tool. On the other hand, the purpose of the acorn, whatever the squirrel or wild pig may do with it, is to become an oak, and by nature (necessarily or for the most part) it will. In the nature the formal and the final causes are in the being (and in the kind of being) and while they can exist by abstraction in a mind, they don't exist there first. (At least they don't for Aristotle, who thinks the world is eternal, not created from the divine idea.) Poetry, by contrast, is born of both nature and artifice. Aristotle's point seems to be that by nature mimesis is engaged in for pleasure and through it we learn; that is, mimesis is for its own sake as well as for some effects. When we start purposefully making them, for our first mimeses are not purposed, we give these effects finer points, or come to them more finely. The first mimeses (those we are taken up into, those the infant finds himself doing) are for their own sake—in an infantile, animal, natural way.[6] Art will keep this element alive: the sheer pleasure in aesthesis; we may come to call it the freedom of aesthetic judgment when we become philosophers.[7]

---

[5] Elder Olson, "The Poetic Method of Aristotle: Its Powers and Limitations," 184. It will be noted in what follows that I disagree with Olsen's implication that the causes of mimesis are pleasure and knowledge, considering rather that the causes are the pleasures of doing and of seeing mimeses. The Greek here is ambiguous, so we must consider further matters of Aristotelian developmental psychology to secure any interpretation. First of all, we should remember that pleasure and pain are the proximate causes of animal motion. No doubt the latter pleasure (seeing mimeses) is closely associated with knowledge, but I am not certain that it is the *knowledge* that causes the infant's pleasure rather than *seeing (or hearing) the mimesis*—which pleasure develops into a love of knowledge (seeing that one thing is like another): the movement of the body/soul caused by the mimesis is pleasant. Hardison (*Aristotle's Poetics*) and Heath ("Aristotelian Comedy") give a story similar to Olson's for the development of comedy. Not only is it not necessary to be cognitivist about how mimesis works on us in order to explain its pleasure, it is not, I think, possible to fit all of the ancient examples of mimeses' working into a cognitivist frame: the mad, disordered motions and cries of the infant are the root of music and gymnastic working in the infant and child "lacking intelligence" (*Laws* 672c). Musical mimeses affect even some other animals (by definition irrational for Aristotle) as well as children and slaves (*Pol.* 1341a15–16) who have not developed it.

The efficient cause of the natural thing's coming to be is in the *same kind* of being. By contrast, artifacts come to be from a *different kind* of being than the made thing. The invention (or coming to be) of a lightbulb took a long time after the final cause was decided upon. Further improvements became possible not by changing the final cause, but by varying and testing the other causes to more effectively achieve the telos the *inventor* keeps in mind. Such a thing does not happen in nature. So, because mimesis is a natural instinct, mimeses are natural to our kind of being; to say human beings are the most naturally mimetic of animals is to say that we mime originally and without a preexisting purpose.[8] We then become innovators—to impose a certain result, or carry it more timely off, in ourselves and others like ourselves.

---

[6] Aristotle's association of mimesis with play or amusement in *Politics* (1336a22–b23, 1337b30–1338a30, 1339a11–1340a5), and Plato's association of mimeses with joy or delight in *Laws* (655c), play, and a charm that is distinct from both benefit and correctness without being harmful (*Laws* 667b–668) bring out this "for its own sakeness"; there is a pleasure in the activity itself, then there may *also* be judgments of correctness and benefit.

[7] This hints at a connection to Kant I will try to make more explicit in Chapter 3. We should note here, however, that Kant also has a distinction like Aristotle's between natural and made things. It comes into play in the *Critique of Judgement* (*KU* 372–74) where he distinguishes a "self-organizing being" (like the oak), in which the parts cause the whole and the whole the parts, from an artificial thing, for which a concept that is produced by a will (clearly external to the thing) is the cause. He makes the further well-known distinction that the former final causes are regulative, but not constitutive, while the latter are constitutive final causes. He does not deny that the regulative final causes we use to guide our inquiry into nature exist (Aristotle does make existential, or constitutive in Kant's terms, claims about these), only that we cannot know them to be so in themselves, since our thought and experience are constituted (naturally, it seems) in accord with those regulative ideas.

[8] It would be interesting to trace the Derridean theme of the (ab)original back to Aristotle's recognition of the human mimetic nature: How can a being be—originally—mimetic? What is the (de)structure of a being which is so? Perhaps I should write "nature," regarding such a being, under erasure. (This is, effectively, what Girard attempts to explain in his mimetic theory.) But would this not be, almost, a confession, as if the son of man could only do what he sees the father doing, or the sublunary beings only and always attempt to imitate the prime mover?

The efficient and formal causes of the existence of mimesis are in nature—in human nature most particularly; the human being is going to do that mimetic thing like an oak is going to leave and make acorns. But for human beings final causes can also be purposed. Indeed, it is probably through mimesis that thought about purposes and thought of purposes develops. The laughing child's cry "Do it again!" proposes just such a purpose. Mimesis is pleasant by nature, but its pleasure need not be purposed, and first, in fact, it isn't. We are carried by our mimetic nature; we don't, at first, set about to enact a mimesis. In *developing* mimeses, however, the poet does so purpose, and it is because *we develop* mimeses in accord with a final cause—such as catharsis, or "to achieve the pleasure particular to tragedy" (*Po.* 1453a36)—that mimeses are like tools. They can be made better or worse, more or less effective. Comic and tragic mimeses differ naturally because they affect us differently; without this natural difference[9] in the effect on the audience we could never have picked them out *for development* in their particular ways, or for analysis. Aristotle might well, then, ask "whether or not tragedy is even now sufficiently developed in its types" (1449a7), while maintaining that it had become something definite before Aeschylus (1449a14–17) and that its development so far is in accord with "tragedy's own nature" (1449a23). Based in and coming to be from our mimetic nature, mimeses affect that nature in certain ways. The early tragedians picked out certain of those effects as choice-worthy and developed means to effect them more perfectly. Thus the "what is" of tragedy became stable, and it stabilized around a certain natural result. Aeschylus and Sophocles innovate on the patent, and further innovations are quite plausible (1449b14–18).

Aristotle makes a similar argument about development in politics, against the claim that political change is undesirable—"if politics be an art, change must be necessary in this as in any other" (*Pol.* 1268b38). Change is necessary in an art when there is a better way to achieve the end. Because of other changes in the sublunary realm, like changes in population, means of, as well as quality and quantity of production, environment and resources, increase of appetite, or changes in general health and relative strength of emotions, even changes in language, changes in art—medicine, poetry, politics—will always be necessary. It is as if Aristotle, in this remark, is aware that dealing with nature—particularly human nature—requires the use of multivariable iterated equations, though he may not yet have the mathematics to lay them out perspicuously, or the computer to solve them.[10] We may fairly bet that knowing the kind of thing we need, the man will develop them, unless the culture has lamed him for virtue.

---

[9] Perhaps I should say "quasi-natural difference," since the differing cathartic effects are deeply tied to morals, which Aristotle thinks are shaped, though not entirely determined, by the polis and its culture. We should remember that polis and culture have natural ends too; some cities and cultures fail to achieve them, and some achieve them effectively for the most part. Comic and tragic mimeses differ because "necessarily or for the most part" they effect us differently. Halliwell calls mimeses "quasi-naturalistic" in the introduction to his new Loeb translation, 9.

The doubleness of the analogy here laid out has caused several problems (as might be suspected). Some scholars have taken the likeness of a poem to a natural thing too far, as we shall see in more detail shortly; on the other side, there have been critics who take poetry as a *technē* (like bridle making) and its products as mere tools—Ion, in Plato's dialogue of that name, being the extant Adam of this particular sin.[11] There is an undoubted likeness between poetry and *technē* as well; it is strengthened by Aristotle's use of medically inflected terms like catharsis, for medicine is a *technē*. Like poetry, medicine no doubt began by trying to strengthen and control the timing of certain natural effects noticed accidentally. If we consider drinking when thirsty, eating when hungry, and seeking warmth when cold as medicinal, then we might consider medicine a natural activity we practice and enjoy from infancy, as mimesis is for all human beings. Even so, for Aristotle, there is an important difference between poetry and medicine. Medicine is concerned with the body, and it is through the instrumentality of the soul that we learn and judge concerning the working of that art (medicine) upon its object. But poetry's aim is for the soul itself.[12] Aristotle's treatment of the arts of the muses in *Politics* indicates that poetics does fall under political science—as it must, since political science is the master science of the good, and mimesis (like every other action, science, and *technē*) aims at happiness. Poetry's particular aims (as those of the music arts generally) are catharsis of the passions, moral education, and intellectual recreation (*Pol.* 1341b37–40). Thus, when it comes to poetry, the well functioning of all our knowledge and feeling is itself at stake, and we cannot reduce this end to a series of rules in a *technē* because the rule-making *technē* is precisely part of the "well functioning of all our knowledge and feeling" that is at stake in the purported rule making. So, what has come to be called the objectivity of *technē*—whether exemplified in the teachable rules of medicine or of carpentry—is either unavailable to poetry (as has become popular opinion since the romantics) or must be based on different grounds than objectivity in science and technology (as both Kant and Aristotle argue). Poetry is what Marcel would call a mystery—it involves the thing it is to explain, rather than a problem—which does not involve the thing it is to explain. A nonmusic, nonmimetic *technē* (bridle making, lightbulb invention, surgery) answers problems; a music, mimetic *poiēsis* (tragedy, comedy) involves mystery. Mimeses propagate mimesis in the mimetic being; neither bedsteads nor bridles propagate anything. The poem is not merely made thing; its *technē* is not wholly rule reducible.

---

[10] In this he foreshadows the work of Thomasina in Stoppard's *Arcadia*.

[11] For a reading of this dialogue, see my "*Ion*: Plato's Defense of Poetry"; the notes therein give wide reference to other interpretations. Now also available in *Platonic Errors*.

[12] This is a Platonic point as well, not only in the (in)famous arguments of *Republic*, but also in the argument of *Philebus* (47d–48a), and *Laws* (1 and 2).

In contrast both to the nakedly natural (acorn) and to the artificial or technical (lightbulb), poetry has elements of both. In this poetry is like constitutions of states. While both mimesis and sociality are in the strongest sense natural to man, poetry and constitutions are purposeful shapings of that natural being, self-conscious refinements of natural acts and affects. *Technē* sometimes works a similar line regarding its products; for example, breeding corn to achieve a certain size kernel is a refinement of the plant's natural entelechy. More frequently *technē* involves inventing or imposing new final causes on nature (which is the material cause); for example, the use of diamonds in a machine for the reproduction of sound in an ancient technology. Even where *technē* and *poiēsis* both seem to follow this latter similar line, however, there is the difference that the human being's *technē* directs or shapes the substantial being of some other natural being, but in poetry and politics it shapes and directs his own.[13] Perfect objectivity about these matters, then, is a fiction available only to God.

---

[13] I am not sure I agree, then, with R. S. Crane's interpretation of Aristotle's remark that "art partly completes what nature cannot bring to completion and partly imitates her" (*Physics* 199a15–17). It seems that Crane, rather undialectically, separates what Aristotle had put together: "Sometimes, as in medicine, the first function is more completely explanatory of what the artist does than the second" (48). Poetry, Aristotle said, does both, and all the time. Politics and poetry are each both mimeses of our nature and completions of it. The Aristotelian questions are "on what does the art work?" and "to what purpose?" Perhaps I should say that human nature is essentially unfinished and so mimeses and constitutions—which aim at the human being as a whole—are necessarily always both part bringing to perfection and part imitation of nature (and they accomplish the former through the latter). But this last statement again approaches a religious, rather than being a strictly scientific, thesis, for it requires us to believe that a certain end is man's. Aristotle's own ideas about

There is the further difference between mimesis and *technē* that mimeses—epic, lyric, dance, mime—require not even so much science as writing, and were well developed in the Bronze Age, and probably considerably earlier. Like societies, which while natural and necessary to *anthrōpos* have developed according to various constitutions and with differing degrees of success, so, too, mimeses develop into poetry of various sorts, about which—like constitutions—we should be able to make judgments. These developments (whether in epic, lyric, dance, or constitutions), not their (ab)original being, do seem to require the minimal rational faculty of counting, so only humans—among creatures that might have mimetic tendencies or the incipient politics of a hive—have *developed* them. As Aristotle thought that the purpose of a constitution—a reasoned construction of our natural social instinct—is happiness, and as politics is the art that understands and aims at that good for a society, so poetry must also shape our natural mimetic instinct for a purpose. We see poetics and politics as analogous sciences when we consider their double source in naturally telic human instinct and our more open-ended purposiveness; insofar as politics is the master science of the good, poetry is subordinate. Catharsis and intellectual pleasure are necessary for happiness; happiness is the aim of politics. As disbelief in, or failure to acknowledge, correctly discern, or aim at happiness makes a constitution a failure (*NE* 1103b5), similarly, failure to acknowledge or correctly discern what the aim of different forms of poetry is will lead to concomitant errors in both poetic criticism and construction. That such errors will have a political effect is a necessary conclusion. And the sea flows the other way also: political errors will no doubt lead to errors in art and aesthetic judgment. Illustrations from the last century are manifold. The political errors are not, however, absolutely determinative of artistic ones; for while poetics is subservient to the complete human good aimed at by politics, according to Aristotle poetry does have a nature of its own, which can be discerned and acted upon even under the conditions of political oppression, imprisonment, and the death camp. This, too, has been proven, as they say, by history. That is to say, human beings have proven it by trying the experiment on other human beings.

---

imitation of the divine and our happiness requiring participation in that divine life so far as that is possible to man knock at this door (*NE* 1177b30–35), as we did in note 8 above. Aristotle considers this religious question to be answered by, and so discoverable in, nature. It is not, then, a matter of faith in the ordinary modern sense.

It should be briefly noted that these political and artistic issues are not merely accidentally or analogously related even in modern philosophy. We might date the beginning of modern political theory to Hobbes, whose *Leviathan*, in contrast to Aristotle, distinguishes sharply between "Nature (the Art whereby God hath made and governs the World)" and "the Art of man" which imitates Nature. Art's highest work, "imitating that Rationall and most excellent worke of Nature, Man . . . goes yet further" than the ordinary engine (or lightbulb). "For by Art is created that great Leviathan called a Commonwealth, or State, (in latine Civitas) which is but an Artificiall Man."[14] Hobbes, unlike Aristotle, does not think there is anything natural in constitutions; indeed, the state of *nature is without one*. Politics and art are both wholly made things for Hobbes—imitations that require cognitive activity in order originally to be made. Mimeses do not arise as part of our nature through which we first learn. They are imitations of a nature already known, not natural themselves. It is quite natural for Hobbes's children to consider the same of all art as it considers all constitutions: both are entirely made things, artificial. Mimesis, translated as imitation, falls, in the modern period, to just this artificiality. Constitutions fall with it. Then, almost as a further natural development, one should eventually say of art that it is all the production of the greater automaton, Leviathan, just as "dreames are caused by the distemper . . . of the inward parts of the Body" (17). Freud, blown up large, becomes Marx. And Marxist art critics are shown here to be the direct descendants of Hobbes: art is merely the expression of Leviathan's distempered dreams. According to Aristotle, the first step on this road contradicts nature, for politics is not mere imitative artifice, but an aspect of nature in us; as is mimesis. Continued travel on this wholly artificial road takes one further and further away from the being of the human. Politics, reading Hobbes's title, becomes wholly beastly, but the Leviathan he imagines being wholly artificial, perhaps he should have named his book *Frankenstein*, or *I, Robot*. In any case, art is but the dream of the distempered giant. There is empirical evidence for the truth of this Aristotelian critique. The reduction of aesthetics to politics is a "natural" conclusion from the originating premise about the artificiality of politics.[15]

---

[14] 14. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 9.

[15] 15. There will be further discussion of these matters in Chapter 3.4: The Freedom of Aesthetic Judgment; see esp. 223–27.

The idea that politics is the master science of the good leads Aristotle to consider that aesthetic questions should find a place within that larger frame (viz., *Politics* 8)—one to which they are necessarily related since happiness is the proper and most excellent functioning of our nature. That is, to judge about tragedy "*in itself* and *in relation to the audience*" are different discourses (*Po.* 1449a8–9), but not unrelated.[16] The first cannot be entirely concluded without reference to the second,[17] nor can the second be adequately understood apart from the first. Therefore the New Critics are just as wrong as the Marxists or reader response theorists—and just as right. What we call "aesthetic" and "political or ethical" questions are distinguishable discourses, but the poem cannot be entirely removed from the matrix of their double discourse. What we find Aristotle doing makes sense, then; for he talks about the relation of the poem to the audience most largely in *Politics* and not in *Poetics*, which he attempts to keep as much as possible on the topic of poetry καθ' αὑτό. Poetics attempts to keep that political discussion at bay, without denigrating its importance or necessity. It is because he keeps that discussion at bay that *Poetics* has been read by many as a perfect formalist treatise eschewing all extrapoemic effect and influence. Whether and how the arts, among them the various forms of *poiēsis*, can contribute to our natural end—happiness—is the center of a long and ancient quarrel.[18] It is a quarrel that is both taken up in, and determines the interpretation of, such Platonic dialogues as *Ion*, *Republic*, and *Laws*, among other things less scholarly if not more important. That the question of how the arts fit into the happy life of states and individuals was a question of the first political importance is indicated by the fact that such matters were the first order of business in *Republic* and *Laws*, and last, but decisive, in *Politics*. *Poetics,* while it reverses the polarity of the discussion by taking up poetry in itself (καθ' αὑτό, cf. 1447a περὶ ποιητικῆς αὐτῆς), never escapes the gravity of politics altogether, for it cannot. That in our current politics matters of poetry suffer wide neglect, while a wider range of critics and artists reduce poetry to a form and venue of political expression are signs that either we are a different species than Plato and Aristotle—one for whom either mimesis or sociality is no longer natural—or that politics and criticism have completely failed to understand their relation or to acknowledge their only true ends.[19]

---

[16] It appears to me that the text of Aristotle here allows several kinds of reasoning (or *logos*): a *logos* about whether or not tragedy is sufficiently developed in its types, a *logos* about judging it (tragedy or tragedy's development into types?) intrinsically, and a *logos* about judging it (tragedy?/types?) in relation to the audience. Aristotle seems not to be putting off as another *logos* the argument about whether or not tragedy has sufficiently developed intrinsically, as the remainder of the chapter concludes that it has achieved its nature. He does seem to talk about types (*eidea*) in chapters 13 and 14, where he also mentions some different effects on the audience. He does not otherwise say anything about tragedy's (or its types') relation to the audience. So I propose to take his distinction between a discussion καθ' αὑτό and one πρὸς τὰ θέατρα in the most general way.

[17] For a more detailed examination of when and why in his argument about poetry intrinsically Aristotle brings this "extrinsic" factor of the audience into play, see my "The Others of Aristotle's *Poetics*." Parts of that argument will be rehearsed in the discussion of *Poetics* 13 and 14.

[18] In order to participate fully in the quarrel, then, one has to know what happiness is, for one is implying a definition of it whether one will or knows. See Chapter 4.

2. THE PROBLEM OF ARISTOTLE'S EVALUATION OF THE *IPHIGENIA*

One of the greater difficulties facing anyone who would build a theory of comedy out of Aristotle's book on tragedy is that not only does he use several unclear though obviously important terms of art, like catharsis, but there are also places where Aristotle seems exceptionally clear about tragedy, but obviously wrong or self-contradictory. Such a crux comes face to face with any reader in the short space of chapters 13 and 14 quoted as the epigram of this chapter, which seems to be both. Not only does there seem to be a contradiction in what the two chapters say constitutes the best tragedy, but chapter 14 seems to mistakenly identify *Iphigenia in Tauris* as a tragedy despite the fact that brother and sister escape and live happily ever after.

To recall the plot briefly: Iphigenia, rather than being sacrificed by her father at Aulis is secretly spirited away by the goddess to the land of the Taureans. Their custom is to sacrifice all strangers to the goddess and Iphigenia is made priestess of the ritual. The plot of the play begins with the arrival of her only brother, Orestes, who is immediately captured. The ritual sacrifice is ordered, but just before she marks him with the goddess's irrevocable sign, brother and sister are revealed to each other. They plan and successfully carry out an escape—or, as Aristotle says, they recognize each other, "thence comes salvation" (1455b12).

Many scholars have attempted to clear up the tragic difficulties Aristotle seems to fall into in the course of these chapters without any reference to a missing theory of comedy. To try to clear up the problem by reference to such a theory would be to explain the paradoxical by the absent. While this may be an honored method in theology, philosophers and literary critics (excepting Freudians) are not apt to look kindly upon such an effort. Though we cannot approach Aristotle's view of tragedy this way, it should be clear that however one resolves this well-known problem in Aristotle's poetics of tragedy, the solution will directly involve one's understanding of the poetics of comedy. The way out of this problem will have reverberations through the whole of the science. For one thing, if one agrees with chapter 14's estimation that *Iphigenia in Tauris* is the best tragedy, it will be clear that a happy ending cannot be the sufficient condition of the comic genre. Aristotle's understanding of comedy—at least what is *not* comedy—is partially revealed by how one resolves the crux of these two chapters. The case of the *Iphigenia in Tauris* is, then, like one of Kant's antinomies, a model problem, a *quaestio* on both sides of which there are reasonable arguments, and the mind is in chains until a solution is found.

---

[19] That Plato considers poetry and politics both to be ways of loving souls can be seen in *Symposium* 209d–e where Diotima places them together, as well as in *Phaedrus*; in other dialogues (*Republic*, *Laws*) their relation is also clearly dialectical, though the limitation of one by the other is brought to the fore. Plato's *poetic construction of the political* discussions might be the best indicator of his thought about the true relationship of poetry and politics: correlative, not contradictory.

The best way to lay out the difficulty is to summarize the problem-causing chapters. Chapter 13 requires the plot to be aimed at by the poet to be complex (having peripety and recognition) and of single issue. The finest (κάλλισται) tragedies will be mimeses of fearful and pitiable events, which implies we should not see decent people (ἐπιεικεῖς) changing from prosperity to adversity since this is repugnant (μιαρόν). Nor should we see depraved people (μοχθηροὺς) rising from adversity to prosperity; this is the least tragic change of all, being neither pitiable nor fearful nor arousing philanthropy. Nor should we see the utterly wicked (σφόδρα πονηρὸν) fall from prosperity to adversity, which may arouse philanthropy, but not fear (which is felt for one like ourselves) or pity (which is for undeserved suffering). This leaves someone in between—a person not preeminent in virtue—who falls from prosperity into adversity not through depravity (μοχθηρίαν) and badness (κακίαν), but through some hamartia. The finest (καλλίστη) tragedy has such a structure (συστάσεως). Aristotle adds that the structure (σύστασις) with the double outcome—opposite for the good (βελτίοσι) and bad (χείροσιν)—is thought to be best because of the weakness of the audience, but its pleasure is more appropriate to comedy.[20]

Chapter 14 begins by remarking that the better poet aims to educe the pitiable and the fearful from the structure of the things done (συστάσεως τῶν πραγμάτων) rather than from the spectacle. As the action must logically take place between friends, enemies, or neutrals, and, if the action is between enemies or neutrals, nothing is pitiable save the suffering (πάθος), it follows that tragedy rightly seeks suffering engendered between philoi, as, for example, when one is about to murder a father, mother, sister, or brother. Aristotle then explains how to make fine use (χρῆσθαι καλῶς) of such traditional stories by presenting four possibilities: (1) The worst is if the action is about to be done knowingly and is left undone. This is repugnant (μιαρόν) and untragic, since it lacks suffering (ἀπαθές). It is the case of Haemon in *Antigone*. (2) The action can occur with knowledge, as when Medea kills her children. This is the second worst action. (3) The action can be done in ignorance, followed by recognition of the relationship, as in *Oedipus*. This is better (Βέλτιον) since there is nothing repugnant and the recognition is thrilling (ἐκπληκτικόν). (4) The best (κράτιστον) is that someone about to do something irremediable recognizes it and so does not do it: the case of *Iphigenia in Tauris*. So while in chapter 13 it seems the best plot is that a protagonist not preeminent in virtue falls from prosperity to adversity, in chapter 14 the best plot is one in which the completely innocent, put-upon, and seemingly goddess-abandoned protagonist, about to kill her only and beloved brother, recognizes him, and salvation follows: from adversity, prosperity.

---

[20] This last is, perhaps, a hint that comedy's pleasure is related to an enjoyment of justice.

3. SOME ATTEMPTED SOLUTIONS: THE FALLACY OF ARISTOTELIAN FORMALISM

Getting Aristotle around what looks to be both self-contradiction and error has led to the development of a host of scholarly devices. There is, naturally, the perennial thesis of historical change in the meaning of terms through time.[21] This leads to remarks like "we are reminded that Aristotle's definition of tragedy is quite different from the modern one, which places major emphasis on the "unhappy ending."[22] But, at best, the thesis of historical change in the meaning of terms would explain the mistake of choosing *Iphigenia* as the *best* tragedy, not the affirmation of the earlier "correct" definition of a tragic plot, which is entirely in line with our modern terms. Nor does this proposal resolve the contradiction between that "correct" definition and the definition and choice of the following chapter, which places *Iphigenia* over *Oedipus*. We must, then, think that Aristotle lived through a revolution in his own thought between writing chapters 13 and 14—and didn't realize it.

---

[21] I will skip over entirely the strongest form of this historicist view. A. W. H. Adkins concluded his analysis of the problem, which attempted to show Aristotle's fourth-century use of key moral and evaluative words was significantly different from those of the fifth-century tragedians, by saying that Aristotle's main ideas not only have "no relevance at all to later tragedy, [like Shakespeare, but they also are without] any relevance to extant Greek tragedy," and only have the historical interest of being the remarks of an intelligent and sensitive reader ("Aristotle," 101). If this were true, then neither the art nor the criticism of Greece could have any significance for our life other than being a sort of esoteric entertainment: a Rube Goldberg device for classicists. If such historicism were true, only the fully adequate historian could understand the text, or get anything

The thesis of historical change in the meaning of terms does not become any easier to believe when we consider Aristotle's further remarks. For example, chapter 13 had rejected the plot with a double issue—"an opposite issue for the good and the bad personages"—by saying "the pleasure here is not that of tragedy. It belongs rather to comedy, where the bitterest enemies in the piece (e.g., Orestes and Aegisthus) walk off good friends in the end, with no slaying of anyone by anyone" (1453a33–39). Here, indeed, "Aristotle appears to be using the word 'comedy' almost in its modern sense of 'having a happy ending'" says the lexical historian, but this "cannot be entirely right because Aristotle considers *Iphigenia in Tauris* a tragedy and calls its kind of recognition, in which the tragic deed is contemplated and then avoided at the last minute, the best kind of all" (Hardison, 188). Such a complex of statements on the part of critics like Hardison confesses that this is not a

---

out of it—and he wouldn't. Adkins, in this article and in his book, treats the Homeric poems as teaching what real men were and ought to be like in the heroic age of shame culture—i.e., he does not treat them as poems.

Vernant and Vidal-Naquet have a similar tendency; see esp. the first chapter of *Myth and Ritual*. The root of the problem here is a deeply philosophical issue; Adkins, and historicists generally, share with the Socrates of *Republic* the view that poetry is primarily a representation (or imitation) of reality, which I would like to distinguish (and I think Socrates would like his interlocutors to distinguish) from poetry as mimesis: something that takes us into a certain set of feelings or even actions: e.g., weeping; Socrates' discussion, and that of the Athenian in *Laws*, allows that there is a difference between the iconic and the mimetic; this distinction seems to be one between what our mind actively builds up and judges, and what imagination is shaped by, so forming our judgment. But then Socrates treats them in an undifferentiated fashion: as if myth were just dogma dressed up: an icon of the invisible, or more simply and more often, the historical truth about the heroes and the gods. That is, Socrates performs as a person who cannot make the distinction, just as his interlocutors (old men who think that in setting the laws they are in control of everything, rather than moved by . . .). Such treatments are thereby marked as palpably incomplete. For further discussion of this problem, see my "Intentionality and Mimesis" and "The Empiricist Looks at a Poem."

[22] O. B. Hardison, with Leon Golden, *Aristotle's "Poetics": A Translation and Commentary for Students of Literature* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 197, cf. 113.

problem for lexical historiography, nor one that can be resolved by philology καθ' αὑτό. The problem with what Aristotle considers "the best" tragedy, and why he thinks it so, is a decisive problem for any philosophical poetics, and central to any discussion of the nature and purposes of comedy: to pull on this string wrongly pulls the whole of *Poetics* out of shape.[23]

Underneath Hardison's remarks there is at work a view I would like to call "Aristotelian formalism." I call it "Aristotelian" not because I believe Aristotle held it, but because it is developed from some of his statements in *Poetics*. I call it "formalism" because it is developed by blowing formal causality into the most significant—if not the only—defining feature of the verbal made thing: the poem. I intend to show that such a view is not only false to Aristotle, it is also false to the things—including the things made by Shakespeare and other artists of a later day as well as those Aristotle knew and was speaking of. What Hardison says about the "modern sense" of comedy implies the modern senses of comedy and tragedy are constrained within this fallacy of Aristotelian formalism.[24] That they do so suffer I agree with; that Aristotle teaches the fallacy is false.

We can see in the remarks already quoted that Hardison is considering Aristotle's outline of possible plots from chapter 13, where, after ruling out several forms as not raising the right emotions, Aristotle says that what remains is the complex plot with a single fatal resolution for the protagonist—who must be a relatively good man suffering due to hamartia. A complex plot is one with peripety and recognition, and he outlines the peripety as being a change in direction of the plot movement; for example, one that seems rising changes to fall. The tack of the unhappy ending that Euripides most frequently takes "is the right line to take" (1453a26). What Aristotle is describing here as the best is the shape of an action that moves the protagonist in a curve approximating the parabola of the mouth on a tragic mask: the protagonist climbs from a bad beginning (runs away from impending tragedy at home) up to a relatively superior position (answers the Sphinx and is named king) where the peripety turns the action to his undoing (discovers the queen is his mother). Aristotle also suggests a contrasting complex plot, which Hardison identifies with our modern idea of comedy. The parabola of this action moves down (the protagonist begins to doubt all his ideas) to a peripety (he considers there might be an evil demon deceiving him, but discovers the good God must exist) whose resolution rises to happiness, not misery (he realizes every clear and distinct idea must be true). The plot of *Iphigenia* clearly fulfills this latter formalist criterion for comedy, as Hardison recognizes. As such formalist critics note, Aristotle cannot be talking about a plot that *simply* moves from happiness to misery or the reverse in a straight line, for he has already specified that the complex plot (involving a peripety or change in plot direction) is better than a simple one (Hardison, 165ff, includes diagrams). The structure of the incidents—the formal cause—has become, in the eyes of these critics, all but definitive of the genre, and in summarizing his discussion of structure versus spectacle Hardison seems to go a little further than is necessary ("structure is always more important than content"; 189) for the definition of the genre.[25]

---

[23] One can also pull *Poetics* out of shape by silence. For example, Golden accepts chapter 13's version of the best tragedy (without argument) when he attempts a theory of comedy; see "On Comedy," 286. He avoids discussion of chapter 14 entirely in "Epic, Tragedy and Catharsis"; see especially 83f. where he makes pity and fear a direct function of the character of the tragic hero. He presumes in his silent act what Bywater proclaims openly by bracketing most of the later chapter as an addition.

[24] Halliwell similarly complains of this formalist tendency in the introduction to his new Loeb translation, 10. John Jones ties the formalism I am against to the invention of the "tragic hero," whose fate substitutes for Aristotle's emphasis on action; see his section 1, esp. 12–16. Formalism is common to both post-Aristotelian classical and medieval theories of comedy and tragedy through Dante and Chaucer; see, e.g., Coghill, "Basis," and notable examples in Preminger et al., eds.

It would follow that all literature, or at least all dramatic and narrative literature, should fall under one of four plot forms: the simple rise from worse to better fortune (a rising line), the complex change from worse to better fortune (a smile), the simple decline from better to worse fortune (a declining line), and the complex change from better to worse (a frown). A formalist might be tempted to go so far as to call the first set of plots comic and the second tragic, but (even without speaking of final causes) Aristotle would not do so, for, as chapter 13 argued, the character of the protagonist has a great influence on how we respond to the play—a supremely good man passing from happiness to misery "is not fear-inspiring or piteous, but simply odious" (1452b34f). Such a movement of such a character therefore cannot function the way Aristotle defines tragedy as functioning: "Through pity and fear accomplishing a catharsis of such emotions" (1449b27–28). Similarly the fall of a braggart, miser, pantalone, or sophist into misfortune is frequently—but not always—comic.[26] Notice that in these last sentences we are implying that we know what comedy and tragedy are apart from the structure of the incidents, and that we will regard some falls of braggarts comic and some not.[27] The formalist mistake is to consider the shape of the plot (or—at best—plot plus character) fully definitive of, and sufficient for, the distinction between the types of drama, whereas Aristotle clearly makes the emotions affected in the audience the decisive criterion for the determination of type.

---

[25] Frye confesses a similar formalism when he says that the "general distinction between fictions in which the hero becomes isolated from his society and fictions in which he is incorporated into it" is that aspect of plot which is referred to by the terms tragic and comic in their larger than dramatic sense (*Anatomy*, 35). He reiterates that formalism in a later sentence, tracing it to Aristotle: "the source of the tragic effect must be sought, as Aristotle pointed out, in the tragic mythos or plot structure" (207). But this sentence is hard to join together with its paragraph-opening counterpart: "Like comedy, tragedy is best and most easily studied in drama, but it is not confined to drama, nor to actions that end in disaster" (207). Clearly *Cymbeline*, one of Frye's examples in this paragraph, is not a fiction that isolates the hero from his society, and it is hard to see why, given what Frye has said about the movement of tragedy, the play should be considered a tragedy at all. A more complex explication of the basic distinction between comedy and tragedy is required than one based solely on *muthos*.

It is of course neither my argument nor Aristotle's that plot and character are disconnected from catharsis, nor that any reader's response is as good as any one else's. As the fall of the good man is odious, so the rise of a bad man to happiness "is the most untragic that can be; it has no one of the requisites of tragedy; it does not appeal either to the philanthropy in us or to our pity, or to our fears" (1452b35–37). Here we see again that Aristotle must, and does, turn outside of the play—to its effect in the theater, on our pity, fear, philanthropy—in his argument about whether or not a play is tragic, so we should turn (and expect he is turning) to the same criterion to answer the question about which tragic plot is best.

Before we come to that solution, however, there are several other instructively mistaken attempts at resolving the crux formed between chapters 13 and 14. Like Hardison's attempt, we will see that these notions have in common a separation of form from function, or (in the case of Else) a limitation of explanatory scope to that suitable for a perfectly natural thing partaking in no way of the way of being of a tool.

[26] As an example of it not being comic consider the scene in *Love's Labour's Lost* (5.2) in which the pedants Nathaniel and Holofernes are mercilessly mocked by the young scholars. After Nathaniel retreats, Costard (the clown), himself having taken part in the driving off, says

> there, an't shall please you, a foolish mild man; an honest man, look you, and soon dashed. He is a marvelous good neighbor, faith, and a very good bowler; but for Alisander—alas, you see how 'tis—a little o'erparted. (576–80)

The clown's speech makes us in the audience feelingly realize we have gone too far ourselves in enjoying the mockery of our neighbor, for we have been laughing at him too—and now the clown chastises us. "This is not generous, not gentle, not humble" (621).

[27] Frye himself argues that comedy turns into tragedy depending on the nature of the scapegoated figure and the depth of the scapegoating in *Anatomy*, 42–43, 45–46.

The second attempt to resolve our puzzle focuses on the distinction between single incident and plot of the whole. These scholars appeal to a seeming division of topics in the two chapters at issue. They note that as chapter 12 (an early, but probably spurious, addition) was about the quantitative parts of tragedy, chapters 13 and 14 are about the qualitative aspects, and in chapter 13 he is "thinking of the course and effect of the tragedy as a whole, [while in chapter 14] he is thinking of the emotional effect of a specific incident within the tragedy."[28] It is, however, fatal for this proposed argument that Aristotle has emphasized so much that plots are mimeses of a unified action (1450b23–25), like the *Iliad* (1451a29), in which the episodes follow by probability or necessity (1452a3–20). Further, the kind of action that arouses pity and fear in the *plot* is the same as the kind of *incident* that will do so: the kind that causes "suffering within relationships such as brother to brother" being the best kind (1453b19–21). So in order to carry through this distinction between "play as a whole" and "incident" the poet would need to make the most effective kind of incident—the one which is meditated, or perhaps already in motion, but thanks to the recognition not committed—merely incidental to the main action of the play. The play's total action must be, finally, disastrous. We are driven to the obvious difficulty that "to have an imminent horror with a happy issue as the crucial incident in a tragedy would seem to be incompatible with an unhappy ending of the play as a whole."[29]

Despite its obvious problem, this answer has been exceedingly popular. The reason for its popularity is that it lets us keep our easy unexamined opinion. For one would only wish to make the happy incident of discovery fit into an unhappy whole by virtue of an unspoken appeal to the fallacy of Aristotelian formalism; this appeal begs the question at issue, which is whether a tragedy needs to have an unhappy ending in order to be (1) a tragedy, or (2) the best exemplar of the tragic.

A third group of scholars answers the problematic crux by saying that Aristotle changed his mind about what the best tragedy was. They take the conclusion in favor of *Iphigenia* over *Oedipus* to be his final considered opinion.[30] No one of whom I am aware has considered the *Iphigenia* preference to be early, and then replaced upon consideration by a preference for *Oedipus*. To my view this sort of explanation at least has the advantage of requiring that the scholar allows Aristotle himself an escape from the formalist fallacy, and while it implicitly accuses Aristotle of sloppiness and forgetfulness of major proportions in not changing, deleting, or clarifying the previous chapter, the admission that Aristotle changed his mind in the direction favoring *Iphigenia* might save us from a hypnotic attraction to the mask of plot form. If a thinker of Aristotle's caliber eventually concludes that *Iphigenia* is both tragic and the best exemplar of the form, we ought to consider why. It is clearly not sufficient to say that the answer to this question "must remain a matter for speculation" (Moles, "Notes," 91), still less to speculate that his final preference "is the manifestation of a jaded critical palate" (Moles, "Notes," 92). Aristotle began the troublesome chapter by saying that tragic fear and pity can be aroused by the spectacle, but the better way is by the structure of the actions (1453b1–3); his rating of plots and actions not only follows this remark but also follows from it, and is neither a disconnected accretion, nor a matter for uninhibited speculation, nor the merely subjective tendence of an old horse.

---

[28] Cooper, "Amplified Version," 46; Moles calls this the "usual attempt" ("Notes," 82).

[29] Thus Cooper, about his own attempted solution; "Amplified Version," 47.

[30] Bywater, e.g., suggests that 1453b22–1454a9 is a later accretion, thereby cutting out everything specific from chapter 14 as not fitting with the original flow of the argument except the remark about plot being more important than spectacle. Glanville suggested that the changes between the two chapters of *Poetics* devolved from Aristotle's sharpening of his views on voluntary

There is, finally, the case of the critics who give Aristotle the lie direct.[31] Aristotle's critical judgments, says Else,

> were based too narrowly to begin with, on his exaggerated and one-sided thesis of the overwhelming importance of plot as against all other elements; and their interlocking [principles] had the result of narrowing his scope still more, to two species of one variety (the complex plot). It so happened that the knife-edge of his judgment hit square on one masterpiece, the *Oedipus*; but the other play it hit upon, the *Iphigenia*, cannot honestly be called much more than a good melodrama, and meanwhile masterpieces like the *Trojan Women* or the *Bacchae*, to say nothing of the *Oedipus at Colonus* or the *Agamemnon*, remain outside the range of Aristotle's formula. . . . Tragedy in its greatest days comported things that were not dreamt of in Aristotle's philosophy.[32]

---

action between (earlier) *Eudemian Ethics* and (later) *Nicomachean Ethics*. I am not convinced that the alleged change between these books is sufficient to ground such a major change in poetics, and it seems exceedingly strange that Aristotle does not notice the contradiction he creates.

[31] Besides Else, we might put Kitto in this group, though he is not quite so direct. When faced with the *Iphigenia*, he says "we have to change entirely our critical premisses" (314), leaving us to remember for ourselves that Aristotle seemed to think his judgment flowed from the premises he had outlined. Even more surprising, Anne Burnett calls the *Iphigenia* "non-Aristotelian, as that term is usually understood" (1) and notes that although he admires the plot, Aristotle "makes no attempt to find a place for it in his system" (2n). It is not clear from her explication of the play (47–72) exactly what is non-Aristotelian about it. It is certain that *Poetics* gives it pride of place.

[32] *Aristotle's "Poetics": The Argument*, 446. Else's thesis has been resurrected lately by Martha Husain, *Ontology and the Art of Tragedy: An Approach to Aristotle's "Poetics."*

But Else, besides here marrying Aristotle to the fallacy of formalism, has also interpreted catharsis in such a way that the narrow jacket he has made of *Poetics* has become a straitjacket. First of all, he has interpreted catharsis in the most intellectualist manner, as his use of the word 'demonstration' in what follows emphasizes. He reads Aristotle's phrase μανθάνειν καὶ συλλογίζεσθαί τι ἕκαστον (1448b16) as "learning, inferring what class each object belongs to" (125)—a kind of "learning" that necessarily belies Aristotle's claims about the firstness of learning through mimesis, and overlooks man's sharing of both mimesis and μάθησις with nonrational animals (which also seem to share in some of our pleasure in music). Secondly, other critics generally recognize catharsis as something that occurs, or at least has a reference, outside of the play in the audience, and that idea allows some possibility of correction or escape from erroneous judgments dependent upon the formalist fallacy. For Else, however,

> the catharsis is not a change or end-product in the spectator's soul, or in the fear and pity (i.e., the dispositions to them) in his soul, but . . . the purification of the tragic act by the demonstration that its motive was not μιαρόν [polluting]. . . . This interpretation makes catharsis a transitive or operational factor within the tragic structure itself, precedent to the release of pity, . . . rather than the be-all and end-all of tragedy itself. (*Argument*, 439)

It must be admitted that Else's remark that catharsis should not be considered the be-all and end-all of tragedy has some Aristotelian evidence for it, for Aristotle himself says that plot is the *psuchē* and *archē* of tragedy (1450a38). Further, the plot, which is the end (telos) of tragedy, effects the function (*ergon*) of tragedy (1450a30, 1452b29). Else does not deny that poetry has effects on the audience, he just denies that those effects are part of the complete explanation of the poem's being. Partly his remark seems to be based on something trivial: If we say that the final cause is in the audience, we are placing one of the causes for a thing outside the thing. This seems counter to the phrasing that plot is telos, *psuchē*, and *archē*, since plot is definitely in the play. Aristotle's phrasing, however, does not stand against the fact that catharsis is the final cause of tragedy while plot is its formal cause. That "the soul is the form of the body" and gives it life implies that "all natural bodies are organs of the soul" (*DA* 415b15, 18; cf. 415b10–12), so a similar remark about plot means that all the other parts of the play (thought, character, rhythm) are the plot's organs, plot being the soul. In this way the plot as *psuchē* is the telos that the elements of the play subserve.

But all of that can be true (and is true) of the poem in itself without denying that catharsis in the audience is the final cause of the whole play itself. For the play is not a merely natural thing that springs fully formed from the mimetic instincts of man (like a child from a different instinct); it is *made to a purpose* and that purpose unaccomplished or come tardy off we must say that the play (like a certain axe; *DA* 412b13–18) is a play in name only. The play is not *just* a tool either, but it is a tool as well. Even the fact that *natural* bodies find their telos in the soul does not gainsay that the final cause of the *complete being* is happiness (or, for animals, satisfaction). That is, the final cause neither is nor is in either the soul or the body, rather the final cause is the excellent functioning of the composite. Even in the case of such completely natural things as souls there is a way of understanding the soul's final cause as being outside the being, for it aims at immortality, which the mortal soul cannot get for itself, but only for its species (*DA* 415b5–8), continuing its kind in beings other than itself. Similarly with the play, which is the composite of plot plus other elements, the final cause of which is catharsis: The plot makes the play be the kind of thing it is and the thing aims at accomplishing something beyond itself. The soul makes the body be the kind of body it is, gives it the capacity—really, *is* the capacity—to function as that kind of being should, and in fully natural beings is the guarantor that a certain final cause—maple, oak, happiness—is the final end at which the being—seed, acorn, man—aims. But a poem is not a fully natural thing as Else's rendering of the analogy makes it; the poem has a certain *psuchē* because the artist *is aiming at* a certain effect.[33] That *psuchē* gives the play its particular life and motion, and plot is also the *archē* dictating the choice of other elements: characters, music, thought, language. All of these are chosen for plot's sake and act on its behalf. It is as a pseudonatural thing that we must understand Aristotle's remarks that "the events and the plot are the telos of tragedy" and "the most important thing" (1450a22–23). It is the most important thing considering the play itself καθ᾽ αὑτό (1449a8; cf. 1447a7 Περὶ ποιητικῆς αὐτῆς). If a play were a natural thing, this would be the *only* way to properly understand it, and Aristotle would not have to begin his treatise by particularly picking it out, nor would he have to note that there is another set of problems—those that arise πρὸς τὰ θέατρα. But there is that other side because plays are not merely natural, with an entirely self-subsistent and self-actualizing entelechy. We aim to do something with them; that act is accomplished in the audience. As the final cause of the hammer is driving the nail and that of the axe is cutting, so the final cause of the play is a catharsis of the passions. It is as something like a tool that we must understand this: the final cause of a tool is always outside the tool. Here might be a good place to point out that the extant *Poetics* closes with Aristotle arguing that tragedy is superior to epic because not only is its plot more unified, but also it requires less space for the attainment of its end and these two causes make it better in its poetic effect (1462b15). If, as I am arguing, this poetic effect—outside the tool, in the theatre—is catharsis, we might expect that book 2 would begin by continuing with a more detailed discussion of that poetic effect—that is, the kinds of catharsis. That discussion would allow Aristotle to clarify the distinction between tragedy and comedy—a perfect beginning to that latter topic, which is what the missing book is supposed to be about. So plot is *archē*, *psuchē* and telos for the poem considered in itself. But considering the poem's relation to the audience (which relation is part of its nature as a poem) the telos is catharsis.

---

[33] Halliwell calls Aristotle's framework "quasi-naturalistic" (see his introduction to the Loeb edition, 9); I take it this explanation lays out his reasoning for that choice of terms. It is precisely because the artist is *aiming* at an effect that Kant is somewhat suspicious of the beauties of art; it purposely draws a relation between morality (the good) and aesthetics (the beautiful); see *KU* 301f., and the discussion below in Chapter 3.3 and 3.4. Art is beauty created with an unavoidable reference to the moral good, because created by a being with practical reason.

Else's idea of catharsis, which makes it a transitive factor in the tragic structure itself—if it can be understood at all—considers tragedy after the model of a *fully* natural thing, with an entelechy that is self-referential and self-developing. This is never the case in art. While mimesis arises naturally and accomplishes its effects naturally, it is shaped by the poet for specific purposes the poet aims to achieve through those natural workings (cf. 1454a10–12). These purposes are outside the poem in the naturally mimetic being from whence the art arises and by whom and for the sake of whom it is made. The telos of everything *in* the poem is the plot, but the telos *of* the poem is not. The medical basis of the word for this telos—catharsis—is no mere happy accident, for ancient medicine developed the same way as drama: noticing a natural effect, the physician sought ways to increase the strength and control the timeliness of the effect, *for the sake of* the being affected.[34] The effect is the end-all of medicine, just as it is of politics, and a legislator or doctor who fails to achieve the end is a failure. So it is also in drama, as Aristotle says in chapter 25: even "impossibilities . . . are justifiable, if they serve the end of poetry itself (which has been stated), that is, if it makes . . . [the poem] more thrilling (ἐκπληκτικώτερον)" (1460b24–25). Similarly, depravity and improbability are inexcusable "when they are not necessary and no purpose is served" by them (1461b18–20). But the ekplektic has clear connections to passional catharsis, not an intellectual clarification (as the next section will exhibit). The aim of poetry is not "the interesting," but the affectively effective.

---

[34] Richard Kraut has shown that "for the sake of which" relations are both causal and normative in his *Aristotle on the Human Good* (200f); we should expect, then, that Aristotle's poetics will be, like medicine and politics, doing both descriptive and prescriptive work. We might even

In his famous definition of tragedy as "a mimesis of a serious action, complete and having magnitude; in language with pleasurable accessories; dramatized, not narrated; through pity and fear accomplishing a catharsis of such passions" (1449b24–28), Aristotle clearly picks out the formal, material, efficient, and final causes he demands of a complete explanation. As has been almost universally noted, he talks about all the other causes at length in the extant *Poetics*, but the final cause—catharsis—is not clearly discussed anywhere in *Poetics*.[35] I have argued at length elsewhere[36] that Aristotle's reason for largely skipping a discussion of catharsis is that he is considering poetics alone—as his opening line suggests: περὶ ποιητικῆς αὐτῆς (1447a7)—and is leaving to the side as much discussion relating to the audience (πρὸς τὰ θέατρα) as possible in order to keep his little study centered as much as possible καθ' αὑτό (1449a7–9), on poetry intrinsically. He must, and does, make reference to the effect of poetry when he discusses kinds of plot in our problematic chapters because, since everything else in the poem is there for the sake of the plot, what is required or best for the plot must be judged by something outside of the poem itself: unless, that is, one thinks it possible to judge of form without reference to function—the fallacy of (Aristotelian) formalism.

Largely because Aristotle does not speak of it elsewhere in *Poetics* Else brackets the whole phrase introducing the *Katharsisfrage* (1449b28) as a late addition by Aristotle, and raises a host of problems to the usual interpretation of it as referring to the passions of the audience. Most apropos to

---

go so far as to say it is impossible for any poetics, medicine, or politics not to be doing both. Being prescriptive implies that it is possible for the art *Poetics* describes to be turned to ill, as well as good; thus always with pharmacy.

[35] Belfiore, like many others, concludes similarly; cf. *Pleasures*, 257–60, 337–39, and her references.

[36] See "The Others In/Of Aristotle's *Poetics*," esp. 250–51.

continuing the analysis of the present problem is his discussion of the last phrase, τὴν τῶν τοιούτων παθημάτων κάθαρσιν, of which he says "either (1) τῶν τοιούτων must equal τούτων (these), or (2) there must be tragic emotions besides pity and fear," and then emends the text in the most limiting direction (*Argument*, 228; cf.226–27). Professor Else considers changing the Greek text because as it stands it clearly implies other passions than pity and fear are involved in tragedy, and he considers it unlikely that Aristotle thought so. I am willing to leave the text unemended and accept the consequence that there are tragic passions besides pity and fear, though Aristotle explicitly names no others when he refers to the feelings tragedy should generate—except philanthropy (1452b28–1453a5). He does mention disgust (το μιαρόν; 1453b39) as something tragedy should not evoke.

I am willing, that is, to stay with the ordinary translation that tragedy, "through pity and fear accomplishes the catharsis of such (or suchlike) passions."[37] Note that whatever other suchlike passions there may be, these too undergo a catharsis *through pity and fear*, or perhaps I should say "through the pitiable and fearful things"—which is Aristotle's preferred locution throughout the questionable chapters. In either case fear and pity are still the most significant of the passions (or events)—the ones (or the kind of things) that do the work—in hearing, reading, viewing a tragedy. Tragedy may arouse other passions, but it is through pity and fear being aroused that catharsis occurs. This interpretation might go so far as to allow that tragedy may work either homeopathically (pity and fear providing a catharsis of pity and fear) or allopathically (pity and fear providing a catharsis of some other—suchlike?—passion), depending on how much like each other passions have to be to be considered homeopathically catharsized.[38] The fallacy of Aristotelian formalism reaches its esoteric dead end when catharsis is made a transitive factor within the structure of the play itself. The play no longer does any work: a Rube Goldberg device with no output.

There is a deep problem in philosophical aesthetics beneath this discussion. Else wishes to explain catharsis apart from the feelings of pleasure and pain engendered in the audience. I suppose the philosophical aim of such an explication is to attempt somehow to make aesthetic judgments of works of art fully autonomous. Any solution of this problem will require us to take note of Kant (in Chapter 3 of this book) but for the time being let us note that Else's desire to make artistic judgments autonomous is itself no doubt an expression of the desire to free them from the vagaries of mere subjectivity or emotionalism, or—this last century's great problem—political dogma and propagandizing. He apparently thinks that a complete disjunction with feeling is necessary in order to defend that wished-for autonomy. As Halliwell shows in the book that was set up as our propylaia, however, the creation of an autonomous sphere for art is not something at which the mimetic theory of art as understood by the ancients aimed. It is doubtful that Plato or Aristotle could even think such a thing as a real possibility for the being called *anthrōpos*. Further, as Kant's work points out (whether or not it itself escapes from this trilemma), judgments about works of art are either (1) wholly subsumable under a determinate theoretical concept (e.g., pseudobiological: "they grow like this") or (2) subsumable under a practical concept (a version of which the political theories of art accept), or (3) result from a merely pathological feeling (about which no agreement can be forthcoming). True autonomy for art will require something other than one of these three choices. Else's formalism escapes the second and third of these difficulties; but his formalism is still not autonomy even if it escapes the charges of being insidiously and surreptitiously political or melancholically phallogocentric.

---

[37] Janko likewise leaves the text unemended ("From Catharsis," 350), as does Belfiore (*Pleasures*, 226); Bywater and Halliwell both translate "such emotions." Prior to Else, F. L. Lucas had found no difficulty in holding that tragedy dealt with "feelings of that sort," i.e., grief, weakness, contempt, blame; cf. his *Tragedy*, 43–44. Else continues to think the matter problematic; see his last book, *Plato and Aristotle*, 159–62.

[38] Resolving the debate between these two versions of catharsis was the final cause behind Belfiore's finely detailed book.

Else's attempt to understand tragedy in this intellectualist way is reminiscent of Karl Philip Moritz's argument that a work of art is internally purposive; that is, that it can only be understood as having a purpose and perfection in itself, without relation to feelings of pleasure and pain.[39] In this case God could tell us what the true aesthetic rank of things is, but human beings are most likely to find themselves mistaken. Moritz might have been the first of the New Critics. The effect of a work of art on a being with feelings of pleasure and pain would be superadded or accidental: a political, rhetorical, or social effect on top of the "properly" artistic one. But where Aristotle says these two discussions—politics and poetics—are distinct, he means it in the way he would say that an analysis of political structure can be kept distinct from a discussion of happiness. That is, we can see how the elements of a poem (or a polis) are related, how plot, character, and language (or legislative, executive, and judiciary) work and interlock, while leaving the purpose of the whole blank. Modern politics—and the modern state—seems to attempt just that. So modern politics, like the New Criticism (and its dark shadow, deconstruction), attempts to understand its object without the reference outside the object's structure:[40] happiness in the political case, catharsis in the case of poetry. But such rigorous objectivity goes too far—by not going far enough: into the audience. In any case it clearly is not Aristotle's position: to keep two discussions distinct (as he does) is not to say either can be completed without the other (which he neither says nor does).

---

[39] For further discussion of Moritz's view, see Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 141–47.

On the way to resolving the problem of the *Iphigenia*, then, our next questions must not be about plot, but about passion: What other passions could be considered tragic? and How do pity and fear accomplish their catharsis?

4. OF STRONG AND PAINFUL PASSIONS

In this section I will show good reason to think that Aristotle considers tragedy's purpose to be a catharsis of the painful emotions, fear and pity being primary among them. By briefly explicating Aristotle's view of the passions I will try to show that what he says about tragedy requires this more inclusive understanding of the passions involved in the art. Part of the argument in this section is aimed against the idea that the passions themselves are, or need necessarily involve, judgments—which view a consistent intellectualist (about *Poetics*) must hold—and partly the argument is aimed at upholding a bifurcation in the passions between those based on pleasure and those based on pain. Such a bifurcation allows for two broad objects of artistic making and catharsis, just as Aristotle suggests by the original two-book structure of *Poetics*.[41]

---

[40] The problem for an Aristotelian analysis of aesthetics, if I am right about Aristotle's understanding of the final cause of poetry, is how a pleasurable feeling of catharsis can be universally valid. This is required if (as Aristotle claims) some tragedies just are better than others, and audiences can be mistaken. This problem, then, is thoroughly dialectical, raising two opposing orders at once, for it requires us to join an effect on *feeling* with a *universally valid judgment*. Against this double-edged sword many a theory of aesthetics—and nearly as many interpretations of *Poetics*—has raised its head, and fallen. This deeper problem of aesthetics will be taken up more directly in Chapter 3.3 and 3.4. It will be necessary, in those sections, to speak of Kant, who clearly sees that this is the problem.

The first indication that a whole spectrum of the passions—not just fear and pity and perhaps two more for comedy—is involved in Aristotle's understanding of catharsis is his use of the term ἔκπληξις. Aristotle says of the *Oedipus*-type plot that the recognition is ἐκπλήκτικον—wonderful, surprising, thrilling (1454a4). The word's literal roots could be translated "to strike forth from" and is related to the term κατάπληξις—shame, self-disgust—or, more literally, "to strike down against."[42] We should note the mechanical or animal impetus invoked by the words here, which connect to the broader anthropological sense of mimesis discussed in the "Propylaia." Besides the kind of thing Aristophanes has Euripides say of Aeschylus's poetry (*Frogs* 962), ἔκπληξις makes Ion's hair stand on end when he recites (*Ion* 535b2), and causes soldiers to flee in panic (Belfiore, *Pleasures*, 219). Socrates uses the root verb to describe his reaction to Agathon's lovely, if inconsequent, speech in *Symposium* (198b5), which he describes as infectious, another hint at a more deeply rooted mimetic effect than cognition. Indeed, Socrates' exactingly cognitive response of questioning Agathon, rather than fleeing or discovering his wits are charmed to stone, makes Agathon reverse his field. Philosophy's difference from tragedy is not merely the content of its speech, but what it makes happen, and on what it works primarily. Perhaps Socrates' praise was itself the disarming countercharm needed to free the obviously excited symposiasts (as well as himself) from the passions excited by Agathon. Κατάπληξις was Pericles' cure for Athenian hubris according to Thucydides (2.65.9). Belfiore argues that ἔκπληξις "is not an emotional effect separate from pity and fear," but is "another term for the same effects" (ibid., 222). Moles considers its primary case to be "the surprise of the audience when things turn out contrary to their expectations" and so is "particularly condu-

---

41. The division in *Poetics* 2 is ἤ σπουδαίους ἤ φαύλους, on which I have more to say later (Chapter 2.1). *Tractatus Coislinianus* says tragedy has pain, comedy pleasure, for its mother (cf. Janko, *On Comedy*, 23, 25, and the discussion of that text in Chapter 2 below). Aristotle's original book had two parts according to all reports: one part on tragedy, the μίμησις πράξεως σπουδαίας, the other on comedy, the μίμησις φαυλοτέρων.

42. More scholarly discussion of these terms can be found in Belfiore, *Pleasures*, 216–22; see also Moles, "Notes," 89–91, and Heath, *Poetics*, 15–16, 42, 112. Stanford emphasizes the visceral effects of tragedy "being felt in the entrails, womb, liver, heart, midriff, lungs, or head, like a stab" (*Emotions*, 21); see also 15, for its effect in crowds; 28f for ἔκπρληξις particularly.

cive to the arousal of pity and fear" ("Notes," 89). Heath says "it and its cognates are used of any emotional reaction, and particularly of those which are particularly intense" (*Poetics*, 15).

The middle ground seems very solid. It is clear that elsewhere in Greek literature (besides discussions of fearful and pitiable things) ἔκπληξις can refer to a wide range of sudden, very strong, encompassing emotional reactions, not necessarily or exclusively pity and fear. Aristotle's three bare uses of the term in *Poetics* (1454a4, 1455a17, 1460b25) argue against it developing any more specific or technical sense in that treatise. In fact, the middle reference is to the recognition of Orestes by Iphigenia, which is hardly frightening, but that from which comes salvation. This *recognition* clearly involves judgment, but the sudden influx of joy in the characters, expressed in both movement and voice, is itself ekplektic and mimetically effective on the audience. So, ἔκπληξις may seem more particularly associated with pity and fear in other places precisely because the topic is frightening things; for example, the reference in *Ion* refers to a recitation of particularly fearful scenes in Homer. But Alcibiades' use of the term with regard to Socrates in *Symposium* 215 might refer as much to a sudden influx of an ungovernable love as to fear. Its use in that context might make us suspect that the ekplectic—the wonderful, surprising, or thrilling—will be an effect to aim at in comedy as well. As Heath notes (*Poetics*, 15), the term is sometimes used to refer to both love and joy by the tragedians themselves. Aristotle's own remark that plausible impossibilities are allowable when they can accomplish a greater ἔκπληξις (1460b22–25), taken together with the already mentioned remark about the recognition scene in *Oedipus* being ἐκπληκτικόν (1454a4), should convince us that it is not the harmful or the shameful deed per se that causes the emotion of ἔκπληξις,[43] but sudden or surprising recognition and peripety, which in the case of Oedipus is pitiable, but which may well be a sudden cause of joy or release from fear—as Iphigenia's saving discovery of Orestes.

We should not be convinced that the ἔκπληξις caused by peripety is mostly or largely due to the event that takes the audience by surprise by making things turn out contrary to their expectations. Ignorance on the part of the audience will clearly be able to heighten this effect in some circumstances, but most tragedy in Aristotle's day was based on traditional stories, which even if (a debatable Aristotelian claim) they were "only known to a few, are

[43] Belfiore (*Pleasures*, 221), plumps for this view—that the revelation of the harmful or shameful causes ἔκπληξις.

a delight *nonetheless* to all" (1451b25–26). Further, Agathon's *Antheus*—"in which both incidents and names are the poet's invention—is no *less* delightful on that account" (1451b21–23), but clearly these plays should be quite a bit *more* delightful if audience surprise is a primary source of ἔπληξις. Finally, many of the plays of the great tragedians were performed on a regular basis (even as they and Shakespeare are now)—the element of surprise cannot be long lasting, and the play could never be as emotionally effective on a second or third reading (or presentation) if surprise were necessary for ἔπληξις. Nor could Ion's recitations of Homer work so.[44] Not only are these things not the case, but frequently a poem becomes more effective the more we read it. In this regard we should also remember that in many plays—like *Bacchae* or *Hecuba*—the prologue lets us know in more or less detail what will be coming. If this were a flaw, Euripides would hardly win Aristotle's palm as the most tragic of poets. It is the rapid and extreme changes of emotion (as well as the fact of being enacted rather than narrated) that makes drama more effective than epic at producing catharsis. As in epic (and probably all music), it is the production of strong feeling that gives delight (τὸ δὲ θαυμαστὸν ἡδύ; *Po.* 1460a17). Partly this is mechanical: the beating down of the feet of the dancing chorus, the rhythms and tones of the voices, the pull of the descant against the melody and rhythm.

In this regard it seems that intellectualist interpretations of catharsis, like Golden's, are particularly ineffective. If catharsis were an intellectual matter, swiftness and sureness of getting an insight should not matter, and certainly not matter more than the fuller and more nuanced insight available to the longer and more ruminative forms (epic or novel). But if catharsis is a matter of feeling, and of *going through* the feelings, then swiftness, sureness, suddenness, and strength are precisely the important matters.[45] Similarly the suddenness of an action or sureness of a recognition are not matters wholly reducible to propositions, even when the recognition involves a statement of fact. We may think of poetry as more philosophical than history not only because the reflection it engenders regards universals (though why this should not be the case for history as well—which is where most tragedy gets its stories—is unclear), but because of its engendering of the passions, which are the active universals in the theater.[46] Despite Freud, Oedipus is no more universal than Darius or Nixon, but the passions a well-constructed plot about any of them might be set to work on *are* universal—it is in the passions that we mimic each other, and these too require their exercise and purification. That the mimetism of the passions does not require "a more fundamental" cognitive explanation, but that the natural mimeticism of the human being—which is, according to Aristotle, fundamental to our coming to know—is itself the explanation of the infectious nature of the passions in the audience lends further support to the thesis that the mimetic arts are more philosophical than history and that poetry "more concerns the universal" (1451b7). For history aims precisely at cognition; and abstraction from the (infectious and beclouding, to add the usual adjectives) active universality of the passions.

---

[44] Nor could a piece of music (something we are more likely to hear several times than a recitation of Homer) work so well depending on this. Yet it does work: you know the descant is coming; you wait for it; it comes; and there you are on the verge of tears again. And if I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand lose its cunning on these strings, and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth. And perhaps the descant is not even words, but a saxaphone.

[45] On this matter, cf. *Poetics* 1462a13–b15 with Golden, "Epic, Tragedy, and Catharsis," 77f.

Halliwell notes that Aristotle's point here is that

> [P]oetic universals operate at a level much less overt, and less susceptible to propositional formulation, than the examples or moral maxims of the orator, still more those of the sytematic philosopher; . . . [they have] a metaphorical presence; . . . understanding poetic universals is a matter of implicit grasp, not—or not necessarily—of explicit articulation.[47]

Such descriptions of the "vituality" of poetic universals in contrast to all usual cognitive universals seem even more applicable to music and dance (which have no *logos*). This explanation of poetic universals also goes along with that anthropologically basic sense of mimesis as working in an infectious, mechanical, or quasi-osmotic fashion, as something *which forms* the human being in accord with it rather than something *upon which* he makes a judgment. The Girardian sense of mimesis goes along with Halliwell's insistence that we consider poetic universals "much less substantial," their work "subtextual, virtual" (102), or my emphasis that the work of mimesis is more infectious than intellectual, more mechanical than cognitive.

I conclude, then, that ἔκπληξις is a sudden, strong, encompassing, visceral, and probably emunctory—Ion's eyes fill with tears, Alcibiades' tears flow—affect; one that can be brought on by, among other things, the recognitions and peripeties of tragedy, recitations of Homer, the speeches of Socrates, the beating of the feet of the chorus or drums, sudden shouts and changes in pitch—a range that includes, but does not necessitate cognitive judgment. History does not aim at ἔκπληξις in its recitations, nor does philosophy by turning our agreement to its universals (Socrates' method being considerably different from the usual treatise), but this affect is central to the purpose of poetry, and, since this is so, production of greater ἔκπληξις may excuse the poet from making a plot that contains an impossibility (1460b22–25).[48] Ἔκπληξις, then, seems to refer to a sudden and overpowering intensification—the superfetation—of a passion or pathos, but the range of passions that may undergo this intensification covers both sides of a Pythagorean list, from fear and pity to joy and love.

---

[46] Again, contrast with Golden, "Epic, Tragedy, and Catharsis," 81, 85.

[47] "Aristotelian Mimesis and Human Understanding," 101.

* * *

With a view to clarifying further Aristotle's view of the passions and their importance for drama, we must synthesize a wide range of texts from *De Anima*, *Ethics*, *De Motu Animalium*, and *Rhetoric*. There are even greater dangers of misinterpretation here, since these texts have distinctly divergent aims from our own. For example, vis-à-vis the *Rhetoric*, clearly when one is speaking to convince, one is attempting to move the passions in different ways and for different reasons than when one is reciting a poem. Further, the audience of a rhetorician is in a different emotional set than the audience of a poet. The audience of the poet expects and probably wishes to be moved; here, the deceived is wiser than the undeceived. The audience of the rhetorician may be suspicious and particularly on the look-out for emotional appeals: something of their own is at stake. Aristotle implicates this difference between the rhetorical and the poetic situations when he says that imagination and judgment are different forms of thinking;

> [T]he former [imagination] is an affection (πάθος) which lies in our power . . . but it is not in our power to form opinions (δοξάζειν) as we will. . . . Again, when we form an opinion that something is threatening or frightening, we are immediately affected by it . . . ; but in imagination (φαντασίαν) we are like spectators looking at something dreadful or encouraging in a picture. (*DA* 427b21–25)

In this latter case we need not come to judgment or take action. The rhetorician, on the other hand, is attempting to make us judge in a certain way in a situation where we must judge one way or another. We should remember that "judge" (or "decide") is the last word in *Rhetoric*. In a rhetorical situation it seems like fear would drive out pity, for these passions move us to opposite decisions—for example, "If we defend the French any longer, we will no longer have the resources to defend our island against the coming invasion"; the opinion that the threat is imminent and great but escapable now does not allow the opinion that the French are to be defended to stand. In the theater, however, we can both fear for Hecuba and pity her. In the theater, then, one passion need not drive out another related passion, but may in fact magnify or enhance it. Close attention to Aristotle's remarks in the two books bears out this point. At *Poetics* 1453a4–6, speaking of the passions the tragic hero's fall engenders, he says, "the one passion concerns the undeserved falling into bad fortune, and the other concerns the likeness. Pity concerns the undeservedness, and fear the *likeness* [to ourselves]." But *Rhetoric* 1385b33 presents a different situation; he notes that people suffering from great fear do not feel pity, being taken up by what *is* happening to themselves.[49] The rhetorical situation is one involving present decision. It has, we might say, existential import, it is not merely "in a picture."

---

[48] Heath makes a similar point in *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy*, 115.

Turning back again to the poetic side, the poet works on imagination. Imagination being in our power, we can decide, when looking at a play or a picture, to let the sight affect us or not. Perhaps we even choose to invent a certain imaginative picture. In a way we let it affect us (imaginatively and passionally); but in a way we do not, not letting ourselves be led to decision and action. When we ourselves are in the dreadful or encouraging picture, however (as in the rhetorical situation), judgment—the power to form opinions—is entailed, and we are immediately affected—in different ways depending on our character and judgment, but it is not in our power *not* to be affected. Our judgment here will not be aesthetic, for it is about the real harms, threats, and goods *we* aim at and *are* involved in, not their *likeness*. This distinction might partially explain why the city of Athens would fine a playwright for presenting a *Sack of Miletus* (see Herodotus 6.21); the event calls up pity and fear, but not the pity and fear appropriate to tragedy; it called up judgment, not imagination, for the sorrow was not *like* their own, but—in fact—their own. One might say such a poet's crime is to take advantage of a poetic venue for rhetorical and political purposes, causing painful emotions—but achieving no catharsis, merely putting us back in our own loss.[50]

---

[49] Golden's view of comedy accepts what *Rhetoric* says about the opposition of certain emotions without considering this problem of the difference between rhetorical and poetic situations of the audience; cf. "On Comedy," 286–87. Stanford, too, presumes too easily on the usefulness of *Rhetoric*'s discussion; cf. *Emotions*, 23.

[50] See Heath, *Poetics*, 66f. on this event. Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* suffers from a similar flaw. He accomplishes the rhetorician's purpose, but not the poet's.

Several studies of ancient tragedy emphasize the importance of the effect we might call the tragic shudder (φρίττειν)[51] on the audience. Even in modern times it is considered high praise if a critic can say "there wasn't a dry eye in the house." Of course this should only happen to an audience when it is clear that the acts occurring on stage (or in the film) are not disgusting, but it is not the purpose of the play to demonstrate that fact (as Else affirmed), but rather to have the shuddering or emunctory effect.[52] How does the play accomplish this shudder, and why is it worthwhile? What are these affections or passions the play aims to cause?

The conclusion reached regarding ἔκπληξις above is completely in line with Aristotle's definition of the affections of the soul—πάθη—"formulae expressed in matter" (*DA* 403a25–26). Ἔκπληξις is not the hair standing on end or the weeping or fleeing, but it is the pathos that finds expression in any of these bodily motions (or others) depending on the nature and habits of the individual in whom it comes to be. At this point we must take a few steps back to clarify what goes on in the human passions and how they move us.

In beginning his investigation of the soul, Aristotle broadly distinguishes the soul's affections (πάθη) from its functions (ἔργα; *DA* 402b14–403a4, 403a11); that distinction parallels the distinction of what the soul suffers (πάσχειη) and what it makes or does (ποιείη, 403a8). He makes a similar distinction between activity and passivity when he investigates bodies alone (403b13, cf. 465b15–17). In *De Motu* he makes this distinction take on physical measure and psychological weight by arguing that if one part (of a joint) moves, the other must be at rest (698a15–25). That is, the actor (or mover) and the acted upon (or passive moved) must both be present and yet distinct in being if there is to be any motion. What is unmoved active mover and what is passive moved may change as we go through any motion or change, as the lower arm is unmoved mover to the moving hand, but moved mover to the unmoving upper arm, which in turn is moved mover to the static torso. In *De Anima* Aristotle asks whether any of these things—functions or affections—can go on apart from the body, and so belong to the soul essentially. He answers that "anger, courage, desire and sensation" are clearly enmattered, as is φαντασία (imagination). Thinking is the only possible exception, he says, though if it depends upon imagination "even this cannot exist apart from the body" (403a10).

---

[51] See, e.g., Heath, *Poetics*, 11f, Belfiore, 226–28, and Gould, chapters 9 and 17; Aristotle uses the strong word referred to here at *Poetics* 1453b5. All the authors mentioned recognize that the play is aiming to cause this kind of strong, even physically manifested, emotional reaction.

[52] The demands of an inferior audience may lead poets to raise this emotional effect in improper ways, but that is the fault of the poet and the audience, not of the art.

In this list of passions and functions (403a7–10) we should first point out that it is highly likely that Aristotle is using particular examples to stand for types of physiopsychic occurrence: there is the primary irascible passion (anger), followed by a wider capacity (θαρρεῖν, better translated as being confident than as courage), then the primary concupiscible passion (desire), followed by sensation, and finally thinking. The last two are characteristic functions (ἔργα) of the soul; the first three are either all what we would recognize as passions (πάθη) in the strict sense—in line with the meaning the word has in English—or two passions (anger and desire) and a capacity (θαρρεῖν) to be affected by certain passions in that strict sense. A longer such list immediately follows, in which he calls anger, gentleness, fear, pity, courage, joy, loving, and hating passions of the soul (ψυχῆς πάθη), remarking that when they appear the body is also affected (πάσχει; 403a16–19). We should note that it is never the case in all this that thought or its cognates and nearest relatives—belief, understanding—are called passions by Aristotle. *Phantasia* seems to go both ways; as Schofield says, Aristotle seems to be making room for it "between thinking on the one side and sense-perception on the other."[53] The receptivity of sensation produces something in imagination and this passive imagination gives rise to the soul's anger, spirit, desire; or, thinking imagines some good or evil and this more self-activated imagination gives rise to the soul's passions. Finally, Aristotle corrects this picture slightly when he says,

> probably it is better not to say that the soul pities, or learns, or thinks, but to say rather that the soul is the instrument whereby man does these things; that is to say, the movement does not take place in the soul, but sometimes penetrates to it [as perception] and sometimes starts from it [as recollection]. (*DA* 408b13–17)

Aristotle's construction in these lines exhibits another quite interesting parallelism. Pitying, learning, and thinking are described as types of movement, and these movements sometimes penetrate to the soul and sometimes start from it. Knowing that the last (thinking) is the only one he considers it even plausible to exist without the body, the last description—movement that starts from the soul—applies most clearly to it, as it does to recollection.

---

[53] Malcolm Schofield, "Aristotle on the Imagination," in Nussbaum and Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's "De Anima,"* 254.

From the other direction, some events penetrate to the soul—as through sense perception—and so move us (for example) to pity. The middle term—learning—seems to go both ways. We think of a hypothesis, we test it, we suffer the consequences: the soul starts one kind of movement and receives another from the world in response. Or the reverse: the mother speaks; the baby, perceiving, imitates the rhythms and syllables. After much babbling he finally names the animals rightly. Embodying and repeating the world is our earliest learning, thinking about those things that have been embodied and repeated by forming general ideas is second.[54] That earliest learning is more a suffering than an activity. Mimesis takes us up before we intend it.

So the things that happen penetrate to the soul and *cause* a passion or a series of passions; *thinking* about those things is a different kind of motion—one in the opposed direction. Thinking starts from the soul and moves out to the world. From the other direction, the harsh or fearful thing happens in the world and it is through the soul's perception of the fearful thing that fear comes to be in the human being. This distinction also goes along with the view of *EE*, where appetition is considered on analogy with force *working on* inanimate objects, but real action requires the capacity for *working from* calculation, which we do not attribute to children (1224a 21–30). Children, who are run by their passions (*NE* 1119b5), learn first through mimesis (*Po.* 1448b8). They may be acting *in accord with* reason and judgment, but not from it. So we first learned language too. Cognition follows after what we suffer (πάσχειν), and we may at some point be able to give propositional descriptions of those sufferings, but affirmation or denial of propositions need not be invoked as the *explanation of* the suffering or passion (πάθος). Such affects, then, do not require judgment, merely perception. So music (rhythm and harmony alone) can cause certain affects even in children and animals, without thought or judgment coming into play. The movement of the sound itself is effective; so too with dance or vigorous gymnastics: the actions themselves are mimeses of character or *ethos*. They work mechanically on the soul, quasi-osmotically; they build up what is necessary for cognition and judgment which are part of true virtue—or they are a mechanism for cowardice and self-indulgence.

In his most detailed explanation of the interlocking activity and passivity of the soul, *De Motu Animalium*, Aristotle reduces all the movers of the animal to thought and desire (νοῦν καὶ ὄρεξιν; 700b19). Desire comes to be either through thought, or φαντασία or sense perception (701a36), which latter two hold the same place in the causal sequence as thought (700b20), and desire is the proximate cause of the movement (701a35). This same story would apply to avoidance, so that it is the pleasant or the fearful thing (ἡδέος ἢ φοβεροῦ; 701b21) which through φαντασία or sense perceptions or ideas (701b16) cause the passions, and these cause movement. It seems that Aristotle thinks that *either* our thought of something fearful *or* φαντασία *or* sense perception of it can cause the passion of fear (or alternatively, desire).[55]

---

[54] Cf. *An. Post.* (99b34–100a8): Perception that persists gives rise to memory and memory of many similar things constitutes experience, which is the universal, when established in the soul.

> For sense perceptions are *at once* a kind of alteration, and φαντασία and thinking have the power of the actual things. For it turns out that the form conceived of the pleasant or fearful is like the actual thing itself. That is why we shudder (φρίττουσι) and are frightened just thinking of something. (701b17–23)[56]

It would make sense, then, that music could cause pleasure in some animals (*Pol.* 1341a16)—or perhaps fear, going so far as to cause a stampede—without necessarily attributing thought to them: sense perception is sufficient. Similarly, sudden sounds in the theater, or screams, can contribute to the arousal of fear operating merely through sense perception, though most of the play—operating through language—works through the higher power. The work of art can (and does) work through any of the three functions of the soul (thought, phantasy, sense) to arouse the passions it aims at. Perhaps art must begin by appealing merely through sense perception; mimesis clearly works originally through this, no more advanced or rational cognition is necessary. Philosophy and stories—as narratives—don't appeal merely through sense perception, though mother's sweet syllables and warm whispering may be what we first, without learning, love, and so listen to, and desiring, attempt to imitate, and through mimesis learn, at last, to speak. But the first time we say "mama" it is meaningless . . . to us.

---

[55] It may be that φαντασία is the required power that in turn is moved by thought or sense perception—φαντασία presenting the forms of the pleasant or of the painful, which forms produce the passions; in this case there would be three steps (sense perception or thought, φαντασία, passion) instead of two (sense perception or thought or φαντασία, passion) (*DMA* 701b21, 703b19–20). This latter would seem to be Aquinas's understanding of it; it is certainly Schofield's. Which of these two is the case is not a matter we have to resolve for our discussion. On the difficulties of these details, see Nussbaum's essay, bound with her translation of *De Motu*, 227–69; also see Dorothea Frede, "The Cognitive Role of *Phantasia*," in Nussbaum and Rorty.

[56] Aristotle uses the same word—to shudder with fear (φρίττειν; *Po.* 1453b5)—as an effect that can be brought about either by spectacle or "merely hearing the events that occur."