Chapter 1
Classical Literary Criticism

Introduction to the Classical Period

The story of Western literary criticism begins shortly after 800 BC in ancient Greece, the era of the great Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as the poets Hesiod and Sappho. The so-called "classical" period, starting around 500 BC, witnessed the great tragedies of Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles, and the comedies of Aristophanes. It was around this time that the foundations of Western philosophy were laid by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle; the discipline of rhetoric and the political system of democracy were established in Athens. The classical period is usually said to end in 323 BC with the death of Alexander the Great. After this is the "Hellenistic" period, witnessing the diffusion of Greek culture through much of the Mediterranean and Middle East, a diffusion vastly accelerated by Alexander's conquests, and the various dynasties established by his generals after his death. The city of Alexandria in Egypt, founded by Alexander in 331 BC, became a center of scholarship and letters, housing an enormous library and museum, and hosting such renowned poets and grammarians as Callimachus, Apollonius Rhodius, Aristarchus, and Zenodotus. We know of these figures partly through the work of Suetonius (ca. 69–140 AD) who wrote the first histories of literature and criticism.

The Hellenistic period is usually said to end with the battle of Actium in 31 BC in which the last portion of Alexander's empire, Egypt, was annexed by the increasingly powerful and expanding Roman republic. After his victory at Actium, the entire Roman world fell under the sole rulership of Julius Caesar's nephew, Octavian, soon to become revered as the first Roman emperor, Augustus. During this span of almost a thousand years, poets, philosophers, rhetoricians, grammarians, and critics laid down many of the basic terms, concepts, and questions that were to shape the future of literary criticism as it evolved all the way through to our own century. These include the concept of "mimesis" or imitation; the concept of beauty and its connection with truth and goodness; the ideal of the organic unity of a literary work; the social,

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political, and moral functions of literature; the connection between literature, philosophy, and rhetoric; the nature and status of language; the impact of literary performance on an audience; the definition of figures of speech such as metaphor, metonymy, and symbol; the notion of a "canon" of the most important literary works; and the development of various genres such as epic, tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry, and song.

The first recorded instances of criticism go back to dramatic festivals in ancient Athens. A particularly striking literary critical discussion occurs in Aristophanes' play *The Frogs*, first performed in 405 BC. This comedy stages a contest between two literary theories, representing older and younger generations; it is also a contest in poetic art.[1] The two competing poets are presented as Aeschylus and Euripides. Aeschylus represents the more traditional virtues of a bygone generation, such as martial prowess, heroism, and respect for social hierarchy – all embodied in a lofty, decorous, and sublime style of speech – while Euripides is the voice of a more recent, democratic, secular, and plain-speaking generation (*Frogs*, l. 1055). Aristophanes' play reveals that for the ancient Greeks poetry was an important element in the educational process; its ramifications extended over morality, religion, and the entire sphere of civic responsibility. By the time of Plato and Aristotle, poetry had achieved considerable authority and status. Plato rejected poetry's vision of the world as unpredictable, ruled by chance, and always prone to the whims of the gods. Much of Plato's philosophy is generated by a desire to view the gods as wholly good, to impose order on chaos, to enclose change and temporality within a scheme of permanence, and to ground our thinking about morality, politics, and religion on timeless and universal truths. So Greek philosophy begins as a challenge to the monopoly of poetry and the extension of its vision in more recent trends such as sophistic and rhetoric which offered a secular, humanistic, and relativistic view of the world. Plato's opposition of philosophy to poetry effectively sets the stage for more than 2000 years of literary theory and criticism.

Plato (428–ca. 347 BC)

It is widely acknowledged that the Greek philosopher Plato laid the foundations of Western philosophy. The mathematician and philosopher A. N. Whitehead stated that Western philosophy is "a series of footnotes" to Plato, who indeed gave initial formulation to the most fundamental questions: how can we define goodness and virtue? How do we arrive at truth and knowledge? What is the connection between soul and body? What is the ideal political state? Of what use are literature and the arts? What is the nature of language? Plato's answers to these questions are still disputed; yet the questions themselves have endured.

At the age of 20, like many other young men in Athens, Plato fell under the spell of the controversial thinker and teacher Socrates. In a story later to be recounted in Plato's *Apology*, Socrates had been hailed by the Oracle at Delphi as "the wisest man alive." He devoted his life to the pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, and virtue. Using a dialectical method of question and answer, he would often arouse hostility by deflating the pretensions of those who claimed to be wise and who professed to teach. A wide range of people, including rhetoricians, poets, politicians, and artisans, felt the razor edge of his intellect, which undermined conventional views of goodness and truth. Eventually he was tried on a charge of impiety and condemned to death in 399 BC. After the death of his revered master, Plato eventually founded an Academy in Athens.

Most of Plato's philosophy is expounded in dialogue form, using a dialectical method of pursuing truth by a systematic questioning of received ideas and opinions ("dialectic" derives from the Greek *dialegomai*, "to converse"). Socrates is usually cast as the main speaker. The canon attributed to Plato includes 35 dialogues and 13 letters. The early dialogues are devoted to exploring and defining concepts such as virtue, temperance, courage, piety, and justice. The major dialogues of Plato's middle period – *Gorgias*, *Apology*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, *Republic* – move into the realms of epistemology (theory of knowledge), metaphysics, political theory, and art. What unifies these various concerns is Plato's renowned theory of Forms, which sees the familiar world of objects which surrounds us, and which we perceive through our senses, as not independent or real but as dependent upon another world, the realm of pure Forms or ideas, which can be known only by reason and not by our bodily sense-perceptions. Plato says that the qualities of any object in the physical world are derived from the ideal Forms. For example, an object in the physical world is beautiful because it partakes of the ideal Form of Beauty which exists in the higher realm. And so with Tallness, Equality, or Goodness, which Plato sees as the highest of the Forms. The connection between the two realms can best be illustrated using examples from geometry: any triangle or square that we construct using physical instruments is bound to be imperfect. At most it can merely approximate the ideal triangle which is perfect and which is perceived not by the senses but by reason: the ideal triangle is not a physical object but a *concept*, an idea, a Form.

According to Plato, the world of Forms, being changeless and eternal, alone constitutes reality. It is the world of essences, unity, and universality, whereas the physical world is characterized by perpetual change and decay, mere existence (as opposed to essence), multiplicity, and particularity. A central function of the theory of Forms is to unify groups of objects or concepts in the world by treating them as belonging to a class, by referring them back to a common essence, and thereby making sense of our innumerably diverse experiences. A renowned expression of Plato's theory occurs in the seventh

book of the *Republic* where he recounts the "myth of the cave" where people have lived all their lives watching shadows of reality cast by a fire, with their backs to the true light of the sun.[2] Plato makes it clear that the cave in which men are imprisoned represents the physical world, and that the journey toward the light is the "soul's ascension" to the world of Forms (*Republic*, 517b–c). In his later dialogues, Plato himself severely questioned the theory of Forms.

Plato on poetry: the *Ion*

Plato's most systematic comments on poetry occur in two texts, separated by several years. The first is *Ion*, where Socrates cross-examines a rhapsode (a singer and interpreter) called Ion on the nature of his art. The second, more sustained, commentary occurs in the *Republic*. In the *Ion*, Socrates points out that the rhapsode, like the poet himself, is in a state of "divine possession," and speaks not with his own voice which is merely a medium through which a god speaks. The Muse inspires the poet, who in turn passes on this inspiration to the rhapsode, who produces an inspired emotional effect on the spectators (*Ion*, 534c–e). Socrates likens this process to a magnet, which transmits its attractive power to a series of iron rings, which in turn pass on the attraction to other rings, suspended from the first set. The Muse is the magnet or loadstone, the poet is the first ring, the rhapsode is the middle ring, and the audience the last one (*Ion*, 533a, 536a–b). In this way, the poet conveys and interprets the utterances of the gods, and the rhapsode interprets the poets. Hence, the rhapsodes are "interpreters of interpreters" (*Ion*, 535a).

The poet, insists Socrates, is "a light and winged thing, and holy, and never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself, and reason is no longer in him" (*Ion*, 534b). Not only poetry, according to Socrates, but even criticism is irrational and inspired. Hence, in this early dialogue, Plato has already sharply separated the provinces of poetry and philosophy; the former has its very basis in a divorce from reason, which is the realm of philosophy; poetry in its very nature is steeped in emotional transport and lack of self-possession.

Poetry in Plato's *Republic*

Plato's theory of poetry in the *Republic* is much less flattering. His main concern in this text is to define justice and the ideal nature of a political state. Interestingly, his entire conception of justice arises explicitly in opposition to poetic authority and tradition. Socrates mentions "an ancient quarrel" between philosophy and poetry (*Republic*, 607b). Plato views poetry as a powerful force in molding public opinion, and sees it as a danger to his ideal city, ordered as this is in a strict hierarchy whereby the guardians

(philosophers) and their helpers (soldiers) comprise an elect minority which rules over a large majority of farmers, craftsmen, and "money-makers" (415a–b; 434c). The program of education that he lays out for the rulers or guardians of the city consists of gymnastics and music. The Greek word *mousike*, as its form suggests, refers broadly to any art over which the Muses preside, including poetry, letters, and music (401d–e).

Just how seriously Plato takes the threat of poetry is signaled by the fact that it is music which primarily defines the function of guardianship: "It is here . . . in music . . . that our guardians must build their guardhouse and post of watch" (IV, 424b–e). Plato advocates an open and strict censorship of poetry on the grounds of: (1) the falsity of its claims and representations regarding both gods and men; (2) its corruptive effect on character; and (3) its "disorderly" complexity and encouragement of individualism in the sphere of sensibility and feeling. Socrates stresses that poets must not present the gods as deceitful since "there is no lying poet in God" (II, 382d). This phrase suggests that poetry by its very nature is a falsifying rhetorical activity. What also emerges here is a conflict between philosophy and poetry in the right to name the divine, to authorize a particular vision of the divine world: for poetry, that world is presented as an anthropomorphic projection of human values centered on self-interest, a world of dark chance, irrational, in flux, and devoid of a unifying structure. The project of philosophy, in Plato's hands, is to stabilize that world, drawing all of its scattered elements into the form of order and unity under which alone they can be posited as absolute and transcendent.

Plato draws a powerful analogy between the individual and the state. In book X, it will emerge explicitly that poetry appeals to the "inferior" part of the soul, the appetitive portion (X, 603b–c). It is, in other words, an encouragement toward variety and multiplicity, toward valuing the particular for its own sake, thereby distracting from contemplation of the universal. In projecting this model onto the state as a whole, Plato aligns the mass of people with the unruly "multitude" of desires in the soul, and the guardians considered collectively with the "unity" of reason. The individuality of the guardians is to be all but erased, not merely through ideological conditioning but through their compulsory existence as a community: they are to possess no private property or wealth; they must live together, nourished on a simple diet, and receiving a stipend from the other citizens (III, 416d–417b). Collectively, then, the guardians' function in the city is a projection of the unifying function of reason in the individual soul.

We now approach the heart of Plato's overall argument concerning justice and poetry. The definition of justice in the state is reached in book IV: justice is a condition where "each one man must perform one social service in the state for which his nature was best adapted" (IV, 433a–b). Predictably, justice in an individual is defined as a condition of the soul where "the several parts . . .

perform each their own task," and where reason rules. In political terms, poetry's greatest crime is its refusal or inability to confine itself to one kind of task. Plato urges that the same man ought not to imitate "many things": any poetic imitation involving "manifold forms" will, says Socrates, "be ill suited to our polity, because there is no twofold or manifold man among us, since every man does one thing" (III, 397b–e). Plato then arrives at the renowned passage urging banishment of the "manifold" poet:

> If a man . . . who was capable by his cunning of assuming every kind of shape and imitating all things should arrive in our city, bringing with himself the poems which he wished to exhibit, we should fall down and worship him as a holy and wondrous and delightful creature, but should say to him that there is no man of that kind among us in our city, nor is it lawful for such a man to arise among us, and we should send him away to another city, after pouring myrrh down over his head and crowning him with fillets of wool. (III, 398a)

This general charge against poetry is elucidated in book X, where Plato presents the poet as a "most marvelous Sophist" and a "truly clever and wondrous man" who "makes all the things that all handicraftsmen severally produce" (X, 596c–d). The political implication here is that poetry can have no *definable* (and therefore limited) function in a state ordered according to a strict hierarchy of inexchangeable function. Poetry literally does not know its place: it spreads its influence limitlessly, dissolving social relations as it pleases and recreating them from its own store of inspired wisdom whose opacity to reason renders it resistant to classification and definition. In this sense, poetry is the incarnation of indefinability and the limits of reason. It is in its nature a rebel, a usurper, which desires to rule; and as such it is the most potent threat to the throne of philosophy, which is also the throne of polity in the state of the philosopher-king.

In political terms, Plato sees poetry as pandering primarily to a democratic constitution (VIII, 568a–d). Like democracy, poetry fosters genuine individuals, "manifold" men who are "stuffed" with differences and resist the reduction of their social function, or indeed their natural potential, into one exclusive dimension. Also, like democracy, poetry nurtures all parts of the soul, refusing obeisance to the law of reason. By implication, then, poetry itself is spurred by the "greed" for liberty which is the hallmark of a democratic society (X, 604e–605c).

All in all, Plato's indictment of poetry has been based on (1) its *intrinsic* expression of falsehood, (2) its intrinsic operation in the realm of imitation, (3) its combination of a variety of functions, (4) its appeal to the lower aspects of the soul such as emotion and appetite, and (5) its expression of irreducible particularity and multiplicity rather than unity. The notion of imitation, in fact, complements truth as the basis of Plato's opposition of philosophy and

poetry. In book X the poet is held up as a Sophist, a "marvelous" handicraftsman who can "make" anything (X, 596c–d). And what the poet imitates is of course the appearance, not the reality, of things, since he merely imitates what others actually produce (X, 596e, 597e). Plato elaborates his famous triad: we find three beds, one existing in nature, which is made by God; another which is the work of the carpenter; and a third, the work of the painter or poet. Hence, the carpenter imitates the real bed and the painter or poet imitates the physical bed. The poet's work, then, like that of the rhapsode, is the "imitation of an imitation." It is thrice removed from truth (X, 597e).

The influence and legacy of Plato

The influence of Plato on many fundamental areas of Western thought, including literary theory, continues to the present day. First and foremost has been the impact of the theory of Forms: discredited though this may have been since the time of Aristotle, it nonetheless exerted a powerful attraction through its implications that the world was a unity, that our experience of manifold qualities in the world could be brought under certain unifying concepts, that the physical world itself is only a small part of, or manifestation of, a higher reality, and that there exists a higher, ideal pattern for earthly endeavors. Some of these elements have been integral in both Judeo-Christian and Islamic theology and philosophy. The distinctions between reason and sense, reason and emotion, soul and body, while not original to Plato, continued through his influence to provide some of the basic terminology of philosophical and religious thinking. Plato's impact on literary critics and theorists has embraced many issues: the doctrine of imitation; the educational and didactic functions of poetry; the place of poetry in the political state and the question of censorship; the treatment of poetry as a species of rhetoric; the nature of poetic inspiration; and the opposition of poetry to various other disciplines and dispositions, such as philosophy, science, reason, and mechanism. We are still grappling with the problems laid down by Plato.

Aristotle (384–322 BC)

The most brilliant student at Plato's Academy was Aristotle, whose enormous contribution to the history of thought spans several areas: metaphysics, logic, ethics, politics, literary criticism, and various branches of natural science. In 343 BC King Philip of Macedon invited Aristotle to serve as tutor to his son Alexander at his court in Pella. Later, Aristotle opened his own school of rhetoric and philosophy, the Lyceum, in Athens. Plato's Academy placed emphasis on mathematics, metaphysics, and politics, while at the Lyceum natural science predominated.

At the heart of Aristotle's metaphysics and logic is the concept of "substance," which he views as the primary reality, underlying everything else. Aristotle basically holds that there are 10 categories through which we can view the world: whatness (substance), quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, state, action, and affection.[3] A mere glance at these categories tells us that they still permeate our own thought about the world at the profoundest levels, especially the notion of substance.

Reversing the Platonic hierarchy, Aristotle urges that universals (qualities, such as "redness" or "tallness") depend on particular things for their existence, not vice versa. Though Aristotle would agree with Plato that reason has access to a higher knowledge than our senses, he insists that the senses are the starting point and the source of knowledge. He attempts to balance Plato's unilateral emphasis on reason with due attention to our actual experience and to close observation of the world. In a broad sense, the history of Western thought has often emerged as a conflict between these two visions: the idealistic Platonic vision which views reality as above and beyond our own world, and the more empirical Aristotelian view which seeks to find reality within our world.

Aristotle's logic

Aristotle's greatest contribution to philosophy lies in the realm of logic. Aristotle was the first philosopher to formalize the rules and methods of logic. The basis of his logic, which acted as the foundation of the discipline for over 2000 years, was the syllogism. This typically consists of a major premise, a minor premise, and an inferred conclusion, as in the classic example: "All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal." Aristotle classified a number of different kinds of syllogism, ranging from this simple "if . . . then" structure to far more complex formats.

Even more fundamental than the syllogism are the three so-called laws of logic (sometimes called the "laws of thought") as formulated by Aristotle and developed by numerous subsequent thinkers into our own day. The first of these is the law of identity, which states that A is A; the second is the law of non-contradiction, which dictates that something cannot be both A and not-A; and the third, the law of the excluded middle, holds that something must be *either* A *or* not-A. These "laws," which can be regarded as the same law expressed from three different perspectives, have served for over two millenia as the (almost) unshakeable foundation of Western thought. As such, they bear examination in a little more detail. What does it mean to say that A is A? Is this not an obvious and empty tautology? We can see that it is no trite proposition the moment we substitute any important term for the letter A. Let us, for example, use the term "man." When we say that "a man is a man," we are appealing to certain qualities which compose the *essence* of man; we are

saying that this essence is fixed and unalterable; we are *also* saying that a man is somehow different from a woman, from an animal, from a plant, and so forth. We can quickly begin to see how our definition will have vast economic and political implications: if we define our "man" as rational, as political, as moral, and as free, it will seem natural to us that he should partake in the political process. The woman, whom we define as lacking these qualities, will by our definition be excluded. That this law of identity is highly coercive and hierarchical will become even clearer in the case of the terms "master" and "slave." The master might be defined in terms of attributes that collectively signify "civilized," while the slave is constricted within designations of "savage" (Aristotle, who owned many slaves, himself defines a slave as a "speaking instrument"). Such hierarchical oppositions have in history embraced the terms Greek and barbarian, Christian and Jew, white and black, noble and serf.

The second and third laws of logic will merely confirm our implicit degradation of the woman or slave. The second law, the law of noncontradiction, on which Aristotle insists,[4] tells us that something/someone cannot be both a man and not a man. Again, is this not obvious? Surely it tells us nothing new? In fact, we are stating a further implication of the law of identity: that a certain set of qualities is attributed to "man" and a *different* set of qualities is accorded to woman, there being no overlap between these two sets of qualities. According to this logic, we cannot speak of a person who might come in between these two poles: a man who had womanly qualities or a woman with manly attributes. The third law, the law of the excluded middle, explicitly forbids this middle ground (*Met. I–IX*, 1011b–23) in its urging that something must be *either* A *or* not-A. One must be either a man or not a man; either American or not-American; either Muslim or Jew; either good or bad; either for or against. Hence, these "laws," which unfortunately still largely govern our thinking today, are not only coercive but encourage a vision of the world as divided up sharply into categories, classes, nations, races, and religions, each with its own distinctive essence or character. So deeply rooted is this way of thinking that even attempted subversions of it, such as those issued from Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis, must operate within a broader network of complicity with what they challenge.

Aristotle's *Poetics*

In contrast with Plato, Aristotle sees poetry as having a positive function in the political state, which exists not merely for utilitarian purposes but to promote what Aristotle calls the "good life," or the achievement of virtue and *phronesis* or practical wisdom.[5] For Aristotle, poetry and rhetoric had the status of "productive" sciences; these disciplines had their place in a hierarchy

of knowledge; and Aristotle viewed them as rational pursuits, as seeking a knowledge of "universal" truths (rather than of random "particular" things or events), and as serving a social and moral function. The entire structure of the Aristotelian system was governed by the notion of substance, from the lowest level to God as the First Cause, or Unmoved Mover. Each element within this hierarchical order had its proper place, function, and purpose. Aristotle's universe is effectively a closed system where each entity is guided by an internalized purpose toward the fulfillment of its own nature, and ultimately toward realization of its harmony with the divine. Poetry, in this system, is analyzed and classified in the same way as the other branches of human knowledge and activity. Our modern notions of poetic autonomy would have been meaningless to Aristotle. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, he states quite clearly concerning productive activity that "the act of making is not an end in itself, it is only a means, and belongs to something else." The purpose of art, like that of metaphysics, is to attain to a knowledge of universals.[6]

At the core of Aristotle's *Poetics* are two complex notions: imitation and action. Like Plato, Aristotle holds that poetry is essentially a mode of imitation. In contrast with Plato, Aristotle invests imitation with positive significance, seeing it as a basic human instinct and as a pleasurable avenue to knowledge.[7] Aristotle asserts that all the various modes of poetry and music are imitations. These imitations can differ in three ways: in the means used, in the kinds of objects represented, and in the manner of presentation. As against popular notions which equate poetry with the use of meter, Aristotle insists that the essential characteristic of the poet is imitation, in which all human beings take pleasure (*Poetics*, I). For Aristotle, the poet is an integral part of human society, rationally developing and refining basic traits which he shares with other human beings.

What is common to all arts, says Aristotle, is that they imitate men involved in action (*Poetics*, II). For Aristotle, "action" has a moral end or purpose. Art imitates human action; but human action must have as its ultimate purpose "the Supreme Good."[8] The actions imitated, says Aristotle, must be either noble or base since human character conforms to these distinctions (*Poetics*, II). Tragedy represents men as better than the norm; comedy as worse than the norm. Aristotle allows only two basic types: narration, where the poet speaks in his own person or through a character; and dramatic presentation, where the story is performed and acted out (*Poetics*, III).

Aristotle makes an important contrast between poetry and history. It is not the function of the poet to narrate events that have actually happened, but rather "events such as might occur . . . in accordance with the laws of probability or necessity" (*Poetics*, IX). He infers that poetry is more "philosophical" and "serious" (*spoudaioteron*) than history because poetry expresses what is universal (*ta kathalou*), while history merely deals with individuals. Another way of putting this is to say that poetry yields general

truths while history gives us particular facts and events. The poet expresses the inner structure of probability or causality which shapes events and, as such, is universalizable and applicable to other sets of events.

Later in the *Poetics* Aristotle seems to broaden his definition of poetic imitation. He says that the poet must imitate in one of three ways. He must imitate things that were, things that are now or things that people say and think to be, or things which ought to be. Aristotle's earlier definitions, we may recall, referred poetic imitation not to morality or realism but to probability and universality. The emphasis now, however, is upon realism: the poet represents events which happened in the past or occur in the present. Moreover, two important factors are introduced. The first is an appeal to the moral imperative of imitation, whereby the poet should represent an ideal state of affairs. The second is an appeal to conventional opinions. For example, while a poet may not represent the gods truthfully, he is justified in presenting them in accordance with prevailing opinions and myths which are told about the gods. This is a huge step toward suggesting that truth is not somehow transcendent and that it is realized within, not beyond, a human community. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle states that "truth is not beyond human nature."[9]

Aristotle's view of tragedy

Aristotle's analysis of tragedy remained influential until the eighteenth century. It is here that the connections between imitation, action, character, morality, and plot emerge most clearly, as in Aristotle's famous definition:

> Tragedy is, then, an imitation of an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude – by means of language enriched with all kinds of ornament, each used separately in the different parts of the play: it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions. (*Poetics*, VI.2–3)

The Greek word used for "action" is *praxis* which here refers not to a particular isolated action but to an entire course of action and events that includes not only what the protagonist does but also what happens to him. In qualifying this action, Aristotle again uses the word *spoudaios* which means "serious" or "weighty." This is essentially a *moral* seriousness. It seems, then, that the subject matter of tragedy is a course of action which is morally serious, presents a completed unity, and occupies a certain magnitude not only in terms of importance but also, as will be seen, in terms of certain prescribed constraints of time, place, and complexity. Moreover, since a tragedy is essentially dramatic rather than narrative, it represents men in action, and a properly constructed tragedy will provide relief or *katharsis* for

various emotions, primarily pity and fear. Hence the *effect* of tragedy on the audience is part of its very definition.

The notion of "action" is central to Aristotle's view of tragedy because it underlies the other components and features, which include plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song. These elements include the means of imitation (diction and song), the manner of imitation (spectacle), and the objects of imitation (actions as arranged in a plot, the character and thought of the actors). Aristotle also prescribes other requirements such as completeness of action, artistic unity, and emotional impact. The element of tragedy which imitates human actions is not primarily the depiction of character but the plot, which Aristotle calls the "first principle" and "the soul of tragedy" (*Poetics*, VI.19–20). Aristotle accords priority to action in poetic representation: tragedy is not a representation of men or of character; rather it represents a sphere "of action, of life" (*Poetics*, VI.12). Because tragedy is essentially dramatic, its basis cannot be the depiction of character; as Aristotle points out, one cannot have a tragedy without action, but a tragedy without character study is quite feasible (*Poetics*, VI.14–15). A tragedy must be based on a certain structure of events or incidents to which the specific actions of given characters contribute. This overall dramatic structure, the plot, is "the end at which tragedy aims" (*Poetics*, VI.13).

For Aristotle, the most important feature of the plot is *unity*: "the component incidents must be so arranged that if one of them be transposed or removed, the unity of the whole is dislocated and destroyed" (*Poetics*, VIII.4). Aristotle sees the entire complex as *one* unified action. How is such organic unity achieved? Aristotle offers the following definition: "A whole is what has a beginning and middle and end" (*Poetics*, VII.2–3). A beginning, for Aristotle, is that which is not necessarily caused by anything else, but itself causes something else. A middle both follows from something else and results in something else. An end is what necessarily follows from something else but does not produce a further result. Hence the unity of the plot is based on a notion of causality (*Poetics*, VII.7). Aristotle's formulae concerning beginning, middle, and end have been profoundly influential, extending far beyond the confines of tragedy or drama, and deeply infusing modes of thinking and writing even into our own times.

Aristotle explains unity of plot in terms of both the plot's formal structure and the emotions produced in an audience. While he divides the formal structure of the plot into prologue, episode, exode, parode, and stasimon, it is clear that for him the real structure of the plot consists in the movement of the action. He divides plots into simple plots, which exhibit a continuous action, and complex plots – as exemplified in *Oedipus Rex* – whose action is marked by a movement through reversal, recognition, and suffering. Much later in his text, he divides the action into two parts, the "complication" which includes all of the events until the change in fortune, and the "denouement"

or unravelling which proceeds from the change in fortune until the end of the play. In this way, the change in fortune is indeed placed at the center of the play: the action as divided both leads to it and flows from it; and it is in relation to it that reversal, recognition, and suffering take their significance. Aristotle prefers complex plots because it is through the processes of reversal, recognition, and suffering that the emotions of pity and fear are evoked, which themselves contribute to the plot's unity.

The plot's unity, then, integrates not only causality, probability, and change of fortune but also the emotions of fear and pity which are generated in an audience. Aristotle explains that pity is aroused by undeserved misfortune; fear is aroused when we realize that the man who suffers such misfortune is "like ourselves" (*Poetics*, XIII.4). Hence these emotions cannot be inspired by a wicked man prospering; nor can they issue from seeing the misfortune suffered by either an entirely worthy man or a thoroughly bad man (*Poetics*, XIII.2–4). Rather, the character in question must occupy a mean between these extremes: he must be a man "who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, and yet it is through no badness or villainy of his own that he falls into the misfortune, but rather through some flaw in him" (*Poetics*, XIII.5–6).

The legacy of Aristotle's *Poetics*

The *Poetics* is usually recognized as the most influential treatise in the history of literary criticism. The legacy of Aristotle's aesthetics, like that of his philosophy as a whole, is a distinctly classical one. The most fundamental premise of Aristotle's classicism is a political one, namely that the individual achieves his or her nature and purpose only within a society and a state. Poetry, for Aristotle, does not express what is unique about individuals but rather their universal characteristics, what they share with other members of society. While Aristotle grants to poetry a certain autonomy, it yet occupies a definite place within the state as an instrument of education and moral edification. Poetry is not, as in Romantic thought, exalted to an eminence beyond other pursuits.

Poetry is also subject to the classical principles of Aristotle's philosophy in general. From the most minute level of diction to the highest level of plot construction, poetry is held to be a rational, deliberative activity which must always observe the central Aristotelian principle of moderation. Like philosophy, poetry seeks to express universal truths, which are not constrained by reference to particular situations. Its relation to reality is governed by the notions of probability and necessity. Also classical in outlook is Aristotle's insistence on distinguishing clearly between different genres in a hierarchical manner: comedy, which deals with "low" characters and trivial matter, ranks lowest; epic, which includes various plots and lengthy narration, falls below

tragedy which is more concentrated and produces a greater effect of unity. Again, the insistence on propriety and consistency of character is classical. Aristotle's notions anticipate developments in several areas of literary criticism: the issue of poetic imitation, the connection between art and reality, the distinction between genres as well as between high and low art, the study of grammar and language, the psychological and moral effects of literature, the nature and function of the audience, the structure and rules of drama, as well as the notions of plot, narrative, and character. All of these notions are still profoundly pervasive in our thinking about literature and the world. Above and beyond all of these influences, however, is his doctrine of substance, a notion that continues to underlie our thinking, and even our attempts to undermine conventional modes of thought.

Notes

1. *Frogs*, ll. 786, 796, in *Aristophanes Volume II: The Peace, The Birds, The Frogs*, trans. Benjamin Bickley Rogers, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press/Heinemann, 1968). Hereafter cited as *Frogs*.
2. *Republic*, in *Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 514a–c. Hereafter cited as *Republic*.
3. Aristotle, *The Categories; On Interpretation; Prior Analytics*, trans. Harold P. Cooke and Hugh Tredennick, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press/Heinemann, 1973), pp. 16–19.
4. Aristotle, *The Metaphysics I–IX*, trans. Hugh Tredennick, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press/Heinemann, 1947), pp. 1011b–13. Hereafter cited as *Met. I–IX*.
5. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. T. A. Sinclair (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p. VII.i.
6. *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (London and New York: Heinemann/Harvard University Press, 1934), pp. VI.ii.5–VI.iii.4–6.
7. *Aristotle: Poetics; Longinus: On the Sublime; Demetrius: On Style*, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press/ Heinemann, 1965), p. IV.2–3. Hereafter cited as *Poetics*.
8. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics; Topica*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and E. S. Forster, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press/ Heinemann, 1976), p. 171.
9. Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. H. C. Lawson-Tancred (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), p. 1355a.