Introduction

1
The Importance of the *Poetics*

Aristotle was the first person ever to write a treatise devoted to literary theory. Before his time others had practised literary criticism in various simple forms, mostly to do with the use (and abuse) of literature as a vehicle for social, moral, religious and political ideas; and Plato, his teacher, was the first to raise many of the questions which he himself sought to answer. But to Aristotle belongs the credit for recognising that literature has its own set of principles, which can be discovered by careful analysis; from this recognition came the *Poetics*.

This brief treatise does not deserve attention only for its pioneering qualities or its incisive comments about ancient epic and drama; it has also had a profound effect on the way we read and analyse literature today. Once the *Poetics* was rediscovered and published in about A.D. 1500, its concepts, methods of analysis and conclusions acquired fundamental importance among Renaissance and seventeenth-century dramatists and literary critics in Italy, France and England. Interest in the *Poetics* has redoubled recently, because it has been acknowledged as a crucial text in the continuing and vigorous debates about the nature and purpose of literature, and about language itself. Nor is this interest likely to decline in the future. Some aspects of Aristotle's theory (notably catharsis) are only now becoming clear in the light of new evidence. Moreover, his analysis has already proved flexible enough to be applied to literary forms that did not exist in his time, like the detective novel; it would still be relevant even to a culture based exclusively on media like cinema or television. There is nothing outdated in Aristotle's construction of a complex yet challenging theory, except perhaps for the breadth of its foundations. These include his own careful analysis of human action, speech and thought, and many aspects of his wider philosophy. Because of this exceptional breadth, as well as

his remarkably acute reasoning, Aristotle has much to offer that is still timely about literature and its relation to life, topics which are no less vital now than they were twenty-three centuries ago when he wrote.

2
Plato's Challenge to Poetry

To understand the importance of poetry to the Greeks, we need to remember that it long occupied the place held by all our modern mass-media put together—books, cinema, theatre and television. As a basic part of Greek education, poems, especially Homer's epics, were copied out, read aloud, memorised and recited. This method taught the practical skills of reading and writing, but was also meant to instill social, religious and moral values. Poetry was no less important in adult life. Performances of poetry and song at public festivals and dinner-parties supplied most of the available entertainment. At Athens there was only one place where the citizens could be addressed as a group on any question not of immediate political concern: the theatre. Many poets perceived part of their task as reasserting or revising the moral, social and religious standards of their time. It is not surprising that, as values changed, what the poets said was sometimes challenged. Thus the early thinker Xenophanes attacked Homer for his portrayal of the gods.

During the fifth century B.C., technical and philosophical prose, and polished public lectures and speeches, began to grow in significance, but poetry maintained its prestige and its claim to be the educator of Greece. The spectacularly successful tragic and comic dramatists of Athens could speak powerfully via their characters to all the citizens. It was a jury of those same citizens who condemned to death Plato's revered teacher, the philosopher Socrates (469–399 B.C.). Whether or not Aristophanes' caricature of Socrates in his comedy the *Clouds* had prejudiced the jury against him, in the aftermath of his execution Plato (ca 427–347 B.C.) argued vigorously that philosophy, rather than poetry, should be the source of values. Putting his arguments into Socrates' mouth in a series of prose dialogues, Plato attacked poetry on four main grounds, to be explained more fully below. They are, in brief:

(i) Poets compose under inspiration, not by using reason.
(ii) Poetry teaches the wrong things.
(iii) Poetry is a *mimēsis* (imitation), at two removes from reality.
(iv) Poetry encourages the emotions of those who perform or listen to it.

Of these charges, the first two refute claims that poetry is a skill (*technē*) which can be learned, and from which we learn. Although such claims were common, nobody could say exactly what poetry taught, or how poets knew about it. Forced by Socrates to specify the contribution of particular poets, his interlocutors reply, for example, that Homer teaches war, or Hesiod farming. Socrates then objects that one could learn these arts better from a general or a farmer. He adds that, if poets do say things that are valid, they do so without knowing what they are saying, since they compose by an inspiration which comes from outside themselves. Both these arguments, used in Plato's early work, the *Apology* (22 B–C), were probably advanced by Socrates himself. In another early work of Plato's, the *Ion*, Socrates adds the charge that epic and tragic poetry encourage the audience to indulge their emotions, notably pity and fear, to the detriment of their powers of reason.

Plato expanded and elaborated this critique of poetry in his *Republic*, which clearly formed the starting-point for Aristotle's reply. In *Republic* II–III (377A–398B) Plato charges that much of the poetry currently used in education is unsuitable for educating the Guardians of his ideal state. Poetry sets a bad moral example, since it misrepresents the nature of divinity, notably in the crude and violent tales of the Olympian gods, and there are similar faults in its depiction of the heroes of old, who are shown as unable to control their emotions. It also presents problems of form. Since the poet or performer puts himself in the place of the character who is speaking, much of it involves *mimēsis* (imitation or impersonation); as ancient poetry was always read aloud, this applies to the reader too. Plato objects that the Guardians should not depart from their own characters by impersonating others, especially people who are morally inferior, because this experience will influence their characters in the wrong way.

In *Republic* X (595A–608B), Plato makes a much more fundamental attack on the nature of poetry itself, based on a vital tenet of his philosophy, the so-called Theory of Forms. He held that perceptible reality, i.e. the particulars of the universe we perceive with our senses, is not the object of true knowledge but only of opinion; for these particulars derive, by a relation of *mimēsis* (imitation), from transcendental "Forms" which we can apprehend only with our intellects, and not with our senses. We recognise e.g. a bed, a chair, justice or goodness,

because a Form of each exists, from which particular beds or just acts derive (we can recognise the Forms embodied in the particulars because our souls knew the Forms before we were born).

From this theory, Plato concluded that art relates to our world of appearances in the same way that our world of appearances relates to the world of the Forms, i.e. by *mimēsis*. An artist depicts a bed, or a poet dramatises a just act, with his eye on particular beds or just acts in our world of appearances; but these particulars are already at one remove from the true reality of the Forms. Art is thus an imitation of an imitation; it is at two removes from reality.

Although art is thus mere illusion, it is a dangerous one, because we can mistake its products for reality. Worse still, we find poetry attractive because it appeals to what Plato considered the lower part of the soul, the part concerned with the emotions. Comedy makes us laugh, tragedy makes us weep, and poetry in general makes us give in to grief, pity, laughter, lust, anger, and so forth. But in his view we should control our emotions rather than indulge them.

For these reasons, Plato concludes in the *Republic* that the only poems to be allowed in the ideal state are hymns to the gods and poems in praise of good men; tragedy, epic and comedy are banned. But, as a lover of poetry himself, he issues a challenge to the poets, and to people who love poetry but are not poets themselves, to prove that it can be a source of benefit as well as of pleasure. This is the challenge to which Aristotle, Plato's greatest student, responds in the *Poetics*.

3
Aristotle and His Reply

Aristotle could afford to adopt a more relaxed attitude towards poetry than his teacher's had been, because times had changed and his own philosophy differed radically from Plato's.

Born in 384 B.C. at Stagira in northern Greece, Aristotle was the son of the court physician to the King of Macedon, a state whose power was to grow as that of Athens declined. Sent to Athens at age seventeen to complete his education, he soon joined Plato's Academy, and stayed there, first as student and then as professor, for two decades till 348, just before Plato died. Passed over as Plato's successor, he moved

first to Assos near Troy (now in N.W. Turkey), where two of Plato's disciples had set up a college with the local ruler's encouragement, and then to the nearby island of Lesbos. In 342 he was invited back to Macedon by King Philip III, to supervise the secondary education of his son and heir Alexander (the Great). Philip's military victory at Chaeronea in 338 was a decisive defeat for the Athenian politicians opposed to the Macedonian domination of Greece; and in 335 Aristotle returned to Athens to set up a college of his own, the Lyceum. Here scholars could teach and research in every branch of knowledge, covering what we now call the humanities, sciences and social sciences (Plato's Academy had a narrower focus). During these years Alexander the Great conquered the vast Persian empire; his early death in 323 set off an anti-Macedonian revolt in most of Greece, and Aristotle was obliged to leave Athens. He died on the nearby island of Euboea the year after, aged sixty-two.

Aristotle combined an intensely analytical approach with an eye for practical details. His writings cover every area of learning except mathematics. The basis for his interest in studying—and indeed in defining for the first time—such diverse fields as logic, physics, meteorology, biology, metaphysics, politics, ethics, rhetoric and poetics, was his rejection of Plato's theory of Forms. Replacing it with his own theory of what "being" is, he reasserted the value of studying the particulars of the perceived world. His method was to analyse and classify the phenomena we perceive with our senses, and draw general conclusions in the process, which can then be applied back to the phenomena. The philosophy which results is less radical and Utopian than Plato's, and more willing to take account of, and to reshape, the opinions of ordinary people. Moreover Plato had to struggle bitterly to get the enterprise of philosophy taken seriously; it was still competing with poetry and rhetoric as a path to wisdom. But when Aristotle formulated his ideas, the kind of teaching and research practised in Plato's Academy clearly had a more secure future.

For these reasons, Aristotle's attitude to poetry was less hostile than his teacher's. Like everything else, poetry has its place in life, and is a worthy object of study by the philosopher. Philosophy should classify the different kinds of poetry, explain how they work and what their purpose is, and subject them to critical appraisal rather than outright condemnation. Aristotle's tone is detached and objective, unlike Plato who suggests that we should reject poetry like "a lover who renounces a passion that is doing him no good" (*Republic* X 608E).

Aristotle made public his refusal to accept Plato's views on poetry in his dialogue *On Poets*, the surviving fragments of which are newly collected and translated in this volume (for his disagreement with Plato

see frags. 1–2). The *On Poets* was a polished work intended for a wide audience. Aristotle most probably published it while Plato was still alive; some of Plato's late works may even respond to the ideas it contained. But Aristotle never published the *Poetics*, which is probably the script for his lectures on poetry. There is no solid evidence that he drafted it much later than he wrote the *On Poets*, although he may well have tinkered with it until almost the end of his life. Most scholars suppose that he waited to deliver these lectures until his last years, when under his direction his students had compiled the *Didascaliae*, a chronological list of Athenian plays; but this seems very unlikely.

Among his own students Aristotle had no need to signal that his theory is fundamentally a refutation of Plato's, but so it is. However, far from rejecting his teacher's views as a whole, he retained much in them that he found valuable; his reformulation and reversal of Plato's positions is complex and subtle.

4
Aristotle's Concept of Representation

Aristotle responds to Plato's charges against poetry by arguing that poetry can be of philosophical value without being philosophy, and of educational value without being education. The four main grounds of Plato's attack were: (i) poetry is composed under inspiration; (ii) it teaches the wrong things; (iii) it is a *mimēsis* (imitation), at two removes from reality, and (iv) it encourages the emotions. To reply to Plato effectively Aristotle must answer all four points, which he does as follows:

(a) Poetry is a skill or art (*technē*) which can be learned, with rules comprehensible by reason. The mere fact that the *Poetics* sets out the principles of poetic composition answers Plato's first argument.
(b) Poetry is a *mimēsis* (representation) of reality, but a useful one from which we can learn: this will be explained below, and is the response to Plato's second and third points.

(c) Poetry does work by arousing the emotions of the audience, but this can be beneficial. This answer to Plato's last argument involves the concept of catharsis, which will be discussed in the next section.

The Greeks drew no clear distinction between imitation, copying, impersonation and representation—all these concepts were included in the word *mimēsis*. Plato and Aristotle agreed that this was the right word to describe the relation between verbal and visual art (e.g. poetry and painting) on the one hand, and the perceived world on the other, but they used it with significantly different emphases. Plato tends to stress the idea that visual art *copies* nature and Homer *impersonates* his characters; neither aspect of *mimēsis* is very complimentary to art. Aristotle redefines *mimēsis* to stress that poetry *represents* action and life, just as language *represents* ideas (see *Rhetoric* III 1.1404a21, and compare *On Interpretation* 1.16a2ff.). Plato often suggests that art deceives us about reality; Aristotle argues that we can learn about reality from it, even at the most basic level, because of how representation works.

According to Aristotle, recognising that something is a representation is an intellectual process—we identify what is represented because it has some features of the actual object (*Poetics* 48b10ff.). Thus we recognise a sketch of a cow because it has four legs, horns and so on. To the complaint that such a sketch involves a loss of detail, Aristotle would reply that this loss is accompanied by an increased clarity of the basic form. This explains his high valuation of plot, the structure of the action which poetry represents; for him, a clearly structured art-work is preferable to one cluttered with formless detail.

At the beginning of the *Poetics*, Aristotle rejects the popular equation of poetry with anything written in verse (47b13–23). From the theory of representation just outlined he draws a still more significant conclusion. He argues that poetry is "more philosophical" than history, because history represents real actions and events ("particulars"), i.e. what actual historical characters said or did, whereas poetry tends to represent generalised ones ("universals"), i.e. what a certain kind of person would say or do in a certain kind of situation. A historian has to keep to the facts, where sequences of cause and effect are often unclear; but a poet can and should make sure that the action he represents (the "plot") is clear in terms of cause and effect (see *Poetics* 51a35–b11). Here Aristotle comes close to redefining poetry as a representation of universals, whether it is in verse or in prose. It follows that his theory is concerned not merely with anything that happens to be in verse, but rather with the whole range of what we call fiction.

5
Aristotle on the Purpose of Literature

As we have it, the *Poetics* provides no explicit reply to Plato's argument that tragedy, comedy and epic stir up our emotions, which we should instead seek to control. Since this aspect of his attack on poetry is so important, scholars have rightly assumed that Aristotle tried to answer it.

Aristotle accepted that these kinds of poetry have powerful emotional effects on the audience, since he often says so in the *Poetics*. In fact he defines the function of tragedy as the "catharsis" of emotions, i.e. their "purgation" or "purification" (49b27); the presence of catharsis in his definition of tragedy proves its importance to his theory, but he gives no further explanation. In a passage on the use of music and poetry in education (*Politics* VIII 7.1341b37–40), he speaks briefly of catharsis, and promises a full account of it in the *Poetics*; since no such account appears in that part of the text we still have, he is most probably referring to its second book (on comedy), now lost. The *On Poets* seems also to have discussed this question. If we are to understand his poetic theory completely, this gap needs to be filled.

Scholars have tried to reconstruct Aristotle's view of catharsis in two ways, either by comparing what he says in *Politics* VIII with his account of the emotional effects of tragedy in the *Poetics*, or by searching for later writers who knew his theory directly or indirectly; both approaches are valuable. The relevant passages from the *Politics* and from these later writers are newly collected, translated and equipped with notes in this volume; some of them have not appeared in English before. Since the later writers who talk about catharsis seem to have known the theory from the more widely read *On Poets* rather than from *Poetics* II, the evidence about it is presented together with *On Poets* frag. *4.

The interpretation of catharsis which has prevailed until very recently is that advanced by Jacob Bernays, the uncle by marriage of Sigmund Freud, in a famous essay published in 1857. At *Politics* VIII 7.1342a4–16 Aristotle explains tragic catharsis by comparing it with the healing of people suffering from hysterical outbreaks of emotion (*enthousiasmos*); these people are cured by 'cathartic songs', which *arouse* their emotions and thereby relieve them. Bernays concluded that the catharsis we obtain from tragedy is a similar process of psychological

healing; we all have build-ups of undesirable emotions of pity and terror, which can be aroused and then released by watching tragedy.

Bernays' medical interpretation allows the theory of catharsis to answer Plato's point that poetry stimulates undesirable emotions, but it is otherwise unsatisfactory. His view makes catharsis an accidental by-product of tragedy, rather than something essential to its nature, as Aristotle implies by including it in his definition of tragedy (*Poetics* 49b27). According to Bernays' theory the best audience for a tragedy, in terms of its emotional effect, would surely be an audience of people who are emotionally disturbed and unbalanced. This seems peculiar; in the *Poetics* Aristotle implies several times that ordinary audiences are inferior to the man of judgement, who is no doubt a philosopher, and therefore less subject to emotional disturbance. The *Poetics* assumes normal audiences in normal emotional states, and nowhere suggests that we go to the theatre for the same reason that we visit the doctor. Moreover, Bernays assumes that the emotions are inherently undesirable, just as Plato thought; but we shall see below that Aristotle did not regard them as necessarily undesirable in themselves.

Since Bernays' interpretation presents these difficulties, others have looked again at either Aristotle's own remarks or later sources for an alternative; and several scholars have arrived by different routes at roughly the same hypothesis. The following interpretation of what Aristotle meant by catharsis is based on a combination of approaches, including some evidence neglected or undiscovered until the last few years.

The *Poetics* indicates that poetry's arousal of the emotions is connected with the core of Aristotle's poetic theory, i.e. his concept of representation. This is especially evident when he says that the tragic poet must aim to bring about the pleasure that comes from pity and terror *by means of representation* (53b12). Pity and terror are painful emotions in themselves, but much depends on why we feel them. Aristotle is distinguishing between experiencing pity and terror in real life, which is not pleasant, and experiencing them because of the tragic representation, which leads to the pleasure proper to tragedy. Similarly at 48b10–12 he says that we derive pleasure from seeing representations even of things that are painful to look at in actuality. According to the argument of the *Poetics*, if the action represented (the plot) is correctly structured, it will arouse in the audience the correct emotional response; in the case of tragedy this is pity and terror. If the action is badly structured, it will arouse the wrong emotional response, which Aristotle calls "shock" or "revulsion" (52b36), literally "dirtiness"—the opposite, surely, of *catharsis*, which means "cleansing" or "purification". These passages show that the theory of catharsis is not an acci-

dental appendage to the rest of Aristotle's literary theory, but an essential part of it.

To progress further, we need to consider Aristotle's general view of the emotions. Plato tended to regard them as merely irrational, but Aristotle considered them an important factor in taking correct decisions and forming good character. In his *Ethics* he argues that we should feel the correct emotion towards the right object, at the right time, to the proper degree and so forth. There are things about which it is right to feel e.g. anger, pity or terror; such correct emotional reactions as proper compassion, justified anger and the right degree of courage can and should affect decision or moral choice (see, for example, *Ethics* III 7.1115b11–20). It is important to feel the emotions rightly. For example, if we feel too much fear, we are cowardly, but if we feel too little we are foolhardy; only if we feel fear to the correct extent, no more no less, are we courageous. Such correct reactions attain the mean between the extremes; in Aristotle's view, this is where virtue lies, e.g. courage is the virtue lying at the mid-point between the extremes, namely cowardice and foolhardiness, which are both errors relative to it.

For Aristotle, one of the main factors in the building of good character is to develop a settled disposition to feel emotion correctly, since this will lead to good decisions. Just as, in Aristotle's moral theory, we become good by habitually doing good, so too by feeling emotion appropriately (towards the right object, at the right time etc.), we become habituated to having the right emotional responses, those emotional responses which attain the mean between the extremes; these help us to take the correct decisions, so that we come nearer to the mean, where virtue lies, and become virtuous in character.

Now poetry offers an obvious way in which we can learn these responses without the hazardous process of undergoing in actuality the experiences represented in poetry. By responding emotionally to the representation, we can learn to develop the correct emotional responses. Aristotle says precisely this about music, *in which he includes poetry*, at *Politics* VIII 5.1340a14–25, translated in this volume as Testimonium A(i) on catharsis.

Thus poetry undoubtedly has an educative and moral function, that is, it helps to form character. This may seem to have little to do with catharsis, but the later writers indicate that it did. Thus Proclus, explicitly referring to Aristotle, says that tragedy and comedy "make it possible to satisfy the emotions in due measure, and, by satisfying them, to keep them tractable for *education*" (Testimonium C(ii): my italics). The remarkable new text about catharsis from Herculaneum states "poetry is useful with regard to virtue, *purifying*, as we said, the [related] part

[of the soul]" (*On Poets* frag. *4.7: my italics). This text even indicates that catharsis applies no less to errors in the intellectual virtue of practical intelligence, than to errors of character and emotion, like excessive fear: poetry contributes to virtue as a whole, which in Aristotle's moral theory depends on both intellect and character. Catharsis and the mean in terms of the emotions are also linked by Iamblichus and the *Tractatus Coislinianus*.

Unfortunately Aristotle himself never states this clearly in his surviving works; but it accords with his theories of character and education, and also with the general sense of his discussion of catharsis in the *Politics*. There he says that music (and poetry) confer three benefits, the education of children, catharsis and entertainment (VIII 1341b32–1342a16, translated as Testimonium A(ii) below). Like the songs used for healing abnormal emotional states, which produce a catharsis in hysterical people, tragedy produces "a sort of" catharsis of pity and terror; but this affects everybody, insofar as we are all prone to excess in the emotions to some degree. From this statement it surely follows that tragedy reduces these emotions so that they are no longer excessive and divergent from the mean, but in due proportion and in accord with it (which is what the *Tractatus Coislinianus* says it does). Both kinds of catharsis are homoeopathic; both work on the emotions by arousing the emotions, just as we treat a fever by piling on blankets.

If the interpretation advanced above is right, tragedy confers the other two benefits as well. It is obviously a form of entertainment, a concept which Aristotle associates not merely with relaxation but also with acquiring intelligence (*Politics* VIII 5.1339a25). However, like the poetry used in education (which surely includes Homer), tragedy also habituates us to feel the correct emotional as well as intellectual responses to the people and actions it represents; this is important for the development of good character and virtue. Thus catharsis falls in between—and combines—education and entertainment.

If this ethical aspect of catharsis is accepted, Aristotle's theory becomes a complete answer to Plato, and a far more subtle and sophisticated one. The above interpretation seems superior to Bernays', because it accords better with Aristotle's view of the emotions and their relation to character; it shows how catharsis is an integral part of poetry, as a representation of actions which arouse the emotions; and it explains how catharsis can benefit everyone, not just people who are emotionally unstable.

Taking tragedy as an example, the cathartic process works as follows. By representing pitiable, terrifying and other painful events, tragedy arouses pity, terror and other painful emotions in the audi-

ence, for each according to his own emotional capacity, and so stimulates these emotions as to relieve them by giving them moderate and harmless exercise, thereby bringing the audience nearer to the mean in their emotional responses, and so nearer to virtue in their characters; and with this relief comes pleasure. Comedy works on the pleasant emotions in the same way.

It must be stressed that this reconstruction of Aristotle's theory of catharsis is, and seems likely to remain, highly controversial. His incidental remarks in the *Politics*, and the scattered statements of later writers, are a poor substitute for a full account of his own.

6
The Structure of the Poetics

We do not know who arranged the *Poetics* in two 'books', i.e. separate rolls of papyrus. *Poetics* I ends at a major break in terms of content, the conclusion of the account of tragedy and epic; the lost Book II was concerned with comedy. The difficulty of the *Poetics* has led to considerable disagreement about its structure. The explanatory headings, and the paragraphs into which this translation is divided, are my own interpretations, since ancient manuscripts gave the reader no such help. Renaissance editors divided the work into twenty-six chapters, but these divisions are not very helpful for understanding its structure. The summary below may be more useful; it is based on the main headings supplied in this translation. For convenience I give in brackets ( ) the old chapter-numbers where each section starts.

1. *Poetry in general* (i)
1.1 Poetry is a kind of representation
1.2 Its kinds classified by (a) the media of representation
1.3 Its kinds classified by (b) the objects represented (ii)
1.4 Its kinds classified by (c) the manner of representation (iii)
2. *The origins and development of tragedy, comedy and epic* (iv)
3. *The nature of tragedy* (vi)
3.1 The definition of tragedy, and its six qualitative parts
3.2 The nature of plot (vii)
3.3 The kinds of plot (ix.51b33)
3.4 The three parts of plot (xi)

It may be valuable to compare this outline with the topics covered in the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, which I argue to be a summary of the lost second Book of the *Poetics*. The contents of the latter are as follows:

A list of the major sections of each work will show how they resemble each other (this is discussed further in the notes on the *Tractatus*):

Poetics	*Tractatus*
Poetry and its kinds	Poetry and its kinds
The origins of poetry	The end of poetry, catharsis
Definition of tragedy	Definition of comedy
The nature of plot	The nature of laughter
Quantitative parts	Qualitative parts
Qualitative parts	Quantitative parts
Comparison with epic	Comparison of kinds of comedy

Aristotle: 384–322 B.C.

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