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Aristotle: *Poetics* (384-322 B.C.)

Aristotle, the premier student at Plato's Academy, and himself the formal founder of a University, the Lyceum, wrote on all subjects known in his time—from metaphysics to the parts of animals—and has arguably exerted more influence than any other Greek thinker on mediaeval, Renaissance, and modern thought in the West. Among his vast body of writings two are devoted spefically to aesthetic questions, the Rhetoric—an analysis of the art of effective oratory—and the Poetics. Each text has kept its vigor into our own time, and can continue to provoke fundamental discussion of the nature of the arts of language.

The Poetics (or the study of the art of making in language; poiesis, making, derives from the verb 'to make,' and means poetry, the making art) is concerned with creation in language, with special emphasis on drama, which for Aristotle was the central verbal art. Aristotle looks at the origins of comedy and tragedy—which we have discussed earlier in connection with the Athenian playwrights—and then turns close attention onto the construction of the tragic drama—we have lost his writings on comedy—both analyzing the components of the art and formulating principles of value.

His analysis of Greek tragedy—for of course his only examples are the dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, which are a century into his past—finds that the essential dramatic elements, in order of importance, are plot, character, thought, diction, melody, and spectacle—the visual of the play. The plot is central for it is the backbone and significance of the drama, and Aristotle devotes attention to the construction of the most effective plot. For him the greatest drama was Oedipus the King, of Sophocles. One reason for his judgment: we are enabled here to see the utterly cogent fall of a great man from power to defeat, and to appreciate the organic movement by which that fall emerges from the inside development of the plot itself. (In general, as you can appreciate, his preferred dramatist was Sophocles, his critique often leveled at Euripides.) From this account you can also appreciate his account of catharsis, as the highest effect to be achieved by the experience of a tragic drama: the arousing of pity and fear and the consequent purifying of them, on the occasion of watching a powerful protagonist fall from the heights to the depths.

Physics. The reader of this ebook on Greek literature will have wondered, long before this, whether literature as such is what we are studying. While he/she might readily have accepted Homer, Pindar, or Archilochos, he/she would have felt already, in reading Solon or Heracleitus or Parmenides, that the ground definition of literature was shifting. By the time the reader came to the orators, or to Socrates, the doubts would have grown even greater. Now we have arrived at Aristotle's *Physics*! Is that literature? What does literature mean here? Had the Greeks a different concept of literature from modern Westerners?

The ancient Greeks had no word corresponding to our word *literature*. (*Techne*, an art or skill, was the general term covering the notion of what we would call 'the arts,' but for the Greeks such a term as *techne* would cover many skills, for instance saddle making or carpentry, which we would not include in at least our notion of the 'fine arts.') Thus we have found, yes, that visionary philosophers write in hexameters, and, in Plato, we have found a philosopher, who wrote in prose, who went more deeply into metaphorical thinking than any

poet had done. Now we arrive at Aristotle, a philosopher in prose—the texts we have from him are basically lecture notes for the University he founded—but a philosopher whose thought was to prove dynamic for some of the greatest (and most poetic) theology of the centuries to follow, and who was to be the poetic guide for Dante, in *The Divine Comedy* (14th century A.D.) Are we willing to include Aristotle's *Physics* with 'literature'?

And what soaring ideas do we see in the *Physics*? We read of final causes, potentiality and actuality, the eternality of the universe, and the Prime Mover of that universe: we are taking a journey, if in a 'prosaic' tone, to the highest registers of what preoccupies the greatest literatures, *Faust, The Divine Comedy, Paradise Lost.* While Plato moves graciously, if intricately, from the individual to the principles of knowing and to the sources of intelligibility, Aristotle scrutinizes, in the *Physics*, a natural world the inner growth and meaning of which is the very stuff our existence is made of.

Metaphysics. Aristotle nowhere calls the present work *Metaphysics*; it acquired its name from those late Hellenistic scholars who first assembled the works of Aristotle. They edited and included the Physics, which we have just considered, then placed after it another text which, because it came *after* the *Physics—meta* (*after*) *t*a *physika*—acquired the name we now give it, the *Metaphysics*, the text following the *Physics*. That this accident of editing turns out to be appropriate becomes evident. The *Physics* is concerned with coming into being, in nature, with the principles of potentiality and actuality as the profile of change, and with forms which confer intelligibility. The *Metaphysics* takes up all these issues, but transfers them from the observation of nature to the realm of being, as it is logically analyzed. The purpose of the *Metaphysics*, viewed in terms of the history of Greek thought, is to provide a reconciliation between the evident changeability of the world and the meaning-giving stability of it. This reconciliation was already the central challenge for Heraclitus and Parmenides—who split over whether all is flux or all is immutability which only *seems* to include change; as it was the challenge for Plato, who met the perplexity of change with his Theory of Ideas, to which we have earlier referred. Aristotle provides reconciliation through his careful analysis of substance, of cause, of essence, and of universality. Without recourse to independent substantiating principles—like Plato's Theory of Ideas—Aristotle derives the dynamic of being from its own inherent dialectic, guided by a First Cause and a Final Cause. His intricate thought-system provided a launching pad for many later adventures in thought, most notably the frameworking of the *Summa Theologica*, that architectonic achievement of Thomas Aquinas, a capstone of mediaeval Catholic thought.

Our references back to Plato—himself quite literally a poet of ideas—and to those visionary philosopher/poets like Heracleitus and Parmenides—should justify our inclusion of Aristotle's scrutinous analysis in a brief ebook summary of Greek literature. From the beginning in Homer, Greek creative expression is an inquiry into the meaning of meaning, in a world where flux and accident seem to carry out a ballet with the permanent principles of reality.