

Plato

ca. 427–347 B.C.E.

“All of Western philosophy is but a footnote to Plato,” Alfred North Whitehead once said, and it is true in the sense that most of the historically significant issues with which philosophy has been concerned — the nature of being, the question of how we know things, the purposes of right action, the structure of an ordered society, the meaning of love and beauty — were issues that he raised. Later philosophers, including Plato’s great pupil, Aristotle, have disagreed not only with his results but also with his ways of setting up the questions, and their argument with Plato makes up much of the history of thought. Nor have later thinkers always merely disagreed with and revised Plato: Century after century has witnessed a renaissance of his system of thought, most notably in the Neoplatonists of the second century C.E., the Cambridge Platonists of the latter seventeenth century, and the idealists of the romantic movement. Later thinkers, including Plotinus (p. 109), Sidney (p. 132), and Shelley (p. 344), directly take up Plato’s challenge, but his shadow falls, as Whitehead said, over all of Western thought.

For contemporary readers the most difficult concept in Plato’s thought is his *idealism* — the doctrine of a permanent realm of eternal Forms that shape our mutable material world. In a philosophy class students might be asked to contrast the “Idea of the Desk” — the concept of a thing to write on that also holds one’s papers — with the physical object in the classroom. The former is timeless and pure, while the latter is time-bound: It came into being, exists for a time, will soon vanish. Nor is the material desk a *perfect* desk: Its very materiality precludes it. Presumably, the Idea of the Desk must have preceded the material desk and caused it, in effect, to be created. A carpenter who is not merely copying an existing desk must be working from some inner awareness of this Idea.

This approach is a time-honored way of introducing Plato’s ideas, but it tends to lead our thought downward, to wondering, for example, whether there is a Platonic Idea of a pencil-shaving or of manure. Actually, despite their vulgarity, these are perfectly sound Platonic questions. The usual solution is to assume that formless things — mud, sawdust, and so on — have no Forms because they are in fact formless matter. The real problem is that the explanation removes Plato’s ideas from common human thought. Few of us are acquainted, other than in theory, with the ideas of things like desks. Nor is it apparent at first glance that the Idea of a Desk is a higher or better thing than a material desk; it is certainly much harder to do one’s work on.

It may be more helpful to think of a geometry class, where one operates with perfect circles, right angles, and parallel lines, and where one learns to prove theorems — or eternal truths — about them. It is understood that the diagrams drawn to illustrate the theorems, however neatly done, are imperfect representations of the lines and angles of the theorem. Here, on a mathematical level, one is working with the Ideal and the Material, and it is the Ideal — the proof, not the diagram — which counts. This may be why the door to Plato’s school, the Academy, had a warning on it: “Let no one ignorant

of geometry enter here.” The mathematics prerequisite, so to speak, had a good reason: Those who had already wrestled with the Idea of the Right Triangle in proving the Pythagorean theorem were prepared to understand the higher ideas of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty that Plato believed shape all human knowledge, right action, artistic endeavor, and love.

Plato developed his idealism in reaction against the notions of the Sophists. They have a poor reputation today — the word *sophistry* testifies to that — but the original Sophists were not a set of quibblers but a diverse group of teachers of what we would now call rhetoric and composition, the language arts. Some of the major Sophists, like Gorgias and Lysias, are known today because Plato used them as debating opponents for his spokesman, Socrates. The Sophists claimed that their science of language could lead to the knowledge of truth and virtue. Against this, Plato thought it dangerous to suppose that the highest realities — Truth, Goodness, and Beauty — had the flickering impermanence of human words, and his world of ideas may derive from his fear that, like language, even matter could be shaped to cheat and deceive.

REPUBLIC, BOOK X

Book X is the most influential discussion of art in the Platonic canon. Its central thesis — that poets have no place in Plato’s perfect state save as writers of hymns to the gods and songs in praise of great leaders — has stung devotees of the arts for the last two thousand years.

Book X is at the end of the *Republic*, the longest of the dialogues, which opens with the issue of whether Might makes Right. This harsh question leads Socrates and his two friends to consider the question, What is Justice? Socrates’ hypothesis is that Justice is knowing one’s place and performing its duties — but how can one know and act properly in the Athenian polis? This question leads Socrates to fashion a model state, a republic governed by a natural elite of guardians, in which it would be possible, as it is not in Athens, to understand one’s place and its duties. But how should the guardians be educated to rule? They must learn a great many other things, but at the center of their training is philosophy. And it is in answering *this* question — of what does philosophy consist? — that Socrates presents his hierarchical portrait of the physical and mental universe: the myth of the divided line. In simplified form, the diagram Socrates draws looks like this:

MODES OF BEING	MODES OF MENTAL ACTIVITY
Ideas	Knowing
Mathematical Forms	Understanding
Material Things	Opinion
Images	Conjecture

The first horizontal line separates the eternal world of true Being from the world of Becoming, the material things that are begotten, born, and die. The vertical line separates modes of existence from the modes of thought appropriate to them. For Plato the word *know* applies only to Ideas, but about material animals, plants, and human artifacts we can at best hold correct opinions, and with respect to mere images we can only hazard guesses.

In this context, the discussion of art in Book X is logically sound. First of all, Plato identifies art as imitation, positing that what artists do (as they have claimed in the centuries before and after Plato) is hold the mirror up to nature: They copy the appearances of men, animals, and objects in the physical world. But if this is the case, then the artistic object is merely an image, slightly but not more meaningfully permanent than a reflection in a pool of water. And the intelligence that went into its creation need involve nothing more than conjecture. (Notice that Socrates is not being redundant when he twice proves the inferiority of art: The first time he proves the inferiority of the *mode of being* of art; the second, its inferiority as a *mode of mental activity*.) As a result, art cannot be justified as an activity worthy in its own right. The poets may stay as servants of the state if they teach piety and virtue, but the pleasures of art are condemned as inherently corrupting to citizens and guardians alike.

ION

~~Much of the *Ion* is reasonably consistent with the *Republic*, and a good deal more entertaining if we allow ourselves to enjoy the spectacle of Socrates exposing the vanity and pretensions of the none-too-bright performer for whom the dialogue is named. (The moment when Ion declares that he is the greatest general in Athens as well as its greatest rhapsode is made richer if one remembers that at the purported time of the discourse, Athens was fighting for its survival in the Peloponnesian War.) Here, as in the *Republic*, Socrates exposes the inferiority of art as a way of knowing.~~

~~Where *Ion* differs from the *Republic* is in the suggestion contained in the image of the magnet as a metaphor of divine inspiration. Just as a magnet attracts iron and passes that attraction along, so the muse inspires the artist, who inspires the interpreter, who inspires the audience. The chain runs from the god to Homer to Ion to the applauding citizens. If this view of art is true, then it is divine, not inferior stuff.~~

~~Reconciling this notion of art with the contrary position in *Republic*, Book X, has been attempted in a number of different ways. One way is to suppose that Plato changed his mind, but that would mean trying to discover which, the *Ion* or the *Republic*, is the later dialogue (we have only conjectural datings) and deciding whether his first or second thoughts were the more trustworthy.~~

~~Another possibility is to suppose that the *Ion* is an essentially ironic (as well as humorous) dialogue, and that Socrates does not seriously respect inspiration. The Greek word translated as "inspiration" is *enthousiasmós*, and its literal meaning is closer to "demonic possession" than to the English derivative "enthusiasm." It is hard to believe that the rationalistic Plato could commend such a state. But on the other side, Socrates *does* praise such an experience elsewhere, in the *Phaedrus*, the principal dialogue on love and beauty, where poetry finds its place along with~~

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Republic, Book X

Of the many excellences which I perceive in the order of our State, there is none which upon reflection pleases me better than the rule about poetry.

To what do you refer?

To our refusal to admit the imitative kind of poetry, for it certainly ought not to be received; as I see far more clearly now that the parts of the soul have been distinguished.

What do you mean?

Speaking in confidence, for you will not denounce me to the tragedians and the rest of the imitative tribe, all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, unless as an antidote they possess the knowledge of the true nature of the originals.

Explain the purport of your remark.

Well, I will tell you, although I have always from my earliest youth had an awe and love of Homer which even now makes the words falter on my lips, for he seems to be the great captain and teacher of the whole of that noble tragic company; but a man is not to be revered more than the truth, and therefore I will speak out.

Very good, he said.

Listen to me then, or rather, answer me.

Put your question.

Can you give me a general definition of imitation? for I really do not myself understand what it professes to be.

A likely thing, then, that I should know.

There would be nothing strange in that, for the duller eye may often see a thing sooner than the keener.

Very true, he said; but in your presence, even if I had any faint notion, I could not muster courage to utter it. Will you inquire yourself?

Well then, shall we begin the inquiry at this point, following our usual method: Whenever a number of individuals have a common name, we assume that there is one corresponding idea or form: — do you understand me?

I do.

Let us take, for our present purpose, any instance of such a group; there are beds and tables in the world — many of each, are there not?

Yes.

But there are only two ideas or forms of such furniture — one the idea of a bed, the other of a table.

True.

And the maker of either of them makes a bed or he makes a table for our use, in accordance with the idea — that is our way of speaking in this and similar instances — but no artificer makes the idea itself: how could he?

Impossible.

And there is another artificer — I should like to know what you would say of him.

Who is he?

One who is the maker of all the works of all other workmen.

What an extraordinary man!

Wait a little, and there will be more reason for your saying so. For this is the craftsman who is able to make not only furniture of every kind, but all that grows out of the earth, and all living creatures, himself included; and besides these he can make earth and sky and the gods, and all the things which are in heaven or in the realm of Hades under the earth.

Translated by Benjamin Jowett. The speakers are Socrates and Glaucon.

He must be a wizard and no mistake.

Oh! you are incredulous, are you? Do you mean that there is no such maker or creator, or that in one sense there might be a maker of all these things but in another not? Do you see that there is a way in which you could make them all yourself?

And what way is this? he asked.

An easy way enough; or rather, there are many ways in which the feat might be quickly and easily accomplished, none quicker than that of turning a mirror round and round — you would soon enough make the sun and the heavens, and the earth and yourself, and other animals and plants, and furniture and all the other things of which we were just now speaking, in the mirror.

Yes, he said; but they would be appearances only.

Very good, I said, you are coming to the point now. And the painter too is, as I conceive, just such another — a creator of appearances, is he not?

Of course.

But then I suppose you will say that what he creates is untrue. And yet there is a sense in which the painter also creates a bed? Is there not?

Yes, he said, but here again, an appearance only.

And what of the maker of the bed? Were you not saying that he too makes, not the idea which according to our view is the real object denoted by the word bed, but only a particular bed?

Yes, I did.

Then if he does not make a real object he cannot make what *is*, but only some semblance of existence; and if anyone were to say that the work of the maker of the bed, or of any other workman, has real existence, he could hardly be supposed to be speaking the truth.

Not, at least, he replied, in the view of those who make a business of these discussions.

No wonder, then, that his work too is an indistinct expression of truth.

No wonder.

Suppose now that by the light of the examples just offered we inquire who this imitator is?

If you please.

Well then, here we find three beds: one existing in nature, which is made by God, as I think that we may say — for no one else can be the maker?

No one, I think.

There is another which is the work of the carpenter?

Yes.

And the work of the painter is a third?

Yes.

Beds, then, are of three kinds, and there are three artists who superintend them: God, the maker of the bed, and the painter?

Yes, there are three of them.

God, whether from choice or from necessity, made one bed in nature and one only; two or more such beds neither ever have been nor ever will be made by God.

Why is that?

Because even if He had made but two, a third would still appear behind them of which they again both possessed the form, and that would be the real bed and not the two others.

Very true, he said.

God knew this, I suppose, and He desired to be the real maker of a real bed, not a kind of bed, and therefore He created a bed which is essentially and by nature one only.

So it seems.

Shall we, then, speak of Him as the natural author or maker of the bed?

Yes, he replied; inasmuch as by the natural process of creation, He is the author of this and of all other things.

And what shall we say of the carpenter — is not he also the maker of a bed?

Yes.

But would you call the painter an artificer and maker?

Certainly not.

Yet if he is not the maker, what is he in relation to the bed?

I think, he said, that we may fairly designate him as the imitator of that which the others make.

Good, I said; then you call him whose product is third in the descent from nature, an imitator?

Certainly, he said.

And so if the tragic poet is an imitator, he too is thrice removed from the king and from the truth; and so are all other imitators.

That appears to be so.

Then about the imitator we are agreed. And what about the painter? — Do you think he tries

to imitate in each case that which originally exists in nature, or only the creation of artificers?

The latter.

As they are or as they appear? you have still to determine this.

What do you mean?

I mean to ask whether a bed really becomes different when it is seen from different points of view, obliquely or directly or from any other point of view? Or does it simply appear different, without being really so? And the same of all things.

Yes, he said, the difference is only apparent.

Now let me ask you another question: Which is the art of painting designed to be — an imitation of things as they are, or as they appear — of appearance or of reality?

Of appearance, he said.

Then the imitator is a long way off the truth, and can reproduce all things because he lightly touches on a small part of them, and that part an image. For example: A painter will paint a cobbler, carpenter, or any other artisan, though he knows nothing of their arts; and, if he is a good painter, he may deceive children or simple persons when he shows them his picture of a carpenter from a distance, and they will fancy that they are looking at a real carpenter.

Certainly.

And surely, my friend, this is how we should regard all such claims: Whenever any one informs us that he has found a man who knows all the arts, and all things else that anybody knows, and every single thing with a higher degree of accuracy than any other man — whoever tells us this, I think that we can only retort that he is a simple creature who seems to have been deceived by some wizard or imitator whom he met, and whom he thought all-knowing, because he himself was unable to analyze the nature of knowledge and ignorance and imitation.

Most true.

And next, I said, we have to consider tragedy and its leader, Homer; for we hear some persons saying that these poets know all the arts; and all things human; where virtue and vice are concerned, and indeed all divine things too; because the good poet cannot compose well unless he knows his subject, and he who has not this knowledge can never be a poet. We ought to consider

whether here also there may not be a similar illusion. Perhaps they may have come across imitators and been deceived by them; they may not have remembered when they saw their works that these were thrice removed from the truth, and could easily be made without any knowledge of the truth, because they are appearances only and not realities? Or, after all, they may be in the right, and good poets do really know the things about which they seem to the many to speak so well?

The question, he said, should by all means be considered.

Now do you suppose that if a person were able to make the original as well as the image, he would seriously devote himself to the image-making branch? Would he allow imitation to be the ruling principle of his life, as if he had nothing higher in him?

I should say not.

But the real artist, who had real knowledge of those things which he chose also to imitate, would be interested in realities and not in imitations; and would desire to leave as memorials of himself works many and fair; and, instead of being the author of encomiums, he would prefer to be the theme of them.

Yes, he said, that would be to him a source of much greater honor and profit.

Now let us refrain, I said, from calling Homer or any other poet to account regarding those arts to which his poems incidentally refer: We will not ask them, in case any poet has been a doctor and not a mere imitator of medical parlance, to show what patients have been restored to health by a poet, ancient or modern, as they were by Asclepius; or what disciples in medicine a poet has left behind him, like the Asclepiads. Nor shall we press the same question upon them about the other arts. But we have a right to know respecting warfare, strategy, the administration of States, and the education of man, which are the chiefest and noblest subjects of his poems, and we may fairly ask him about them. "Friend Homer," then we say to him, "if you are only in the second remove from truth in what you say of virtue, and not in the third — not an image maker, that is, by our definition, an imitator — and if you are able to discern what pursuits make men better or worse in private or public life, tell us what State

was ever better governed by your help? The good order of Lacedaemon is due to Lycurgus, and many other cities great and small have been similarly benefited by others; but who says that you have been a good legislator to them and have done them any good? Italy and Sicily boast of Charondas, and there is Solon who is renowned among us; but what city has anything to say about you?" Is there any city which he might name?

I think not, said Glaucon; not even the Homeric poets themselves pretend that he was a legislator.

Well, but is there any war on record which was carried on successfully owing to his leadership or counsel?

There is not.

Or is there anything comparable to those clever improvements in the arts, or in other operations, which are said to have been due to men of practical genius such as Thales the Milesian or Anacharsis the Scythian?

There is absolutely nothing of the kind.

But, if Homer never did any public service, was he privately a guide or teacher of any? Had he in his lifetime friends who loved to associate with him, and who handed down to posterity a Homeric way of life, such as was established by Pythagoras who was especially beloved for this reason and whose followers are to this day conspicuous among others by what they term the Pythagorean way of life?

Nothing of the kind is recorded of him. For surely, Socrates, Creophylus, the companion of Homer, that child of flesh, whose name always makes us laugh, might be more justly ridiculed for his want of breeding, if what is said is true, that Homer was greatly neglected by him in his own day when he was alive?

Yes, I replied, that is the tradition. But can you imagine, Glaucon, that if Homer had really been able to educate and improve mankind — if he had been capable of knowledge and not been a mere imitator — can you imagine, I say, that he would not have attracted many followers, and been honored and loved by them? Protagoras of Abdera, and Prodicus of Ceos, and a host of others, have only to whisper to their contemporaries: "You will never be able to manage either your own house or your own State until you appoint us to be your ministers of education" — and this

ingenious device of theirs has such an effect in making men love them that their companions all but carry them about on their shoulders. And is it conceivable that the contemporaries of Homer, or again of Hesiod, would have allowed either of them to go about as rhapsodists, if they had really been able to help mankind forward in virtue? Would they not have been as unwilling to part with them as with gold, and have compelled them to stay at home with them? Or, if the master would not stay, then the disciples would have followed him about everywhere, until they had got education enough?

Yes, Socrates, that, I think, is quite true.

Then must we not infer that all these poetical individuals, beginning with Homer, are only imitators, who copy images of virtue and the other themes of their poetry, but have no contact with the truth? The poet is like a painter who, as we have already observed, will make a likeness of a cobbler though he understands nothing of cobbling; and his picture is good enough for those who know no more than he does, and judge only by colors and figures.

Quite so.

In like manner the poet with his words and phrases¹ may be said to lay on the colors of the several arts, himself understanding their nature only enough to imitate them; and other people, who are as ignorant as he is, and judge only from his words, imagine that if he speaks of cobbling, or of military tactics, or of anything else, in meter and harmony and rhythm, he speaks very well — such is the sweet influence which melody and rhythm by nature have. For I am sure that you know what a poor appearance the works of poets make when stripped of the colors which art puts upon them, and recited in simple prose. You have seen some examples?

Yes, he said.

They are like faces which were never really beautiful, but only blooming, seen when the bloom of youth has passed away from them?

Exactly.

Come now, and observe this point: The imitator or maker of the image knows nothing, we

¹Or, "with his nouns and verbs." [Tr.]

have said, of true existence; he knows appearances only. Am I not right?

Yes.

Then let us have a clear understanding, and not be satisfied with half an explanation.

Proceed.

Of the painter we say that he will paint reins, and he will paint a bit?

Yes.

And the worker in leather and brass will make them?

Certainly.

But does the painter know the right form of the bit and reins? Nay, hardly even the workers in brass and leather who make them; only the horse-man who knows how to use them — he knows their right form.

Most true.

And may we not say the same of all things?

What?

That there are three arts which are concerned with all things: one which uses, another which makes, a third which imitates them?

Yes.

And the excellence and beauty and rightness of every structure, animate or inanimate, and of every action of man, is relative solely to the use for which nature or the artist has intended them.

True.

Then beyond doubt it is the user who has the greatest experience of them, and he must report to the maker the good or bad qualities which develop themselves in use; for example, the flute player will tell the flute maker which of his flutes is satisfactory to the performer; he will tell him how he ought to make them, and the other will attend to his instructions?

Of course.

So the one pronounces with knowledge about the goodness and badness of flutes, while the other, confiding in him, will make them accordingly?

True.

The instrument is the same, but about the excellence or badness of it the maker will possess a correct belief, since he associates with one who knows, and is compelled to hear what he has to say; whereas the user will have knowledge?

True.

But will the imitator have either? Will he know from use whether or not that which he paints is correct or beautiful? or will he have right opinion from being compelled to associate with another who knows and gives him instructions about what he should paint?

Neither.

Then an imitator will no more have true opinion than he will have knowledge about the goodness or badness of his models?

I suppose not.

The imitative poet will be in a brilliant state of intelligence about the theme of his poetry?

Nay, very much the reverse.

And still he will go on imitating without knowing what makes a thing good or bad, and may be expected therefore to imitate only that which appears to be good to the ignorant multitude?

Just so.

Thus far then we are pretty well agreed that the imitator has no knowledge worth mentioning of what he imitates. Imitation is only a kind of play or sport, and the tragic poets, whether they write in iambic or in heroic verse,² are imitators in the highest degree?

Very true.

And now tell me, I conjure you — this imitation is concerned with an object which is thrice removed from the truth?

Certainly.

And what kind of faculty in man is that to which imitation makes its special appeal?

What do you mean?

I will explain: The same body does not appear equal to our sight when seen near and when seen at a distance?

True.

And the same objects appear straight when looked at out of the water, and crooked when in the water; and the concave becomes convex, owing to the illusion about colors to which the sight is liable. Thus every sort of confusion is revealed within us; and this is that weakness of the human mind on which the art of painting in

²Dramatists wrote in iambic verse and epic poets in dactylic hexameters — "heroic" verse.

light and shadow, the art of conjuring, and many other ingenious devices impose, having an effect upon us like magic.

True.

And the arts of measuring and numbering and weighing come to the rescue of the human understanding — there is the beauty of them — with the result that the apparent greater or less, or more or heavier, no longer have the mastery over us, but give way before the power of calculation and measuring and weighing?

Most true.

And this, surely, must be the work of the calculating and rational principle in the soul?

To be sure.

And often when this principle measures and certifies that some things are equal, or that some are greater or less than others, it is, at the same time, contradicted by the appearance which the objects present?

True.

But did we not say that such a contradiction is impossible — the same faculty cannot have contrary opinions at the same time about the same thing?

We did; and rightly.

Then that part of the soul which has an opinion contrary to measure can hardly be the same with that which has an opinion in accordance with measure?

True.

And the part of the soul which trusts to measure and calculation is likely to be the better one?

Certainly.

And therefore that which is opposed to this is probably an inferior principle in our nature?

No doubt.

This was the conclusion at which I was seeking to arrive when I said that painting or drawing, and imitation in general, are engaged upon productions which are far removed from truth, and are also the companions and friends and associates of a principle within us which is equally removed from reason, and that they have no true or healthy aim.

Exactly.

The imitative art is an inferior who from intercourse with an inferior has inferior offspring.

Very true.

And is this confined to the sight only, or does it extend to the hearing also, relating in fact to what we term poetry?

Probably the same would be true of poetry.

Do not rely, I said, on a probability derived from the analogy of painting; but let us once more go directly to that faculty of the mind with which imitative poetry has converse, and see whether it is good or bad.

By all means.

We may state the question thus: Imitation imitates the actions of men, whether voluntary or involuntary, on which, as they imagine, a good or bad result has ensued, and they rejoice or sorrow accordingly. Is there anything more?

No, there is nothing else.

But in all this variety of circumstances is the man at unity with himself — or rather, as in the instance of sight there was confusion and opposition in his opinions about the same things, so here also is there not strife and inconsistency in his life? Though I need hardly raise the question again, for I remember that all this has been already admitted; and the soul has been acknowledged by us to be full of these and ten thousand similar oppositions occurring at the same moment?

And we were right, he said.

Yes, I said, thus far we were right; but there was an omission which must now be supplied.

What was the omission?

Were we not saying that a good man, who has the misfortune to lose his son or anything else which is most dear to him, will bear the loss with more equanimity than another?

Yes, indeed.

But will he have no sorrow, or shall we say that although he cannot help sorrowing, he will moderate his sorrow?

The latter, he said, is the truer statement.

Tell me: will he be more likely to struggle and hold out against his sorrow when he is seen by his equals, or when he is alone in a deserted place?

The fact of being seen will make a great difference, he said.

When he is by himself he will not mind saying many things which he would be ashamed of anyone hearing, and also doing many things which he would not care to be seen doing?

True.

And doubtless it is the law and reason in him which bids him resist; while it is the affliction itself which is urging him to indulge his sorrow?

True.

But when a man is drawn in two opposite directions, to and from the same object, this, as we affirm, necessarily implies two distinct principles in him?

Certainly.

One of them is ready to follow the guidance of the law?

How do you mean?

The law would say that to be patient under calamity is best, and that we should not give way to impatience, as the good and evil in such things are not clear, and nothing is gained by impatience; also, because no human thing is of serious importance, and grief stands in the way of that which at the moment is most required.

What is most required? he asked.

That we should take counsel about what has happened, and when the dice have been thrown, according to their fall, order our affairs in the way which reason deems best; not, like children who have had a fall, keeping hold of the part struck and wasting time in setting up a howl, but always accustoming the soul forthwith to apply a remedy, raising up that which is sickly and fallen, banishing the cry of sorrow by the healing art.

Yes, he said, that is the true way of meeting the attacks of fortune.

Well then, I said, the higher principle is ready to follow this suggestion of reason?

Clearly.

But the other principle, which inclines us to recollection of our troubles and to lamentation, and can never have enough of them, we may call irrational, useless, and cowardly?

Indeed, we may.

Now does not the principle which is thus inclined to complaint, furnish a great variety of materials for imitation? Whereas the wise and calm temperament, being always nearly equable, is not easy to imitate or to appreciate when imitated, especially at a public festival when a promiscuous crowd is assembled in a theater. For the feeling represented is one to which they are strangers.

Certainly.

Then the imitative poet who aims at being popular is not by nature made, nor is his art intended, to please or to affect the rational principle in the soul; but he will appeal rather to the lachrymose and fitful temper, which is easily imitated?

Clearly.

And now we may fairly take him and place him by the side of the painter, for he is like him in two ways: first, inasmuch as his creations have an inferior degree of truth — in this, I say, he is like him; and he is also like him in being the associate of an inferior part of the soul; and this is enough to show that we shall be right in refusing to admit him into a State which is to be well ordered, because he awakens and nourishes this part of the soul, and by strengthening it impairs the reason. As in a city when the evil are permitted to wield power and the finer men are put out of the way, so in the soul of each man, as we shall maintain, the imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less, but thinks the same thing at one time great and at another small — he is an imitator of images and is very far removed from the truth.

Exactly.

But we have not yet brought forward the heaviest count in our accusation: The power which poetry has of harming even the good (and there are very few who are not harmed) is surely an awful thing?

Yes, certainly, if the effect is what you say.

Hear and judge: The best of us, as I conceive, when we listen to a passage of Homer or one of the tragedians, in which he represents some hero who is drawing out his sorrows in a long oration, or singing, and smiting his breast — the best of us, you know, delight in giving way to sympathy, and are in raptures at the excellence of the poet who stirs our feelings most.

Yes, of course I know.

But when any sorrow of our own happens to us, then you may observe that we pride ourselves on the opposite quality — we would fain be quiet and patient; this is considered the manly part, and the other which delighted us in the recitation is now deemed to be the part of a woman.

Very true, he said.

Now can we be right in praising and admiring another who is doing that which any one of us would abominate and be ashamed of in his own person?

No, he said, that is certainly not reasonable.

Nay, I said, quite reasonable from one point of view.

What point of view?

If you consider, I said, that when in misfortune we feel a natural hunger and desire to relieve our sorrow by weeping and lamentation, and that this very feeling which is starved and suppressed in our own calamities is satisfied and delighted by the poets; the better nature in each of us, not having been sufficiently trained by reason or habit, allows the sympathetic element to break loose because the sorrow is another's; and the spectator fancies that there can be no disgrace to himself in praising and pitying anyone who, while professing to be a brave man, gives way to untimely lamentation; he thinks that the pleasure is a gain, and is far from wishing to lose it by rejection of the whole poem. Few persons ever reflect, as I should imagine, that the contagion must pass from others to themselves. For the pity which has been nourished and strengthened in the misfortunes of others is with difficulty repressed in our own.

How very true!

And does not the same hold also of the ridiculous? There are jests which you would be ashamed to make yourself, and yet on the comic stage, or indeed in private, when you hear them, you are greatly amused by them, and are not at all disgusted at their unseemliness; the case of pity is repeated; there is a principle in human nature which is disposed to raise a laugh, and this, which you once restrained by reason because you were afraid of being thought a buffoon, is now let out again; and having stimulated the risible faculty at the theater, you are betrayed unconsciously to yourself into playing the comic poet at home.

Quite true, he said.

And the same may be said of lust and anger and all the other affections, of desire and pain and pleasure, which are held to be inseparable from every action — in all of them poetry has a like effect; it feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they

ought to be controlled if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue.

I cannot deny it.

Therefore, Glaucon, I said, whenever you meet with any of the eulogists of Homer declaring that he has been the educator of Hellas, and that he is profitable for education and for the ordering of human things, and that you should take him up again and again and get to know him and regulate your whole life according to him, we may love and honor those who say these things — they are excellent people, as far as their lights extend; and we are ready to acknowledge that Homer is the greatest of poets and first of tragedy writers; but we must remain firm in our conviction that hymns to the gods and praises of famous men are the only poetry which ought to be admitted into our State. For if you go beyond this and allow the honeyed Muse to enter, either in epic or lyric verse; not law and the reason of mankind, which by common consent have ever been deemed best, but pleasure and pain will be the rulers in our State.

That is most true, he said.

And now since we have reverted to the subject of poetry, let this our defense serve to show the reasonableness of our former judgment in sending away out of our State an art having the tendencies which we have described; for reason constrained us. But that she may not impute to us any harshness or want of politeness, let us tell her that there is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry; of which there are many proofs, such as the saying of "the yelping hound howling at her lord," or of one "mighty in the vain talk of fools," and "the mob of sages circumventing Zeus," and the "subtle thinkers who are beggars after all,"³ and there are innumerable other signs of ancient enmity between them. Notwithstanding this, let us assure the poetry which aims at pleasure, and the art of imitation, that if she will only prove her title to exist in a well-ordered State we shall be delighted to receive her — we are very conscious of her charms; but it would not be right on that account to betray the truth. I dare say, Glaucon,

³Socrates is alluding to various proverbs, otherwise unknown, denigrating both poets and philosophers.

that you are as much charmed by her as I am, especially when she appears in Homer?

Yes, indeed, I am greatly charmed.

Shall I propose, then, that she be allowed to return from exile, but upon this condition only — that she make a defense of herself in some lyrical or other meter?

Certainly.

And we may further grant to those of her defenders who are lovers of poetry and yet not poets the permission to speak in prose on her behalf: let them show not only that she is pleasant but also useful to States and to human life, and we will listen in a kindly spirit; for we shall surely be the gainers if this can be proved, that there is a use in poetry as well as a delight?

Certainly, he said, we shall be the gainers.

If her defense fails, then, my dear friend, like other persons who are enamored of something, but put a restraint upon themselves when they think their desires are opposed to their interests, so too must we after the manner of lovers give her up, though not without a struggle. We too are inspired by that love of such poetry which the

education of noble States has implanted in us, and therefore we shall be glad if she appears at her best and truest; but so long as she is unable to make good her defense, this argument of ours shall be a charm to us, which we will repeat to ourselves while we listen to her strains; that we may not fall away into the childish love of her which captivates the many. At all events we are well aware that poetry, such as we have described, is not to be regarded seriously as attaining to the truth; and he who listens to her, fearing for the safety of the city which is within him, should be on his guard against her seductions and make our words his law.

Yes, he said, I quite agree with you.

Yes, I said, my dear Glaucon, for great is the issue at stake, greater than appears, whether a man is to be good or bad. And what will any one be profited if under the influence of honor or money or power, aye, or under the excitement of poetry, he neglect justice and virtue?

Yes, he said; I have been convinced by the argument, as I believe that anyone else would have been.

Ion

~~SOCRATES: Welcome, Ion! And whence come you now to pay us a visit? From your home in Ephesus?~~

~~ION: No, Socrates, I come from Epidaurus and the festival of Asclepius.¹~~

~~SOCRATES: What! Do the citizens of Epidaurus, in honoring the god, have a contest between rhapsodes² too?~~

~~ION: Indeed they do. They have every sort of musical competition.~~

~~Translated by Lane Cooper.~~

~~¹Greek god of medicine; his festival, like that of other minor divinities connected with Apollo, was the occasion for artistic performances and competitions.~~

~~²Professionals who delivered recitations of poetry, especially of Homer and the other epic poets.~~

~~SOCRATES: So? And did you compete? And how did you succeed?~~

~~ION: We carried off first prize, Socrates.~~

~~SOCRATES: Well done! See to it, now, that we win the Panathenaea also.~~

~~ION: It shall be so, God willing.~~

~~SOCRATES: I must say, Ion, I am often envious of you rhapsodists in your profession. Your art requires of you always to go in fine array, and look as beautiful as you can, and meanwhile you must be conversant with many excellent poets, and especially with Homer, the best and most divine of all. You have to understand his thought, and not merely learn his lines. It is an enviable lot! In fact, one never could be a rhapsode if one did not comprehend the utterances of the poet, for the rhapsode must become an interpreter of the poet's thought to~~

Plato

THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

Republic, VII
514 a, 2 to 517 a, 7

Translation by Thomas Sheehan

THE ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

SOCRATES: Next, said I [= Socrates], compare our nature in respect of education and its lack to such an experience as this.

PART ONE: SETTING THE SCENE: THE CAVE AND THE FIRE

The cave

SOCRATES: Imagine this: People live under the earth in a cavelike dwelling. Stretching a long way up toward the daylight is its entrance, toward which the entire cave is gathered. The people have been in this dwelling since childhood, shackled by the legs and neck..Thus they stay in the same place so that there is only one thing for them to look at: whatever they encounter in front of their faces. But because they are shackled, they are unable to turn their heads around.

A fire is behind them, and there is a wall between the fire and the prisoners

SOCRATES: Some light, of course, is allowed them, namely from a fire that casts its glow toward them from behind them, being above and at some distance. Between the fire and those who are shackled [i.e., behind their backs] there runs a walkway at a certain height. Imagine that a low wall has been built the length of the walkway, like the low curtain that puppeteers put up, over which they show their puppets.

The images carried before the fire

SOCRATES: So now imagine that all along this low wall people are carrying all sorts of things that reach up higher than the wall: statues and other carvings made of stone or wood and many other artifacts that people have made. As you would expect, some are talking to each other [as they walk along] and some are silent.

GLAUCON: This is an unusual picture that you are presenting here, and these are unusual prisoners.

SOCRATES: They are very much like us humans, I [Socrates] responded.

What the prisoners see and hear

SOCRATES: What do you think? From the beginning people like this have never managed, whether on their own or with the help by others, to see anything besides the shadows that are [continually] projected on the wall opposite them by the glow of the fire.

GLAUCON: How could it be otherwise, since they are forced to keep their heads immobile for their entire lives?

SOCRATES: And what do they see of the things that are being carried along [behind them]? Do they not see simply these [namely the shadows]?

GLAUCON: Certainly.

SOCRATES: Now if they were able to say something about what they saw and to talk it over, do you not think that they would regard that which they saw on the wall as beings?

GLAUCON: They would have to.

SOCRATES: And now what if this prison also had an echo reverberating off the wall in front of them [the one that they always and only look at]? Whenever one of the people walking behind those in chains (and carrying the things) would make a sound, do you think the prisoners would imagine that the speaker were anyone other than the shadow passing in front of them?

GLAUCON: Nothing else, by Zeus!

SOCRATES: All in all, I responded, those who were chained would consider nothing besides the shadows of the artifacts as the unhidden.

GLAUCON: That would absolutely have to be.

PART TWO: **THREE STAGES OF LIBERATION**

FREEDOM, STAGE ONE

A prisoner gets free

SOCRATES: So now, I replied, watch the process whereby the prisoners are set free from their chains and, along with that, cured of their lack of insight, and likewise consider what kind of lack of insight must be if the following were to happen to those who were chained.

Walks back to the fire

SOCRATES: Whenever any of them was unchained and was forced to stand up suddenly, to turn around, to walk, and to look up toward the light, in each case the person would be able to do this only with pain and because of the flickering brightness would be unable to look at those things whose shadows he previously saw.

Is questioned about the objects

SOCRATES: If all this were to happen to the prisoner, what do you think he would say if someone were to inform him that what he saw before were [mere] trifles but that now he was much nearer to beings; and that, as a consequence of now being turned toward what is more in being, he also saw more correctly?

The answer he gives

SOCRATES: And if someone were [then] to show him any of the things that were passing by and forced him to answer the question about what it was, don't you think that he would be a wit's end and in addition would consider that what he previously saw [with his own eyes] was more unhidden than what was now being shown [to him by someone else].

GLAUCON: Yes, absolutely.

Looking at the fire-light itself

SOCRATES: And if someone even forced him to look into the glare of the fire, would his eyes not hurt him, and would he not then turn away and flee [back] to that which he is capable of looking at? And would he not decide that [what he could see before without any help] was in fact clearer than what was now being shown to him?

GLAUCON: Precisely.

FREEDOM, STAGE TWO

Out of the cave into daylight

SOCRATES: Now, however, if someone, using force, were to pull him [who had been freed from his chains] away from there and to drag him up the cave's rough and steep ascent and not to let go of him until he had dragged him out into the light of the sun...

Pain, rage, blindness

SOCRATES: ...would not the one who had been dragged like this feel, in the process, pain and rage? And when he got into the sunlight, wouldn't his eyes be filled with the glare, and wouldn't he thus be unable to see any of the things that are now revealed to him as the unhidden?

GLAUCON: He would not be able to do that at all, at least not right away.

Getting used to the light

SOCRATES: It would obviously take some getting accustomed, I think, if it should be a matter of taking into one's eyes that which is up there outside the cave, in the light of the sun.

Shadows and reflections

SOCRATES: And in this process of acclimitization he would first and most easily be able to look at (1) shadows and after that (2) the images of people and the rest of things as they are reflected in water.

Looking at things directly

SOCRATES: Later, however, he would be able to view (3) the things themselves [the beings, instead of the dim reflections]. But within the range of such things, he might well contemplate what there is in the heavenly dome, and this dome itself, more easily during the night by looking at the light of the stars and the moon, [more easily, that is to say,] than by looking at the sun and its glare during the day.

GLAUCON: Certainly.

FREEDOM, STAGE THREE: THE SUN

Looking at the sun itself

SOCRATES: But I think that finally he would be in the condition to look at (4) the sun itself, not just at its reflection whether in water or wherever else it might appear, but at the sun itself, as it is in and of itself and in the place proper to it and to contemplate of what sort it is.

GLAUCON: It would necessarily happen this way.

Thoughts about the sun: its nature and functions

SOCRATES: And having done all that, by this time he would also be able to gather the following about the sun: (1) that it is that which grants both the seasons and the years; (2) it is that which governs whatever there is in the now visible region of sunlight; and (3) that it is also the cause of all those things that the people dwelling in the cave have before they eyes in some way or other.

GLAUCON: It is obvious that he would get to these things -- the sun and whatever stands in its light -- after he had gone out beyond those previous things, the merely reflections and shadows.

Thoughts about the cave

SOCRATES: And then what? If he again recalled his first dwelling, and the "knowing" that passes as the norm there, and the people with whom he once was chained, don't you think he would consider himself lucky because of the transformation that had happened and, by contrast, feel sorry for them?

GLAUCON: Very much so.

What counts for "wisdom" in the cave

SOCRATES: However, what if among the people in the previous dwelling place, the cave, certain honors and commendations were established for whomever most clearly catches sight of what passes by and also best remembers which of them normally is brought by first, which one later, and which ones at the same time? And what if there were honors for whoever could most easily foresee which one might come by next?

What would the liberated prisoner now prefer?

SOCRATES: Do you think the one who had gotten out of the cave would still envy those within the cave and would want to compete with them who are esteemed and who have power? Or would not he or she much rather wish for the condition that Homer speaks of, namely "to live on the land [above ground] as the paid menial of another destitute peasant"? Wouldn't he or she prefer to put up with absolutely anything else rather than associate with those opinions that hold in the cave and be that kind of human being?

GLAUCON: I think that he would prefer to endure everything rather than be that kind of human being.

PART THREE:
THE PRISONER RETURNS TO THE CAVE

The return: blindness

SOCRATES: And now, I responded, consider this: If this person who had gotten out of the cave were to go back down again and sit in the same place as before, would he not find in that case, coming suddenly out of the sunlight, that his eyes ere filled with darkness?"

GLAUCON: Yes, very much so.

The debate with the other prisoners

SOCRATES: Now if once again, along with those who had remained shackled there, the freed person had to engage in the business of asserting and maintaining opinions about the shadows -- while his eyes are still weak and before they have readjusted, an adjustment that would require quite a bit of time -- would he not then be exposed to ridicule down there? And would they not let him know that he had gone up but only in order to come back down into the cave with his eyes ruined -- and thus it certainly does not pay to go up.

And the final outcome:

SOCRATES: And if they can get hold of this person who takes it in hand to free them from their chains and to lead them up, and if they could kill him, will they not actually kill him?

GLAUCON: They certainly will.

End

Aristotle

384–322 B.C.E.

Unlike his teacher Plato, who was a native-born Athenian aristocrat, Aristotle was a *metic* — a foreigner with a green card, as it were — the son of a doctor from Thrace. Aristotle's origins may help explain why Plato's idealism had so little ultimate appeal for him. As a skilled biologist from Macedonia, an impoverished military state, Aristotle may have been loath to dismiss physical reality as an illusion. Certainly for Aristotle the universal *processes* of nature, the eternal laws of change, were not mere signs of the mutable, inferior character of the world of Becoming compared with the unalterable world of Ideas. They possessed immense significance.

Aristotle spent many years in Plato's Academy, learning its philosophy and its methods of argumentation, but his own school, the Lyceum, rejected Plato's idealism in favor of a materialism that investigated every aspect of the physical world. If Plato is the father of Western philosophy, Aristotle is the father of most of the sciences. Although Aristotle was often wildly wrong about details (Galileo's disproof of his speculations on gravity is the most famous instance), his systematizing of thought made science as we know it possible.

Aristotle's immense philosophical output may be divided into treatises on three types of science: the *theoretical* sciences, like logic or physics, which aimed at improving thought itself — one's general ideas on a particular subject; the *practical* sciences, like ethics and politics, whose goal lay in the realm of human action; and the *productive* sciences, like rhetoric and poetics, whose purpose was in making something. Here already, one can see a major difference from Plato, whose *Republic* combined speculation on metaphysics, ethics, politics, music, poetry, and much else. For Plato, thought was *holistic*: all was ultimately One and could be known through one dialectical method. For Aristotle, the world was not One but Many, and investigating it meant adapting one's methods and principles to the subject under consideration. This is the *problematic* method, and it is rare in the history of philosophy, where most thinkers have preferred universal dialectic to institutionalized improvisation. At the same time, Aristotle's mode of organization has clearly prevailed over Plato's in the structure of the modern university, where specialized departments of physics, psychology, literature, and music pursue their disparate disciplines by different methodologies.

Textual scholars believe the *Poetics* to be what is technically termed an *esoteric* treatise — it was circulated privately, within the Lyceum — rather than an *exoteric* one meant for general publication. It can be compared to teacher's lecture notes, brief and pointed, but meant to be filled out with further examples and arguments during presentation. Where the text seems dogmatic or disconnected or downright obscure, we should be tolerant — this was not the form in which Aristotle's students received it. There are other sources of obscurity, of course, the usual gaps that appear in transmitting and translating a verbal text more than two thousand years old. In Chapter 6, for example, Aristotle tells us that he will speak of comedy later, but never returns to the subject. It has been presumed for centuries that the treatise on

comedy was a second book of the *Poetics* that had been lost forever. Recently a manuscript has turned up containing what some scholars believe to be fragments of the lost *Poetics II*, but whether the fragments are genuinely Aristotelian or not is still undecided.

ORGANIZATION AND METHOD

As a treatise on productive science, the *Poetics* takes as its topic the making of a work of art, specifically a dramatic or epic tragedy. Although the *Poetics* was later misread as a how-to manual, Aristotle was only presenting the general *principles* of dramatic construction as they applied to the poetry and theater of his age; he was not dispensing tips for the practicing tragedian. Later critics attacked the drama of their day for not conforming to Aristotle's rules, often without understanding the reasons behind his general statements or the highly empirical basis of the *Poetics*. It would be as much a mistake to fault Aristotle for not being able to anticipate every development in the drama over the last two millennia.

Productive science relies on Aristotle's method of four-cause analysis, in which an artifact is defined by its shape (the formal cause), its composition (the material cause), its manner of construction (the efficient cause), and its end or purpose (the final cause).¹ Thus, in the poetics of hammers, that tool might be defined by its shape (a long handle to give leverage, a flat striking surface), its materials (hard metal for the head, light but strong wood or plastic for the handle), its manner of construction (the relation and attachments of the parts), and its purpose (pounding nails). In defining a dramatic or epic tragedy, the same method of definition is used. Here the material is language, rhythm, and harmony; the form is the imitation of a serious action; the manner is dramatic or narrative (as the case may be); and the end is the *katharsis* of pity and fear (about which more will be said later). The first four chapters of the *Poetics* discuss the causes of tragedy (among the other arts) and prepare the reader for the famous definition of tragedy in Chapter 6.

(Note that Aristotle never formally defines more general categories like *poetry* or *drama*. For him these are not legitimate genres. They are not definable because they do not have all their causes in common. Those things called poetry are similar in formal and material causes; those called drama in formal, material, and efficient causes; but because they do not have similar final causes, they remain congeries of many things rather than one definite species. Aristotle is a genre critic, in other words, not by choice but because of the demands of his systematic method.)

Having defined tragedy, Aristotle analyzes its qualitative parts (plot, character, thought, diction, song, and spectacle), and then examines each part successively, beginning with the most important — plot. Nearly half of the *Poetics* is devoted to the analysis of plot, and here again the same four-cause organization is used. Aristotle considers plot *form* (its general character, length, relation to history, the course of the action, and so on), plot *materials* (devices like recognition and reversal or the tragic deed), and plot *handling*. All these technical issues are

¹The method of analysis is itself discussed in the *Posterior Analytics*, one of Aristotle's major treatises on logic.

explained ultimately in terms of the *purpose* of plot, the *katharsis*. In Chapter 13, he argues deductively that *hamartia* — the tragic protagonist's character flaw — derives directly from the nature of the tragic emotions of pity and fear. Later he moves from plot to the formal and material aspects of character, thought, and so on. Throughout, his method is rigorous, though what remains of the *Poetics* is not complete and there are occasional interruptions or interpolations (like Chapter 12).

ARISTOTELIAN IMITATION

Although Aristotle, like Plato, considers poetry a form of mimetic art, he surprisingly does not think that art itself is necessarily or essentially imitative. (Thus without having experienced abstract art or even discussing it, he does not preclude its possibility.)² Another surprise is the title of the treatise, since the word *poētikēs* in Greek means "things that are made or crafted." The point is that for Aristotle, poetic art is not, as Plato thought, merely copying: It is a creative act.

One reason poetics cannot be simple copying is that art involves the translation of reality into another medium. Just as the portrait sculptor translates the human countenance into clay or stone, the poet translates action into language. Nor can the poet merely translate his materials raw. Even if he does not invent his plots but takes them, as many Greek tragedians did, from the historical or mythological record, he selectively reshapes the action to make it more universal, and thus more powerfully tragic. Divesting the historical action of the accidental and the incidental,³ he pares away unnecessary prologue until he has a probable sequence of actions leading inexorably to the protagonist's doom. If this is done well, the bare summary of a tragic plot should have something of the tragic effect. After he has constructed the plot, he must compose it verbally using extraordinary, "embellished" language and compose it visually for the stage. The whole process is a complex one — of making, not of mere imitation — that requires keeping the ultimate end in constant view.

For Plato, that artists were not always faithful to the truth counted against them; for Aristotle, artists must disregard incidental facts to search for deeper *universal* truths. For Plato, Pygmalion's statue, which came to life, would be the transcendent triumph of art; for Aristotle, a statue that was merely true to life would not be art at all.

KATHARSIS

One of the most controversial passages in the *Poetics* is contained in the passage on the final cause of tragedy: The play, "through incidents arousing pity and fear effects

²In the sentence where Aristotle tells us that poetry is a form of imitation, he uses not the usual verb *eimi* ("be") but rather *tugkhanō*, "happen to be."

³"Poetry . . . is more philosophical and more significant than history, for poetry is more concerned with the universal, and history more with the individual." This is a crucial passage in the *Poetics* (see p. 65). The issue for Aristotle seems to be that we can learn more from the universal principles that poets must abstract in creating their plots than from the messy, contingent realities the historian is forced to deal with. This is the paradox behind the saying "Truth is stranger than fiction." Precisely — the poets who create fictions must jettison the strange accidents that shape the events of this world.

their *katharsis*.”⁴ But what does *katharsis* mean and what is “katharted”? Three possible translations of *katharsis* are “clarification,” “purification,” and “purgation”; and what is clarified, purified, or purged must be either the “incidents” or the emotions of “pity and fear.”

According to the classical scholar Leon Golden, *katharsis* means “clarification,” and it is the tragic *incidents* that are clarified: The process of poetic imitation, by stripping all accident and contingency from the tragic fall of the noble protagonist, reveals as clearly as possible how such things can happen. Tragedy here has an educative function. The “purification” theory, which has a long history beginning with the Renaissance theorists Lodovico Castelvetro and Francesco Robortello, suggests that tragedy has the function of tempering (or hardening) the emotions by revealing to the audience the proper objects of pity and fear.

The oldest theory holds that *katharsis* means “purgation,” the violent driving-out of the emotions of pity and fear. This theory is supported by the only other instance in which Aristotle uses *katharsis* in the context of the arts, in a passage from the *Politics*:

Music should be studied . . . for the sake of . . . many benefits . . . [one of which is] purgation (the word purgation we use at present without any explanation, but when hereafter we speak of poetry we will treat the subject with more precision). For feelings such as pity and fear, or, again, enthusiasm, exist very strongly in some souls, and have more or less influence over all. Some persons fall into a religious frenzy, whom we see . . . when they have used the sacred melodies, restored as though they had found healing and purgation. Those who are influenced by pity or fear, and every emotional nature, must have a like experience, and others in so far as each is susceptible to such emotions, and all are in a manner purged and their souls lightened and delighted. (*Politics* 1341^b 35 to 1342^a 15)

Aristotle thought that the *Poetics* would clarify the *Politics* rather than the other way around, but the context of this passage is clear enough: Unpleasant feelings may be relieved through music or poetry. When the experience is over, the soul is “lightened and delighted.” After seeing a performance of *Oedipus the King* or *King Lear*, spectators are no longer gripped by pity and fear; rather they are exhausted, cleansed, emptied of emotion. The primary meaning of the word *katharsis*, preserved in the English cognate “cathartic,” is the action of a powerful laxative. A doctor’s son, Aristotle perhaps could not resist using a familiar medical metaphor for the experience.

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⁴Editor’s literal translation.

Aristotle | Poetics (excerpts)

Part IV: Speaking generally, Poetry seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature. First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated. We have evidence of this in the facts of experience. Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. The cause of this again is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general; whose capacity, however, of learning is more limited. Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.' For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the coloring, or some such other cause.

Imitation, then, is one instinct of our nature. Next, there is the instinct for 'harmony' and rhythm, meters being manifestly sections of rhythm. Persons, therefore, starting with this natural gift developed by degrees their special aptitudes, till their rude improvisations gave birth to Poetry.

Part VI: [...] Let us now discuss Tragedy, resuming its formal definition, as resulting from what has been already said. Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. [...]

For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. Again, without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character. The tragedies of most of our modern poets fail in the rendering of character; and of poets in general this is often true. It is the same in painting; and here lies the difference between Zeuxis and Polygnotus. Polygnotus delineates character well; the style of Zeuxis is devoid of ethical quality. Again, if you string together a set of speeches expressive of character, and well finished in point of diction and thought, you will not produce the essential tragic effect nearly so well as with a play which, however deficient in these respects, yet has a plot and artistically constructed incidents. Besides which, the most powerful elements of emotional interest in Tragedy- Peripeteia or Reversal of the Situation, and Recognition scenes- are parts of the plot. A further proof is, that novices in the art attain to finish of diction and precision of portraiture before they

can construct the plot. It is the same with almost all the early poets. The plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy; Character holds the second place. A similar fact is seen in painting. The most beautiful colors, laid on confusedly, will not give as much pleasure as the chalk outline of a portrait. Thus Tragedy is the imitation of an action, and of the agents mainly with a view to the action.

Part VII: These principles being established, let us now discuss the proper structure of the Plot, since this is the first and most important thing in Tragedy.

Now, according to our definition Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude; for there may be a whole that is wanting in magnitude. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles.

Again, a beautiful object, whether it be a living organism or any whole composed of parts, must not only have an orderly arrangement of parts, but must also be of a certain magnitude; for beauty depends on magnitude and order. Hence a very small animal organism cannot be beautiful; for the view of it is confused, the object being seen in an almost imperceptible moment of time. Nor, again, can one of vast size be beautiful; for as the eye cannot take it all in at once, the unity and sense of the whole is lost for the spectator; as for instance if there were one a thousand miles long. As, therefore, in the case of animate bodies and organisms a certain magnitude is necessary, and a magnitude which may be easily embraced in one view; so in the plot, a certain length is necessary, and a length which can be easily embraced by the memory. The limit of length in relation to dramatic competition and sensuous presentment is no part of artistic theory. For had it been the rule for a hundred tragedies to compete together, the performance would have been regulated by the water-clock- as indeed we are told was formerly done. But the limit as fixed by the nature of the drama itself is this: the greater the length, the more beautiful will the piece be by reason of its size, provided that the whole be perspicuous. And to define the matter roughly, we may say that the proper magnitude is comprised within such limits, that the sequence of events, according to the law of probability or necessity, will admit of a change from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad.

Part VIII: Unity of plot does not, as some persons think, consist in the unity of the hero. For infinitely various are the incidents in one man's life which cannot be reduced to unity; and so, too, there are many actions of one man out of which we cannot make one action. Hence the error, as it appears, of all poets who have composed a Heracleid, a Theseid, or other poems of the kind. They imagine that as Heracles was one man, the story of Heracles must also be a unity. But Homer, as in all else he is of surpassing merit, here too- whether from art or natural genius-

seems to have happily discerned the truth. In composing the *Odyssey* he did not include all the adventures of Odysseus -- such as his wound on Parnassus, or his feigned madness at the mustering of the host -- incidents between which there was no necessary or probable connection: but he made the *Odyssey*, and likewise the *Iliad*, to center round an action that in our sense of the word is one. As therefore, in the other imitative arts, the imitation is one when the object imitated is one, so the plot, being an imitation of an action, must imitate one action and that a whole, the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed and disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the whole.

It is, moreover, evident from what has been said, that it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen -- what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with meter no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how a person of a certain type on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she attaches to the personages. [...]

Of all plots and actions the episodic are the worst. I call a plot 'episodic' in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence. Bad poets compose such pieces by their own fault, good poets, to please the players; for, as they write show pieces for competition, they stretch the plot beyond its capacity, and are often forced to break the natural continuity.

But again, Tragedy is an imitation not only of a complete action, but of events inspiring fear or pity. Such an effect is best produced when the events come on us by surprise; and the effect is heightened when, at the same time, they follow as cause and effect. The tragic wonder will then be greater than if they happened of themselves or by accident; for even coincidences are most striking when they have an air of design. We may instance the statue of Mityls at Argos, which fell upon his murderer while he was a spectator at a festival, and killed him. Such events seem not to be due to mere chance. Plots, therefore, constructed on these principles are necessarily the best.

Part X: Plots are either Simple or Complex, for the actions in real life, of which the plots are an imitation, obviously show a similar distinction. An action which is one and continuous in the sense above defined, I call Simple, when the change of fortune takes place without Reversal of the Situation and without Recognition

A Complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by such Reversal, or by Recognition, or by both. These last should arise from the internal structure of the plot, so that what follows should be the necessary or probable result of the preceding action. It makes all the difference whether any given event is a case of *propter hoc* or *post hoc*.

Part XI: Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity. Thus in the Oedipus, the messenger comes to cheer Oedipus and free him from his alarms about his mother, but by revealing who he is, he produces the opposite effect. Again in the Lynceus, Lynceus is being led away to his death, and Danaus goes with him, meaning to slay him; but the outcome of the preceding incidents is that Danaus is killed and Lynceus saved.

Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune. The best form of recognition is coincident with a Reversal of the Situation, as in the Oedipus. There are indeed other forms. Even inanimate things of the most trivial kind may in a sense be objects of recognition. Again, we may recognize or discover whether a person has done a thing or not. But the recognition which is most intimately connected with the plot and action is, as we have said, the recognition of persons. This recognition, combined with Reversal, will produce either pity or fear; and actions producing these effects are those which, by our definition, Tragedy represents. Moreover, it is upon such situations that the issues of good or bad fortune will depend. Recognition, then, being between persons, it may happen that one person only is recognized by the other- when the latter is already known- or it may be necessary that the recognition should be on both sides. Thus Iphigenia is revealed to Orestes by the sending of the letter; but another act of recognition is required to make Orestes known to Iphigenia.

Two parts, then, of the Plot- Reversal of the Situation and Recognition- turn upon surprises. A third part is the Scene of Suffering. The Scene of Suffering is a destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds, and the like.

Part XIV: Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes Place. This is the impression we should receive from hearing the story of the Oedipus. But to produce this effect by the mere spectacle is a less artistic method, and dependent on extraneous aids. Those who employ spectacular means to create a sense not of the terrible but only of the monstrous, are strangers to the purpose of Tragedy; for we must not demand of Tragedy any and every kind of pleasure, but only that which is proper to it. And since the pleasure which the poet should afford is that which comes from pity and fear through imitation, it is evident that this quality must be impressed upon the incidents. [...]

Part XXV: The poet being an imitator, like a painter or any other artist, must of necessity imitate one of three objects- things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be. The vehicle of expression is language- either current terms or, it may be, rare words or metaphors. There are also many modifications of language, which we concede to the poets. Add to this,

that the standard of correctness is not the same in poetry and politics, any more than in poetry and any other art. Within the art of poetry itself there are two kinds of faults- those which touch its essence, and those which are accidental. If a poet has chosen to imitate something, [but has imitated it incorrectly] through want of capacity, the error is inherent in the poetry. But if the failure is due to a wrong choice- if he has represented a horse as throwing out both his off legs at once, or introduced technical inaccuracies in medicine, for example, or in any other art- the error is not essential to the poetry. These are the points of view from which we should consider and answer the objections raised by the critics.

First as to matters which concern the poet's own art. If he describes the impossible, he is guilty of an error; but the error may be justified, if the end of the art be thereby attained (the end being that already mentioned)- if, that is, the effect of this or any other part of the poem is thus rendered more striking. A case in point is the pursuit of Hector. if, however, the end might have been as well, or better, attained without violating the special rules of the poetic art, the error is not justified: for every kind of error should, if possible, be avoided.

Again, does the error touch the essentials of the poetic art, or some accident of it? For example, not to know that a hind has no horns is a less serious matter than to paint it inartistically.

Further, if it be objected that the description is not true to fact, the poet may perhaps reply, 'But the objects are as they ought to be'; just as Sophocles said that he drew men as they ought to be; Euripides, as they are. In this way the objection may be met. If, however, the representation be of neither kind, the poet may answer, 'This is how men say the thing is.' applies to tales about the gods. It may well be that these stories are not higher than fact nor yet true to fact: they are, very possibly, what Xenophanes says of them. But anyhow, 'this is what is said.' Again, a description may be no better than the fact: 'Still, it was the fact'; as in the passage about the arms: 'Upright upon their butt-ends stood the spears.' This was the custom then, as it now is among the Illyrians.

Again, in examining whether what has been said or done by some one is poetically right or not, we must not look merely to the particular act or saying, and ask whether it is poetically good or bad. We must also consider by whom it is said or done, to whom, when, by what means, or for what end; whether, for instance, it be to secure a greater good, or avert a greater evil. [...]

In general, the impossible must be justified by reference to artistic requirements, or to the higher reality, or to received opinion. With respect to the requirements of art, a probable impossibility is to be preferred to a thing improbable and yet possible. Again, it may be impossible that there should be men such as Zeuxis painted. 'Yes,' we say, 'but the impossible is the higher thing; for the ideal type must surpass the reality.' To justify the irrational, we appeal to what is commonly said to be. In addition to which, we urge that the irrational sometimes does not violate reason; just as 'it is probable that a thing may happen contrary to probability.' [...]