



## Plutarch, Aristotle, and the Nature of Poetry (I)

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## Plutarch, Aristotle, and the Nature of Poetry

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“ There is nothing new under the sun ” is an adage that has been frequently invoked to argue that the wisdom of the ancients, at least germinally, contained substantially everything that has been said through the ages. Whether this is accurate as applied to all areas of philosophical speculation or not, I shall not risk a defense, but in the field of poetics the signs of its truth are ubiquitous. Most significant essays on poetry have called upon Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and others, if not for their justification, at least for their orientation, for, as Ben Jonson said speaking of Aristotle, “ He asked all the right questions.”

Moreover, their positions and their statements possessed a certain pristine purity that was not so much evolved as beclouded by latter day efforts, and in this regard an analysis of their thinking recommends itself.

Plutarch, whose dates were from 46 or 47 A. D. to 120 A. D., qualifies as an ancient and, indeed, an ancient of renown. I find him a particularly suitable subject for a comparative study with Aristotle and as a point of departure for a more precise examination of certain aspects of poetry, because he was a philosopher not ignorant of his predecessors, and in his tract on poetry he introduces nearly every essential element of poetic consideration. In so doing, he supplies one with a sufficiency of matter to be compared and contrasted in fashioning a *manuductio*.

By way of a few prefatory words on Plutarchian poetics, their author was a biographer and moralist of enormous repute ; and, in as much as he was a moralist, certain qualities of thought are evinced in his treatise on poetry that are themselves extra poetical, yet highly influential in his analysis, and I have chosen to review them in this preliminary chapter. I would be grossly unfair in this specialized study to state as definitive the nature of Plutarch's moral philosophy. Yet even in his tract on poetry he manifests inclinations that might very well account for the fact that although he saw most of the essential elements of poetry as Aristotle knew them, he chose, in the name of moral philosophy, to emphasize certain ones in such a degree that the net effect was to thoroughly miscast Aristotelian perspectives.

Both Aristotle and Plutarch would concur with the phrasing of St. Thomas' statement, “ Nam poetae est inducere ad aliquod virtuosum per aliquam decentem repraesentationem,”<sup>1</sup> but as to the partic-

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1. In *I Post. Anal.*, lect.1.

ular sense of it there would likely be some difference. Aristotle, as we shall see, holds out for a cathartic function in poetry, and it seems therethrough that something in the order of virtue is accomplished. Since poetry will not essentially transcend the appetitive order he has less to fear from poetic alchemy than does Plutarch, who will, as much as possible, keep poetry in the intellectual order.

Plutarch shows a huge optimism in the guarantee that comprehension allows to moral virtue. Certain passages, such as the following, suggest a near Platonic identity of intellectual and moral virtue :

For by declaring that bravery is a thing to be learned, and by expressing the belief that friendly and gracious intercourse with others proceeds from understanding, and is in keeping with reason, the poet urges us not to neglect our own selves, but to learn what is good, and to give heed to our teachers, intimating that both boorishness and cowardice are but ignorance and defects of learning. With this agrees very well what he (Homer) says regarding Zeus and Poseidon :

*Both, indeed, were of one descent and the same birth-place.*

*Yet was Zeus the earlier born and his knowledge was wider.*

For he declares understanding to be a most divine and kingly thing, to which he ascribes the very great superiority of Zeus, inasmuch as he believes that all the other virtues follow upon this one.<sup>1</sup>

Aristotle, it seems, does not stake everything on understanding. In the *Politics* he allows for the acquisition of valour through its experience and exercise in gymnastics.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, he allows for a certain moral good to be derived from the emotional exercise in the poetic experience. If he is not at odds basically with Plutarch, there is, evidently, a difference in emphasis, and the difference is significant enough to turn Plutarch's evaluation of poetry towards the singular role of illustrating moral wisdom. The moral effect that poetry shall have is indicated in this passage wherein he is discussing what is to be gained through the collation of varying poetic statements :

Such comparison and consideration of opposing sentiments will result in one of two ways : it will either guide the youth over toward the better side or else cause his belief to revolt from the worse.<sup>3</sup>

Although this may amount to no more than a point of emphasis from the position of moral philosophy, it has telling effects when applied to poetry, and I propose to reveal certain of these effects through the course of this treatment.

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1. PLUTARCH, *How the Young Man Should Study Poetry*, vol.I, p.167 (Plutarch's *Moralia*, Loeb Edition).

2. *Politics*, Bk VIII, Ch.3 (McKeon Edition).

3. *Op. cit.*, p.111.

## I. PLUTARCH AND POETRY

Plutarch's treatment of poetry comes to us in the form of a letter to a friend counselling him on his youthful son's education and, especially, on the role that poetry ought to play therein. That which follows from this motive is an inquisition into the nature of the poetic arts and the prescriptions that one should follow in using this instrument in the intellectual and moral formation of the youth. Not being a formal treatise, Plutarch can be forgiven for not introducing more order to it. The work wanders considerably and repeats itself frequently, employing again and again different examples to make the same point. One suspects that the moralist in him is still at work and that even here he is seizing the opportunity to ply his first interest. I will attempt, therefore, to select the most significant passages and fashion them into an order that will fairly and adequately reveal his opinions.

Plutarch wastes no time at all in telling us why poetry is among those things that ought to be considered when the question of education arises. His epistle begins in these words :

If, my dear Marcus Sedalus, it is true, as the poet Philoxenus used to say, that of meats those that are not meat, and of fish those that are not fish, have the best flavor, let us leave the expounding of this matter to those persons of whom Cato said that their palates are more sensitive than their minds. And so of philosophical discourses it is clear to us that those seemingly not at all philosophical, or even serious, are found more enjoyable by the very young, who present themselves at such lectures as willing and submissive hearers. For in perusing not only Aesop's *Fables*, and *Tales from the Poets*, but even the *Abaris* of Heracleides, the *Hycon* of Ariston, and philosophic doctrines about the soul when these are combined with tales from mythology, they get inspiration as well as pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

Why poetry? Because in it we find both "inspiration as well as pleasure," and philosophy that is not philosophy — "meat that is not meat." The youth is, therefore, to find in poetry philosophical wisdom revealed through a mode unphilosophic in character, a mode that has none of the aridity and abstractness of reasoning to or from principles, but rather one that serves as a ready vehicle, well proportioned to the youth's development, that may, through the presentation of full bodied illustrations to his imagination, convey philosophic, or more precisely for Plutarch, ethical verities.

Therefore, in the youth's incipient stage of philosophical formation he shall make his first contact with wisdom in a manner that is "seemingly not at all philosophical, or even serious," but which is

1. *Op. cit.*, ch.1, p.75.

decidely enjoyable or pleasant. This appeal simultaneously to his intellect and his appetites, is at least paradoxical, if not contradictory for Plutarch and, consequently, the chief theme running through the remainder of the letter is a struggle to resolve this difficulty. 'Inspiration' (moral wisdom) and 'pleasure' seem to be pursuing different ends, and to be of different content, and to incline naturally and properly to separate and distinct modes. The problem is, can they be brought to coincide?

Perceiving in this "meat that is not meat" the possibility of fantasy and falsehood he continues in these words :

... it is very pleasant to eat but it makes one's sleep full of bad dreams and subject to disturbing fancies as they say . . . in poetry there is much that is pleasant and nourishing for the mind of the youth, but quite as much that is disturbing and misleading, unless in the hearing of it he have proper oversight.<sup>1</sup>

It seems that in moral philosophy examples are frequently employed. Must they in every case be "disturbing," or are there species, some sound and others harmful in their natures? Plutarch draws this distinction :

Philosophers, at any rate, for admonition and instruction, use examples taken from known facts ; but the poets accomplish the same result by inventing actions of their own imaginations, and by recounting mythical tales.<sup>2</sup>

But more than "accomplishing the same results" another element creeps in tarnishing the purity of poetic examples, and rendering them through this impurification potentially noxious as instruments of education. This corruption of the pure example follows because first the poet lacks the purity of intention and in his foremost desire to achieve a pleasing and moving effect he compromises ineluctably the truth of the example. On this count Plutarch comments :

Many the lies the poets tell, some intentionally and some unintentionally ; intentionally because for the purpose of giving pleasure and gratification to the ear (and this is what most people look for in poetry) they feel that the truth is too stern in comparison with fiction. For the truth, because it is what actually happens does not deviate from its course, even though the end be unpleasant ; whereas fiction, being a verbal fabrication, very readily follows a roundabout route, and turns aside from the painful to what is more pleasant.<sup>3</sup>

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1. *Ibid.*, ch.1, p.77.

2. *Ibid.*, ch.4, p.103.

3. *Ibid.*, ch.2, p.83.

Then he adds with a comprehension almost coincident with Aristotle's *Poetics* that neither metre, nor figure of speech, nor loftiness of diction, nor aptness of metaphor nor unity of composition has so much allurements and charm as a "clever interweaving of fabulous narrative."<sup>1</sup> This I say sounds solidly Aristotelian because this "clever interweaving of fabulous narrative" appears to be in Plutarch's estimation the vital cause of the distinctly poetic pleasure, and there is no doubt that a very similar element, which Aristotle calls the *Plot* or *fable*, and the "life and soul" of the poem, is the substantial aspect of poetic art in which all other elements, such as Diction, Thought, Character, etc., inhere as accidents.

But we have here a basic note of opposition between the two philosophers concerning their positions on art. We are here witnessing the origin of the split whose chasm ultimately will be so vast. Aristotle is very well content to unstintingly praise the virtues of a well-wrought plot, for in this form rests the act and perfection of the poetic whole; but, by contrast, Plutarch has nothing but misgiving about this true poetic quality for, in effect, it must finally threaten to abort the didactic use of poetry, in that it is both "fabulous" and "clever."

Nonetheless, Plutarch is not discouraged, despite this inescapable orientation of poetry, for he yet, in his appraisal of poetry, discovers a means of coping with the deceptive therein, and of counteracting its natural allurements by this means, and thereby turning it to advantage. He urges that the youth should not "seal his ears with wax," eschewing it altogether, but because of its usefulness we should:

... set against the (poetic arguments) some upright standard of reason and there bind them to fact, guiding and guarding their judgment, that it may not be carried away from the course by pleasure towards that which will do them hurt.<sup>2</sup>

We will not, he says:

uproot or destroy the Muse's wine of poetry, but where the mythical and dramatic part grows all riotous and luxuriant, through pleasure unalloyed, which gives it boldness and obstinacy in seeking acclaim, let us take it in hand and prune it and pinch it back. But where with its grace it approaches a true kind of culture, and the sweet allurements of its language is not fruitless or vacuous there let us introduce philosophy and blend it with poetry.

Then certainly, he continues:

... poetry, by taking up its themes from philosophy and blending them with fable, renders the task of learning light and agreeable for the young.

1. *Ibid.*, ch.2, p.83.

2. *Ibid.*, ch.1, p.77.

Wherefore poetry should not be avoided by those who are intending to pursue philosophy, but they should use poetry as an *introductory exercise* in philosophy by training themselves habitually to seek the profitable in what gives pleasure and to find satisfaction therein ; and if there is nothing profitable, to combat such poetry and be dissatisfied with it.<sup>1</sup>

This method of safeguarding and turning to advantage will be developed in greater detail as the letter progresses, but in the meantime let us press further Plutarch's analysis of the dangers that inevitably swarm about poetry. ("It is true," he says, "that we know of sacrifices without dancing or flute, but we do not know of any poetic composition without fable or without falsehood.")<sup>2</sup>

We have already seen to some extent how the intrinsic demands of producing allurements and pleasure seem to compel the poet to frequently take leave of the truth. Hence Plutarch will score the poem itself in such words as :

Whenever therefore, in the poems of a man of note and repute some strange and disconcerting statement either about the gods or lesser deities or about virtue is made by the author, he who accepts the statement as true is carried off of his feet, and has his opinions perverted ; whereas he who always remembers and keeps clearly in mind the *socery* of the poetic art in dealing with falsehood, who is able on every such occasion to say to it, ' *Device more subtly cunning than the lynx,*' why knit your brows when jesting, why pretend to instruct when practicing deception ? will not suffer any dire effects or even acquire any base beliefs, but will check himself when he feels afraid of Poseidon and is in terror lest the god rend the earth asunder and lay bare the nether world.<sup>3</sup>

Under the heavy demands of poetic pleasure the poet perhaps knowingly takes license with the truth, but Plutarch with doubts akin to Socrates' in the *Ion* goes on to add, "Such things as this the poets fabricate intentionally, but more numerous are the things they do not fabricate, but think and believe in their own hearts, and then impart to us in their false colouring."<sup>4</sup> The fault is, in his evaluation, not entirely due to the exigencies of poetry itself, but moreover the same effects accrue as well from the dementia of the poet, for, "These are the voices of persons affected by emotion and prepossessed by opinions and delusions."<sup>5</sup>

This point concerning the poet's evident natural predisposition towards the highly imaginative is not greatly developed by Plutarch, but in this comparative study one may note that Aristotle himself

1. *Ibid.*, ch.1, p.81.

2. *Ibid.*, ch.2, p.83.

3. *Ibid.*, ch.2, p.85.

4. *Ibid.*, ch.2, p.87.

5. *Ibid.*, ch.2, p.89.

is in concurrence concerning the demands that poetry inherently makes upon the emotions, and even suggests that a certain dementia may be of assistance.<sup>1</sup>

Given, therefore, the likely direction of poetry itself and the characteristic "prepossession" of the poet, it is not startling to find Plutarch as chary about the merits of poetic creations as was Socrates when he (Socrates) refused to take up poetry, though induced to do so in a dream, and instead chose to satisfy the request by copying the fables of Aesop because he himself, having been a champion of truth all of his life, was not "a plausible nor a naturally clever workman in falsehood."<sup>2</sup>

Returning once more to the nature of poetry itself (or the poem itself as distinguished from the poet), Plutarch amplifies his description in these terms :

We shall steady the young man still more if, at his first entrance into poetry, we give a general description of the poetic art as an imitative art and faculty analogous to painting. And let him not merely be acquainted with the oft-repeated saying that "poetry is articulate painting, and painting is inarticulate poetry," but let us teach him in addition that when we see a lizard or an ape or the face of Thersites in a picture, we are pleased with it and admire it not as a thing of beauty, but as a likeness. For by its essential nature the ugly cannot be beautiful ; but the imitation be it concerned with what is base or what is good, if only it attains to the likeness, is commended. If, on the other hand, it produces a beautiful picture of an ugly body, it fails to give what propriety and probability require.<sup>3</sup>

This passage is reminiscent of the *Poetics*. We find in the opening chapter Aristotle remarking that through imitation objects that in reality are repulsive to view are rendered pleasing to the sight. Imitation in this sense of portraying objects is, says the Philosopher, the cause of poetry. (We shall treat this at greater length subsequently). This immediate notion of imitation is the primary sense in which art is first known to imitate nature. This, moreover, is a proper sense of imitation in poetry, insofar as poetry is often called imitative art, for no other species of art, e. g., the mechanical arts, imitates nature in this manner. Nonetheless, imitation in this sense appears only to be imitation of a material sort for Aristotle, and as he develops his analysis in the *Poetics* he moves towards a formal kind of imitation that is more intrinsic and universal and fundamental. We shall see in due time how this formal sense plays the dominant role in the poem and how ultimately all of the elements in the poem, including material imitation, shall resolve to it. For the present it is suffice to merely

1. *Poetics*, ch.17, 1455 a 30.

2. *Op. cit.*, ch.2, p.83.

3. *Ibid.*, ch.3, p.91.



make the distinction so that we may be aware of the fact that where Aristotle resolves to the form Plutarch resolves to the matter. This definitely will be the chief difference in the two treatments of poetry.

The second point of interest, which Plutarch begins to prove in this last passage, is the question of the requirements of "propriety and probability" of the reproduction. He points out that to be unfaithful to the ugly and the beautiful, the evil and the good as found in nature in the production of poetry is to offend propriety and probability. As great as will be the differences between the views of Plutarch and Aristotle on poetry, on this point again, there appears to be consonance. It shall become manifest however that their motives for fidelity to reality as probability and propriety would have it are quite opposed. In fact it tends to become evident *ab initio* that the word "probable" as used by each takes on a different meaning. Where Aristotle speaks of the "likely impossible" he is evidently leading the notion of probable to the extrinsic opinions of men, and not to the intrinsic properties of the matter, as seems to be Plutarch's meaning in this continuation :

In these matters it is especially necessary that the youth should be trained by being taught that what we commend is not the action which is the subject of the imitation, but the art, in case the subject in hand has been properly imitated. Since, then, poetry often gives an imitative recital of base deeds, or of wicked experiences and characters, the young man must not accept as true what is admired and successful therein, nor approve it as beautiful, but should simply commend it as fitting and proper to the character in hand.<sup>1</sup>

It seems that what is "fitting and proper to the character in hand" is not the same as what men would generally opine such and such a man to probably or necessarily do, but is, rather, what a truly good or bad man would do *in se*, regardless of common opinions on the matter. When Plutarch insists on leading the imitation back to the objects of imitation themselves he must, as he avows, strain the credibility of the reader, since men come to the truth only after overcoming most of their opinions ; and in so doing he would have the poet forego the ruses through which the poet "seduces" and induces something like Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief." To tamper with probability, to, in any way, threaten credibility, would be, it seems for Aristotle, a cardinal sin of poetry.

Although there is a common awareness and agreement between the two, Aristotle and Plutarch, concerning the *fact* of probability, or as Plutarch calls it, *plausibility*, it is fair to say that they differ as to the importance of this *fact*. Aristotle on the one hand treats it as the argumentative means of moving from fact to fiction, and Plutarch on

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1. *Ibid.*, ch.3, p.93.

the other, regards it as the justification of poetry and the means of leading fiction back to fact. Notice in this section how Plutarch attributes the preservation of objective truth in poetry to poetry's *vraisemblance* :

... that while poetry, inasmuch as it has an imitative basis, employs embellishments and glitter in dealing with the actions and characters that form its groundwork, yet it does not foresake *the semblance of truth*, since imitation depends upon plausibility for its allurements. This is the reason why poetry that does not show an utter disregard of the truth brings out, along with the actions, indications of both vice and virtue commingled.<sup>1</sup>

There is, I believe, a certain opposition running through the Plutarchian analysis of poetry. As evinced in afore quoted excerpts, as well as in the one just cited, he assigns the "embellishment and glitter" and "fable and falsehood" of poetry as the cause of its allurements. It seems to be by dint of the contributions from the poet's imagination that the poetic imitation is elevated above the quotidian banalities that surround the objects of imitation as they exist in reality. But here we discover Plutarch also attributing allurements to "the semblance of truth," or the verisimilitude with which poetry must invest itself.

I have accused Plutarch of being contradictory, or at least ambiguous, on the subject of poetic pleasure, but the same indictment might be charged against Aristotle. He says near the beginning of the *Poetics* that poetry has its origin in two causes; namely, that man first learns by imitation, and that he naturally delights in imitation. He explains this phenomenon in these words, "To be *learning* something is the *greatest of pleasures* not only to the philosopher but also to the rest of mankind, however small their capacity for it; the reason of the *delight* in seeing the picture is that one is at the same time *learning* — gathering the meaning of things, e.g., that the man there is so-and-so";<sup>2</sup> Aristotle is saying here that the cause of poetry is a kind of pleasure associated with learning, a pleasure that is intellectual in nature. Later on in the *Poetics*, however, as he develops his analysis he speaks of another sort of pleasure related to poetry as when he says, "not every kind of pleasure should be required of a tragedy, but only its own proper pleasure."<sup>3</sup> He is referring to the cathartic pleasure of fear and pity produced by the particular structure of the tragic composition. In this instance, pleasure is not taken under the ratio of the intellectual, that is, not merely resolved to the experience of learning something, but is, it seems, resolved to the cathartic

1. *Ibid.*, ch.7, p.133.

2. *Poetics*, ch.4, 1448 b 14-18.

3. *Ibid.*, ch.14, 1453 b 10-11.

experience of the passions ; hence this latter pleasure is moral or, one might say, under the ratio of the appetitive.

There is no real opposition however. The intellective pleasure found in poetry, though a cause or source of poetry, is not a proper pleasure unique to poetry, but is one commonly shared with all the other species of learning. It is applied to poetry because in poetry there is, on the basis of imitative representation, a certain satisfaction of the natural human disposition for knowledge. The passage quoted above from the *Poetics* relevant to this idea has a complementary companion passage in the *Rhetoric* worth citing :

Again, since learning and wondering are pleasant, it follows that such things as acts of imitation must be pleasant — for instance, painting, sculpture, poetry — and every product of skillful imitation ; this latter, even if the object imitated is not itself pleasant ; for it is not the object itself which here gives delight ; the spectator draws inferences ( ‘ That is a so-and-so ’ ) and thus learns something fresh. Dramatic turns of fortune and hairbreath escapes from peril are pleasant, because we feel all such things are wonderful.<sup>1</sup>

Pleasure in this sense as discovered in poetry resolves to learning through imitation, and ultimately is related to the object of imitation, but insofar as this pleasure is attained in poetry, it pertains to the object as imitated and not simply as object. Plutarch would arrest poetic pleasure at this point, and as poetry leads to science he would lead the youth from the intellective pleasure of knowledge through poetic imitation to the intellective pleasure of the scientific possession of the true natures of the objects themselves. I believe that the sense of pleasure that Plutarch affixes to “ fable and falsehood,” “ variety and diversity,” and the like, can be understood as belonging to intellectual pleasure in aforesaid sense, that is, to the extent that these elements in poetry produce wonder through heightening our desire to learn the causes of such wondrous effects.<sup>2</sup> In this case Plutarch’s “ clever interweaving of fabulous narrative ” consists of essentially no more than the “ dramatic turns of fortune and hairbreath escapes from perils,” which are pleasant, because “ we feel all such things are wonderful.”

The introduction of cathartic pleasure brings a new dimension to poetry. It is no longer one of several ways of learning but now takes on a proper aspect and proper pleasure that shall distinguish it from all other arts and sciences. This cathartic or appetitive pleasure is

1. *Rhetoric*, Bk. I, ch.11, 1371 b 4-12.

2. “ Est autem admiratio desiderium quoddam sciendi, quod in homine contingit ex hoc quod videt effectum et ignorat causam : vel ex hoc quod causa talis effectus excedit cognitionem aut facultatem ipsius. Et ideo admiratio est causa delectationis in quantum habet adjunctum spem consequendi cognitionem ejus quod scire desiderat.” S. THOMAS, *Ia IIae*, q.32, a.8, c.

not at odds with the pleasure of learning. Rather, the pleasure of learning through imitation shall remain a characteristic of poetry as an *infima doctrina* awakening and quickening the readers's intellect to learning, yet essentially, since poetry has its own proper pleasure and purpose the learning in itself is of value insofar as it serves the proper pleasure and purpose of poetry. That which is imitated and that which is learned in imitation is transformed and recast through the intellectual ordering of a suitable *plot* or form by the poet so as to elicit a certain emotional or cathartic response in the spectator or reader. In as much as the response is unique to poetic art and is therefore its proper pleasure and purpose, so will the concomitant intellectual pleasure of learning through imitation be subservient to the proper pleasure and purpose of poetry. The resolution of this pleasure will not therefore be found properly in the material elements of imitation, but shall come to rest or to resolve instead in the formal element, which Aristotle calls the *Plot* or fable.

I believe it can be maintained that Aristotle settles the paradoxical opposition of the two pleasures in his *Poetics*. The pleasure of learning it seems is a cause as it is the source of poetry, and as it is the means to cathartic pleasure. Cathartic pleasure, on the other hand, is the final cause of a poem. Plutarch, though hinting at some sort of appetitive or emotion stirring delight, does not settle the question. The reason is clear. He does not wish to make it a question, or rather according to his purposes (and, I venture to say, because of a certain ignorance) the question cannot arise; because, if poetry is a direct introduction to philosophy it must remain essentially within the intellectual order. Though allowing for a certain intellectual delight taken through the apprehension of a "clever interweaving of fabulous narrative" poetry does not represent a term in the intellectual order but rather a primal and imperfect stage of intellectual perfection, which perfection does not experience the fruition of its pleasure until realized in the possession of scientific understanding. This is the essential accounting and orientation that Plutarch attaches to poetry.

It appears already, and will appear more strongly as this exposition progresses, that Plutarch insists upon pursuing the learning in poetry beyond the limits of the imitations themselves to the very objects of imitation themselves — that is, to arrive at a knowledge of these objects in themselves. The objects of imitation in poetry are such objects as human action, emotion, etc., and being such, a knowledge of them properly falls within such disciplines as history, psychology and moral philosophy. Plutarch then will pursue the imitations of poetry until they, by exhaustion, come to rest (or a resolution) in one of these several disciplines. Therefore, he will not be satisfied with representations that have merely the semblance of truth and appeal to opinion. But Aristotle with a cathartic end in view is well content to let poetry turn the intellectual pleasure of learning to the

service of appetitive pleasure by accommodating learning to a probable poetic argument based upon a semblance of truth.

Aristotle is not so directly utilitarian about poetry. Poetry will be for him, as for St. Thomas and St. Albert, surely an *infima doctrina*, but not as directly inducing the intellectual virtues. More properly, it will pertain to the moral virtues, that is, to the appetitive dispositions that must be rectified as a preliminary to the perfection of the intellectual virtues. We will take this matter up in a succeeding chapter, but for now it is mentioned to manifest the essential elements that go into the solution of the aforesaid paradox of the two pleasures.

As I said, Plutarch is aware of the emotional element in poetry, yet according to his understanding it is an element to be resisted. He has placed poetry as an *infima doctrina* strictly in the intellectual order and to this extent the emotional can only impinge upon and sully the purity of the ordering. He has made this allocation I believe for two reasons. First, as was mentioned in the introductory chapter he shows a marked tendency to wed the intellectual and moral virtues in a Platonic fashion so that in knowing the good one necessarily chooses it. Hence it is vain to rectify the appetites in a manner independent of intellectual rectification. The second reason, related to the first yet distinct, pertains to the nature of poetry itself. Plutarch manifests only an inchoate grasp of poetry's nature and hence its potential. As seems to be the case, he fails to perceive the true nature and role of the *Plot*, that is, that combination or series of incidents that unifies the poem. With this principle (*Plot*), Aristotle sees positively how the emotional that stems from the use of imitative representations can be brought essentially into the service of poetry and through the intelligible ordering of the *Plot* can thereby serve wisdom through cathartic pleasure. Given the need to rectify the passions, poetry can exercise these passions not randomly but by the instrumentality of the *Plot* or form which orders the exercise neither to excess nor defect but rather to a proportionality inductive of moral virtue. It is only when the emotional in poetry is seen in this light that it becomes valuable ; yet more than valuable, for in the end, taken in this measure it shall be the very *raison d'être* of poetry itself. Plutarch may say :

But when poetic art is divorced from the truth, then chiefly it employs *variety and diversity*. For it is the sudden changes that give to its stories the elements of the emotional, the surprising, and the unexpected, and those are attended by very great astonishment and enjoyment ; but sameness is unemotional and prosaic.<sup>1</sup>

And for Plutarch, this may be no more than a regrettable concomitant feature of poetry, purely illusory insofar as it wanders from the truth.

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1. *Op. cit.*, ch.7, p.133.

This represents the natural orientation of poetry, and it is against this orientation that he labors in order to bring it in line with philosophy and in so doing to draw from it some value *secundum quid*. Aristotle on the other hand would see in this observation the material predisposition of poetry. The tendential bearing of poetry towards the bizarre and extravagant is not as such the essential direction of poetry and is in no sense evil because the "diversity and variety" that are materially there are formally brought into unity by the *Plot*, which addresses itself calculatedly to the cathartic purpose. (And I repeat, the cathartic purpose is essentially good.)

In the *Poetics* Aristotle makes the point that the *Plot* of the tragedy is its "life and soul," "its first essential," "its form," and that character and the other elements come second and are as the *matter*, and he goes on to add, "— compare the parallel in painting, where the most beautiful colours laid on without order will not give one the same pleasure as a simple black-and-white sketch of a portrait."<sup>1</sup> By this analogy he is pointing up the fact that the *Plot* or form gives the real force to the poem. Curiously in contrast, Plutarch employs a similar example saying :

But, just as in pictures, colour is more stimulating than line drawing because it is life-like, and creates an illusion, so in poetry falsehood combined with plausibility is more striking, and gives more satisfaction, than work which is elaborate in metre and diction, but devoid of myth and fiction.<sup>2</sup>

The looseness of an example does not permit one any more definite inference from the contrasting analogies than to merely consider them as signs. To sustain the example long enough to draw out a meaning, one reads from it that as color is related to the figure of a sketch so is matter related to form ; and as Plutarch attributes the vigor of poetic pleasure to color or *matter*, Aristotle attributes it to figure or *form*.

If the preceding general analysis is correct and if these signs really are significant, it must be concluded that Plutarch's "clever interweaving of fabulous narrative" is not the same thing as Aristotle's *Plot*, in spite of the apparent verbal or descriptive similarity. Plutarch's dual pleasures are both due to the pleasure of learning. In the case of verisimilitude the pleasure is in learning that the portrayal is of such-and-such, and in the case of "variety and diversity" and all that is the flowering of the poetic imagination the pleasure flows from the wondering at the causes of such alluring events. Yet insofar as these pertain to learning they are not proper poetic pleasures. The contradiction in Plutarch is that in the case of "variety and diversity" he sees something of a unique poetic pleasure but he cannot accommodate it to his poetic purposes. Hence a schizoid

1. *Poetics*, ch.6, 1450 b 1-4.

2. *Op. cit.*, ch.2, p.83.

opposition persists. He wants all the benefits of this poetic characteristic without the burdens that accrue to hamper his didactic motives. Aristotle accepts all of this, save the Plutarchian motive, and goes beyond Plutarch in arguing for a cathartic purpose in poetry ; which gives poetry a proper objective, following and unifying the tendential direction of poetic potential, and thus resolves the apparent opposition. This natural direction is actualized and culminated in what he calls the formal principle or *Plot* of the poem. Plutarch, in fact, speaks only of the beginnings of poetry, those causes that first give rise to it, yet in as much as his thought on poetry never matures to the extent of grasping the purpose of the *Plot*, all that which he has to say pertains only to those elements that are considered as material in the Aristotelian analysis.

The probable or plausible in poetry addresses opinion and opinion as such is indifferent *in se* to either truth or falsity. Since Plutarch has in his thinking oriented poetry directly to science he is wary in the extreme about the consequences that may result from this. If he would have his way, and if poets were all that he would have them be, their representations would not merely be plausible, but below the semblance of truth one would find an intrinsically true "fittingness," and the good character then would more than pleasingly and convincingly appear to be good, but would in fact be inherently good by the most rigorous standard — for the speculative truth of moral philosophy is more than an appearance of truth.

With Aristotle, by contrast, fittingness is a condition of poetry and not essentially an end. The end of poetry, as of all arts, has its own proper hypothetical necessity and to realize that end certain appropriate means must be followed. Poetry's means deal with the human not as a science but as an instrument. The Tragedian looks upon human action, not as the chemist looks upon marble seeking to discover its properties and its definition, but rather as the sculptor who looks at the same marble with the idea in mind only of how it may be of service to him in his art. He is perfectly satisfied to arrive at the right conclusion for the wrong reason. If the poet or the painter errs as to the truth of the matter that he imitates this is merely a technical error but not a poetic one, "since it is a lesser error in an artist not to know, for instance, that the hind has no horns, than to produce an unrecognizable picture of one."<sup>1</sup> By appealing to opinion through what appears probable to opinion (not probability in the dialectical sense) is, unquestionably, the most efficacious manner available for the poet, even (and perhaps especially), when dealing with virtuous and vicious actions and beliefs. Plutarch himself says that the commonly possessed notions of base and noble deeds and

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1. *Poetics*, ch.25, p.1460 b 31-33.

thoughts are a long way removed from that which is understood of them by the philosophers.<sup>1</sup> If the poet portrayed virtue after the philosophers's definition of it his picture would be "unrecognizable" — and needless to say, grossly improbable. Hence it is that plausible arguments addressed to fluid opinion ought to be the poet's *modus operandi*, and that to anchor his representation in the *in se* truth of the thing represented threatens its plausibility and jeopardizes the instrument's success. If common opinion happens to coincide with what is true then the poetic argument behooves itself to conform in its representations to the truth, but as is evident the presence of speculative truth owes its being there to an accident (that opinion and the true happen to conform).

The obviously seductive character of poetry is justified because it leads to a rectification of the appetites of man and an inducing of virtue therethrough. Thus it is, that for Aristotle the means of the poetic argument (though not the highest form of human argumentation, but not inherently evil) are supremely worthy in the light of the end to be achieved. Now Plutarch, ignorant of, or discounting the appetitive purpose in poetry, cannot see in the poetic means essential virtue, because that is to be found in science itself and is only in poetry insofar as it shares in science — as a *per accidens* accommodation for the undeveloped minds of the young.

*Plausibility*, though it can possibly be at odds with the truth, may be tolerable, since some kind of philosophical contact with the young is better than none at all, Plutarch would argue ; but the consequences of plausibility in poetry are less tolerable. Plausibility appeals to what we opine already and seems not to add to the existing moral corruption of man, but plausibility is a bridge and a road that leads us out of our prosaic world of common place events to a world of "variety" and "diversity," a world illusory to the core, and we are there by the seduction of a creation "more cunning than the lynx." Great and brave heroes, even gods, are made to behave in this new world according to the caprice of the poet, and the reader all this time is dazzled and credulous and accepts willynilly any bogus truth or virtue that the poet so wishes to call true or virtuous.

One toys with danger, he argues, yet on the one hand, poetry is a lodestone to the youth's mind and he will be drawn to it naturally, and on the other hand, seizing this opportunity, we can, through proper cautioning and instruction, seduce the youth to philosophic truth by manipulating his mind as he is motivated naturally to learning — though the means at present be only poetic.

The first cautioning is the sobering reminder :

That poetry is not greatly concerned with the truth, and that the truth about these matters, even for those who have made it their sole business to

1. *Op. cit.*, ch.14, p.195.



search out and understand the verities, is exceedingly hard to track down and hard to get hold of, as they themselves (the philosophers) admit.<sup>1</sup>

Next, he turns from the subject matter itself to address the dispositions of the individual readers as they encounter the poem, recalling to mind the ever seductive and ever illusory nature of poetry, saying instructively:

Do not let him (the youth) get into the habit of commending everything, nor let him be plausible and adroit at making excuses or explaining away base actions, but rather, . . . let him cherish the belief that poetry is an imitation of character and lives, and of men who are not perfect or spotless or unassailable in all respects, but pervaded by emotions, false opinions, and sundry forms of ignorance, who yet through inborn goodness frequently change their ways for the better.<sup>2</sup>

Whether this is either a very accurate or very ridged description of poetic characters or not, it serves the Plutarchian purpose by pointing out that which the youth should be wary of, and having done this, he reiterates the attitude that the youth should assume, saying :

One ought not timorously or as though under a spell of a religious dread in a holy place to shiver with awe at everything, and fall prostrate, but should rather acquire the habit of exclaiming with confidence " wrong " and " improper " no less than " right " and " proper." <sup>3</sup>

And again :

For he who meets and resists, and refuses to entrust himself broadside on to every breath of doctrine, as to a wind, but believes in the correctness of the saying that ' a fool is wont to be agog at every word that is said ' will thrust aside a good deal of what is not *true* or *profitable* therein. This then will take away all danger of harm from the perusal of poetry.<sup>4</sup>

Speaking concretely, how does one thrust aside " what is not true or profitable therein " ? Several steps are suggested by Plutarch. One of the first, easiest and least damaging to the whole of the poem is to construe all ambiguous words and actions toward the best interpretation. This seems harmless enough *prima facie*, but it might very well be that the poet intended a certain ambiguity to best achieve his poetic purpose. The " displays of verbal ingenuity," that Plutarch fears so much, may be for Aristotle perfectly justified and is, in fact, in his judgment, one of the prime qualities found in Homer for whom he has so much praise.

1. *Ibid.*, ch.2, p.91.

2. *Ibid.*, ch.8, p.137.

3. *Ibid.*, ch.8, p.137.

4. *Ibid.*, ch.9, p.149.

This technique is advanced just a turn when Plutarch recommends that even where analogous words are found and where they may be stretched and twisted the youth or his advisor should take the liberty of interpreting them in the most wholesome terms.

The organic unity that ought to be present in a well wrought poem, however, is seriously challenged, more than compromised, when Plutarch prescribes a technique for dealing with certain passages whose philosophic "truth or profitableness" is questionable. He urges that they be abstracted from the context of the whole and compared to statements made elsewhere by the same author to evince a contradiction in his thinking, and in so doing allow the youth to choose the better side. The same method may also be extended to accommodate comparisons of conflicting or conforming statements of several different poets of renown.<sup>1</sup> The materiality of his analysis is clearly manifest in this ; for in this methodology he is freely disjoining the material elements of poetry from the poem itself and seeking to resolve and measure them, in the first case in the poet, and in the second in the collectivity of poems or poets ; and in either case, to ultimately discover the unity of poetic declarations in the truth of the matter imitated itself.

The extreme is reached when he proposes what he calls a "system of amendments."<sup>2</sup> Until now the intrinsic structure of the poem itself has not been tampered with, but at this juncture he counsels a means of expunging the noxious in poetry that involves rewriting potentially harmful lines. This last step, if it were done for the purpose of enhancing the poem as a cathartic instrument, might well be valid, as it is where playwrights adapt their own versions of once told tales ; but the purpose here is strictly an enhancement for didactic objectives oriented towards moral philosophy, and the effect of the amendments would more than probably mean the devastation of the poem as poetry.

We are well aware by this time, relevant to Plutarch's analysis, that the *raison d'être* of poetry is that it introduces moral philosophy by way of psychologically conditioning the young. We have seen poetry's negative aspects introduced through the poet's imagination, (which is as much a principle of error as truth), and we have heard the admonitions and instructions germane to the dangers that invariably accompany poetry. In the final chapter Plutarch makes the last and the positive step that delivers the young reader into the house of wisdom. Here is how he concretely links the means to the end :

... so whenever we find any edifying sentiment neatly expressed in the poets we ought to foster and amplify it by means of proofs and testimonies from the philosophers, at the same time crediting these with the discovery.

1. *Ibid.*, ch.4, p.111.

2. *Ibid.*, ch.13, p.179.

For this is right and useful, and our faith gains an added strength and dignity whenever the doctrines of Pythagoras and of Plato are in agreement with what is spoken on the stage or sung to the lyre or studied at school, and when the precepts of Chilon and Bias lead to the same conclusions as our children's readings in poetry.<sup>1</sup>

So, through frequent warnings, construing, and amendments, and best, through the work of the poet himself, we look for a positive moral content in poetry that will appeal more or less directly to the youth's intelligence. We are seeking to bring out from poetry's concrete and particular representation some universal truth. Plutarch gives an example of this worth citing as he quotes from Homer :

Hence it is a duty to make a point of indicating that the lines,  
 ' You my child have not the gift of arms in battle,  
 Your concern must be for loving arms in wedlock',

and

' Seeing that Zeus is wrath if you fight with a man far better',  
 do not differ from ' Know thyself,' but have the same purport as this . . .<sup>2</sup>

It is by reconciling and conjoining such sentiments with the doctrines of the philosophers that poetry is brought forth from " the realm of myth and impersonation, and invested with seriousness in its helpful sayings." <sup>3</sup>

Poetry is in bondage to philosophy, but, at one and the same time, operates as an external agent opening and stimulating the minds of the young, according to its own manner, in advance of philosophical learning. It is in a popular way combatting the moral ignorance and misunderstandings that the youth has been inculcated with by those around him, and in this pleasant foretaste of philosophic truth he is painlessly weaned to the realm of moral wisdom, for if confronted directly with philosophic truth it would confuse and amaze him as the bright sunlight dazzles one stepping out of the darkness. " The dazzling rays of truth are softened by combining truth with fable, to face facts of this sort without being distressed, and not to try to get away from them," <sup>4</sup> — this is the service of poetry. With prudent pilotage in these matters of reading, " he may be forestalled with good schooling rather than prejudice, and in a spirit of friendships and good will and familiarity, he may be convoyed by poetry into the realm of philosophy." <sup>5</sup>

1. *Ibid.*, ch.14, p.189.

2. *Ibid.*, ch.14, p.189.

3. *Ibid.*, ch.14, p.193.

4. *Ibid.*, ch.14, p.195.

5. *Ibid.*, ch.14, p.197.

## II. ARISTOTLE'S POETICS

In the first chapter of *De Partibus Animalium* Aristotle states :

The fittest mode, then, of treatment is to say, a man has such and such parts, because the conception of a man includes their presence, and because they are necessary conditions of his existence, or, if we cannot quite say this, which would be best of all, then the next thing to it, namely, that it is either quite impossible for him to exist without them, or, at any rate, that it is better for him that they should be there ; and their existence involves the existence of other antecedents. This we should say, because man is an animal with such and such characters, therefore is the process of his development necessarily such as it is ; and therefore is it accomplished in such and such an order, this part being formed first, that next, and so on in succession ; and after a like fashion should we explain the evolution of all other works of nature.<sup>1</sup>

This represents the first step in the mode of procedure in natural philosophy. It is not only, as he says, the "fittest mode", but in fact it was this aspect, as stated above, with which the ancients who philosophized about nature "busied themselves." Hence it seems that the natural beginning in such a study, both from the point of view of method and from that of history, is with the material principle and the material cause. Yet a perfect study of nature will demand a complement to this beginning :

But if men and animals and their several parts are natural phenomena, then the natural philosopher must take into consideration not merely the ultimate substances of which they are made, but also flesh, bone, blood, and all the other homogeneous parts ; not only these, but also the heterogeneous parts, such as face, hand, foot ; and must examine how each of these comes to be what it is, and *in virtue of what force*. For to say what are the ultimate substances out of which the animal is formed, to state, for instance, that it is made of fire or earth, is no more sufficient than would be a similar account in the case of a couch or the like. For we should not be content with saying that the couch was made of bronze or wood or whatever might be, but should try to describe its design or mode of composition in preference to the material ; or, if we did deal with the material, it would be at any rate with the concretion of material and form. For a couch is such and such a form embodied in this or that matter, or such and such a matter with this or that form ; so that its shape and structure must be included in our description. *For the formal nature is of greater importance than the material nature.*<sup>2</sup>

This "fittest mode" of treatment so naturally apt in the philosophy of nature is likewise amenable to the philosophy of art, and thus it

1. *De Partibus Animalium*, Bk. I, ch.1, 640 a 32 — 640 b 41. (McKeon edition, 1941.)

2. *Ibid.*, 640 b 17-29.

is that Aristotle begins his *Poetics* with an analysis of the material causes and components of poetry. The reason for the common mode in the treatments of nature and poetry can be confusedly seen in two observations of St. Thomas. As he begins Book II of the *Physics* he says, "Dicit ergo primo quod inter omnia entia, quaedam esse dicimus a natura ; quaedam vero ab aliis causis, puta ab arte vel a casu."<sup>1</sup> (It should be understood that he is referring to *entia sensibilia* at this point). However, natural beings and artistic beings have more in common as sensible beings than that they both merely proceed from causes. *Ars imitatur naturam in sua operatione*,<sup>2</sup> and this principle establishes a very precise rapprochement between the two, separating themselves from those *sensibilia* that come to be by chance. I intend to detail and clarify the meaning of this in the next chapter. For the present it indicates why Aristotle ought to and does commence his *Poetics* with a material analysis.

According then to this "fittest mode," Aristotle opens the *Poetics* saying :

"Let us follow the natural order and begin with the primary facts.

Epic poetry and Tragedy, as also Comedy, Dithyrambic poetry, and most flute playing, are all, viewed as a whole, *modes of imitation*. But at the same time they differ from one another in three ways, either by a difference of kind in their means, or by differences in the objects, or in the manner of their imitations."<sup>3</sup>

All three of these modes pertain primarily, as we shall see, to material imitation. The *means*, Aristotle says, refers to such things as rhythm, language and harmony as aids to imitations and portrayals — the same may be extended to the other fine arts in terms of the sculptor's marble and the artist's paints and canvas. The *matter* of poetry might in this sense be called the *proximate matter*, for the reason that such is the matter with which the poet or artist works directly and immediately.

I say that the means of imitation in poetry has the relation of matter because it does not properly distinguish poetry. As Aristotle says, it is not the metre (another species of *means*) that makes the poet for history and theories of medicine and physical philosophy may all be set down in a metrical form, yet never confused with epic poetry. The same can be said in one way or another of all the other species of *means*. Moreover, this same accidental quality can be predicated in some fashion of the two remaining *modes*.

A second mode of imitation by which poems are said to differ is the *manner* of imitation. Manner bears upon whether, for example,

1. *In II Phys.*, lect.1, n.142 (Marietti).

2. ST. THOMAS, *Ia*, q.117, art.1.

3. *Poetics*, ch.1, 1447 a 11-12.

a poem is a narration or in an assumed character, or whether the representation is dramatic or not, and the like. This mode has a similitude to that of *means* insofar as both are material aspects of poetry directly and immediately before the poet in his poetic composition, and for this reason it might also be designated a *proximate material* aspect. Again, it is not essentially proper to poetry but might be found as well in other arts. As history may be recounted in verse and metre so might it be narrated, or told in an assumed character, or even dramatized.

As to the third mode, "the *objects* the imitator represents are actions, with agents who are necessarily either good or bad men . . ." <sup>1</sup> In a real sense these objects are the true "stuff" or matter of poetry. The matter in this sense is the matter that allows poetry to move the reader affectively. Because the poet wishes to emotionally move the reader he chooses an appropriate matter and nothing suits his purpose better than human actions and human emotions. Yet in as much as these objects are once removed by the imitation they may be distinguished as the *remote matter* of poetry. I will not venture an exhaustive treatment of the full meaning and import of the objects of imitation in poetry and the relations that they have with the *proximate matter*. It is sufficient to point out merely that the poet is properly the imitator of these objects and that in his imitations of them he is only interested in such objects as they bear on his poetic purpose. We will treat of his poetic purpose very shortly. If, however, his interest in such objects was not a kind of utilitarian interest but instead was turned upon these objects as such, then he would necessarily share a certain relation with the historian, psychologist, moral philosopher, and all others whose scientific interests pertain to human actions, emotions, etc., in some respect. These people, according to the modes of their several sciences and disciplines, are each seeking a kind of *adequatio* with the objects, that is, some kind of speculatively true understanding of these objects. If you will, these objects form the *proximate matter* of their work, whereas the poet as poet will maintain only a utilitarian concern for them, aloofly related to them as they are *in se*, and in his hands as imitated it is well to regard them as his *remote matter*. This basic opposition between the pragmatic order and the speculative order as they bear upon poetry is, as I have already mentioned, at the root of Plutarch's problems.

In the sense just described the poet is more the master properly speaking of his proximate matter (his manner and means) or, as it were, the tools of his trade, than he is of his *remote matter*. He leaves the mastery over the latter to the historian and the scientist. I say that he must be more the master of the former than the latter because to err with respect to the object, e. g., as painting a hind with no horns,

1. *Ibid.*, ch.2, 1448 a 1-2.

is only an error of technical correctness whereas errors regarding his manner and means of representation, e. g., where he fails to make the hind recognizable, are truly poetic errors.<sup>1</sup>

While still within his material analysis of poetry Aristotle alluded to its genesis assigning two causes. First, he said, imitation is natural to man from childhood, it is one of the advantages that he has over the lower animals and hence he is the most imitative of creatures in this world. Secondly, he learns by imitation. The truth of this is discovered readily in experience where we perceive the delight man takes in viewing artistic representations of things. The reason of his delight, said the Philosopher :

is that in seeing the picture he is at the same time learning — gathering the meaning of things, e. g., that the man there is so-and-so ; for if one has not seen the thing before, one's pleasure will not be in the picture as an imitation of it, but will be due to the execution or colouring or some similar cause. Imitation, then, being natural to us — as also the sense of harmony and rhythm, the metre being obviously a species of rhythm — it was through original aptitude, and by a series of improvements, for the most part gradual, on their first efforts, that they created poetry out of their improvisations.<sup>2</sup>

As is indicated here by Aristotle the particular pleasure contained therein relates to that of learning. Yet as it bears upon poetry in its wholeness it retains a material relationship. It is essentially related to the human capacity to create and learn by imitation and, moreover, is ultimately related to the human capacity to grasp and enjoy a poetic argument ; however, as considered at this level its significance is basically that of the *terminus a quo* in the generation of poetry.

In the preceding chapter we began an analysis of this observation, and pointed out in the process that Plutarch arrested poetry's generation at this level. Resolving to this level, he resolves to the matter of poetry, and specifically to the *remote matter* of poetry — that is, to the objects of imitation. Such is relevant to what Aristotle here calls, "gathering the meaning of things, e.g., that the man here is so-and-so," or as Plutarch would say, that such and such an action or thought represented is "fittingly" portrayed and is "right" and "proper" as we can see when we relate it to such and such a statement made by Socrates or Plato or some other worthy moral philosopher concerning the objective truth of the action or thought. Beyond this we noted that Plutarch also perceived in poetry a source of delight in its "glitter and embellishment." In one metaphor he referred to the pleasure of "colour" which gives a life-like attractiveness to the poetry-painting. In another passage he spoke of the true lover of poetry (as distinguished

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1. *Ibid.*, ch.25

2. *Ibid.*, ch.4.

from he who takes up poetry not for pleasure but for education) as one who "does not fail to observe the novel and unusual points of the story."<sup>1</sup> In either case, I submit that the sense of his meaning falls under the Aristotelian observation that in the event that "one has not seen the thing (the thing portrayed) before, one's pleasure will not be in the picture as an imitation of it, but will be due to the execution or colouring or some similar cause." These elements or parts either individually or *in toto* do not equal or explain the whole of the poem but are yet material elements only and may be classified among those things pertaining to the *manner* and *means* of imitation. Thus, even this aspect of the Plutarchian analysis resolves to the material elements of poetry.

Proceeding from its *terminus a quo* the genesis of poetry took the following manner of evolution according to Aristotle. "It was through the original aptitude, and by a series of improvements, for the most part gradual, on their first efforts, that they (the poets) created poetry out of their improvisations." Still in the same order of intellectual pleasure, the myth-makers developed poetry to a point where it arrived at its *proper* term amongst those things productive of intellectual pleasure. St. Albert commented on this matter in a text that must be quoted in revealing the full meaning of this development :

Qui autem dubitat et admiratur, ignorans videtur : est enim admiratio motus ignorantis procedentis ad inquirendum, ut sciat causam ejus de quo miratur : cujus signum est, quia ipse Philomithes secundum hunc modum Philosophus est : quia fabula sua construitur ab ipso ex mirandis. Dico autem Philomiton poetam amantem fingere fabulas. Mithon enim, prima producta, fabulam sonat, et Philomiton sonat amatorem fabularum si penultima producat : sicut enim in ea parte logicae, quae poetica est ostendit Aristoteles, poeta fingit fabulam ut excitet ad admirandum, et quod admiratio ulterius excitet ad inquirendum : et sic constet philosophia, sicut est de Phaetonte, et sicut de Deucalione monstrat Plato : in qua fabula non intenditur nisi excitatio ad mirandum causas duorum diluviorum aquae et ignis ex orbitatione stellarum erraticarum provenientum, ut per admirationem causa quaeratur, et sciatur veritas : et ideo poesis modum dat philosophandi sicut aliae scientiae logices : sed aliae scientiae vel partes logices modum dant probandi propositum a ratione vel argumentatione perfecta vel imperfecta : *poesis autem non, sed modum dat admirandi per quem excitetur inquirens.*<sup>2</sup>

Poetry and Philosophy in the intellectual order have a certain community according to mode. They are both concerned with wonder so that one may be excited or moved to inquire into the causes of things that he may learn the truth. Yet as the sciences go on to proving propositions by reason or argumentation, poetry has only the mode of

1. *Op. cit.*, p.159.

2. ST. ALBERT, *Metaph.*, L.I, c.6. (Parisiis).



conjuring up wonder and stimulating investigation thereby, but not giving the explanations and proofs or reasons. Hence, though poetry shares a common mode with science as a cause of knowledge, it yet has a *proper* term in this order, namely, only to move one to inquiry by *admiratio*. This is all within the order of the pleasure of learning nonetheless, as was shown in the quotation taken from Aristotle's *Rhetoric* mentioned in the previous chapter.

Plutarch's "diversity and variety" found in his "clever interweaving of fabulous narrative" can be accounted for in terms of the pleasure associated with *admiratio*; yet he urges that poetry trespass its legitimate boundaries and mingle intimately with the reasoning and argumentation of philosophy, that is, at least to concretize within itself the conclusions of philosophic reasoning and argumentation.

It seems that, consonant with Aristotle's analysis in the *Poetics*, poetry had one more step in its evolution to arrive at its *terminus ad quem*, and to attain its own proper place and perfection among the arts and sciences. That step which "created poetry" brought it to its formal principle, which Aristotle called the *Plot* or fable. It is natural that poetry itself would be some time in reaching this final state, for commenting on the subtlety and inwardness of *Plot* Aristotle says, "A further proof is in the fact that beginners succeed earlier with Diction and Character than with the construction of the story."<sup>1</sup> The *Plot* or "the construction of the story" represents a transitional passage from the material elements of poetry to their formal principle; and, as shall become apparent, the Aristotelian *Plot* is not as it might seem, the equivalent of Plutarch's "clever interweaving of fabulous narrative," but is rather, within the elements of poetry itself, a vital principle of another order.

Surpassing the measure of *admiratio* itself, and certainly surpassing Plutarch's conformity with objective truth, Aristotle poses a unique end proper to poetry by which it may attain excellence. In the sixth chapter of the *Poetics* Aristotle takes up the central subject of the general work, the Tragedy, and, gathering from what he has said until now germane to the history and materiality of poetry he sets down this definition:

A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, is complete in itself; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form; which incidents arousing fear and pity, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions.<sup>2</sup>

It is evident from this definition that, at least for the tragedy, the end is not speculative; neither as exciting inquiry through *admiratio*,

1. *Poetics*, ch.6, 1450 a 35-37.

2. *Ibid.*, ch.6, 1449 b 24-28.

nor as giving by reason the causes of wonderful events. The element of learning and of intellectual pleasure in the imitation is not neglected, yet it is not self sufficient, for the learning that is there in the poem is present for the unequivocal practical purpose of accomplishing a catharsis of those emotions fear and pity.

Pursuant to the definition Aristotle undertakes an intrinsic analysis of the poetic work itself, stating that there are six formative elements in tragedy which are : Spectacle, Character, Diction, Melody, Thought and Fable or *Plot*. He reduces the first five as arising from the three modes of imitation already mentioned, to wit, Melody and Diction as pertaining to *means*, Spectacle as relevant to the *manner*, and Thought and Character as related to the objects of imitation. *Plot* also, since in one sense it is an imitation of action and life, may be listed as related to the objects of imitation. To this extent it has a certain material character, but to the extent that it is the chief principle effecting the purgative purpose it will transcend the other elements as a formal cause of unity. The several modes of imitation, as Aristotle indicated at the start, furnish the principles by which all poetry differs ; they stand as matter does in nature in ready potentiality wanting to be actualized and unified in this or that particular poem. The principle that is the artificial form, transcending these material elements as substance transcends the accidents and giving existence and purpose to the parts formerly awaiting a *raison d'être*, is precisely the *Plot*. Here is Aristotle's general argument for the dignity and supremacy of the *Plot* and his statement concerning the relation it has towards the elements contained therein :

The most important of the six is the combination of the incidents of the story. Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, happiness and misery. All human happiness takes the form of action ; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions — what we do — that we are happy or the reverse. In a play accordingly they do not act to portray the Characters ; they include the Characters for the sake of the action. *So it is the action in it, i. e., its Fable or Plot, that is the end and purpose of the tragedy ; and the end is everywhere the chief thing.* Besides this, a tragedy is impossible without action, but there may be one without Character. The tragedies of most of the moderns are characterless — a defect common among poets of all kinds, and with its counterpart in painting . . . And again : one may string together a series of characterless speeches of the utmost finish as regards Diction and Thought, yet fail to produce the true tragic effect ; but one will have much better success with a tragedy which, however inferior in these respects has a *Plot*, a combination of incidents in it. And again : the most powerful elements of attraction in Tragedy, the Peripeties and Discoveries, are parts of the *Plot*. A further proof is in the fact that beginners succeed earlier with the Diction and Character than with the construction of a story ; . . . We maintain, therefore, that the first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of Tragedy is the *Plot* ;

and that the Character comes second — compare the parallel in painting, where the most beautiful colours laid on without order will not give one the same pleasure as a simple black-and-white sketch of a portrait. We maintain that Tragedy is primarily an imitation of action, and that it is mainly for the sake of the action that it imitates the personal agents.<sup>1</sup>

I do not believe that this quotation requires further comment. Continuing in a particular way Aristotle meticulously unfolds that which is implicit in this passage showing that none of the other material elements explain the poetic argument, and re-affirming that the one indispensable element remaining as properly necessary and ever-present in tragedy is the *Plot*. “Character is what makes us ascribe certain moral qualities to the agents,”<sup>2</sup> he says. Yet *moral qualities* as we have just seen exist for the action. Plutarch, however, reverses the process so that the action serves Character. “Thought is shown in all they (the agents) say when proving a particular point or, it may be, enunciating a general truth,” Aristotle continues. Again, Plutarch alights on these “general truths” in poetry and stresses their value insofar as they conform to philosophic truth, yet Aristotle points out that unless they bear upon Character they are useless in a Tragedy. He states while relating Thought and Diction :

The Thought of the personages is shown in everything to be effected by their language — in every effort to prove or disprove, to arouse emotion (pity, fear, anger, and the like), or to maximize or minimize things. It is clear, also, that their mental procedure must be on the same lines in their actions likewise, whenever they wish them to arouse pity and horror, or to have a look of importance or probability.<sup>3</sup>

As we have already learned, “characterless speeches even of the utmost finish regarding Diction and Thought yet fail to produce the true tragic effect.” Regarding Thought and Diction Aristotle points up their accidental relations to poetry singling out the former as belonging more to the arts of Rhetoric and Politics<sup>4</sup> and the latter more to the art of Elocution.<sup>5</sup> In like manner he accounts for the remainder of the elements.

To obviate an ambiguity that is likely to be confusing from fore-going remarks, the end or *finis* has two senses.<sup>6</sup> In one sense it is the *finis operationis*, an intrinsic end in the work itself, that is, the final form (*forma est finis generationis*). In the drama this would be

1. *Ibid.*, ch.6, 1450 a 15, 1450 b 5.

2. *Ibid.*, ch.6, 1450 a 4-5.

3. *Ibid.*, ch.19, 1456 a 36 — 1456 b 5.

4. *Ibid.*, ch.6, 1450 a 7.

5. *Ibid.*, ch.19, 1456 b 12.

6. ST. THOMAS, *De Potentia*, q.3, art.16.

the *Plot*. Thus Aristotle has said, "So it is the action in it, i.e., its Fable or *Plot*, that is the end and purpose of the tragedy." On the other hand, a more proper and ulterior sense of end is the *finis intentionis*. This second sense is that of an extrinsic end, the end for which the thing was produced, such as the eliciting of a catharsis of fear and pity that is worked by the *Plot*. As, "the end is everywhere the chief thing," the more ultimate of ends is the more important. The more ultimate, of course, is the *finis intentionis*, and as the *causa causarum*, it explains the *finis operationis*, and all of the elements contained within it. In the *Poetics*, however, Aristotle is chiefly concentrating on the work of art itself, the *finis operationis*, and demonstrating thereby how all of its parts resolve to it. Nevertheless, this *finis*, which is the *Plot*, is itself determined by its *finis intentionis*, and it is on the strength of this ultimate end that the significance of the *Plot* is lifted out of the order of intellectual pleasure and placed in the order of moral pleasure, thereby differing in kind from the "clever interweaving of fabulous narrative."

The *Plot* or form in poetry as the form in nature cannot exist independently of its matter. The separation is only in the intellect, for the definition of the thing be it in poetry or in natural philosophy must include the presence of the matter to be accurate. Yet there is an intrinsic order in art as in nature that allows one to say that "the formal nature is of greater importance than the material nature." Revisiting the *De Partibus Animalium* just briefly, Aristotle speaking again of the afore mentioned couch says, "For though the wood of which they are made constituted the couch and the tripod, it only does so because it is capable of receiving such and such a form."<sup>1</sup> The poet as the couch maker is not indifferent to the matter he uses because it must be capable of receiving such and such a form. For the poet this means not only his remote matter, wherein he like the tragedian wants a kind of personage "not pre-eminently virtuous," and an action bringing misfortune "not by vice or depravity but by some error in judgment,"<sup>2</sup> but it means also his proximate matter, for the representation may achieve its purgative effect more excellently with one kind of diction and metre than another, or in a dramatic presentation than in a narrative. In all cases the selected elements should be appropriate to the form, for the more perfect the *Plot* or form is and, in turn, the more suitable the matter is, the more perfect shall be the poem.

The interplay of remote and proximate matter is curious. In certain species of poetry, for example the Epic, the precise suitability of the personages and actions can be relaxed and the deficiencies can

1. *De Partibus Animalium*, 641 a 31-33.

2. ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1453 a 8-10.

be made up for by the poet's genius in handling narration and the like. He will be somewhat like the painter who produces the distinctive features of a man, and at the same time, without losing the likeness, will make him handsomer than he is. The net effect is that the form of his work will be as effective, or in some cases more effective, in producing the desired result. An advantage of the efficacy of narration is seen in its ability to produce great wonder at events which if they were presented on the stage would appear improbable.<sup>1</sup> The wonder otherwise would be dispelled if the absurdities were not veiled. I intend to refer again to this feature of poetry in a treatment of poetic truth.

While relating the idea of *Plot* in a particular way to the elements and the purpose of poetry, Aristotle also spells out several of its general and intrinsic characteristics. In the seventh chapter he says :

A tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete in itself, as a whole of some magnitude, for a whole may be of no magnitude to speak of. *Now a whole is that which has a beginning, middle and end.*<sup>2</sup>

He infers from this that "a well-constructed Plot, therefore, cannot either begin or end at any point one likes." As a poem is a *whole* so are its parts arranged in a order neither beginning nor terminating at random, but rather, the series or combination of incidents commences at a fitting point and is related through a middle to a calculated conclusion — and I might add, so as to cause its own proper pleasure. Aristotle relates this idea of wholeness to that of beauty whose essential properties involve integrity, clarity and proportion. I am not so much interested in beauty in this analysis as I am with the meaning of these properties as they relate to the *Plot* and to the *raison d'être* of *Plot*, namely poetry's proper pleasures.

In line with their meaning, Aristotle in the eighth chapter turns up another facet of wholeness :

The truth is that, just as in the other imitative arts an imitation is of one thing, so in poetry the story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole. For that which makes no perceptible difference by its presence or absence is no real part of the whole.<sup>3</sup>

As we noted several pages back, matter and form do not exist separately in nature save as separated in the mind of the knower. The same obtains in poetry. And, even to attempt to discuss form is to bring along traces of matter, e. g., *Plot* which is in one aspect the form

1. *Ibid.*, ch.24.

2. *Ibid.*, 1450 a 23-26.

3. *Ibid.*, ch.8, 1451 a 30-35.

of the poem is in another the action imitated. Conversely, to tamper then with the matter of a well-wrought formal unity, to withdraw, transpose, substitute and amend the matter is to disurb the whole, so long as that material element is a real part. It is in this regard particularly that Plutarch offends with his "system of amendments."

Another side of the intrinsic unity that the *Plot* bestows upon the poem is shown in the ninth chapter where Aristotle says :

From what has been said it will be seen that the poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i. e., what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse — you might put the work of Herodotus into verse, and it still would be a species of history ; it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other the kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such and such a kind of man will probably say or do — which is the aim of poetry, though it affixes proper names to the characters ; by a singular statement I mean one as to what, say, Alcibiades did or had done to him.<sup>1</sup>

A playwright is like a shipwright in that the shipwright will look at his materials, say wood, not as interested in its nature as it grows in the tree, but only in as much as it is potentially durable, pliable, and in general, serviceable to him in the construction of a ship. As shipwright he is no botanist. The playwright likewise takes his matter from his sense experience of history, if you will, but he is not interested in it as history but only insofar as its potential is serviceable to him in his art. In this sense, the historical singular represents his remote matter or his objects of imitation and the poem is its formal adaptation after it has passed through his hands, or rather, through his imagination. The qualities that accrue through the poetic transformation in the name of the *Plot* are just such qualities as unity, wholeness and the order of beginning, middle and end. The consummate effect of the well made poem then is to relate these singulars through a combination of related incidents and in so doing to invest them with a quality of intelligibility or universality that they were without in their existence as singulars. A quality that the formal unity evinces is, therefore, that of universality, but a kind of concrete universality not to be mistaken for the logical universal. Aristotle touches on this subject once again with a statement that underlines this sense of universality. "History does not deal with one action, but with one period and all that happened in that to one or more persons, however disconnected the several events may have been."<sup>2</sup>

1. *Ibid.*, ch.9, 1451 a 6 — 1451 b 11.

2. *Ibid.*, ch.23, 1459 a 22-25.

In the final chapter of the *Poetics* Aristotle considers the question of whether the Tragedy or the Epic is the higher form of art. He concretizes the value of these several general notions we have just been considering showing that because the action is one in the Tragedy, whereas it is usually plural in the Epic, the Tragedy on the strenght of this unity attains its poetic effect better than the Epic and is thereby a higher form of art.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the properties expressly treated in the *Poetics* the notion of *Plot* relates poetic art to a universal principle predicable of all species of art — *ars imitatur naturam in sua operatione*. The meaning of this principle shall be the subject of the next chapter.

(*To be continued*)

John NEUMAYR.



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1. *Ibid.*, ch.26.