

A-B-D-C-E

PART IV

PONDERING *THE POETICS*

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ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS* IS TOUGH SLEDDING, even if you take it on knowing exactly what you expect to find. I expect it to be syntactically quaint, syllogistic, archaic, but ultimately mind-bendingly relevant. I expect to finally come face to face with the esoteric terms Austin Wright chalked around his triangle on the blackboard in American Lit class years ago: *desis, lysis, peripeteia, anagnorisis, catastrophe, denouement* as applied to Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannos*. I expect after all these years of winging it to finally know what I'm talking about when I use terms such as *hamartia, katharsis, mimesis, and epiphany*. I expect these terms, as well as *in medias res, deus ex machina, and The Three Unities*, to jump out at me or at least be in italics. I expect to breeze right through it.

After all, the *Poetics* isn't very long, so you can read it, too. You can even skim it. (Cheating, however, will not be tolerated. No scoping out anybody else's opinion, or consulting *Cliff's Notes*—and that goes double for you teachers and admissions officers!)

In truth the *Poetics* reads like a rough draft that contains a lot of erudite thinking-outloud—in shorthand. For this there is a reason: Though Aristotle created a comprehensive system for classifying every other category of existing knowledge, he never published the *Poetics*. In fact, the disjointed fragment that we have was lost to all of Europe until 1500, when the West once again gained access to the contents of the libraries that had been in Arab hands. The *Poetics* contains no reference to any arcs, triangles, or to A-B-D-C-E. To top it off, when it comes to pontificating upon his literary theory, Aristotle writes exactly how I beg my kids not to: All *Tell*, no *Show*. Which explains why anyone who has ever tried to understand the *Poetics* has had no choice but to puzzle it out by means of jerryrigged diagrams and charts in pedantic, artificial fashion.

Here's just the sort of thing I mean.

STRUCTURE OF SOPHOCLES' <i>OEDIPUS TYRANNOS</i>					
Prologue	Episode 1	Episode 2	Episode 3	Episode 4	Episode 5
Effect of plague on Thebes: Oedipus/priest; Oedipus/Creon	Oedipus: "Let me answer" Oedipus curse; Oedipus/ Tiresias: "The murder is here."	Beginning of truth: Oedipus/Creon: conspiracy charge; Oedipus/ Jocasta: doubts about oracles.	Truth revealed: Jocasta's prayer Oedipus/ Jocasta Messenger: Oedipus not son of Polybus.	The truth confirmed: Oedipus; messenger; herdsman.	Jocasta's death; blinding of Oedipus: Messenger; Oedipus/Chorus Oedipus/Creon: Oedipus requests denied.
OEDIPUS AS SAVIOR		OEDIPUS BELIEVES HE IS "THE SON OF CHANCE"		OEDIPUS AS POLLUTED CRIMINAL	
Parados	Stasimon 1	Stasimon 2	Stasimon 3	Stasimon 4	Exodos
Entry of Chorus of Thebans. Prayers to gods to aid Thebes	Oracle of Apollo. The murderer is an animal. Man's ignorance.	Tyrant's pride. Effect of religious skepticism & impiety. "Why should I honor the gods?"	Speculation about Oedipus's parentage. "Is he the son of a god?"	"The generations of men." Oedipus as a man of misery.	"Count no man happy before he is dead."

[http://www.temple.edu/classics/oedipus_structure.html]

The subject of the *Poetics* is Greek Tragedy. Some scholars believe Aristotle also penned a lost companion piece on Comedy. Some also say it was intended to be Aristotle's response to Plato, who advocated the censorship of poetry in *The Republic*.

PLATO'S OBJECTION TO POETRY

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

I suppose if we were being purists, we could endeavor to grapple with the original text in Attic Greek. And were our main objective a microscopic parsing, we could carefully weigh as well the quality of Aristotle's various translations and the merits of each of his translators themselves. But that's not where we're headed.

RIGHT OFF THE BAT it's clear that the *Poetics* as a read is murky. The drop-dead statement I've been hoping for all this time to put my son in his place will not be forthcoming. It's possible something has been lost in the translation, or worse, was never here to begin with. Skimming Aristotle's *Poetics* yields NOTHING....Neither does reading and re-reading the same precise-sounding but completely meaningless numbered blocks of text.

I do not discern any validation of my expectations in Aristotle's convoluted general definition of poetry, which I've mercifully paraphrased:

Poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature.

- 1) The instinct of imitation is the means by which we learn;
- 2) We experience pleasure by seeing things imitated. ...

Nor is it evident in Aristotle's definition of Tragedy:

Tragedy imitates an action that is serious, complete and of a certain magnitude, whose stated aim is to elicit pity and fear in an audience and then purge them of pity and fear.

Nor in his account of how the new genre evolved:

Tragedy—as also Comedy—was at first mere improvisation. The one originated with the authors of the Dithyramb, the other with those of the phallic songs, which are still in use in many of our cities. Tragedy advanced by slow degrees; each new element that showed itself was in turn developed. Having passed through many changes, it found its natural form, and there it stopped.

Aeschylus first introduced a second actor; he diminished the importance of the Chorus, and assigned the leading part to the dialogue. Sophocles raised the number of actors to three, and added scene-painting. Moreover, it was not till late that the short plot was discarded for one of greater compass, and the grotesque diction of the earlier satyric form for the stately manner of Tragedy. The iambic measure then replaced the trochaic tetrameter, which was originally employed when the poetry was of the satyric order, and had greater with dancing. Once dialogue had come in, Nature herself discovered the appropriate measure. For the iambic is, of all measures, the most colloquial

Nor in Aristotle's list of the six necessary components of tragedy:

- 1...*Plot*...is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy...

Central to the plot's success are the skilled placement of these two elements:

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....

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*...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...

There is a third concluding component of the plot:

The Scene of Suffering is a destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds, and the like.

It is designed to elicit the cathartic emotions of pity and fear in the audience;

...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*. ...

- 2 ...*Character* is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids.
- 3...*Thought*, on the other hand, is found where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated.
- 4... Fourth among the elements enumerated comes *Diction*; by which I mean...the expression of the meaning in words; ...its essence is the same both in verse and prose.
- 5 ...*Song* holds the chief place among the embellishments
- 6...The *Spectacle* has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. ...

Can *this* be Aristotle's description of The Three Unities?

A well constructed plot,...must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles. ...But the limit as fixed by the nature of the drama itself is this: ...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.

Can *this* be A-B-D-C-E?

We now come to the quantitative parts—the separate parts into which Tragedy is divided—namely, *Prologue*, *Episode*, *Exode*, *Choric Song*; this last being divided into *Parode* and *Stasimon*. These are common to all plays...

- The *Prologue* is that entire part of a tragedy which precedes the *Parode* of the Chorus.
- The *Episode* is that entire part of a tragedy which is between complete *Choric Songs*.
- The *Exode* is that entire part of a tragedy which has no choric song after it.
- Of the Choric part ...
 - the *Parode* is the first undivided utterance of the Chorus:
 - the *Stasimon* is a Choric ode without anapests or trochaic tetrameters:
 - the *Commos* is a joint lamentation of Chorus and actors....

How did that Freytag guy, *anyone* for that matter, come up with a triangle to begin with? Based on the empty abstractions I've been reading and rereading so far, I would be on the verge of experiencing a major *peripeteia-anagnorisis* of my own, were it not for the reflexive homage I've paid to Aristotelian methodology every time I go to read anything, ever since my sophomore year of college. "It's always in the subtext," I keep muttering reflexively. And so I grit my teeth and continue reading. It's the very least that I can do.

Aristotle's genius lies in the airtight analytical Organon he devised for compartmentalizing knowledge into Categories, Interpretation, Prior Analytics, Posterior Analytics, Topics, and Sophistical Refutations. Whereas his teacher Plato had concluded in *The Republic* that the arts were too volatile to be permitted entry into his overarching Ideal Schema, Aristotle, on the contrary, believed that, when armored by the logic of his dialectic one could approach poetry safely. We'd have to define "safe," of course. If Aristotle means "immune," then I for one failed to be inoculated. For in the very act of taking language back to its most basic elements in order to disarm it, (I wonder if he knew) he managed to unleash it.

Aristotle's purpose in the *Poetics* is to furnish us with the tools by which we can study The Arts dispassionately. In the course of doing so, he must, reasonably enough, name the various categories of The Arts, then systematically scrutinize each according to its substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, state, action, and affection. In the further course of doing so, he must name the various genres within each category, then, to provide a representative example, single out one to serve as its epitome. For the paradigm of Tragedy, Aristotle selects Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*. Because, of

necessity, tragedy is comprised of words combined into a formal order, its elements must be analyzed as well.

And so I stumble upon the true power of the *Poetics* in the least likely place. And I know that were I not a writer, I would have completely missed it. Everyone else certainly seems to have! It's in the Diction section, where it begs to be passed over as either too self-evident or too arcane. Yet, to succumb to wave after wave of grammatical minutiae of this lengthy section in Aristotle's stately catalog of implacable syntax, is to be compellingly caught up in a mantra that transcends translation.

EXCERPT FROM THE POETICS

To catch its cadence, read aloud.

SECTION II Part XX Language in general includes the following parts: Letter, Syllable, Connecting Word, Noun, Verb, Inflection or Case, Sentence or Phrase. A Letter is an indivisible sound, yet not every such sound, but only one which can form part of a group of sounds. For even brutes utter indivisible sounds, none of which I call a letter. The sound I mean may be either a vowel, a semivowel, or a mute. A vowel is that which without impact of tongue or lip has an audible sound. A semivowel that which with such impact has an audible sound, as S and R. A mute, that which with such impact has by itself no sound, but joined to a vowel sound becomes audible, as G and D. These are distinguished according to the form assumed by the mouth and the place where they are produced; according as they are aspirated or smooth, long or short; as they are acute, grave, or of an intermediate tone; which inquiry belongs in detail to the writers on meter. A Syllable is a non significant sound, composed of a mute and a vowel: for GR without A is a syllable, as also with A- GRA. But the investigation of these differences belongs also to metrical science.

A Connecting Word is a non significant sound, which neither causes nor hinders the union of many sounds into one significant sound; it may be placed at either end or in the middle of a sentence. Or, a non significant sound, which out of several sounds, each of them significant, is capable of forming one significant sound—as *amphi, peri*, and the like. Or, a non significant sound, which marks the beginning, end, or division of a sentence; such, however, that it cannot correctly stand by itself at the beginning of a sentence—as *men, etoi, de*.

A Noun is a composite significant sound, not marking time, of which no part is in itself significant: for in double or compound words we do not employ the separate parts as if each were in itself significant. Thus in Theodorus, 'god-given,' the *doron* or 'gift' is not in itself significant.

A Verb is a composite significant sound, marking time, in which, as in the noun, no part is in itself significant. For 'man' or 'white' does not express the idea of 'when'; but 'he walks' or 'he has walked' does connote time, present or past.

Inflection belongs both to the noun and verb, and expresses either the relation 'of,' 'to,' or the like; or that of number, whether one or many, as 'man' or 'men'; or the modes or tones in actual delivery, e.g., a question or a command. 'Did he go?' and 'go' are verbal inflections of this kind.

A Sentence or Phrase is a composite significant sound, some at least of whose parts are in themselves significant; for not every such group of words consists of verbs and nouns—'the definition of man,' for example—but it may dispense even with the verb. Still it will always have some significant part, as 'in walking,' or 'Cleon son of Cleon.' A sentence or phrase may form a unity in two ways—either as signifying one thing, or as consisting of several parts linked together. Thus *The Iliad* is one by the linking together of parts, the definition of man by the unity of the thing signified.

SECTION III, Part XXI: Words are of two kinds, simple and double. By simple I mean those composed of non significant elements, such as *ge*, 'earth.' By double or compound, those composed either of a significant and non significant element (though within the whole word no element is significant), or of elements that are both significant. A word may likewise be triple, quadruple, or multiple in form, like so many Massilian expressions, e.g., '*Hermo-caico-xanthus* [who prayed to Father Zeus].'

Every word is either current, or strange, or metaphorical, or ornamental, or newly-coined, or lengthened, or contracted, or altered. By a current or proper word I mean one which is in general use among a people; by a strange word, one which is in use in another country. Plainly, therefore, the same word may be at once strange and current, but not in relation to the same people. The word *sigynon*, 'lance,' is to the Cyprians a current term but to us a strange one.

Metaphor is the application of an alien name by transference either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or by analogy, that is, proportion. Thus from genus to species, as: 'There lies my ship'; for lying at anchor is a species of lying. From species to genus, as: 'Verily ten thousand noble deeds hath Odysseus wrought'; for ten thousand is a species of large number, and is here used for a large number generally. From species to species, as: 'With blade of bronze drew away the life,' and 'Cleft the water with the vessel of unyielding bronze.' Here *arusai*, 'to draw away' is used for *tamein*, 'to cleave,' and *tamein*, again for *arusai*—each being a species of taking away.

Analogy or proportion is when the second term is to the first as the fourth to the third. We may then use the fourth for the second, or the second for the fourth. Sometimes too we qualify the metaphor by adding the term to which the proper word is relative. Thus the cup is to Dionysus as the shield to Ares. The cup may, therefore, be called 'the shield of Dionysus,' and the shield 'the cup of Ares.' Or, again, as old age is to life, so is evening to day. Evening may therefore be called, 'the old age of the day,' and old age, 'the evening of life,' or, in the phrase of Empedocles, 'life's setting sun.' For some of the terms of the proportion there is at times no word in existence; still the metaphor may be used. For instance, to scatter seed is called sowing: but the action of the sun in scattering his rays is nameless. Still this process bears to the sun the same relation as sowing to the seed. Hence the expression of the poet 'sowing the god-created light.' There is another way in which this kind of metaphor may be employed. We may apply an alien term, and then deny of that term one of its proper attributes; as if we were to call the shield, not 'the cup of Ares,' but 'the wineless cup.'

A newly-coined word is one which has never been even in local use, but is adopted by the poet himself. Some such words there appear to be: as *ernyges*, 'sprouters,' for *kerata*, 'horns'; and *areter*, 'supplicator,' for *hiereus*, 'priest.'

A word is lengthened when its own vowel is exchanged for a longer one, or when a syllable is inserted. A word is contracted when some part of it is removed. Instances of lengthening are: *poleos* for *polos*, *Peleiadeo* for *Peleidou*; of contraction: *kri*, *do*, and *ops*, as in *mia ginetai amphoteron ops*, 'the appearance of both is one.'

An altered word is one in which part of the ordinary form is left unchanged, and part is recast: as in *dexiteron kata mazon*, 'on the right breast,' *dexiteron* is for *dexion*.

Nouns in themselves are either masculine, feminine, or neuter. Masculine are such as end in N, R, S, or in some letter compounded with S—these being two, PS and X. Feminine, such as end in vowels that are always long, namely E and O, and—of vowels that admit of lengthening—those in A. Thus the number of letters in which nouns masculine and feminine end is the same; for PS and X are equivalent to endings in S. No noun ends in a mute or a vowel short by nature. Three only end in I—*meli*, 'honey'; *kommi*, 'gum'; *peperi*, 'pepper'; five end in U. Neuter nouns end in these two latter vowels; also in N and S.

Part XXII. The perfection of style is to be clear without being mean. The clearest style is that which uses only current or proper words; at the same time it is mean—witness the poetry of Cleophon and of Sthenelus. That diction, on the other hand, is lofty and raised above the commonplace which employs unusual words. By unusual, I mean strange (or rare) words, metaphorical, lengthened—anything, in short, that differs from the normal idiom. Yet a style wholly composed of such words is either a riddle or a jargon; a riddle, if it consists of metaphors; a jargon, if it consists of strange (or rare) words. For the essence of a riddle is to express true facts under impossible combinations. Now

this cannot be done by any arrangement of ordinary words, but by the use of metaphor it can. Such is the riddle: 'A man I saw who on another man had glued the bronze by aid of fire,' and others of the same kind. A diction that is made up of strange (or rare) terms is a jargon. A certain infusion, therefore, of these elements is necessary to style; for the strange (or rare) word, the metaphorical, the ornamental, and the other kinds above mentioned, will raise it above the commonplace and mean, while the use of proper words will make it perspicuous. But nothing contributes more to produce a cleanness of diction that is remote from commonness than the lengthening, contraction, and alteration of words. For by deviating in exceptional cases from the normal idiom, the language will gain distinction; while, at the same time, the partial conformity with usage will give perspicuity.

The critics, therefore, are in error who censure these licenses of speech, and hold the author up to ridicule. Thus Euclides, the elder, declared that it would be an easy matter to be a poet if you might lengthen syllables at will. He caricatured the practice in the very form of his diction, as in the verse: "*Epicharen eidon Marathonade badizonta*, I saw Epichares walking to Marathon," or, "*ouk an g'eramenos ton ekeinou elleboron*. Not if you desire his *hellebore*."

To employ such license at all obtrusively is, no doubt, grotesque; but in any mode of poetic diction there must be moderation. Even metaphors, strange (or rare) words, or any similar forms of speech, would produce the like effect if used without propriety and with the express purpose of being ludicrous. How great a difference is made by the appropriate use of lengthening, may be seen in Epic poetry by the insertion of ordinary forms in the verse. So, again, if we take a strange (or rare) word, a metaphor, or any similar mode of expression, and replace it by the current or proper term, the truth of our observation will be manifest. For example, Aeschylus and Euripides each composed the same iambic line. But the alteration of a single word by Euripides, who employed the rarer term instead of the ordinary one, makes one verse appear beautiful and the other trivial. Aeschylus in his *Philoctetes* says: *phagedaina d'he mou sarkas esthieï podos*. "The tumor which is eating the flesh of my foot." Euripides substitutes *thoinatai*, 'feasts on,' for *esthieï*, 'feeds on.' Again, in the line, *nun de m'eon oligos te kai outidanos kai aeikes*, "Yet a small man, worthless and unseemly," the difference will be felt if we substitute the common words, *nun de m'eon mikros te kai asthenikos kai aeides*. "Yet a little fellow, weak and ugly." Or, if for the line, we read, *diphron mochtheron katatheis mikran te trapezan*. "Setting a wretched couch and a puny table." Or, for *eiones boosin*, 'the sea shores roar,' *eiones krazousin*, 'the sea shores screech.'

Again, Ariphrades ridiculed the tragedians for using phrases which no one would employ in ordinary speech: for example, *domaton apo*, 'from the house away,' instead of *apo domaton*, 'away from the house;' *sethen, ego de nin*, 'to thee, and I to him;' *Achilleos peri*, 'Achilles about,' instead of *peri Achilleos*, 'about Achilles;' and the like. It is precisely because such phrases are not part of the current idiom that they give distinction to the style. This, however, he failed to see.

It is a great matter to observe propriety in these several modes of expression, as also in compound words, strange (or rare) words, and so forth. But the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances....

IF NOTHING ELSE, ONE COMES AWAY from this "Diction" section of the *Poetics* with a rare sense of the malleable inventive fun it's possible to have with language: lengthening syllables, compressing them, interweaving exotic words, concocting new ones, mindful all the while of the conversational characteristics of iambic pentameter, the extra beat and eccentric stresses dactylic hexameter imposes on the writer's boundaries and the listeners' well-tuned ear. In short, Aristotle has a very different, very welcome "take" on diction than the College Board's SAT₂WRI, which is, rather, grimly bent on chloroforming any sprightly "sport" it comes across and impaling it on a pin to serve as a brittle, lifeless specimen.

On the other hand, there *is* the remote chance that Sections II:xx, III:xxi, and III:xxii of the *Poetics*, as translated by S.H. Butcher and presented in their relentless unabridged entirety by *moi*, did not succeed in producing the same eureka-evoking sense of bliss in you that it did in me. Yes, yes, I know the reason for that could be because I'm certifiable. But I think, rather, it's because once you've experienced a lift-the-top-of-your-head-right-off creative epiphany or two yourself and coached a couple of hundred high school seniors to theirs, your radar becomes mega-sensitized to look for narrative rhythms ever after. So when I catch myself slipping under the spell of Aristotle's mantra-like explanation of Greek grammar, I KNOW something else is going on here behind the theoretical pea soup I've just been struggling with.

Then it dawns on me that when Aristotle writes about the cathartic impact of *Oedipus the King* upon an audience, he isn't saying: this is what *theoretically ought* to happen when we watch the play; he is describing what DOES happen. He isn't saying: if you imitate this specific narrative formula, powerful psychic energy will *theoretically* be generated and released. He is saying: it *IS* generated and released.

Aristotle testifies that the power of a tightly crafted plot conveyed by means of the tightly-crafted diction he has just at length described was such that an Athenian audience did not even have to witness the action dramatized on stage to be moved—which is something to think about in and of itself. However, Athenians didn't merely *hear Oedipus Tyrannos*; its presentation also involved those five other essential elements Aristotle says "every play must have." There was a chorus eerily chanting in hexameter and dancing to pulse-rate elevating flute and tympani. There were shamanistic actors wearing grotesque masks, clad in elaborate costumes, and wearing height-enhancing footgear. There was the flash of lights, the wheeling in of the *ekkyklema* bearing a tableau of the aftermath of carnage the audience didn't actually get to see occurring, and, when things on stage got *really* tense, the lowering of a divinity-bearing mechanical contraption, the *geranos*. Most importantly, there was an audience psychically predisposed to be led to the brink of the abyss in a state of "empassioned contemplation" to thence leave the amphitheater keenly cognizant that the line between godlike rationality and bestial ravaging is fragile.

It is possible that Aristotle does not describe catharsis more accessibly because, ever the scientist, he wanted to classify it as dispassionately as possible. He was, after all, writing about dramas performed 150 years before he was born. It is also possible that the man who advocated "Everything in Moderation; Nothing to Excess" had not, himself, actually synaptically experienced the Xtreme

potency of the creative energy he is describing. That at least is what Nietzsche quotes Goethe as thinking in *The Death of Tragedy*...

"No one, not even Aristotle, has analyzed the effect of tragedy in terms of its esthetic conditions and the esthetic activity of the audience. At one moment we are told of the release of pity and terror through the serious events of the action, at another we are asked to be elevated by the victory of noble principles and hero's sacrifice to a sublime moral norm. I am sure that the effect of tragedy for many people resides in precisely this, but I am equally sure that these people, and those who interpret to them, have not the slightest inkling of tragedy as a supreme form of art. Aristotle's *catharsis*, that pathological release of which philologists are unsure whether to place it among medical or moral phenomena. . . Can it have been that one of the virtues of the ancients that, for them, the highest pathos was but a form of esthetic play, while for us there is need of verisimilitude in the production of such a work?

Which is when it suddenly occurs to me, if I'm really serious about eschewing secondary sources wherever possible, Aristotle isn't the ultimate last word in this matter after all.

