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ARISTOTLE'S STUDY OF TRAGEDY*

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HIS METHOD AND HIS AIM

The *Poetics* of Aristotle, which contains the best known definition of tragedy, has been more lavishly praised and more bitterly condemned than any other work of literary criticism. These extremes of judgment seem to be founded on a common misunderstanding: friend and foe alike have erred in treating Aristotle as a prophet and law-giver rather than as a scientist and philosopher. Those who have praised the *Poetics* most highly have often revealed their ignorance of the scientific method upon which it is based by accepting Aristotle's findings as though they were oracles from on high, and those who have most bitterly condemned the *Poetics* have done so because they have mistakenly ascribed to Aristotle the dogmatism which is all too evident in the writings of some of his disciples.

The outstanding merit of the *Poetics*, the quality which makes it the necessary starting point of any inquiry into the nature of tragedy, is its application of a scientific method to the study of poetry. This method is more important than the particular conclusions which have inspired so much fruitless controversy.

*This essay was planned and written as an introductory chapter in a book to be entitled *Tragedy: A View of Life*. At a number of points in the discussion of the *Poetics* I have introduced, in commenting on the limitation of Aristotle's study, some of my own conclusions on the meaning of tragedy. For longer statements of these conclusions, see H. A. Myers, "The Tragic Attitude Toward Value," *Ethics*, Vol. XLV, No. 3, April, 1935; "Dramatic Poetry and Values," *The English Journal*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 5, May, 1939; "The Tragic Meaning of *Moby Dick*," *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. XV, No. 1, March, 1942; and "Heroes and the Way of Compromise," in *Essays in Political Theory*, edited by M. R. Konvitz and A. E. Murphy, Cornell University Press, 1948.

Among its procedures are the use of inductive reasoning, the analysis of specimens into their constituent elements or parts, and the synthesizing of conclusions in a definition by genus and differentiae. Of these, the most important is induction, the mode of reasoning which derives general propositions from a careful study of particular instances. If any of Aristotle's generalizations concerning tragedy are valid, they owe their validity to the fact that before formulating them he examined the tragedies available in his time as carefully as a botanist examines a collection of rare plants.

A generalization which is supported by all the known facts or instances is incontestable, and may properly be regarded as scientific description. If all the tragedies with which we are familiar had been available to Aristotle, we may be sure that he would have taken them into account and that as a result the *Poetics*, greatly modified, would be for us a much more satisfactory and accurate description of the general nature of tragedy. But he had only the Greek tragedies, including the many now lost and the few that have survived, to study; and he himself implies that his conclusions may be tentative by raising the question "whether tragedy has as yet perfected its proper types."

It had not yet perfected all its possible types, as we know; and for this reason the *Poetics* is for us a compilation of conclusions which are based on incomplete evidence. We may determine whether these conclusions need to be modified by carefully examining the new types and examples of tragedy, or we may

accept them as they stand because they are the dicta of an eminent philosopher. If we accept only those generalizations which are supported by the facts, we follow Aristotle in the use of inductive reasoning, his chief contribution to the study of literature; if we accept his findings as dicta, we turn from scientific description to literary prescription, to a kind of *a priori* critical authoritarianism which is the exact opposite of the Aristotelian method.

The excellence of Aristotle's method cannot make up for the outstanding weakness of his study, namely, his indifference to the meaning of tragedy and his consequent failure to trace the general outlines of the tragic view of life. This failure of a great philosopher to judge, or even to notice, an important view of life can only be explained as an after-effect of that "ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry" which Socrates describes to Glaucon in Plato's *Republic*. The cause of the quarrel was the desire of the philosophers to replace the poets as the sole interpreters of life and as the recognized teachers in questions of conduct. Since the Greeks were unique among early peoples in their freedom from a priestly caste, their poets enjoyed for many centuries, and particularly from the time of Homer to the time of Euripides, a secure prestige as recorders and interpreters of experience and tradition. When the early Greek philosophers turned from the study of nature to the study of man, however, they encroached upon the preserves of the poets, and the resulting rivalry reached a peak of intensity at the end of the Fifth Century B.C. Aristophanes presents a bitterly satirical picture of Socrates in *The Clouds*; and Plato, using Socrates as spokesman, strikes back hard at the poets in *The Republic*. Poetry, he maintains, is thrice removed from the truth since

the poet copies a particular object which in turn is a copy of a universal idea. Many of the best known poems contain immoral fictions which represent gods and heroes as even worse in behavior than ordinary men. The pleasures afforded by poetry are at best of an inferior order; at worst they may lead men into weak sentimentalism or buffoonery. Poetry feeds the passions, which should be starved. For these and other reasons Plato would expel the poets from his ideal republic.

Aristotle's attitude toward the poets is so much less uncompromising than Plato's that he seems at first glance to do justice to the significance of poetry. Writing at a time when the philosophers had gained in prestige at the expense of their rivals, he is generous in victory, and seeks to end the ancient quarrel by assigning to the poets a respected sphere of activity and to poetry an important function. The true end of poetry, he maintains, is to give pleasure, and the pleasure derived from poetry is a good which contributes to the well-being of the virtuous man. The effect of great poetry upon the emotions is beneficial, not injurious. As for the fictions of the poets, they are dangerous only to children, who cannot distinguish between fiction and fact; for mature men the poet is an artist and not a teacher, and the appeal of poetry is to the feelings and not to the intellect.

While conceding to the poet an important role as a contributor to the emotional well-being of man, Aristotle reserves to the philosopher the more important function of interpreting life. This division of functions between the rivals has merit. By stressing the fact that the reading of poetry has a value apart from any moral guidance which may be found in the experience, it helps the critic to distinguish a poem from a didactic jingle. But it implies a sharp division

between the intellect and the emotions which does not in fact exist. Our reason and our feelings are not shut up in separate compartments; on the contrary, our feelings are stirred solely by our ideas, and our ideas are all too often inspired solely by feeling. The feelings which inspire a system of philosophy and the intellectual pattern of a poem may be implicit rather than explicit; but they are present, and not to be ignored. If a tragic drama has the power to restore us to tranquillity after stirring our deepest feelings, the reason is that the poet has shaped his tragic incidents into a pattern, implicitly intellectual, which we are usually unable to discover when similar incidents occur as parts of the chaos of everyday experience. The question whether that pattern is the true pattern of human life is the most important question concerning tragedy, but it is a question that we are not likely to raise if we assign the realm of feeling to the poet and the realm of ideas to the philosopher.

Aristotle seems to have been at least partly aware that the power of poetry to excite and soothe our feelings implies that poetry has intellectual aspects of a high order. Poetry, he tells us, is higher and more philosophical than history, for poetry stresses the universal while history stresses the particular. This recognition of the universality of poetry might well have raised the essential question concerning tragedy in Aristotle's mind, for if poetry tends to express the universal, the tragic hero may truly represent mankind, and his fate may be the fate of all men. If not, why not? But Aristotle is too deeply committed to his solution of the ancient quarrel to probe deeply into the intellectual patterns implicit in poetry. An examination of the high points of the *Poetics*—the analysis of tragedy into its elements, the description

of the ideal tragic hero, and the famous definition of tragedy—reveals that, in spite of his excellent method of investigation, he never credits the tragic poet with an important view of life, and is content to explain, as best he can, how tragedy affords intense pleasure by exciting and purging the emotions of pity and fear.

THE ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY

The constituent elements of tragedy, according to Aristotle, are, in their order of importance, Plot, Character, Thought, Diction, Melody, and Spectacle. By Plot he means the structure of the story which is unfolded in dramatic action, the organization of the incidents which provides the pattern and unity of the tragedy. By Character (*ethos*) he does not mean an individual agent in a tragedy, as Agamemnon or Romeo; he means the moral bent which disposes an Agamemnon or a Romeo to choose or avoid a certain course of action. His illustrations of Thought (*dianoia*) refer to passages in which speakers use rhetoric to excite feeling, offer arguments in proof or disproof of a point, or use general maxims in commenting upon events; Thought, therefore, means either the intellectual ability of a speaker, his skill in saying the right thing at the right time, or examples of this ability. By Diction Aristotle means the poet's choice and arrangement of words; by Melody he means the choral songs of Greek tragedy; and by Spectacle he means the costuming and scenery required in the theatrical production of a tragedy.

Aristotle's treatment of Thought, which is consistent with his solution to the rivalry between the poets and the philosophers, is the principal defect in his analysis of tragedy into its constituent elements. Since he is convinced in advance that the proper appeal of poetry is to the emotions, he ignores the tragic

view of life implied in the possibility that the hero's fate may truly represent the destiny of man. His Thought—the intellectual ability of the hero or of other agents as evidenced by their skill in persuasion, in argumentation, and in the use of apposite maxims—is too narrow a conception to throw much light upon the over-all meaning of tragedy.

Since the intellectual ability of an agent may play as important a part as his moral bent in disposing him to choose or avoid a certain course of action, we might well treat intellectual ability and moral bent as two aspects of Character, thereby eliminating Aristotle's Thought and making room for the element of tragedy which he ignores, namely, Meaning. For Plot, Character, and Meaning are in fact the principal elements of tragedy, and their interdependence and equal importance may best be indicated by a simple formula: Plot plus Character equals Meaning.

For Aristotle, however, Plot is the first element of tragedy, and his discussion of its importance is a masterly combination of analysis and induction. A well-constructed plot, he tells us, has a beginning, a middle, and an end; and the series of incidents which it comprises follow one another in a probable or inevitable sequence, forming an organic whole. It is neither too short to be impressive nor too long for its parts to be easily held in memory; within these limits its precise length is best determined by the number of incidents necessary to represent a change from bad fortune to good, or from good fortune to bad.

The relative effectiveness of plots, according to the *Poetics*, may be explained by an analysis of their construction. The worst plots are the episodic, in which the episodes or events follow one another without probable or necessary sequence. An effective plot, on the other hand, al-

ways represents a single action, a change of fortune in which no incident may be displaced or removed without disturbing the organic unity of the whole. The best plots combine Change of Fortune (*metabasis*) with Reversal (*peripeteia*) and Discovery (*anagnorisis*). Change of Fortune is a series of events in probable or necessary sequence carrying the hero from prosperity to adversity, or from adversity to prosperity—as the downfall of Oedipus in *Oedipus the King*, or his restoration to the favor of the gods in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Reversal is a change by which a course of action results in the opposite of the effect intended by the agent—as in *Oedipus the King* the Messenger intends to cheer Oedipus and free him from his fears by revealing his identity but instead hastens his fall into misery. Discovery is a change from ignorance to knowledge, and the most effective discovery, Aristotle concludes, is a recognition of identity accompanied by a reversal and a change of fortune, as in *Oedipus the King*.

Nothing in the later history of drama discredits Aristotle's main observations on the parts of Plot. Forms of drama to which his generalizations are inapplicable have appeared and enjoyed popularity, but only the hazier critics have mistaken these new forms for tragedy. The slice-of-life play, of which Gorki's *Lower Depths* is the archetype, always represents many actions instead of one action, and often derives its unity mainly from its setting. The expressionistic play, stemming from Strindberg's *Dream Play* and *Spook Sonata*, is composed of episodes which usually follow one another in a kaleidoscopic or dreamlike fashion quite unlike the probable or necessary sequence which events follow in the plots of effective tragedies. But Gorki, Strindberg, and their followers have artistic aims different from the aims of such

artists in tragedy as Aeschylus, Shakespeare, Goethe, Ibsen, and O'Neill; and their slice-of-life and expressionistic plays, when subjected to the Aristotelian method of study, reveal new principles of construction peculiarly suited to the achievement of the new aims. The emotional and intellectual effects of tragedy, however, still depend upon the sense of inevitability which the tragic dramatist conveys to the reader or spectator by unfolding the events of his plot in a probable or necessary sequence.

The later history of drama fully supports Aristotle's observation that Change of Fortune is the indispensable element of a tragic plot, and that the best plots combine a change of fortune with a reversal and a discovery. The best discoveries in later tragedies, it is true, do not always depend upon recognition of personal identity, as Aristotle thinks they should; but although the discoveries of the Elizabethan or modern hero may be intangible truths or values, they are nevertheless correctly described by his general definition of Discovery as a change from ignorance to knowledge. Similarly, although Sophocles prefers to use only a half-turn of the great wheel of fortune in each tragedy, representing the fall of Oedipus in one play and his subsequent rise in another, Shakespeare prefers a full turn of the wheel, representing in single plays the fall and rise of Lear and the rise and fall of Macbeth. These minor changes do not affect the validity of Aristotle's analysis of Plot; and any one who examines the plots of *King Lear*, of *Faust*, of *Hedda Gabler*, and of *Desire Under the Elms*, will find that, like the plot of *Oedipus the King*, their effectiveness mainly depends upon an artful combination of a change of fortune with a reversal and a discovery.

The more we are impressed by the brilliance of Aristotle's analysis of Plot,

however, the more we must be disappointed by his failure to expand his findings into a description of the tragic view of life. Since he asserts without reservation that Plot is the soul of tragedy, its animating principle, and since he considers the manner in which the incidents of the best plots mirror the events of life, we might expect that if ever he is to pose the question of the over-all meaning of tragedy, he will do so at this point in his discussion. Significantly, at this point we do find his famous assertion that poetry is more philosophical than history in that it stresses the universal rather than the particular.

Aristotle persists, however, in treating even the plot of his favorite tragedy as though its values were chiefly or altogether emotional. That *Oedipus the King* was his favorite we may infer from his comments on its qualities: he mentions Oedipus first in a list of personages suitable for treatment in perfect tragedies, and from the plot of the play he derives his first example of Reversal and his first example of the best kind of Discovery. Yet he analyzes the perfections of its plot only because they heighten the feelings excited by the downfall of Oedipus: the plot is so admirably constructed, he tells us, that a reader, or one who hears the play read, will experience the same intensities of pity and fear which affect one who sees the play enacted, with costuming and scenery, in the theatre.

How stultifying a preoccupation with the emotional effects of tragedy can be is evident from the fact that Aristotle fails to mention the reversal and the discovery which most clearly indicate the profound meaning of *Oedipus the King*. As his example of Reversal, he instances the recoil whereby the Messenger's attempt to cheer Oedipus produces the opposite

effect, a recoil which is accompanied by his example of the best kind of Discovery, the recognition by Oedipus of his true identity as the son of Laius and Jocasta. This combination is indeed emotionally exciting, but in the most wonderfully intricate of all plots it is merely a move toward the revelation of the best of all combinations. The supreme reversal in the tragedy is the recoil of events whereby Oedipus, who fled from Corinth to evade the oracle that he will kill his father and marry his mother, brings on his doom by his efforts to escape. The discovery which accompanies this supreme reversal is that he who seeks to evade the inevitable merely hastens its fulfillment, a proposition as profoundly significant as any in science or philosophy, and more convincingly demonstrated than most. To Oedipus, who at the end accepts the oracle as the will of the gods, this discovery is proof of his own responsibility for his fate; to the spectator who no longer believes in oracles it is nevertheless a light thrown upon the nature of whatever he accepts as the inevitable; but to Aristotle it is apparently a discovery in a realm in which the poet lacks authority.

When we seriously consider the tendency of poetry to express the universal, we find in tragedy, and particularly in the parts of Plot, an intellectually significant pattern which Aristotle overlooked. If poetry stresses the universal, then surely Change of Fortune, the indispensable part of the first element of tragedy, represents the fundamental condition of life, the essence of human destiny: good and evil are the necessary poles of experience, and no man may hope to enjoy life without paying the price in suffering. The main reversal in a great tragedy demonstrates that this fundamental condition of life is unalter-

able: when the hero attempts to evade it, an inevitable recoil of events hastens his fall into misery. Finally, the important discovery in every great tragedy is the revelation to the hero of some meaning in his fate and to the spectator of some of the fixed and universal conditions of human destiny.

THE IDEAL TRAGIC HERO

Aristotle considers five basic situations, involving various kinds of persons in changes of fortune, as possible material for tragic plots, rejecting the first three, praising the fourth as suitable for a perfect tragedy, and describing the fifth as a concession to the inferior taste of theatre-goers. (1) On two grounds he rejects the fall of a virtuous man from prosperity to adversity: first, it excites neither pity nor fear, and secondly, it is revolting to our moral sense. (2) Similarly, he rejects the rise of a bad man from adversity to prosperity because it neither satisfies the moral sense nor excites pity and fear. (3) On a single ground, however, he rejects the downfall of an utterly wicked man: although it satisfies the moral sense, it is neither pitiable nor terrible. (4) After these rejections there remains, he tells us, as intermediate between these extremes, the man, neither vicious and depraved nor eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune is brought on by some failure (*hamartia*) to find the path of wise and virtuous conduct. This situation is ideal, he maintains, for the downfall of such a man excites the pity which we feel for one whose great misfortune is unmerited and the terror which we feel in witnessing the misfortune of a man like ourselves. And presumably—although Aristotle does not say so—his change of fortune also satisfies our moral sense. (5) As a concession to the weakness of the audience, however, the dramatist often

chooses a story with a double thread of plot, in which the good personages rise and the bad fall. This is an inferior kind of drama, and more like comedy than tragedy.

Aristotle's description of the ideal tragic hero as an intermediate between the extremes of the eminently virtuous man and the utterly depraved man is confirmed by the distinction which we now make between melodrama and tragedy. In the black-and-white world of melodrama men are divided into two sharply opposed classes, represented by the unblemished hero and the unspeakable villain. In tragedy, however, the hero whose deeds match his intentions in goodness and the villain whose deeds reflect his evil intentions disappear, and are replaced by a single representative of mankind, a man whose intentions are always good, but whose judgment of what is the good for himself and for others is clouded by the urgencies of his appetites and passions. The first premise of melodrama is that there are two distinct kinds of men: the first premise of tragedy is that all men are essentially the same. That the *Poetics* foreshadows this distinction is evident from the fact that Aristotle rejects as unsuitable for tragedy all changes of fortune (1,2,3,5) involving melodramatic heroes and villains.

The changes of fortune which Aristotle rejects are not, however, all suitable for melodrama. Although they all involve either eminently virtuous or utterly vicious men, only two of them (3,5) provide a conclusion agreeable to our ingrained sense of justice. The first premise of melodrama may misrepresent the facts of life, but once it is accepted, it renders all conclusions save one unacceptable to our moral sense; consequently, every effective melodrama ends in the poetic justice which rewards the

innocent and punishes the guilty. Since they indicate that injustice prevails, the downfall of a good man (1) and the rise of a bad man (2) are effective in drama only as the bases for the problem and propaganda plays which incite the spectator to take action against the status quo in society. The overthrow of a villain (3) satisfies the demands of poetic justice, but since a villain's defeat is usually a hero's victory, the story with a double thread of plot, with appropriate rewards and punishments for the innocent and the guilty (5), is always the most effective material for popular melodrama.

How does tragedy itself satisfy our ingrained love of justice? Aristotle does not answer this question. Moreover, since his ethical views are set forth in detail in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he does not trouble in the *Poetics* to analyze or define the failure (*hamartia*) which he describes as the immediate cause of the hero's misfortune. Some interpreters of the *Poetics* have reduced tragedy to the level of melodrama by insisting that the hero's *hamartia* is a sin, and that our pleasure in tragedy is partly derived from our discovery of a condign punishment in the hero's downfall. The available evidence clearly indicates, however, that Aristotle found in tragedy a pleasure different from the pleasure afforded to moralizers by an instance of poetic justice. First, he attributes the pity properly excited by the best tragedies to the spectacle of a misfortune greater than the fault which is its cause. Secondly, he describes the best possible illustration of poetic justice (5) as a concession to the weakness of spectators. Finally, it is most unlikely that he, the author of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, could have failed to understand the true nature of the tragic hero's *hamartia*.

The final test of the good life, of hap-

pineness as it is described in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is completeness. Happiness or well-being (eudaimonia), the true aim of life, is to be found only in complete self-realization, in full participation in the activities proper to a human being. As eye, hand, foot, and all parts of the body have specific functions, and as the musician, the sculptor, and the artist have each a distinct function, so man must have a function which distinguishes him from other beings. This function cannot be merely living, for the life of nutrition and growth is shared even by plants; it cannot be life at the level of perception, for perception is a function of all animals: consequently, the true function of man must be activity which follows or implies a rational principle, for man is the only rational animal. The function of the good man is to perform in a great and noble manner activities involving reason: happiness may be found only in activity of soul in accordance with virtue. But, Aristotle tells us, the happy life is a complete life. One swallow does not make a summer, nor does one day; and one day, or a short time, does not make a man happy.

The good life requires moderation in those spheres of activity in which reason must co-operate with the appetites and passions. Here we must always aim at the golden mean which lies between the extremes of too little and too much, at the courage which is the mean between the extremes of cowardice and rashness, at the proper pride which lies between abject humility and vanity, at the temperance which lies between abstinence and indulgence, at the liberality which lies between miserliness and extravagance, at the friendliness which lies between surliness and obsequiousness. But since acts involving moral choice are always particular events, the mean between

too little and too much is always relative to the facts of a particular situation; consequently, its determination is no easy task.

Aristotle discusses important exceptions to his doctrines of the golden mean and the complete life. An exception to the doctrine of the golden mean is that no mean between too little and too much can be found in respect to certain passions and acts; as their names indicate, such passions as spite, shamelessness, and envy, and such actions as adultery, theft, and murder, are always bad. One cannot, for example, make adultery right by moderation, by committing it only with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way: it is always wrong. An exception to the doctrine of the complete life is that the doing of an unquestionably noble deed may be compensation for the loss of a complete life. If necessary, the good man will cheerfully sacrifice his life for his friend or for his country, for he will prefer one great and noble deed to many petty activities, and one year lived nobly to many years spent in routine affairs.

In respect to the moral virtues the *Nicomachean Ethics* is a philosophical refinement of the common sense which is based upon experience, particularly of that kind of common sense which evaluates the passing moment by the long view rather than the short view. Long before Aristotle, some sensible man coined the adage that one swallow does not make a summer, and generations of sensible men have since repeated it to make the point that a momentary pleasure may not lead to lifelong happiness. Like Aristotle, the sensible man condemns those acts which everywhere have a bad name and praises those acts which are everywhere regarded as noble. The moral problems of the sensible man are not raised by clear cases of vice and vir-

tue; they arise when he is confronted by the particular situations which require him to choose the mean between too little and too much, to discover the moderate course most likely to lead to the long and complete life which he prizes above all else. In short, Aristotle, the philosopher of common sense, is altogether worldly in the best sense of the word: his object is to attain the good here and now, not in the hereafter; his conception of the good includes the life of the appetites and passions as well as the life of reason; and his means of attaining the good, in so far as problems of moral virtue are involved, is chiefly the moderation which experience has proved the best course for one who aims at a long and complete life.

How, then, would the author of the *Nicomachean Ethics* regard the tragic hero and his *hamartia*? First, we must remember that for Aristotle the ideal tragic hero is not one whose misfortune is brought on by a vice which is everywhere regarded as a vice, nor is he one whose change of fortune consists in his laying down his life for his friend, or for his country, or in any similar act of unquestionable nobility. But if he is neither utterly depraved nor eminently virtuous, what is his outstanding trait? As we meet him in the world's great tragedies, he is, first and foremost, an extremist. To reach his goal, whatever it may be, he is always willing to sacrifice everything else, including his life. Oedipus will press the search for the unknown murderer, although he is warned of the consequences; Hamlet will prove the King's guilt and attempt to execute perfect justice, whatever the cost may be to his mother, to Laertes, to Ophelia, and to himself; Solness will climb the tower he has built, at the risk of falling into the quarry; Ahab will kill Moby Dick or die in the attempt. The usual conse-

quence of this heroic extremism is exactly what experience has taught the sensible man to expect: the tragic hero lives intensely but not long—his summer often ends with the first swallow. If we judge him by the standards of the ordinary sensible man, he fails, through a lack of moderation, to realize the supreme good of a long and complete life. And it is doubtless this failure which Aristotle has in mind when he ascribes the tragic hero's misfortune to his *hamartia*.

But although Aristotle correctly describes the ideal tragic hero, he fails to explain what John Dewey has called "the peculiar power of tragedy to leave us at the end with a sense of reconciliation rather than with one of horror." That tragedy has this power to make us feel that the conditions of life are as just as they are ineluctable countless other witnesses have testified. At points in the unfolding of a great tragedy we experience the pity and terror which, as Aristotle maintains, the misfortunes of men like ourselves normally excite, but these and other deep feelings which we experience as we follow the hero in his moments of glory and despair are at the end merged with our recognition of a pattern in the hero's fate into a total impression as significant as it is moving. And since meaning is as important a part of this total impression as feeling, a philosopher who limits his study of poetry to its emotional effects can never adequately explain the wonderful power of tragedy.

If we analyze those intellectual aspects of the total impression of tragedy which Aristotle neglects, we find that the ideal tragic hero's change of fortune may satisfy our sense of justice in at least three important ways. First of all, we discover in the intensity of the hero's experience a compensation for its lack of breadth

and duration. As Aristotle points out in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the good man who lays down his life for his friend prefers the intense satisfaction of a single noble deed to years of dull existence. The ideal tragic hero is not an eminently virtuous man, but he too prefers drinking the cup of life at a single draught to taking it in the manner of a valetudinarian sipping milk. Nor is any man free from the temptations of the extremist's attitude: many a lonely and unnoticed soul would gladly exchange the seemingly empty years ahead for the great moments of a Romeo or a Hamlet. And what can we say of their choice except that it is not the choice of the sensible man? Secondly, we discover a just balance between the depths of the hero's suffering and the heights of his joys. That the hero's joys and sorrows are equalized by his capacity for feeling, which is the same for one as it is for the other, we cannot doubt, for how can the bitterness of the loss of a Juliet, or of a kingdom, or of power, or of reputation, or of life itself, be measured except by the sweetness of possession? How much it means to the hero to possess what he prizes, so much the loss—no more, no less. Thirdly, the power of poetry to shadow forth the universal suggests to us, as we follow the fortunes of the hero, that in a correct reckoning one man is neither better off nor worse off than another. The hero's change of fortune, universalized, suggests that good and evil, the fundamental modes of experience, imply one another so necessarily that no one may hope to escape from the grief which is the counterpart of his gladness.

And it is this power of poetry to universalize—to present a tragic hero as the representative of mankind—which finally lifts us, as we witness the rise and fall of a man like ourselves, above envy and pity, filling us with a sense of an all-

prevailing justice which brings to every man equal measures of suffering and joy.

THE DEFINITION OF TRAGEDY

Aristotle's definition of tragedy epitomizes the virtues of his method and the weakness of his aim in the study of poetry. Since the definition appears in the *Poetics* near the beginning of the discussion of tragedy, and is followed by generalizations which seem to depend upon its acceptance, an unwary reader might mistakenly infer that these generalizations are consequences deduced from supposedly self-evident assumptions. The answer to such a misunderstanding of the Aristotelian method is to be found in the difference between the order of investigation and the order of demonstration. In his investigation of tragedy, Aristotle started by analyzing the available specimens into their distinguishable parts, proceeded by generalizing concerning the constituent elements of tragedy, and ended by synthesizing his findings in the definition. In demonstrating his results, however, he reverses the steps of investigation: in the *Poetics* he starts with his definition, proceeds by discussing the generalizations which it summarizes, and ends by supporting each generalization with examples chosen from particular tragedies. Properly understood, then, the definition marks the end of the investigation of tragedy and the beginning of the demonstration of its nature. But although the definition is the culmination of an admirable scientific method, its ending in a puzzling metaphor signalizes the inadequacy of Aristotle's attempt to explain tragedy by treating it as though it were charged with feeling but lacking in meaning.

"Tragedy," says Aristotle, "is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of adequate magnitude—in language embellished in different ways in

different parts—in the form of action, not of narration—through pity and terror effecting the purgation of these emotions.” Here we have the kind of logical definition, invented by Socrates and perfected by Aristotle, which first places the object to be defined in its proximate genus and then distinguishes it as a species by listing its specific differences. Like all other forms of poetry, tragedy is an imitation of an action: imitation is the genus to which tragedy, as one of the imitative arts, belongs. The action represented in a tragedy, however, has qualities which distinguish it from the actions represented in other arts and other kinds of poetry. It is serious, complete, and of adequate magnitude. A single incident of suffering or enjoying may serve as material for a lyric poem or a dramatic episode, but the action of a tragedy cannot be less than the series of incidents, in probable or necessary sequence, of a change of fortune. Unlike the little ups and downs of comedy, which can be laughable because they are trivial, the change of fortune of a tragedy is serious, with great and grave consequences; therefore, a tragedy loses effectiveness if its action is too brief to make a serious impression or too long for its incidents, which reveal the probability or necessity of the change of fortune, to be easily retained in memory. A (Greek) tragedy is composed of choral odes and dramatic episodes, and each of these is embellished in its own way, one with melody, the other with meter—a point which further distinguishes (Greek) tragedy from other kinds of (Greek) poetry. Tragedy is distinguished from epic and narrative poetry by its dramatic form: its main incidents are in the form of action taking place at the moment they are seen or read. And since (presumably) each kind of poetry is most clearly distinguished by the par-

ticular pleasure derived from its special emotional effects, a poem which meets the other tests may be positively identified as a tragedy by the pleasure it affords while purging us of the emotions of pity and terror.

Interest in Aristotle's definition has always centered on his concluding phrase—“through pity and terror effecting the purgation of these emotions”—on the famous metaphor which brings to an anticlimax a study which, had it been guided only by a scientific method, should have resulted in a clear, literal, and objective definition of tragedy. When we remember that Aristotle is necessarily defining only Greek tragedy in relation to Greek art and poetry, we must admit that the early parts of his definition possess the qualities of scientific description. The concluding phrase manifests, however, a sharp break with his method. From a consideration of those qualities of tragedy which may be objectively observed and analyzed, he turns suddenly to the effects of tragedy as they are subjectively experienced by the spectator. At the end of a series of generalizations, literally applicable to the individual tragedies from which they have been derived by induction, he falls back upon a metaphor suggested by the science and art of medicine.

Though it does not take us far, probably the only safe guide to the meaning of Aristotle's medical metaphor is the passage in the *Politics* in which he discusses the place of music in education. Many benefits, he tells us, are derived from music: some melodies are valuable aids in education; others offer relaxation and recreation after exertion; and still others offer a restoring and healing purgation to those who are troubled by an excess of such feelings as religious enthusiasm. This purgation, he goes on to say, is an important function of art;

through catharsis those who are especially susceptible to pity, fear, and enthusiasm, and all others in a lesser degree of intensity, find a pleasurable relief. That is all we find in the passage, except the promise that he will provide a fuller explanation of catharsis in his study of poetry.

Since the *Poetics*, as we know it, fails to keep this promise, some scholars have assumed that the part of the text containing the explanation has been lost. Several considerations suggest reasonable doubts concerning this possibility. Although parts of the *Poetics* may be missing, is it likely that the most important part should be lost and completely forgotten? And since Aristotle's promised explanation of catharsis would necessarily trace this mysterious effect to its causes, making possible a consideration of the relative effectiveness of these causes as they appear in particular tragedies, is it likely that Aristotle had worked out an explanation of how pity and terror are pleasurable purged and yet failed to use it or to refer to it in any of the many scattered passages in which he discusses how these emotions are effectively excited? It seems more likely that Aristotle, realizing that an explanation would raise the question of the meaning of tragedy, decided that his metaphor was by itself sufficiently clear to serve its purpose.

Although a metaphor is anticlimactic at the end of a scientific investigation, Aristotle's theory of catharsis, as it is explained in the passage in the *Politics*, admirably suits his purposes in the study of poetry. It answers Plato's extreme criticisms of poets and poetry. Poetry, Plato had charged, feeds the passions, which should be starved. Poetry, Aristotle seems to reply, provides a healthful emotional outlet, a beneficial mean between the dangerous extremes of surren-

der to passion and suppression of feeling. The poets, Plato had charged, are untrustworthy teachers. The poets, Aristotle seems to reply, are to be judged, not as teachers, but as contributors to the emotional well-being of mankind. Indeed, the theory of catharsis is Aristotle's solution to the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy: the poet is granted an honored function in the realm of the feelings, but the philosopher remains king in the realm of meaning.

If Aristotle's metaphor were altogether clear and illuminating, we might accept it as proof that philosophy and science must end, as they so often begin, in poetry. Instead of a clear and full illumination, however, it provides an intriguing and tantalizing partial illumination: in it we find the question to be answered rather than the answer to the question. This question presents an apparent paradox. The misfortunes of men like ourselves excite such unpleasant feelings as pity and terror, and yet the total effect of tragedy is pleasing. Aristotle recognizes this apparent paradox but fails to explain it. Although he discusses in detail the objective causes of the spectator's pity and terror, judging the suitability of heroes, of plots, and of the parts of plots by their effectiveness in exciting these emotions, he *nowhere* points out the cause or causes of the catharsis which supposedly transforms pity and terror into pleasure. His metaphor merely asserts that this transformation takes place; it contains no hint as to why it takes place. For this reason, scholars who accept Aristotle's metaphorical definition of tragedy are obliged to furnish their own explanations of its meaning, with the result that there are said to be now available more than sixty interpretations of the theory of catharsis.

The theory of catharsis, as Aristotle presents it, ignores the manifest inten-

tion of the Greek tragic poets to demonstrate the fundamental conditions of human destiny. Aeschylus, the inventor of tragedy, obviously regarded himself as a teacher of personal freedom and responsibility and his tragedies as striking illustrations of the divine justice which finally prevails in human affairs. Sophocles, by stressing the dignity and beauty of the heroic human spirit, taught a religious acceptance of ordained events, however terrible they may be. Euripides, the rebel and sceptic, was torn between a desire to equal the triumphs of his predecessors in demonstrating the justice of strange dooms and a desire to surpass them by using drama to expose the injustices of the status quo in society. Each poet developed a distinctive attitude or solution, but all aimed at the solution of one and the same problem, the problem of justice; and it would be ridiculous to say of any one of them that as an artist in tragedy his purpose was merely to play upon the emotions of the spectator or

to afford the spectator a healthful but inexplicable pleasure.

Aristotle's preoccupation with the emotional effect of poetry obliged him to ignore the plain and obvious fact that every true tragedy is a demonstration of the justice of the unalterable conditions of human experience. If he had been willing to admit that the reason that tragedy leaves us at the end with a sense of reconciliation rather than with one of horror is that it affects both the mind and the feelings by presenting a view of life in which the idea of justice is central, he might have avoided his puzzling and unsatisfactory metaphor and concluded his definition with a clear, literal, and objective statement of its essential quality. "Tragedy," *he might then have said*, "is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of adequate magnitude—in language embellished in different ways in different parts—in the form of action, not of narration"—*revealing a just relation between good and evil in the life of a representative man*.