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ARISTOTLE AND EPISODIC TRAGEDY*

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Introduction

It is no exaggeration to say that Aristotle's *Poetics* is one of the most influential documents in the history of Western tradition. Not only, after its re-discovery in the early sixteenth century, did it dominate literary theory and practice for no less than three hundred years. Even after it had lost its privileged status – first to the alternative theories of literature brought forth by the Romantic movement and then to the literary theory and practice of twentieth-century modernism – the *Poetics* still retained its role of the normative text in opposition to which those new theories were being formulated. It will suffice to bring to mind the explicitly non-Aristotelian theory of drama developed by Bertold Brecht to see that, even when rejected, it was the *Poetics* that dictated the agenda of the theorists.[1]

This has changed in the last thirty years, with the emergence of post-modern literary theory. Although in the questioning of the notions of closure, of artistic illusion, of unity of plot the post-modern theory owes much more than it cares to admit to such modernists as Brecht or Adorno and through them to Aristotle, the *damnatio memoriae* it has imposed on the *Poetics* is so thorough that some theorists seem to be hardly aware of the very fact of its existence. This is probably why many theorists, in their privileging of emotional distancing over identification, meta-theatrality over illusion, formal and semantic openness over determinacy and closure, find their models in Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and other non-Western literary traditions rather than in ancient Greece. That is to say, in so far as Aristotle is no longer considered relevant to literary theory, Greek

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[1] All the references are to J. Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre: the development of an aesthetic* (New York, 1964); on non-Aristotelian drama see especially pp. 46f. For a discussion of Brecht and Aristotle taking a view rather different from that advocated here see I. Lada, *Arethusa* 29 (1996), 87ff.

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literary tradition too is not considered relevant. The tacit presupposition on which this attitude is based is that Aristotle's *Poetics* adequately represents ancient Greek literary practice.

Only few writers beyond the field of Classical Studies are aware that the widespread view of Aristotle as a spokesman for the Greek literary tradition is manifestly incorrect. Nobody has made this point clearer than Gerald F. Else. I quote:

> The sum of the matter is that we cannot tell what proportion of all Greek tragedies exactly fitted Aristotle's prescriptions for the best plot, but it cannot have been more than a small fraction: perhaps as much as a tenth. Among the extant plays the proportion is spectacular: two (*Oedipus Rex* and *Iphigenia at Tauris*) out of 32 . . . Actually I believe that the fact is a damaging one to Aristotle's credit as a critic, no matter how one looks at it. His principles, which with his characteristic logic he has pushed to a radical conclusion, have led him into a *cul de sac*. They were based too narrowly to begin with, on his exaggerated and one-sided thesis of the overwhelming importance of plot as against all other elements; and their interlocking into the tight nexus we have described had the result of narrowing his scope still more . . . It so happened that the knife-edge of his judgment hit square on one masterpiece, the *Oedipus*; but the other play it hit upon, the *Iphigeneia*, cannot honestly be called much more than a good melodrama, and meanwhile masterpieces like the *Trojan Women* or the *Bacchae*, to say nothing of the *Oedipus at Colonus* or the *Agamemnon*, remain outside the range of Aristotle's formula. This is not the way one can arrive at an organic comprehension of the best of Greek drama. Tragedy in its greatest comported things that were not dreamt of in Aristotle's philosophy.[2]

A harsh verdict, to be sure, but hardly undeserved. If anything, it is perhaps even too restricted, for it is not only the *Trojan Women* and the *Bacchae*, the *Oedipus at Colonus* and the *Agamemnon* that Aristotle ignores or finds objectionable. He ignores the entire genre of lyric poetry and practically the entire oeuvre of Aeschylus, and he hardly even mentions the choral odes of tragedy. His comments on the so-called Cyclic epics are negative throughout. He has no patience with happy endings, as for example that of the *Odyssey*; with sudden changes of mind as in the *Iphigenia at Aulis*; with the *deus ex machina* as in the *Medea*.[3] And he strongly disapproves of episodic tragedy.

[2] G. F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), 446.

[3] On Aristotle's neglect of the chorus in tragedy and the first-person poetic genres in general see esp. S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London, 1986), 238ff., 276ff.; on the absence of lyric poetry from Aristotle's classification of literary genres see M. Finkelberg, *The Birth of Literary Fiction in Ancient Greece* (Oxford, 1998), 11, 196. Aristotle on the Cyclic epics: *Poet*. 1451a23–30, 1459a30–b7, 1460a5–11; on happy endings: 1453a12–39; on the *Iphigenia at Aulis*: 1454a31–6; on the *Medea*: 1454a37–b7. The only unambiguous references to the plays of Aeschylus are *Poet*. 1455a4 (the *Choephori*), 1456a3 (the *Prometheus*), 1456a17 (the *Niobe*), 1458b22 (the *Philoctetes*).

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In Aristotle's unflattering characterization, the episodic plot is one in which the unity of action is diluted, as it were, in a succession of single episodes which do not follow the strict logic of cause-and-effect relationship. To put it into his own words,

> I call a plot 'episodic' in which the episodes or acts succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence (οὗτ' εἰκὸς οὗτ' ἀνάγκη).[4]

As I will argue, in that it highlights his general strategies of inclusion and exclusion, Aristotle's treatment of episodic tragedy adumbrates what may be called the 'alternative poetics', which comes very close indeed to the basic tenets of contemporary literary theory.

1.

Among the extant tragedies, the *Prometheus Bound*, the *Trojan Women*, and the *Oedipus at Colonus* are thoroughly episodic, while many others display elements of episodic plot. Yet, strange as it may appear, there has been no comprehensive treatment of episodic tragedy, which in itself may well serve as yet another instance of Aristotle's all-pervasive influence on the classicists' agenda. One of the few students of Greek tragedy who did pay some attention to it was H. D. F. Kitto. In his *Greek Tragedy* Kitto argued that, although the episodic play certainly loses in terms of the unity of action, it gains in poetic intensity, in that logical sequence is subordinated to what he defined as 'the law of increasing tension'. In the course of his discussion of the *Prometheus Bound* he wrote:

> The choice of these [the episodes] and of their appearance is not arbitrary, but it is by no means inevitable; we cannot say that they come κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον, by Aristotle's law of inevitable or probable sequence. It would be possible and just as natural for Io to appear before Oceanus – but this does not involve Aristotle's censure of plays in which scenes could be transposed without making any difference. Aristotle's rule is not valid here. There is a law, but this is one of increasing tension, not of 'natural' or logical sequence. To transpose Oceanus and Io would outrage no logic – except the logic which makes Prelude precede Fugue and Scherzo follow Andante.

[4] *Poet*. 1451b35. Tr. S. H. Butcher. As M. Heath, *Unity in Greek Poetics*, (Oxford, 1989), 49ff., points out, the term *epeisodion* as such is used by Aristotle in a much more comprehensive sense than his discussion of 'episodic' plots may allow us to suggest: it designates both purely quantitative parts of tragedy, the 'acts', and, in connection with epic, digressions from the main narrative which do not interfere with the unity of the plot. Cf. also E. S. Belfiore, *Tragic Pleasures. Aristotle on Plot and Emotion* (Princeton, 1992), 121f. (with bibliography).

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In his discussion of the *Trojan Women*, Kitto refers to such an arrangement of episodes as 'essentially lyrical in conception'.[5] As we shall see immediately, there is much more in this than just an analogy with another literary genre.

As far as I can see, the pattern of composition on which the episodic plot is based can be traced back to the traditional poetic form of priamel. The latter can be characterized as follows. Various illustrations of the same idea are considered one by one, to be either explicitly or implicitly rejected, until we arrive at the closing unit which is the object of the entire sequence. The simplest example is Sappho's 'Some think a fleet, a troop of horse or soldiery the finest sight in all the world; but I say, what one loves'. Consider also such more elaborate instances as the hierarchy of water, gold, and the Olympian Games in the definition of *ariston*, given in the opening lines of Pindar's *First Olympian*, or the opening of Tyrtaeus' famous elegy, where athletic excellence, physical strength, beauty, wealth, royal power, and rhetorical skill are juxtaposed as all too imperfect embodiments of *aretê*, thus preparing the ground for the identification of the latter with the military valour of the hoplite soldier.[6]

The pattern in question is especially characteristic of the arrangement of stanzas in the choral ode. Take for example the Fourth Stasimon of the *Antigone*, set as the Chorus' reaction to Antigone's imprisonment. The ode introduces three mythological examples each of which is a variation on the theme of imprisonment: the first strophe treats the imprisonment of Danae, the first antistrophe that of the Thracian king Lycurgus, and the second strophe and antistrophe apparently deal with the imprisonment of Boreas' daughter Cleopatra by her former husband Phineus and his wife (lines 944ff.). According to the interpretation proposed by Maurice Bowra, the three stories are offered as different ways of looking at Antigone's situation. Not all Sophoclean scholars would agree with this line of interpretation,[7] but when the ode is read in the perspective of the pattern discussed above, it becomes possible to see that the same 'law of increasing tension' is at work in this case as well. Namely, while Danae's imprisonment is

[5] H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (London, 1961[3]), 58f., 215. On the episodic structure of the *Trojan Women* see also R. Meridor, *SCI* 11 (1991/92), 2 (with bibliography); on the *Prometheus Bound* cf. Heath (n. 4), 49.

[6] Sappho 16.1ff. Page; Pindar, *O.* 1.1ff. Snell-Maehler; Tyrt. 12.1ff. West.

[7] See e.g. M. Griffith (ed.), *Sophocles. Antigone* (Cambridge, 1999), 284: 'Interpretations that try to find a common thematic denominator, and/or a common moral, in the three *exempla*, all run into the problem that the narratives are so varied – not to say contradictory.' Cf. C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford, 1944), 105.

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similar to that of Antigone in that both are undeserved but dissimilar in that it has a happy ending, and Lycurgus' is similar in that both end unhappily but dissimilar in that it is deserved, Cleopatra's imprisonment provides the exact parallel to that of Antigone in that both are undeserved and end unhappily; in addition, in evoking the fact that in Cleopatra's case those guilty of the undeserved imprisonment were eventually punished, the last example foreshadows both Antigone's death and Creon's penalty.[8] That is to say, although the stanzas exhibit no causal relationship, the ode works quite effectively as a symbolic counterpart to Antigone's story.

This was obviously not good enough for Aristotle. No wonder, therefore, that early tragedy, with Aeschylus as its most prominent representative, is hardly mentioned in the *Poetics*. The choral parts of the plays are also practically ignored. The reason is obvious: from the point of view of the plot, the choral parts do not fall under the law of probability and necessity and are therefore also 'episodic'. The same would be true of other 'disruptive' elements in Greek drama of which Aristotle explicitly disapproved, such as the sudden change of mind or *deus ex machina*. In other words, not only the episodic tragedy as such but also all the elements of plot structure that earned Aristotle's disapproval are in fact different aspects of one and the same kind of composition, which we may tentatively identify as 'episodic'.

This is not yet to say that Aristotle sees plot as important in its own right. His criteria for the best plot, in that they interlock into what Else refers to as the 'tight nexus' of ignorance → *hamartia* → reversal → recognition → knowledge, allow for the creation of a full-scale illusion of real-life experience and, as a result, for the audience's emotional identification with the characters.[9] Only such emotional identification would lead to the proper tragic pleasure that Aristotle seeks. In so far as it disrupts the tight cause-and-effect sequence of events, episodic plot breaks the dramatic illusion, prevents the spectator's or the reader's emotional identification with the characters, and thus precludes tragedy from fulfilling its edifying function. To put it in modern terms, the episodic plot creates what is sometimes called 'emotional distancing'. In that it forces the spectator or the reader to become estranged from the fictional action, such emotional distancing encourages the audience to retain its critical judgment vis-à-vis the dramatic illusion.

[8] For a similar arrangement of stanzas see e.g. Aesch., *Choephori* 585–651, with A. F. Garvey (ed.), *Aeschylus. Choephori* (Oxford, 1986), 202f.

[9] On the connection between plot and emotion in the *Poetics* see especially Belfiore (n. 4), 57f.

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Thus, in that it highlights the most characteristic features of all that does not fit into his formula of the effective plot, episodic tragedy becomes the quintessential target of Aristotle's criticism. So much so that in *Metaphysics N* we find:

> It is reasonable to suggest on the basis of its manifestations that nature does not act episodically, like a bad tragedy (*οὐκ ἔοικε δ' ἡ φύσις ἐπεισοδιώδης οὖσα ἐκ τῶν φαινομένων, ὥσπερ μοχθηρὰ τραγῳδία*).[10]

More than anything else, this passage indicates how deeply the issue of episodic tragedy was rooted in Aristotle's mind. On another occasion, in *Metaphysics Λ*, he writes:

> And those who say mathematical number is first and go on to generate one kind of substance after another and give different principles for each, make the substance of the universe a series of episodes (*ἐπεισοδιώδη*) – for one substance has no influence on another by its existence or non-existence – and they give us many principles; but the world must not be governed badly.[11]

In both cases, the target of Aristotle's criticism, the 'they' of *Metaphysics Λ*, is Plato and his school, and it is indeed to Plato that I now turn.

2.

As is well known, Aristotle expresses opinions opposite to those of Plato on practically every question concerning poetry. In view of this, it would be hard not to agree with those who see in Aristotle's *Poetics* a direct answer to the theory of poetry developed by Plato.[12] Aristotle thoroughly revises Plato's ideas on poetry and comes to conclusions directly opposite to those of his predecessor. He does follow Plato in assuming mimesis as a basis for his poetics, but whereas Plato regarded mimesis as the art of producing phantoms of reality, for Aristotle, not committed to Plato's ontology, it is an art that enables the representation of the universal, purified of the accidental aspects of empirical reality. In other words, Aristotle uses Plato's view of

[10] *Met.* 1090b19f. My translation.

[11] *Met.* 1075b37–1076a4. Tr. W. D. Ross. Cf. Belfiore (n. 4), 122: 'Because it is not in fact "episodic", but is governed by one first principle according to which everything contributes to everything else, nature, in Aristotle's view, is like a tragedy that imitates one whole action, whose parts cannot be changed or removed without making a difference to the whole.'

[12] See S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (New York, 1951⁴), 158ff., 203ff., 220ff.; Else (n. 2), 97ff., 306, and *passim*; D. W. Lucas, *Aristotle. Poetics* (Oxford, 1968), 228, 235ff., 299; Halliwell, (n. 3), *passim*; R. Janko, *Aristotle. Poetics* (Indianapolis/Cambridge, 1987), x ff.; Finkelberg (n. 3), 10f., 17, 189f., 199ff.

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poetry as a mimetic art to build a hierarchy of preferences directly opposed to Plato's. Thus, while Plato considered tragedy the least acceptable of all literary genres, for Aristotle it was the most acceptable; while Plato faulted Homer for the considerable part played by impersonation in his poems, Aristotle saw this as one of Homer's greatest virtues; while Plato thought poetry has a harmful effect on the soul in that it feeds the emotions that destroy its rational part, in Aristotle's eyes the emotions aroused by poetry have a purifying effect on the soul, and so on. To borrow Else's formulation, 'Aristotle puts highest what Plato puts lowest'.[13]

There can be no doubt that Plato's views of mimetic poetry acted as the groundwork for Aristotle's *Poetics*. But there can equally be no doubt that the *Poetics* in turn acted as what Richard Janko defined as 'reformulation and reversal of Plato's position'.[14] Like Aristotle afterwards, Plato knew only too well that, in virtue of its ability to cause the audience to identify themselves with the characters, mimetic poetry, and especially mimetic drama, exerts a profound emotional influence on the human soul. Thus, he writes in *Republic* 10:

> I think you know that the very best of us, when we hear Homer or some other of the makers of tragedy imitating one of the heroes who is in grief, and is delivering a long tirade in his lamentations or chanting and beating his breast, are delighted, and abandon ourselves and follow the action, suffering together with the characters (*χαίρομέν τε καὶ ἐνδόντες ἡμᾶς αὐτοὺς ἑπόμεθα συμπάσχοντες*), and eagerly praise as an excellent poet the one who most strongly affects us in this way.[15]

'We are delighted, and abandon ourselves and follow the action, suffering together with the characters' – this description not only gives a clear idea of the degree of emotional involvement experienced when Homer and tragedy were being performed but also leaves no doubt that this emotional involvement was felt as especially enjoyable.

Aristotle believed that if the action represented in poetry is of the right, 'philosophical', kind, the emotions of fear and pity aroused in an audience who are fully absorbed in the action would purge the soul and thus allow an ordinary man, by sharing for a while the edifying experience of the characters, to arrive at the kind of pleasure which comes as close as possible to the pure cognitive pleasure experienced by the philosopher. Plato, on the other hand, interpreted this very experience as contamination of the soul by emotions. To quote *Republic* 10 again:

[13] Else (n. 2), 98.
[14] Janko (n. 12), xiv.
[15] *Rep.* 605d. Tr. P. Shorey, slightly changed. Cf. J. Herington, *Poetry into Drama. Early Tragedy and the Greek Poetic Tradition* (Berkeley, 1985), 10ff.

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. . . the part of the soul which in the former case, in our own misfortunes, was forcibly restrained, and which has always hungered for tears and a good cry and satisfaction, because it is its nature to desire these things, is the very element in us that the poets satisfy and delight (*τὸ ὑπὸ τῶν ποιητῶν πιμπλάμενον καὶ χαίρον*), while the best element in our nature, since it has never been properly educated by reason or even by habit, now relaxes its guard over the plaintive part, inasmuch as it is being engaged in contemplating the sufferings of others and it is no shame to itself to praise and pity another who, claiming to be a good man, abandons himself to excess in his grief – on the contrary, it thinks that this vicarious pleasure is so much clear gain (*ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνο κερδαίνειν ἡγεῖται, τὴν ἡδονήν*), and would not consent to forfeit it by disdaining the poem altogether.[16]

One of the founders of the genre of soap opera in Latin America, Felix B. Caignet, put the same idea in much simpler terms: 'The audience wants to cry, and I take it upon myself to give them the excuse.'[17]

But Plato was also an accomplished writer, and his dialogues give us an opportunity to look at the way in which this arch-enemy of mimesis handled mimetic representation in his own writings. As could only be expected, the pattern of composition that he chooses to exploit in his more complex and artistically elaborate dialogues is that of episodic plot. The *Gorgias*, the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus* – all these dialogues are built as cumulative episodic sequences in which the transition from one episode to another only too rarely follows the cause-and-effect order. Accordingly, it is the readers themselves who have to supply the missing logical links. Think for example of the famous Palinode, Socrates' abrupt change of mind in the *Phaedrus*, which does not fall short of the heroine's change of mind in the *Iphigenia at Aulis* that was so severely criticized by Aristotle; of the *Gorgias'* series of exchanges between Socrates and Gorgias, Socrates and Polus, and Socrates and Callicles, which displays a dramatic sequence closely similar to that of *Prometheus Bound* and other episodic plays;[18] or of the *Rashomon*-like array of loosely connected speeches, each presenting a different view of the nature of Eros, which constitutes the *Symposium*.[19]

Moreover, Plato's dialogues are metapoetical throughout. They

[16] *Rep.* 606 a–b.

[17] Quoted from Ambrosio Fornet, 'Bertold Brecht's Astuteness', *CubaNow*, 15 March 2004 (www.cubanow.net).

[18] This point was first suggested to me by Deborah Gera.

[19] On the structure of the *Phaedrus* see especially C. J. Rowe, *Plato: Phaedrus* (Warminster, 2000), 7ff.; on the *Gorgias*, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* see R. B. Rutherford, *The Art of Plato. Ten Essays on Platonic Interpretation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 141ff., 260ff.

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abound in self-referential remarks, multiple dramatic frames, intertextual allusions – in short, in all those devices which, in that they prevent the work of art from consolidating into a single all-engulfing whole, destroy the illusion that a mimetic representation naturally tends to create and thus also have a marked 'episodic' effect.[20] As far as I can see, Plato was the first who consciously employed such devices as a remedy against readers' emotional identification with the characters which would result in their passive acceptance of everything they find in a work of fiction. It is Plato therefore who should be considered the first representative of the anti-Aristotelian theory of poetry, even if he expressed these ideas several decades before the *Poetics* was written.

3.

This is not to say that emotional distancing, which plays such an important role in modern and post-modern literary theory, was invented by Plato. As Niall Slater has reminded us only recently, Old Attic Comedy, for one, with its highly developed self-referentiality, was exactly such a distancing medium. It is indeed only rarely taken into account that artistic illusion is not a given but, rather, a cultural convention which, like any other convention, is ineffective unless socially interiorized. Slater's caveat seems to be in place here:

> Earlier discussions of metatheatre in ancient comedy have been heavily influenced by peculiarly nineteenth-century notions of illusion. Thus some acknowledge the presence of metatheatre only when the audience is addressed directly (ὦνδρες and the like) or when a character on stage refers explicitly to a piece of stage machinery such as the *ekkyklema*, thereby 'breaking the illusion' of the stage world. Such a view implies that this 'illusion' is somehow prior, the natural state of affairs on stage, into which metatheatre is a later and artificial intrusion. This view suppresses the fact that illusion itself is an artifice. A sustained, illusionistic representation of character and situation is a creation of a particular, historical moment. It is a convention, an agreement or contract (usually implicit but sometimes explicitly negotiated) between performers and audience on certain expectations about character and action.[21]

[20] On Plato's narrative strategies in the *Symposium* and other dialogues see now R. Hunter, *Plato's Symposium* (Oxford, 2004), 20ff.

[21] N. W. Slater, *Spectator Politics: Metatheatre and Performance in Aristophanes* (Philadelphia, 2002), 3. On similar tacit assumptions regarding literary unity see Heath (n. 4), 150; on the poets' and the audiences' strategies of bridging over the gaps in plausibility inherent in any fictional narrative see R. Scodel, *Credible Impossibilities: Conventions and Strategies of Verisimilitude in Homer and Greek Tragedy* (Stuttgart, 1999). Cf. also M. Finkelberg, 'The City Dionysia and the Social Space of Attic Tragedy', forthcoming in J. Davidson, F. Muecke, P. Wilson (eds.), *Greek Drama III* (London, 2006), 23f.

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We have seen that not only Old Comedy but also not a few tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides in fact did not follow the rules of strictly illusionist representation. Even more significantly, until quite recently the non-illusionist representation seems to have been the norm in non-Western traditions. It is not for nothing that Brecht found in the Chinese theatre, with its tradition of performance in which the actor, rather than identifying with the character, 'limits himself from the start to simply quoting the character played',[22] a welcome antidote to the illusionist performance traditions of the West. The distancing practices of both actors and audience in the Japanese traditional theatre and the highly elaborate metapoetic principles characteristic of the literary traditions of India point in the same direction. It appears, therefore, that, when taken in a broader historical perspective, it is the episodic plot, and the non-illusionist representation it involves, that proves to be the normal practice, whereas the principles on which the *Poetics* is based are idiosyncratic. This brings us back to the specific historical context in which the *Poetics* belongs.

As I argued elsewhere, Athens of the second half of the fifth century BC was the place where for the first time literary fiction was consolidated as an independent sphere, irreducible to any other sphere of human activity.[23] The recognition of the fact that fiction created a new cultural space that needed its own nomenclature was signalled, among other things, by the famous definition of tragedy given by Gorgias:

> Tragedy is a deception (*apatê*) in which the deceiver is more just than one who did not deceive, and the deceived is more wise than one who was not deceived.[24]

As Gorgias' words indicate, the Athenian festivals in the course of which tragedy was performed created an audience sophisticated enough to demand from what was presented on the tragic stage a degree of artistic illusion allowing for the spectators' emotional identification with the characters.[25] To quote Gorgias again,

[22] Brecht in Willett (n. 1), 94.

[23] Finkelberg (n. 3), 172ff. A. Ford, *The Origins of Criticism. Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton, 2002), 229ff., locates this development in the first half of the fourth century.

[24] *Gorgias* 82 B 23 DK. My translation.

[25] Cf. A. Bierl, *GRBS* 31 (1990), 367f., commenting on the tragic *apatê*: 'The precondition of the function of theatre is an agreement between poet and audience on the process of communication. The poet must have the ability to exert "deception" on the public; but the public must be willing to be "deceived", that is to become involved in the illusion the poet produces.' See also Scodel (n. 21).

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There comes over the audience of poetry a fearful horror and tearful pity and doleful yearning (*καὶ φρίκη περίφοβος καὶ ἔλεος πολύδακρυς καὶ πόθος φιλοπενθής*). By means of the discourse their spirit feels a personal emotion (*ἴδιόν τι πάθημα*) on account of the good and bad fortune of others (*ἐπ' ἀλλοτρίων τε πραγμάτων καὶ σωμάτων*).[26]

Gorgias addresses the illusionist tendencies that started to develop in the performance of Homer and tragedy in the fifth century BC. In the fourth century these tendencies became predominant. The Old Attic Comedy, with its face-to-face contact with the audience, gave place to the Middle and New Comedy, which was much closer to such favourites of Aristotle as *Iphigenia at Tauris* than to the comedies of Aristophanes. 'From Greek New Comedy descends a long and rich tradition in western comedy, whose variations still play themselves out on stage and screen . . . Most of these plays rely on a sentimental identification of audience with the play's participants and avoid any disruption of that identification with a stage illusion.'[27] The illusionistic trends in fourth-century Greek painting and sculpture may also be mentioned in this connection.[28] Plato's criticism of mimetic poetry and painting in *Republic* 10 and of mimetic sculpture in *Sophist* 335–40 emerged as a direct reaction to these developments, and it was these developments again that Aristotle's theory of mimesis apparently addressed. A fragment from the *Women at the Dionysia* by the Middle Comedy poet Timocles, in which a character discusses how watching the mythological plots of tragedy brings comfort and consolation to the audience in their personal sorrows, points in the same direction.[29] It was above all this audience whose demands prescribed much of what was happening on the Attic stage. As far as our evidence goes, these demands can be epitomized in two words – 'illusion' (*apatê*) and 'pleasure' (*hêdonê*).[30]

[26] Gorg. 82 B 11. 9 DK. Tr. O. Taplin.

[27] Slater (n. 21), 7. See also N. W. Slater, 'The Fabrication of Comic Illusion', in G. W. Dobrov (ed.), *Beyond Aristophanes. Transition and Diversity in Greek Comedy* (Atlanta, 1995), 29ff.

[28] On painting see e.g. G. M. A. Richter, *A Handbook of Greek Art. A Survey of the Visual Arts of Ancient Greece* (Oxford, 1987), 277f.; on sculpture see J. J. Pollitt, *Art and Experience in Classical Greece* (Cambridge, 1972), 157ff., 174ff.

[29] 6 K.-A. 8ff. For the discussion see Slater (n. 27), 34f.

[30] Cf. Easterling in P. E. Easterling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1997), 214. Commenting on the power of the ancient theatre to influence mass audiences, Easterling brings forward a quotation from the pseudo-Platonic *Minos* (321), where tragedy is described as the branch of poetry 'most delightful to the mass of the people (*dêmoterpestaton)* and most powerful in its appeal to the emotions (*psuchagôgikôtaton*)'.

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4.

Thus, when placed within its historical context, the *Poetics*, with its privileging of illusionism in art and its popular if not populist stance proves to be strongly rooted in the time and place of its composition. Yet it was the historic circumstances of its reception in early modern Europe and the ensuing worldwide dominance of Western cultural tradition that determined the all-pervasive influence of the *Poetics* not only on Western but eventually also on non-Western literary theory and practice. Should we infer from this that, in so far as he discovered how our natural response to representation in art may be most effectively exploited, Aristotle benefited humanity with a magic formula of everlasting significance – 'the greatest invention of the Western culture', as Orhan Pamuk called 'this newfangled plaything called the novel', in itself yet another offshoot of the illusionist literary tradition stimulated by the *Poetics*?[31] Or does the eclipse of the *Poetics* in recent decades indicate that, together with the literary practice it stimulated, it was only a passing episode in the history of literature? And, if the latter, should we regard this as a welcome development?

It is hardly a secret that the spheres in which the principles of the *Poetics* are still valid are first and foremost those of commercial fiction, the film industry, and TV, whereas Platonic 'episodic' poetics is more at home in contemporary literary theory, as well as in so-called 'high literature' and non-commercial cinema. This situation obviously has its dangers, which have been discerned, among others, by such distinguished literary theorists as Hans Robert Jauss and Umberto Eco. Thus, in his 'Levels of Identification of Hero and Audience', Jauss wrote:

> And at the other extreme are the demands made by experimental art upon education, knowledge of interpretative techniques, and sheer perseverance, demands which can be met only by an exclusive circle of receivers. The dismantling of narrative functions can lead to a linguistic experiment void of content, 'réification' can lead to a monotonous ascetism of perception, obscurity can lead to the directionlessness of arbitrary decipherability, and in all of these cases one frequently sacrifices that last scrap of power to interest which remains necessary even when the reader is supposed to become the main character himself, even when he himself must put on the abandoned identity of the missing hero or that of the very author. The boundary of aesthetic indifference cannot be violated with impunity.[32]

[31] Quoted from R. Wright, *TLS* 10 October 1997, p. 23. On the *Poetics* and the novel see Finkelberg (n. 3), 193ff.

[32] *New Literary History* 8/9 (1973/74), 316.

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Consider also the following passage from Eco's 'Thoughts on Aristotle's *Poetics*':

> Even the refusal of the novel Nouveau Roman to make us experience pity and terror becomes exciting against our deep conviction that a story must produce pity and terror. And thus biology exacts its revenge. If literature does not supply us with plots, we find them in American made-for-television films or by default on the front page in the news stories from Kuwait.[33]

Or, in Aristotle's words, 'Nature does not act episodically, like a bad tragedy'. It seems indeed that the examples of Plato and Aristotle are still relevant, in that they offer two alternative ways in which the tastes of the mass audience can be approached. Plato's rejection of tragedy as a low form of art is especially illuminating in this respect. That is to say, the Platonic way is to perpetuate the gap between the so-called 'high' and 'low' culture, the gap that has already pushed the mimetic art of our days into the narrow slot of the 'made-for-television films' to which Eco refers. The Aristotelian way is to exploit the tendencies that, as Plato also recognized, are inherent in our response to the mimetic art, and to cultivate the latter as a form of art that is both intellectually satisfying and aesthetically enjoyable. As far as I can see, this is the lesson that Aristotle's *Poetics* can still teach us.

[33] In C.-A. Mihailescu and W. Hamarneh (eds.), *Fiction Updated: Theories of Fictionality, Narratology, and Poetics* (Toronto and Buffalo, 1990), 236. Cf. also Scodel (n. 21): 'In trivializing credibility, criticism denies experience, for even though talking about the plausibility of fictions is not at all fashionable, almost everyone does it. While the academy does not interest itself in the practical credibility of narratives, audiences regularly make three demands of any narrative: that it be interesting, that it be credible, and that it be morally acceptable. Even very sophisticated readers and writers do not stop caring about credibility'.

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