

## Aristotle's *Poetics* and Aristotle's Nature

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I was taught that the *Poetics* results from Aristotle's empiricism, that as Francis Fergusson puts it, Aristotle "starts with works of art he knew well, and tries to see in them what the poet was aiming at, and how he puts his play or poem together."<sup>1</sup> The more contemporary view is that Aristotle's generalizations about drama are derived from the nature of the subject, not from a study of particular works.<sup>2</sup> What follows is based on the conviction that the *Poetics* can also be understood as following logically from Aristotle's work in natural science.<sup>3</sup>

Only a small portion of Aristotle's work is concerned with what he called productive science, the art of making things like houses and plays. Aristotle was also interested in practical science, which is concerned with how people are to act in various circumstances, and with theoretical science, which includes mathematics, theology and natural science. Indeed, the greatest part of Aristotle's life was devoted to the study of natural science including areas we would now call meteorology, chemistry, physics, psychology, and biology. Fully a third of Aristotle's work was in biology.

John Herman Randall argues that all of Aristotle's thought is primarily functional and biological; that Aristotle aimed above all at understanding life, particularly human life: "His whole philosophy is built around the categories of life."<sup>4</sup> In keeping with this idea, I argue that the *Poetics*, now regarded as a relatively late work, can be usefully interpreted in light of Aristotle's understanding of natural science, particularly biology. Because art, according to Aristotle, is to imitate nature's way of acting, the conviction that we can analyze much of the *Poetics* in terms of what he took to be nature's processes should not be very surprising. But to my knowledge, the relationship between Aristotle's science and his *Poetics* has not been made explicit.

So profound has been the influence of Aristotle's dramatic theory over the last four hundred years that contemporary theatre which violates its principles

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is referred to as “anti-theatre,” and is thought to be anti-reality. Critic Ronald Hayman, for instance, presumes that contemporary theatre, “anti-theatre,” is “hostile to reality, though the anti-world it creates can never provide a viable alternative to reality.”<sup>5</sup> Such presumption shares Aristotle’s common sense idea that reality is a given, our means of knowing what it is and of representing it not problematic. But, I argue elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> contemporary theatre like contemporary science, challenges that idea. And it calls upon us to make explicit the view of nature implicit everywhere in Aristotle’s aesthetic.

Aristotle’s underlying assumption about art is that it is continuous with nature and that all principles of explanation must find illustration in the works of both nature and art. Aristotle understood “art” to mean the making of something, the realizing of some form in some matter. Nature is the great maker or artist. Human artists, like nature, also make something, realize some form in some matter. The only difference between nature and the human artists is that nature makes something out of its own materials, whereas human artists make something out of some materials outside themselves.<sup>7</sup> Human production, art, is for Aristotle the clearest illustration of what a natural process is, of what nature can do. It is the most complex, and in a sense the most successful instance of nature at work, carrying nature’s enterprises to their most successful fulfillment. Hence many comments about the making of art are to be found in the *Physics*, which is Aristotle’s philosophical introduction to the concepts of natural science and as much an analysis of the “process by art” as of any other natural process, and in the *Metaphysics*, Book Theta, which is an analysis of what is involved in any process or *kinesis*.

John Herman Randall sees Aristotle’s endeavors to be centered on knowing three things: living, knowing, and talking—knowing and talking being the distinctive attributes of human life.<sup>8</sup> I here borrow Randall’s categories showing that the thought in the *Poetics* can be understood to follow from Aristotle’s ideas about living, knowing, and talking.

## I. LIVING

### A. ACTION

Aristotle believed the subject matter of natural science to be motion. By motion he meant any transition from potential to actual being: a change from one state of affairs to another. For Aristotle, nature is a principle of movement.<sup>9</sup> The wide scope of the Aristotelian concept of motion is perpetuated in the later scholastic adage: “who knows not motion knows not nature.” But since Aristotle wants most of all to understand life, his account of change must explain what he considers to be the characteristic change of earthly living things, namely, developmental change. He wants to understand the “motion” of eggs, not just of billiard balls.

The most complex and developed forms of change and motion are living and knowing. It is these above all other motions that science must explain. Not accidentally, it is also these which drama imitates. All art, according to Aristotle, imitates human life—not its outward acts, but these as they

represent spiritual movements, the activity of the soul. Landscape and animals, then, are not thought of as objects of aesthetic imitation.<sup>10</sup> If, furthermore, "poetry imitates men who *live at the level of action*, for whom action is the goal and the principle of life: 'men in action,' but also 'men of action,'" <sup>11</sup> then evidently, drama is the most satisfying of the arts. And plot, which is character in action, is more important than character. Action, however, should not be understood in any shallow sense: what human beings delight in is imitation of human powers of operation. Of these, knowing is one of the most important, for it is the nature of a human being to seek knowledge; and recognition, which is the representation of the character's coming to know, plays an important part in the best dramas and is closely allied with the reversal. The best drama necessarily entails growth and development of character.

Aristotle's concept of action in drama has its primary characteristics in common with the primary characteristics of his concept of motion in nature. Each is central to the analysis of the matter at hand. Each, as I show, is understood as an innate principle, a way of acting, a finite process defined by its end, determinate, continuous in time, and unified.

Given Aristotle's idea of nature as change or process and his idea that drama is an imitation of nature, that is of an action, a complex human motion, we should not be surprised that among the arts his first interest is in the drama, nor that in the drama the first principle is plot. According to him, all the poetic arts imitate action but drama evidently reproduces it most completely.

#### I. CAUSALITY

Nature is an innate impulse toward movement.<sup>12</sup> The distinction Aristotle draws between natural and manufactured objects lies precisely in that: elements and their compounds, and animals initiate movement from within.<sup>13</sup> Aristotle is interested in human beings, not as they are buffeted about by forces external to them but as their actions arise from within them. The concept of human powers of operation means that the source or origin of the movement is innate to the characters represented. This internal principle of movement he calls the soul.<sup>14</sup> Motion is the actualization of what is potential: the oak tree is the acorn's power realized. "The germ is the ruling influence and fabricator of the offspring."<sup>15</sup> There is thus continuity in the human personality; it has a single identity throughout its existence. A person will change and develop but that development can be understood as that which would arise necessarily or probably. Behavior can be analyzed causally. In the drama the agents' dispositions are revealed by their choices and refusals. The analysis of nature in terms of cause explains why Aristotle asserts that "the character will be good if the purpose is good."<sup>16</sup> Plot is the principle of motion in the play, its soul, as it were. To understand the action, the analysis of plot, like that of each character, must be causal.

#### 2. TELEOLOGY

The nature of a thing is its power of acting in a specific determinate way. Motion is the realization of the form or the purpose of potential being. The

nature of a thing is identical with the end toward which it is moving. Life is to be understood not in terms of its elements and origins alone but in terms of its ends. Aristotle's concept of nature is teleological. What each thing is when fully developed is its nature. "Life consists in action and its end is a mode of action, not a quality . . . and the end is the chief thing of all."<sup>17</sup> We can readily understand Aristotle's preference for the dramatic action which is done rather than contemplated and not done.

To the whole of nature there is an unconscious purpose: the highest good is immanent in the world as its intelligible order and transcends the world as its ideal end. The logical moves the world. The things which come to be by natural processes all exhibit in their coming to be a uniformity either absolute or highly regular. Nature always does the best among possible courses. As nature is orderly so should drama be. Within that which is shown there should be nothing illogical. Everything should follow necessarily or probably; art should be controlled as if by a ruling force of nature.

The purposes of nature are not only logical but ethical. While each thing can be good according to its kind, that drama is best which imitates noble actions, and the highest in nature, because these are finally the truest representations of nature's efforts. Tragedy represents persons of superior moral bent and so is the highest kind of drama.<sup>18</sup> As nature satisfies the moral sense, so should tragedy. It is unnatural for an utterly good person to fall into unhappiness. Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing the kinds of things a person chooses or avoids.<sup>19</sup> It and thought are needed to give the agent's actions moral quality, and moral quality is needed in order to account plausibly for the agent's success or failure, i.e. his end in happiness or unhappiness.

I turn from the purpose of nature in general to the purpose of art in general and of tragedy in particular. Art is an activity in which something is made distinct from the activity of producing it. The artwork, the object produced by the activity of "making," is itself a means to the using of it and finally to some form of action which is its own end. Useful and fine arts are—both alike—art. In the case of fine arts, it does not seem that Aristotle thought of aesthetic contemplation as an end in itself.<sup>20</sup> All activities differ in goodness or desirability, and their proper pleasures differ accordingly. There is a great difference between the pleasures derived from the various arts, and their ends are to be kept distinct. Alien pleasures interfere with the artwork. Aristotle would not have been impressed with the tragical-comical-historical-pastoral or poem unlimited which the players in *Hamlet* are said to have been capable of playing. Each art product, like each kind of activity, is to be distinguished by its end.

The end of tragedy is to effect the arousal and then the catharsis of pity and fear. The word *catharsis* has been variously understood to mean "purgation," "purification," or "clarification." It is explained in the *Rhetoric* that fear is caused by whatever we see that has great power of destroying us, of harming us in ways that tend to cause us great pain, and that, generally speaking, anything causes us to feel fear that—when it happens to or threatens others—causes us to feel pity.<sup>21</sup> By "purgation" is meant the elimination of the feelings of pity and fear, by "purification," the amelioration of such feelings,

and by "clarification," the manifestation of a coherent relation between the hero's character and his end. Aristotle required that tragedy show (or seem to show) a relationship between a tragic character and his tragic fate. A fatal tragedy with a wholly good person as a protagonist is, in his view, repellant; a fatal tragedy about a good person with a *hamartia* [translated by Hardison as "miscalculation" or "missing the mark"] is not only satisfactory but produces the highest kind of tragic pleasure.<sup>22</sup> We come, through such work, to understand that there is a kind of logic and morality to the universe after all. "Clarification" is the meaning of *catharsis* most closely allied with the idea of the importance of *hamartia* and is also most consistent with Aristotle's belief that people take pleasure in imitation because they take pleasure in learning. However, it is not necessary to support one of the three definitions over any other to understand in general the significance of Aristotle's idea about the purpose of tragedy, for each of the definitions entails the assumption that there is in some sense a causal relationship between a person's behavior and the events which befall him. Each also entails the assumption that society or, at least, Athenian society, is part of nature and is therefore good, and that whatever in the society makes us feel pity and fear is something that we have to come to terms with individually. All of nature is a cause that operates for a purpose and that purpose is finally ethical. Of course, practically every modern drama is at odds with these assumptions. The good woman of Setzuan suffers through no fault of her own. The society in which she lives is not good, not natural, and as an individual she cannot survive in it. Nothing will do, Brecht implies, but that collective action be taken to overthrow the existing society.

The persistent suggestion that Aristotle was unsure about whether tragedy had reached its final form of development (chapter 4) is, according to Gerald Else, a foolish one:

Aristotle makes it perfectly clear . . . that he regards tragedy as having reached the heights with Sophocles and Euripides. . . . So far as his "history" of the poetic art is concerned, Aristotle justifies his implication that tragedy was at its highest form and had reached a kind of perfection by pointing out that serious poetry did end its development with that form. . . . One can speak of tragedy as having come or sprung from a much earlier primitive stage, just as one can speak of a man's birth and early years, even though during them, strictly speaking, he was a baby and not a man.<sup>23</sup>

There is a natural progression to higher forms but the development of art is not an endlessly evolving process.

Art does not infinitely evolve because, according to Aristotle, nature does not. The idea of motion entails the idea of development and change, but the motions are finite. The world is not a process of processes; Aristotle is not an evolutionist. He regards matter as ungenerated, indestructible and eternal, and the world as stable and unchanging. Nothing new or different ever actually happens. Art cannot consist of perpetually new creation because that which represents reality is timeless. For Aristotle creation means discovery, the uncovering of a true relation which already exists in the scheme of things. The happy life is not one of search for truth but of contemplation of truth already attained.

The highest art is not only eternal but universal. The idea that art can be universal arises from Aristotle's concept of space. He believes it to be finite and far more limited than we know it to be today. He views the heavens as a series of concentric spheres to which the various heavenly bodies—sun, moon, planets, stars—are attached. The heavens are unchanging. The motion of each concentric sphere is circular and regular. Perhaps one might best think of place rather than space, for each thing has a proper place and a fixed relationship to the whole. At the center of these spheres is the earth, situated motionless. Man at the stationary center of the universe has the ideal perspective on things.

While motion in the heavens is absolutely regular, Aristotle acknowledges that on earth things are more complex: there is precariousness and contingency as well as stability, order, and regularity. That is why he says that, outside mathematics, things happen in certain ways, "always or for the most part."<sup>24</sup> Chance represents a limit set to science: it stands for all those events for which no scientific prediction is possible. It is what the scientist sets to one side when he says, "Other things being equal, such and such will take place." One cannot have a science of all the things that may befall any particular acorn, only of those that are "natural" to acorns in general, of the powers any acorn possesses "by nature." The rest are contingent, accidental, incidental to being an acorn. All the ends caused by factors that are not relevant to the ends of natural processes, all the nonteleological events interfering with the natural working out of a process, are chance events. An acorn's becoming a squirrel's breakfast, for instance, is a chance event; it impinges on the natural process of the acorn "by violence" from without. "Chance is any event having no end, no For What, 'itself in vain' . . . Chance hence presupposes an order of natural teleology and is posterior to that order. It is said to be 'against nature' or 'contrary to nature,' like the birth of distorted monsters."<sup>25</sup>

As chance events are not part of the natural working out of occurrences, they have no business in works of art. Art, like science, shows what is essential to a kind of thing or event. Art and science begin with things we perceive by the senses, yet they do not merely express these but embody the universal truths about these things. Knowledge is not of the particulars but is identical with the universal forms, the intelligible structure of the world. What the poet represents, then, is not the actuality of events but their logical structure, their meaning. Art imitates nature by doing what nature is prevented from doing fully and completely by unnatural events: "To seize the universal, and to reproduce it in its simple and sensuous form is not to reflect a reality already familiar through sense perceptions; rather it is a rivalry of nature, a completion of her unfulfilled purposes, a correction of her failures."<sup>26</sup>

### 3. UNITY AND ORDER

Motions in nature are clearly distinguished from one another. The study of science and the subject matter for dramatic analysis is a single action removed from all other actions. Hence, Aristotle does not think highly of plays with multiple plots. Analysis had best be of a change of a single thing that

remains identical in kind through a continuous interval of time. We know that we are dealing with a single motion or process when it has been completed, for anything that can be said to be a unity is always complete and whole. It is this feature of reaching a goal or end that makes a process self-limiting. The action in drama consists of a development and eventual change of state in time which is carried through to a natural goal in happiness or unhappiness. Reversal and discovery may be understood as changes from a particular state to its opposite. Reversal is an action's turning back upon itself and is, Aristotle thinks, highly desirable in drama. Circular motion—the motion of the spheres—is first, for that which is complete is prior in nature to that which is incomplete, like motion in a straight line which has no limit or end.

As action takes place in continuous time, drama is essentially a time art. The means of the poetic arts, of which drama is one, must be those which entail temporal succession—rhythm, language, and tune—whereas painting and sculpture produce their effects through spatial extension. Spatial phenomena, of course, play their part in the drama but in Aristotle's opinion this is a very subsidiary part. In general, Aristotle does not regard the visual arts highly as imitative means. Painting, for instance, is the least imitative of the arts: in painting there are no actions, no operations of characters; painting is completely static, it portrays only a single moment halted.

The poetic work should be of sufficient magnitude to let us see all the parts of the completed action but not so large that we cannot keep them in mind. Aristotle explains that 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."<sup>27</sup> Else believes that Aristotle's dictum that the action of the tragedy ought not to exceed one day refers to actual time, not dramatic time. It is the maximum length of time over which people can hold in their minds the concept of the whole, assuming an orderly arrangement of the parts; it is, in Else's words, "the greatest possible stretch of felt unity in an art that operates through time."<sup>28</sup> Analogizing the play to a living organism, Aristotle maintains that:

a beautiful object, whether it be a living organism or any whole composed of parts, must not only have an orderly arrangement of parts, but must also be of a certain magnitude; for beauty depends on magnitude and order. Hence a very small animal organism cannot be beautiful; for the view of it is confused, the object being seen in an almost imperceptible moment of time. Nor, again, can one of vast size be beautiful; for as the eye cannot take it all in at once, the unity and sense of the whole is lost for the spectator.<sup>29</sup>

We notice here Aristotle's assumption that beauty is in nature but that it is also what a person can perceive as beautiful. Order is in nature and, at the same time, humans have an instinct for rhythm and harmony, for order. We shall see that Aristotle assumes a correspondence between humans' faculties, values, and purposes and nature's.

In the calculation of proper length for a complete action the accidents of "empty time" are left out. And tragedy, as opposed to epic, is in length more efficient, more in command of its means. Aristotle admired works which were

dense—restricted in length and tightly packed. In fact, Else believes that the *raison d'être* of the complex plot is this concentration and intensification.<sup>30</sup> Again we find that the aesthetics of art are consistent with those of nature. Nature, in Aristotle's view, "always succeeds in attaining maximum achievement by minimum effort."<sup>31</sup> Greater concentration and intensification are achieved when the parts are intimately and integrally related. We understand, then, why it is best if the people involved in the dramatic action are near and dear. The requisite law of economy, together with that of causality, explains why recognitions are better the better they are integrated into the plot, why *hamartia* is an integral part of good tragedy, and why pity is best aroused by the inner sense of the piece rather than by spectacular means.

I turn now from the whole and its surveyability as such to the relationship of the parts to that whole. They are naturally subordinate. "Nature has provided that which is less as an addition to that which is greater and superior and not the other way round. If, therefore this way is better, and if nature always does the best among possible courses, it is not through possessing hands that man is the most intelligent animal but it is because he is the most intelligent animal that he has hands."<sup>32</sup> In Aristotle's biology the form or soul is 'prior' to the body, and he thinks of the plot as prior to the poem in exactly the same way. "The plot is the *structure* of the play, around which the material 'parts' are laid, just as the soul is the structure of man."<sup>33</sup> The parts have interest and meaning only in so far as they serve the whole. A hand is no longer a hand if it is severed from the person. Moreover, nature never gives an organ to an animal except when it is able to make use of it; nature does nothing in vain. At the same time all the organs are there which are necessary to make a complete organism. So, in the drama, the parts gain their interest from their relationship to the whole. No parts comprising the whole should be omitted; none which do not serve the whole should be there. The relationship of the parts to the whole should be clear and each part as distinct as are the fingers on the hand of a person. "Now, as each of the parts of the body is for something . . . for some action, it is evident that the body as a whole must be constituted for some complex action."<sup>34</sup> It is the complex action, that of a human being, which interests Aristotle and which he seeks to explain. As it is the most complex organisms which are capable of the most complex actions, it would seem that the organism which Aristotle has uppermost in mind in analogizing the best play to an organism is a human being.

The more inclusive, complex, and various processes and organisms are higher. I have repeatedly spoken of values higher and lower, good and bad, beautiful and ugly, as being inherent in Aristotle's nature. He believes that the axiological antitheses of superior and inferior are to be found everywhere in nature—between soul and body, intellect and appetite, human and animal, male and female—and that where such a difference between two things exists it is to the advantage of both that the superior rule the inferior. As these things are antitheses in nature, when represented in art they should be clearly distinct. That art is best which represents the highest in nature: the beautiful, the serious, the actions of the souls of good people, males, the rule of reason.

The organism and the play are unified wholes distinct from the rest of reality. They are best of surveyable size and inclusive of the highest and most



complex processes. The drama, like the organism, has a life; it is born, grows, and dies. Its nature, implicit until its form is fulfilled, is in suspense; we do not know precisely what its end will be or how it will come about, only that it has such an end, which develops necessarily or probably from its beginning. The parts serve the whole; there are none which need not be there, all which need be there to serve the highest purpose of the organism or play.

There are five sources from which critical objections to drama may be drawn: "Things may be censured either as impossible or irrational, or morally hurtful, or contradictory, or contrary to artistic correctness."<sup>35</sup> In short, that is to say, they may be censured as unnatural.

## II. KNOWING

It is thinking and talking that sets human beings apart from other animals. The fundamental drive in humans is to set their distinctive powers of knowing into operation and thus to become that which they alone can become—knowers.<sup>36</sup> Human beings are the only organisms given to understand nature's logical and ethical purposes, and thus they have a central role in nature. To know and understand is the highest power in the world. The life of reason is therefore the highest life. The specific function of human beings is to act intelligently. And the truly human pleasures are derived from fulfilling the function proper—that is—specific to humans. The end which humans seek, happiness, is reasonable virtuous activity. As reason and moral action are specifically human so there is a correlation between nature's purposes and the abilities of human beings. As knowing and understanding are distinctively human functions, one needs to concentrate on them in any study of humans *per se*.

The things of the world simply are what they are in themselves, independent of our attitude toward them or our opinions about them. Yet, whatever is can be known. The mind is such that it can perceive the external world as it is. There is nothing that is unknowable. The human role in knowing is a very active one. Sensing is of particulars; knowledge starts with the perceivable, but actual knowledge is identical with the universal.<sup>37</sup> The forms perceived by the knower are the very forms that exist in things. The mind can know the world unaided by technology, such is the correspondence between mind and matter.<sup>38</sup>

Because of their desire to know, according to Aristotle, humans delight in imitation. Indeed, Aristotle would say that imitation, like the desire to know, is an instinct of our nature.<sup>39</sup> Imitation mirrors the world in essence, revealing its underlying forms and purposes. Yet that imitation is objective, and so the poet should speak as little as possible in his own person. The spectator, drawing upon the same knowledge of the world, will experience it in the same way. In so far as we today do not believe that the model in the mind is a mirror of reality but a personal and hypothetical construct of uncertain relation to a changing reality, we cannot think of dramatic imitation as mirroring.

As art is, in Aristotle's belief, an imitation of reality that reveals intelligible structure and purpose, so art must be made by human beings; it cannot be found, or made by animals. Moreover art springs from the brains of superior people; all of us are capable of enjoying artistic imitations, but not all of us are

capable of producing them. Inferior intellects provide inferior art: "the graver spirits imitated noble actions, and the actions of good men. The more trivial sort imitated the actions of meaner persons."<sup>40</sup> And, as the power of knowing is limited in most people, Aristotle is no believer in folk creation. The belief that the highest art requires a superior mind and has strict demands for logic and unity also seems to rule against communal creation.

Art is an activity and the *Poetics* is an analysis of that activity. But the end of that activity is the making of an external product and is distinguished from activity which aims at action itself. The art activity results in a finished product, and what the audience sees is that finished product, the true imitation of nature, and not the artist's efforts in arriving at it.

### III. TALKING

The world lends itself to the grasp of language; it has a logical and discursive character and a systematic structure. It comes in discrete parts. Words have fixed meanings and nature is constant. Motion, like language, takes place in time. Whatever is can be expressed in words and discourse. There is nothing that cannot be talked about, nothing wholly inaccessible to discourse, nothing ineffable. A thing is known when it can be stated in precise language what that thing is and why it is as it is. Knowledge is a matter of language, of verbalized distinctions, and precise statements. Discourse and reason are one and the same thing: "logos." In the last analysis the structure of the Greek language and the structure of the world are the same. Knowing, one of the highest motions, depends on words.<sup>41</sup>

We can understand why drama expresses action in words and why Aristotle chooses poetry as the art he will discuss. Perhaps because of the directness with which drama presents action, Aristotle regarded the dramatic as superior to the narrative. While the action is necessarily conveyed in language, it is the plot not the language that is to move people, and certainly not the oral performance of that language.<sup>42</sup>

The language of drama is verse because the means of art are to be refined from life. The means of art, like those of nature, should be clear, efficient, and beautiful. The master principle of imitation decrees that good verse is a distillation of the natural rhythms of speech. "The greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. . . . It is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances."<sup>43</sup> Hardison explains that the attraction of metaphors is that while they use plain words they also make language distinguished. He says further that it is that ability to see hidden similarities that characterizes both the philosopher and the scientist in Aristotle's system of knowledge.<sup>44</sup> I do not think that he means to imply that Aristotle's science is but a system of metaphors but that the activity of scientist and artist is similar. It might further be pointed out that metaphors are compact and can serve to make the parts relate to the whole.

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I have shown much of Aristotle's *Poetics* to be concordant with his idea of nature. One idea central to the *Poetics* is not consistent with his view of nature

and that is the idea of the importance of surprise. Pity and fear are most effectively aroused—or, rather, since Aristotle talks about events, structural elements in the play, fearful and pathetic happenings are most effectively brought about—when they come about logically but unexpectedly. Gerald Else believes that the unexpected “appears to be a concept which Aristotle originally associated with the epic, in the primary sense of wonders and marvels (Cyclops, Circe, the magic ship of the Phaeacians, etc.), and only later worked into his view of tragedy. In the epic it is characterized as having a kind of low “appeal” and it is practically identified with the irrational or the absurd. The irrational, Aristotle says, “should be banished from tragedy as far as possible.”<sup>45</sup> Else therefore endeavors to explain the importance of surprise in tragedy for Aristotle:

The essence of the tragic is an irreconcilable conflict between man's nature and his fate. Aristotle does not speak of such a conflict; his Socratic-Platonic inheritance was too strong for that. Nevertheless, in so far as he senses its existence, it plays its role in his theory in the guise of the “fearful and pitiful.” This means in the first place a drastic reduction in its dimensions; for fear and pity are measured by “us” *l'homme moyen sensuel*. But then Aristotle further postulates that they are most felt when the events that “carry” them seem to be irrational (i.e. contrary to what we expected) *but are not so* (i.e., standing in causal relation to one another after all). This is his attempt to make the best of two incompatible worlds. The Tragic, the inrush of the demonic powers upon a man's happiness, becomes merely the “unexpected” the unforeseen, and in this guise the Tragic is wedded to Causality (= probability or necessity).<sup>46</sup>

Else's view seems to be that the idea of surprise arises from Aristotle's unconscious understanding of nature. I stop short of such argument.

Because the aesthetic principles to be employed in the drama are the natural ones, they form the structure of the *Poetics* as well. Aristotle, as he says, arranges the *Poetics* by following the order of nature.<sup>47</sup> He begins with the whole art and then moves to tragedy, and then focuses on progressively smaller parts of that whole, poetry and then tragedy, and then each part of tragedy in order of importance, plot first. It looks, apart from what are generally thought to be interpolations, as though Aristotle might have had some intention in the *Poetics* of making each section proportionate in length to its importance in tragedy.

No Aristotelian scholar takes the text of the *Poetics* remaining to us as the completed product, although none seems to doubt that, in either written or verbal form, there once was a completed product. And what remains to us, as Gerald Else has convincingly argued is “a single coherent piece of argument.”<sup>48</sup> It is chiefly on the basis of the structure of this argument that scholars have argued that some portions of the text are later interpolations by Aristotle or another. It is also on the basis of the structure of this argument that latter day extrapolations on the nature of comedy have been made. The argument constituting the structure of the essay is the equivalent of the action of the drama. It is written so that we attend to the structure of the argument and the meaning of the words. The argument is single; there is a linear progression; each part is clearly delineated and follows from the preceding

part necessarily or probably. It is presented primarily in terms of universals. It is meant to be timeless. As there are higher and lower forms of poetry, and tragedy is the highest, we can understand that Aristotle took up tragedy first—if, in fact, he ever did get around to writing about comedy at all. Early in the argument (chapter 4) Aristotle provides a history of poetry and of drama in particular, it being important in understanding anything to know its cause. Else is convincing in arguing that this “history” is a logical construct rather than a genuine history, despite the weight given it by various later theatre historians.<sup>49</sup> Aristotle writes it with assurance because it is, in his belief, the reasonable development and therefore, probably, the true one. The tone of the whole is authoritative and serious; Aristotle is confident in his powers of knowing and his role in nature to define, explain, and show significance.

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## Notes

1. *Aristotle's Poetics*, trans. Samuel H. Butcher, intro., Francis Fergusson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961) 3.
2. See for instance, O.B. Hardison, Jr., *Aristotle's Poetics*, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1968) 62.
3. My understanding of Aristotle's view of nature is based primarily on my reading of Frederick James Eugene Woodbridge, *Aristotle's Vision of Nature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1965) and Sarah Waterlow, *Nature, Change and Agency in Aristotle's Physics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982). I am indebted throughout to distinguished Aristotelian scholars for various readings and have tried to acknowledge my debt without endless quotations.
4. John Herman Randall, Jr., *Aristotle* (New York: Columbia UP, 1960) 243.
5. Ronald Hayman, *Theatre and Anti-Theatre* (New York: Oxford UP, 1979) 241.
6. See “John Cage, Nature and Theater” *TriQuarterly*, 1982 and a forthcoming book tentatively entitled “Actors on the Stage of Life.”
7. *Physics*, Book 2, ch. 8, 199a 11-15.
8. Randall, 4, 234.
9. See the *Physics*, Book 3 and the *Metaphysics*, Book Theta.
10. Samuel H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (New York: Dover, 1951), 124.
11. Gerald F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1967) 73.
12. *Physics*, Book 2, ch. 1.
13. *Physics*, Book 8, ch. 4, 254b.
14. *Parts of Animals*, Book 1, 645b.
15. *Parts of Animals*, Book 1, 645 27-30.
16. *Poetics*, ch. 15, 145a 1. Samuel H. Butcher translation used throughout this essay.
17. *Poetics*, ch. 6, 1450a 15-20.
18. *Poetics*, ch. 2, 1448a 15; ch. 15, 145b 5.
19. *Poetics*, ch. 6, 450b 5.
20. David Ross, *Aristotle* (London: Methuen, 1974) 216-17.
21. *Rhetoric*, Book 2, ch. 5 and 8.
22. Hardison 184.
23. Else 150, 152, 155.
24. *Physics*, Book 2, 196b 10-15.
25. *Physics*, Book 2, chs. 4-6.
26. Butcher 154.
27. *Poetics*, ch. 7, 1451a 15.
28. Else 217.
29. *Poetics*, ch. 7, 1450b 35-40.
30. Else 355.
31. E.J. Dijksterhuis, *The Mechanization of the World Picture*, trans. C. Dikshoorn (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969) 76.
32. Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, Book 4, ch. 10, 678a 5-23.
33. Else 242.
34. Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, Book I, ch. 5, 645b 15-20.
35. *Poetics*, ch. 25, 1461b 20-25.

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37. *On the Soul*, Book 2, ch. 5, 417b 22-26.
  38. *On the Soul*, Book 3, ch. 4.
  39. *Poetics*, ch. 4, 1448b 20-25.
  40. *Poetics*, ch. 4, 1448b 25.
  41. Aristotle's discussion of the relationship between language and scientific knowledge appears in the *Posterior Analytics*.
  42. Else 409.
  43. *Poetics*, ch. 22, 1459a 5.
  44. Hardison 259-60.
  45. Else 332.
  46. Else 330.
  47. *Poetics*, ch. 1, 1447a 1.
  48. Else vii.
  49. Else x.