A FOREWORD TO THE POETICS

ON THE MATTER OR SUBJECT OF THE POETICS

Since this science gets its name from the poet, it might be good to ask what a poet is.

The word *poet* comes from the Greek word meaning a maker, but not everyone who makes is called a poet. Hence, two questions arise: “What is the poet a maker of?” and “Why is this name which is common to many (maker) applied to the poet in particular?” The answers to these two questions are connected.

The poet is said to make a likeness of human life in words. He is a maker of plots or stories with their characters.

The poet is also said to be a maker of verses. He puts words into meter. Thus some people call anything with meter a poem, especially if it has metaphor and/or simile in addition.

These two meanings of poet and poem are not equivalent. Every likeness of human life in words does not have meter. The novel and the short story do not have meter. And everything in meter is not a likeness. Philosophy has been written in verse (as by Empedocles and Lucretius and Boethius) and prayers have been put into meter.

The *Poetics* or the book *About the Poetic Art* is named from the poet who makes a likeness of human life in words, regardless of whether these words do or do not have meter (even though Aristotle may have had in mind most of all works written in meter or verse). Of course, the first great poets wrote or spoke in words with meter; and most works in verse may also be likenesses of human life; and it is perhaps more appropriate for the maker of likenesses in words to use meter than anyone else.

The meanings of poem can be distinguished in the same way as poet. And only in the corresponding meaning does it belongs to poetics. Sometimes also the word poem is used for the smallest of its species, as plant is distinguished against tree (although a tree can also be called a plant in the general sense). The poems that Aristotle is most interested in, however, are the large or great ones.

It is difficult to give the reason why the common name *maker* is given to the poet in particular. Two reasons might be assigned. One is in comparison to the other ways in which a man might be led to a conclusion by something expressed in words or within rational philosophy. The second is in comparison to all the kinds of making.

Within rational philosophy (which considers the ways in which reason is led to a conclusion), the poetic art alone or most properly is about the way of leading the mind to a conclusion from fictions or things made: "Si autem procedit ex fictis facientibus delectationem vel abominationem, erit alia pars logicae quae vocatur poesis vel poetica." (St. Albert, *De Praedicabilibus*, Ed. Doyon, p. 5B) Moreover, the poet makes in something exterior (words) more than the dialectician or demonstrator. A sign of this is that the excellence of a poet's work makes it untranslatable; so that Samuel Johnson could say that the preservers of language are the poets who compel us to learn the language in which they wrote if we are to appreciate them. But Euclid's work need not suffer in translation. Rhetoric is closer to poetry in this respect (as in many other ways) than are dialectic and demonstration. The enthymeme and examples of the rhetorician are translatable, but his persuasive power also depends on his language (See Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Bk. III), which does not lend itself so much to translation (although more so than the poet's language). This is why the rhetorician is called a speaker although the dialectician and demonstrator also speak. (Dialectic in turn has a more exterior work than demonstration, as can be seen in Book VIII of the *Topics* of Aristotle and as indicated by the origin of the word *dialectic* itself.)

There is also a reason why the poet might be called a *maker* in some special sense, distinguishing him from other makers. A carpenter (for example) who makes in a stable exterior matter might in some way be thought to leave an exterior product after his activity more than the poet whose matter (words) is transient. Yet in another way, a poet might be thought to be even more a maker, and this in two ways. First, the matter of the poet, words, is a product of man himself who forms the words and gives them a meaning by convention.

The carpenter takes his material from nature, as does the statue-maker. Even the musician uses sounds that signify more by nature. He imitates the natural sign of the human feelings in our voice. *Poetic* means made-up, fictitious. Do we not apply *made-up* more readily to stories and plots than to other things made? We speak especially of stories or plots as being made-up. This implies almost made out of nothing, something not real; and therefore the poet might seem to be more master of what he has made than the carpenter.

Insofar as the major forms of fiction (epic, drama, novel, short story) are about happiness and misery and the change between them, fiction or the poem seems to be about something far greater in importance than, say, the chair of the carpenter which is directed to some lesser and particular good (sitting). The poet or maker of fiction seems to take in the whole of human life in some way. Moreover, the Greeks thought of the poet as inspired by the gods in the making of his work.

But if one thinks that *maker* is said more of the one who makes in some matter such as wood than the one who makes in words, it is safer to say that maker distinguishes the poet in comparison to rhetoric, dialectic and demonstration; just as *places* distinguishes one part of logic from other parts although place is said more properly in natural science.

Having considered briefly the word *poet*, we can now turn back to the subject and title of the so-called Poetics.

The actual title of what is called the *Poetics* in English is *About the Poetic Art*. And in the beginning of the book, it is also said to be about the poetic art and not just the poem. In this way it is like the *Rhetoric*, which is also about the art of persuasion and not just about the speech. This is not indifferent, even though the one who talks about the poetic art will also talk about the poem (drama, epic etc.). Since a poem is a thing made by us, a proper or scientific consideration of it must include how it is to be made. Common principles do not suffice for science; science must proceed from proper principles or the principles private to the matter under consideration. The proper or private principles of a thing made or done by us must express how it is made or done. By giving the poetic art as his aim, Aristotle shows that he is going to make a scientific consideration, one based on the private principles of the thing. The *Poetics* instructs the poet, to some extent, at least in general, as to how to make his work.

This casts light on the division of imitations in the first part of the *Poetics*. This is not a division of the subject of one science (called *aesthetics or the philosophy of art* by some). There cannot be one science concerned with all imitations if by science is meant a knowledge of things by their private principles. When that in which the imitation or likeness is made differs generically, there cannot be the same proper or private principles of what is made (although there may be common beginnings). Thus, for example, one cannot understand how a likeness in line and color is made by the same private beginnings as a likeness in words. This is also true of the servile arts. The private beginnings of the art of carpentry are adapted to working with wood while the private principles of the art of sewing are adapted to working with cloth or threads. The art of carpentry must differ from the art of sewing as it does from the art of glass blowing. The poetic art, thus, can only be concerned with things made in words.

Again there cannot be one science or art about everything in words. Science and art are a work of reason, and reason seeks order or makes order. But not every order of things in words can be understood by the same proper principles. The order in Euclid's *Elements* and the order in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* cannot be understood by the same proper or private principles. The order which the grammarian considers is understood by proper principles different from either of the above. There cannot be one science of everything written in verse or meter. For example: prayers as well as imitations have been put into meter, and the excellence of a prayer and the excellence of a likeness of human life cannot be judged by the same proper principles. And the suitability of one meter rather than another must be judged by what it is that is being put into meter. Thus, it seems that the poetic art, and consequently the book *About the Poetic Art,* can be concerned only with imitations made in words.

But does every likeness of human life in words belong to one art or science? Only imitations in words having plots of some length are considered in the book *About the Poetic Art*. If some of the principles of this work (such as those concerned with diction and metaphor) can be applied to small poems like sonnets, the latter certainly do not belong to the main or principal subject of the book.

Aristotle, moreover, does not consider all the species of imitations in words that have plots. Of the imitations in words having plots of some length, Aristotle considers two main types or species - tragedy and comedy (in the lost

part of the *Poetics*). There are reasons for considering these two species before all the rest.

First, the kind of tragedy and the kind of comedy that Aristotle considers are contraries in the genus of imitation in words that have plots; that is, they are the species which are the farthest apart. But contraries are the first beginnings - all things come to be from contraries. (See the fragments of Heraclitus, the *Phaedo* of Plato, Aristotle's first book of *Natural Hearing* (the so-called *Physics)* and the tenth book of his *Metaphysics*. Thus although there may not be a determinate number of species between the tragedy and the comedy considered by Aristotle, we can arrange the intermediate species as closer or further from each contrary as they share in or resemble one contrary more than another. The contraries considered by Aristotle thus serve as principles in knowing all other species.

Another reason for considering these two species can be given. Tragedy is the highest or noblest species of imitation in words having a plot and therefore should be considered according to the rule of Ammonius Hermias, the great commentator on Aristotle. And there is the same knowledge of opposites and comedy is opposed to tragedy.

Aristotle considered tragic drama and we assume comic drama. To the consideration of tragic drama is attached the consideration of the tragic epic. And if there is a kind of work which is to comedy as the Iliad is to tragedy (say perhaps, the lost *Margites* of Homer), this could be attached to the consideration of comic drama. (Fielding called his *Joseph Andrews* a *comic epic in prose*.)

If there are species between tragedy and comedy, or species inferior to the tragedy and comedy considered by Aristotle, it does not seem that he considered them in the *Poetics*. However, this is not because they belong to a different science. There are many instances in the other sciences (e.g., logic and natural science) of Aristotle's considering only the main or greatest types (For example, we have books by Aristotle on the categorical statement and syllogism, but not on the hypothetical and disjunctive. If we consider these other species of imitation in words having plots of some length, we are continuing to work within the same science to which the *Poetics* belongs. Drama, epic and novel seem greater forms than the many forms of short story.

The putting together of deeds or actions in the plot of a tragedy or comedy and consequently the choice of characters and diction would seem to be determined by the emotional effect aimed at in tragedy or in comedy, the feelings moved and purged by tragedy and comedy. This raises the question whether the order in imitations such as *The Divine Comedy*, *The Faery Queene*, and *Paradise Lost* can be considered by the same science as that to which the *Poetics* belongs. The same question could be raised about the Platonic dialogues which are imitations even further removed from those considered in the book *About the Poetic Art*.

Perhaps where the end differs so does the science. And the purgation of the feelings is one end. And there are mixed forms. Do opera and ballet belong to one art or more than one? Even in the *Poetics* one is referred to rhetoric for the thought element. But the rhetorician is far closer to the poet than is the dialectician.

ON THE RESTRICTION OF THE SUBJECT OF THE POETICS

The restriction of the subject or matter of the *Poetics* of Aristotle is apt to appear strange to a modern reader. Our purpose is to consider that restriction in the light of the principles and kinds of restriction that are found in many books of Aristotle. It may contribute to the usefulness of the *Poetics* to find reasons why its author could begin where he did and go no further.

We shall find that there are two kinds of restriction that can be noted in the *Poetics*. The first restriction is to what can be the subject of one science or art. The second restriction is *within* what can be the subject of one science or art. These two kinds of restriction should not be confused, and the reasons for them are not the same, as will appear.

We are accustomed to an academic discipline called *aesthetics*, but it is very doubtful that Aristotle would agree that there is one science or art corresponding to that word. The term *aesthetics* refers to all the fine arts. These are approximately the same as the imitative arts which are divided in the first chapters of the *Poetics* on the basis of that in which they make their imitations, and what they imitate, and how they imitate. This division gives the specific differences of the poetic art, which has already been assigned as the subject of the *Poetics* in the first sentence of that book. Is Aristotle dividing

one general science (which some today might call aesthetics) into its parts, one of which is the poetic art? The text of the *Poetics* here cannot justify such an interpretation, and it would seem to be contrary to what Aristotle has taught us about what can or cannot constitute the subject of one science or art. In order to make this clear, let us review this teaching on the diversity of the sciences and arts.

At the beginning of the sixth book of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle observes that every science (and we might add art) has some principles or beginnings that it considers. But it is in the *Posterior Analytics* (Bk. I, Chs. 9-10) that he makes his crucial distinction between the common and proper or private beginnings of a science; and the same distinction could be made in the arts. The proper principles or private beginnings of a science are adapted to a subject that is related to our mind in one way. The science of geometry, for example, is related to our mind in a different way from that of natural science. The subject of natural science is based on our sense-experience of natural things, and conclusions in it must correspond to or agree with our sense-experience. The subject of geometry, however, does not seek or need confirmation in our sense-experience. Taking a science such as geometry, we can find that it uses beginnings adapted to its subject, and beginnings that are common to it and other sciences. The definitions of a point, the straight line and the circle, or the postulate that all right angles are equal are examples of beginnings that fit the subject of geometry or that are private to it. But common beginnings, such as that the whole is larger than one of its parts, do not fit the subject of geometry anymore than that of natural science or any other science. Such common beginnings do not suffice to constitute one science because nothing can be concluded from them until they are adapted to some particular subject. (See *Posterior Analytics*, Bk. I, Ch. 28)

The distinction between common and private beginnings or principles can also be made in the arts. If we take the practical arts of carpentry and glass blowing, for example, we shall see that there are both common beginnings and beginnings or principles adapted to the particular matter with which that art works. A common beginning in the arts is that one should work in a way suitable to the matter, yet such a principle does not suffice for having one art, because nothing can be made on the basis of it until it has been applied to the particular matter at hand. But when we turn to wood and glass, we see that they cannot be worked in the same way. The proper principles, or private beginnings, that actually enable one to know how to make something out of wood are not the same as those that do this for glass or cloth. A sign of this is the diversity of

their tools - the carpenter cannot use the tools of the glass blower and vice-versa. The common beginnings do not enable one to know how to make anything, and hence cannot constitute an art which is defined in terms of the capacity to make.

What has been said of the above arts is also true in the imitative arts. These latter arts differ in the first place by difference of that in which they imitate or make their likeness. (It is significant that Aristotle begins with this difference when he distinguishes the arts.) And, for example, the way of making a likeness out of line and color (a painting) and the way of making a likeness out of sounds having rhythm and harmony (music) are not the same. And like in the practical arts, the tools are not the same. The brush is useless to the musician, as is the piano to the painter. The imitative arts then have a unity only of common principles, which does not suffice to make one art or science out of them. This is why Aristotle in the *Poetics*, restricts himself to the consideration of imitations in words, or the art which imitates in words.

If it be asked why he shows in the beginning of the book how to distinguish all the imitative arts, it should be known that not only is some knowledge of these differences necessary to understand the poetic art in particular, but since that art is the highest of the imitative arts and has most of the character of wisdom among those arts, it belongs to that art or the consideration of it to distinguish it from all the other imitative arts. And that distinction must be made in words.

But Aristotle does not consider every kind of imitation in words in the *Poetics*. There would also seem then to be not only a restriction to one science or art, but also a restriction within one art or science.

It is reasonable to expect such a restriction. Alexis de Tocqueville has pointed out the aristocratic desire to see a few things (the best) well. There is also the limitation of time for any author. The great commentator Ammonius Hermias has noted Aristotle's restriction to highest forms in logic. And we note this restriction in other parts of philosophy. We attribute to Aristotle the books on animals, but little on plants whose consideration he left principally to his disciple, Theophrastus. Aristotle wrote the *Politics*, but one of his students apparently wrote the book on domestic philosophy.

In the *Poetics,* Aristotle considered the highest forms of fiction. These are a likeness of happiness and misery and the change from one to the other.

Tragedy, representing this change in men better than us, would seem to be the highest. (Epic is similar and is to be considered for the same reason, even though Aristotle will argue that tragedy as a form is superior even to epic.) Comedy needs to be considered also because it is the contrary of tragedy and there is the same knowledge of opposites (as Socrates is pointing out to the tragic poet Agathon and the comic poet Aristophanes at the end of the *Symposium*). Moreover, every other major form of fiction would seem to be mixed from these two contrary forms. Even if tragedy were not the highest form, we would still consider it first as one of the two contraries; just as Aristotle considers democracy and oligarchy before the republic even though the latter is better. The contraries being simpler and extremes are easier to grasp than any forms intermediate between them which seem to arise from them like grey from black and white.

ON THE PLACE OF THE POETICS IN THE DIVISION OF PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy is divided into two chief parts, which are theoretical or looking philosophy and practical philosophy. These differ by their end. For the end of looking philosophy is just to understand, but the end of practical philosophy is to do. But if we consider the tool of philosophy also a part of it, we could add to the two chief parts, rational philosophy or logic.

Under looking philosophy come three particular kinds of philosophy: natural philosophy, mathematical philosophy and first philosophy or wisdom.

And under practical philosophy come ethics, domestics and political philosophy.

To which of the three parts of philosophy does the *Poetics* belong?

Not to looking philosophy, because the truth of these things is so little, being posterior to natural things and even to human action, which is not studied primarily for the sake of truth.

Not to practical philosophy because the subject of poetics is not human action, but the imitation of such action and the art of making such imitations.

When Albert the Great and Thomas divide rational philosophy or logic, they will consider rhetoric and poetics as being about ways of coming to conclusions that are weaker than dialectical reasoning and even more so than demonstrative reasoning.

Logic in the more strict or narrow sense (which includes the books on demonstration and dialectical reasoning, but not rhetoric which is an offshoot of political studies and dialectic, or the poetic science) is more a tool of looking philosophy than practical philosophy. Although we might follow logic in the beginning of practical philosophy, the latter is completed by knowing how to do something (e.g., how to become virtuous or how to preserve or overthrow a government) and this is not a concern of logic.

But rhetoric and poetics seem to be more tools of practical philosophy. For it is the statesman who wants to persuade the crowd and rhetoric is the art of persuasion. And the poetics is about things that can dispose men for virtue. Hence, Thomas says: “poëtae est inducere ad aliquod virtuosum per aliquam decentem representationem.” Moreover, fiction gives the practical philosopher many examples to illustrate his teaching. Fiction does not give the looking philosopher many examples although the wonder of the *philomuthos* is a necessary stepping-stone to the wonder of the philosopher.

Rational philosophy as a whole is about the tools of philosophy. But logic in the strict or narrow sense is more about the tools of looking philosophy, definition and demonstration and dialectical arguments, while rhetoric and poetics are about the speech and the play, which are more the concern of the practical philosopher.

Is the poetic art an offshoot of practical philosophy as rhetoric is in part? Or does the *Poetics* have more a unity of its own private principles? There are reasons to think both.

PURPOSE OF THE POETICS

Is the *Poetics* written for the poet or for his audience or for the literary critic?

A careful reading of the book will show that it is ordered to all three. Aristotle does instruct the poet, for example, as to how to construct his plot and make his characters. But by pointing out the pleasure and the catharsis private to each form of fiction, he is teaching the audience how to approach each form of fiction and not to seek, for example, the pleasure of a happy ending in tragedy. And in explaining how the plot and characters and diction should be, he is obviously also instructing the literary critic.

The *Poetics*, then, is useful for (1) writing good tragedies, etc. (2) to know what pleasure to seek in each form of fiction or from each form, and (3) to judge whether a particular work is well made or not.

ON THE ROAD OF THE POETICS

The *Poetics* is divided into a short proemium (paving the way) and then the *tractatus* or drawing out of the work.

In the proemium, Aristotle gives first the aim or subject of the *Poetics* and then the order in which he shall proceed by pointing out the natural beginning for a consideration of that subject.

In the *tractatus* or drawing out of the work, Aristotle first considers the poetic art and its species in general; and then, second, descends to a particular consideration of tragedy (along with epic) and comedy (which part has been lost)

In the general consideration of the poetic art and its species, Aristotle first considers the differences of the poetic art from the other imitative arts and the differences of the species of the poetic art from each other. And second, he considers the origin of the poetic art and its species. For as he points out in the beginning of the *Politics*, he who considers things from their origin will get the clearest understanding of them.

To the particular consideration of tragedy is attached the consideration of epic. The particular consideration of comedy is lost, although there are allusions to it in other works of Aristotle.

The *Division of the Poetics* can be consulted for a more complete division of the *Poetics.*

Longinus has told us that literary criticism is the last fruit of a long experience. We, of course, are lacking much of the experience of Greek drama which Aristotle had, especially that from the performances of the plays. And someone who lacks this experience is not a good judge of what Aristotle says. We have experience of the plays of Shakespeare, of course, and others, but there are differences between these plays and those which Aristotle knew.

And in accord with this dependence upon experience for judgment, it should be noted that *a drama or epic is good or bad* is more known to us than *why it is good or bad.* One should recognize the excellence of Homer or Sophocles before one can give the reasons for this excellence.

Literary history is important for a knowledge of the origin of literary forms and their nature. A good example for us is the *Allegory of Love* by C. S. Lewis which helps us to understand at least one kind of Shakespeare's plays. Aristotle is said to have done some research into literary history, but the details of that are lost to us.

This science demonstrates especially from the end or purpose of tragedy or comedy, but these demonstrations cannot have the rigor of those found in geometry or arithmetic.

Judgments in this science must return to the works themselves. This is why Goethe said that a work of art should be discussed in its presence.

Aristotle considers those literary forms that have reached a certain stability in their evolution, and he proceeds fairly quickly to the species without a long consideration of the genus. It is difficult or impossible to understand something which is changing; and the variability of the matter and the ease of falling into equivocation are avoided better by trying to define the species before the genus.

Moderns might consider tragic and comic drama together, but Aristotle considers tragedy and epic together. This is because what they imitate is more essential than how they imitate.