

I. THE *POETICS* AND THE MODERN READER

The *Poetics*, short as it is, is the most fundamental study we have of the art of drama. It has been used again and again, since the text was recovered in the early Renaissance, as a guide to the techniques of play-making, and as the basis of various theories of drama. In our own time the great Marxist playwright, Bertolt Brecht, started with it in working out his own methods. He thought that all drama before him was constructed on Aristotle's principles, and that his own "epic drama" was the first strictly non-Aristotelian form.

When Aristotle wrote the *Poetics*, in the fourth century B.C., he had the Greek theater before his eyes, the first theater in our tradition. Perhaps that is why he could go straight to the basis of the dramatic art: he "got in on the ground floor." There is a majestic simplicity about the opening sentence, which we (in our more complex world) can only envy: "I propose to treat of Poetry in itself and of its various kinds, noting the essential quality of each. . . ." It still appears that, for tragedy at least, his favorite form, he did just that.

But the *Poetics* is not so simple for us as that sentence suggests. In the two thousand years of its life it has been lost, found again, and fought over by learned interpreters in every period. The modern reader, approaching it for the first time, may benefit from a little assistance.

The text itself is incomplete, repetitious in spots, and badly organized. It probably represents part of a set of lecture notes, with later interpolations. Our

text is the translation of the late S. H. Butcher, who also edited the Greek from the sources. It is one of the standard texts, probably the best now available in English. The reader will find Butcher's "Analytical Table of Contents" on pages 45-48 a useful guide on a first reading. Each chapter is summarized, and the main interpolations and omissions are indicated.

In writing the *Poetics* Aristotle apparently assumed that his readers would know his own philosophy, and also the plays and poems he discusses. Certain key terms, like "action," "pathos," "form," can only be fully understood in the light of Aristotle's other writings. Moreover, his whole method is empirical: he starts with works of art that he knew well, and tries to see in them what the poet was aiming at, and how he put his play or poem together. He does not intend the *Poetics* to be an exact science, or even a textbook with strict laws, as the Renaissance humanists tried to make out with their famous "rules" of the unities of time, place, and action. He knew that every poet has his unique vision, and must therefore use the principles of his art in his own way. The *Poetics* is much more like a cookbook than it is like a textbook in elementary engineering.

The *Poetics* should therefore be read slowly, as an "aid to reflection"; only then does Aristotle's coherent conception of the art of drama emerge. In what follows I shall offer a short reading of this kind: bringing out the main course of his thought; pausing to see what he means by his notions of human psychology and conduct; and illustrating his artistic principles by actual plays. For the sake of convenience I shall use Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*,

Aristotle's own favorite tragedy, as my main illustration. But of course the art of drama is the matter in hand, and the more plays one analyzes in the light of Aristotle's principles, the better one understands the scope and value of the *Poetics*.

II. PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS ON POETRY AND OTHER ARTS (CHAPTERS I-V)

The opening chapters of the *Poetics* appear to be an introduction to a longer work (which has not survived) on the major forms of Poetry known to Aristotle, including comedy, epic, and dithyrambic poetry, as well as tragedy. The *Poetics* as it has come down to us, however, is devoted mainly to tragedy, and it is in Aristotle's analysis of that form that his general theory of art is most clearly illustrated. The first five chapters should be read, therefore, as a preliminary sketch which Aristotle will fill in when he gets down to business in Chapter VI.

Poets, like painters, musicians, and dancers, Aristotle says, all "imitate action" in their various ways. By "action" he means, not physical activity, but a movement-of-spirit, and by "imitation" he means, not superficial copying, but the representation of the countless forms which the life of the human spirit may take, in the media of the arts: musical sound, paint, word, or gesture. Aristotle does not discuss this idea here, for it was a commonplace, in his time, that the arts all (in some sense) imitate action.

The arts may be distinguished in three ways: according to the *object* imitated, the *medium* em-

ployed, and the *manner*. The object is always a particular action. The writer of tragedy (as we shall see) imitates a "serious and complete action"; the writer of comedy, one performed by characters who are "worse"—by which Aristotle may mean "sillier"—than the people we know in real life. By "medium" he simply means the poet's words, or the painter's colors, or the musician's sound. By "manner" he means something like "convention." Thus the manner of the writer of epics (or novels) is to represent the action in his own words; that of the playwright to represent it by what characters, acted on a stage, do and say. One may use the notions of object, medium, and manner still, to give a rough classification of the varied forms of poetry we know in our day.

In Chapter IV Aristotle briefly raises the question of the origin and development of poetry, which includes all the forms of literature and drama. He thinks it comes from two instincts in human nature itself, that of *imitation* and that of *harmony and rhythm*. The pleasure we get from the imitations of art is quite different from direct experience: it seems to come from *recognizing* what the artist is representing; some experience or vague intuition which suddenly seems familiar. It satisfies our need to know and understand; imitation has to do with the intellectual and moral content of art, and is therefore related to philosophy. Harmony and rhythm, on the other hand, refers to the pleasures of form which we usually consider "purely esthetic." It is characteristic of Aristotle to recognize both the content and the form of art.

After this short but suggestive passage, Aristotle sketches the historic development of the dithyramb,

comedy, epic, and tragedy, in Greece. The passage is important, for it is the starting point of modern investigations of the sources of literature and the theater in our tradition, but Aristotle has, at this point, very little to say. It has been left to modern anthropologists and historians to fill in the details as well as they could, and I shall have something to say of their theories on pages 36 to 40.

Aristotle did not have our interest in history, nor did he believe, as we often do, that the most primitive forms of human culture were the most significant. He thought that the only way to understand man, or his institutions, or his arts, was in their most fully developed, or "perfected" state. In the *Poetics* he seeks the highest forms of the art, and the masterpieces within each form, in order to see, in them, what poetry may be; and so he is led to tragedy. "Whether Tragedy has as yet perfected its proper types or not . . . raises another question," he writes (IV.11); but tragedy was the form known to him which best fulfilled the aims of poetry, and most fully employed the resources of that art. He leaves room (in his usual cautious way) for the possible appearance of other forms; meanwhile he takes Greek tragedy, and especially Sophocles' masterpiece, *Oedipus Rex*, as his main instance of what poetry can be.

In Chapter V Aristotle begins a discussion of comedy, but this part is fragmentary, and not enough survives to tell us what he thought of that art. In Chapters XXIII and XXVI he discusses epic, but he thinks the principles of epic are only corollaries of those of tragedy, the more complete form. It is his analysis of tragedy, which begins in Chapter

VI, that constitutes the main argument in the *Poetics*.

III. TRAGEDY: AN IMITATION OF AN ACTION

In Chapter VI.2, Aristotle starts his analysis of the art of tragedy with his famous definition:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.

This definition is intended to describe tragedy, and also to distinguish it from other forms of poetry. Greek tragedy employed a verse form near to prose, like our English blank verse, for the dialogue, and elaborate lyric forms with musical accompaniment for the choruses; that is what Aristotle means by the different kinds of language. It is "in the form of action"—that is, it is acted on a stage—unlike epic, which is merely told by one voice. The "purgation of pity and fear" is Aristotle's description of the special *kind* of pleasure we get from tragedy.

The play itself, as we read it or see it performed, is the "imitation" of an action, and in what follows Aristotle devotes his attention, not to the action, but to the making of the play which represents an action. He is concerned with the *art* of tragedy; the phases of the poet's work of play-making. The six "parts of Tragedy" which he discusses are, in

fact, part of the poet's creative labor, and should be translated, "plot-making," "character delineation," and so forth. But before one can understand Aristotle's account of the poet's *art*, one must know what the art is trying to represent: the vision, or inspiration, which moves the poet to write or sing, i.e., the "action."

THE CONCEPT OF "ACTION"; ACTION AND PASSION

Just after the definition of tragedy (VI.5) Aristotle tells us that action springs from two "natural causes," character and thought. A man's character disposes him to act in certain ways, but he *actually* acts only in response to the changing circumstances of his life, and it is his thought (or perception) that shows him what to seek and what to avoid in each situation. Thought and character together *make* his actions. This may serve to indicate the basic meaning of "action," but if one is to understand how the arts imitate action, one must explore the notion a little further.

One must be clear, first of all, that *action* (*praxis*) does not mean deeds, events, or physical activity: it means, rather, the motivation from which deeds spring. Butcher* puts it this way: "The *praxis* that art seeks to reproduce is mainly a psychic energy working outwards." It may be described metaphorically as the focus or movement of the psyche toward what seems good to it at the moment—a "movement-of-spirit," Dante calls it. When we try to define the actions of people we know, or of characters in plays, we usually do so in terms of

* *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, by S. H. Butcher. 4th ed., London: 1932.

motive. In the beginning of *Oedipus Rex*, for instance, Oedipus learns that the plague in Thebes is due to the anger of the gods, who are offended because the murderer of old King Laius was never found and punished. At that point Oedipus's action arises, i.e., his motive is formed: "to find the slayer." His action so defined continues, with many variations in response to changing situations, until he finds the slayer, who of course turns out to be himself. When Aristotle says "action" (*praxis*) in the *Poetics*, he usually means the whole working out of a motive to its end in success or failure.

Oedipus's action in most of the play is easy to define; his motive is a clear and rational purpose. That is the kind of action which Aristotle usually has in mind in discussing tragedy, and his word *praxis* connotes rational purpose. The common motive "to find the slayer" accounts for the main movement of *Oedipus Rex*; and most drama, which must be instantly intelligible to an audience, depends on such clearly defined motivation. But we know that human motivation is of many kinds, and in *Oedipus Rex*, or any great play, we can see that the characters are also moved by feelings they hardly understand, or respond to ideas or visions which are illusory. When one thinks of the other arts that imitate action, it is even more obvious that "rational purpose" will not cover all action: what kind of "movement-of-spirit" is represented in music, or painting, or lyric verse? "The unity of action," Coleridge wrote,* "is not properly a rule, but in itself the great end, not only of drama, but of the lyric, epic, even to the candle-flame of the epigram—not only of poetry, but of poesy in

* In his essay on *Othello*.

general, as the proper generic term inclusive of all the fine arts as its species." That is exactly Aristotle's view. He sees an action represented in every work of art, and the arts reflect not only rational purpose but movements-of-spirit of every kind.

In the *Poetics* Aristotle assumes, but does not explain, his more general concept of action. Thus when he writes (VI.9), "life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action," he is referring to the concept as explained in his writings on ethics. The word he uses there to cover any movement-of-spirit is *energeia*. In his studies of human conduct he speaks of three different forms of *energeia*, which he calls *praxis*, *poiesis*, and *theoria*. In *praxis* the motive is "to do" something; we have seen that Oedipus's action, as soon as he sees that he must find the slayer, is a *praxis*. In *poiesis* the motive is "to make" something; it is the action of artists when they are focused upon the play, or the song, or the poem, which they are trying to *make*. Our word "poetry" comes from this Greek word, and the *Poetics* itself is an analysis of the poet's action in making a tragedy. In *theoria* the motive is "to grasp and understand" some truth. It may be translated as "contemplation," if one remembers that, for Aristotle, contemplation is intensely active. When he says (VI.9) that the end of life is a mode of action, he means *theoria*. He thought that "all men wish to know," and that the human spirit lives most fully and intensely in the perception of truth.

These three modes of action—doing, making, and contemplation—provide only a very rough classification of human actions, and Aristotle is well aware of that. For every action arises in a particular character, in response to the particular situation he

perceives at that moment: every action has its own form or mode of being. Moreover, in Aristotle's psychology, both action and character (which he defines as *habitual action*) are formed out of ill-defined feelings and emotions, which he calls *pathos*. In any tragedy, which must represent a "complete action," the element of pathos is essential. If we are to understand the action in our example, *Oedipus Rex*, we must reflect upon the relationship between the pathos with which the play begins and ends, and the common purpose, to find the slayer, that produces the events of the story.

In Aristotle's philosophy, and in many subsequent theories of human conduct, the concepts "action" and "passion" (or *praxis* and *pathos*), are sharply contrasted. Action is active: the psyche perceives something it wants, and "moves" toward it. Passion is passive: the psyche suffers something it cannot control or understand, and "is moved" thereby. The two concepts, abstractly considered, are opposites; but in our human experience action and passion are always combined, and that fact is recognized in Aristotle's psychology. There is no movement of the psyche which is pure passion—totally devoid of purpose and understanding—except perhaps in some pathological states where the human quality is lost. And there is no human action without its component of ill-defined feeling or emotion; only God (in some Aristotelian philosophies) may be defined as Pure Act. When Aristotle says "life consists in action," he is thinking of action, in its countless forms, continually arising out of the more formless pathos (or "affectivity," as we call it) of the human psyche. Even in pain, lust, terror, or grief, the passion, as we know it, acquires some

more or less conscious motive, some recognizably human form. That is why Aristotle can speak (XVIII.2) both of "pathetic" motivation, which is closer to the passionate pole of experience, and "ethical" motivation, which is closer to reason and the consciously controlled will.

With these considerations in mind, one can see more clearly what Aristotle means by the "complete action" which a tragedy represents. In the Prologue of *Oedipus Rex*, Thebes is suffering under the plague, and the Citizens beseech King Oedipus for help: the common purpose, "to cure Thebes," arises out of the passion of fear. When Creon brings the Oracle's word, the action is more sharply defined as "to find the slayer." Each Episode is a dispute between Oedipus and one of his antagonists about the quest for the slayer, and each one ends as the disputants fail to agree, and new facts are brought to light. The Chorus is left a prey to its fear again. The Choral Odes are "pathetic" in motivation, but their pathos, or passion, is given form through the continued effort *to see* how the common purpose might still be achieved. When Oedipus at last finds himself to be the culprit, his action is shattered, and even his character as an ethically responsible man along with it. The Chorus suffers with him; but through the laments and terrible visions of the end of the play, their action moves to *its* end: they see the culprit, and thereby the salvation of the city. Moreover, they see in self-blinded Oedipus a general truth of the human condition:

Men of Thebes: look upon Oedipus.

This is the king who solved the famous riddle
And towered up, most powerful of men.

No mortal eyes but looked on him with envy.
Yet in the end ruin swept over him.

Let every man in mankind's frailty
Consider his last day; and let none
Presume on his good fortune until he find
Life, at his death, a memory without pain.*

This marks the end of the action in more ways than one. The common purpose has reached its paradoxical success, and the Chorus (and through it, the audience) has attained that mode of action, *theoria*, contemplation of the truth, which Aristotle regarded as the ultimate goal of a truly human life.

The complete action represented in *Oedipus Rex* is (fortunately for our purposes) easy to see. But all human actions which are worked out to the end, passing through the unforeseeable contingencies of a "world we never made," follow a similar course: the conscious purpose with which they start is redefined after each unforeseen contingency is suffered; and at the end, in the light of hindsight, we see the truth of what we have been doing. Mr. Kenneth Burke has used this "tragic rhythm of action," as he calls it, Purpose, to Passion, to Perception, in his illuminating analyses of various kinds of literature. All serious works of fiction or drama represent some complete action, even so complex a form as Shakespearean tragedy. In short, Aristotle's notion is useful still; for his lore of "action" is a kind of natural history of the psyche's life.

HOW PLOT-MAKING IMITATES THE ACTION

Plot-making is in bad odor with contemporary critics of poetry, because they think of it as the

* *Sophocles' Oedipus Rex*. An English Version by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: 1949.

mechanical ingenuity of whodunits and other "plotty" entertainments. Aristotle saw the usefulness of that kind of plot-making, and offers suggestions about how to do it; but his own primary conception of plot is "organic." He sees the plot as the basic *form* of the play, and in that sense one might speak of the "plot" of a short lyric.

But he is discussing the making of the plot of tragedy, and his first definition of it (VI.6) applies only to drama: "the arrangement of the incidents." This definition is very useful, as a beginning, because it enables one to distinguish the plot both from the story the poet wishes to dramatize, and from the action he wishes to represent.

The *story* of Oedipus was known to Sophocles as a mass of legendary material covering several generations. In making his *plot*, he selected only a few incidents to present onstage, and represented the rest through the testimony of Tiresias, Jocasta, the Messenger from Corinth, and the old Shepherd. The distinction between plot and story applies to all plays, including those whose story is invented by the poet. The story of an Ibsen play, for instance, might be told as a three-decker novel, but Ibsen always "arranges the incidents" in such a way as to show only a few crucial moments directly.

The purpose of plot-making is to represent one "complete action," in the case of *Oedipus Rex* the quest for the slayer which I have described. We must suppose that Sophocles saw a quest, a seeking motive, in the sprawling incidents of the Oedipus legend. That would be his poetic vision or "inspiration," the first clue to the play-to-be. He saw this action as tragic: as eventuating in destruction, suffering, and the appearance of a new insight. At

that moment plot-making begins; the incidents of the story begin to fall into a significant arrangement.

"Plot, then," says Aristotle (VI.15), "is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy." This is the organic metaphor which is so useful in the analysis of a work of art. By "soul" Aristotle (who was a biologist) means the formative principle in any live thing whether man, animal, or plant. Consider an egg, for instance: it is only potentially a chicken until the "soul" within it, through the successive phases of embryonic development, makes it *actually* a chicken. Similarly, the action which the poet first glimpses is only potentially a tragedy, until his plot-making forms it into an *actual* tragedy. Aristotle thought that when the incidents of the story are arranged in their tragic sequence, they already produce some of the tragic effect, even though the characters are hardly more than names. That stage would correspond to the embryo when it is first recognizable as a chicken. But the chicken is not fully actual until it has plumage and a squawk, and the tragedy is not fully actual until all the *dramatis personae* are characterized, and all the language is formed to express their changing actions, moment by moment. The plot, in other words, is the "first" or basic form of the play, but it is by character delineation and the arts of language that the poet gives it the final form which we read, or see and hear.

The Parts of the Plot

A complete action (as we have seen) passes through the modes of purpose and pathos to the final perception, and the plot therefore has "parts"

—types of incidents in the beginning, middle, and end of the play—resulting from the various modes of action. Aristotle discusses the parts of the plot in several ways, in connection with various play-writing problems.

In Chapter XII he lists and defines the “quantitative parts” of a tragedy, by which he means the sections (rather like the movements of a symphony) in which Greek tragedies were traditionally written: Prologue, Episode, Exode, and Choric song. This chapter is probably a late interpolation, and defective; but in the light of modern studies of the relation between tragedy and the ritual forms from which it was derived, it is important. The table on page 41 shows the “quantitative parts” of *Oedipus Rex* in relation to the action, and to the supposed form of the Dionysian ritual.

Aristotle devotes most of his attention to the “organic parts” of the plot, by which he apparently means those which represent a tragic action, and best serve to produce the specifically tragic effect. They all represent the action at the moment when it is reaching its catastrophic end: Reversal of the Situation, Recognition, and Pathos, which Butcher translates “Scene of Suffering.” In the best tragedies, reversal, recognition, and pathos are inherent in the basic conception of the plot, and depend upon one another, as in *Oedipus Rex*.

“Reversal of the Situation,” Aristotle says (XI.1), “is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite. . . . Thus in the *Oedipus*, the Messenger comes to cheer Oedipus and free him from his alarms about his mother, but by revealing who he is, he produces the opposite effect.” Notice that the objective situation does not change, for Oedipus

was, in fact, Jocasta's son all along. What changes is the situation as the thought of the characters makes it out at that moment; that is why Oedipus's action changes before our eyes. The action which seemed to be about to reach a happy end is seen to be headed for catastrophe, and Oedipus's final pathos follows.

“Recognition,” Aristotle writes (XI.2), “. . . is a change from ignorance to knowledge.” Oedipus's change from ignorance to knowledge occurs as he cross-questions the Messenger, and then the old Shepherd. By plotting this crucial moment in this way, Sophocles has, as it were, spread out before our eyes the whole turn of Oedipus's inner being, from the triumph which seems just ahead to utter despair. The tremendous excitement of this passage is partly due to the fact that what Oedipus “recognizes” is the reversal: “The best form of recognition is coincident with a Reversal of the Situation, as in the *Oedipus*,” says Aristotle (XI.2). And it is due also to the fact that this moment of enlightenment was inherent in the whole conception of the Tragic Plot: “. . . of all recognitions,” says Aristotle (XVI.8), “the best is that which arises from the incidents themselves, where the startling discovery is made by natural means. Such is that in the *Oedipus* of Sophocles.”

Aristotle offers the recognition scenes in *Oedipus* and in Sophocles' *Electra* (where the situation on-stage turns from despair to triumph) as models of their kind. He also briefly analyzes other more mechanical and superficial ways of plotting the passage from ignorance to knowledge. He is certainly right in calling the recognition scene an “organic part” of the tragic plot, for in good drama

down to our own day such scenes are essential to the tragic effect. Consider old Lear's gradual recognition of Cordelia, as he wakes in Act V; or Mrs. Alving's recognition of her son's mortal illness at the end of *Ghosts*. The action of perceiving, passing from ignorance to knowledge, is near the heart of tragedy, and the masters of that art all know how to "arrange the incidents" in such a way as to represent it on the stage.

Pathos also is an essential element in tragedy. We have seen that the whole action of *Oedipus Rex* arises out of the passion of fear; sinks back into pathos in each of the Choral Odes, and ends in the long sequence when the Chorus finally sees the meaning of Oedipus's suffering. Aristotle has little to say about plotting the "scene of suffering," perhaps because in Greek tragedy the element of pathos is usually represented in the musically accompanied verse of the Choral Odes. His most important point is in Chapter XIV.1: "Fear and Pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece. . . . He who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place. This is the impression we should receive from hearing the story of the *Oedipus*." When Oedipus yells in agony, when he appears with bleeding sockets for eyes, pathos is certainly represented by "spectacular means"; but by that moment in the play we understand Oedipus's plight so deeply that the sights and sounds are only symbols of the destruction of his inner being.

In discussing the "organic parts of the Plot" Aristotle has nothing to say about the Episodes. In *Oedipus Rex* the Episodes are the fierce disputes

between Oedipus and his antagonists, whereby the quest for the slayer moves to its unforeseen end; they are essential in the unfolding of the story. Perhaps the text is again defective here, or it may be that Aristotle thought the Episodes less essential to the tragic effect than reversal, recognition, and pathos. However that may be, the inner structure of the Episodes, which are public debates, struggles of mind against mind, may best be considered under the heading of Thought and Diction, and I shall have something to say of them on page 26.

Kinds of Plots

Since the vision which the poet is trying to represent in his play is a certain action, there are various kinds of plot-making appropriate to the various kinds of action. The *Oedipus* is (in Aristotle's view) the best model: the action is "complete" and the plot represents it almost perfectly. The plot is "Complex," by which Aristotle means that it includes reversal and recognition, but there are "Simple Plots" which do not include these elements. The plot of *The Death of a Salesman*, for example, is simple, for poor Willy Loman proceeds straight down to his sordid end without ever passing from ignorance to knowledge. The action of *Oedipus Rex* takes the form of "ethical" motivation as Oedipus pursues his rational and morally responsible purpose of finding the slayer, as well as "pathetic" motivation at the beginning and end of the play. But Aristotle also recognizes plays of essentially pathetic motivation, and plays of essentially ethical motivation. In our time, Chekhov's plays are pathetic in motivation, and the plot, or basic form, is

more like that of a lyric than that of traditional "drama." Ibsen's plays are mainly ethical in motivation, and consist chiefly of disputes like the Episodes in *Oedipus*.

Aristotle never forgets that a play must, by definition, hold and please an audience in the theater, and his whole discussion of plot-making is interspersed with practical suggestions for the playwright. The story must seem "probable," and Aristotle has canny recipes for making it seem so. The supernatural is hard to put over, and it is wiser to keep the gods off the stage. In Chapter XVIII.1, Aristotle points out that any plot may be divided into two main parts, the Complication, which extends from the prologue to the turning point, and the Unraveling or denouement, from the turning point to the end. This way of describing the structure of a plot will sound familiar to anyone who has learned the mechanics of the "well-made play." It is a useful formula for the practical playwright, because it has to do, not with the dramatist's vision, but with the *means* of making any action clear and effective in the theater.

Aristotle's practical suggestions are still valuable, but they require no explanation, and I return to his main theory.

The Unity of the Play; Double Plots

The most fundamental question one can ask about any work of art is that of its unity: how do its parts cohere in order to make *one* beautiful object? Aristotle's answer, which he emphasizes again and again, is that a play or poem can be unified only if it represents *one action*. The poet, in building his

form, conceiving his characters, writing his words, must make sure that everything embodies the one movement-of-spirit. That, as Coleridge says, is a counsel of perfection, "not properly a rule," but rather what all the arts aim at.

The plot of a play is the first form of the one action; what then are we to say of plays, like many of Shakespeare's, in which several plots, often taken from different stories, are combined?

Aristotle of course did not have Shakespeare's plays, but he did have Homer, who also combined many stories, many plot sequences, both in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. And he recognized that Homer unified that more complex scheme by obeying the fundamental requirement of unity of action: (VIII.3): ". . . he made the *Odyssey*, and likewise the *Iliad*, to center round an action that in our sense of the word is one." Aristotle returns to this point in Chapter XXIII, where he takes up the epic. Lesser poets, he says, have tried to unify an epic by basing it upon one character, or one great historic event, like the Trojan War. Only Homer had the vision to discover one action in the wide and diversified material of his epics. The action of the *Iliad* (as the first lines suggest) is "to deal with the anger of Achilles." The action of the *Odyssey* is "to get home again," a nostalgic motive which we feel in Odysseus's wanderings, in Telemachus's wanderings, and in Penelope's patient struggle to save her home from the suitors. The interwoven stories, each with its plot, are analogous; and in the same way the stories which Shakespeare wove together to make a *Lear* or a *Hamlet* are analogous: varied embodiments of one action.

Aristotle did not think that tragedies plotted like

the *Odyssey* with "a double thread of plot" (XIII.7) were the best tragedies. He preferred the stricter unity of the single plot and the single catastrophe. Perhaps if he had read *Lear* or *Hamlet* he would have modified this view. Even so, his principle of the unity of action is still the best way we have to describe the unity of a work of art, including the vast and complex ones with two or more plots.

HOW CHARACTER DELINEATION IMITATES THE ACTION

In Aristotle's diagrammatic account of play-making, the poet works on characterization after the action has been plotted as a tragic sequence of incidents. Characters are of course implicit from the first, since all actions are actions of individuals. But, as Aristotle reminds us again and again, ". . . tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life" (VI.9), and therefore "character comes in as subsidiary to the actions." The poet sees the action of the play-to-be first; then its tragic form (or plot), and then the characters best fitted to carry it out with variety and depth.

One must remember that in Aristotle's psychology, character is less fundamental than action: *Character* is defined as "habitual action," and it is formed by parents and other environmental influences out of the comparatively formless pathos (appetites, fears, and the like) which move the very young. As the growing person acquires habitual motives, he begins to understand them rationally, and so becomes ethically responsible: we say that he is a good or bad *character*. When we first meet Oedipus, he is a fully-formed character: a re-

sponsible ruler who (apparently in full awareness of what he is doing) adopts the rational motive of finding the slayer of Laius. But his discovery that he is himself the culprit destroys, not only his motive, but the "character" of knowing and responsible ruler; and passion, or pathos, takes over. Old Lear, at a similar point in his story, describes the experience accurately:

O, how this mother swells up toward my heart!
Hysterica passio! Down, thou climbing sorrow,
Thy element's below.

After the catastrophes both Lear and Oedipus are "pathetically" motivated, like children, and like children ask for help and guidance. In tragedy, character is often destroyed; and at that moment we can glimpse "life and action" at a deeper level.

It is easy to see how the character of Oedipus, as imagined by Sophocles, is admirably fitted to represent the main action of the play, and carry it all the way to the end. With his intelligence, his arrogant self-confidence, and his moral courage, he is the perfect protagonist. But the other characters are almost equally effective for this purpose: Tiresias, who knows the will of the gods all along, but cannot himself take the lead in cleansing the city; or Jocasta, who obscurely fears the truth, and so feels that Thebes would be better off in ignorance. The contrasting characters reveal the main action in different ways, and their disagreements make the tense disputes of all the Episodes. But all this diversity of characterization, all this conflict of thought, is "with a view" to the action of the play as a whole: that common motive which I have said

is "to save Thebes from its plague, by finding the unknown culprit."

It is, of course, by the plot that this main action, or common motive, is established. It is very clear in the Prologue, when everyone wants only to save Thebes. We forget it in the excitement of the disputes, and in the fascination of the contrasted characters; but we are reminded of it again in each Choral Ode. It is the Chorus which most directly represents the action of the *play*; and the Chorus can do that just because it has less "character" than Oedipus or his antagonists. In the Chorus we can sense the action at a deeper-than-individual level, and its successive Odes, with music and dance, mark the life and movement of the *play*.

We must suppose that the actions of Tiresias, Jocasta, even Oedipus, would be quite different if we saw them apart from the basic situation of the play—the plague in Thebes. We see them only in relation to that crisis, and that is why their actions, different though their characters are, are analogous. Aristotle has a good deal to say (VI.11 and 12) about less successful kinds of character delineation. Some of our "modern poets," he says, do not make effective characters, and so their works are devoid of ethical quality. Others develop character for its own sake—for local color, perhaps, or glamour, or amusement—thereby weakening the unity of the play, which can only be achieved when the action is one. In *Oedipus Rex* this problem is beautifully solved: the characters, sharply contrasted, are full of individual life and varied "ethical quality," yet the action of the *play* underlies them all.

Aristotle offers many other ideas about character delineation, based on his observation of the theater

he knew, notably in Chapters XIII and XV. They are essentially practical rules of thumb, intended to assist the playwright to succeed with his audience, like his insistence on "probability" and consistency in characterization, or his notion that the tragic protagonist should usually be a ruler or leader. His observations are shrewd; but to be of assistance now they must be translated into terms of the modern theater.

HOW "THOUGHT AND DICTION" IMITATE THE ACTION

In Chapter XIX Aristotle takes up "Thought" and "Diction" together, for they are both aspects of the language of the play. By *Diction*, he tells us, he means "the art of delivery": diction or speech as it is taught in modern schools of acting. Diction is one of the six parts of tragedy, for tragedy is by definition acted on a stage, and the actors must know how to handle its language. But Aristotle has little to say about it, because he is studying the art of the poet, who does not have to know how to speak as actors do.

Thought, however, concerns the poet directly, for thought is one of the "causes" of action. The poet works it out after the situations of the plot, and the characters, are clearly conceived. The word "thought" (*dianoia*) refers to a very wide range of the mind's activities, from abstract reasoning to the perception and formulation of emotion; for it is thought that defines all the objects of human motivation, whether they are dimly seen or clear and definite, illusory as dream, or objectively real. In the play, thought is represented by what the char-

acters *say* about the course to be pursued, in each situation. That is why Aristotle identifies thought with the arts of language. "Under Thought," he says (XIX.2) "is included every effect which has to be produced by speech, the subdivisions being—proof and refutation; the excitation of the feelings, such as pity, fear, anger, and the like; the suggestion of importance or its opposite." At this point Aristotle refers us to his *Rhetoric*, where these modes of discourse are analyzed in detail.

In that work he writes (I.2), "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. . . ." (Jowett's translation.) He is thinking primarily of a public speaker, a lawyer or statesman, whose action is "to persuade" his audience to adopt his opinion. He considers the various means the speaker may use to persuade his audience: his attitudes, his use of voice and gesture, his pauses—in short, such means as actors use. But his main attention is devoted to arts of language, from the most logical (proof and refutation) where the appeal is to reason, to more highly colored language intended to move the feelings. The *Rhetoric* is an analysis of the forms of "Thought and Diction" which the action of persuading may take.

This analysis may be applied directly to the Episodes in *Oedipus*, i.e., to the thought-and-language of Oedipus and his antagonists, in the successive situations of the plot. They meet to debate a great public question, that of the welfare of Thebes; and they try to persuade not only one another, but the listening Chorus, and beyond that the frightened city. They are thus situated as Aristotle's user of rhetoric is, and they resort to

the same arts of language. They begin with a show of reason ("proof and refutation"); but as this fails to persuade, they resort to more emotional language, and when that too fails the dispute is broken off in dismay.

Sophocles' Athenian audience, which was accustomed to the arts of public speaking, would presumably have enjoyed the skill of Oedipus and his antagonists. In modern drama we find neither the sophisticated formality of Greek tragedy, nor the rhetorical virtuosity which Aristotle analyzes. But the principles, both of tragedy and of classical rhetoric, are natural, and disputants in our day—politicians or mere amateur arguers—resort to rhetorical forms, whether they have ever heard of them or not. Disputing characters in all drama—especially drama of "ethical" motivation like Ibsen's—instinctively use the stratagems of rhetoric, as they try to overcome each other with thought-and-language. The structure of great scenes of conflict, in Neoclassic French drama, in Shakespeare, in Ibsen, is in this respect similar to that of the Episodes in *Oedipus*.

At this point the logic of Aristotle's scheme seems to require an analysis of the language of the Choral Odes which follow each Episode. In glossing his definition of tragedy he explains (VI.3), "By 'language embellished' I mean language into which rhythm, 'harmony,' and song enter"—which must refer to the Odes with their musical accompaniment. And he emphasizes the importance of the Chorus in the structure of the play (XVIII.7): "The Chorus too should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action, in the manner not of

Euripides but of Sophocles." We know from his remark on *Mousiké*, which includes both music and lyric verse (in his *Politics*, VIII) that he thought the modes of *Mousiké* imitated the modes of action with singular directness and intimacy. But he does not analyze either music or the language of lyric poetry in any of his extant writings. Perhaps the relevant passages are lost, for the texts of both the *Politics* and the *Poetics* are incomplete.

One may, however, find the basis for an Aristotelian analysis of lyric language in some parts of the *Rhetoric*, and in Chapters XXI and XXII of the *Poetics*. I am thinking especially of his brief remarks on analogy and metaphor, which he regards as the basis of poetic language (XXII.9): "But the greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor. This alone cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances." His analysis of kinds of metaphors is dull, and he never demonstrates the coherent metaphors in a whole poem, as modern critics of lyric verse do; yet the basic conception is there. His definition of analogy is austere (XXI.6): "Analogy or proportion is when the second term is to the first as the fourth to the third. We may then use the fourth for the second, or the second for the fourth." But this conception of analogy has also proved fertile, far beyond what Aristotle could have foreseen. It is the basis of the subtle medieval lore of analogy, which underlies the poetry of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

The Choral Odes in *Oedipus* may, like all lyrics, be analyzed in terms of metaphor and analogy. Take for example the first Strophe of the Parode, as translated by Fitts and Fitzgerald:

What is the god singing in his profound
Delphi of gold and shadow?
What oracle for Thebes, the sunwhipped city?

Fear unjoints me, the roots of my heart tremble.

Now I remember, O Healer, your power and wonder:
Will you send doom like a sudden cloud, or weave it
Like nightfall of the past?

Ah no: be merciful, issue of holy sound:
Dearest to our expectancy: be tender!

The main metaphors here are of light and darkness: "gold and shadow," "sunwhipped city," "sudden cloud," "nightfall of the past." In the rest of the Ode light and darkness appear in many other metaphors, and are associated with Apollo, the god of light, of healing, and also of disease; it was he who spoke through the Oracle of Delphi. The imagery of light and darkness runs through the whole play, stemming from Tiresias's blindness, and Oedipus's blindness at the end. It is based on the *analogy* between the eye of the body and the eye of the mind—sight : blindness :: insight : ignorance. We may then, as Aristotle points out, use the fourth term (ignorance) for the second (blindness), and vice versa. Physical blindness and the darkness of nightfall express the seeking-action of the play, the movement-of-spirit from ignorance to insight. The Chorus "shares in the action," as Aristotle puts it. The Chorus cannot *do* anything to advance the quest, but as it suffers its passions of fear and pity it can grope through associated images of light and darkness, healing and disease, life and death, toward the perception of the truth.

It is not my intention, however, to attempt a full analysis of the poetic language of *Oedipus Rex*. I

merely wish to suggest that, with the aid of the Aristotelian notions of metaphor and analogy, one can see how the Odes also imitate the action. The same principles apply to the poetic language of any good play, and the best modern critics (experts in the lyric) have made such analyses of the language of poetic drama, from Shakespeare to Yeats and Eliot.

SONG AND SPECTACLE; ACTION AND ACTING

The three basic parts of the art of tragedy are, as we have seen, plot-making, character delineation, and thought-and-language, for by these means the poet gives the action its tragic form, and its concrete actuality. The other three parts, *speech*, in the sense of the art of delivery, *song*, and *spectacle*, all have to do with the production of the play. They are thus essential to the art of tragedy, but concern the poet less directly than the other three, and Aristotle has little to say about them. He apparently did not feel qualified to discuss music and its performance (as one gathers from his remarks on *Mousiké* in *Politics*, VIII), and he seems to have had a low opinion of theatrical production in his time. When he wrote, the great dramatists were gone; and he seems to have known a number of egoistic actors, like some of our modern stars, who made the plays into vehicles for their own personalities.

But Aristotle knew that the poet, in the very act of making his tragedy, had to be an actor. The poet does not need the techniques of voice, diction, and bodily movement, but he must, as he writes, imitate each character in his own inner being and

“believe” the situations, just as a good actor does. For tragedy, as he says in his basic definition, is “in the form of actions,” i.e., acted by characters. In Chapter XVII.1 and 2, he gives the poet some practical suggestions about achieving this essential quality:

In constructing the plot and working it out with the proper diction, the poet should place the scene, as far as possible, before his eyes. . . . Again, the poet should work out his play, to the best of his power, with appropriate gestures; for those who feel emotion are most convincing through natural sympathy with the characters they represent; and one who is agitated storms, one who is angry rages, with the most lifelike reality. Hence poetry implies either a happy gift of nature, or a strain of madness. In the one case a man can take the mold of any character; in the other, he is lifted out of his proper self.

The purpose of any good technique of acting is to help the actor to perceive the action of the character he is portraying, and then re-create it in his own thought and feeling, as Aristotle says the playwright must do. The best-known acting technique of this kind is that of the Moscow Art Theater, which is widely cultivated (in several versions) in this country. The late Jacques Copeau taught such a technique, and so did the best theater schools in Germany, before Hitler. Each school tends, unfortunately, to develop its own technical vocabulary, but I think their basic assumptions may all be expressed in Aristotelian terms. They all assume that the actor's art consists in “taking the mold” of the character to be portrayed, and then responding to the situations of the play as they appear to that character. Only in that way can the actor

achieve "lifelike reality." Superficial mimicry cannot produce psychological truth, fidelity to the playwright's imagined people and situations, or emotional effect on the audience. The masters of acting technique have a subtle and practical lore of action. There is no better way to understand "action," as that concept is used in Aristotle's *Poetics*, than by studying its practical utility in the art of acting.

IV. THE END OF TRAGEDY: PLEASURE, THE UNIVERSAL, AND THE PURGATION OF THE PASSIONS OF FEAR AND PITY

The question why tragedy, with its images of conflict, terror and suffering, should give us pleasure and satisfaction, has been answered in many ways. Aristotle's answers, cautious and descriptive as they are, have interested his readers more than anything else in the *Poetics*, and produced more heated controversies among his interpreters. The appeal of tragedy is in the last analysis inexplicable, rooted as it is in our mysterious human nature, but Aristotle's observations of the effect which tragedy has upon us are as illuminating as anything we have on the subject.

He accepted, to begin with, the Greek notion that the fine arts have no end beyond themselves. The useful arts, shipbuilding, carpentry, and the like, provide transportation or shelter, but a play or a symphony cannot be used for anything but "pleasure." And we have seen that in his introductory remarks Aristotle suggests that the arts give

pleasure because they satisfy the instincts, or needs, of "imitation" and of "harmony" and "rhythm."

When we recognize the movement-of-spirit "imitated" in a play or poem, we get the satisfaction of knowledge and understanding. The joy of Romeo when he hears Juliet's voice saying his name, the despair of Macbeth when he sees that his mad race is lost, seem to confirm something we half-knew already. The creatures of the poet's imagination do not literally represent anything in our own experience; it must be that *through* word, character, and situation we glimpse something common to men in all times and places. That is why Aristotle writes, (IX.3): "Poetry . . . is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular."

"Harmony and rhythm" must refer, not only to music, but to the accords and correspondences that we enjoy in any beautifully formed work of art. Stephen Daedalus, in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, explaining his own Aristotelian conception of art, offers a general definition of rhythm: "Rhythm is the first formal esthetic relation of part to part in any esthetic whole or of an esthetic whole to its part or parts or of any part to the esthetic whole of which it is a part." Young Stephen's formula is laughably pedantic, but (if one thinks it out) extremely accurate. Stephen's whole discussion shows the right way to use Aristotle's ideas: as guides in one's own thinking about art.

Why do harmony and rhythm please us? We do not know; we can only note that they do. "There seems to be in us a sort of affinity to musical modes and rhythms," says Aristotle (*Politics*, VIII),

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Why do harmony and rhythm please us? We do not know; we can only note that they do. "There seems to be in us a sort of affinity to musical modes and rhythms," says Aristotle (*Politics*, VIII),

"which makes some philosophers say that the soul is a tuning, others that it possesses tuning." The notion of the human psyche as itself a harmony and rhythm reappears again and again in our tradition, notably in Shakespeare, who often uses music to suggest the health of the inner being.

Such are the pleasures we find in all the fine arts; but the special quality of our pleasure in tragedy may be more closely defined. It comes, says Aristotle, from the purgation of the passions of fear and pity. At this point Stephen's meditations may help us again: "Aristotle has not defined pity and terror. I have. . . . Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause." Notice that these passions must be stirred by the grave and *constant*. A particular calamity with no general meaning—a street accident for example—does not produce the tragic emotion, but only meaningless pain. Here we meet once more the universality of art: the passions of tragedy must spring from something of more than individual, more than momentary, significance. Moreover, the cause of our terror must be "secret." Tragedy, like the Dionysian ceremonies from which it was derived, touches the dark edge of human experience, celebrates a mystery of our nature and destiny.

It would seem (on thinking over the effects of a few tragedies) that pity and fear *together* are required. Pity alone is merely sentimental, like the shameless tears of soap opera. Fear alone, such as we get from a good thriller, merely makes us shift

tensely to the edge of the seat and brace ourselves for the pistol shot. But the masters of tragedy, like good cooks, mingle pity and fear in the right proportions. Having given us fear enough, they melt us with pity, purging us of our emotions, and reconciling us to our fate, because we understand it as the universal human lot.

Aristotle's word for this effect is "purgation" or "catharsis." The Greek word can mean either the cleansing of the body (a medical term) or the cleansing of the spirit (a religious term). Some interpreters are shocked by it, because they do not wish to associate poetry with laxatives and enemas; others insist that Aristotle had the religious meaning in mind. I think it is more sensible to assume that Aristotle did not mean either one *literally*: he was talking about tragedy, not medicine or religion, and his use of the term "purgation" is analogical. There are certainly bodily changes (in our chemistry, breathing, muscular tensions, and the like) as we undergo the emotions of tragedy, and they may well constitute a release *like* that of literal purgation. But tragedy speaks essentially to the mind and the spirit, and its effect is *like* that which believers get from religious ceremonies intended to cleanse the spirit. Aristotle noticed (*Politics*, VIII) that, in religious rituals that he knew, the passions were stirred, released, and at last appeased; and he must have been thinking partly of that when he used the term "purgation" to describe the effect of tragedy.

In the *Poetics* Aristotle does not try to show how the various effects which the art of tragedy aims at, as its "end," are united in an actual play. The pleasures of imitation, harmony, and rhythm; the

universal quality of art, and the release and cleansing of the passions, are things he observed, and mentioned in different contexts. But we may, if we like, confirm them in any good tragedy. The effect of *Oedipus Rex*, for example, depends upon its subtle and manifold "rhythm" as Joyce defines the word; upon the pity and fear which are stirred in us, and upon our recognition, at the end, of something both mysterious and universal in Oedipus's fate. Aristotle had a consistent and far-reaching conception of the art of tragedy, and of its end; but his conception only emerges gradually as one thinks over his observations in the light of one's own experience of drama.

V. THE POETICS AND THE RITUAL FORMS OF GREEK TRAGEDY

For the last hundred years or more, Greek tragedy has been understood as an outgrowth of rites celebrated annually at the Festival of Dionysus. Those rites have been investigated both in their relation to the god Dionysus and in their relation to the primitive religion of the Greeks. The result is a conception of Greek tragedy which is very different from that which prevailed from the Renaissance into the eighteenth century. The Renaissance humanists and their successors saw it in "civilized" and rational terms; in our time we see that much of its form and meaning is due to its primitive source, and to the religious Festival of which it was a part.

This new conception of Greek tragedy has had a very wide effect upon our understanding of the sources of poetry in our tradition, and also upon

modern poetry itself, including the theater and music. One thinks of Wagner, and of Nietzsche, who when he wrote *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* was the prophet of Wagner; of Stravinsky, of T. S. Eliot; of French writers as different as Cocteau and Valéry.

In writing the *Poetics* Aristotle was interested in the fully developed tragic form, and not in its ritual sources. He recognized them, however, in his account (IV.12) of the growth of tragedy from the dithyramb. The "quantitative parts" of the tragic plot which he describes are apparently traditional, and derived from the parts of the old rituals. And the "end" of tragedy as he describes it, the purgation of passion, and the embodiment of a universal truth, are analogous to the purposes of religious ritual. The rituals of the Festival of Dionysus are supposed to have included initiation ceremonies, intended to purify the neophyte by the enactment of symbolic ordeals and sacrifices; and also "rites of spring," symbolic enactments of the death and re-birth of a "season-spirit" (as Harrison calls him), upon whom the annual renewal of vegetable life was thought to depend. If these modern theories of the ritual sources of tragedy do not explain the *Poetics* directly, they may throw light upon it indirectly, by deepening our understanding of the art form which Aristotle was analyzing.

Unfortunately little is known directly about the rites of the Dionysian Festival, or about the poets, Aeschylus's predecessors, who gradually made the tragic form out of ritual. The scholars who devote their lives to such matters do not agree upon the evidence to be accepted, nor upon the interpretation of the evidence. But some of their theories are

extremely suggestive, especially those of the Cambridge school, Frazer (of *The Golden Bough*), Cornford, Harrison, Murray, and their colleagues and followers. It is this school which has had the deepest influence upon modern poetry and upon the whole climate of ideas in which we now read Greek tragedy and the *Poetics*.

Jane Ellen Harrison's *Themis, A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*, is a basic work of this school. It contains a note by Gilbert Murray on "The Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy." Murray writes (page 341):

The following note presupposes certain general views about the origin and essential nature of Greek Tragedy. It assumes that Tragedy is in origin a Ritual Dance. . . . Further, it assumes, in accord with the overwhelming weight of ancient tradition, that the dance in question is originally or centrally that of Dionysus; and it regards Dionysus, in this connection, as the spirit of the Dithyramb or Spring Drômenon . . . an "Eniautos-Daimon" [Season-Spirit] who represents the cyclical death and rebirth of the world, including the rebirth of the tribe by the return of the heroes or dead ancestors.

Murray is referring to such mythic figures as Attis, Adonis, and Osiris, whose cults and legends are described by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*; representatives of the Season-Spirit. Murray continues:

If we examine the kind of myth which seems to underlie the various "Eniautos" celebrations we shall find:

1. An *Agon* or Contest, the Year against its enemy, Light against Darkness, Summer against Winter.
2. A *Pathos* of the Year-Daimon, generally a ritual or sacrificial death, in which Adonis or Attis is slain by

the tabu animal, the Pharmakos stoned, Osiris, Dionysus, Pentheus, Orpheus, Hippolytus torn to pieces (*sparagmos*).

3. A *Messenger*. For this *Pathos* seems seldom or never to be actually performed under the eye of the audience. . . . It is announced by a messenger.

4. A *Threnos* or Lamentation. Specially characteristic, however, is a clash of contrary emotions, the death of the old being also the triumph of the new. . . .

5 and 6. An *Anagnorisis*—discovery or recognition—of the slain and mutilated Daimon, followed by his Resurrection or Apotheosis or, in some sense, his "Epiphany in glory." . . . It naturally goes with a *Peripeteia* or extreme change of feeling from grief to joy.

Murray does not maintain that the ancient rituals were all exactly the same, nor that the Greek tragedies we have exactly follow any ritual pattern. He lists all of the extant tragedies, and briefly indicates the ritual forms which he finds, in a different way, in each one.

The theory here expounded by Murray has been much criticized by other experts, and the whole field is full of disputes so erudite that the non-specialist can only look on in respectful silence. But the general notion—that the ritual enactment of struggle, suffering, sacrifice, and the appearance of new light and new life, is at the root of the tragic form—is an insight of the first importance. In primitive societies the ritual is intended to assure the rebirth of vegetation, upon which the physical life of the tribe depends, after the annual death of winter. In civilized societies it comes to signify the rebirth of the human spirit through suffering, as in the Christian liturgy. In *Oedipus Rex* many very primitive elements are present: the wasting of the

Oedipus Rex (sequence of scenes)	Citizens ask Oedipus for help. Creon brings word from the Oracle	Chorus	Oedipus and Tiresias	Chorus	Oedipus and Creon	Oedipus, Creon, Jocasta	Chorus with Oedipus	Oedipus and Jocasta	Chorus	Jocasta, Messenger, Oedipus	Chorus with Oedipus	Oedipus and Shepherd	Chorus	Attendant, Chorus, Oedipus Blind, Creon	Chorus alone (final lines)
	Action of Play	To discover how to cure Thebes of plague	To find the slayer of Laius (rational purpose)	To accept the truth (Pathos—Perception)	Prologue	Parode	Episodes and Choric Songs	Episodes and Choric Song	Episodes and Choric Song	Episodes and Choric Song	Episodes and Choric Song	Exode	Pathos or "Scene of Suffering"	Pathos, with Messenger (in the play, above, the Attendant who tells of Jocasta's death and Oedipus' blinding)	Epiphany
"Quantitative Parts," Poetics XII					Episodes and Choric Songs	Episodes and Choric Song	Episodes and Choric Song	Episodes and Choric Song	Episodes and Choric Song	Episodes and Choric Song	Episodes and Choric Song	Episodes and Choric Song	Episodes and Choric Song	Episodes and Choric Song	Episodes and Choric Song
"Organic Parts," Poetics X, XI															
Parts of the Dionysian Ritual (after Murray)	(a Messenger often gives a Prologue—cf. Creon in the play)				Agon or Contest, season—spirit against its antagonists						Anagnorisis or Recognition and Threnos or Lamentation				

The relation between the scenes of *Oedipus Rex*, the action of the play, the "parts" of the play according to Aristotle, and the parts of the Ritual according to Murray.

physical life of Thebes under its "plague," Oedipus's limp, and his mutilated eyes, signs characteristic of the scapegoat, king, or semidivine hero, who undergoes ritual combat and suffering to restore the life of the community. But in Sophocles' play these ancient savage elements represent the renewal, or cleansing, of the life of the spirit through suffering and the perception of truth.

The table on page 40 is intended to show parallels between the form of *Oedipus Rex*, as Aristotle analyzes the tragic form, and the ritual forms as reconstructed by Murray and his school. It is offered, not as a provable or disprovable hypothesis, but as an "aid to reflection" upon the form and meaning of tragedy.

Suggestions for Further Reading

This short list is confined to books in English, most of them easily available in libraries or in inexpensive editions. The reader who wishes to go farther into the vast literature on the *Poetics* and related topics will find bibliographies in several of the books listed below.

Books available in paperback editions are marked with an asterisk [*].

I. THE POETICS IN ENGLISH

S. H. Butcher. *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*. 4th ed., London: 1932. Contains our text in Greek and English, with a long essay by Butcher.

Ingram Bywater. *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry*.