Was Aristotle more friendly to poets than Plato?

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Plato is still notorious as an enemy of poetry today. He regards works of art as only copies (*mimēsis*) of sensible objects and concludes that they are at the third remove from Forms in the *Republic* X. According to Plato, as imitative poetry appeals to the lowest part of the soul and often corrupts people, such poetry must be excluded from his ideal state. On the other hand, Aristotle gives the meaning of the *mimēsis* a 180-degree turn[1] and defends poetry from bad treatment. It is generally believed that Aristotle writes the *Poetics* to defend poetry against Plato's strictures and establish its independent value[2]. In this paper, I would like to challenge this firm prejudice that Plato does not give proper respect to poetry while Aristotle has a better understanding of the true value of poetry.

Plato's criticism against poetry is made from three different points of view. They are as follows:

1) an epistemological point of view: Poetry is far away from truth and poets are ignorant of what they write about.

2) a psychological view: Poetry strongly appeals to the lowest part of the human soul and upsets the noblest part of it with feelings of excessive pleasure or lamentation.

3) a political view: Poetry imbues people with false ideas about gods'

nature and human lives. It leads them to corrupt the right order of a state. So we can admit no poetry into an ideal state except hymns to the gods and praise of good men.

I will examine Aristotle's theory of poetry from these three points of view and try to make clear the nature of Plato's criticism against poetry.

2. The criticism from an epistemological point of view

After Plato sets forth important parts of his doctrine of Forms, he tackles the problem of poetry again in the *Republic* X. Unlike that of the *Republic* Ⅲ, he bases his new criticism on his theory of Forms. By assuming the existence of a Form for every set of those things which we call by the same name, for example, we come to have three kinds of beds; the Form of the bed, the beds on which we can sleep, and appearances of beds that can be produced by paintings. God made the Form as unique. Using the Form of the bed as a perfect model, artisans make the beds. Imitating sensible beds made by artisans, painters produce appearances of beds. We should count poets among painters as imitators. They can produce anything which they want without having proper knowledge of the models for their products.

Some objections to Plato are focused on the failure of this analogy between painters and poets. J. Annas maintains that Plato makes paintings the paradigm of art in order to trivialize poetry. She points out the failure of the analogy between paintings and poetry as follows.

"Homer cannot be said to copy the appearance of things in anything

like the way that the illusionistic painter does. What corresponds to holding up the mirror, or capturing the perspective of the way a bed looks from one particular angle of vision? There seems no analogy at all".[3]

To be sure, there is no need for poets to have a model when they write their poetry. However, we should not demand strict correspondence to the analogy. We have to be satisfied with the analogy in so far as we can understand what kind of point Plato is trying to make by means of it. I think the point is concerned with the name of poet itself. A term *"poiētēs"* (poet) in Greek literally means the person who makes something. Plato wonders if a poet can be qualified as a *poiētēs* (maker). People take it for granted that poets are makers or creators, hence Plato asks in what sense they are called makers. As Else points out, in ancient Greek paintings beds or chairs are no more common subjects of paintings than a landscape[4]. Plato uses them because he wants to call into question poets' ability to produce (*poiein*). Therefore Plato even says in the *Republic* X mentioned above that God made the Form, although the Form is never regarded as coming into existence or being made in his works elsewhere[5].

It is difficult to go through such a simple but basic question brought up by Plato here. If you make something, say a bed, you must have a knowledge of the bed. However when you draw a picture of it or write about it as poetry you do not have to possess knowledge of it. Painters or poets do not make their objects like artisans do. I think this is a stubborn and undeniable fact. Collingwood maintains that Plato suggests the very foundation-stone of all sound aesthetic theory.

To distinguish art from science and morality and handicraft and to assert that it has a sphere of its own; to distinguish the value of its works from scientific truth and from practical utility, and to place them in a distinct metaphysical category; this is the first step towards any real philosophy of art[6].

No artist can compete with an artisan in terms of knowledge of beds. However artists might claim they have another kind of knowledge, for example, wisdom about human nature, life, love, courage and so on. Aristotle's famous statement on poetry's superiority over history may sound very pleasant for them.

The real difference is this, a historian tells what happened and a poet what might happen. For this reason poetry is something more philosophical and serious than history, because poetry tends to give the universal (*ta katholou*) while history gives particular facts. (*Poetics*. 1451b4-7)

Does Aristotle believe poetry gives us the knowledge of the universal? The point is the meaning of the universal to which he refers here. Aristotle himself explains the meaning of the universal immediately after the above passage.

By the universal I mean the sort of thing that a certain type of man will do or say either probably or necessarily. (*Poetics*. 1451b8-9)

Tragic poetry does not imitate universals. The objects of tragic imitation are particular actions. Poetry does not have a special kind of object (universal) distinct from that of history[7]. We should not translate the functions of universals into the terms of artistic idealism, according to which art is a vehicle for transcendent ideals[8]. Even when Aristotle tells in the *Poetics* 4 that the anthropological basis of imitation is derived from the pleasure of learning, he does not indicate that we learn anything about the object imitated from its imitation. In his view, the function of poetry is not to enable us to learn something new about the world but to recognize that "this is so-and-so[9]."

Some scholars try to understand a kind of typology in terms of universals[10]. They think Aristotle tells us about "ideal personalities, made to act and speak in accordance with the law of character which the author has assumed for each[11]." However, Aristotle does not put a lot of importance on such a typology. When he analyses tragedy into six main components in chapter 6, he says tragedy cannot exist without actions, but can without characters (1450a23-25).

According to his view the tragedies of contemporary poets are without character. Therefore, we should attach more importance to necessity and probability in order to understand the poetic universals.

I would like to quote some passages from A.N.Whitehead's book to understand the important role of necessity and probability in the tragedies and its great influence on western thought. He believes that the vision of fate, remorseless and indifferent, in Greek tragedies becomes the natural scientific vision of the order of nature.

Let me here remind you that the essence of dramatic tragedy is not

unhappiness. It resides in the solemnity of the remorseless working of things. This inevitableness of destiny can only be illustrated in terms of human life by incidents which in fact involve unhappiness. For it is only by them that the futility of escape can be made evident in the drama. The remorseless inevitableness is what pervades scientific thought. The laws of physics are the decrees of fate[12].

I think Whitehead had the *Poetics* 9 in his mind when he wrote these passages. Because like Aristotle, he sees the core of Greek Tragedies as a kind of necessity or inevitableness. Universality in tragedies is the systematic way of constituting a plot in accordance with a causal relationship among actions. It may have provided modern science with the basic model of theoretical explanations by means of causal laws, but naturally explanations of tragedy are not based on scientific pursuits. Tragedy demands the necessity and probability to show that the destinies of men or women can be changed by an inevitable fate which is beyond human wisdom or prediction. It does not intend to deepen knowledge about the world but only tries to purify the feelings and emotions by a solemnity of remorseless fate.

In addition, Aristotle acknowledges that for poetic effect a convincing impossibility is preferable to that which is unconvincing though possible (1461b11-12). He is not concerned with the truthfulness of what poets write. His main interest is whether a plot of a drama seems to be plausible for the audience. That is why he adds the probability to the necessity in considering poetic universals.

Thus, Aristotle does not think that poets have any special wisdom which can be explained in terms of poetic universals. As for Plato's

criticism against poetry from an epistemological viewpoint, in the *Poetics* Aristotle does not defend poetry against Plato's criticism, not at least, in a explicit way.

3. The criticism from a psychological point of view

Plato's criticism from the psychological viewpoint and that from the political one are so closely related that we cannot separate them clearly. That is mainly because Plato does not treat a person as an isolated individual. In his theory the human soul has many parts just like a city-state so that there could be many factions and strivings within a soul in action.

Plato regards the part of the soul to which mimetic poetry appeals as the inferior. He calls it the fretful (*aganaktētikon*) and senseless (*anoētos*) part. Poets minister to the satisfaction of it. He is worried that after thoroughly feeding the emotion of pity (*eleinon*) through poems, it is not easy to restrain it in our own sufferings (*Republic*, 606b7-8). The poetic imitation brings same bad effects in regard to the emotions of sex and anger, all the appetites and pains, and pleasures (*Republic*, 606d).

These phrases, especially references to pity, immediately remind us of Aristotle's well-known definition of tragedy.

Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of a certain magnitude — by means of language enriched with all kinds of ornament, each used separately in the different part of the play: it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and

through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions (*di' eleou kai phobou perainousa tēn tōn toioutōn patēmatōn katharsin*). (1449b24-8)

Aristotle uses the word *"katharsis"* only twice in the *Poetics* including this paragraph. In the other place (at 1455b15) it refers to the ritual of purification in the *Iphigeneia*. Owing to the fact that he does not explain the meaning of the *katharsis* which tragedy produces, a vast number of papers on it have been written since the Renaissance.

In the variety of the interpretations of this artistic *katharsis* we have three major views.

1) a purgation of emotions: "since the middle of the nineteenth century, a majority of commentators have held that it refers to the homeopathetic treatment of emotional disorders in the manner of Hippocratic medicine (the way the word is used in the *Politics* 7. 1341a-1342a)[13]

2) a purification of emotions: this view has had proponents since the Renaissance[14]. It is connected with the understanding that *katharsis* refers to a form of religious expiation (the sense in which the term is used in the *Poetics* 17. 1455b)[15].

3) an education of emotions: some recent scholars tend to think it refers to a kind of clarification or enlightenment.

There are many objections to these kinds of interpretation. My aim in this paper is not to decide the meaning of artistic *katharsis*. I think we are allowed to suppose a broader understanding so as to cover all these interpretations, because Aristotle does not specify its meaning at all in the *Poetics* despite his promise in the *Politics* 8, 1341b38-40.

What Aristotle means by *katharsis* here is the ordinary experience which the audience generally has at a theater. Therefore, in order to understand the outline of *katharsis* we have only to imagine what happens to us while we are watching a suspense film or a sad film. We have a sort of mentality to enjoy feelings of fear or pity to a greater or lesser extent; besides, when we finish watching a drama we can go back into our world relieved from such fictional fear or pity. In other words, we can enjoy them to our hearts' content on the condition that we know they are not real or will not continue in our lives. A tragic drama can both bring us strong feelings of fear and pity and relieve us from them. Through this process we are able to enjoy dramatic pleasures.

Plato knows very well such pleasures that tragedy gives. The better he knows the enchantment of poetry, the more cautious he is about its effects. He thinks once the power of poetry enters the soul, it forms its pattern of feeling and thinking, and modifies it permanently. For all his strong criticism against Homer, Plato admits his attachment to him (*Republic*, 595b-c). That poetry gives us overwhelming pleasures through pity or other feelings is well known to Plato and just a starting point from which Plato begins his criticism (*Republic*, 607c).

Although scholars disagree whether artistic *katharsis* is used in the medical sense (1), in the religious sense (2) or in another way (3), they try to read a more positive meaning in Aristotelian *katharsis*. Aristotle, however, is not the first person who connected *katharsis* to poetry. Aristoxenus, one of Aristotle's pupil, asserts that Pythagoreans used a musical and spiritual type of *katharsis*, which may represent an important precedent for Aristotle's use of the term[16]. Furthermore, we can find a more important precedent in Plato himself.

Plato makes Socrates tell that philosophy is the greatest of all arts (*mousikē*) in the *Phaedo* (61a). Philosophy is defined as a process of *katharsis* (purification) from bodily foolishness to the pure truth (*Phaedo* 67a, c-d, 69b-c). Therefore, it is Plato who sees the best function of arts in *katharsis*.

In the *Sophist* Plato also calls a sort of elenchos or refutation by the name of cathartic art (*kathartikē*; 231b). From cathartic art we learn modesty; we must be purged of our prejudices first and made to think that we know only what we know (230c-d). Although *katharsis* is the central concept in the Aristotelian definition of tragedy, it is a word that appears much more frequently in Plato than in Aristotle[17]. Even if you insist on a positive function of artistic *katharsis* such as taking care of one's soul through purification of feelings or through some other way, you cannot ascribe its origin to Aristotle. It is far from the truth that Aristotelian artistic *katharsis* is his innovative defence from a psychological view against Plato's criticism against literature.

4. Criticism from a political point of view

Does Aristotle have any objection to Plato's approval of censorship? Plato, for example, demands that poetry should not describe the best men among us or one of the heroes who is in grief, and delivers a long tirade in his lamentations (*Republic*, X, 605c-d). Aristotle, however, also requires that poets should respect popular morality in the *Poetics*.

It is obvious to begin with that one should not show worthy men passing from good fortune to bad. For this does not inspire either fear

or pity, but only revulsion (*miaron*). (*Poetics*, 1452b34-36)

Out of his respect to popular morality, Aristotle rejects not only this plot but also another one that shows wicked people passing from bad fortune to good. If we turn our eyes to the *Politics* we come to know the similarity between Plato and Aristotle. When it comes to the problem of education for the young generation, there is no sharp difference between their opinions on the role of poetry.

The Directors of Education, as they are termed, should be careful what tales or stories the children hear, for all such things are designed to prepare the way for the business of later life, and should be for the most part imitations of occupations which they will hereafter pursue in earnest. (*Politics*, 1336a30-34)

For until they are seven years old they must live at home; and therefore, even at this early stage, it is to be expected that they should acquire a taint of meanness from what they hear and see. The legislator ought therefore to banish indecent talk (*aischrologia*), as much as anything else, out of the state altogether. (*Politics*, 1336b3-5)

Aristotle also orders the banishment of indecent pictures or speech from the stage. His legislators would not allow youth to be spectators of iambi or of comedy until they became mature. Judging from these regulations, we can suppose Aristotle has his own moral standard of art. As Halliwell points out for other reasons, the contrast between Plato and Aristotle is not a simple antithesis between their respective

conceptions of the heteronomy and autonomy of art. Aristotle does not react against Plato by defining a realm of pure artistic self-sufficiency[18].

5. Conclusion

In spite of the commonly held view that Aristotle is more friendly to poetry than Plato, he does not offer an obvious defence in response to Plato's three areas of criticism and thus restore the value of poetry. Plato criticizes poetry thoroughly from a philosophical standpoint mainly because he knows that poetry is so powerful as to be a rival to philosophy. Poetry like Homeric literature could have authority and significantly determine how people live. For Plato the quarrel between poetry and philosophy exists but for Aristotle poetry is not an opponent or rival of philosophy anymore. His poetic theory appears to have accepted Plato's criticism. I conclude that in the *Poetics* we cannot find any refutations which would deprive Plato's criticism of its far from negligible power.

<NOTES>

1) Else. G. F., *Plato and Aristotle on Poetry*, 1986, p. 74
2) Cf. Jones. J, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy*, 1962, p. 21. Jones believes Aristotle answered all three criticisms. Cf. Halliwell. S, Plato and Aristotle on the Denial of Tragedy, *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, No. 210, 1984, p. 49
3) Annas,J., Plato on the Triviality of Literature, in *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom, and the Arts,* ed. by Moravcsik, J. and Temko,P., 1982,

p. 5. Cf. Barnes, J., Rhetoric and poetics, in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, 1995, p. 274.

4) Cf. Else, *op. cit.*, p. 33 sqq.

5) I support Cherniss' interpretation. Cf. Cherniss, H., On Plato's Republic X 597b, *American Journal of Philology*, 1932

6) Collingwood. R. G, Plato's Philosophy of Art, *Mind*, 1925, p. 159

7) Heath, M., The Universality of Poetry in Aristotle's Poetics, *Classical Quarterly*, 41, 1991, p. 390

8) Cf. Halliwell. S, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, 1987, pp. 109-111

9) Heath, *op. cit.*, p. 399

10) Bywater, I., *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry*, Oxford, 1909; Else, *op. cit.*, p. 113

11) Bywater, *ibid*, p. 189

12) Whitehead, A. N., *Science and the Modern World*, 1926, Cambridge, pp. 15-6

13) Cf. Salkever, S. G., Tragedy and the Education of the Demos: Aristotle's Responses to Plato, in *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, ed by Euben, J. P., 1986, p. 292. This is his explanation such a purgation.

14) Lear, J., Katharsis, *Phronesis*, vol. XXXIII, 1988, p. 302. But he says this view is not seriously held today.

15) Salkever, op. cit., p. 292

16) Halliwell, S., *Aristotle's Poetics*, 1986, p. 187

17) Salkever, op. cit., p. 283

18) Halliwell, S., Aristotelian Mimesis Reevaluated, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 28, 1990, p. 505