Truth and Beauty in Story
A Reading of Aristotle’s *Poetics*

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The Project

• Articulation of principles underlying the life of Pacific Islanders
  • *Thinking about Political Things: an Aristotelian Approach to Pacific Life*
  • Impact of Christianity
  • Impact of Western culture

• Traditions have been handed down in stories told to only a few

• The young are distracted by study and careers

• Experts point to social sciences, science and perhaps philosophy
  • ‘Life is not a story, life doesn’t work as a story, and the idea that that’s how we think, that’s how we arrive at meaning, that’s how we respond to complex ideas and to the world that is changing in front of us and in a state of constant upheaval is wrong.’ Maria Tumarkin, Future Tense, RN 7/1/2018.
Aristotle, *Poetics*

- A short work of 24 chapters; intimately linked to:
  - *Ethics* (character), *Politics* (Bk VIII), *Rhetoric*.

- Obstacles:
  - Some corruption of the text
  - Varied nature of the text – what is it?
    - 6: epitome; 16: typology; 25: summary notes of *Homeric Problems*
  - Likelihood of parts missing – ‘The second book’ (*Name of the Rose*)
    - 6: mention of work on comedy; some tradition of this; note shortness on epic (23-24)
  - Mainly on tragedy – 17 of 26 chapters
  - Ancient and particular to Greece
Poetry – nature and kinds (1-3)

• Aristotle’s analysis is formal and from first principles
• Poetry: ‘a kind of mimesis’ – ‘imitation and representation’
• Division of kinds on the basis of
  • Media: rhythm, language and melody
  • Objects: people in action, good or bad; gods; animals
  • Mode: narrative, dramatic presentation or a mixture
• Epic, tragic poetry, comedy, song, instrumental music, dancing, painting, sculpture, ...
• A developing series of arts reaching a pinnacle in tragedy
Poetry – its origins (4-5)

• Causes:
  • ‘natural propensity, from childhood onwards, to engage in mimetic activity’
  • Pleasure taken in mimetic objects: ‘It is for this reason that men enjoy looking at images, because what happens is that, as they contemplate them, they apply their understanding and reasoning to each element’. (4)

• Homer was the supreme poet of serious subjects
  • Epic: *mimesis* in spoken metre on serious subjects, only narrative
  • Comedy: *mimesis* of persons who are inferior, but not completely evil
  • Tragedy: *mimesis* of persons little better than ourselves who fail

• The range of A’s interest, though more on music in *Politics* VIII
• ‘Tragedy, then, is a representation (*mimesis*) of an action which is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude – in language which is garnished in various forms in its different parts – in the mode of dramatic enactment, not narrative – and through the arousal of pity and fear effecting the *katharsis* of such emotions.’ (6)

• ‘Since tragedy is a representation of an action, and is enacted by agents, who must be characterised in both their character and their thought, we have the plot-structure (*muthos*) as the *mimesis* of the action, while characterisation is what allows us to judge the nature of the agents, and thought represents the parts in which by their speech they put forward arguments or make statements.’ (6)

• Elements: plot, characterisation, thought, style, lyric poetry, spectacle.
Muthos: plot, plot-structure, story, myth

• ‘The most important of these elements is the structure of events, because tragedy is a representation not of people as such but of actions and life, and both happiness and unhappiness rest on action. The goal is a certain activity, not a qualitative state; and while men do have certain qualities by virtue of their character, it is in their actions that they achieve, or fail to achieve, happiness.’ (6)

• ‘So, the events and the plot-structure are the goal of tragedy, and the goal is what matters most of all.’ (6)
Beauty and Truth

• ‘Tragedy is a representation of an action which is complete, whole and of a certain magnitude.’ (7)

• Whole: beginning, middle and end
  • Beginning: no necessary connection with a preceding event
  • End: occurs after the preceding event ‘by necessity or as a general rule’
  • Middle: causal connections with what precedes it and what ensues

• ‘Any beautiful object must possess not only ordered arrangement but also an appropriate scale.’ (7)

• ‘Poetry is both more philosophical and more serious than history, since poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars. A universal comprises the kind of speech or action which belongs by probability or necessity to a certain kind of character.’ (9)
The educative role of tragedy

• The tragic figure:
  • Not the good going to affliction, nor the wicked prospering, but someone like us.
  • ‘Such is one who is not preeminent in virtue and justice, and one who falls into affliction not because of evil and wickedness, but because of a certain fallibility *(hamartia)*.’ (13)
  • *Hamartia*: waywardness; wrong-doing / error / mistake (*Ethics* V, 8; *Rhet* I, 13)
• Politics VIII: infants: habituation; youth: instruction; adults: the arts.
• *Katharsis*: purification, purgation; emotional impact of tragedy
• Emotional and intellectual training in what might happen and how to respond well.
Truth in Story

• The skill of the poet
  • ‘A poet ought to imagine his material to the fullest possible extent while composing his plot-structures and elaborating them in language. By seeing them as vividly as possible in this way, he is likely to discover what is appropriate, and least likely to miss contradictions.’ (17)

• Standard: plausibility, consistency, unity, intelligibility.

• The Homeric Problems (25)
  • Image-maker portrays: things that were or are the case; things said and thought to be the case; things that should be the case.
  • Fails: in failing to achieve portrayal or in portraying something erroneous

• Oral Traditions: stories are ‘cleansed’ as they are repeated