

ARISTOTLE'S POETICS

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➔ "ARISTOTLE'S AESTHETICS 2:
CRAFT, NATURE AND UNITY IN ART"

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III

Aristotle's Aesthetics 2:
Craft, Nature and Unity in Art

In the previous chapter I examined perhaps the two most fundamental dimensions of Aristotle's treatment of poetry and the other arts: the concept of art itself (representing the mimetic *technai* as a cohesive group), and the concept of aesthetic pleasure (grounded in the cognitive experience of mimetic structures). Aristotle's thinking can in both cases be seen ultimately to centre on the notion of mimesis, which will receive an independent analysis in ch. IV. In the present chapter I offer some observations on a further group of important questions concerning the conceptual and evaluative categories which constitute Aristotle's understanding of art, but especially poetry: first, the character of the individual artist's capacity to produce or invent his works; secondly, the relation between nature and tradition in the evolution of genres; and finally, the principles of unity in works of art.

No area in the theory and criticism of art is given more to *a priori* arguments and unsubstantiated assertions than that of the sources and processes of artistic invention – or 'creativity', to employ a term which itself has roots in a particular movement of thought on the subject.¹ I noted in the introductory chapter that ancient Greek view of the resources which the artist draws on to produce his work

¹ 'Creativity' is strictly inappropriate as a historical concept in the Greek context. Ar. himself holds the view that everything which comes into being must do so out of something pre-existent: e.g. *Met.* 1032a 14, b 30-2, 1033b 11. Moreover, the artist must know in advance the form of that which he intends to produce: see esp. *Met.* 1032b 6ff. On the incompatibility between general Greek ideas of cosmic rationality and the notion of creation *ex nihilo* see A. Dihle, *The Concept of the Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley 1981) 1-5, 71f. For the extension of the idea of creativity from the divine to the human in the Renaissance and later see Lieberg 159-73, P.O. Kristeller, '“Creativity” and “Tradition”', *JHI* 44 (1983) 105-13, and R. Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth 1965) 19-24. Wehrli (1957) examines the ancient roots of a more naturalistic concept of 'das Schöpferische'.

moved from an early date around the poles of the dichotomy between 'craft' (or knowledge and skill) and inspiration. But to this fact we have to add the relative lack of emphasis within classical (and neo-classical) attitudes to art as a whole, in contrast to the modern consensus fostered by Romanticism, on the personal or special qualities of the artist himself.² That in this respect Aristotle is largely typical of the tradition has already emerged from the construction of his concept of art around the ideas of *technê*, mimesis and *poiêsis*. These ideas characterise either the objective relation between the artist and the artistic product (*technê*, *poiêsis*), or that between the work of art and reality (mimesis). If the understanding of art is framed entirely in terms of these relations, then it would seem that Aristotle's thought leaves nothing of importance to be predicated of the individual artist as such. In order to seek confirmation or qualification of this inference, it is worthwhile to ask whether attention to particular passages of the *Poetics* allows us to detect any operative assumptions about the source of artistic production in the poet or painter himself.

The issue is one which elicited so unequivocal a response from Plato as to provide us with an important test and point of comparison for Aristotle's views. Plato seems to have followed the fifth-century philosopher Democritus in attributing the force of artistic invention to an inspiration which he was inclined to represent as madness. The case is presented in its most sustained form in the *Ion*, where its corollary, the poet's lack of a systematic or rational skill, a *technê*, is given full weight.³ While the idea of inspiration had been propounded by poets themselves in order to arrogate a religiously privileged and inimitable status, Plato manages to twist it round so as to lend to it the largely unrespectable appearance of a force which is opposed to true knowledge – the very value which inspiration was supposed to vouchsafe. In the *Ion* the conclusion that poets must be inspired is arrived at ironically as a *pis aller*, for once it is putatively established that poets have no knowledge or expertise which can be intelligibly accounted for or relied upon, there is apparently nothing left to assign to them but an exotic motivation which can be safely – because in the context of the dialogue meaninglessly – clothed in the traditional

² At Aristoph. *Thesm.* 149-70 there may be a comic allusion to a contemporary view which takes account of the individual nature (*phusis*) of the poet himself, but it is equally a possibility that the idea is a humorous invention.

³ On poets' lack of knowledge and skill see also *Apol.* 22b-c, *Meno* 99c-d.

language of divine afflatus. By pursuing this polemical line of argument Plato can, in his own terms at least, undermine the status of poets as teachers and educators, and he can reduce the pleasure afforded by art to an irrational type, of low or dubious value. But there remain two potential tensions within the Platonic position as a whole. The first arises from the fact that Plato does at times attempt to rescue the language of inspiration for his own philosophical purposes, as part of his paradoxical enterprise – paradoxical, given the strength of his dismissal of poetic culture – of defining a new philosophical substitute for poetry and its truth-claims: a new *mousikê*, to use a term which itself bears traces of the notion of inspiration.⁴ Plato therefore cannot allow more than a specious or limited form of inspiration to poets. But there is also a tension between *any* idea of inspiration and the common Platonic emphasis on mimesis as an activity of mechanical image-making, carried out, in the reductive terms of *Republic* 10, by a kind of inferior craftsman.

While these anomalies within Plato's critique of art are in part due to the fluctuations in his own attitudes, they can also be taken as a reflection of the inherent inadequacy of the inspiration-craft dichotomy for the interpretation of the artist's sources and procedures. Yet, in however stereotyped a form, the two concepts could at least be said to acknowledge the observable gulf which exists between the explicable and inexplicable elements in the production of poetry and art, and it is an immediate question about any theory of art which treats either one of these poles as sufficient in itself, whether it can expect to cope convincingly with the range of relevant phenomena and achievements. There is, it must be said, a *prima facie* case for raising just this question in connection with the *Poetics*. If Plato's treatment of the subject involves inconsistencies (or eristic variations), Aristotle's apparently offers a rigorous but one-sided adherence to a single principle. The *Poetics* creates an unmistakable impression, from the first sentence onwards, of a craft-based view of poetry and art. Again and again Aristotle flatly contradicts both the *Ion* and other germane Platonic passages by asserting and assuming that poetry is a complete *technê*, a rational productive activity whose methods can be both defined and justified.

⁴ On Platonic *mousikê* see Vicaire 265-7, Dalfen 287-304. For desirable forms of madness in Plato see esp. *Phdr.* 243e ff. (poetry is mentioned at 245a, where the inadequacy of *technê* is noted). On the whole subject cf. E.N. Tigerstedt, *Plato's Idea of Poetical Inspiration* (Helsinki 1969), and see Appendix 2 below, under 55a 32-4.

One relevant negative factor is the likelihood that the concept of inspiration, in its essential religious sense, was not one to which Aristotle could have given serious credence.⁵ But if inspiration was discarded, the ostensible consistency and coherence of the craft model of artistic production was nonetheless open to obvious objections: principally, the difficulty of accounting for some of the exceptional achievements of existing Greek poetry, especially the unique status of Homeric epic; but also the challenge of the poets' own claims about the nature of their art. In order to see to what extent Aristotle anticipated the force of such objections, I propose to examine in turn those passages in the *Poetics* where he explicitly touches on the relationship between the artist and his work.

Near the start of the book we are told that some visual artists work by rational skill (*technê*), others by experience or habit (47a 19f.). The contrast is illuminated by, for example, the opening of the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle observes that all men engage to some extent in the component activities of rhetoric, its primary argumentative aims. But some do so randomly, others by experience: the task of an art (here meaning theory embodied in a treatise) is to explain and systematise the necessary skills (1354a 4ff.). We can therefore deduce a tripartite structure of categories which it will be appropriate to bear in mind: ordinary indiscriminate activity, which will achieve its aims, if at all, only by chance; regularised experience or habit, which develops consistencies of procedure that nevertheless fall short of art; and *technê* itself, in which a self-conscious and rational understanding of the subject establishes secure techniques for success in it. We find, then, in ch. 1 of the *Poetics* a preliminary acknowledgement of the coexistence, at least in the visual arts, of the latter two categories of ability (the first being, of course, here beneath consideration).⁶

⁵ *Rhet.* 1408b 19 (poetry is inspired, *enthous*) is sometimes cited as if it suggested otherwise, but the context, where orators too are described as 'inspired', intimates that Ar. is talking metaphorically (perhaps with some irony too) in concession to traditional attitudes: see Hubbard 146 n.3, Russell 78f. Compare the language of 'possession' in a metaphorical sense at e.g. *EN* 1179b 9, in contrast to Plato *Ion* 536c, *Phdr.* 245a. The point is purely psychological, not religious, in the references to *enthousiasmos* as an effect of poetry at *Pol.* 1340a 11, 1341b 34, 1342a 7: cf. ch. VI pp. 190ff. At *EE* 1225a 28-30, it should be noted, Ar.'s discussion of prophetic inspiration emphasises the *involuntary*: this would be inconsistent with *technê*. (Plato's apparent combination of *technê* and inspiration in poetry at *Laws* 719c and in prophecy at *Phdr.* 244c (and cf. Aesch. *Eum.* 17, Soph. *OT* 562) hardly represents a positive doctrine.)

⁶ At *Met.* 981a 14-24 Ar. concedes that theory without practice may be inferior to experience alone; experience matters in art because it is possible to have universal knowledge but still make mistakes over particulars: cf. *An.Pr.* 67a 27f., *Pol.* 1269a 11f.,

A further factor seems to be introduced in ch. 4 (48b 22-4, 49a 2-14), where, in sketching the historical development of poetry, Aristotle mentions the 'nature' of individual poets and describes their improvisatory activities as having 'begotten' particular genres.⁷ He posits a correspondence between poets and the nature of the works which they produce, or of the genres to whose discovery and development they contribute. I commented in the previous chapter on the general relation in Aristotelian philosophy between human *technê* and the processes of nature, and in the next section I shall draw out some of the implications of this relation for his interpretation of cultural history and tradition; but what calls for immediate attention here is the limitation on the reference to the 'nature' of individual poets, which might at first sight suggest an important qualification on the dominance of *technê* within the *Poetics*.

In the first place, there is no indication of true individualism entering into the early stages of poetry's growth: the 'nature' of each poet is conceived of as a typical characteristic, inclining him, in particular, either to a serious or to a humorous style of performance; it is a heightened form of the universal and natural propensity of humans to mimesis (48b 5ff.). The cultural model which Aristotle here hints at is therefore relatively *impersonal*, hypothesising no more than the existence of individuals with a greater than normal aptitude for mimetic experiment. This aspect of the passage is clarified by the fact that the operation of the individual's nature is seen within the larger framework provided by the 'nature' of the genres whose discovery and evolution are in question. Artist and art-form are parts of a compound natural pattern and process, and the relation between them is not a matter of purely contingent historical circumstance. And it is precisely because the phenomenon involves the realisation of a somehow already existing natural potential, that the process will ultimately lead to the stage of *technê*: paradoxically, therefore, Aristotle's acknowledgement of a natural factor in the invention and advancement of poetic genres serves not to reduce the validity of the

Rhet. 1393a 17f. On the importance of experience and practice in art see also *EN* 1103a 32-4 and *Protr.* B48 Düring (1961); and for the Aristotelian scheme of sense-perception/memory/experience/art or science see *An.Post.* 100a 3ff., *Met.* 980a 27ff.

⁷ For *phusis* as natural ability cf. Plato *Phdr.* 269d, *Laws* 700d 4, Aristoph. *Thesm.* 167, *Frogs* 810. There is no question in Ar. of *phusis* in the sense of 'inspiration', for which see Plato *Apol.* 22c 1, *Laws* 682a 2, and Democritus fr. 21.

concept of *technê*, but only to reinforce its natural origins and foundations. Even if this passage of the *Poetics* were less elliptical than it is, and even if our ignorance of the early forms of Greek poetry were less grave than it is, it would be inapt to challenge Aristotle on the basis of historical data alone, for what he offers, in embryo, is a set of theory-laden suppositions about the relations between the individual poet, the genre, and the dynamics of cultural change.

These suppositions can be studied further in the passage of ch. 8 (51a 24) where Homer's grasp of the principle of poetic unity is attributed uncertainly to either *technê* or his natural endowment (*phusis*).⁸ It seems most appropriate to relate this reference to Homer's 'nature' to the more general use of the term in ch. 4 just considered, and to treat it not as an acceptance of the possibility of a purely personal source of poetic achievement, unintelligible without the supposition of unique individuality, but simply as a specific application of the idea of an affinity between the artist and the natural requirements of his art. There are, in other words, despite Aristotle's recognition of Homer's greatness, no Romantic overtones of 'natural genius' here, for the connotations of free and inimitable creativity attaching to such a concept are alien to Aristotle's underlying cultural teleology. On contextual grounds alone we can discern the limitations of Aristotle's point: the very pairing of *technê* and 'nature' bespeaks a *technê*-oriented point of view; it is simply not a conjunction which would be utilised in this way by anyone who believed in the essentially inspirational or strongly creative character of poetry, since it inescapably implies that *technê* could achieve the same results, whether or not it did so in this case. Moreover, the feature of Homeric epic which Aristotle here commends is not an unrepeatable achievement, but a grasp of the fundamental principle of poetic unity and organisation on which the *Poetics* places maximum emphasis. There is, therefore, no compromise on the treatise's central assumptions: the apparent concession is made primarily for obvious historical reasons, in that a *technê* of poetry needs to be regarded as the outcome and fruition of a period of actual experiment and experience, and could not be projected back with complete plausibility onto the early period of epic.

There is also a historical dimension in the next pair of passages to

⁸ With this antithesis compare Sophocles' alleged remark on Aeschylus, *apud* Athen. 428f. At *Met.* 1025b 22f. Ar. mentions intelligence (*nous*) or 'some faculty' alongside *technê* as possible sources of productive activity (*poiêsis*).

be cited. In ch. 13 (53a 17-22) Aristotle claims that tragic poets originally picked their mythical subjects arbitrarily, but that the best tragedies now concentrate on the sufferings of just a select group of families. The point is reformulated and expanded at 54a 10-12: it was originally not by rational choice and art but by chance that poets discovered how to achieve the right effect in their tragedies.⁹ These passages deserve a brief mention as illustrating, negatively at least, Aristotle's attitude to poetic invention. Aristotle appeals to current practice to confirm his prescriptive theory of the ideal tragedy: the theory, that is, is not directly based on practice, but can receive secondary ratification from it; for the theory purports to analyse the essence of the genre and its inherent potential, which emerges not simply from scrutiny of existing practice but from rational reflection on its 'nature'. The implication of this is that when practising tragedians are successful, their success is a matter of the materialisation of generic potential, not of their own original insight or inventiveness. We can trace here, therefore, the tripartite scheme which I cited earlier: the original choices of tragic material represent ordinary random activity, whose occasional success would be due only to chance; out of this emerges the gradual regularisation of experience, which may indeed be the level at which some tragedians still work; and, finally, the discoveries of the genre's natural potential which experiment has brought to light can now be rationalised into the art of which the *Poetics* is the theoretical embodiment. The underlying teleology, operating through the stages of cultural evolution, is not difficult to discern: the primary sources of poetic art are located, once again, beyond the individual, and even, in a sense, as I shall argue in the next section, beyond strictly human tradition.

Some might argue, however, that what has been so far said needs to be qualified in the light of ch. 17, 55a 32-4 – a vexed passage, since the insertion of one word, as advocated by some scholars, virtually inverts its sense.¹⁰ Despite some difficulty over the wording of the

⁹ Cf. *Met.* 1034a 9f., *EN* 1140a 17-20 on the relation between art and chance.

¹⁰ See the long note of Lucas (1968) on 55a 32-4 for a good discussion. Note that *ekstatikos* (55a 34) is not easy to reconcile with Ar.'s general conception of poetry: in addition to the passages cited by Bywater on 55a 34 see esp. *EE* 1229a 25-27 on uncontrollable passion (including that of wild boars!). For Ar.'s general attitude to inspiration cf. n. 5 above.

Ar.'s idea of composition at 55a 22ff. may have been readily intelligible in a society where recitation and dictation were familiar; it is wholly and anachronistically misconstrued by Else (1957) 489f. Compare the comically exaggerated behaviour of Agathon in Aristoph. *Thesm.* 101ff. (cited on p.114).

preceding passage, it is clear enough that Aristotle is discussing the convincing presentation of emotion by the poet, and is arguing for a psychological link between the poet's technique of composition and the achievement of this aim. His suggestions bring the poet into line both with the actor and with the rhetorician, and the injunction that the poet should visualise his dramatic events as vividly as possible (as if he were present: a traditional formulation), even to the point of acting them out with gestures, loses its superficial peculiarity once we take account of the tradition of the poet-producer in the Athenian theatre (and also recall the standard practice of reciting poetry aloud). The rhetorician would similarly need to imagine and anticipate how a piece of oratory, with its full vocal and visual delivery matching the language, could effectively communicate emotion. As the text stands, Aristotle concludes his suggestions by saying: 'therefore poetry is the task of a naturally gifted person or manic one; for the first is inventive, the second ecstatic.' If this is allowed to stand, then we must take him to be identifying two types or degrees of nature suitable for the poet. If, however, we insert a word to convert 'or' into 'rather than', then we actually produce a rejection of inspiration, in favour of a flexible quality of mind, a type of imagination,¹¹ of a kind which can be controlled and, so the tenor of the passage as a whole intimates, deliberately cultivated. It is in fact this latter point which deserves to be emphasised, whether or not we are prepared to alter the text. In other words, even if we accept that Aristotle here makes a concessive gesture towards the traditional notion of inspiration, this is outweighed not only by the fact that he does so nowhere else in the *Poetics*, but also by the clear implication of the full context in the first part of ch. 17 that the imaginative requirements of poetic writing, though they may be assisted by certain natural talents, can be accommodated and practised within the framework of a *technê*-based concept of the subject. Even if these considerations do not compel us to emend the text, they do, I maintain, show that nothing in this section of the *Poetics* disturbs the balance of Aristotle's general argument.

Continuity of interpretation is possible between ch. 17 and Aristotle's description of metaphor in ch. 22 (59a 6f.) as 'the only thing one cannot acquire from someone else, and a sign of natural ability': first, because the occurrence of the term for natural ability –

¹¹ For the reference to imagination at 55a 23 see ch. VI n.17.

euphuia, the noun cognate with the adjective used of the talented poetic nature in ch. 17 – helps to confirm that Aristotle's main alternative to a capacity founded purely on *technê* is not inspiration, but a disposition less remote from ordinary mental experience;¹² and secondly because the recognition of metaphor as exceptional unquestionably implies that most elements or resources of poetic production are firmly within the ambit of a rational and teachable art. The point is reinforced by the parallel passage in the *Rhetoric* (1405a 3ff.), where alongside the acknowledgement of the special status of metaphor we also find some analytic treatment of its types and properties, designed to indicate that even metaphor must be controlled by general canons of appropriateness (here rhetorical, but there are equivalents for poetry). The natural endowment which enables a poet to excel at metaphor is therefore productive of results which, although unteachable, can be judged from the secure standpoint of the art; and this is confirmed by the definition of the endowment not as a mysterious instinct but as 'the capacity to see resemblances' (59a 8).

Aristotle's brief remarks on metaphor have the paradoxical force of conceding the limits of *technê* only in such a way as to strengthen the underlying sense of its dominance within the *Poetics*' conception of poetry, as of the mimetic arts in general. We have here, then, as in the other passages considered above, testimony to what could anyway be taken to be an implication of the treatise-form itself, namely the belief that poetry is a rationally intelligible and teachable art, because it rests, like all Aristotelian arts, on determinate and discoverable principles which are rooted in man's nature and in his relation to the rest of the natural world. If Aristotle can be said to enter the traditional debate about the sources of poetic activity, he does so with a supreme assurance which allows him hardly even to mention the opposing point of view: we may infer that it is his intention not so much to contradict the possibility of inspiration as to

¹² *Euphuia* corresponds to *physis* as used elsewhere in the *Poetics*. *Euphuia* and practice are contrasted at *Rhet.* 1410b 7f., analogously to *Poet.* 51a 24. The language used for the uniqueness of metaphor recurs in a moral context (where, however, the sentiment is not Ar.'s own) at *EN* 1114b 9-12.

It is perhaps surprising that Ar. nowhere in the *Poetics* employs *sophos* terminology for poets or artists (for its currency cf. ch. I n.16), despite its close connection with *technê*, as e.g. at *EN* 1141a 9-12 (of the visual arts). He may have been deterred by his use of *sophia* as a synonym for the highest philosophy, though *sophos* does occur, applied to poets, in *Protr.* B43 Düring (1961), = fr. 58 Rose.

demonstrate that an understanding of poetry need not take any account of it. Given the use made by Plato of the idea of inspiration, there can be no doubt that Aristotle's virtual silence on this score is meant to be eloquent.

It is important to emphasise that the various references in the *Poetics* to the natural aptitudes and abilities of poets justify little or no qualification on the conclusion just stated. The main reason for this is that, as I explained in the previous chapter, the notions of nature and art are ultimately complementary within Aristotelian philosophy. The ends of art, and its basis in human behaviour, are given by nature: by man's tendency, in the case of mimesis, to try to understand the world by producing representations of it and taking pleasure in the experience of these. If, therefore, certain poets (or other artists) can be said to depend on their natural endowments, rather than on a systematic craft, that offers no challenge to the notion of the craft as such, but only a comment on a contingent factor such as the stage of development reached by a particular genre at a particular time, or the circumstances in which a given individual happens to produce poetry. For if someone is able to rely on nature in this way, that is only because there is an underlying alignment between human potential for mimetic invention and the natural cultural movement towards the realisation of generic goals, that is of forms of poetry which have a precise scope for the mimesis of certain aspects of life. Nature is the starting point from which, by processes of experiment and discovery, progress may be made towards the mature genres of art in which the perfected techniques of a productive craft will be discernible to the analytical eye of the theorist, and become codifiable into rational canons for the continuation of the art. And when this mature stage of the elaborated art is reached, the fulfilment is one which, to complete the conceptual circle, Aristotle holds to be a manifestation of a natural goal accomplished (49a 14f.).

But if this is a just statement of the Aristotelian position, we are now equipped to observe a curious feature of it. The traditional dichotomy between craft and inspiration can be formulated as a distinction between a view of the artist as the master of productive or inventive skills, and a view of him as one who has access to a force which derives from outside and works through him. The tenor of the *Poetics*' advocacy of a strongly craft-based conception of poetry is such as to confirm the sense of art as a procedure in which the maker rationally controls and shapes his material. Yet, if my elucidation of

the relation between *technê* and nature in Aristotle's philosophy is right, then it seems that from this larger perspective the artist may once again come to be seen as a medium through which the operations of natural and greater forces are channelled. Inspiration, it could be argued, has been 'naturalised' within the Aristotelian view of art. To discover whether this judgement can be sustained, it is necessary now to open the argument up from the narrower question of the individual artist's resources, to the broader issues of Aristotle's treatment of poetic history and tradition.

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I tried to show in the previous chapter how, in the interpretation of Aristotle's concepts of art and of aesthetic pleasure, it is important to refer to the naturalistic framework of his whole philosophy. The conclusions reached there may be complemented, and given more concrete application, by a consideration of the hints which the *Poetics* contains on the historical status of poetic genres within the theory. A number of passages in the *Poetics* reveal an Aristotelian belief in the natural essence of genres and their attributes. The following are among the most important:¹³

Ch. 4, 49a 14f.: 'and after undergoing many changes, tragedy ceased to change, once it had acquired its own nature.'¹⁴

Ch. 4, 49a 23f.: 'when dialogue came into being, nature itself discovered the metre which suited it.'

Ch. 7, 51a 9f.: 'the limit [of dramatic size] which corresponds with the very nature of the material ...'

Ch. 24, 60a 4f.: 'nature itself teaches [poets] to choose the metre which suits an epic structure.'

'Nature' in the first of these passages is a matter of the whole generic potential of tragedy. In the second and fourth quotations, 'nature itself' refers to particular elements of the genres and to what Aristotle

¹³ Others are: 49b 24, the definition of tragedy's 'being' or 'essence' (*ousia*), which is the same as its 'nature' and 'goal' (*phusis* and *telos*: cf. e.g. *Met.* 1015a 11ff.); the *phusis* terms at 50b 28f.; and the analogies with living creatures at 50b 34-51a 4, 59a 20. Cf. Pfeiffer 68f., who underestimates, however, the degree to which teleology is to be understood literally in this context.

¹⁴ For some Aristotelian parallels to the pattern of tragedy's development see Else (1957) 153.

takes to be the given natural attributes of individual rhythms:¹⁵ in both these cases too, in fact, 'the very nature of the genre' would be an equally apposite translation. In the third passage, where Aristotle has just before appealed to natural standards of beauty (illustrated by the forms of living creatures, 50b 34ff.), there appears to be a compound concern with objective standards or criteria of unity and beauty, as these apply to the plot-structure of tragedy. It is particularly striking that in three of these cases, either 'nature' or the genre itself is the subject of a clause. The formulation is indicative of the belief that the significance of the history of poetry resides not in the contingent acts or inventions of individuals, but in processes of a teleological kind in which the fundamental determinants are truly natural. These passages, then, collectively create a presumption that Aristotle's application of the language of 'nature' to the history of poetic genres is neither a mere metaphor, nor simply the codification of the contingent path made for itself by cumulative poetic tradition. That this presumption is merited can best be confirmed by a closer look at the first of the passages listed, for it is here that the context is fullest and gives us the clearest view of the character of the argument and its underlying assumptions.

It is hardly accidental that what history there is in the sketch of Greek poetry's development in *Poetics* 4 and 5 is obscure and questionable in a number of respects; and to remark that Aristotle perhaps here fails to match even his own rudimentary and limiting definition of history in ch. 9 of the treatise is not to indulge in irony at his expense, but to suggest a point of importance about these two chapters. Whether indeed Aristotle can by his own standards be deemed to be even attempting to write any history here is at least doubtful: for if, as ch. 9 claims, history deals only with particulars, it cannot be the appropriate mode for Aristotle's argument in a passage where he is manifestly concerned to trace the pattern of natural poetic growth *beneath* the particulars. Thus the accent of the argument falls, for example, on the way in which Homer prefigures both tragedy and comedy, and on the supposed way in which, once these latter genres have been discovered, they supersede epic and are turned to by poets whose 'natures' are correlated with the poetic types which they are instrumental in advancing. If some of the precise historical details get garbled (or lost) in the course of the

¹⁵ On rhythm see ch. II n.29.

argument, that is of less importance to Aristotle than the discernment of the larger pattern.¹⁶

When, therefore, tragedy is described as moving through various stages of growth and change before it attains its 'nature', Aristotle's claim ought to be confronted at face-value. It should not be assumed that, because he sometimes draws a basic distinction between the principles of nature and art, he cannot also see the latter in the larger perspective of his view of nature. This is precisely what he does in the case of poetry. While individual poems are directly the products of individual makers, it is still open to Aristotle to regard the evolution of a genre, as he does in *Poetics* 4, as a matter of naturalistic teleology. If the course of tragedy's history depended primarily on the choices or the originality of individuals, and the cumulative tradition arising out of them, then a conclusion concerning the genre's 'nature' could be no more than the most tenuous metaphor, and Aristotle could not afford to be as brief and elliptical as he is over the data of innovations.¹⁷ It is because he considers these to be stages in the growth towards a perfect form, and not as independently valid moments of cultural history, that the emphasis of his account is placed on the supposed direction of progress within the development of the genre. And it is necessary to perceive that even the achievement of the *telos* is not strictly located in historical terms: to say, as is commonly done, that ch. 4 implicitly attributes perfection in tragedy to Sophocles, is to obscure the abstract and *a priori* quality of this section. Aristotle had no need to identify perfection with a particular playwright: the nature of the full-grown genre is precisely the subject of the subsequent chapters of the treatise, and one might well suppose that the ultimate vindication for Aristotle of his claims about tragedy's evolution is the possibility of the *Poetics* itself.¹⁸

¹⁶ On Ar.'s reconstruction of literary history cf. Dale 176f. n.2. Lord (1974) does not accept that Ar.'s approach in this chapter is theoretical, but the contorted argument which he uses to show that Ar.'s case is lucid and coherent helps to confirm the very opposite. Cf. also ch. IX nn.6 and 25 below.

¹⁷ The vagueness is particularly striking if we suppose Ar. to have been carrying out his documentary research on tragedy (cf. Appendix 1 p. 328), and if we compare the remains of his *On Poets*: frs. 71, 72, 75 (Rose) touch on matters of chronology. Moreover, the whole early history of Greek poetry, including questions of chronology and influence, had received attention before Ar.: see esp. the frs. of Glaucus of Rhegium (Lanata 270-7), regrettably ignored by Pfeiffer.

¹⁸ Attempts to locate the roots of Ar.'s theory in a particular playwright are unnecessary and inconclusive: e.g. Söffing 217-26 (Sophocles' *OT* – a common view), Kannicht *Poetica* 8 (1976) 327f. n.5 (Euripides), Fuhrmann (1973) 12 (Sophocles and Euripides), and, least convincingly of all, the articles of Webster and Kitto

The sketch of poetry's development, then, in ch. 4 (and, to a lesser extent, ch. 5 too), is in Aristotle's own terms largely *ahistorical*. Its chief purpose is to discern a natural pattern of progress towards a natural *telos*: that is, an end or fulfilment which is intrinsic and determined, not simply the result of choices, processes and acts which might have turned out otherwise. It is worth reminding ourselves at this point of Aristotle's view (p. 50 above) that all arts (*technai*) have been repeatedly discovered and evolved in the history of the world. What Aristotle therefore rules out is a purely cultural and man-made tradition, and one whose essential course can only be analysed *post eventum* as a matter of historical detail.¹⁹ It is on the basis of such an alternative explanation of the development of tragedy and other genres that Aristotle's naturalistic assumptions can be questioned – and, indeed, *ought* to be questioned by anyone who sees the implications of his scheme for, among other things, Aeschylean tragedy.²⁰ Nor is there any danger of conceptual anachronism in such a challenge, since the issue between a naturalistic or teleological and a contingent historical understanding of cultural development can be traced back to the roots of a distinction which had been a central discovery of fifth-century Greek thought: that between nature (*physis*), on the one hand, and tradition, cultural continuity, and man-made convention (*nomos*), on the other. Aristotle was of course familiar with this antithesis, but the firmness of his allegiance to *physis* as the ultimate explanatory principle, in

(fourth-century tragedy). But Radt (1971), esp. 201-5, goes too far in concluding that Ar.'s ideal is wholly 'unhistorical'.

¹⁹ For a sketch of a flexible notion of tradition see Quinton 97-101.

²⁰ Aeschylus is the most scantily treated of the major tragedians in the *Poetics*. 49a 15-18 implies an important historical role for him, but seems to place him before the attainment of the canonical *physis* (pace Brown 3-5) and also gives a hint of the problematic status of the chorus in Ar.'s theory of poetry (see ch. VIII below). 56a 17 gives a brief, complimentary mention, 58b 19-24 an unfavourable one. 60a 32 is also unfavourable, but may not refer to Aeschylus's *Mysians*. 55a 4-6 cites the *Choephoroi* in a garbled fashion for the second-best type of tragic recognition. The considerable scope of Aeschylean lyrics, with their concomitant dramatic techniques, is probably the main reason for Ar.'s relative lack of interest in the playwright; but the theory does not seem accommodating to trilogies either: cf. Vahlen (1911) 254 and note, Söffing 195-204. Aeschylus, it should be noted, is by far the least often cited of the great trio in the corpus as a whole: the only references outside the *Poetics* appear to be at *HA* 633a 19ff., *EN* 1111a 10, and *Rhet.* 1388a 8. For the possibility that *Poet.* 53b 9 alludes to Aeschylus (though I take the primary reference to be to fourth-century producers) see not only 56a 2f. and the usual citation from the *Vita Aeschyli* (e.g. Lucas (1968) ad loc.) but also Aristoph. *Frogs* 834. Cf. Taplin 44-6.

poetry as elsewhere, is uncompromising.²¹ And it is in this light that the acknowledgements of individual contributions to generic development in *Poetics* 4 and 5 must be seen: the recognition of the importance of Homer or Sophocles is outweighed by the fact that tragedy can in the final resort be made the proper subject of its own evolution.²²

I suggest, then, that the considerations adduced in this section complement those put forward in the previous chapter on the relation between nature and art in Aristotelian philosophy. The result of this is to provide corroboration both that Aristotle's notion of poetic *technê* has implications which do not conform to ordinary Greek (or modern) ideas of craft, and also that the elucidation of this Aristotelian notion carries us not into a deeper sense of the artist's own creative resources, but into the wider, impersonal perspective of cultural teleology. Hence, behind the *Poetics*' recurring references to the aim, function and potential of tragedy, there is a strongly *a priori* and prescriptive set of presuppositions, which derive from the theorist's own perception of the natural history of poetry and of the intrinsic perfection of which tragedy is capable, rather than from the strict observation of established practice or the major existing achievements in the genre. Aristotle's assurance is such as to tell us in advance what standards any further achievements in the genre would satisfy; and if it appears ironic that, as a result of the irreversible decline into which we can now see that Greek tragedy had slipped, this assurance was never to receive historical vindication, it may be doubted whether Aristotle would have regarded that as in any way invalidating his philosophy of poetry.

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I turn, finally in this chapter, to another of the central tenets of that philosophy. The concept of unity, in one version or another, is one of the most pervasive and arguably indispensable criteria in the understanding of art. Yet its fundamental status makes it exceptionally difficult to come to terms with on the level of articulate

²¹ For the antithesis see e.g. *Int.* 16a 26-8 (linguistic forms), *EN* 1134b 18ff. (justice), *Pol.* 1253b 21f. (slavery), 1257b 11 (money).

²² In other fields Ar. sometimes acknowledges the importance of individuals in historical development: see esp. *Met.* 993a 30-b 19. On the particular importance of the starting-point (*archê*) in the arts (n.b. for Homer's status in Ar.'s scheme) see *SE* 183b 17ff., *EN* 1098a 21-6.

theory, for not only do presuppositions concerning it lie so deeply embedded in discourse about art as to be hard to bring clearly to the surface, but unity is by its very nature a notion which tends to coalesce with, or transform itself into, other categories employed in the evaluation of works of art. It is certainly to Aristotle's credit in the *Poetics* that he offers some firm and unambiguous indications of the canon of unity which he brings to bear on poetry, and while the tendency for unity to merge into other concepts is sometimes in evidence here too (so that, for example, it cannot effectively be separated from the *Poetics*' standard of beauty),²³ Aristotle's efforts at definition do give us some solid grounds on which to base an assessment of the vital function of unity within his theory of poetry. It will also be seen that, although the concept of unity is elaborated in specific application to poetic genres, Aristotle holds it to be basic to the experience of all mimetic art.

The notion of poetic unity is insinuated at the very start of the treatise in connection with that of *muthos*, 'plot' or 'plot-structure'. Aristotle refers in his opening sentence to the construction of plots in such a way as to imply that this is an essential part of all poetic composition, and the verbal idea of 'construction' involved here might itself be aptly glossed as 'to make a unity of'. We consequently find that the noun cognate with this verb is used by Aristotle in one of his periphrases for plot – namely, 'the structure of events' (*sustasis tôn pragmatôn*). It becomes evident in the course of the work that a poetic plot-structure can indeed only be properly so called when it is unified in the requisite ways. Aristotle builds the requirement of unity into his definition of tragedy as 'the mimesis of an action ... which is complete and of ample scale'. These elements in his definition he proceeds to expand and clarify in chs. 7 and 8, where he produces the formula of 'beginning, middle and end', as well as the analogy between the beauty and unity of poetic structures and the same properties in living creatures. *À propos* of this last point, it needs to be firmly stated that Aristotle's principles of order and beauty are

²³ Ar.'s notion of beauty rests primarily on criteria of form, order and proportion: esp. *Met.* 1078a 36ff. Ar., unlike Plato, separates beauty from ethical goodness: *ibid.* 31ff. For artistic proportion (*summetria*) see *Pol.* 1284b 8-10, and cf. Pollitt 14-22, 160-2 on the general concept. But *summetria* is insufficient for beauty: magnitude, too, is required (*Poet.* 50b 25f., *EN* 1123b 7f.). The claim of Else (1938) 187 that beauty is the 'master-concept' of the *Poetics* is part of an over-zealous attempt to connect Ar. with the doctrines of Plato's *Philebus*. For appropriate caution see Butcher 161f., and cf. Svoboda ch. 2.

not 'biological', as often claimed; they are universal standards, applying, as he affirms, to 'everything which consists of parts', and the case of living creatures is just one instance and illustration of them.²⁴ Neither the beginning-middle-end schema nor the comparison of a poetic structure with a living form is peculiarly Aristotelian; both occur in Plato, most strikingly in the remarks made on unity in the *Phaedrus*.²⁵ But what does deserve to be regarded as characteristically Aristotelian is the further underpinning given to the concept of unity or integration by its exposition, in chs. 7 and 8, as an interlocking set of factors and criteria.²⁶ Since this compound concept of unity – whose constituents are wholeness, order, singleness, and appropriate scale – concerns the representation of human action, the perception of poetic unity, as will be confirmed, rests inescapably on the cognitive understanding of the action portrayed. Aristotle's interpretation of unity is emphatically not aestheticist.

This is true even of the dimension of appropriate scale or size, which may at first sight strike a modern reader, in view of the analogy with living creatures, as a purely formal matter of beauty. But what this analogy signifies for Aristotle is not the mere sense-experience of an animal's shape and proportions, but the understanding (by teleological criteria) of the interrelated functions of its parts; scale cannot, from this point of view, be divorced from purpose.²⁷ Correspondingly, the appropriate scale for a tragedy is

²⁴ The scale and unity of a poetic *muthos* can, from the point of view of the analogy between art and nature, be seen as the imposition of standards of the kind which in nature are intrinsic (e.g. *De An.* 416a 16f.). The essential thinking is teleological (see *De An.* 412b 8f., and cf. n.27 below) not 'biological'. This last term is often applied to Ar.'s view of tragedy or to his methodology without sufficient reason: e.g. Atkins vol. 1, 77, Henn 2 ('the plot is the skeleton of the animal' – but the plot is the *soul* (50a 38)!), Rees (1981) 28ff. (mistaking *logical* concepts and method which are used in the biological works for being themselves biological). Aristotelian biology is itself subsumed within the framework of larger philosophical ideas of form, function and purpose.

²⁵ See Appendix 2, under ch. 7's references. Cf. also Gorgias fr.11.5, and see Brink (1971) 77ff.

²⁶ The point is made tersely by Hubbard 100 n.4. Teichmüller vol. 1 68f. (cf. vol. 2 436-40) argues for a strict separation of wholeness and unity (or 'singleness'), but the former is defined by Ar. so as to presuppose the latter (even if the reverse need not always hold). Cf. *Met.* 1023b 26ff.

²⁷ Perhaps the passage which best confirms this is *Pol.* 1326a 34ff., where the interrelations between excellence (beauty), scale and function are spelt out; cf. also *PA* 645a 23-6 for the teleological aspect of beauty. Given Ar.'s way of looking at nature, it is inconceivable that the perception of order (*taxis*: *Poet.* 50b 37) could be divorced from

defined, as are all the other aspects of unity, by reference to the cardinal principle of 'necessity or probability', which represents the internal and intelligible cohesion of the action dramatised in the poetry. It is, therefore, in the scrutiny of the notion of necessity and probability that we must look for a fuller understanding of Aristotelian unity. The correctness of this procedure is corroborated by the way in which the observations of *Poetics* 7 and 8 lead up to the central philosophical generalisations of ch. 9, where we encounter the heaviest density of reference to necessity and probability in the treatise. Although I shall retain the phrase necessity and/or probability for convenience of description, it is obviously important that it should be taken unprejudicially in its Aristotelian sense, and that any irrelevant associations of the English terms should be disregarded.²⁸ Aristotle cites the pair of ideas again and again in the main chapters of the treatise, either singly or, more often, in combination. Little is offered, however, by way of direct explanation of necessity and probability, though ch. 9 in particular gives some important clues. It is clear that we are dealing here with terminology with which Aristotle presupposed some familiarity, and for whose interpretation it is therefore useful to draw on assistance from his wider philosophy.

The more problematic of the two concepts is undoubtedly necessity, since the language of necessity is employed by Aristotle outside the *Poetics* in a wide variety of contexts and applications, the fine details of which are beyond the scope of my argument.²⁹ On the broadest level, necessity can be considered as a category of cause or explanation; together with nature, chance and human agency, necessity belongs to the scheme of four major types of cause at *EN* 1112a 32f. Within the framework of this scheme necessity reappears in more specific forms. It is evidently most pertinent to its place in the

the understanding of the function or purpose of the structure and its parts; compare the relation between form and intelligibility in the periodic style defined at *Rhet.* 1409a 35ff. It is instructive to observe how Lucas (1968) on 50b 37, while grasping the essential point about the teleological view of beauty, struggles with it because of his own concern with 'aesthetic satisfaction': cf. ch. II n.27.

²⁸ 'Probable' and 'probability' have been used in this context since at least the time of neo-classicists such as Dryden and Rymer, and it is difficult to think of a less imperfect translation for the purpose. The main qualification to attach to the term is the exclusion of statistically based ideas, *pace* House 60, whose discussion of necessity and probability (58-62) is otherwise illuminating.

²⁹ For a short survey see Sorabji 222-4.

Poetics to ask what part necessity plays in the sphere of human action, since the poetic plot-structure, for whose coherence and unity Aristotle invokes necessity as a principle, is precisely a structure of actions. One of the clearest statements of the role of necessity in human action can be found in the first Book of the *Rhetoric*, where it is said that of those actions which men themselves do not cause necessity is one of the two chief explanations, the other being chance (1368b 32ff.): But necessity in this context can be subdivided into nature and compulsion, and when in this same passage Aristotle draws up his final list of the seven causes or explanations of human action, it is these two particular forces, rather than necessity as such, which he includes. Where action at least is concerned, therefore, necessity encroaches on the territory of nature, and is clearly distinguished only from chance and from the various internal motive forces of human agency (desire, reason, etc.).

Elsewhere in the *Rhetoric*, however, Aristotle makes the observation that little or nothing in the area of human action can be attributed to necessity (1357a 22ff.). He does so in connection with the subject of rhetorical arguments (enthymemes) and the kind of premises which can be used in them; and he moves from the point that most human actions could be other than they are, to the conclusion that rhetorical 'syllogisms' (which consist of propositions about action) will generally have the force only of probability, not of necessity. This passage helps to illustrate what can be argued on more substantial grounds, that Aristotle's notions of causal and logical necessity are not altogether separable, and there is no good reason why we should have to make a choice between the two in attempting to relate the necessity of the *Poetics* to parts of the larger philosophical system.³⁰ In the case of unity of dramatic plot-structure, causal necessity might be thought to be more immediately relevant, since it is evident in most of the treatise's references to the principle that what is at stake is the causal sequence of the human actions which constitute the material of the plot: 'it makes a great difference whether things happen because of, or only after, what precedes them.'³¹ But the *perception* of dramatic sequence and structure is comparable to the understanding of a logical or quasi-logical argument; the audience's sense of intelligible structure is a matching

³⁰ Cf. Sorabji 223. There is insufficient reason to follow Else (1957) 295 n. 30, 297, and 303 n.7, in taking *sumbainein* at 51a 13 and b 9 to mean 'follow logically'.

³¹ 52a 20f.: cf. e.g. *An.Post.* 73b 10ff., *Rhet.* 1401b 31.

response to the causality within the plot.

It is for this reason, among others, that there is for Aristotle an affinity or analogy between poetry and rhetoric. One indication of the awareness of this is precisely the common occurrence of the conjoined concepts of necessity and probability in his treatments of the two subjects. Just as the orator constructs arguments with a view to what his audience will understand and be prepared to believe, so the playwright must order the material of his plot-structure in such a way as to convince his audience of its intelligibility as a sequence of human actions. In both cases there is, in the strict sense, a subjective and an objective side to the matter. For the orator, the subjective resides in what his hearers can reasonably be expected to believe; the objective consists in the claims which his arguments make to represent the truth, the facts of the case. For the playwright, the subjective element is of the same kind; but the objective inheres in the action which he portrays by mimesis.³² Before returning to the question of how necessity can fit into this, I turn now directly to probability (*eikos*).

Aristotle defines *eikos*, again in the *Rhetoric*, as 'that which happens for the most part' (1357a 34): a concept for which I have accepted the translation 'probability', but which could be rendered, depending on the precise setting, as likelihood, plausibility, or generality. *Eikos* represents, therefore, a degree of regularity or consistency which falls short of the invariable or the necessary. This is probability in its objective aspect noted above, and is equally applicable to the propositions of the orator's argument and to the actions which a dramatic plot-structure comprises: and it is on this plane that Aristotle can juxtapose general considerations of probability with the known facts of reality, as he does at *Rhet.* 1400a 7. But probability also has a subjective dimension, and it is in this respect that it can be described as a central principle – perhaps *the* central principle – of rhetoric, the foundation of the rhetorical function of persuasion. Subjectively, probability is to be seen in terms of what people suppose and are prepared to believe – their common assumptions and prejudices. From this point of view, rhetorical *eikos* can be conceived

³² For the subjective-objective dichotomy note *Rhet.* 1402b 15: arguments from probability concern things 'which either *are* or are *thought to be* usual'. A similar ambivalence can be discerned in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where *eikos* is defined as 'the plausible' (*pithanon*: 272d-e) and hence as 'what most people think likely' (273a), yet it can also be said that *eikos* involves a likeness to the truth (273d).

and analysed not so much by reference to objective regularities as to the mentality of an audience, the set of attitudes, suppositions and expectations which most of them share and to which, if he is to be persuasive, the orator's arguments must conform and appeal.³³

But the subjective and objective aspects of probability are, of course, potentially complementary, and the subjective may be thought to mirror or reflect the objective (though some, hardly Aristotle, would invert the relationship). The difference between them depends on one's point of reference: if the focus is on an audience, and on the task of persuading or convincing them, then it is the subjective sense of probability which is more appropriate; if on the inherent relations between the components of an argument or an equivalent structure of thought, then the objective sense is predominant. It can now be additionally noted that probability is parallel to necessity in virtue of the fact that it has a status which bears both on logic and on causality. On the one hand, *eikos* can be used to categorise the conclusion of an argument as plausible but not certain. On the other, it may describe a causal regularity which is less than that of necessity. In both these senses however, it is unquestionable that Aristotle regards probability as much more characteristic of matters of human action than necessity.

This latter point raises a question about the necessity-and-probability principle of the *Poetics*, to which we can now return with the wider evidence for these two concepts in mind. If necessity scarcely enters into the sphere of human action, and therefore into the construction of dramatic plots which represent such action, why does Aristotle repeatedly mention both necessity and probability, rather than simply the latter, as the requisite canons of poetic unity? If an answer to this question is possible, it will need to emerge from an attempt to piece together the implications of all the relevant passages of the treatise, beginning with the least elliptical of them in ch. 9. Here Aristotle invokes necessity and probability as the defining feature of the proper subject-matter of poetry. Poetry deals, he says, not with things that are known to have happened, but with 'the kinds of events which might happen and which are possible according to

³³ Note the connection between *eikos* and plausibility (*pithanon*) at 61b 11-15, *Rhet.* 1400a 8f. See also *An.Pr.* 70a 2ff., where *eikos* is defined as an agreed premise, i.e. 'what people know to be, or not to be, the case for the most part'; similarly *ps.-Ar. Rh.Alex.* 1428a 26-29a 20. Note that *Poet.* 56b 2-7 indicates a connection, or analogy, between rhetorical *eikos* and the implicit *eikos* of the dramatic plot.

probability or necessity'. It is this which, as he goes on to state, makes the poet's material 'more philosophical' than the historian's, for the poet is concerned with general propositions or universals, by which Aristotle means 'the sorts of things which certain sorts of people will say or do, according to probability or necessity'.³⁴ These formulations have a deceptive simplicity about them, and as much as anything in the work they signal Aristotle's concern with abstract theorising rather than practical protreptic. This is not to question that on one level Aristotle shows in this passage a grasp of the need for a dramatic structure to conform to what I have called subjective probability: that is, to convince an audience of the plausibility of the plot. But that is not his emphasis, either here or elsewhere in the *Poetics*. If it were, it would be difficult, for one thing, to explain the telling reference to the nature of philosophy. The implicit connection with rhetoric, carried by the notion of *eikos*, is insufficient to account for Aristotle's concern in ch. 9, which is more with the status of poetic content itself (the causal sequence of the action) than with its direct relation to the mentality of the audience.³⁵

Ch. 9 is, in other words, directed more towards the objective presentation than the subjective reception of the general propositions which the poet's dramatisation of human action embodies – more towards their intrinsic validity, in terms of necessity or probability, than their capacity to convince an audience (whose credence will anyway, it is assumed, follow from successful plot-construction). This accords not only with Aristotle's general reluctance to appeal to the mentality of audiences as a standard of poetic practice (though he is occasionally prepared to do so in a negative fashion), but also with the fact that the work's other references to necessity and probability show little inclination to emphasise the quasi-rhetorical element of persuasiveness, but firmly imply that what is at issue is the inherent credibility and intelligibility of the poetic plot-structure. If ch. 9 concentrates on the status of poetic meaning in comparison to the

³⁴ 51b 8f.: cf. the similar formulation at *De An.* 434a 17f. On universals see n.38 below.

³⁵ One important divergence between rhetorical and poetic *eikos* is that in the former various types of manipulation are both possible and pragmatically necessary (given an opponent, audience resistance, and other factors): see e.g. *Rhet.* 1395b lff. on appeals to vulgar prejudice. Such things have a slighter place in poetry: *Poet.* 60a 18f. perhaps suggests a mild instance. Ar.'s theory as a whole presupposes a constancy of relation between the play and the audience's perception of it. It was Renaissance theorists who turned the probability of the treatise into pure *vraisemblance*: see ch. X p. 298.

criteria of philosophy and history, most of the other relevant passages in the *Poetics* place the accent on the causal connections between the components of a dramatic sequence of events. In ch. 7 necessity and probability are cited in connection with the turning-point of a tragedy, the critical transformation of fortune (*metabasis*). In ch. 8 the lack of suitable coherence between certain events in Odysseus's life is described as not matching the requirements of sequential necessity or probability, and it is the same standard which is appealed to in ch. 9 to characterise the deficiency of the episodic plot. The point is put positively again in ch. 10, where the crucial transition which defines the complex plot is yet another opportunity for necessity and probability to be applied, and Aristotle makes the remark which I quoted earlier, that 'it makes a great difference whether things happen because of, or only after, what precedes them.' Not only do we here find the causal dimension of the principle explicitly mentioned, but we also learn that necessity and probability are to be expected even of the vital turning-points of fortune which for Aristotle lie at the heart of tragedy. The same is true of the passage from ch. 7 cited above, and the idea is later reinforced by further references to the causal principle in immediate connection with the components of the complex plot – reversal and recognition. Since it is also into the mechanism of the complex plot that Aristotle introduces *hamartia* in *Poetics* 13, the nature of necessity and probability raises substantive issues in the interpretation of the core of the theory of tragedy, with which ch. VII of this book will try to deal. The essential point to be observed here is that the complex plot central to Aristotle's theory does not represent a qualification of the principle of necessity or probability, but gives this a deliberately paradoxical embodiment – 'paradoxically but on account of one another' being an approximate translation of the phrase used at 52a 4, effectively for the key stages of the complex plot.³⁶ The arousal of pity and fear in their most intense form hangs on a pattern of action which does not follow a linear progression (the schema of the 'simple' plot), but which incorporates a tragic twist of fortune. Yet even this pattern, in Aristotle's theory, must leave intact the underlying necessity or probability of the plot-structure. It is emblematic of the philosopher's whole view of the genre that intelligibility must be preserved even at the heart of tragic instability.

³⁶ On this passage, and *peripeteia* generally, see ch. VII p. 212f. and nn.15-16.

But it is not the theory of tragedy as such with which the present argument is concerned, and it is now time to take stock of what has been said about necessity and probability, in order to draw together the strands of Aristotle's conception of poetic unity. We have seen that the framework within which this conception is elaborated is that of poetic plot-structure (*muthos*), which the *Poetics* from its first sentence onwards normatively assumes as a feature of all poetry. Since the *muthos* is a structure of human actions, or, more strictly, of the mimesis of human actions, the notion of unity which is applied to it turns out to be related to categories which are employed by Aristotle elsewhere in the understanding of the causality of action, and in the interpretation (in rhetoric, philosophy, and ordinary rational discourse) of propositions and arguments concerning human action. Adapted to poetic theory, these categories, necessity and probability, bear both on the intrinsic causality of the action, and on the 'logic' which the construction of the plot requires us to apprehend in it. From this it emerges that the one negative judgement which can be made with assurance on Aristotle's concept of poetic unity is that it is not a purely formal criterion, for it is grounded in the representation and understanding of human action: one cannot judge poetic form or unity without reckoning with the principles (that is, the causes and motivations) of human action itself.³⁷ Aristotle's underlying preoccupation, in other words, is with intelligibility, not with formality in itself or for its own sake. We have here, therefore, a conclusion parallel to that which I reached in the previous chapter on the concept of aesthetic pleasure. In both cases it has transpired that the experience of poetry is inescapably cognitive, and that the ordering of the work of art, together with the proper pleasure to be derived from it, is, for Aristotle, inseparable from the universals which ideally furnish its content.³⁸ Moreover, it is as clear for unity as it was for aesthetic pleasure, that Aristotle is elaborating in detailed application to poetry a principle which he would hold as valid for all mimetic art: 51a 30.

It is, I believe, the strength of Aristotle's stress on the causal

³⁷ Russell 91 calls Ar.'s criterion of unity 'wholly aesthetic', but he refers to 62b 1ff., which concerns concentration rather than basic unity, while the main treatment of unity in chs. 7-8 indicates that it is a function of intelligibility in the plot-structure. Will 159-62 is similarly mistaken in seeing the justification for necessity and probability as narrowly 'aesthetic'.

³⁸ For universals see esp. *Met.* 1038b 1-39a 23, *Rhet.* 1394a 21ff., 1356b 30ff. Universals are the true object of knowledge: *De An.* 417b 22f., *Met.* 982a 21ff.

intelligibility of the tragic plot-structure (as a paradigm for other types of poetic *muthos*) which explains the fact, to which I earlier drew attention, that the *Poetics* repeatedly mentions necessity alongside probability, even though, on Aristotle's own admission elsewhere, necessity plays little part in the sphere of human action outside the limited factors of compulsion and unavoidable facts of nature (neither of which would have much scope in the types of plot recommended in the treatise). We need not suppose that Aristotle imagined the causal sequence of a play could often have the degree of cohesion which a necessary relation between events would entail. But necessity stands for an extreme or ideal of unity which Aristotle clearly finds it theoretically important to emphasise. It has, that is, the significance of overstating the requirement of unity of action. Probability (*eikos*) is sufficient, but since in a sense *eikos* aspires to the condition of necessity, necessity itself can be held up as the perfect accomplishment of an integrated plot-structure: it represents a degree of causal and logical cohesion which, even if human action can rarely if ever achieve this, would constitute a perfect embodiment of dramatic meaning.³⁹ If necessity does stand in the *Poetics* as an ideal though scarcely attainable standard, this is congruent with Aristotle's remarks in ch. 9, where the distinction between poetry and history, and the comparison between poetry and philosophy, seems to imply that poetry heightens as well as generalising reality. It is precisely, as ch. 8 makes clear, the lack of patterns of coherence in the events of much ordinary life (or even in the life of a single hero) which makes them inadequate material for the demands of a poetic plot-structure. Poetry should in some sense rise above mundane life (though not with a necessarily optimistic import) and elevate human action to a higher level of intelligibility, so that it acquires something which even the philosopher might recognise as significant. If, then, Aristotelian poetic unity has the anti-formalist virtue of relating to the mimetic content, the constituent actions, of the poem, it equally represents a movement away from the realistic portrayal of ordinary life towards the universalised status of philosophical propositions of general (or probable) validity.

³⁹ An analogy to the relation between probability and necessity in the *Poetics* is Ar.'s observation at *Rhet.* 1370a 6-9 that 'habit resembles nature, since frequent occurrence is akin to invariability'. On the assimilation of probability ('that which happens for the most part') to necessity cf. De Ste Croix 47-50. But the two should not be casually interchangeable: see *Top.* 112b 1ff. The fact that Ar. considers tragedy to

One final implication of Aristotle's concept of unity deserves to be drawn out, and that is what it precludes. The *Poetics* is unequivocal on this point, but since most of the relevant passages occur in the later chapters of the work, in the analysis of epic, there is some risk that their relevance to the central theory of poetry will be underestimated. On a number of occasions Aristotle comments directly on the need, except in certain qualified circumstances, to eliminate from a poetic plot any trace of the unintelligible or 'irrational'.⁴⁰ This is precisely the negative corollary of the positive requirement of unity of plot. That Aristotle should have enjoined the exclusion of the irrational from a tragic, epic or other poetic construction, appears at first sight unobjectionable, but reflection on the point in relation to existing Greek poetry may prompt the view that it is in some degree contentious. On the level on which Aristotle is simply concerned, as to some extent he certainly is, with the avoidance of anomalies in human action, his principle is perfectly understandable. But insofar as it can be taken to entail that all the action of poetry should be both fully intelligible and intelligible in wholly human terms, it raises the issue of how far such a demand is compatible with some of the major presuppositions of traditional Greek religion, as we find this dramatised in poetry. One facet of this issue touches on the status of chance both in traditional religious thinking and in Aristotle's philosophy. Both the positive principles of unity and the warnings against the irrational which we find in the *Poetics* clearly exclude the play of chance in the sense understood by Aristotle himself: indeed, one Aristotelian definition of chance – that which happens neither always nor for the most part – is simply the reverse of necessity and probability.⁴¹ But the main Greek term for chance, *tuchê*, carries a much more indeterminate sense and value within the unsystematic outlook of traditional religion and myth, and in particular it shades into belief in divine causation. If Aristotle's notion of unity rules out the possibility of this and other religious ideas of the irrational, then this clearly has serious implications for the relation between the *Poetics* and existing Greek epic and tragic poetry. Whether such a conflict does exist between

be capable of greater unity than epic does not justify the attempt of Friedrich (1983) 51 to refer necessity to the former, probability to the latter.

⁴⁰ 54b 6-8, 60a 11-14, 28-32, 60a 34-b 2, 61b 14f., 19-24.

⁴¹ *Phys.* 196b 10ff., *Rhet.* 1369a 32-5.

the theory and earlier poetic practice is a question to which I shall return in ch. VII, but I have mentioned the possibility of it here in order to end this section with a further pointer to the strongly cognitive and rationalist tenor of the concept of poetic unity adumbrated in the treatise, and indeed of Aristotle's aesthetic thinking as a whole.