Aristotle's Poetics and Rhetoric

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3. Tragedy as cathartic
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1. Productive vs Practical science

The *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* are productive sciences: they look at processes w/ external products. If the *Ethics* and the *Politics* are practical sciences, concerned w/ self-directed action, then the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric* are productive not just in the sense that a poem or a speech is the product of a labor that aimed at it, but also because they both discuss ways in which action is produced from outside a person: ways in which people are manipulated, are "moved," as we say.

2. The relevant definition of humans: the embodied imitative political animal with *logos*

To understand how people can be moved, let us first recall the definition of the human as the political animal with *logos*. Humans live in groups, with speech as the medium. (*NE* 1.7 and *Pol* 1.2)

Next, we have to remember that humans are embodied. Not only is this the reason we are pulled down out of activity, but it is also the positive source of training of character excellences: Aristotle is clear in NE 2.3, as was Plato, that pleasure and pain is the key to upbringing, as an appropriate regime of rewards and punishments will instill disgust at the ugly and disgraceful and pleasure at the beautiful and noble before logos can take root. In other words, the formation of taste--the physical reaction to objects--is the key to character formation. And, let's remember that taste is the key to desire: we want things that make us feel good, so that character formation is the channeling of desire, the rendering of desire and action predictable. Moreover, the body is important for intellectual activity as well as practical: recall that an appropriately ordered body is necessary for the withdrawal of the body from consciousness to allow the transcendent vision of the intellect. We have dealt extensively with the questions of social position and leisure in producing such bodies trained for thinking and correct character. Let's recall that the ideal male body, after all, is capable of becoming either a killing or a thinking machine, with trained, predictable, and transparent flows, even if its everyday political existence retains only the power to assume such machinic qualities.

Finally, let's turn to the *Poetics* 1.4 (Unfortunately not in our selections.) Here Aristotle will give us a last clue to the puzzle, as he will emphasize the imitative nature of human children. This is a very important claim, about which it's unclear that Aristotle recognizes its radicality. If human children are by nature imitative, then there is no fixed human nature! In contemporary terms, Aristotle here can be seen as a strong nurture rather than nature guy. Moreover, if humans are by nature political, they imitate the things of their culture. And, what's even more fascinating, taking the claim that pleasure/pain are the primary medium for character formation, they imitate the emotional environment in which they are raised prior to the "logical environment," that is, they do as their parents and role models feel, not as they say!

3. Tragedy as cathartic

Embodied, imatative, political: these are the conditions for character (taste and desire) formation. Let's now think about the two ways people are moved by productions. First, by tragedy. Combining the definitions offered in *Poetics* 1.6 & 1.13, Aristotle says that tragedy is the imitation (*mimesis*) of important actions of a man better than most who commits an error (*hamartia*) and brings down upon himself an undeserved evil; seeing this

performed has a particular emotional effect on the spectators: it is a purging/purification (*catharsis*) of pity and fear. In a nutshell, seeing the bad effects of an error purges our feelings.

Now many people have proposed many different readings of the three key terms: imitation, error, and purification/purging. What's important for our concerns here is the bodily basis of all three: the childhood imitation that forms character (taste and desire) via pleasure and pain; the imperfect nature of that formation and of the world, so that error occurs; the purging/purification effect of bodily emotion.

The complexity of taste/desire formation, the unpredictability of the world, the strange blend of pleasure/pain in seeing tragedy, the bodily basis of all three: all these makes cultural struggle, for the Greeks and for us, both vitally important and extremely complicated. Philosophy (or at least the ones blessed as canonical) has tended to shirk its responsibilities to think and act in this realm, preferring life above the cave and letting politicians do the dirty work of taste and desire work. When and if philosophers do read literature, that's exactly what they do: they read it, staying on the level of logos and mythos, and never "descend" (but "descend" is a loaded term!) to the level of bodily emotion, since that is childish or effeminate. Recall the self-director as active and the other-directed as laboring.

4. Logos, ethos, pathos

This suspicion about bodily emotion underlies Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. If we recall the story of Socrates and the sophists--both the public identification of them and Plato's attempt to distinguish them--philosophers have always though that there's something suspicious about rhetoric. I submit that it's this ability to move people, which disrupts their ability to direct themselves that underlies philosophers' unease.

In the *Rhetoric,* Aristotle clearly prefers the logical appeal, grudgingly accepts the ethical appeal, and can barely disguise his disdain for the pathetic appeal, even though he describes at great length the emotional bases. We can say that the pathetic appeal aims to move people: aims to divert their bodily flows and hence manipulate their tastes and desires. Now the more homogeneous the society, the more predictable the emotional response. But in even the most homogeneous society the channeling of these is tricky business; the situation in a multi-cultural society with transverse and perverse practices (i.e., those that render people unpredictable) is even more precarious. Thus rhetoric is doubly dangerous: even in the best case it moves people by relying the predictable responses of well-trained solid citizens in a homogeneous society; in the worst case it inflames the multiple flows of unpredictable passions generated in a multi-cultural society and so enhances social strife. Rhetoric's very existence, then, is a scandal: it exposes the embodied and imitative nature of the political animal, those conditions that disrupt the transcendent vision of the intellect.