CHAPTER 2

THE POETICS - HISTORY, FORM AND CONTENT
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THE POETICS - 'HISTORY, PLOT AND CONTENT

"The Poetics of Aristotle has a long and famous life, which began about 330 B.C.\(^1\) This work is commonly thought to belong to the period of Aristotle's headship of the Lyceum. "It is the first work of literary criticism and it is written by the world's First Scientist"\(^2\). It is the first inquiry, in the Western culture about the nature of drama. At the present, unfortunately, we have only the first part of the 'Poetics' and the second is lost irrevocably. For us nothing is to be regretted more, than this loss, because the lost second part is supposed to contain the elucidation of the term 'Catharsis', what it means and how it is achieved.

Many controversies and misconceptions arise, because the 'Poetics' is not complete and is fragmentary. Many terms are left unexplained, which, may be generally understood in his age and were current then, but which have created and still create interesting and difficult problems for research. As Prof. F.L. Lucas says,

"Its [Poetics] still living value lies in the crucial problems it raises - such as Mimasia, Catharsis, Plot, Character, Style, Unity,


\(^2\) Ibid., p.1.
Tragic irony - Passages where single sentences have given rise to whole volumes.3 After its rediscovery the 'Poetics' held a prominent place and even today it is considered "the starting point for the study of serious drama."4 We can easily call it the most living book. Lessing describes the 'Poetics'

"as infallible as the elements of Euclid."5 And there was a time, when it was considered a sacred book and followed faithfully.

In the ancient times, the 'Poetics' did not arouse much interest, nor draw any special attention, except, "the fact of our oldest, extant Greek manuscript (46) having been written somewhere about the year 1000 A.D."6 The history of the book, in the classical period is obscure. Much of its teachings and terminology survives in the later literature of compilation, but the book itself seems to have been after a time, either ignored, or but little studied. There are no traces of an ancient commentary on it, and comparatively few citations, acknowledged or unacknowledged in the ancient literature.

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Aristotle's *Poetics* continues to occupy the minds of scholars and critics, after 1000 B.C., when it was rediscovered. It has a long and famous history. It is one of the most living books, which have interested the great philosophers and aestheticians of the past. Its history is of special interest to us. Its history tells us, how and why the book has aroused many controversies and provides ample opportunity for the multiple commentators and critics for their speculative interpretations.

The authorities for the textual tradition of the *Poetics* are reduced to two (1) and (2) in a less definite way, the traces and indications of another Greek text, recoverable from the Arabic version and the surviving fragment of the lost Syrian version.

The Parisinian 1741, manuscript of the 11th century is generally supposed to be the archetype from which all other extant MSS. directly or indirectly are derived. "Parisinian 1741 known among the Aristotelians as 'A' is part of a volume which contains not only the *Poetics* but also the *Rhetoric* and several post Aristotelian works on *Rhetoric*.

In the Sixteenth Century, it was examined by Victorius while it was

7 Ibid., p.xxvii.
still in Florence. "Since then it has been repeatedly collated, first by an unnamed friend of Burges (perhaps Corey) for the critical Appendix to Tyrwhitt's edition (1794), then by Beckfor the Berlinc Aristotle (1831) and then by Jusenihi (1865) Vahlen (1865) and others." The superiority of the Parisinus 1741 over all the extant MSS is beyond dispute. Usser recognizes it as our one great authority for the text of the various treatises of Dionysius included in the volume. Though it cannot be shown to be of such unique importance for the 'Rhetoric', it is confessedly our best source for the text of the 'Poetics'.

"In the 'Poetics', A° must always claim the premier place, even if the Arabic version now and then supplies a better reading or corrects some of its more patent scribal errors." But Prof. Bywater does not share the view that A°MS is the sole source from which the rest are derived. He thinks that there was another greek MS, unknown to us from which many late Renaissance editions known as 'Apographa' are derived.

Among the Greeks of the Middle Ages, there is no indication of any interest in the treatise. "However it found readers in the East, as it was translated into Syriac.

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8 Ibid., p.xxvii.
9 Ibid., p.xxvii.
in the eight century and from the Syriac into Arabic in the
Eleventh Century. The commentary of Avicenna which was based
on this Arabic version was rendered into Hebrew and also under
the title of 'Aristotelis Poetria' into Latin Almainns by
Hermannus Almainns in the Thirteenth Century'. 10 Roger Bacon
knew the work of Hermannus Almainns, but not the Greek
'Poetics' or any Latin version made directly from the Greek.
The 'Poetics' was not among the many Aristotelian and other
philosophic Greek books which found translators in the Thir
teenth Century when the Latin occupation opened up the
Byzantine world to the Westerns. The 'Rhetoric' was transla-
ted in Latin at this time, but its fellow treatise was left
out in cold.

The Arabic version came to light by the efforts of
Dr. S.J. Margoliouth who faced the many difficulties of the
Arabic text and translated it in Latin and gave it to the
world in a printed form in his 'Analecta Orientalia and
Poeticum Aristotelisc' in 1887. "In the absence of a complete
translation our estimate of the Arabic version, must be based
on Dr. Margoliouth's notes and extracts'. 11 Critics agree
that no final estimate can yet be made of the precise value
of this version, for the criticism of the text. The use of

10 Ibid., p.xxxiv.
11 Ibid., p.xxxi.
the A.V. is that we are often able to look beyond it. So as to recover the readings of a Greek MS which was at least three centuries anterior to A⁰. But it is 'a version of a version' not made directly from the Greek, but from a now lost Syrian translation of the Greek and 'we have to discern the original text, through the distorting medium of two oriental translations'.¹²

Aristotelian scholars agree that there was a Greek Manuscript from which the Syrian version was made. They come to this conclusion because they find some terms and phrases which are not in the A⁰ text but which are found in this Arabic version and consequently in some of the Renaissance 'apographs'.

These indications of the Greek text E, as known from the Arabic version, may be combined with those already observed in the Syrian Fragment as leading to the general conclusion that it is dating from antiquity. But its antiquity does not prove its superiority because we must remember the fact that, after all, this text E is not quite the same thing as an actual Greek MS. "A Greek text recovered by art and inference from a version of a version — each of them in an oriental language—is exposed at times to doubts and suspicions of a kind from which that of A⁰ is free".¹³

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¹² Ibid., p.xxxii.
¹³ Ibid., p.xxxvii.
"The modern history of the book begins in the second half of the Fifteenth Century. The Greek text now became known among the learned in Italy and at the end of the century (1495) the first translation of that by G. Valla was given to the world. It is difficult to see why the 'Poetics', was not included in the great Aldine Aristotle of 1495-7. It was later included in 1503 A.D. in Vol. I of the 'Aldine Rhetoricorum'.

The many Renaissance MSS which we still have, are enough to show that the book must have been accessible and in the hands of not a few of the earlier humanists. These Renaissance MSS of the Greek text, now usually known as the 'Apographa' originate a discussion among the Aristotelian scholars. 'Instead of acquiescing in Spongel and Vahlen's view of the unique importance of Aε as the ultimate source of the texts of the 'Apographa', many seem more than half inclined to think that some or any rate of better readings in them, more especially those confirmed by the Arabic version, point to the survival in the Fifteenth Century of another textual authority, a now lost Greek MS independent of Aε and free from certain of its errors'.

14 Ibid., p.xxv.
15 Ibid., p.xxxix.
seen derivating from $A^c$, it is only so because of a desire
to amend the older text or present it in an easier form,
and there is no possibility of another Greek MSS as the
source of apographi in place of $A^c$.

Thus we see that the 'Poetics' has a long
history and the text of it may have suffered in the transmu-
tation from one language to another.

The most important editions of Aristotle's 'Poetics'
are those of

1. G. Moral - 1555.
2. I. Bechoer in his standard edition of
   Aristotle's works 1831.
3. J. Vahlen - 1367.
5. J. Eywater - 1893, revised text with
   commentary - 1909.

There are other English editions of Soulston,
Tyrwhitt (1794), Swinling (1793).

So must also mention the well-known German
Bernay's edition (1857) and Jucemah's (1855, 1874).

\[16\] This list is given by John Warrington,
'Aristotle's Poetics' (London: Spocymen's Library,
In English editions we can also note

2. Lane Cooper - 1913 - rept. - 1947.

The Form of 'Poetics'

The 'Poetics', in its extant form is fragmentary. It originally consisted of two books, one dealing with Tragedy and Epic, the other with Comedy and other subjects. We have only the first part and so it is unfinished. It is generally accepted that the 'poetics' is the lecture-notes of Aristotle, as Gilbert Murray says

"The style though luminous, vivid, and in its broader division systematic, is not that of a book intended for publication. Like most of Aristotle's extant writing, it suggests the mind of an experienced lecturer, full of jottings and exscreptions, with occasional phrases written carefully out, but never revised as a whole for the general reader". 17

The extant text of the 'Poetics', with its form and structure, with its rough and unfinished condition, make us ask, if it is Aristotle's own lecture notes for oral teaching or notes taken down by his pupil or pupils. The Aristotelian

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critics agree that the 'poetics' is one of his 'esoteric works'
and "These were lectures or lecture-notes or records of
discussion all reverently preserved at the Lyceum.\(^\text{13}\) That
the work is notes, taken down by some pupils, is ruled out
by various considerations. It is difficult to suppose,
"That the notes of a pupil would have produced so coherent
and intelligible a result as the work in main presents or
that the notes of different pupils would have shown such a
uniformity of style".\(^\text{19}\) It is possible to regard the work
as Aristotle's own rough notes for lectures by its terse
manner. It is suggested by many phrases that Aristotle is
addressing hearers and not the readers. "There can be no
doubt, however of the close connection of most of the written
works with the teaching in Lyceum".\(^\text{20}\) Aristotle may have
written out his lectures complete, before delivering them and
the written works may be his lectures in this sense, or it
may be that Aristotle lectured more freely than this and
that the book as we have it was written down subsequently
by him as memoranda, to show to those, who had missed the
lectures, and by way of having a more accurate record of
his views than the memory or the notes of his students.

It would not be wrong if we accept the 'Poetics'
as the lecture-notes of Aristotle.

\(^\text{10}\) Hamilton Py\_20, p.xii.
\(^\text{13}\) J.P. Ross, p.16, n.3.
\(^\text{19}\) Ibid., p.17.
The Structure of the 'Poetics'

The next point of interest is the general plan and the structure of the 'Poetics'. "The scheme of the work as a whole is admirably simple and logical comprising five main parts or sections:

1. A preliminary discourse on Tragedy, epic poetry, and comedy, as the chief forms of imitative poetry, and the subject of the inquiry that is to follow (Chap. 1-5).

2. Definition of a tragedy, and the rules for its construction (Chap. 6-22).

3. Rules for the construction of an epic (Chap. 23-4).

4. Enumeration of the criticism to which an epic or tragedy may be subjected, and of the various possible replies to them (Chap. 25).

5. A comparison of epic poetry and tragedy, showing the artistic, superiority of the latter (Chap. 26). 21

The chief difficulties usually found in the book are in the contents and arrangements of the second section, that dealing with the rules for the construction of tragedy. Here the genuineness of some chapters is questioned and the order in which the material now appears is thought to deviate

21 Bywater, p.xvii.
more or less from that of Aristotle himself. Many scholars reject the chapters 12 and 20 as interpolations, and many scholars change the order of chapters like Baselier, "who lifts the whole of chapter 15 out of its place in order to make it come immediately after Chapter 13". All this has happened because the text of the 'Poetics' has suffered in transmission. As many scholars have allowed themselves a free hand.

Content of the 'Poetics'

In the 'Poetics', Aristotle's analysis of poetry provides for careful isolation of the specific character of poetry, while permitting the analogy of poetry to oratory as well as the consideration of the nozel of both.

Tragedy, however, which is the only kind of poetry analyzed in the extant portion of the work is defined in terms of its form and purpose, as a kind of imitation and a mode of personation or excitation of pity and fear and thereby their catharsis. Thus in the famous definition of the 6th Cham. tragedy imitates serious action of great magnitude in a dramatic form to accomplish the catharsis of emotions.

Applying this definition as the basis for the discussion of poetry in a part-whole analysis - as

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22 Ibid., p:xxix.
in the analysis of the universe in terms of its parts in 'De caelo' and in that of animals in terms of their parts in 'De partibus Animalium' - Aristotle considered poetic art in terms of the characteristics and interrelations of the six parts of tragedy, plot, character and thought (the objects of mimesis), diction and melody (the means of mimesis) and spectacle (the manner of mimesis).

The last four chapters of the 'Poetics' return to more general questions of value and to final causes by means of detailed comparisons of tragedy with comparable poetic works and specifically with the epic.

The 'Poetics', with its history, form and content is one of the first treatises of literary criticism, which still occupy an important place in the field of art criticism.