

IS *POETICS* 1447 b 9–23 A DIGRESSION?

Several commentators have found this passage to be a digression from the main thrust of the argument in chapter One of the *Poetics*¹). I wish to argue that this view is mistaken and that the passage actually has an integral relationship to the main theme of the chapter. In the first sentence of his treatise Aristotle expresses his intention to engage in a wide ranging and profound investigation of the essential nature of *ποίησις*. As the first step in this investigation he identifies a number of kinds of “poetry” (the English word does not in any way match the scope of the Greek term) as forms of *mimesis*. This identification of poetry with *mimesis* is of the greatest theoretical importance in the *Poetics*. In the first five chapters of the treatise significant implications of this doctrine are worked out in detail by Aristotle.

At 1447 a 13–18 Aristotle indicates the specific forms of *ποίησις* which he is discussing and then describes the three formal ways in which these and other poetic forms can be compared:

ἐποποιία δὴ καὶ ἡ τῆς τραγωδίας ποίησις ἔτι δὲ κωμωδία καὶ ἡ διθυραμβοποιητικὴ καὶ τῆς ἀθλητικῆς ἢ πλείστη καὶ κιθαριστικῆς πᾶσαι τυγχάνουσιν οὔσαι μιμήσεις τὸ σύνολον· διαφέρουσι δὲ ἀλλήλων τρισίν, ἢ γὰρ τῷ ἐν ἑτέροις μιμεῖσθαι ἢ τῷ ἕτερον ἢ τῷ ἑτέρως καὶ μὴ τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον.

Aristotle then concentrates on the different means used by various kinds of *ποίησις* to accomplish their mimetic function. No difficulties arise in regard to such commonly observed forms

1) I. Bywater, *Aristotle On the Art of Poetry* (Oxford, 1909) p. 108 shows a perceptive understanding of the meaning of this passage although he does not place it in the larger context of the general discussion of *mimesis* in the *Poetics* and thus calls it a digression. D. W. Lucas, *Aristotle Poetics* (Oxford, 1968) p. 59 characterizes the passage as a “digression on the naming of forms in terms of metre” and does not relate it to the general argument concerning *mimesis*. G. F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967) p. 40 also does not recognize the relationship of this passage to the general analysis of *mimesis*. He argues that this passage “is not on the same level as the preceding and does not carry Aristotle's main classification forward (that is resumed in b 23). Instead it is a footnote to ἀνώνυμος τυγχάνουσα”.

of *ποίησις* as painting, flute and lyre playing, and dancing. However, at 1447 a 28–b 9 Aristotle points out that there are some forms of *ποίησις* that had not received any commonly accepted name up to the time at which he was writing. It is at this point that the passage under discussion occurs which has been labeled digressive by several scholars. We now quote this passage, 1447 b 9–23, in full:

οὐδὲν γὰρ ἂν ἔχοιμεν ὀνομάσαι κοινὸν τοὺς Σώφρονος καὶ Ξενάρχου μίμους καὶ τοὺς Σωκρατικούς λόγους οὐδὲ εἴ τις διὰ τριμέτρων ἢ ἐλεγείων ἢ τῶν ἄλλων τινῶν τῶν τοιοῦτων ποιοῖτο τὴν μίμησιν. πλὴν οἱ ἄνθρωποι γε συνάπτοντες τῷ μέτρῳ τὸ ποιεῖν ἐλεγειοποιούς τοὺς δὲ ἐποιοιούς ὀνομάζουσιν, οὐχ ὡς κατὰ τὴν μίμησιν ποιητὰς ἀλλὰ κοινῇ κατὰ τὸ μέτρον προσαγορευόντες· καὶ γὰρ ἂν ἰατρικὸν ἢ φυσικὸν τι διὰ τῶν μέτρων ἐκφέρωσιν, οὕτω καλεῖν εἰώθασιν· οὐδὲν δὲ κοινὸν ἐστὶν Ὅμηρῳ καὶ Ἐμπεδοκλεῖ πλὴν τὸ μέτρον, διὸ τὸν μὲν ποιητὴν δίκαιον καλεῖν, τὸν δὲ φυσιολόγον μᾶλλον ἢ ποιητὴν· ὁμοίως δὲ κἂν εἴ τις ἅπαντα τὰ μέτρα μιγνύων ποιοῖτο τὴν μίμησιν καθάπερ Χαιρήμων ἐποίησε Κένταυρον μικτὴν ῥαμφιδίαν ἐξ ἁπάντων τῶν μέτρων, καὶ ποιητὴν προσαγορευτέον.

Aristotle first points out here that our theory of poetic *mimesis* is deficient because we do not have a suitable designation for such existing genres of imitation as mimes and Socratic dialogues nor for such a theoretically conceivable genre as one that would be achieved through such verse forms as trimeters or elegiacs.

This lack of a fully adequate nomenclature for the various kinds of *ποίησις* reminds Aristotle at this point of the naive practice of many people who consider poetry to be nothing more than the application of meter to words. With some outrage Aristotle notes that all these people do is to add the root of *τὸ ποιεῖν* to the name of a meter in order to establish a genre of *ποίησις*. In Aristotle's view this procedure is an extremely serious subversion of the authentic theory of *ποίησις*. At 1447 a 16 he has asserted that major branches of *ποίησις* are forms of *mimesis*. Here at 1447 b 15 he makes that doctrine even more fundamental and universal by asserting that poetry becomes poetry only by virtue of being *mimesis*. From this judgment he goes on to draw a very important conclusion at 1447 b 16–23:

καὶ γὰρ ἂν ἰατρικὸν ἢ φυσικὸν τι διὰ τῶν μέτρων ἐκφέρωσιν, οὕτω καλεῖν εἰώθασιν. οὐδὲν δὲ κοινὸν ἐστὶν Ὅμηρῳ καὶ Ἐμπεδοκλεῖ πλὴν τὸ μέτρον, διὸ τὸν μὲν ποιητὴν δίκαιον καλεῖν, τὸν δὲ φυσιολόγον μᾶλλον ἢ ποιητὴν· ὁμοίως δὲ κἂν εἴ τις ἅπαντα τὰ μέτρα μιγνύων

ποιούτο τὴν μίμησιν καθάπερ Χαιρήμων ἐποίησε Κένταυρον μικτὴν ῥαψωδίαν ἐξ ἀπάντων τῶν μέτρων, καὶ ποιητὴν προσαγορευτέον.

Aristotle points out that the publication of a medical or scientific work in meter does not alter the nature of that work and transform it into poetry. Only works that are essentially mimetic can be considered poetry and the concept of *mimesis* is the large, universal, and exclusive criterion that can be used to determine if any work legitimately belongs to the domain of *ποίησις*. Aristotle draws the further consequence here that if a poet like Chairemon achieves a legitimate *mimesis* by using an unusual medley of meters, he has, nevertheless, created a genuine work of poetry. It is *mimesis* which determines *ποίησις*.

Now at 1448 b 4–15 Aristotle explains further his doctrine of poetic *mimesis* as follows:

Ἐοίκασι δὲ γεννηῆσαι μὲν ὅλως τὴν ποιητικὴν αἰτία δύο τινές καὶ αὗται φυσικαί. τό τε γὰρ μιμεῖσθαι σύμφυτον τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἐκ παίδων ἐστὶ καὶ τούτῳ διαφέρουσι τῶν ἄλλων ζώων ὅτι μιμητικώτατόν ἐστι καὶ τὰς μαθήσεις ποιεῖται διὰ μιμήσεως τὰς πρώτας, καὶ τὸ χαίρειν τοῖς μιμήμασι πάντας. σημεῖον δὲ τούτου τὸ συμβαῖνον ἐπὶ τῶν ἔργων. ἃ γὰρ αὐτὰ λυπηρῶς ὁρῶμεν, τούτων τὰς εἰκόνας τὰς μάλιστα ἠκριβομένους χαίρομεν θεωροῦντες, οἷον θηρίων τε μορφῶν τῶν ἀτιμοτάτων καὶ νεκρῶν· αἴτιον δὲ καὶ τούτου, ὅτι μαθάνειν οὐ μόνον τοῖς φιλοσόφοις ἠδιστον ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ὁμοίως, ἀλλ' ἐπὶ βραχὺ κοινωνοῦσιν αὐτοῦ.

Here Aristotle tells us that poetic imitation is deeply rooted in a fundamental principle of human nature: the desire which all mankind has to learn and to understand. *ποίησις* provides the intense intellectual pleasure and fulfillment of *mimesis* at the highest level. Thus we see that 1447 b 9–23 is not at all a digression; it is rather a very relevant link in the systematic argument which Aristotle develops in the *Poetics* concerning the relationship between *ποίησις* and *mimesis*. At 1447 a 16 we are told that a number of branches of *ποίησις* are forms of *mimesis*; at 1447 b 9–23 this point is made more precise by Aristotle's affirmation that *mimesis* is the *essential* defining factor of *ποίησις* and not such accidental qualities as meter; and at 1448 b 4–15 the profound source, nature, and pleasure of artistic imitation are described for us. No part of this argument is digressive or immaterial; all of it contributes directly to the systematic analysis of poetic imitation in the *Poetics*.