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ARISTOTLE'S THEORY OF ART—A SKETCH

By AUSTIN S. GARVER

The better to get Aristotle's point of view and to understand the problem he set himself, we must remember the stage of Greek culture in his time. His date is the middle of the 4th century, B. C. (384-322). There was just closing behind him the greatest period of Greek culture and civilization. His life almost touched that of Socrates. He was the pupil and companion of Plato during the last twenty years of the life of that philosopher (368-348), and during the best years of his own life (from his 16th to 36th year).

In literature the great age lay immediately behind him. Sophocles and Euripides were only twenty years in their graves, and Aeschylus was as near to him as Abraham Lincoln is to us. He was enveloped by their living influence.

Sculpture had just passed its zenith. The Parthenon with its decorations by Phidias and his school, was still fresh, and gleamed over the city as the source of its greatest pride and glory. Names of great painters too appear, such as Polygnotus and Zeuxis, the former of whom had decorated the porch of the Parthenon with celebrated paintings.

That marvelous fifth century B. C. witnessed the highest triumphs of the Greek genius in every field of the creative imagination. In its scope and the quality of its achievement, there is nothing to be compared to it in history.

When Aristotle appeared it was past indeed, but its glory was still fresh. All this is worth recalling for the sake of seeing how favorable was the time for a general survey and summing up of this past experience. It is also of value as making clear to us what Aristotle set out to do. His was a keenly analytic mind. He had little interest in abstract discussions. His method was that of the scientist, to interrogate the facts and ascertain the truths to be drawn from them. His wide-ranging mind touched every field of human interest, and his writings are but the report of his observations and conclusions.

It was so in the field of art. He starts from the concrete facts. All the splendid fifth century achievement lies open before him. He appreciates its power and its charm. He

asks himself, what is the secret of its power and its charm. This is the question for which he seeks an answer, and in a way it is a simple question. We must not look upon him as the spinner of an abstract theory of aesthetics. He begins his inquiry at the other end. Here is a poem, a statue, a painting, why does it give us such delight, wherein does its greatness consist, and what is the cause of the powerful impression it produces? He studies the concrete example for the purpose of extracting the principle underlying and inherent in it. It is a modest, scientific way of going at the problem, and never was there a more auspicious time, or a mind so competent for such an inquiry.

Furthermore, in the Greek practice there was no such separation of art and artists as has created so much confusion in later times. There were many varieties of beautiful things, vases and other common domestic utensils, little figurines for children or graves, potters' work, and painters' work, and stone-carvers' work and builders' work, and the work of the physician and the teacher and the poet and the statesman;—one star differs from another star in glory, but they all together form one galaxy. Perhaps galaxy is too brilliant a word; company would be nearer the Greek idea. It would seem that the artist was not highly esteemed. Certainly he was not set apart as a class, much less a distinguished class. Our use of language would have been incomprehensible to a Greek. He would understand if you spoke of workmen in this or that material, in marble or clay or wood or bronze or color or even in language. The word "maker" would have been intelligible to him, but in his logical mind all "makers" would belong together, and the only distinction between them would be that of good and bad, and not at all that of the material in which they worked. Art naturally splits up into innumerable forms according to its object, its medium and its mode of expression, but the principle that unites all these forms is one and indivisible, and that is to be found in a relation to nature.

This large simplicity of view is shared by Aristotle. He knows nothing, for instance, of two distinct realms known as the fine and the useful arts. He distinguishes between them, it is true, but he never separates them. There are degrees of eminence which he recognizes, but there is no exclusion of any humble member from the family circle.

His all inclusive statement is that "art imitates nature," and whatever, high or low, comes within the scope of that definition as he interprets it, is art. As a matter of fact, he does bring within it pretty much all that man does, as daily

workman, as moral agent, as a political animal, or as a worshipper of the gods. Art, as revealed in the things that please and satisfy the instructed and fully developed man, is thus in one view a criticism of life and an approach to its innermost meaning.

The brief and somewhat fragmentary treatise on poetry contains his chief discussion of the subject. There are frequent references to it in his other works, but they are for the most part in the nature of casual observations. His completest statement is in the "Poetry," but even there it is far from complete. The work itself is imperfect, and, as the name implies, is concerned mainly with the Art of Poetry and especially with tragedy. But all the arts are included, with more or less particular mention, and united under one general principle.

Aristotle employs two great cardinal terms, which are central in his whole discussion, and which are as vital and significant now as when he first adopted and expanded them. The one is *κάθαρσις*, cleansing, to denote the effect of art, especially of tragedy; and with this I am not concerned in this paper; the other, no less pregnant with meaning, is *μίμησις*, imitation, to denote the origin or originating principle of all art, which I would attempt summarily to discuss.

At the very beginning of his work Aristotle states his thesis in these words: "Epic poetry and Tragedy, Comedy also and Dithyrambic poetry, and the music of the flute and of the lyre in most of their forms, are all in their general conception modes of imitation." In these arts the imitation is produced by rhythm, language and harmony. This is his general statement, but his thought is not limited to the subjects mentioned, for in the immediate context he speaks of those who imitate objects through the medium of color and form and the voice, referring to the arts of painting, sculpture and song. The point emphasized is that while *μίμησις* is the mark of every kind of Art, it must necessarily vary with the objects to be represented, the medium used and the mode of expression. For instance, in poetry the effect is produced by language and rhythm, in music by rhythm and harmony, and in dancing by rhythm alone, for character and emotion can be portrayed in all these ways. It is no narrow mechanical theory he has in mind; it is a view that takes into account the varied wonder of the whole world of art. It is based on the universal instinct of imitation, through whose exercise man learns his earliest lessons and experiences the liveliest pleasures. On this conception the foundation of art is as broad and deep as the nature of man and the nature of things.

Aristotle further illustrates the meaning and scope of artistic imitation, in what he says about imitating men in action. They are to be represented not merely as men, but as men possessed of certain qualities. There are higher and lower types. The artist's task is determined by these differences. He may represent men either as they are in actual life, or as worse than they are, which is the case in Comedy, or as better than they are, as is done by Homer, Polygnotus and Sophocles. The "better," as the cited exemplars would seem to show, is to be taken not strictly in a moral, but in an ideal sense, as meaning the nobler type moving in a field appropriate to it; an Antigone it might be, or fleet Achilles, or Orestes, or Othello. The artist is not confined to a single type, nor to a perfect type in his work. He may represent what he will, but his success and rank will depend less upon his subject than upon the idea by which his purpose is directed. Even when the subject is imperfect, it may be shown in its "better" and truer being, not by the exclusion of the imperfection, but by treating it as a constituent part of a nobler whole. The character is made whole and complete, and at the same time kept true to life by the artistic intention. This is the way any good man might regard his moral failings. In this way Achilles is portrayed by Homer.

Throughout Aristotle's whole discussion of Art, a certain conception of nature, the object of imitation, is implicit. In Plato, God is the divine artist; the idea is a familiar one in Greek thought, and the universe as declaring the divine intention is a divine poem, not yet completed. Aristotle discovers this intention in nature and feels no need of going back of what he finds there. Without going into detail, nature is something more than its material part; in its essence it is a purpose, an urgency towards a goal, a struggle with rebellious matter, a creative force working towards a more perfect end than is yet visible except to the discerning mind. The artist follows this inner tendency of nature, and in the mimic world which he builds, he brings it to completion.

This principle is seen to hold even in the useful arts. Modern medicine has made us familiar with the idea of the deeper self which makes for wholeness and happiness; below all surface symptoms are these old life currents, moving ever in the direction of health. But this movement may be checked or diverted so that the end which nature has in view is not reached and we are sick. Now the art of the physician will consist mainly in his co-operation with the intention of nature, by removing the obstructions caused by fears and worries as well as physical defect, which prevent her free operation. The

best the physician can do is to give nature a chance and free her hand. For nature cannot realize her latent powers, unless she has suitable materials to work with, and the things that clog her steps are overcome. So it is that the art of the gardener aids the effort of the soil to produce plant life. So with all the practical arts. Even on these lower levels there is a certain *μίμησις* in man's struggle to supply his needs. Thus the escape of steam from a teakettle might suggest to the imaginative mind of a Watt an idea that would recreate the world. Such intimations are to be found everywhere. Nature gives the flint, art sharpens the edge and then proceeds to create the perfect tool. Nature furnishes the shelter of a cave, art isolates the cave, inserts windows and constructs a house. Nature makes a little hollow in the soft clay and fills it with water, art lifts the rude cup out of the detaining mass and places it in the hand after shaping it for a hundred uses.

In the higher ranges of art this fundamental principle is more clearly seen. Where the object of imitation is a definite object or a particular character, the work of the artist is not merely or mainly to hold the mirror up to nature to get a reflection of it in its actual appearance; for, as has been stated, there is more to nature than sense can report. It is an energy as well as an appearance and it does not work in vain. There is something here akin to our thought of evolution. Nature has an end in view which is "better" than the present reality. And this imminent intention of nature, which is perceived by the mind, becomes the "true idea" or ideal which is the object of the highest artistic imitation. It is the artist's privilege, therefore, and his greatest achievement to imitate things not as they are, but as they ought to be "according to a true idea."

The best instances of this are to be seen in the representations of character in the drama. A briefer illustration will serve to make the point clear. In painting a horse, the artist may paint the individual before him down to the minutest particular like a Preraphaelite, resulting in a more or less faithful copy; or dissatisfied with a bare realism he may veer to the other extreme and give you a fanciful picture which the foolish will call an ideal horse. But if he have the discerning mind he will proceed from the idea formed there of the horse in his essential attributes, and will do what Donatello did in his Gattamelata, or Phidias on the frieze of the Parthenon. There you have the immortal breed, real but not literal, only clothed with the highest reality.

When, therefore, Aristotle declares that art is the *μίμησις* or imitation of nature, he is far from meaning that the artist

is a copyist or mimic as our equivalent English term might seem to imply. Taking as his starting point the impressions and suggestions of nature, he forms an ideal towards which they point and in which their law is fulfilled; and his function is to give this ideal its fullest possible expression. From these sense impressions, as Shelley says,

“create he can
Forms more real than living Man,
Nurslings of Immortality.”

Better than further exposition, let me cite a modern instance described in the recent volume “Artist and Public,” by the eminent critic and painter, Kenyon Cox. He is considering Millet’s famous “Sower” in the Metropolitan Museum, a work as simple, severe and intellectual as the classic examples which Aristotle analyzed; and exhibits the qualities on which he laid emphasis. It has the special interest that in it we catch a supreme artist at work, and can observe his method. One can imagine what an ordinary painter would do with such a subject—the pleasant field with its many interesting details, the peasant dressed for the occasion so as to be presentable and attractive: a picture more or less pleasing, more or less faithful to a given model of a man sowing.

Many of Millet’s preliminary drawings and studies exist, and it is possible to trace the process by which the final result was arrived at. The everyday incident was his starting-point. It was there his imitation began, but it did not stop there. The idea in passing through his mind took on a larger significance. “At first we have merely a peasant sowing grain. Gradually the background is cut down, the space restricted, the figure enlarged until it fills its frame as a metope of the Parthenon is filled. The gesture is ever enlarged and given more sweep and majesty, the silhouette is simplified and divested of all accidental or insignificant detail. A thousand previous observations are compared and resumed in one general and comprehensive formula, and the typical has been evolved from the actual. We have no longer a man sowing, but ‘The Sower,’ justifying the title he instinctively gave it by its air of permanence, of inevitability, of universality. All the significance which there is or ever has been for mankind in that primeval action of sowing the seed is crystallized into its necessary expression.” Millet starting from the actual, but never content with the shows of things, penetrates deeper till he reaches the essential and universal. That is the supreme mark of all his work. Both in the simpler and grander scenes, he creates great and inevitable types of what Aristotle calls the highest object of imitation—“men in action.”

Such an illustration brings us very near to the heart of Aristotle's doctrine of *μίμησις*. It shows us how profound is the meaning of the term, and helps us to understand that "imitative art in its highest form is the expression of the universal element in human life."

We see then what the ideal would mean in this view of fine art. It is not something opposed to the real, or something better and prettier than the real, like the sentimental Madonnas of Guido Reni, or the sleek figures that not long ago passed for praiseworthy sculpture. The ideal is the real carried out to its full conclusion; it is the form which the ideas that are never completely manifest in the original, would naturally take if hindering conditions were removed. It is the representation of things, actions, passions, character in a word, "as they ought to be," and this "ought to be" is discovered by the intellectual divination of what is natural and necessary in the given circumstances. The artist is the maker, and it is his business to make man after the image of his own creative mind, to body him forth in his essential being, stripped of the disguise of what is temporary and accidental, until the *real* man, not transformed or "idealized," but liberated, alone is left for contemplation. That is why the artistic spectacle of life is so much more powerful to awaken emotion than any actual scene. It is a consistent, simplified whole, kept true to reality by the principle of imitation, yet unified, controlled and interpreted by the logical understanding. That is the ideal, the supreme achievement of the human mind, and the product of the highest creative genius.

It is never out of order to recall the clear and sane teaching of one whom Dante calls "the master of those who know;" especially in a time when the lights seem to have gone out, and art has become an experiment, and its secret is so often sought in fancies and schemes and formulas. It is well to be reminded on such authority that in its vast scope and variety, art in its fundamental meaning is one, not divisible except in a model way into the two unrelated departments of the fine and useful. The neglect of Aristotle's wholesome teaching has had a tendency to give us a denatured art, and has made so much modern criticism a dialect for studios and exhibitions, and much modern practice so full of vagaries, and so scornful of guiding principles.

We need not conclude that Aristotle has given the final and complete theory of art; important phases of the subject did not appear till long after his day. But he has left a body of doctrine of such value that it can never be forgotten or neglected without grievous loss. He died long ago, but his word is still

modern. All the great art since his day has been based on the principles then first clearly stated. Consciously or unconsciously, the great workers in art have obeyed the law, of which, if he was not the first discoverer, he was the first scientific investigator and interpreter.