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Poetics as Composition of Events

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ABSTRACT

The paper argues that Aristotle's *Poetics* reveals a unique view of art or poetic creation as a realm closely intertwined with the rest of the domains of human cognitive and creative practices such as philosophy, science, technology all stemming from the centrality of the notion of *technē*. In order to access the notion of *technē* in a way that allows for the propositions made here, one has to endorse the trajectory of reading Aristotle's text through the prism of the concept of *systasis* (of elements) as the definition of tragedy, an argument put forward in a daring and illuminating way more almost 70 years ago by the Macedonian classical philologist, Mihail D. Petruševski.

Key words: technē, technology, art, artificiality, structuralism, mimēsis and cognition

In the third decade of the 21st century, Aristotle's *Poetics*¹ is one of the most quoted and influential philosophical treatises dealing with the definition of the artistic (creativity) or seeking to respond to the question "What constitutes arts." A different and more classical way to pose the same question is – what is poetics? In addressing this question, Aristotle chose to apply it on what he estimated to be the most superb or accomplished form of art – tragedy. In doing so, the tra-

¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 23, translated by W.H. Fyfe, Harvard University Press – William Heinemann Ltd., Cambridge, MA – London, 1932. *Poetics* is available at Perseus Tufts Project URL <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0056>, accessed on 1 October 2022. The Greek original used here is *Aristotelis De Arte Poetica Liber*, ed. R. Kassel, Clarendon Press Oxford, 1966, available at Perseus Tufts Project URL <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0055>, accessed on 25 September 2022.

dition teaches us, Aristotle supposedly argued that tragedy – or any worth work of art – should produce *catharsis*, purification of emotions, passions (possibly of a pathological kind).

In these times, when scientific advancements in the study of languages, stemming from the structuralist tradition established by Ferdinand de Saussure, are opening endless possibilities for artificial intelligence while esthetics and technology merge, we are invited to dwell on the question of *technē* in Aristotle, but also on that of structure. Without the interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics* preferred by Mihail Petruševski in the mid-20th century, and his redefining of the essence of tragedy and, thus, of poetics, as "composition" rather than "catharsis", we would not be able to propose the thesis about the link with Saussure's notion of structure. Aristotle's language is rid of moralism and pompous praise, void of ideologization or its ancient equivalent, or of any effort to impose a certain finite value system. Poetics has defining properties that are more related to scientific thought and expression than philosophical, at least in the continental sense of the word. The view of these properties of the text is made possible by the shedding of light on its constitutive core by the reading and translation venture of Mihail Petruševski. Petruševski's heuristic and paleographic-philosophical product boils down to a revolutionary solution in translating and interpreting the original of the definition of tragedy. Instead of the psychological state of catharsis, at the heart of Aristotle's definition of tragedy, Petruševski sees the composition of events or rather "things" or elements – *σύστασις τῶν πραγμάτων* [systasis tōn pragmatōn].²

The concept of *technē*, which is one of the central terms in Aristotle's discussion of what the moderns call "art" today is an examination of the poetic technique, craft, craftsmanship. In our 21st century, predominantly post-idealist context, it might resonate as debasing to art – creation is reduced to craft, no different than that of any other skill of human creation, even the most banal one (plumbing, for example?). But did Aristotle think any form of *technē* as inferior to what can be put in proximity of philosophy (also as a form of human existence)? I argue the opposite: my examinations of his *Rhetoric*, *The Organon*, *Metaphysics*, necessary for a book I am co-authoring with two colleagues from the UK on the topic of materialism in philosophy, sciences and computing, show that it is a term Aristotle uses to describe a valid logical or scientific (philosophical) reasoning. But it is also the other way around, in *Poetics* itself Aristotle argues that in the craft of the arts, or for that matter in any form of craft, we see at work the ability to detect something we will tentatively call structure and, by doing so, abstract it from its material foundation. Having begun our discussion here with an examination of the status of *technē* in Aristotle's treatise, I will argue that Aristotle's *Poetics* is a purely formal execution of an argument, laying out the elements and the principles of how the poetic craft is crafted – how art comes to being. It comes to

² Petruševski 1954, 229-231, 234-235.

being as a structure in a way, an organizational unity which “comes to life” by the workings of its elements according to particular inherent laws. It “lives” as a living organism, it brings forth lively emotions (passions in the etymological sense or as Spinoza used the term)³ or contemplation, it moves the human psyche (or mind, if you will), and yet the coming to being of art – or tragedy, more specifically – is dismantled in order to study its mechanisms as the only way of explaining how it operates as an organic whole. The method resembles, I argue, Saussure’s approach to language whereby the utmost banal mechanicity (phonetic or otherwise) is not only in no contradiction with the organic self-development and branching out of language, and the sensation of it being naturally flowing in use, but rather explains these very possibilities.⁴

Aristotle’s core of the argument as to what constitutes tragedy, and thereof art/poesis in all its forms, does not lie in the dialectics of emotions (and morals) culminating in catharsis but in what he calls systasis – the “standing together” – of the elements of the tragedy that consist of movement and change (drama, in its etymological sense), i.e., of that which happens, of “events.” According to the classical interpretation of the *Poetics*, the essence of tragedy is catharsis (*παθημάτων κάθαρσιν* [pathēmatōn katharsin]), and that section of the text 1449b21-28 is what is habitually treated as “the definition of tragedy.” On the other hand, there is recurring reference to *ἡ τῶν πραγμάτων σύστασις* [hē tōn pragmatōn systasis], or the “systasis of deeds” (or of things, elements) as the ousia, the true being, substance or essence of tragedy, namely in the following parts of the *Poetics*: 1450a15, a32, b22, 1452a19, 1453a3, 1453a23, 1453a31, 1453b2, 1454a14, 1454a34, 1459b21 и 1460a3. One of the leading classical philologists of what was then Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, Mihail Petruševski, challenged the canonical interpretation by offering a dissident paleographic analysis of the original arguing that by medieval times an error in writing has appeared and the place which should read *τῶν πραγμάτων σύστασις* [tōn pragmatōn systasis] was erroneously reconstructed as *παθημάτων κάθαρσιν* [pathēmatōn katharsin]. The dissident interpretation is presented in Petruševski’s translation of Aristotle’s *Poetics* into Macedonian following an elaboration of the discovery published in Macedonian at length and summarized in French in perhaps the most prestigious Yugoslav journal of classical philology of the time *Antiquité Vivante* (1954).

The “definition” of tragedy according to which the essence of the tragic is catharsis imposed as authoritative thanks to the canon of interpretation beginning with the Renaissance period and relying on a particular script or rather a copy (of an older scroll) of *Poetics*. The words “catharsis of passions” are misspelled on

³ Spinoza, Benedict de (2003), *The Ethics*, translated by R. H. M. Elwes, The Project Gutenberg Etext Publication, available at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3800/3800-h/3800-h.htm>, accessed on 7 October 2022.

⁴ Kolozova 2019, 55-88.

the damaged and illegible place in the text, according to Petruševski.⁵ The classical interpretative solution is at odds with the other parts of the text that define tragedy or the work of art as *systasis* or composition of the elements or things or events, Petruševski claims. It is also at odds with *Poetics*' basic intentions in attempting to respond to Plato's *Phaedrus* 268c-d.

The term *πραγμάτων σύστασις* [*pragmatōn systasis*] is created by Aristotle and expected to express the fundamental difference in the understanding that tragedy is not just about "expressions" but above all about "acting" (the Greek word drama means nothing but "action"); that in poetry, especially in great poems, such as epic poetry, tragedy and comedy, composition of events [elements] is the most important (*ἡ τῶν πραγμάτων σύστασις* [*hē tōn pragmatōn systasis*]).⁶

Thus, thanks to a poor philosophical and philological reconstruction of a damaged place in the manuscript, the only place in the text in which the word *catharsis* is mentioned (1449b21–28) has become the "definition" itself of tragedy (and, for that matter, of any work of art). Despite several places in the text that make up definitions of tragedy, these few lines in the text and word sequence "catharsis of passions" have acquired the status of a "definition", and paradoxically so, i.e., precisely because they are the exception. The isolated lyrical take on the definition, where the use of the term *catharsis* appears, has acquired the status of a "mystery" that philosophers seek to unravel and bring forth the "truth" behind it. It seems that its lonely place in the text, rather than interpreted as a deviation from the consistency of argumentation, brings a dimension of redundancy (of the status of mere noise) that calls for equally treating as redundant most of the classical philosophical interpretations.

Meanwhile, the simple question remains: is the intervention in the manuscript (the transcript of *Poetics*), whose authority is solidified in the Renaissance although (as later established) dates back to the 12th century, supported by the overall argument of the text? But in order to raise such a question, it is necessary to break the totem-like status of the word "catharsis" we find in the two most authoritative manuscripts (transcriptions) of *Poetics*, Riccardianus 46 and Parisinus 1741, solidified by the notion's centuries-old romanticization by literary scholars and philosophers.

Poetics contains multiple definitions of tragedy. The place 1449a21–28 is not marked by anything indicating that this "definition" (a descriptive passage) is more substantive, more basic or that it is the determination in the last instance of tragedy (and, for that matter, all poetics). Unlike the isolated appearance of the term *catharsis* in 1449b21–28, the syntagma "composition of elements (or: of things and events)"

⁵ Petruševski 1954, 229-231, 234-235. Petruševski's argument draws on a prior analysis offered by Heinrich Otte, *Kennt Aristoteles die sogenannte tragische Katharsis*, Weidmann, Berlin 1912.

⁶ By Mihail Petruševski's "Introduction" to *Poetics* by Aristotle: see Aristotle, *Poetics*, translation Mihail D. Petruševski, Kultura, Skopje 1990, s.p. My translation of the Macedonian original.

[*systasis tōn pragmatōn*] appears in following places: 1450a15, a32, b22, 1452a19, 1453a3, 1453a23, 1453a31, 1453b2, 1454a14, 1454a34, 1459b21 and 1460a3.

What is special about Petruševski's translation, and his interpretation of the text, is that it is about reading faithfully – truthfully to the letter, literally as in exact exegesis – the text itself, in search of its structural rules and paths/routes of inference making, without imposing a pre-conceived idea of the interpreter as to “what the truth of tragedy should be”. For Aristotle, the structure or composition of the elements (or events) is the definition in the ultimate instance of what constitutes the tragic.

The most important of all (these parts) is the composition of events, because tragedy is the emulation [miming, my intervention] of not people but of actions and life, and happy and unfortunate, and happiness and misfortune consists in action, and the goal is some action and not a state (quality); why people are, by their character, like this or that, and, according to the actions, fortunate or the opposite. (1450a15ff)⁷

The ratio of the parts and rules of their "shaping a single whole" is what Aristotle deals within his *Poetics*. Possessing the quality of constituting a single whole and the degree of its perfection are what makes a tragedy good or bad.

“It (tragedy) is miming of action, and through it, of course, of the characters as well,” Aristotle (1450b1–5) says, quickly adding: “Character is, by the way, such a thing that reveals intent, disclosing what someone seeks [...]” (1450b5-10)

Feelings and thoughts are important if they are in service of the composition (*systasis*) of the elements or events (*pragmatōn*), i.e., if they reflect character (1450b10–15) the latter being in service of unveiling intent and thus leading to events. Fear and regret are the basic feelings in tragedy, indispensable ingredients in the art form of tragedy. They are constituents of knowledge that stem from the imitation (*mimēsis* or miming) of life seen “seriously” (as opposed to comedy).

What makes a particular action poetic (artistic) is the procedure of imitating or miming (executing *mimēsis*) of reality. A certain art equates to a certain form of reality from the point of view of the sensory abilities on which it relies (artistic, musical, etc.). This means that materiality is embedded in the realm of idea or form and vice versa, which is consistent with Aristotle's view on this issue explained in its *Metaphysics*. Tragedy – or drama – puts all forms of sensitivity – or simply, all the senses – into operation and, thus, is a complete imitation of *reality*. The action or drama, that which moves tragedy, consists of a fall from happiness or fortune into accident, both in the sense of incident as well as in the sense of affliction, misfortune, and vice versa.

⁷Please note that the quotes are my translation of Petruševski's Macedonian translation of the text, executed against the background of the Greek original. I am discussing this in my Postface to the 2015 reedition of Petruševski's translation in the Macedonian of Aristotle's *Poetics* (full reference in Bibliography).

Consequently, the essence of mimesis in tragedy is a) emulation or recreation of life in its entirety, b) creating a sense of wholeness which consists in imitating an action that has “a beginning and an end” or an action that makes sense. Translated into modern philosophical language, the latter refers to a dialectical understanding of reality. Elizabeth Belfiore in her work *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion*,⁸ forty years after the publication of Petruševski's study on the centrality of the composition of events or elements, through a careful discourse analysis of Aristotle's text, arrives at a similar conclusion to that of Petruševski. Given that Belfiore, apparently, does not know of Petruševski's philological exegesis, the concept of catharsis is analyzed as an instance of knowledge and not of feelings, notably as a product of the composition of elements or its aspect. Belfiore's study belongs to the contemporary interdisciplinary studies of antiquity and reminds us of the method of Jean Pierre Vernant's school of thought.

Furthermore, Petruševski's analysis underlines Aristotle's known consistency and thus removes the superfluous dichotomy between composition and catharsis. “The whole” that is subject to mimesis holds the status of *causa finalis* of the work of art, and the “intertwining of the elements” is meant to cause grief and fear. If tragedy emulates the totality of human life, then its purpose betrays an understanding of human reality as marked, in its essence, by suffering and death. This sort of underlying philosophy is, in fact, in line with the Homeric belief system as we find it in epic poetry, but also in the lyric poetry, as well as in Hesiod's *Works and Days*.

If the roots of tragedy really lie in the Eleusinian Mysteries, as some argue,⁹ and if tragedy inherits their idea of the resurrection of the mortal god, it is noteworthy to state the fact that there is neither resurrection nor comfort in tragedy. To affirm death and misery, to affirm the senselessness at the heart of humanity's misfortune (the fall due to a tragic mistake) is to affirm mortality and human imperfection. Thus, the truth about humanity as defined by its mortality and imperfection is affirmed. Thereby, the truth about humanity as defined by its finitude as opposed to the immortality and perfection of gods is underscored.

Knowledge by imitation causes satisfaction, Aristotle says. Satisfaction comes from the revelation about the dynamism of reality, i.e., its dialectical nature, but also from recognizing its tragic essence. The turnaround (contrary to what is expected) and recognition are states of knowledge, and they are the most important factors of the successful composition of events. (Cf. 1450a30-35)

Art (poetic) work and, primarily, total artwork, i.e., tragedy, as a mixture of the fullness of human life in terms of dialectics and purpose (*causa finalis*), should rely on the logic of “possible by probability or necessity” (1451a35–40). It should not be

⁸ Elizabeth Belfiore, *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion*, Princeton University Press, 2014.

⁹ Vernant – Vidal-Naquet 1990, 386-412.

a description of what happened but the discovery of the underlying conditions or inherent laws under which things could occur. The state in which tragedy brings us is transcendental in the final instance, despite the mimetic dimension that is immanently related to material reality and the senses.

What has been said so far clearly shows that the poet's work does not consist in saying what happened, but how something could happen and what is possible in order of probability or necessity. (1451a35-40)

According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the poet's work does not seem to be very different from that of the philosopher and the scientist: they discover the laws of reality of human life's experiences, within the circle of a lifepath understood as determined by its mortality (according to Homeric tradition and religiosity, not philosophically).

Recreating reality according to the possible is what makes poetry or poesis (art), primarily dramatic, different from philosophy or science. The recreation of bodily and material reality produces *wonder(ing)* (θαύμα [thauma], which, according to Plato, is the starting point of any reflection on the essences of reality or of "theorizing". In fact, this is the only product of mental processes that represents the simultaneous recreation of reality and the creation of truth (for it). Perhaps that is why, because of the boundary position between reality and mental processes, there is something in art that always remains inaccessible to thought.

Despite the unreachable remnant just discussed, in his *Poetics*, as Mihail Petruševski's reading reveals, Aristotle manages to explain the core of the tragic and of *poiēsis* (artistic creation) through a formal and rigorous procedure of thought. Aristotle's procedure or execution of the argument can be likened to that of 20th century structuralism in the humanities, in particular in linguistics. As for the contents itself, the philosophical and moral message a work of art should contain, Aristotle chooses not to say anything of it. Taking into consideration that he does not make any decision as to what the reality or the truth of poetics might be, he does not posit it semantically, does not ascribe any "truth" as to what tragedy represents, but rather excavates its regularities and inner rules of composition and organization, Aristotle's text on the poetic reads more as scientific than philosophical.

To be able to read Aristotle in this way is premised, to a large extent, on precisely the illuminative philological and philosophical analysis of the text proffered by Mihail Petruševski's.

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