

ARISTOTLE ON THE PHILOSOPHICAL NATURE OF POETRY

I. POET AND HISTORIAN

In *Poetics* chapter 9, Aristotle claims that the poet's function differs from the historian's. The historian should describe what has happened, but the poet should say 'what sorts of thing might happen, that is, the things possible according to likelihood or necessity' (1451a36–8).¹ The difference is not between fiction and non-fiction. Some past events happened according to likelihood and are thereby candidates for poetic representation (1451b29–32). Rather, the poet differs from the historian with respect to the level of abstraction at which he considers the actions and experiences of agents. The historian should engage in accurate and thorough *ιστορία*—'research' or 'fact-gathering'—by carefully recording his or others' observations of particular events.² The poet, on the other hand, looks for causal relations among fictional or non-fictional events, for he cares whether his composition has a plot with events that happen *because* of other events and not merely *after* them (cf. 1452a20–1). The poet may discern in the historian's materials some causally related events fit for dramatic or epic representation, but that is not the historian's concern. As Aristotle says in chapter 23, the historian should report 'whatever befell one or more people during a particular period of time, each of the events relating to the others by chance' (1459a23–4). The last clause is an overstatement; we have just noticed Aristotle's admission that some past events were likely to happen. Also, he elsewhere says that 'future events will for the most part be like past events', presumably because they share a similar causal structure (*Rh.* 1394a8).³ The remark's point is clear enough, though: the historian should report what happened whether or not the events exhibit explanatory coherence.⁴

If that is Aristotle's general view of the historian's job, his view of the poet's still needs explication, especially in light of another famous remark in *Poetics* 9:

T1: That is why poetry is more philosophical than, and superior to, history—for poetry tends to speak of universals, but history particulars. (1451b5–7)

That poetry 'tends to speak of universals' is meant to explain why it is more philosophical than history. Because T1 immediately follows Aristotle's reiteration that the poet 'describes the sorts of thing that might happen' (1451b5), we can see that both 'speaking of universals' and 'describing what might happen' are used to explain poetry's philosophical nature. However, to understand the relation between

¹ Translations from the Oxford Classical Texts are my own. Abbreviations of the titles of Aristotle's works are from H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones (edd.), *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1940; 9th edn, repr. 1992), p. xix.

² Aristotle's concern for accuracy appears in his criticism of Herodotus at *H.A.* 523a15; cf. Herodotus III.101.

³ Aristotle compares the aggression of past Persian kings with what to expect from the present Persian king (*Rh.* 1393a32–b4).

⁴ How could Aristotle seem to have got Herodotus, his sample historian, so wrong (cf. 1451b2–4)? Herodotus tells stories, after all. Unfortunately, Aristotle's remarks on historiography are scant, but we can hazard a response based on the difference of function (*ἔργον*, 1451a37): the historian's is to make an accurate report. If he also aims to tell a good story, he functions as a poet.

universals and 'what might happen', and how either makes poetry philosophical, we must understand what sort of universal and particular is being spoken of in T1. I argue that once we grasp the nature of Aristotle's poetic universals, we not only better understand the philosophical nature of poetry, we also gain insight into Aristotle's view of the metaphysical structure of literary representations. After brief explanations of some key terms in T1, I argue that the universals of T1 are types of events or, more specifically, types of actions, and that T1's particulars are event- or action-tokens. As a special kind of event- or action-type, the poetic universal is the same as the structure of incidents in a literary representation, a structure which Aristotle calls a *μῦθος* or 'plot'. In conclusion, I explain how these action-types function in Aristotle's theory of mimesis.

II. POETRY, PHILOSOPHY, AND SUPERIORITY

In chapter 9, Aristotle seems to use the term 'poetry' only for dramatic and epic compositions, but at the beginning of the *Poetics* he includes much more. He says that poetic works differ from other compositions by being mimetic, by 'representing' things. Among the objects of representation are the characters, experiences, and actions of agents (1447a27). These may be represented in a variety of media, including not only literary compositions, but painting, music, and dance (1447a13–28). The bulk of the *Poetics* centres on tragedy, however, and T1 appears in the middle of the discussion of tragedy extending from chapter 6 to chapter 22. It is reasonable to assume, then, that tragedy is the form of poetry being compared with history in T1. As it turns out, however, the universal that makes tragedy more philosophical than history is also necessary for good epic and comedy.⁵

The term 'more philosophical' (*φιλοσοφώτερον*) here means 'involving more understanding'. Aristotle's broad conception of philosophy is simply that of knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη*) of the truth,⁶ and he sometimes speaks of knowledge as including not only theoretical sciences but applied skills (*τέχναι*).⁷ It is in this sense that Aristotle, at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*, contrasts knowledge and skill with mere experience: knowledge and skill involve the grasp of universals generated from the experience of similar particulars (981a5–6). Grasp of the universal enables the person with knowledge or skill to understand, with respect to her field, the reasons why things are the way they are or why tasks ought to be done in a certain way, and consequently allows her to teach the same to others (981a29–b10). Since Aristotle thinks that poetry is a skill (*Po.* 1450b20), he must think that the poet grasps a certain subject. It remains to be seen what that subject is.

'Superior' renders the comparative adjective *σπουδαιότερον*. Aristotle frequently uses the positive *σπουδαῖος* to predicate excellence or goodness of various things because the noun *ἀρετή* lacks an adjectival form (*Cat.* 10b5–9). Among the things Aristotle sometimes calls *σπουδαῖος* are human beings, states of character, people with skills, actions, laws, lives, friends, activities, and the faculty of perception and its objects.⁸ When used in this sense, it contrasts with *φάυλος* or 'base' (*Top.* 109b38).

⁵ Indeed, even in chapter 9 comedy is used as an example of composing at the level of the universal instead of the particular (1451b8–15).

⁶ *Metaph.* 993b19–20; cf. *Top.* 105b30–1. This contrasts with Aristotle's narrow conception of philosophy as the science of being *qua* being (*Metaph.* IV).

⁷ *E.N.* 1094a28, *Top.* 111a37–8.

⁸ *E.N.* 1099a23, 1146a15, 1098a9, 12, 14, 1137b4, 5, 10, 1152a21; *Top.* 152a8, 9, 28; *E.N.* 1170b19, 1176b19, 1174b22, 25.

However, *σπουδαῖος* can also mean ‘serious’ and be contrasted with the comical or amusing (*E.N.* 1177a3, 5). In the *Poetics*, both senses appear. Aristotle says that tragedians and epic poets represent ‘good’ agents, but comedians represent ‘base’ agents (1448a2, 16–18, 27). The semantic connection between goodness and seriousness is close to the surface in this passage.⁹ At two places in the *Poetics*, however, *σπουδαῖος* rather unambiguously means ‘good’: tragedies themselves can be good or bad (1449b17), and something done or something said can be good or bad (1461a6). On the other hand, the verb *σπουδάζεσθαι* also appears in the *Poetics* and in its context rather unambiguously means ‘to be taken seriously’ (1449b1). Translators often employ this sense of the word when rendering *σπουδαιότερον* in T1, but this is a mistake.¹⁰ To see this, consider Aristotle’s discussion in the *Rhetoric* of arguments about the comparative value of two things. He claims that as a science is more fine and excellent (*σπουδαιότερα*), so its object is more fine and excellent. For ‘as the science is, so is its truth’ (*Rh.* 1364b7–9).¹¹ This clear instance of the comparative adjective being predicated of a science parallels its being predicated of the poet’s skill in T1. Like the comparison of sciences in the *Rhetoric* passage, the comparison of poetry with history in T1 is made on the basis of how excellent they are—meaning, presumably, that composing good drama or epic requires more understanding, more grasp of relations among universals, than does reporting on past events.

III. RIVAL INTERPRETATIONS

What is the nature of T1’s universals (*τὰ καθόλου*) and particulars (*τὰ καθ’ ἕκαστον*)? We may think of the division of beings in *de Interpretatione* chapter 7 where Aristotle says, ‘By “universal” I mean that which by its nature is predicated of many things, and by “particular” that which is not. For example, “human being” is of the universals but Callias is of the particulars’ (17a38–b1). Bywater, Gudeman, and Janko all refer to this passage in their comments on the text of T1.¹² Bywater and Gudeman seem to offer it as support for understanding the universals and particulars of T1 to be individuals such as human beings and their properties, for example, Socrates and ‘pale’. Janko offers it as the ‘true philosophical definition’ of ‘universal’ and ‘particular’ as opposed to what he takes to be the indefinite examples in the passage immediately after T1. Halliwell does not explicitly cite the *de Interpretatione* passage, but he seems to have something like it in mind when he says that universals ‘are the general categories and concepts used to understand and describe the world’.¹³ Let us call the view of universals and particulars behind these interpretations of T1 the Individuals and Their Properties View (ITP).

Another approach to the universals of T1 takes them to be a sort of truth. Halliwell elsewhere claims that these universals are ‘philosophical propositions of general (or

⁹ The close connection also appears at 1448b34 (read in the context of 1448b24–27), 1449b10, and 1449b24.

¹⁰ See, for example, R. Janko (trans.), *Aristotle, Poetics* (Indianapolis, 1987), p. 12, and S. Halliwell (trans.), *The Poetics of Aristotle* (Chapel Hill, 1987), p. 41.

¹¹ Besides the greater excellence of the objects of a science, *de Anima* 402a1–3 claims that the marvellousness of a science’s object and the greater precision of a science in investigating its object are also reasons for holding one science to be more fine and honourable than another.

¹² I. Bywater, *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry* (Oxford, 1909), p. 189; A. Gudeman, *Aristoteles Poetik* (Berlin/Leipzig, 1934), p. 207; Janko (n. 10), p. 92.

¹³ Halliwell (n. 10), p. 106.

probable) validity'.¹⁴ Woodruff most often speaks of them as 'universal truths' such as the theme of Plato's *Phaedo* that 'death is nothing to a philosopher'.¹⁵ Lucas thinks that the universals in question 'raise all the great questions about pain and suffering and justice and the nature of the world in which the tragic event is allowed to happen'.¹⁶ He offers no other hint about the nature of these universals except that they are 'general truths'.¹⁷ Butcher suggests that the universals in poetry are general truths about human nature,¹⁸ and Else was perhaps thinking something similar when he claimed that they are 'general principles' of the practical sciences.¹⁹ Heath also suggests that the universals involve 'general principles'.²⁰ Let us call this the Thematic View.

The view I defend takes the relevant universals to be event-types and the relevant particulars to be event-tokens. Woodruff may have had something like it in mind when he claimed that the universals of T1 are 'universal types of events'.²¹ Other than Woodruff's brief suggestion, this view is developed nowhere in the secondary literature that I know of. I shall argue for this third, Events View after arguing against its rivals.

The ITP and Thematic Views should be rejected because they do not fit Aristotle's own explication of the relevant universals and particulars. Immediately after the text of T1, he writes:

T2: A universal is the sorts of thing that a certain sort of person happens to say or do according to likelihood or necessity, which is what poetry aims at, although names [of characters] are added. A particular, on the other hand, is what Alcibiades did or what he experienced. (1451b8–11)

A cursory reading might take this universal to be a sort (singular) of saying or doing such as a kind of exclamation or a kind of after-dinner activity.²² Instead we find Aristotle saying that the poetic universal is sorts (plural) of sayings or doings—a claim whose grammar grates on the ear but whose substance needs explanation. How can several types of saying or doing be one universal? Also, the particular mentioned in T2 is not simply Alcibiades, but 'what Alcibiades did or what he experienced'—

¹⁴ S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London, 1986), p. 106. Although Halliwell in a later article says that poetic universals are not 'straightforwardly formulable moral truths' ('Pleasure, understanding, and emotion in Aristotle's *Poetics*', in A. O. Rorty [ed.], *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* [Princeton, 1992], pp. 241–60, at p. 251). In the same article he also denies that they are 'abstractions' (p. 249), saying, 'The poet does not deal in abstracted universals, as the philosopher does' (p. 250). But while poets and philosophers do not deal with universals in the same way, for example, poets do not attempt definitions of them, poets do deal with universals in the form of plots and the incident- and character-types that constitute them. See below.

¹⁵ P. Woodruff, 'Aristotle on *mimêsis*', in A. O. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton, 1992), pp. 73–95, at pp. 86–8.

¹⁶ D. W. Lucas, *Aristotle, Poetics* (Oxford, 1968), p. 120.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁸ S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (New York, 1907; 4th edn, repr. 1951), pp. 163, 194.

¹⁹ G. F. Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge, MA, 1957), p. 305.

²⁰ M. Heath, 'The universality of poetry in Aristotle's *Poetics*', *CQ* 41 (1991), 389–402, at p. 389.

²¹ Woodruff (n. 15), p. 88.

²² Although lacking an article, it would seem that the *καθόλου* of T2 is a singular substantive serving as the antecedent of the singular relative *οὗ* at the beginning of the phrase translated as 'which is what poetry aims at'. It also parallels the singular *τὸ καθ' ἑκάστων* of the next sentence. Although I prefer the singular reading of *καθόλου* in T2, it is possible that *οὗ* refers to the whole idea of the preceding clause and that each of the sorts of thing that a certain sort of person says or does is what Aristotle here calls a universal. In this case, a unified plot representing 'one action' would be a structure of universals causally linked by likelihood or necessity. I thank *CQ*'s anonymous referee for this observation.

concrete 'doings' of Alcibiades. According to ITP, Alcibiades alone would be the particular. He is not in this case, so ITP must be rejected.

The Thematic View seems to be supported by the fact that tragedies and epics have themes, and themes can be thought of as truths for which the drama or epic is a sort of argument. This is surely right as it stands, but it seems a mistake to understand the universals of *Poetics* 9 this way. The full argument against the Thematic View will be seen after I show how the Events View makes better sense of the universals in chapter 9 and those mentioned elsewhere in the *Poetics*. For now let us notice only that the Thematic View does not account for the particular of T2—Alcibiades' concrete deed or experience.

Aristotle uses the term *καθόλου* not only for a category of being but also for a kind of proposition. For example, in the *Prior Analytics* Aristotle claims that a universal proposition predicates a property of all members of a class, e.g. 'All horses are mammals', or denies it of all members of a class, e.g. 'No horses are mammals' (24a17–19). A defender of the Thematic View could read the explication of the universal in T2 as a universal proposition stating a sort of truth. We should reject this reading. The example of the particular in T2, if it is to be construed as a proposition, would be a singular proposition predicating something of a particular person, Alcibiades. However, Aristotle uses *μία κατάφασις*, 'single affirmation', and *μία ἀπόφασις*, 'single negation', to denote singular propositions (*Int.* 17b28–9, 37; 18a2, 8). The term in T2 is *καθ' ἑκάστων*, and Aristotle seems never to use *καθ' ἑκάστων* for a singular proposition.²³ Without the ability to take both the universal and the particular of T2 as propositions, the Thematic View fails to explain the text.

IV. POETIC UNIVERSALS AS EVENT-TYPES

According to the Events View, the universal of T2 is an event-type or, more specifically, an action-type, and the particular of T2 is an action-token. That is, 'what Alcibiades did' and 'what Alcibiades experienced' are action-tokens which, if we knew the details, might fall under several different action-types. For example, if the action-token was 'Alcibiades argued for the Sicilian expedition', the action-type may be 'Ambitious young general puts personal interest above the common good' or 'Articulate politician argues for expansion of the empire'. The action-types, *qua* types, are multiply instantiable; they need not apply to Alcibiades' actions alone. In this way, the universal and the particular of the Events View share important formal characteristics with the universal and the particular of the ITP View. On the Events View, however, the tokens are particular events, not particular people, animals, or plants, and the types are properties of those events instead of properties of particular individuals.²⁴

One reason for the Events View is now clear: unlike its rivals, it makes perfect sense of the particular in T2. It also makes sense of what Aristotle says about the poetic universal: 'A universal is the sorts of thing that a certain sort of person happens to say

²³ It is possible that Aristotle sometimes substitutes *καθ' ἑκάστων* for the more common *κατὰ μέρος* and *ἐν μέρει* to signify the particular proposition, i.e. one that predicates or denies a property of some members of a class (cf. *A.Pr.* 24a17–19). However, the scant evidence for this possibility is sometimes ambiguous between propositional and ontological readings of the terms (cf. *Rh.* 1357b1–3, 1359a24). Independent of this issue, however, remains the fact that the claim about Alcibiades in T2 is not technically a particular proposition.

²⁴ For another use of an event-type as a universal, see *A.Po.* 94a36–b8 (cf. Herodotus V.97–102).

or do according to likelihood or necessity, which is what poetry aims at, although names [of characters] are added'. For the Events View to work, it should explain how the doing- and saying-types cohere to form one universal. As I shall argue momentarily, likely or necessary links among the incidents give them the required coherence, and these links obtain because of the character-type involved—T2's 'certain sort of person'. At this point, however, it should be mentioned that most appearances of likelihood and necessity in the *Poetics* occur in Aristotle's discussions of the connections that should obtain among the incidents of a unified plot (cf. chapters 7 and 8). This gives us reason to think that the unity generated from T2's 'sorts of doing and saying' would be that of a special kind of event-type: a plot as it exists before the poet adds the characters' names and the details of the episodes.

The plot of a tragedy, Aristotle says, ought to be a representation of a single whole action (*μίμησις πράξεως μιᾶς καὶ ὅλης*) (1451a30–2). 'A whole is that which has a beginning, middle, and an end' (1450b26–7).²⁵ In order to be a whole action, the incidents which form the action's parts must connect structurally so that a change in their order disrupts the whole (1451a32–4). Aristotle mentions two necessary conditions of the ordering. First, the beginning should not follow a preceding event by necessity, and the end should not be followed by another event by necessity. Second, the beginning, middle, and end of the poetic action should be joined to each other by either necessity or likelihood (1450b27–31).²⁶ Hence, necessary or likely connections among the plot's incidents are the glue that turns them into 'one action'.²⁷ Without such connections, plots become disjointed and 'episodic' (1451b35). Many other discussions of plot also mention the importance of likely or necessary links among the incidents.²⁸ Therefore, Aristotle can explain how different types of incidents—different types of doing and saying—coalesce to become one universal.

Another way of describing the effect of necessary or likely connections among a set of events is to say that they turn them into one 'continuous' (*συνεχής*) action or process (cf. 1452a15). Aristotle's formal discussion of the continuity of processes is found in *Physics* V. There Aristotle says that a process (*κίνησις*) is one if and only if it is continuous, and that two events are continuous if and only if their 'extremities' (*ἑσχατα*) are one (228a20–4; 227a10–12). The extremities must do more than touch; they must go together out of necessity (227a23). Episodic plots, therefore, are ruled out as possible representations of one action since, although their incidents 'touch', they are not continuous. But notice that the requirement of the *Physics* is that the connection between two continuous events be a *necessary* connection. This creates a

²⁵ The ordering of the parts is explicitly mentioned as a requirement in Aristotle's formal definition of 'whole' at *Metaph.* 1024a1–3. If the order of a thing's parts does not matter, then that thing is only a 'totality' and not a whole.

²⁶ Or, in this case, by necessity or by 'what happens for the most part' (1450b30). I take Aristotle's use of 'naturally' in this passage to be ambiguous between necessity and likelihood. In later passages, Aristotle drops 'naturally' as the description of how one incident in a plot ought to follow another and uses 'by likelihood or necessity' instead.

²⁷ Thus Aristotle has a principle of action individuation different from the one Bittner uses in his interpretation of Aristotle's 'one action'. Bittner claims that 'an action stands out as an action . . . [b]y being meaningful. The doings of a person coalesce into individual actions discrete by virtue of separately making sense. One action is what you get if you cut a person's doings into the smallest meaningful parts' ('One action', in A. O. Rorty [ed.], *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* [Princeton, 1992], pp. 97–110, at p. 99). With this principle in hand, Bittner argues that the unity of an action comes 'too cheap . . . or else it is incomprehensible' (p. 103). But he nowhere argues that this is how Aristotle individuates actions, and Aristotle explicitly endorses another principle.

²⁸ See, for example, 1451a12–13, 27–8, b13, 31, 1452a20, 24, 1456b4.

snag in Aristotle's account of unity in the *Poetics*, for he allows that the incidents which make up the one action of a tragedy be connected by either likelihood or necessity. The *Physics* account would seem to allow only for the latter, more stringent, condition.

In fact, Aristotle sometimes refrains from mentioning necessity altogether in places where we would expect it to appear alongside likelihood. For example, immediately after the text of T2, Aristotle claims that comic poets, unlike the composers of lampoons, tend to speak of universals by first composing plots out of incidents connected by likelihood and then adding the names of individual characters (*Po.* 1451b11–15). He makes no mention of connections by necessity. Similarly, when Aristotle says that actual past events, as opposed to mythical events, may provide the subject-matter for a poem, he mentions only connection by likelihood as a condition of their suitability for the poet's attention (1451b29–32). Necessity is dropped also when Aristotle gives examples of the sayings and doings of particular characters. In his general account of character, Aristotle says that, just as in the case of plot construction, character-types should be made to say or do things of certain types according to either necessity or likelihood (1454a34–6). But when it comes to giving examples of characters in an actual tragedy, Euripides' *Iphigenia at Tauris*, Aristotle mentions only likelihood.²⁹ For example, given Iphigenia's new belief that Orestes is alive and her subsequent desire to be rescued by him from Tauris, Aristotle says it is likely that she would wish to send him a letter (1455a17–19). Her dictation of the letter in Orestes' presence enables him to recognize the priestess as his sister. An alternative recognition scene, suggested by Polyidus and cited with apparent approval by Aristotle, has Iphigenia recognize Orestes when, at the point of sacrifice, Orestes reasons aloud that he is meeting the same fate as his sister (1455a7, b10). The recognition scene, Aristotle says, occurs according to likelihood; necessity receives no mention. We may surmise that if the recognition scene occurred by necessity, a plausible alternative version would not be possible.

We may react to this problem in one of two ways. On the one hand, we may fault as incoherent Aristotle's account of the unity of plot since he does not require that a plot's incidents be joined by necessity. According to Aristotle's own account in the *Physics*, necessary connections are necessary for continuity and thus for unity. But when it comes to poetic action, Aristotle implies that likelihood suffices to connect the incidents. On the other hand, we may suppose that Aristotle loosens the requirement of *Physics* V in order to make likely connections sufficient for the continuity of human doings and sayings. This is reasonable since Aristotle often jointly opposes necessity and 'what happens for the most part' to chance.³⁰ The latter alternative also has the advantage of saving Aristotle's theory of poetic action from incoherence. I choose it for these reasons and assume that, with respect to the connections between human doings and sayings, Aristotle views likelihood as sufficient to secure their continuity.

A passage in *Poetics* 17 gives further support to the view that poetic universals are plots, that is, special sorts of event-types consisting of incidents linked by likelihood

²⁹ In the case of an actual epic, however, Aristotle says that Homer was justified in omitting mention of Odysseus' wounding on Parnassus and his pretence of insanity during recruitment since these events are not linked by necessity or likelihood to the events of the *Odyssey* (*Po.* 1451a22–8).

³⁰ E.g. *A.Po.* I.30; *Ph.* II.5. Also relevant is Aristotle's claim that action is the subject of deliberation, and we do not deliberate about matters which could not be otherwise, i.e. those that occur by necessity (*Rh.* 1357a23–7; *E.N.* 1140a35–b1).

or necessity. Here Aristotle explains that a poet, when composing stories (λόγοι), should first layout universals (καθόλου) and then fill in the episodes (1455b1–2).

T3: What I mean by picturing the universal (τὸ καθόλου) in this way is, for example, [the story] of Iphigenia: A young woman was sacrificed and disappears in a way unclear to her sacrificers, but after being set down in another country, in which it was a custom to sacrifice foreigners to the goddess, she came to hold this priesthood. Later, the brother of the priestess came, but the fact that the god sent him to go there—for a reason outside the universal—and for what purpose is outside the plot. After he arrived and was captured, he was about to be sacrificed when he recognized [her]. . . . After that came the rescue. After [laying out the plot] the character names are added and the episodes filled in. (1455b2–12)

The interchangeable use of the phrases ‘outside the universal’ and ‘outside the plot’, and the explicit introduction of the plot as a universal, together suggest strongly that the plot is a kind of universal and thus support the previous claim that the universal of T2 is a plot.³¹

It is interesting that, when sketching the incidents of the plot, Aristotle leaves out the names of the characters of the familiar story. The characters instead appear under descriptions such as young woman, foreigner, sister, goddess, priestess, brother, and god. With the exception of Poseidon, proper names are also omitted in Aristotle’s brief statement of the story of the *Odyssey* (1455b16–23). Referring to the characters with descriptive terms instead of proper names puts the object of the poet’s imagination at the level of the type and makes salient certain properties of the characters which are relevant to the explanation of the story’s incidents and, consequently, to the construction of the plot. Proper names are to be added later, along with the episodes, when the plot’s events have been properly fitted together. Aristotle’s comment about ‘adding names’ is the same found in T2—yet further evidence that the universal the poet ‘aims at’ in T2 is the same kind as that ‘pictured’ in T3.

We can now see how the necessary and likely connections among the incidents of a plot come together with the necessary and likely connections between a character and her sayings and doings.³² In T3, the description of the plot gives little indication as to why one incident follows another. But we might find resources for the coherence of the plot if we consider the properties ascribed to the characters. The presence of these character traits makes it likely or necessary that a character would do or say a certain sort of thing in her kind of circumstance. The existence of likely or necessary connections among event-types, therefore, implies the presence of likely or necessary connections between the characters and what they do and say (cf. 1454a33–6).³³

³¹ *Contra* Butcher (n. 18), who claims, ‘The καθόλου of [T3] denotes the broad outline, the bare sketch of the plot, and is wholly distinct from the καθόλου of [T2], the general or universal truth which poetry conveys’ (pp. 193–4).

³² The latter sort of connections are mentioned at 1454a33–7 and in T2.

³³ A passage in *Poetics* 6 might be understood as evidence against this conclusion. There Aristotle argues that plot is the most important part of tragedy, even more important than character. ‘The tragedy is a representation not of human beings but of actions and life’, Aristotle explains (1450a16–17). As an apparent consequence of this, he says that ‘tragedy cannot exist without action, but without characters it may’ (1450a24–5). It is difficult to understand what this could mean, and Aristotle’s examples do not clarify matters. He says that the tragedies of his own day often are without character and that the paintings of Zeuxis, in contrast to those of Polygnotus, contain no character at all (1450a25–9). We, however, do not have any ‘characterless’ tragedies from the mid-fourth century, nor do we have any of Zeuxis’ or Polygnotus’ paintings. We might, however, guess that by ‘character’ here Aristotle means the rather narrow notion of ‘that which reveals decision [προαίρεσις]’ (1450b9). In that case, it would not be accurate to say that the characters of the tragedy have no personality traits, but rather that they are not shown making choices that reveal deliberation about the right action to take (*E.N.* III.2–3).

V. UNIVERSALS AND MIMESIS

What does this account of poetic universals imply for Aristotelian mimesis? To begin, Aristotle says that tragedy is the representation of one action. He also says that the plot is a representation of one action. The poet most often finds the action which a tragedy and its plot represent in the body of traditional myth, but he may also find it in a sequence of actual past events or invent the action from scratch (cf. 1451b19–21, 29–30). The poet represents this action first by discerning its structure, that is, he sees that it is likely or necessary that a person of a certain type, or people of certain types, would do or say certain things when placed in certain sorts of circumstances. He then reproduces that structure in the poetic composition. The structure is a kind of universal—an action-type—and can be instantiated many times both in real life and in make-believe contexts with varying degrees of similarity to other instances of the type. The names of the agents, the details of the setting, and other aspects of the tokens may change, but the explanatory properties of the incidents remain. The action-type may also be conceived at varying degrees of abstractness or concreteness. At its most concrete stage, the action-type is fleshed-out in all of the details of a poet's final script. This is what is usually called the plot. The plot may be abstracted away from the details of the characters and the episodes, however, and be conceived as a plot-type to be instantiated differently in the performances of another script. Indeed, it seems possible even for the same plot-type to be instantiated at one time as a comedy and at another as a tragedy. So long as the structure of the incidents remains the same, alterations in the diction, setting, and musical accompaniment may be sufficient to create very different emotional responses in the respective audiences.

Some of this is admittedly speculative, but none of it I think departs very far from Aristotle's conception of the metaphysics of poetry. If the view I have defended is right, it would seem that the subject the poet must understand in order to function as a poet is the relation between the character traits of humans and gods and the actions which those traits tend to produce. Only then will the poet grasp the universal in an action and recast it on stage with the causal coherence necessary to move an audience. Even if the portrayed event has never actually occurred, perceptive audience members should be able to see that the action as portrayed on stage is something that 'might happen'—something that would likely or necessarily occur given the initial circumstances and the types of characters involved. If they cannot, Aristotle would no doubt think that the plot—the 'soul' of tragedy—fails.³⁴

Southern Virginia College

J. M. ARMSTRONG

jarmstrong@southernvirginia.edu

³⁴ Earlier versions were presented at the 1997 Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Philadelphia, at the 19th Annual Workshop in Ancient Philosophy at Texas A&M University, and to the Euthyphrones at the University of Texas at Austin. I sincerely thank Julia Annas, Thomas Christiano, Christopher Colvin, Daniel Graham, R. J. Hankinson, Martha Nussbaum, Gregory Scott, Joseph Tolliver, Stephen A. White, Paul Woodruff, and an anonymous referee of *Classical Quarterly* for all of their very helpful comments.