

Wonder, Nature, and the Ends of Tragedy

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ABSTRACT: A survey of commentaries on Aristotle's *Poetics* over the past century reflects a long-standing assumption that pleasure, rather than understanding, is to be seen as the real aim of tragedy, despite weak textual evidence to this end. This paper seeks to rehabilitate the role of understanding in tragedy's effect, as Aristotle sees it, to an equal status with that of its affective counterpart. Through an analysis of the essential inducement of wonder on the part of the viewer and its connection with the organic unity of the plot—what Aristotle calls the “soul” of tragedy—I argue that the *telos* of tragedy in the *Poetics* is intended to accommodate both pleasure and incipient philosophical activity without necessarily privileging either.

In all natural objects there is something wondrous.
—Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, 645a17.

EARLY ON IN THE *POETICS*, Aristotle calls our attention to the pair of natural causes out of which poetic activity emerges. “[I]t is an instinct of human beings, from childhood, to engage in mimesis . . . , (it is through mimesis that [the human] develops his earliest understanding), and it is also natural that everyone finds enjoyment in mimetic activities” (1448b4–8).¹ If it is by nature that we seek understanding and pleasure in mimetic production, for Aristotle it is likewise the case that these natural causes are intermixed in beholding such productions. “[U]nderstanding gives great pleasure not only to philosophers but to others as well. . . . [T]his is why people enjoy looking at images, because through contemplating them it comes about that they understand and infer what each thing is” (1448b12–17). From its most rudimentary forms of likeness, as in the case above, to its highest expression in tragedy, the work of art for Aristotle naturally integrates intellectual activity and pleasure on the part of its audience.

It is worth noting that neither here nor anywhere else in the *Poetics* does Aristotle assert a priority of one cause over the other in the experience of art. Whether understanding is activated for the sake of pleasure, or whether pleasure is simply a side-effect of understanding in aesthetic matters is not a question over which Aristotle seems to trouble himself. Curiously, where he offers his famous definition of tragedy, both of these elements are conspicuously absent: “Tragedy . . . is mimesis of an action that is elevated, complete, and of magnitude; in language embellished by distinct forms in its sections; employing the mode of enactment,

¹Unless otherwise noted, the translations used in this essay follow those of *Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995).

not narrative; and through pity and fear accomplishing the catharsis of such emotions” (1449b24–28). It seems that Aristotle took the presence of understanding and pleasure to be so obviously contained in tragedy that they did not bear mention in his terse articulation. Insofar as scholars have taken the above definition as the orienting point from which to interpret Aristotle’s theory of tragedy, however, an inordinate emphasis has come to be placed on its emotional effects as well as upon the cryptic process of catharsis that Aristotle takes no pains to elaborate.² Where he does insist that each art form is to produce its appropriate kind of enjoyment as an evaluative criterion, and that tragedy “should create the pleasure which comes from pity and fear through mimesis” (1453b11–12), this criterion has been accorded much greater weight than the text merits. Katherine Gilbert, for example, cites this latter formulation as evidence that, for Aristotle, “the production of pleasure [is] the final cause or ultimate purpose of such art.”³ Yet nothing of the sort is stated in the passage at hand, nor do we find there the term *telos* that would support such a conclusion.⁴ In fact, where Aristotle does speak of the *telos* of tragedy, he explicitly identifies it with the rationally-structured course of events that compose the plot (1450a21–23).⁵

Despite its lack of substantial grounds, Gilbert’s claim reflects a position that has become widespread in the past century, echoing S. H. Butcher’s pronouncements that in the *Poetics*, “the main appeal [of poetry] is not to the reason but to the feelings,”⁶ and that Aristotle was the first to “put into definite shape . . . [the theory] that poetry is an emotional delight, its end is to give pleasure.”⁷ For adherents to this thesis, Aristotle’s observation that the invocation of wonder (*ton thaumaston*) is not only necessary to tragedy (1460a), but is the means by which poets accomplish the intended effect of their compositions (1456a19–20), constitutes something of an embarrassment. For, the intimate correlation between wonder and philosophical engagement that Aristotle famously enunciates in the *Metaphysics* suggests a more extensive role for intellectual activity in the effect of tragedy than proponents of the

²A speculative reconstruction of *Poetics* II, undertaken by Richard Janko, does suggest, however, that Aristotle provides a more extensive discussion of catharsis in his treatment of comedy. See *Poetics* I, trans. R. Janko (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 1987).

³“Aesthetic Imitation and Imitators in Aristotle,” *The Philosophical Review* 45 (1936): p. 569.

⁴Cf. Stephen Halliwell: “Of course the *telos* and *ergon* of tragedy must incorporate pleasure, but it is as significant as it has often been obscured that Aristotle nowhere says without qualification that pleasure is the end or function of tragedy.” “Pleasure, Understanding, and Emotion in Aristotle’s *Poetics*” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*, ed. A. O. Rorty (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), p. 255.

⁵While pleasure is mentioned in the context of tragedy’s *telos* in Chapter 26 (1462a13–b1), Aristotle there at best implies that pleasure belongs to the goal of tragedy. I concur with Halliwell in reading the connection between the two as in no way exclusive of other psychological factors (*ibid.*, p. 255).

⁶S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (New York NY: Dover, 1951 [1911]), p. 202.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 215. Indeed, similar positions can be found throughout the literature on the *Poetics*, including F. L. Lucas, *Tragedy: Serious Drama in Relation to Aristotle’s Poetics* (New York NY: Collier Books, 1962); Lane Cooper, *The Poetics of Aristotle: Its Meaning and Influence* (New York NY: Cooper Square Publishers, 1963); A. W. Gomme, *The Greek Attitude to Poetry and History* (Berkeley CA: Univ. of California Press, 1954); Norman Gulley, “Aristotle on the Purposes of Literature” in *Articles on Aristotle*, vol. 4, ed. J. Barnes, M. Schofield, and R. Sorabji (London UK: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1979), pp. 166–76; and more recently by G. R. F. Ferrari, “Aristotle’s Literary Aesthetics,” *Phronesis* 44 (1999): p. 192.

pleasure-*telos* theory typically acknowledge. One strategy for bypassing the thorny issues raised by *ton thaumaston* in the *Poetics* is to render it in pre-philosophical terminology merely as “surprise” or “amazement.”⁸ A more direct strategy, however, is that taken by Jonathan Lear, who attempts in his “anticognitivist” reading to dampen the suggestive role of wonder by arguing for a strict distinction between its poetic and philosophical senses, on the one hand, and by conflating the proper and inferior invocations of tragic wonder that Aristotle holds apart, on the other.⁹ In what follows I wish to offer a fresh reading of the role of wonder in the *Poetics* as a way of meeting the challenges set by Lear above, and in so doing, to promote a conception of tragedy that pays equal heed to the dual causes of pleasure and understanding that underlie its status as a mimetic object.

I will begin by considering Aristotle’s discussion of wonder in the *Metaphysics* in light of the initial stage of Lear’s argument. The second and third sections are devoted to developing an account of tragic wonder in relation to the artwork’s organic structuring principle. Section four takes up this organic principle in order to show how it establishes, contra Lear’s second stage of argument, criteria for distinguishing the wonder proper to tragedy from wonder in its inferior forms. In the final section, I conclude with a brief set of reflections on wonder’s salience for rethinking the ends of tragedy in Aristotle’s aesthetics.

I

It is clear from the analysis of mimesis with which we began that understanding is a necessary aspect of our engagement with artworks. In fact, we cannot appreciate a work *as* mimetic, according to Aristotle, without understanding, at least on a basic level, the objects that it portrays.¹⁰ Insofar as tragedy is mimesis of action, it requires our understanding of that course of events that it represents. However, a special feature of tragedy is that, in order effectively to represent fearful and pitiable matters, these events must “occur contrary to expectation yet on account of one another” (1452a4). Aristotle continues, “For wonder will be maintained in this way more than through show of chance and fortune” (1452a4–5). Jonathan Lear takes this passage to be indicative of a break between philosophical and aesthetic wonder as such:

[I]n the *Poetics* passage [above] Aristotle seems to be suggesting that the relation between wonder and understanding is precisely the opposite of that suggested by the *Metaphysics*: it is by cognitively grasping that the events, though unexpected, are intelligibly linked to one another that wonder is produced in us. So while in the *Metaphysics* wonder provokes us to understand, in the *Poetics* understanding provokes us to experience wonder. (p. 324)

⁸Cf., *inter alia*, Mark Moles, “‘*Philanthropia*’ in Aristotle’s *Poetics*,” *Phoenix* 38 (1984): p. 330, as well as Ferrari, “Aristotle’s Literary Aesthetics,” p. 192.

⁹Jonathan Lear, “*Katharsis*,” in Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*, pp. 315–40.

¹⁰As Aristotle points out, “For, if one happens not to have seen the subject [represented] before, the image will not give pleasure qua mimesis but because of its execution or color, or for some other such reason” (*Poet.* 1448b17–19).

While we will examine Aristotle's characterization of wonder in this passage of the *Poetics* in more detail in section three, a brief look at the *Metaphysics* demonstrates that the opposition posited by Lear between these two relations of wonder and understanding does not hold.

"It is through wonder," Aristotle states in chapter two of *Metaphysics A*,

that humans begin and originally began to philosophize; wondering in the first place at obvious perplexities, and then by gradual progression raising questions about the greater matters too, *e.g.*, about the changes of the moon and the sun, about the stars and about the origin of the universe. (982b12–13)

Perplexity, he further notes, implies an acknowledgment of our own ignorance that we correspondingly attempt to escape by seeking knowledge for its own sake.¹¹ Yet these occasions for wonder, these perplexities that Aristotle has in mind, do not arise *ex nihilo*. They arise with respect to phenomena that occupy a place within the natural, orderly scheme of things; that is, they issue from a perceived order—whether of the regular movements of the sun, the patterns of the stars—that we already, to some degree, understand. When we wonder, we are moved to consider the very order that we had up to that point taken for granted.¹² The ignorance, then, that we seek to overcome has to do with those principles or causes¹³ out of which the perceived order issues. Hence, Aristotle's qualification of this experience as "wondering that things should be as they are,"¹⁴ wondering about the makeup of those things that we find intelligible.¹⁵

Seen thus, wonder arises not simply through ignorance, but rather through a blend of ignorance and understanding,¹⁶ the crucial mixture of which Lear omits in his account of the *Metaphysics* passage above. In fact, only against the backdrop of understanding can a failure to understand can make itself apparent as such.¹⁷ It is precisely in this way that humans make their "gradual progression," as Aristotle says, from wonder at things close at hand to wondering about the more expansive and more universal matters: through achieving knowledge of certain principles and causes, we proceed to the limits of such knowledge and so confront new *aporias*. Oddly, however, Aristotle only describes the function of wonder in the *Metaphysics*; it is in the *Rhetoric* that

¹¹"*Phaneron hoti dia to eidenai to epistasthai eidiokon kai ou chreseos tinos heneken*" (*Meta.* 982b21–24).

¹²Cf. Joe Sachs: "The state of wonder holds in abeyance for an extended moment the natural flow of our opinions." *Poetics* (Newburyport MA: Focus Publishers, 2006), p. 17.

¹³"*Archon kai aition*" (*Meta.* 982b9–10).

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 983a14–15.

¹⁵G. W. F. Hegel treats the presupposition of a prior form of understanding in wonder in similar terms: "[W]hoever wonders no longer regards the whole of the external world as something which he has become clear about . . . and thus he has changed the objects and their existence into a spiritual and self-conscious insight into them." *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. I, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), p. 315.

¹⁶A complementary, yet alternative, account of wonder in the *Metaphysics* can be found in Denise Schaeffer's "Wisdom and Wonder in *Metaphysics A*: 1–2" in *The Review of Metaphysics* 52 (1999): pp. 641–56.

¹⁷Cf., in this connection, Jacob Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno* (Chicago IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 90–94.

he provides its definition as a “desire to understand” or “learn,”¹⁸ (1371a21). Yet, as with all desire, *thaumazein* operates according to its own natural dynamic, wherein it overcomes us and at the same time seeks its own overcoming. As this particular intellectual desire, wonder seeks to purify consciousness of the mixture of ignorance and knowledge that gave rise to it by returning to the more natural state (*eis to kata phusin kathistasthai*) of untroubled understanding (1371a22).

In light of this initial critique of Lear’s supposed opposition between forms of wonder, we are now in a position to consider the place of *ton thaumaston* in the *Poetics*. In order to demonstrate that the latter arises through a similar blend of ignorance and understanding, we shall pursue two questions on the basis of our critique. First, what is the specific kind of order that appeals to our understanding in tragic mimesis? And secondly, what eludes comprehension and thus becomes the proper object of wonder in the context of tragedy, according to Aristotle? The next two sections address these questions respectively.

II

If one of the criteria for a successful tragedy lies in producing its proper kind of pleasure, it is also the case for Aristotle that tragedy is to be judged in accordance with the elements¹⁹ that compose its form and that thus make it comprehensible. Among these formal elements, he unequivocally holds the plot (*muthos*), or the structure of events, to be of principal importance. For the plot is not only, as we have noted, tragedy’s *telos*, but, as Aristotle states, it is “the first principle (*arche*) and, as it were, the soul of tragedy” (1450a37). As such, it serves to represent the entirety of a certain kind of action (*praxis*), namely, an action in which one or more agents undergoes a transformation from prosperity to adversity or the reverse (1451a12–15). *Qua* representation, the plot is not reducible to the events themselves that comprise the action, but refers equally to the composition or interweaving of such events.²⁰ Aristotle emphasizes this compositional aspect with alternative uses of the roughly synonymous *sustasis* and *sunthesis* (1450a4, 1450a15) to denote the “setting” or “placing-together” of subsidiary actions making up a single plot. Our capacity to cognize this structure—in its internal points of linkage as well as in its character as a unity—derives, for Aristotle, from the “natural” (*pephuken*) order that the tragic plot should exhibit (1450b29).

Looked at more closely, the formal arrangement in which the plot consists is to be regarded as natural in more than one sense. The first of these senses has to do

¹⁸The term that Aristotle uses is *mathesis*, which carries the dual yet linked senses of both learning and understanding.

¹⁹These elements, introduced as a group in Chapter 6 (1450a7–10), comprise plot, character (*ethe*), thought (*dianoia*), diction (*lexis*), lyric poetry (*melopoia*), and spectacle (*opsis*), and are ranked in this order of importance at the end of the section (1450a38–b20).

²⁰That events and their placement are considered as distinct dimensions of the representation of tragic action is made clear by Aristotle’s separation of the two at 1450a21: “Thus, the events and the plot (*ta pragmata kai ho muthos*) are the goal of tragedy.” Cf. Halliwell, *Aristotle’s Poetics* (Chicago IL: Chicago Univ. Press, 1986), p. 142: “The ‘action’ (*praxis*) is the structure of a play’s events viewed as a dimension of the events themselves; it is the pattern discernible in the ‘actions and life’ which the poet dramatizes.”

with the internal confluence between events as they arise from and impact the agents within the plot, namely, that these events must occur “on account of one another.” Aristotle characterizes the requirement of this linkage in terms of “necessity or what happens for the most part (*ex anankes e hos epi to polu*)” (1450b29). This requirement applies first and foremost to the tragic agents themselves, “who should have certain qualities in both character (*ethos*) and thought” (1449b36–37). The action of tragedy is a function of the sorts of individuals involved, individuals embodying circumscribed patterns of intentional action through which their characters are recognizable. Aristotle refers to these ethical patterns as “universals” (*katholou*), or “the kinds of things which it suits a certain kind of person to say or do, in terms of likelihood or necessity” (1451b8–9). Such patterns of action are *katholou*, that is, *kata olon*, “directed to a whole,” in that they emerge from and reflect a coherent human character-type. Ajax’s suicide, Neoptolemus’s rejection of deceit, and Antigone’s burial of her brother are all events dictated by their respective characters; in each case, any other deed would have gone against that agent’s specific nature.²¹

Whereas the representation of character in its unity must obey the natural strictures of inevitability or likelihood, these latter requirements apply as well to the events arising in the course of the interaction of agents, the nexus of occurrences that, though usually occasioned or conditioned by human choice, outstrip the purposive striving of the agents themselves and reveal them to be patients in turn.²² It is, in fact, hard to miss Aristotle’s emphasis on both aspects of tragic action: “With character, precisely as in the structure of events, one should always seek necessity or likelihood—so that for such a person to say or do such things is necessary or likely, and the sequence of events is also necessary or likely” (1454a33–37).²³ Whether due to human choice or compulsion, the course of interrelated events must unfold in a way that is consistent with our understanding of various orders of causation.²⁴

The second sense in which plot structure’s intelligibility is to be regarded as natural has to do with the way in which these causal orders are integrated within the comprehensive unity of tragic action as such. Aristotle introduces this second order by way of an image: the form of the beautiful animal, the model of organizational nature:

Something beautiful, whether an animal or anything else with a structure of parts, should have not only its parts ordered but also an appropriate magnitude: beauty consists in magnitude and order, which is why there could not be a beautiful animal which was either

²¹Aristotle’s separation of *ethos* from *phusis* in the *Nicomachean Ethics* notwithstanding (1103a19–33), the invocation of one’s “nature” in the sense of Aristotle’s *ethos* is common in Greek tragedy, and is especially pronounced in the latter two of these dramas (cf. *Phil.* 79, 88, 874, 1310; *Ant.* 77, 523).

²²As Gerard Else puts it, “tragic ‘action’ involves not only man’s (sic.) own causality . . . , but something that breaks in upon him, ‘happens’ to him from outside.” *Aristotle’s Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 306–07.

²³With regard to these parallel orders of human action, Terry Eagleton writes, “Aristotle seems to contrast not freedom and necessity, but inner and outer necessities.” *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2003), p. 118.

²⁴Cf. Elizabeth Belfiore’s analysis of necessity in *Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion* (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992). “‘Necessity’ in the sense of ‘compulsion or force’ is clearly relevant to this and other tragic plots, in which actions take place under certain unavoidable circumstances,” p. 115.

miniscule (as contemplation of it . . . has no distinctness) or gigantic (as contemplation of it has no cohesion, but those who contemplate it lose a sense of unity and wholeness). . . . So, just as with our bodies and with animals, beauty requires magnitude . . . that allows a coherent perception (*eusunopton*). (1450b34–1451a6)²⁵

The interrelation of events in tragedy bringing forth a change from prosperity to adversity—which makes up its duration, and hence, its magnitude—requires the observance of a kind of order that is, as with a living entity, *organic*. In the manner that animals function as individuated yet unified organisms due to being ensouled, so too must the representation of a tragic action “complete, whole and of magnitude” (1450b24–25) function as an organic unity²⁶ through its component events such that “if any is displaced or removed, the sense of the whole is disturbed and dislocated: since that whose presence or absence has no clear significance is not an integral part of the whole” (1450a32–35). It is not only, therefore, the natural conjoining of occurrences through necessity or likelihood to which our understanding is attuned in drama, but we attend as well to the unifying axis of significance about which these interlinked occurrences revolve.²⁷

This structural significance of tragedy, however, is not grounded in the representation of individual agents, though the latter contribute this end.²⁸ For, while the deeds which individuals undertake must derive from an ethical universal, this does not by itself result in a coherence of action.²⁹ Rather, the movement between the poles of prosperity and adversity itself constitutes the foundational significance, and thus, the limits, of the whole. “Tragedy,” Aristotle maintains, “is mimesis not of persons but of action and life; and happiness and unhappiness consist in action” (1450a15–16). Tragic characters—their respective lives and fates—exist for the sake of the over-riding action to which they belong.³⁰ As the *telos* of tragedy, the plot makes evident

²⁵Aristotle recapitulates this metaphor of the beautiful animal in relation to epic unity at 1459a16–20.

²⁶“An action one and whole is similar to an animal one and whole in that both are the smallest still meaningful parts of the respective realm, of the whole range of acting the one, of the whole range of animal life the other. Actions have beginning, middle and end the way animals have forelimbs and hindlimbs, because that is what it takes to be a full member of the domain in question.” Rüdiger Bittner, “One Action,” in Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle’s Poetics*, p. 101.

²⁷The twofold conception of unity that I propose here departs from more prevalent views holding that the wholeness of a plot consists simply in the sequential coherence of events. J. M. Armstrong, a proponent of this latter view, states that “necessary or likely actions among the plot’s incidents are the glue that turns them into ‘one action.’” “Aristotle on the Philosophical Nature of Poetry,” *The Classical Quarterly* 48 (1998): p. 452. On my reading, however, it would be more accurate to confer upon necessity and likelihood the status of necessary conditions with respect to bringing about a whole tragic action, though not sufficient conditions.

²⁸Martha Husain formulates this point most starkly: “The formal definition of tragedy singles action out by listing it as the only immediate object of imitation. In the following analysis of this definition, characters and articulated rationality are recognized as constitutive parts under the differentia objects of imitation, only because they are implied by action, not independently and in their own right.” *Ontology and the Art of Tragedy: An Approach to Aristotle’s Poetics* (Albany NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 2002), p. 75.

²⁹Cf. 1451a16–18: “A plot is not unified, as some think, if built around an individual. Any entity has innumerable features, not all of which cohere into a unity; likewise, an individual performs many actions which yield no unitary action.”

³⁰As John Jones puts it, “Mutability is Aristotle’s tragic focus, not misfortune . . . the alternative of upward or downward movement is ultimately open, what matters is that the action shall have room to display life’s bottomless instability.” *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (New York NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962), p. 47.

through its structure that the *telos* of each of its characters, their happiness, is set at stake. On the basis of this structure, the events become dramatic; that is, they appear to the audience as pitiable and fearful. We understand, therefore, not only the natural course of events as such, but also grasp this course within a thematic unity that is not reducible to its component events.³¹ These two forms of order together compose the *eusunopton*, the coherent perception or, literally, the “seeing-together-well” that tragedy must, according to Aristotle, bring about.

III

Aristotle’s strict attention to order and comprehensibility *vis-à-vis* the elements of plot structure in the *Poetics* is not accompanied by a discussion of the corresponding form of ignorance to which wonder is equally bound. What remains to be explained is how events coming about “on account of one another (*di’heauta*),” in cognizable relations of likelihood and necessity, can also arise “contrary to expectation (*para ten doxan*).” In other words, we must account for the aspect of the plot that, precisely *through* its understandable form, awakens within us the desire to understand. Such accounting can be found in further elaboration of the biological metaphors with which Aristotle operates.

Given that Aristotle privileges action over actors in the *Poetics*, the synthetic organism that tragedy embodies is a counter-intuitive one, to say the least. Yet it affords a clue for understanding Aristotle’s statement above that tragedy is mimesis “not of persons but of action and life.” While the lives of specific individuals are held in the balance—narrowly saved or violently dashed—the life in question refers neither to these fragile agents for whom we feel pity and fear, nor to life in general; rather, it refers to the “life” of the action itself. This animation initially becomes evident in the unity of significance that emerges from the course of events in accordance with its own logic, the meaningfulness that determines the proper place and worth of each of its elements. In recognizing this larger unifying order, whose significance dictates what is to be included and what is gratuitous, what is a beginning and what an end, we see the action take on, as it were, a life of its own. What comes to life through the events yet “against expectation”—not only the expectation of the characters, but our expectation in particular—is the manifestation of an overarching design of action that belongs not to any one character or any string of causes, but to the action itself. This sort of meaningful manifestation that cannot be simply calculated with reference to discrete events or their addition to one another comes about, as Aristotle’s formulation suggests, in the form of *paradoxia*, or marvelousness. We follow the events, we see how they arise through one another and coalesce, yet we are ignorant of, and therefore find wondrous, the hidden causes underlying the organic wholeness to which they belong.³²

³¹As Halliwell puts it, “the action of a play is not simply the sum of the component actions or events; it is a coherent and meaningful order, a pattern which supervenes on the arrangement of this material and arises out of the combination of purposive individual actions” *Aristotle’s Poetics*, p. 143.

³²Such ignorance, proceeding from the shift between two natural forms of order, is distinct from an ignorance of the fates of the characters themselves. Marie George, for example, states: “As the plot builds

Grasping the organic order of tragedy entails more, however, than simply recognizing that a meaningful story emerges from a collection of linked events. The plot's soul-like quality, its internal principle of motion, reveals itself in the dynamic nature of this significance according to which the action comes forth as a unity.³³ In complex plots—those that involve, along with suffering, the components of reversal (*peripeteia*) and recognition (*anagnorisis*)—Aristotle finds this synthetic principle of motion most evident (1452a13–22), and furthermore highlights these latter two components as the “most potent means of psychological effect (*psychagoge*)” (1450a32–34). *Psychagogia*, literally, the leading of souls, implies not merely a directedness according to which souls are to be moved. It is also associated with that effect produced by excellent mimetic objects in making the inanimate appear animated, as in Xenophon's retelling of the conversation between Socrates and the sculptor Cleiton, whose works “bring forth that illusion of life (*zotikon phainesthai*) which is their means of captivating (*psychagoge*) their beholder.”³⁴ In producing this illusion of life in tragic mimesis, reversal occupies the preeminent position. For reversal, as Aristotle defines it, is a “change to the opposite direction of events . . . in accord . . . with probability and necessity” (1452a22–24). While tragedy in general for Aristotle has to do with this change between the poles of adversity and prosperity, reversal distinguishes complex from simple plots in concentrating this transformation of action within a relatively brief time span, occurring suddenly, thereby intensifying the experience of pity and fear.³⁵ Since Aristotle states that “in reversals and simple structures of events, poets aim for what they want by means

up to its climax our wonder is aroused as to how things are going to turn out . . . how are they going to get out of that one? is Lear going to get his come-uppance? what will happen to Cordelia?” “The Wonder of the Poet, the Wonder of the Philosopher” in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 65 (1991): p. 195. This characterization of tragic wonder is flawed in that it presupposes that wonder is extinguished in a single viewing of a work, once the missing blanks have been filled in, as it were. On this account, modern adaptations of earlier stories—Sophoclean, Shakespearean, and the like—could not be wondrous at all, because we already know how the story goes and how things will be resolved. Moreover, this conception implies that those in attendance at a production which adheres to the course of a particular traditional myth—surely familiar to many, if not most, of the viewers in Fifth Century Athens—would lack the proper psychological response. Rather, following Ferrari, it is necessary to observe that “the audience at a tragedy knows, by generic convention if by nothing more definite” the general course in which a drama is headed (p. 195). As further support for the audience's foreknowledge of events, we can also point to Euripides' fondness for projecting, through the mouthpiece of a divinity, significant events or even the climax of the action from the very beginning. This is especially the case in Aphrodite's opening speech of the *Hippolytus*, and applies to a lesser extent in the *Bacchae*, *Alcestis*, and *Hecuba*. Thus, what is remarkable about the wonder produced by such plots is that despite our ability to understand and follow the events and to possess a general idea of what will happen, our experience is nonetheless imbued with wonder.

³³“The unity of tragedy as a specific nature . . . requires the functional isolation of the action on its own level. . . . It is this self-contained isolation that enables the action to function analogously to the soul of a living animal and so to function with the constitutive primacy of an immanent formal-final cause.” Husain, *Ontology and the Art of Tragedy*, p. 56.

³⁴*Memorabilia* 3.10.6—an observation that I borrow from Seth Benardete and Michael Davis, *Aristotle: On Poetics* (South Bend IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2002), p. 22.

³⁵Cf. Else: “The notion of ‘reversal of fortune’ is inherent in all tragedy, as Aristotle sees it, not merely in complex tragedies. On the other hand the notion of a *sudden* reversal, which touches off the catastrophe, is inherent in *para ten doxan*, which implies that our expectation must have time to expand in one direction before the action ‘swings’ to the other,” *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*, p. 345.

of the wondrous” (1456a18–20),³⁶ it is convenient to assume that wonder is nothing more than a feeling of surprise. Reversal, however, is not merely an abrupt change in the action of the drama; it is an abrupt change as well in the *significance* of the events leading up to this change, and thus, of the work as a whole. As Michael Davis observes, “the turn of events [in reversal] involves not so much a change as a reinterpretation of what has already occurred. . . . Reversal must, therefore, be *our* recognition as an audience that what we thought to be is not what we thought it to be.”³⁷

This point can be demonstrated by considering a particular case of reversal that Aristotle finds paradigmatic, namely, that inaugurated by the messenger in *Oedipus the King*. Formally limited to one relatively brief section of the action, Aristotle notes that the reversal takes place when “the person who comes to bring Oedipus happiness, and intends to rid him of fear about his mother, effects the opposite by revealing Oedipus’s true identity” (1452a24–26). On its own, this illustration of reversal seems only to be a localized oppositional movement insofar as the messenger—a character of secondary interest in the drama—accomplishes an inadvertent contradiction of his own intentions (he had hoped to gladden the king, not ruin his life). Yet by revealing more information to Oedipus than he had originally intended, that is, not merely that his father in Corinth has died, but also his early salvation from exposure outside of Thebes, the messenger helps Oedipus to the recognition of his own terrible fate.

The recognition that this scene brings about on the part of the audience, on the other hand, has to do with the action of the plot as a whole. While we have been watching Oedipus doggedly seek out Laius’s killer, the emphasis of the tragedy seems to have been a straightforward linkage between Oedipus’s own character and the purposes he pursues; he appears to direct the better part of events throughout. Paradoxically, however, in light of the revelation brought by the messenger, the initial meaning of Oedipus’s words and deeds from the beginning of the play onward reveal themselves as elusive of Oedipus’s intentions; they turn out to belong to a larger order of events that ultimately show him to be as much a patient of actions as he is their author. For example, his pronouncements, early in the drama, that he is “a stranger to the story [of Laius’s murder] as a stranger to the deed” (220) take on new meaning in view of the fact that events have determined Oedipus to be as well a stranger to himself: we realize that he was not simply mistaken about who killed Laius, but also about the significance of his own speech and action.³⁸ Indeed, each successive act that he undertakes as Thebes’s savior seems only to further testify, in retrospect, to his role as its source of pollution. As well, in condemning Creon for conspiring against him, Oedipus succumbs to a state of paranoia that—whether it initially strikes us as a misguided product of the sharp wit for which he is famous or

³⁶Cf. *Rhetoric* 1371b24–25: “The same may be said of reversals and narrow escapes from danger; for all these things are wondrous.”

³⁷Benardete and Davis, *Aristotle: On Poetics*, p. xx.

³⁸F. L. Lucas articulates a related conception of reversal, yet one which rests more directly upon the expectations of the characters *within* the drama, what he calls the “irony of human blindness,” namely, the “tragic effect of human effort producing exactly the opposite result to its intention,” p. 99.

a flaw in his character—we eventually come to see as part of his developing victimhood. In such events their necessary and probable sequence that at first moves along the lines of a mystery undergoes, contrary to expectation, a shift or transformation in meaning, wherein the significance of the hero's specific actions are sublated into the larger design of the action in which he is unknowingly caught up. Here, with the aid of reversal, we are made aware of a unity that had been taking shape behind, as it were, the sequential course of speeches and deeds; events that we had originally followed according to their necessary or probable linkage subsequently “hang together” in a new constellation: the logic of the action as a whole.³⁹ In this paradigmatic *psychagogia*, then, we are led not just to a heightening of pity and fear, but also to that beautiful organic order whose manifestation provokes in us the phenomenon of wonder mixed with these affections.⁴⁰

IV

If we have succeeded thus far in outlining a conception of wonder in the *Poetics* that functions in like manner to that of the *Metaphysics*, it nonetheless remains open to debate whether aesthetic pleasure is the true end of tragedy. Reference back to the *Rhetoric* reveals not merely that wonder involves the desire to understand, but that this desire is itself pleasant (1371b23–24). Thus, one may argue that it is simply the

³⁹The principle of the emergent life of the plot, while perhaps best illustrated in *Oedipus*, can be discerned to lesser or greater degrees in other tragedies as well. *Antigone*, for example, embodies this principle more modestly in its scope. The reversal of the play's action (beginning with the death of Haemon) sets the words and deeds of both Antigone and Creon, in their mutual struggle, into a new framework of significance. For not only had Antigone appeared up to the point of her revealed suicide to be the primary figure of the drama (whereas Creon turns out to be the real center of the action as well as its patient); the action first appears to be determined by the conflicting commitments of individuals who could have chosen otherwise, whereas in fact the dual elements of *physis* and *nomos*, indicative of human life as such, have in their necessary tension shaped the conflict from the beginning. Antigone resists Creon not as a political subject, but rather as a family member of the deceased, yet her final address is as a citizen—a status which she cannot escape—to her city. Creon, on the other hand, acts out of political motivations in setting and enforcing his ban on burying Polyneices, disregarding Antigone's blood relation as well as the matrimonial ties between her and his son. The inversion of the protagonists becomes complete when we notice that it is as a father and husband that Creon suffers the fate to which he willingly, yet unknowingly, contributed. In this case, our wonder is piqued as these broad, yet decisive forces come into view and reveal themselves to have been driving the action as much as the agents themselves, and this broader view provides us with a set of terms within which to interrogate humanity anew.

A more recent expression of reversal in this connection is exemplified by Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, wherein the scene of recognition and reversal gestures not to an ancient conception of fate or necessity, but rather to the connection between socioeconomic and psychological conditions with which the protagonist Nora must contend. Her struggle to keep a shameful secret from her husband so that he will continue to love her brings Nora to reject both her husband's affections as well as the family life that she strove to preserve nearly to the point of suicide. In her revelation at the end of the play, we recognize that Nora had not merely been struggling to meet the moral and political demands of bourgeois society; she had been unknowingly struggling at the same to free herself from these demands insofar as they obscure her own capacity of self-awareness. Like Oedipus, she operates with a tragically false conception of who she is and meets with the fate she'd hoped to controvert. Yet in her case, the very meaning of such a fate is transformed from devastation to self-affirmation once we observe the larger forces at play.

⁴⁰Cf. Belfiore: “The logical connection . . . between events that are ‘pitiable and fearful’ and events that have ‘the wonderful’ implies that tragic pity and fear include an element of wonder,” *Tragic Pleasures*, p. 222.

particular kind of pleasure accompanying this desire, rather than its directedness toward fulfillment in understanding, that is essential to tragedy. Indeed, this seems to be what Jonathan Lear has in mind in the second prong of his critique of poetic wonder where he considers Aristotle's third and final mention of wonder in Chapter 24 of the *Poetics*, which runs thus:

In tragedy one needs to create wonder, but epic has more scope for the irrational (*ton alogon*) (the chief cause of wonder) . . . wonder is pleasurable: witness the fact that all humans exaggerate when relating stories, to give delight. It is above all Homer who has taught other poets the right way to purvey falsehoods. (1460a11–19)

It is, of course, not simply explicable phenomena—that is, those that possess their own *logos*—that move us to wonder about them; our desire to know can be aroused equally by those occurrences that are *alogon*, lacking any determinable cause or principle. “In this case,” Lear writes, “it cannot be that wonder provokes understanding which is pleasant—for irrationality ultimately resists understanding.”⁴¹ Lear takes the fact that aesthetic wonder can have either rational or irrational stimuli as evidence for his thesis that the pleasure proper to tragedy is non-cognitive; any understanding that accompanies such pleasure is, on this line of thought, incidental at best.

That we must distinguish two orders of wonder⁴²—not due to differences of inherent dynamic or intensity, but rather with regard to the opposition between their sources—becomes clear in the further development of Aristotle's discussion:

Stories should not comprise irrational components; ideally there should be no irrationality, or, failing that, it should lie outside the plot . . . not inside the drama. . . . The excuse that the plot would have been ruined [without irrational elements] is ridiculous; one should not construct plots like this in the first place. If a poet posits an irrationality, and a more rational alternative is apparent, this is an absurdity. (1460a27–34)

Aristotle's prescriptions for successful plot construction dictate, therefore, that tragic wonder is to be born of causes that can be understood in principle, to the exclusion of any inherently unfathomable source. If wonder were simply the vehicle for pleasure in drama, it is difficult to see why Aristotle would insist upon keeping the tragic plot pure of irrationalities when the latter would work just as well to provide this specific brand of pleasure.

Yet a look at the kinds of phenomena that Aristotle calls “irrational” brings our conception of tragic wonder—and its link with understanding—into further relief. As he notes above, the sorts of phenomena opposed to a scheme of likely or necessary events coming about “on account of each other” include the exaggerated

⁴¹Lear, “*Katharsis*,” p. 324.

⁴²On this point I am in agreement with Else that “[t]here are two kinds of wonder” (*Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*, p. 624). However, his point of distinction between the two varieties of wonder is not entirely clear. Rational wonder, he notes, “is essentially intellectual, a manifestation of the desire to know,” whereas the “irrational-marvelous” is based upon illusion and falsehood (*ibid.*, pp. 624–25). The implication is that the second kind of wonder is somehow lacking in the desire to understand or learn; if this is so, then a case must be made for Aristotle's decision to use the same term for both of these phenomena.

(*prostithentes*) and the downright false (*paralogismos*). Achilles' bare shake of the head to restrain the Achaean army from interfering in his pursuit of Hector is clearly such an exaggeration of the army's visual and interpretive capacities that it stretches into the impossible, and would be utterly ridiculous if put on stage.⁴³ Such patent implausibility, while inspiring wonder,⁴⁴ comes at the cost of pity and fear because the audience thereby loses its sense of similarity, and therefore identification, with the characters portrayed.⁴⁵ Moreover, wonders of this sort arise as isolated phenomena whose strangeness of place only either obscures or distracts from our consciousness of the wholeness of action to which they have been artificially attached; hence, these impede the *eusunopton* essential to tragedy's effect.⁴⁶

Aside from this aspect of *ton alogon* bearing upon plausibility and coherence of tragic action, there are two other types of irrationality that affect rather the distinctive *quality* of such action. Recall those events that from the outset⁴⁷ Aristotle distinguishes from the rational cause of wonder, namely chance (*automaton*) and fortune (*tyche*). As Aristotle makes clear in *Physics* II, chance and fortune, while distinct from impossibility *per se*, do not arise as part of a logical order within which their causes can be grasped; these operate "outside of (*para*) . . . necessary sequences or those that happen for the most part" (197a19–20). Yet in the *Poetics*, he implies that chance and fortune can in certain cases masquerade as components of a meaningful order "because even among chance events we find most wondrous those which seem to have happened by design (as when Mity's statue at Argos killed the murderer of Mity's, by falling on him as he looked at it: such things *seem* not to occur randomly)" (1452a5–9). Occurrences like the death of Mity's murderer, despite their wondrous suggestiveness, nonetheless provoke an inferior form of wonder precisely because for Aristotle the "design" toward which they gesture would appear to belong to the divine, rather than the human, sphere.⁴⁸ As such, the complex interplay of human intention and error, of activity and passivity, that culminates in the life of action

⁴³Michael Davis observes: "At least [Achilles] would have had to repeat [this signal] a number of times to the various segments of the army he passed by during the chase. Either Homer ignores the limitations of space—the sign could never have been seen at so great a distance, or he ignores limitations of time—the sign would have had to be repeated. . . . This sort of wondrous event, the irrational (*alogon*), is less possible in tragedy where the cosmos of the visible governs." *The Poetry of Philosophy: On Aristotle's Poetics* (South Bend IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1992), p. 140.

⁴⁴Else refers to this variety of wonder as serving the "childish" pleasure associated with "playing up" stories when we retell them (*Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*, p. 624).

⁴⁵Aristotle notes that feeling fear for another, in particular, presupposes an awareness of likeness between ourselves and the person for whom we fear (1453a3–7).

⁴⁶One of the reasons why forms of wonder based in *aloga* are more suited for epic has to do with the limits and capacities of the genre itself; between tragedy and epic Aristotle finds the latter "less one (*het-ton mia*)" than the former (1462b3–7), though lack of strict coherence allows epic naturally to excel in the areas of "grandeur, variety for the hearer, and diversity of episodes (*megaloprepeian kai to metaballein ton akouonta kai epeisodioun anomoiis epeisodiois*)" (1459b28–30).

⁴⁷From Aristotle's first mention of wonder (1452a3).

⁴⁸Aristotle does not explicitly identify divine agency with irrationality in the *Poetics*. However, several passages strongly indicate this identification, among them Aristotle's irritation at the fact that the *deus ex machina* in *Medea* was not set outside the plot as irrational elements should be (1454a37–b2), as well as his approval of the exclusion of Apollo's oracular pronouncement from the plot in *Iphigenia in Tauris* (1455b7–8).

is flattened out, reduced in the end to the work of unfathomable divine laws and purposes⁴⁹ before which the viewer must shrug her shoulders.

Aristotle's resistance to these irrational components of drama is indicative of what Stephen Halliwell has called a "secularization" of tragedy in the *Poetics*.⁵⁰ That is, tragedy is essentially circumscribed within the limits of intelligible human action, and this action takes on a logic whose ultimate causes and meaning, though not readily apprehensible, incite us to their elucidation.⁵¹ The blend of ignorance and understanding that composes tragic wonder for Aristotle is trained upon the principles of human life and the ambiguities of the human condition that exhibit in their representation this very blend of clarity and obscurity.⁵² In this regard, Jean-Pierre Vernant conceives tragedy itself as a form of questioning, one in which "man (sic) and human action are seen . . . as problems."⁵³ Here action manifests itself in tragedy through a fundamental paradox: the precariousness of humanity rooted precisely within its own concerted agency. From the Aristotelian perspective, tragedy must embody the mysteries of fate in such a way that it provokes the kind of wonder that, as a desire for knowledge, is capable of fulfillment.

V

Although this paper is concerned primarily with the problem of understanding in Aristotle's conception of tragedy with respect to its invocation of wonder, it is necessary to clarify, on the other hand, a distinction between the experiences of philosophic and aesthetic wonder. While these have been shown to share an overall dynamic that is geared toward order and partakes both of understanding and ignorance, it would be a mistake to assume that they are identical phenomena.⁵⁴ For it is clear that tragic wonder is not the product of a detached intelligence, but arises in concert with pity and fear; moreover, these latter emotions, in order to be tragic and thus to translate into a kind of pleasure, consist in the audience's liminal position with respect to the reality and unreality of the events unfolding before them on stage.⁵⁵ The viewer is seduced by the dramatic action, but in maintaining an implicit

⁴⁹*Epithes*, or "design," is associated frequently with purposiveness. Cf. *LSJ*, s.v.

⁵⁰Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, p. 233.

⁵¹"The mind that contemplates the tragedy, and is drawn into it by the pull of pity and fear, is led to recognize the mechanisms of human errors and their consequences in the heightened form made available by myth." *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁵²Though there is not sufficient space within the scope of this essay to detail the significance of *hamartia*, or the hero's tragic error, it is nonetheless indispensable that those humans with whom the audience identifies must be characterized by a kind of ignorance that only manifests itself as such in the poetic device of recognition. In this sense, the audience's ignorance of the meaning of tragic action in its unfolding is mirrored by the ignorance of the agents within the drama itself.

⁵³Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York NY: Zone Books, 1990), p. 38. What I take from Vernant in particular is this conception of the human as a problem in tragedy; where I disagree with Vernant is his insistence that tragedy is a "questioning to which there can be no answers" (p. 38). My position is that, as with any object of interpretation, a wealth of accounts is possible, none of which is final. Nonetheless, there is in each case an opportunity for understanding.

⁵⁴As Else appears to do (*Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument*, pp. 624–25).

⁵⁵A point that Paul Woodruff develops at greater length in "Aristotle on *Mimesis*" in Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, pp. 73–95.

awareness of its status as a mimetic object does not confuse this action with the passivity that she enjoys as an intensely sympathetic observer. To this extent, the audience recapitulates within itself the mysterious duality of agency and victimhood played out on-stage by allowing itself to be carried along by the plot while actively following it at the same time. This psychological position, wedded to pity and fear, cannot but hamper a fully theoretical perspective.⁵⁶ Thus, to follow a tragedy, and to watch an action come to life, is to partake of philosophical wonder in incipient form; we typically make neither our ignorance nor our understanding explicit to ourselves while we are caught up in the drama. Attending a tragedy is not, properly speaking, doing philosophy any more than it is seizing an opportunity to watch terrible things happen to good people.

We may say, therefore, that the more immediate function of tragedy does have to do with the pleasure that comes “from pity and fear through mimesis.” However, tragedy’s broader end is not realized in its performance; beyond our pleasure, we nonetheless retain a desire to decode the meaning of that which has pleased us. Indeed, as an object of study, a well-constructed tragedy reveals successive layers of significance and accommodates a wealth of interpretations without exhausting its meaning in any single definition. Thus, we can analyze the action represented within a tragedy and work out an explicit account that illuminates one aspect or another of our human condition. To do this, however, is to pursue further the wonder provoked within us as members of an audience, and to this extent, to transpose the distinctive pleasures of the theater with those of philosophy.⁵⁷

⁵⁶Halliwell places wonder in a kindred liminal space: “Wonder itself does not seem to be simply identifiable either with the particular emotions elicited by tragedy, or with the process of understanding: yet it has both an emotional and a cognitive significance.” *Aristotle’s Poetics*, p. 75.

⁵⁷Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2008 meeting of the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy and to the philosophy faculty at Fairfield University. I am indebted to those audiences as well as to Christopher Long, Gary Gurtler, and Sara Brill, each of whom provided invaluable encouragement and criticism on various drafts of this work.

