The Others in/of Aristotle's *Poetics*

Gene Fendt, Department of Philosophy, University of Nebraska, Kearney NE 68849

*Abstract*

This paper aims at interpreting (primarily) the first six chapters of Aristotle's *Poetics* in a way that dissolves many of the scholarly arguments concerning them. It shows that Aristotle frequently identifies the object of his inquiry by opposing it to what is other than it (in several different ways). As a result aporiai arise where there is only supposed to be illuminating exclusion of one sort or another. Two exemplary cases of this in chapters 1-6 are Aristotle's account of mimesis as other than enunciative speech (speech that makes truth claims, or representation) and his account of the final cause of tragedy *in itself* as plot, vis a vis its final cause as *regards the audience*, which is *katharsis*. Confusions arising from failure to see the otherness of representation and *katharsis* leads to an overly intellectualist understanding of the purpose of tragedy.

The Others in/of Aristotle's *Poetics*

It frequently happens in Aristotle's writing that he brings up the other of a topic or an answer he is working toward in order to center more precisely on his topic, or to show by contrast his own view of the problem.[[1]](#endnote-1) In such cases, no matter how clear these others may be in themselves, they become shadows against which background Aristotle casts light on the problem at hand. As his style in most works is quite elliptical, this method frequently causes aporiae, which in turn prove to be foundations for large and impressive scholarly theories baptized in his name. The first 6 chapters of *Poetics* are a particularly rich darkness of elliptical examples aporealizing large and impressive scholarly structures. This kind of elliptical movement, in fact, leads up to the famous sentence about katharsis, with more than the usual train of scholarly consequences because the naming and separating out has already gone on for several chapters. Let us begin with a short summary of what happens, and what questions might arise.

The first chapter opens with the claim that poetry (including drama) and music are modes of mimesis (1447a15) which mimeses differ in three ways—means, objects, manner. We might ask here on what grounds Aristotle picks out just those muses (poetry and music)—what principle, if any, differentiates them from other mimeses? That there are other mimeses becomes immediately apparent when the next sentence talks about color and form being the means of some other mimeses (painting, and probably sculpture), though not any of the above-mentioned ones. Then, as he goes through the list of possible means and their combinations, Terpsichore appears, having rhythm alone as her means of mimesis, after being skipped over in the original list of muses whose mimeses he seemed to want to discuss.[[2]](#endnote-2)

In chapter two, where he claims that the objects of poetic mimesis are men in action, and such are necessarily either good or bad, painting again makes an appearance, which would seem to indicate that  in 1448a1 does not exclude  when it picks up the  of 1447a27. That is to say, since mimesis is of *character* as well as what they *do* and *suffer* (1447a27), then the later reference to action and actors (1448a1) implies as well character (1448a3) and suffering (not mentioned in 1448a). When he adds, of dancing and music, that such differences of character "are even possible" there (1448a9,10), he may be implying that the distinctions apply across all mimeses, or that they do not necessarily apply there (a negation modern dance, music, and painting might seem to want to hold). We may, in that latter case, wonder whether there are other possible objects of mimesis than actions and agents and their concomitant as the remark about music and dancing might seem to imply. We might particularly wonder about that with regards to painting since paintings can be of things not yet recognized (1448b17), which would seem to indicate that they are mimeses of something other than human character.

And then in chapter three, which claims that the manner of mimesis is by narration, dramatization, or both (as in Homer),[[3]](#endnote-3) he is most clearly talking about poetry, not about sculpture, dance, painting, or music. He has, however, already ruled out some things that look like poems, namely the verses of Empedocles, which have nothing but meter in common with poetry and to which these further questions (means, object, and manner) should not at all apply. All of these shadows are cast well before their darkness is set to work in chapter 6.

Let us start with the most general division which seems to underlie this opening discussion, the shadow of which falls on Empedocles and rules his verses out. The burden of the first four chapters is mimesis: its kinds (1), causes (4), means (1), objects (2), manners (3). If Empedocles has nothing in common with Homer or other poets except his metrical language, then it is reasonable to think that Empedocles' verses are an example of an other of mimesis. They are in fact also an example of what *De Interpretatione* called enunciative or declarative speech ()—speech that makes truth-claims. This does not necessitate that enunciative speech is *the* other of mimesis, for there may be other others, for example the diagram Socrates draws in the dirt for Meno's slave boy, which also seems not to fit with the mimeses Aristotle mentions in *Poetics*. That drawing is not essentially a mimesis of action or character and is not itself a declarative speech. I will, however, suggest without further ado that the other of mimesis is representation and I suggest it because of a line of Plato's.[[4]](#endnote-4) In the *Laws* Plato's Athenian stranger says "all the arts of the muses are and "a)and the first term is related to those ikons which cast their shadows in the cave, which ikons are representations of the things outside.[[5]](#endnote-5) Empedocles, like Socrates to Meno's slave boy, is representing to us a state of affairs about the world: the picture theory of language applies, if anywhere, only in enunciative, scientific speech; it is not what poetry, or any other kind of mimesis does. By enunciative, or declarative, scientific speech I mean what Aristotle seems to mean by it in *De Interpretatione*—speech that makes truth claims. As Aristotle explains later, if a historian wrote in verse he, too, would not be a poet.[[6]](#endnote-6) Where representation (like this article) aims at knowing and truth, mimesis aims at feeling and katharsis.[[7]](#endnote-7) When we ask questions along the representative line we are asking questions subject to gnoseology, the criteria of which are relations of things in the world; our usual question is "is it true?" When we ask questions along the mimetic line we are asking (broadly speaking) moral questions, the criteria of which are passions; our usual question is "is it good?" (Or, if we are Nietzscheans, "is it healthy?")

If we pay close attention to what Aristotle says about the causes of mimesis—that we have an instinct from childhood to do it, and there is a universal delight in seeing it done[[8]](#endnote-8)—we note that mimesis is *ab initio* tied to pleasure, and so its great area of functioning is the appetitive and emotional part of the soul. Further, if we remember what it is that children learn earliest—moral states, not intellectual concepts, children having no part in the active life of the rational element (NE 1100a, 1103b25)—we will consider that mimesis must be tied to the feelings and emotions as it works even on the pre-rational soul, and not directed to learning as that is usually understood. Learning in the usual sense has a reference to truth, but the question of truth only arises with reason, and mimesis is effective from childhood on—before reason and its particular form of learning become active in the soul of the human being. Before we learn what is true, we "learn" to love the good and the beautiful—or not; but these kinds of learning are different and take place by different means.[[9]](#endnote-9) By representation, then, I mean something about which it is fitting to ask "is it true?" This question is out of place with regard to mimeses. It is not asked by young children, and it is out of place for adults. An adult who comes out of "Stars Wars" asking "is it true, do you think?" has missed the point.[[10]](#endnote-10) "Is it good?" is a different question and the most important one according to Plato (and proper to ask of mimeses as Aristotle will imply in *Nichomachean* *Ethics*, in the *Politics,* and in the *Poetics*).

Perhaps I should put things slightly differently: A child's soul is of course a rational soul or it would not be human, but infants and the youngest of children love mimeses, so much so that you can draw their attention from bodily pains to a mimesis. What begins in mimetic play is *that on which* knowledge may later be built. What we "learn at first by imitation" (1448b9) is this *organization* of the passions. This learning is pleasant even for children because imitation is natural to us. It is not that the desire for knowledge is what draws the child in—its emotions and desires do; similarly we will find that our emotions and desires are the thing poetry aims at effecting a katharsis of, and that emotional katharsis is the reason we can go to a great play many times. So, when we ask 'is it true?' of a mimesis we are asking a critic's question, not a scientist's: Does the mimesis mime the character, action, emotion, etc. well? We are not saying *there is* a certain character or action that has been performed in Thebes at some time, or even that *there is* a place called Thebes findable on a map. *There is* is a phrase that is central to enunciative speech in *De Interpretatione*, however. The question is whether the mimesis evokes and contains 'likenesses' of moral and emotional states (cf. *Politics* 1340a10-27, 39-1340b19). The critic's question is whether this is done well, the politician's is whether it is good to do. The truth of mimesis may be a complete fiction.

Poetry, then, is mimesis, not representation, though *Poetics* itself is a work of representation—a work of enunciative speech about a realm in which enunciative speech is not. There are, of course, enunciative speeches *in* poetry—"Jocasta is dead"—but poetry is not enunciative: enunciative speech is one of the others *of* poetry (another other would be Socrates drawing a triangle for Meno's slave, or a magician finding the ace everywhere in a deck of cards). Similarly, mimeses (in general) may represent or have representations within them, but they are not, essentially, representative.[[11]](#endnote-11) We commonly follow this rule of division: If *Genesis* is a mimesis then it is a mistake to take it as a representation of cosmological or historical anthropological states of affairs; similarly, if a Platonic dialogue is a mimesis, ….

That can of worms is other than the topic of this paper, just as Plato and his dialogues constitute one of the others of the *Poetics*. About mimesis we might want to know how many kinds there are, or the principle of their division, but Aristotle seems to have picked up just one of them—poetry—and so in his list of means (chapter 1) he merely lists all the means found in all the various forms of poetry (cf. *Symposium* 205b8-c10). He points out along the way that some of those means belong as well to other mimeses—other muses: color and form belong to painting, harmony and rhythm belong to music, rhythm alone belongs to dance, language alone belongs to the nameless art of Sophron, Xenarchus and Socratic Conversation, but all four of them belong to comedy and tragedy—which brings him closer to the specific subject his *Poetics* will study.

When he next (chapter 2) takes up the topic of the objects of mimesis, he is giving another simply distinct way of categorizing mimeses: according to the character of the object. That is, this is not the second in a series of right-hand divisions (see note 1), for it crosses all the aforementioned means, nor does it depend in any way on those previous divisions. While he has in mind what we would call 'poetry' and is aiming to pick up dramatic poetry in particular, he points out a distinction which not only (necessarily) crosses all poetry but also (possibly) applies as well to all other 'makings'—poetry in the broader Greek sense, or kinds of mimesis. We know it applies to some other mimeses, like painting and flute-playing.[[12]](#endnote-12) We may be tempted to doubt that that moral distinction of characters (1448a1-4) is applicable to every poem, or that every poem is about actions with agents, though that certainly is true of tragedy, comedy and epic, but if we consider that the action may just be speaking, and the agent speaking reveals a certain character in his language, rhythms, topic—in a word, voice—then "the agent mimed must either be above our own level of goodness or beneath it, or just such as we are" (1448a3-5) even in the shortest lyric.[[13]](#endnote-13) In this way Aristotle would cover "feelings"—that which popular artists since the romantics have considered the object of which art is the "expression" (read mimesis)—as that which is mimed, for a person's feelings are either better, worse, or the same as ours.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Finally, granted that poetry is a kind of mimesis which uses language, or language with pleasurable accessories, and that it imitates actions with agents, it may do so in one of three ways: dramatically, by assuming characters (comedy, tragedy), by 'narrating' and thus remaining the same throughout (dithyramb, nome, lyric), or both narrating and assuming characters (epic). This distinction of mode or manner is a third independent distinction applicable to mimeses, and among these distinctions there is no hierarchy of application. That this third distinction might apply, as do the others, to other forms of mimesis than what we call poetry has already been limned in note 3. Aristotle layers these distinctions—and each casts its own umbra and penumbra—in an effort to focus on dramatic poetry. It would seem, then, that a complete poetics might include, besides the famously missing book on comedy, a book on the poetry that remains the same throughout, and one on those things that work like epic, which Aristotle might think is complete in chapters 23-26.[[15]](#endnote-15) A complete verbal aesthetics would include those forms of writing that use language alone (without rhythm?),[[16]](#endnote-16) without meter and harmony—including Platonic dialogue—and a complete aesthetics would include all forms of mimesis. All those absent others cast their shadows in *Poetics*, and from those shadows many a theory of criticism has been created.

So we should read those first five chapters as focusing more and more directly on what the rest of *Poetics* is about: drama. He begins by talking about poetic production itself (), showing the various sorts of distinctions one can make, noting their media, objects, modes, kinds, their *dynameis*, and the synthesis of plot for fine *poieses* (1447a). The first three chapters serve as a summary of these issues as 1448b2 indicates. When he picks up the division of mimeses according to character again (1448b25, cf. 1448a1-7), he notes that the nature of the poet is defined by the kind of character he (or she) imitates: the better character imitated by the tragic (and epic) poet, the worse by the comic.[[17]](#endnote-17) He lines up several other kinds of making in accord with this distinction and we might well suppose that all of our making falls subject to this categorization. So all art is either comic or tragic, or—as we might say these days—low or high. This topic of the mimetic character of human beings, and so the mimetic character of poets leads Aristotle to the altogether unsurprising question of whether poetry should be judged in itself () or with regard to the (equally mimetic, equally divided) character of the audience (), which he leaves aside as an other discourse ().[[18]](#endnote-18)

It is not quite completely other, for in *Poetics* 6 Aristotle gives two different explanations of tragedy, and they give, pretty clearly, the four causes of tragedy as understood precisely in accord with that question—first with regard to the audience (1449b24-28), and then as it is in itself (1449b31-1450a25). That is, Aristotle gives the causes of tragedy both as a reader response theorist would understand it and as a formalist or new critic would understand it. The first definition, the most famous sentence in literary criticism, is a summary of that 'other discourse' which Aristotle is not taking. In that logos tragedy would be understood as a dramatic *mimesis praxeos* (form) in sweetened speech (matter) which through incidents arousing pity and fear (efficient cause) accomplishes a *katharsis* of such *pathemata* (final cause). If the treatise's first three words and Aristotle's modus so far are to be believed, this is the road not taken by the remainder of *Poetics*.[[19]](#endnote-19)

The second set of causes takes considerably longer than a sentence for Aristotle to set out, and this should be a further hint that that first definition is one of those elliptical others set next to the topic at hand in order to show more clearly what is to be discussed, *and what not*. The final cause of tragedy according to the second set of causes is the plot, which, we will discover later, includes the reversals and recognitions. It is to the plot that all the other elements and causes of tragedy (in this understanding of it—tragedy in itself) turn. The next chapters (7-22) take great pains to lay out these internal characteristics. The thought and character of the agents are the efficient causes of the action, and the characters of the tragedy exist for the sake of the plot: If you want certain things to happen, you have to have characters who are likely *to do* (motive cause) such things. While the matter of the tragic poem is still words—so diction and melody—the poem (as there are actors) is in the form of a spectacular world (: 1449b33).

This brings out an interesting point about *mimeses*, and about *politeiae*. Poetry and polities have mixed natures. They are both natural to man, and natural things have an internal teleology. They are also constructions, like a carved bowl or a car, and so they have an external teleology: artefacts have their good outside themselves in the service they render. We can study states and poems as independent things—for their internal order and *ergon*—as Aristotle studies states in the first books of *Politics*. We can also raise questions about them with regard to that telos which is outside themselves, which they are supposed to achieve (*Politics* 7). This is not generally the case for (e.g.) biological substances. In the case of states the telos is *eudaimonia*, and Aristotle makes clear in another book—the *Nichomachean* *Ethics*—not only that we rate the goodness of a state by how well it achieves that telos, but what the proper understanding of that telos entails. With regards to poetry, the plot is then the *arche* or final cause of tragedy considered in itself, and the *psyche* or formal cause when we consider tragedy as it relates to an audience (1450a37).[[20]](#endnote-20) Under that latter consideration, katharsis is the final cause of poetry. As with any other made thing, it is the cause for which the thing is made—the end to be achieved outside the making of the thing—that is the index of its worth to the polity. Unlike any other (pure) artefact, the poem can *also* be treated as having its own internal teleology. So, the final cause *of* tragedy is katharsis, but though Aristotle lays out in 1449b25-30 what direction a logos about the worth of tragedy would take, he puts it off. Aristotle can study poetry , but all the while he knows it has another side—a reference to its service to us, the audience in the theatre. This particular other of poetics is neither the left side of a division, nor an example, nor someone else's opinion, but another aspect of the thing itself (cf. note 1).

The *Poetics* is, then, not an answer to any of Plato's supposed problems with drama, for it considers tragedy in itself, without relation to its audience. We can see from what he has said in the earlier chapters, however, that an investigation of the worth of tragedy would be a very complex undertaking, for it would have to consider the permutations of two sets of three kinds of character, since we would have to consider the effects of better, equal, and worse poets (or voices) on better, equal and worse audiences.[[21]](#endnote-21) There would be, then, nine possible effects of tragedy, and three possible effects if we consider that tragedy can only be written by a character which mimics the good. Tragic catharsis is, then, not one thing, but at least three.[[22]](#endnote-22) Considering the complexity of the problem, it is no surprise that Aristotle puts it off to get clear about the thing "in itself" first.

So, then, critics like Alexander Nehamas[[23]](#endnote-23) are right in their claim that Aristotle is not answering Plato's charges in *Republic* X in writing the *Poetics*. (That Aristotle is answering Plato is a rather standard view.)[[24]](#endnote-24) They are wrong, however, in their reasoning. Even Janko, whose article seeks to explain (I would say) the effect of good tragedy on the middling audience, is too intellectualizing. He says, "because the emotions also have a cognitive component, such reactions [as those we have at a play] help us to take the correct decisions" (343). The emphasis here is at least misplaced, for "the self-controlled (*enkrateis*) but not fully virtuous" already make the right choice, *their cognitions* need no correction; it is *their feelings* that need catharsis, and a good tragedy provides a shape in which those feelings may be aroused and grow to their proper power and shape—be transformed, purified, released. It would be better to say that "because the emotions can be aroused through cognition a play can work on our passions." The play's proper work is on our passions, not on the "cognitive component," though we will also understand ourselves better being thus transformed. Therefore we need not be as concerned as Janko is about the ability—or lack of ability—of a person to discriminate mimesis from reality (352-353), for the feelings aroused and catharsized by the good comedy or tragedy will be proper, ie, those that conduce to virtue.[[25]](#endnote-25) It is not that Aristotle thinks tragedy is primarily something intellectually stimulating and clarifying of how the passions work, still less that he transforms the purpose of playing into achieving an intellectual resolution—an understanding of necessity in the play. The intellect is not the issue. S. H. Butcher is another who takes this rather aesthetic, or aestheticizing (which rhymes with anaesthetizing)[[26]](#endnote-26) view of tragedy and claims that "fine art sets practical needs aside; it does not seek to affect the real world, to modify the actual" (157). But this is false, for katharsis is *a modification of the real passions of the audience*; it is science (*theoria*) which only knows and does not affect, or aim to affect. Tragedy aims to effect certain affects.[[27]](#endnote-27) Katharsis is the final cause of tragedy when we examine it with a view to its relation to an audience, but that examination is not entered upon in *Poetics*, it is an other of *Poetics*.

Of course there are some problems about tragedy that cannot be resolved by examining it purely . Two come up for particular notice in *Poetics*. If everything *in* a poem is for the sake of the plot, then in order to specify more exactly what makes a plot tragic rather than comic we have to set the poem into a framework of greater reference, namely the end of tragedy with regard to the audience. It is not surprising, then, that when Aristotle wishes to answer just such questions about the plot (chapters 13 and 14) he refers again to the *ergon* of tragedy (1452b30). If the plot is that to which everything *in* the poem is subservient, then in order to be definitive about *its* details we have to examine what the *poem itself* is subservient to—the end outside of it.

Secondly, if we wish to make a judgment about the worth of a tragedy, the proof is in the putting on (1453a26-28). And in the putting on we can see if it accomplishes that particular aim for which the artist shaped it. The aim of tragedy being "through pity and fear to accomplish a katharsis of such *pathemata*," Aristotle can answer critics who prefer double plots (1453a30-39), and those who like spectacle (1453b1-13), by reminding them of tragedy's particular *telos*. There is no place in *Poetics* for him to exhibit or defend his reasons for thinking that "through pity and fear accomplishing a katharsis of such *pathemata*" is the final cause of tragedy, that would be *allos logos*. He assumes that external end when he needs it to explain some detail about the poem . Like a politician, a poet shapes something natural—man's sociality for the politician, our mimetic nature for the poet—in order to achieve something better. Just as one can do an analysis of the major parts and interconnections of a state without much reference to its purpose—*eudaimonia*, so one can analyze poetry in the same way—without reference to katharsis. So, as the *Politics* assumes happiness is the end of politics, but does not talk much about it (until book 7 it is an other logos), the *Poetics* assumes katharsis is the end of poetry, but does not say much about it. These textual absences do not imply that a state or a poem is devoid of moral purpose or that no judgments can be made about states or poems as to both their comparative success and the comparative value of that success, they merely place the question on the side, and use—when necessary—the shadows they cast as that against which to see something else more brightly.

So then, what I have called 'representation' is an other of what the *Poetics* is about. Poetry is not (nor is it concerned to be) a direct contributor to our store of true facts about the world; Empedocles is—or wants to be. Then, too, the *Poetics* is not (in the main) about mimesis in general, it is not about all the ways our feelings and moral states may be moved or shaped by art, but only about those mimeses which use language. Further, it—at least what we have of it—is not concerned even with all the kinds of mimesis that use language, but only tragedy (epic being a subtype thereof) and comedy. So far as we can tell it never aimed even at covering all of the mimeses that use language, for there is no evidence that there was a third book covering that nameless type of poem made by Sophron, Xenarchus and Plato. Those, too, are others of the *Poetics*, though not others of poetry or mimesis. However, since the *Poetics* covers the most inclusive form of mimesis (or, since tragedy uses all the means the other arts use separately) we may be able to read it as synecdochic of those mimeses which only use rhythm or language, for all of those other mimeses will break into the same categories of character—better/worse or tragic/comic. In either case that will be another logos.

To eliminate further conversations (or mark out work that needs to be done in later or different books), the *Poetics* is not *about* either emotion or katharsis; Aristotle assumes that the connection between mimesis and pleasure and mimesis and emotional states is recognized, and briefly gestures in that direction in chapter four. He later simply states that tragedy is made in order to accomplish a katharsis of such emotions as pity and fear, but again assumes we know both what katharsis is and that it is the purpose of poetry (if not all mimeses). So, finally, this lack of concern about emotion and katharsis in the *Poetics* does not mean that Aristotle thinks that tragedy in particular or poetry in general is a teacher of the mind,[[28]](#endnote-28) that katharsis is primarily intellectual,[[29]](#endnote-29) or that katharsis is something that occurs in the poem itself.[[30]](#endnote-30) He gestures at a fact about the nature of human beings—the link between the passions and mimesis, and defines the telos of the maker of tragic mimeses in relation to that fact about human nature, the telos being what any maker of a thing has in mind, and the true telos of a thing being the end the best makers make it subservient to and achieve. But *katharsis* of the *pathemata* occurs outside of the poem, and the poem  is the topic of the *Poetics*, so *katharsis* and *pathemata* lie outside its purview—though they cast their shadows within. Most of the critical confusion about the *Poetics* is due to the confusion of one or another of these 'others' with the real topic, outlined in the first sentence of the treatise, and carried through rigorously, if elliptically, throughout. The war engines of competing critical theories are not erected "by seizing on some accidental side of his doctrines,"[[31]](#endnote-31) but are visions caused by the crossings of these shadowy others in the *Poetics*. All of them are others of the *Poetics*.[[32]](#endnote-32)

1. So there are these two ordinary others—the 'left hand' side of a division, Aristotle dividing further on the right to get to a definition, and the opinion of another, Heraclitus, e.g.—against which he presents his own ideas. Generally an Aristotelian investigation begins with a list of the latter; curiously, the *Poetics* does not. There is also Aristotle's sometimes perfunctory use of concrete examples from a class which is later divided (or which examples are also elements of other classes) which leaves open the question whether the whole class (or which class) fits under the point being considered. We will see all of these methods of distinction at play shortly. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. In his posthumously published *Plato and Aristotle on Poetry* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1986), Gerald F. Else says there is no art of rhythm alone known to Aristotle since dance always included music, which would be an example of melody with rhythm (77f). But surely Aristotle would be able to distinguish two different practices here even if in performance the dancer was always also the musician. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This phrase (1448a20-24) is an infamous crux, of difficult grammar and various emendation, and probably not soluble in a universally satisfiable manner. See Gerald F. Else's discussion in chapter 3 of *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967). I have consciously elided the translation in a direction which allows the echo of *Republic* 392d to be heard in my argument. Elision in that direction is particularly disliked by scholars, such as Else, who like to keep their Plato and Aristotle in disagreement, so I need some more explanation behind this all too quick summation. Butcher's translation offers what Else calls a bipartite division in manner: mimeses may be  (by narration)—either assuming other personalities as Homer or remaining the same throughout—or …  (presenting the whole through actors). The first division, as we see, is itself also bipartite.

   It strikes me that Aristotle's idea here might be explained by considering voice. A mimesis may be in a single voice or a complex of voices; if complex, these voices may be contained in one master voice, as Homer's in the *Iliad* or Socrates's in the *Republic*, or they may be thoroughly independent as in drama and the *Meno*. So we have, on one end of this range, simple saying—one voice speaking as one: me, here, now—and on the other end drama, and in between something that partakes of both—drama's multiplicity of voice in the characters and narrative's simplicity of voice in the master narrator. Plato might say that between the homodiegetic and the heterodiegetic is the homo-heterodiegetic. From either Aristotle's direction, or mine, or the Platonic, we can derive something like the romantic's genrel distinction: lyric, epic, dramatic. The advantage Aristotle gains by using less distinctly poetic or philosophical-critical terms than 'voice' or 'diegesis' is that his distinction , taking up different characters or using one unchanging one, or …  is more applicable to those shadowy others of poetics (e.g., dance, paintingmusic) than Plato's or my more strictly poetic explanation. So a dancer may take up a series of characters or remain one, *or* there may be several dancers interacting dramatically. The book begins in extreme generality——about artistic makings: these are the manners: 'narrating' as one character or as several, or presenting through actors.

   This way of understanding Aristotle's phrasing, besides going along with some fairly basic facts about art generally and poetics specifically, avoids erasing and emending Aristotle's text (as Else, *Argument*, page 95), or claiming, as Gérard Genette—an even more strictly bipartite divider—(*The Architext: An Introduction*, translated by Jane E. Lewin, Berkeley: University Press, 1992, cf 11-14, 22-23) that "as for the poems that we would call lyric (for example, those of Sappho or Pindar), neither here nor elsewhere in the *Poetics* does Aristotle mention them; they are plainly outside his field" (10). My reading is that while Aristotle does not mention Pindar and Sappho they are clearly in the field, although, as he is aiming to bring drama particularly to light, he skips over them in silence, assuming we see where among the shadows of the preterite muses they fall. Aristotle's use of examples here is partial and representative, not exhaustive and inclusive. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Though the distinction will cause much ado, not the least of which reason is that *mimesis* and its Greek cognates are frequently translated as representation or one of its English cognates. Cf., for example, Martha Nussbaum ("Tragedy and Self-sufficiency" in *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics*, edited by Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, Princeton, 1992): 280, Richard Janko ("From Catharsis to the Aristotelian Mean," in Rorty, ed.): 341-353. Even if not mistranslating *mimesis* to representation, many scholars treat the two terms as equivalent (cf. Stephen Halliwell "Pleasure, Understanding, and Emotion in Aristotle's *Poetics,*" also in Rorty, ed. and Genette, *The Architext*, page 10f and passim), which generally leads to turning Aristotle's view of tragedy and catharsis into something much more intellectualist than there is good reason to believe is true about tragedy, catharsis, or Aristotle's view of them. Some further examples of this intellectualist tradition are Halliwell, Else, Nehamas. At the outermost extreme they lead to statements like "the Greeks had no theory of non-representational art because they had no non-representational art" (at a conference, scholar forgotten), the premise of which is clearly false. Take a drinking cup, which besides the gorgoneion (is that a representation? of what? how do you know? ever see one?) have figurative designs and use colors in ways which are not representative. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Else (27) considered it a rather surprising fact that "neither  nor any word like it is ever used in the *Poetics* to describe any aspect of the poet's work." If it were a fact, my use of the distinction from *Laws* would go far to explain it, but, alas, it is false. At 1460b8 Aristotle says that "the poet is a *mimêtês* just like a painter or any other *eikonopoios*." A defense of the use of this particular word—'representation'—as the other of mimesis would require a much longer and different logos. For that discourse see my article "Intentionality and Mimesis: Canonic Variations on an Ancient Grudge, Scored for New Mutinies," *Sub/Stance* 75 (December, 1994): 46-74. Briefly, I should like to group together on the side of representation, terms like *eikastike*, *eikon*, 'enunciative speech,' 'lie,' and on the other side words whose root is 'mimesis.' The point of my use of *Laws*' distinction is not to say that representation and mimesis are ever thoroughly separate; as the Athenian stranger says, all the arts of the muses are *both*. My understanding is that the muses are weighted toward mimesis, the sciences to representation. The point Aristotle make in his discussion is that the mimetic aspect is what is important, and that this is so the rest of 1460b could teach us, for there he says that, given the representative aspect of art, there are two kinds of mistake: meaning to represent correctly and failing through lack of expressive power—in which case the poet's art is at fault; or, meaning to describe in some incorrect way through which a technical error in some special science gets into the poet's description—in which case the error is "*not in the essentials of the poetic art*" (1460b23). That's my point: Representative truth is not the prime motive of poetry (that is also true of painting in at least some cases known to Aristotle, since there are paintings of things no yet recognized); problems of correct representation are only "accidentally" (1460b17) problems of poetics. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. I take it that this is Aristotle's point at 1451b1-7. He considers that it is already granted that history and philosophy are other than mimetic (I would say they are representative); given that we know how things work in that other—hyperbolically opposed—area, we may make the comparison Aristotle does: poetry argues/reasons/speaks (*legein*) according to the universal (as philosophy, over there does), history argues/reasons/speaks according to the particular. Cf. Stephen Halliwell, who thinks that Aristotle is trying "to locate a domain for poetry which is somewhere (though not at some exact midpoint) between territories whose character …would be deleterious to…drama. The paradigms of these territories are philosophy and history" (251). On my view drama is located in a territory hyperbolically other to both, and so in a way not located between them at all: drama is mimetic, philosophy and history representative, the latter two make truth claims, as I do, here. The ship of poetry is triangulable from two points in a different realm: land. Poetry is thus "more philosophical" than history and "of graver import" without having the same kind of relation (declarative) to universals and particulars as either one of those disciplines. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Of course, one may, in an enunciative speech, be attempting to lie—represent an untruth—but even so we represent it as being the truth, as being the way things are related in the world. A magician does the same thing with his cards. Similarly, a mimetic work may not accomplish a katharsis of any emotions, but instead aim at or succeed in making the emotional situation of the audience worse (as a lie can aim at or succeed in making the intellect worse). As poetry is a form of mimesis and aims at katharsis, rhetoric is a form of representation and aims at persuasion—more exactly, at decision—as the last word of that treatise indicates. These two aspects (mimesis and representation) are never entirely separable, as the paper in *Sub/Stance* goes to some length to show. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Butcher thinks that the two causes for poetry are the instinct for mimesis and the instinct for harmony and rhythm, and claims that the usual interpretation of the  as the instinct of imitation and the pleasure derived from imitation gives but two tendencies of one —the natural love of knowledge (*Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, New York: Dover, 1951): 140n-141n. Butcher's explication, like that of most scholars, tends towards intellectualism; further, it is clear from Aristotle's opening discussion that rhythm and harmony are means of mimesis (1447a23), as such they cannot be an instinct separate from mimesis. I think that the two causes are the pleasure of mimesis and the pleasure of seeing mimeses. These are two distinct pleasures, both clearly noticeable in children. It is truth, not the exigencies of grammar or plausible textual reconstruction, which should be our testing stone here. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For by "dwelling as it were in a salubrious region [our children] may receive benefit from all things about them, whence the influence that emanates from works of beauty may waft itself to eye or ear like a breeze that brings health from salubrious places, and so from earliest childhood *insensibly guide* them to likeness, friendship, and harmony with the beauty of reason" (*Republic* 401c-d). Only a human soul responds in this way to beauty, and it does so quite early. The reason which awakens reason in the child is the reason in the things around it, brought out and attended to by the culture in which the child grows and which the child *mimics*, not knowing the reasons of things. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Compare a famous scene in Freud's *Future of an Illusion*. In that book the father praises the son who asks of a fairy tale "is it true?" and hearing that it is not walks away in disgust. This shows that neither father nor son understand the purpose of playing. Freud and son's mistake is common in our science worshipping post-enlightenment age. He thinks there is scientific, representable truth and there is play; and the question of scientific truth is for full-fledged adults, while play is for id. Mimesis is strictly neither, though it partakes of both. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. A poem, in fact, may be made up entirely of enunciative propositions, but even so we do not read it as we do *De Interpretatione* or the *Poetics*. As Wittgenstein says, "The way music speaks. Do not forget that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information , is not used in the language-game of giving information" (*Zettel*, #160). Thanks to H. L. Hix for this reminder and other helpful comments. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. My guess is that the moral qualification (good or bad object) applies necessarily to poetry because it uses language, and wherever there is language (logos) there is reason (logos) and wherever there is reason there is the distinction between good and evil, for the mind only sees in the light of the good, or to be less platonic, the chief good (NE 1094a22). It may be that other mimeses (those that do not use language) may be able to escape the moral judgment Aristotle says applies across all poetry, though I doubt it. That, too, is a topic for an other discourse. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Else makes as excellent a case as can be made that Aristotle only has two categories in mind here:  and . (chapter 2, 68-82)—the worthwhile and those of no account. Whether the distinction here is into two or three makes little difference to my argument. That the worthwhile might have two different kinds of life—the practical and the contemplative would allow a third to show up in the original dichotomy, though it is unlikely that one could make a very good play that is a mimesis of the contemplative life. Music, on the other hand, might be an appropriate medium for such a mimesis. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Two comments: 1) This explanation would allow that Aristotle's distinction of mimeses according to character could apply even to abstract expressionist painting, since, even without knowing what a painting represents, it is the mimesis of a characteristic emotion, passion, or feeling—not necessarily the artist's own. 2) Needless to say Aristotle does not suffer from the fashionable and really fallacious view that emotions are just there and we can make no moral judgement about them. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Aristotle may consider the book on epic complete in those four chapters (23-26) and not requiring a separate study since tragedy includes all the elements of epic, and more (1449b17-20). However there are other forms than epic which use epic's mode of a master voice with several characters—most novels for instance. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Aristotle says language (1447a29). Else argues (*Argument*, 30-33 and 38) that the phrasing allows that rhythm may stand alone while harmony and language always stand with rhythm. On a closely related point Aristotle apparently counts only 3 or 4 kinds of verse as *metra*. On the continuity and ambiguity of the two terms rhythm and meter see Else, *Argument*, 60-66. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. If this moral distinction is rigorously exclusive it should be somewhat surprising that whoever can write good tragedy can also write good comedy (*Symposium* 223d), for the character that imitates the good is not the same kind of character as the one that imitates the worse—unless he does it only for the sake of play (*Republic* 396e). Homer is peculiar for just this reason (1448b34-49a2). It should also be surprising that we have characters who are not among the better sort in any tragedy—as, say, most of the Greeks in *Hecuba*. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. 1449a7-9. We can find parts of this other discourse, as we shall see later. See below in text and note 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. It is, then, not at all surprising that, as Elisabeth Belfiore says (and many others complain), "katharsis is never explained" (*Tragic Pleasures*, Princeton: University Press, 1992): 338. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. In *De Anima* 415b3 Aristotle says that "for the sake of which" is ambiguous; it may mean (a) the end to achieve which, or (b) the being in whose interest the act is done. So katharsis is that for the sake of which (a) plot is made, and tragedy is that for the sake of which (b) the plot is made. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Even if Else is correct in thinking that Aristotle's division allows of only two kinds of character— and  or the worthwhile and those of no account—among the worthwhile there still are the contemplatives. See above, note 13 and below, note 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. So we might suspect that Aristotle outlines the functions of mimesis generally in the last chapters of *Politics*, where he takes up the functions of one specific mimesis—music. Music's possible *tele* break up precisely in accord with the three types of character: *What katharsis means depends on who you are*. 1) It can be used for mere amusement and relaxation by those who are worse than ourselves, and spend their time—insofar as that is possible—only in such pursuits. (That these are worse than us is made clear in *Ethics* 1176b8-30.) 2) Music conduces to virtue for those of us who are not yet among the perfect. (Janko argues, rather convincingly, that this is all of us in the article noted above, note 4.) 3) Music "contributes to the enjoyment of leisure and mental cultivation, which is a third alternative," applicable to our superiors, or perhaps even ourselves when we are in our best state (1339a21-26, cf.1341b35-40). For a picture of how these three plausible types of katharsis are applicable to comedy see my paper, "Resolution, catharsis, culture: As You Like It," *Philosophy and Literature* 19 (1995): 248-260*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. "Pity and Fear in the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*," in Essays on Aristotle's *Poetics*, edited by Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, Princeton, 1992. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. See, for example, Nikolas Pappas, "The *Poetics* argument against Plato" (note 2 in Nehamas' article) Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, and in several of her essays, Leon Golden in various articles, and Richard Janko, "From Catharsis to the Aristotelian Mean," who, however, bases his arguments largely outside of the *Poetics*. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. I mean that we need not make this distinction (mimesis/reality), or use it, in order to judge of the goodness of the poem. A poem or work of art which needs this distinction in order to be defended is probably not morally defensible. We should, of course, be concerned for someone who cannot make the distinction, for such a one is mad; but that is a distinctly different problem from judging works of art. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. I say this to make a point: the aestheticising of art is the cutting away of art's direct mimotional impact and its particular task: to effect certain affects, to move *and so* to educate the passions, not *to tell* and so to educate, as Empedocles teaches physics. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Therefore the arts are a more important element of the education and culture of a city than science (on this, too, Plato and Aristotle agree), for they are most closely related to the right working of the soul, which right working is eudaimonia—the aim of politics and every individual. Theoretical wisdom may be a virtue not everyone has the requisite gifts to achieve, certainly we do not all have the capacity for it to the same degree, but moral virtue is available to all whose capacity for it has not been destroyed by (for example) being raised in a barbaric culture. The first order of political business is poetics.

    It is, of course, a kind of falsity to separate the passions and the rational element as if they were thoroughly distinct parts of the human being, like the gas and the engine of a car. Our passions are different from animal passions because they are the passions of a rational animal; our reason is different from God's—our reason is passionate. We can have a passion for justice, God just is. A child is moved passionally before it is moved by reason, mimesis is passional movement. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. As did the Platonic Socrates (poetry is a very bad teacher of the mind); also Halliwell, in various articles. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. As Leon Golden, and Nussbaum; the latter says "emotions … are individualized by the character of the beliefs involved," ("Tragedy," 273) which would mean that neither children nor animals could *feel* a distinct difference between anger, fear and pain. But there is a mimetic differentiation between them that, for example, any parent can hear in a child's cry at one month. To say these differences depend on beliefs strikes me as not parsimonious. Nehamas maintains it is "impossible… that the catharsis to which the definition refers is a process which involves the emotions in any way" (293), so he has the strongest version of the intellectualist thesis (i.e., he is furthest removed from the truth). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Gerald Else, *Argument*; Paul Schollmeier, "The Purgation of Pitiableness and Fearfulness," *Hermes* 122 (1994): 289-299. What occurs in the poem is recognition and resolution, as my article on *As You Like It* shows. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory*, 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. I would like to thank H.L. Hix, Paul Schollmeier, and Owen Goldin for reading early drafts of this paper and providing many helpful and encouraging remarks. It is a mimesis of the *Poetics* that these footnotes are nearly as many words as the text; unfortunately Aristotle did not have use of this convention, which keeps the others of his main argument in no other place at all. I am also very grateful to my nameless but exacting and helpful reader at this journal.

    Words: 143 abstract, 4841 text, 3520 notes. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)