AN OUTLINE OF POETIC THEORY[1]

ELDER OLSON

I

WHEN, in any field of learning, discussions of the subject are based upon different principles, employ different methods, and reach different conclusions, such differences tend to be interpreted, by expert and layman alike, as real disagreement. The differences are not of themselves dangerous to the subject; the tendency to interpret them as contradictions is. The dogmatist, however sound in his own method, usually regards them as signs of the chaos that must await any who depart from his position. The syncretist regards them as signs that all positions are at least partly false, and collects "truths," which frequently lose, in his synthesis, not only their supporting arguments but their original significance as well. The skeptic, finally, interprets such differences as implying the impossibility of philosophical knowledge in the field. All these views are potentially harmful to learning in so far as, in suppressing discussion, they suppress some (and in the case of skepticism, all) of the problems and because, consequently, they retard or even arrest progress within the subject. Skepticism, indeed, is most dangerous of all, for it does not arrest progress merely in certain respects but arrests it wholly; and, once given head, it does not pause until it has also canceled whatever has been achieved in the past.

Criticism in our time is a sort of Tower of Babel. Moreover, it is not merely a linguistic but also a methodological Babel; yet, in the very pursuit of this analogy, it is well to remember that at Babel men did not begin to talk nonsense; they merely began to talk what *seemed* like nonsense to their fellows. A statement is not false merely because it is unintelligible; though it will have to be made intelligible before we can say whether it is true. The extreme diversity of contemporary criticism is no more alarming than—and, indeed, it is connected with—the similar diversity of contemporary philosophy; and the chief import of both is of the need for some critique which shall examine radically how such diversity arises, by considering what aspects of a given subject are amenable to treatment, what problems they pose, and how these may be

1. Reprinted from *Critiques and Essays in Criticism, 1920–1948*, ed. Robert Wooster Stallman (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1949). This essay represents, in a very condensed form, an argument developed much more fully in a forthcoming book to be entitled "General Criticism and the Shorter Forms of Poetry."

diversely formulated. For the diverse may be contradictory or not; theories of criticism which are not contradictory or incompatible may be translated into one another or brought to supplement one another, and a just decision may be given between those which are really contradictory, provided that we can isolate the differences of formulation from the differences of truths and falsities. True interpretation is impossible when one system is examined in terms of another, as is true refutation when the refutative arguments are systematically different from those against which they are directed. To propose such a critique is, in effect, to state the possibility of a fourth philosophic attitude: that of pluralism. Dogmatism holds the truth of a single position and the falsity, in some degree at least, of all others; syncretism holds the partial falsity of all; skepticism the total falsity of all. All these take into their consideration doctrines alone; pluralism, taking both doctrine and method into account, holds the possibility of a plurality of formulations of truth and of philosophic procedures—in short, of a purality of valid philosophies.

Such pluralism is possible both in philosophy and in criticism because criticism is a department of philosophy. A given comprehensive philosophy invariably develops a certain view of art; the critical theories of Plato, Aristotle, Hume, and Kant, for instance, are not any random views but are generated and determined by their respective philosophies. And while a given criticism or theory of art may not originate in a comprehensive philosophy and may resist reference to one already existent, it is not therefore really independent of a more comprehensive system, for the discussion of art must entail assumptions which involve more than art; it is merely part of a whole as yet undeveloped. In short, since criticism or the theory of art is part of philosophy, it has the same bases as philosophy and is determinate or variable according to the same principles.

It is impossible within the scope of this essay to discuss all the factors in the foundations of philosophies and criticisms; but perhaps a rough and partial statement may serve for illustration. I propose that the number of possible critical positions is relative to the number of possible philosophic positions and that the latter is determined by two principal considerations: (1) the number of aspects of a subject which can be brought into discussion, as constituting its *subject matter;* (2) the kinds of basic dialectic which may be exerted upon that subject matter. I draw this distinction between the subject and the subject matter: the subject is what is talked about; the subject matter is that subject in so far as it is represented or implied in the discussion. Philosophers do not discuss *subjects themselves;* they can discuss only so much as the terms or materials of the discussion permit; and that is the subject matter. We cannot discuss what we cannot, first of all, mention, or what we cannot bring to mind. In other words, any discussion of a "subject" is relative to its formulation. But,

further, any discursive reasoning must employ some method of reasoning or inference; and, since there are various possible systems of inference, we may say that a given discussion is a function of its subject matter and of the dialectic, i.e., system of inference, exerted upon that subject matter.

Whatever art in itself may be, as a *subject*, it is clear that criticism has employed certain aspects of it as subject matters. Thus one aspect of an art is its product; another, the instrumentality, active or passive, which produced the product; another, the product as relative to or determined by that instrumentality, and hence as a sign of the nature of that instrumentality, whether this last be viewed as actual or potential. Another is the relation of an art to a certain subject or means, as a consequence, and hence as a sign, of these; still another aspect is its production of a certain effect, either of activity or of passivity, upon those who are its spectators or auditors; and, lastly, there is the art viewed as instrumental to that effect. We may sum up all this by saying that criticism has viewed art variously as a product; as an activity or passivity of the artist; as certain faculties or as a certain character of the artist; as a certain activity or passivity of the audience; as certain faculties or as a certain character of the audience; as an instrument; or as a sign, either of certain characteristics of the artist or his audience or of something else involved in art, e.g., its means, subject, etc.

The significances which the term "poem" assumes in critical discussions may illustrate this. In its most obvious meaning it refers to the product of the poetic art; but critics have often used it to refer to what they considered more important aspects of poetic art or have differentiated it by reference to such aspects. Thus those who think that it is characterized by its instrumentality mean by "instrumentality" either the poet or the poetic powers; those who define poetry in terms of the poet see the poet as active craftsman or as the passive instrument of his inspiration or as a mixture of the two; while those who define poetry in terms of poetic powers see the poet as possessed of faculties or qualities either of a certain kind or of a certain degree. With these differences, both consequently view the poem as a kind of behavior of the poet; and, for both, the literal poem—the product—becomes a sign of that behavior, which is, in turn, a sign of the poetic character or faculties. Others find that the poem properly exists in the audience; the audience is the true poet, for, without it, the poem could never come to life; and the audience, like the poet, can be viewed as actualizing certain active or passive potentialities or merely as possessing such potentialities—hence the theories of "audience-participation" (the active view) or "art as experience" (the passive view), etc. Finally, "poem" may mean the end to which the product is instrumental, e.g., the psychological cure or ethical or political attitude or behavior.

These seem like "conflicting views"; hence they have been treated so in the history of criticism. If "conflicting" merely means "different," there is no quarrel, for these views are different enough. But if it means "contradictory" or "inconsistent," nothing could be more absurd. For, in the first place, all these doctrines have different references, and it is impossible to have contradiction except in the same reference; and, secondly, where contradiction exists, one view must be false if the other is true, whereas all these views are perfectly true in their proper senses, for all are founded upon perfectly obvious aspects of art, poetic or otherwise. Nor, if they are not contradictory, are they inconsistent, in the sense that they proceed from, or result in, contradiction; for, asserting the existence of certain aspects of art as they do, they are all true in some sense, and it is impossible for true propositions to be inconsistent. Indeed, nothing prevents certain philosophers, like Plato and Aristotle, from investigating all these aspects of art.

Whatever aspect of art a critic may fix upon, he usually seeks to explain its nature by reference to certain causes or reasons; thus those who are concerned with the product of art, for instance, have thought to explain the nature of the product by reference to its matter or medium, to the subject represented or depicted, to the depictive method of the artist or some other productive cause, or to the end or effect of the product; and some have employed merely one of these causes or reasons, while others have used several or all. Aristotle, for instance, employs differentiations of object, means, manner, and effect to define tragedy, whereas a critic like Richard Hurd finds the nature of poetry adequately defined by its subject matter.

I have remarked that the kind of dialectic exerted upon the subject matter is the other determinant of a given mode of criticism. The variety of dialectics is an exceedingly complex question, but we may occupy ourselves here only with a single characteristic of dialectics—their concern with likeness or difference, or both. The integral or likeness-dialectic reaches solutions by combination of like with like; the differential or difference-dialectic, by the separation of dissimilars. Thus a criticism integral in its dialectic resolves its questions by referring poetry, for example, to some analogue of poetry, finding characteristics of poetry which are shared by the analogue; whereas a criticism differential in its dialectic resolves its questions by separating poetry from its analogues, finding characteristics which are peculiar to poetry.

Thus—to confine our illustrations to the various criticisms which deal with the product of art—we find criticisms differing as they center on either the subject matter of art or its medium or its productive cause or its end or several of these, and as they proceed integrally or differentially. Subject-matter criticism of the integral kind resolves the subject matter of the arts into something not

peculiar to the arts, on the basis of likeness; and the principles of art, when so found, are always the principles of things other than art as well. Thus Plotinus finds the beautiful in art to consist in the imitation of the beautiful; but inquiry into that characteristic, for him, shows it to be common also to natural objects and to actions, and so upward to the Beauty which is almost indifferentiable from the Good; and the ultimate solution of artistic as well as of all other problems lies, for him, in the contemplation of God. Differential criticism of this order, on the other hand, separates the kinds of subject matter and argues on the basis of such separation, either to distinguish the arts from other faculties or activities or to distinguish them *inter se*.

In pure subject-matter criticisms, once the subject matter has been found, it determines all other questions, e.g., of artistic capacity or character or of the techniques, forms, processes, criteria, and ends of art. For example, if the subject matter in the raw, so to speak, is all-sufficient, the characteristics of the artist tend to appear as sharpness of observation and readiness of comprehension; if the subject matter requires order and selection, correlative capacities for order and selection are constituents of the artistic character; and so on. A similar determination operates throughout all other problems: criteria, for instance, are produced from some correspondence or opposition, absolute or qualified, between the subject and the medium, or the artist, or the effect. Thus many of the theories of artistic realism have as their criterion the absolute correspondence of the effects of art with those of reality itself; art is thus copyistic, and the work is a "slice of life," all formal criteria (such as order) being supplanted by attributes of the reality. Where the subject matter of art is opposed to the reality, however—whether it requires an order and selection not found in reality or differs from reality even more radically—such correspondence is qualified, or even negated, as in modern nonrepresentationalist theories.

Comparably, criticisms centering on the medium can be integral or differential, and solve their problems through reference to the medium. The integral criticism of this order is exemplified in the innumerable attempts to find general criteria for all literature, whether poetic, historical, philosophic, or personal, on the ground that all literature employs words; and the differential criticism is exemplified in the theories of men like I. A. Richards and Cleanth Brooks, who seek to differentiate poetry from prose by differentiation of the kind of diction employed in each, in order to discriminate appropriate criteria for each.[2] The character of the artist varies as the character of the medium is stated; where the medium is viewed as indifferent to form, the capacities of the artist are at the maximum, and, conversely, where the medium is viewed as tending toward form, the artist frequently appears as a kind of midwife to nature,

2. See above, pp. 46 ff., 92 ff.

assisting the bronze or the marble to a form which it implicitly contains. Criteria, again, can be found, by consideration of the degree to which a given work actualizes or fulfils the potentialities of the medium.

When the productive cause is central, the integral criticism establishes analogies between the artist or the artistic process and some more general cause, e.g., nature or natural process, or God and the divine creative process (Coleridge). Extreme criticisms of this order reduce the art-product almost to a by-product of the artistic character; Fracastoro and Carlyle, for example, refuse to limit the name of poet to those who actually write poems, since poetry is merely incidental to the possession of poetical character. Differential criticism of this kind, again, confines the conception of the artist to the unique maker of a certain product. When discussion centers on the natural elements of the artist, the artistic character lies outside the possibility of any deliberate achievement, as in Hazlitt; conversely, when the artistic character is defined in terms of acquired traits or disciplines (as in Reynolds), discussion of genius and inspiration is at a minimum, and the artistic character itself appears as amenable to art and, indeed, often as the *chef d'œuvre* of the artist.

When criticism turns on the ends of art, integral and differential dialectics are again possible; the ends of art can be analogized to other purposes of men or to some natural or divine teleology or, conversely, can be differentiated from all else. And, here, as above, the nature of the problems and of their solutions is determined by the choice of the ground-term.

All such criticisms may be called "partial," for each attempts to resolve all problems by consideration only of a part. All fix upon a single *cause*, in Aristotle's sense of the word, and account for everything in terms of it, as if one were to account for a chair merely in terms of its wood or merely in terms of its maker. None permits a full account, for the respects in which art is compared with, or contrasted to, other things are always only a part of its actual characteristics. This partiality remains, even if several of these causal factors are combined, unless, indeed, all are involved.

As opposed to such partial criticisms, there are comprehensive criticisms such as those of Plato and Aristotle, the former being primarily integral, the latter primarily differential, although each includes both likeness and difference. These systems permit not only the discussion of all aspects of art but a full causal account; for, whereas Aristotle makes the maximum differentiation of causes, Platonic dialectic employs only a single cause, but one subsuming all. The difference—not in truth or in cogency of argument but in *adequacy*—between comprehensive and partial systems can be readily seen by comparing, say, Aristotle with the "Aristotelian" Scaliger: Aristotle can discuss any aspect of poetry, but Scaliger, basing all merely upon the medium and viewing

that only in its most general light—the universal power of language being to express fact or opinion—thereby confines himself to the treatment of poetry only as the instrument of instruction.[3]

Recognition of the methodological differences between systems of criticism, and of their consequent respective powers and limitations, quickly establishes the fact that twenty-five centuries of inquiry have not been spent in vain. On the contrary, the partial systems of criticism correct and supplement one another, the comprehensive intertranslate, to form a vast body of poetic knowledge; and contemporary theorists, instead of constantly seeking new bases for criticism, would do better to examine the bases of such criticisms as we have and so avail themselves of that knowledge. Many a modern theory of criticism would have died a-borning, had its author done a little more reading as he thought, or thinking as he read. Critical knowledge, like all knowledge, must be constantly extended; but no one is very likely to extend it who is not fully aware of what has already been accomplished or of what consequences follow from such accomplishments.

If a plurality of valid and true kinds of criticism is possible, choice must still be exercised, for it is impossible to employ all methods simultaneously, and the selection of method is by no means a matter of indifference. Choice is determined by the questions one wishes to ask and the form of answer one requires and by the relative adequacy of given systems. The discovery of properties peculiar to a given kind of poetry demands a differential method, as that of properties which poetry holds in common with other things requires an integral method. If one wishes to know the nature of a given kind of poetry, as a certain *synolon* or composite, a whole and its parts specified with the maximum differentiation possible without the destruction of the universals upon which science depends, an Aristotelian criticism is requisite; if one proposes to view poetry in terms of principles of maximum community, a Platonic criticism is demanded. Every philosophy is addressed only to certain questions and can answer them only in certain forms.

II

In the method of Aristotle, which underlies the following sketch, poetics is a science concerned with the differentiation and analysis of poetic forms or species in terms of all the causes which converge to produce their respective emotional effects. Scientific knowledge falls into three classes: theoretical, practical, and productive. The end of the first class, comprising metaphysics, mathematics, and the natural sciences, is knowledge; that of the second, com-

3. Cf. Bernard Weinberg, "Scaliger versus Aristotle on Poetics," *Modern Philology* XXXIX (1942), 337–60.

prising ethics and politics, is action; that of the third, comprising the fine and the useful arts, is some product over and above the actions which produce. Only the theoretical sciences are exact; the productive sciences, or arts, are less exact than the practical, since they involve a greater number of principles, and principles derived from many other sciences.

The poetics of a given species takes as its starting point the definition of the product, i.e., a statement of the nature of the whole composite produced by an art, and thence proceeds by hypothetical reasoning to treat of the questions specific to that whole and its parts. Such analysis does not exhaust all aspects of the art; but any which it excludes are referred to other sciences. Thus the consideration of art as a skill falls under ethics; that of art as a political and social instrument, under politics; and that of art as a mode of being, under metaphysics, in accordance with the general Aristotelian practice of assigning questions to their appropriate sciences. A given special poetics, therefore, does not treat centrally of the faculties requisite for production, or of the effects to be produced by art, but of the special product, viewed as a differentiable synthesis of differentiable parts, and, as such, having the capacity or power (*dynamis*) of producing certain peculiar effects.

Before we can consider the various special arts of poetry, however, we must discuss the significance of certain concepts of a more general nature. Unity, beauty, and imitation, for instance, relate to things other than poetry but are not therefore less important to poetic discussion. The term "imitation" is used coextensively with "artificial"; it differentiates art from nature. Natural things have an internal principle of motion and rest, whereas artificial things—a chair or a table—have, qua products of art, no such principle; they change through propensities not of their form but of their matter. Natural and artificial things alike are composites of form and matter; but art imposes a form upon a matter which is not naturally disposed to assume, of itself, such a form. The acorn of itself grows into the oak; the stone does not of itself become a statue or tend to become a statue rather than a column. Art may be said to imitate nature either in the sense that the form of the product derives from natural form (e.g., the human form in the painting resembles the natural human form) or in the sense that the artistic process resembles the natural (e.g., artificial fever in the art of medicine does what fever does naturally). The useful and the fine arts are both imitative; but the latter have as their end the imitation itself, as a form possessed of beauty. Since every imitation has some form imposed somehow upon some matter for some end, specification of all these factors results in a definition of a given species of art; e.g., by specifying *what* is imitated in tragedy (object of imitation), *in what* (means of imitation), *how* (manner of imitation), and to what effect we construct the definition of tragedy. Such

definitions are the principles from which reasoning proceeds in the arts; if a certain product or whole is to be produced, it will have a certain number of parts of a certain nature ordered in a certain way, etc.[4]

A poem has unity in the sense in which anything which has continuity is unified; but, more than that, it is one in that it has a single form and is an ordered and complete whole. A piece of wire is one because it is continuous, and if you break the continuity you have two pieces; but some things are totals rather than wholes—a cord of wood, for instance, because the parts need merely be present, and not in any particular arrangement—and others are wholes proper, because they are not only complete and have all their parts but also have them in the proper arrangement, i.e., the least important ordered to its superior part, and so on until the principal part is reached. Parts of a shoe stitched together anyhow are one in the sense of continuity, but not one in the sense of assemblage into a certain single form, the shoe; a poem is similarly an ordered and complete whole.

Moreover, it is not only a whole, but one of a certain nature; it is an imitation in a certain means; hence, since a given means can imitate only certain objects (color and line cannot imitate the course of thought, or musical tones a face), poetry must imitate action, character, or thought; for a given means can be used to imitate only something having the same characteristics as it or something of whose characteristics its own characteristics are signs, and speech (the medium of poetry) is either action or the sign of action, character, and passion. (For example, painting can represent color directly, but the third dimension only by signs, such as perspective diminution, faintness, etc., of objects.) Media are not such things as certain pigments or stones but such as line, color, mass, musical tones, rhythms, and words. The object imitated, therefore, must be some form which these can take or which they can imply by signs. Hence inference plays a large role in all the arts.

Inference and perception serve to institute opinions and mental images concerning the object, and opinions and mental images produce emotion. We see or infer the object to be such and such, and, according to our opinion of what it is, we react emotionally in a certain specific way. If we have the opinion, we react, whether the thing, in fact, is so or not; and if we do not have it, we do not react, whether the thing is so or not. The opinion that a disaster is imminent produces fear; and the opinion that the victim suffers undeservedly produces pity; and so on.

Emotions are mental pains (e.g., pity), pleasures (e.g., joy), or impulses

4. It should be borne in mind that the present discussion applies strictly only to what I have elsewhere called "mimetic," as distinguished from "didactic," poetry. See above, pp. 65 ff., and below, pp. 588 ff.

(e.g, anger) instigated by opinion. The basis of our emotions toward art may be explained as follows: We feel some emotion, some form of pleasure or pain, because our desires are frustrated or satisfied; we feel the desires because we are friendly or hostile to, or favor or do not favor, the characters set before us and because we approve or disapprove the events; and we are friendly or hostile to the characters because of their ethical traits; in brief, we side with the good against the bad or, in the absence of significant differentiations of moral character, upon grounds still moral, as with the oppressed against the oppressor, with the weak against the strong, etc., our judgment now being primarily of the action rather than of the agents.

Since the object of imitation as we conceive it determines the emotions which we feel and since moral differentiation lies at the basis of our conception of the object, the possible objects of imitation in poetry, drama, and fiction may be schematized in terms of extremes, as follows: The serious, i.e., what we take seriously, comprises characters conspicuously better or worse than we are or at any rate such as are like ourselves and such as we can strongly sympathize with, in states of marked pleasure or pain or in fortunes markedly good or bad. The comic, i.e., the ridiculous, comprises characters as involved in embarrassment or discomfiture to whom we are neither friendly nor hostile, of an inferiority not painful to us. We love or hate or sympathize profoundly with the serious characters; we favor or do not favor or condescend to the comic. Serious and comic both divide into two parallel classes: the former into the tragic kind, in which the character is better than we, and the punitive, in which the character is worse; the latter into what may be called "lout-comic," in which the character, though good natured or good, is mad, eccentric, imprudent, or stupid, and the "rogue-comic," in which the character is clever but morally deficient. These kinds are illustrated in drama by *Hamlet*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, *She Stoops To Conquer*, and *The Alchemist;* the protagonists in these are, respectively, a man better than we, wicked men (the brothers of the Duchess), a good man with a ridiculous foible, and rogues. Between these extremes of the serious and the comic lie what I have called the "sympathetic" or the antipathetic; i.e., forms in which the morality of the characters does not function in the production of emotional effect so much as does our judgment of the events as, for example, just or unjust; the man is indifferent, but the suffering is greater than even a criminal should undergo, etc. The emotions produced by the contrary objects are themselves contrary; for instance, the pity and fear of tragedy are opposed by the moral vindictiveness and the confidence of retribution in the punitive kinds. Again, the emotions are contrary as the events are contrary; that is, the spectacle of a good man going from good fortune to misfortune or from a pleasant to a painful state effects emotions contrary to those

evoked by the spectacle of a good man going from misfortune to fortune or from pain to pleasure. Again, comic "catastrophe" is mere embarrassment or discomfiture, and effects emotions contrary to those produced by catastrophe in the serious forms.

In short, the emotions we feel in poetry are, generally speaking, states of pleasure and pain induced by mental images of the actions, fortunes, and conditions of characters to whom we are well or ill disposed, in a greater or lesser degree, because of our opinions of their moral character or, such failing, because of our natural sympathy or antipathy; or, in other words, our emotions are determined by the object of imitation and vary with it.[5] Emotion in art results, thus, not because we believe the thing "real" but because we vividly contemplate it, i.e., are induced by the work of art to make mental images of it. Compare such expressions as "He was horrified at the mere thought of it," "The very notion filled him with ecstasy," etc.

Pleasure, in general, is a settling of the soul into its natural condition; pleasure in poetry results primarily from the imitation of the object and secondarily from such embellishments as rhythm, ornamental language, and generally any such development of the parts as is naturally pleasing. Where the object of imitation is itself pleasant and vividly depicted, pleasure is direct; when the object is unpleasant, pleasure results from the catharsis or purgation of the painful emotions aroused in us, as in tragedy. Pleasure is commensurate, in other words, with the beauty of the poetic form; and distinctive forms, as they have peculiar beauties, evoke peculiar pleasures.[6]

By "beauty" I mean the excellence of perceptible form in a composite continuum which is a whole; and by "excellence of perceptible form" I mean the possession of perceptible magnitude in accordance with a mean determined by the whole as a whole of such-and-such quality, composed of such-and-such parts. Assuming that parts of the number and quality required for the whole have been provided and ordered hierarchically to the principal part, the whole will be beautiful if that prime part is beautiful; and that part, as a continuity, must have magnitude and be composed of parts (e.g., plot, the prime part of tragedy, has magnitude and has parts); since it has magnitude, it admits of the more and the less, and hence of excess and deficiency, and consequently of a definite and proper mean between them, which constitutes its beauty. Specifically, in terms of the form itself, this mean is a proportion between whole and part and, consequently, is relative to the different wholes and parts; in reference to perception, it is a mean between such minuteness of the parts and such

5. But cf. above, p. 71.

6. For a further discussion of the relation between pleasure and poetry see below, pp. 588–89.

extension of the whole as would interfere with the perception of the parts, as of their proper qualities, and as in interrelation with each other and the whole. Thus in tragedy the mean of plot-magnitude lies between the length required for the necessary or probable connection of the incidents and the limit imposed by the tragic change of fortunes. The constituents of beauty are, therefore, definiteness, order, and symmetry; the last being such commensurability of the parts as renders a thing self-determined, a measure to itself, as it were; for example, plot is symmetrical when complication and denouement are commensurate. As a thing departs from its proper magnitude, it either is spoiled (i.e., retains its nature but loses its beauty) or is destroyed (i.e., loses even its nature). Compare a drawing of a beautiful head: alter its definitive magnitude to a degree, and the beauty is lost; alter it further, and it is no longer recognizable as a head.

III

These questions are not peculiarly poetic ones but rather matters belonging to metaphysics, psychology, and ethics. The problems we now approach, however, are poetic and may be divided into two kinds—general questions, common to all the poetic arts, and special questions, peculiar to a given poetic art. Biology offers a parallel; for some attributes are common to all forms of life, others are peculiar. Similarly with poetics; some questions come about merely because the imitation is of action, like Aristotle's discussion of plot prior to chapter 13, others because of something specific, like his discussion of the tragic plot, imitating a certain kind of action. I shall here deal with both kinds, though illustratively only, and take up first the question of the definition of forms.

In their scientific order, all the arts, as I have said, begin with definitions of their specific products as wholes, which they utilize as the principle or starting point of their reasoning. These definitions, far from being arbitrary resolutions, must be collected from a conspectus of the historical growth of the species to which they relate; a kind of art, to be known and defined, must first actually exist. Not every aspect of the growth of artistic species, however, is relevant to their artistic character; hence their historical development must be examined in terms of their character as imitations. No single line of differentiation suffices for the separation of species. Most broadly, the arts are distinguished in terms of their media, for, since nothing can be made actual which is not potentially in the medium, the potentialities of the medium, as matter, determine all else; yet the means, even when fully differentiated, singly and in combination, is insufficient for specific distinction, for arts which have the same means may imitate opposite objects, as do comedy and tragedy. In turn, objects may be differentiated, but even such further differentiation is not definitive, for

imitations may still differ in manner, although the possibilities of manner are now broadly determined. With the distinction of modes or manners of imitation, the account of the parts of imitation qua imitation is complete, and the historical survey of the rise of the arts—the synthesis of these differentiated parts into distinct wholes—is now possible. Such history begins as the causes emerge. The poetic arts, like the other fine arts, originate in instinct, some matter being given a form not natural to it, by an external efficiency, for the sake of the pleasure produced. Yet, though imitation is natural to man, instinct is insufficient to account for the further development of art; for art ramifies rather than remains constant, as the universal cause of instinct would suggest; and its ramifications are determined by the character of the artist: the noble minded imitate the noble, the low-minded the low. Even so, the tale is not complete: for art develops further until a form is achieved and valued for its own sake. Art passes, thus, through three stages—the instinctive, the ethical or practical, and the artistic—the first two of which are determined by the nature and character of the artist, and the last by the form. The achievement of form is signalized by a revolution in the ordering and constitution of the parts: once the specifically pleasurable effect has luckily been produced, the part which is primarily effective becomes principal, develops its proper extension and qualities, and all other parts readjust to it, in their proper artistic order. A distinctive synthesis—a species of art—has now formed, and its poetics may begin, for the formulation of the distinctive means, object, manner, and effect of the synthesis gives all four of the causes which are collectively, but not singly, peculiar to it, and a definition results.

Aristotle has frequently been defended on the ground that all poetic species reduce to those which he has enumerated, and more frequently attacked on the ground that they do not. Both defense and attack are mistaken, the former because it makes poetics predictive, the latter because it assumes that, since Aristotle did not define certain species, his theory could not afford a basis for their definition. In fact, as the above account has shown, the poetics of a given species must always develop after the species has come into actual being, the definition being formed by induction; but, on the other hand, the poetic arts in their development do not leave their bases; they do not cease to have means, objects, and manners, or even the differentiations of these mentioned by Aristotle; they merely differentiate these further and produce new syntheses. The distinction between narrative and dramatic manner, for instance, has not been rendered obsolete, although it affords no significant distinction, in itself, between Homer and Henry James; yet, to distinguish them, we must begin with the different possibilities of telling, as opposed to impersonating, and discriminate the various complexities of narrative device.

Once object, means, manner, and effect have been specified to the emerging species, the definition of the artistic whole which so results permits an analysis into parts; and when the principal part has been identified and the order of importance of the remaining parts established, the proper construction of the principal part must be ascertained. That part is itself a whole composed of parts, and these parts—its beginning, middle, and end—must be determined, and the character of their conjunction—necessity and probability—must be shown. But the whole is not only a whole, but a whole of some magnitude; and, since it is, moreover, to be a beautiful whole, it must be a whole of some definite magnitude. As I have remarked, this definite magnitude lies in a mean between excess of the part and excess of the whole, the former producing such vast extension that the whole cannot be comprehended, the latter such minuteness that the parts cannot be apprehended. This formula, however, is general and must be specified to the species of art involved. Relatively to perception, it must always be determined in the temporal arts by the limits of memory, since in these arts the parts are not coexistent but successive and, consequently, must be remembered if the whole is to be comprehended; but even this is relative to the species, differences of the parts and wholes of which impose different burdens upon the memory. (A given lyric might be too long to be remembered, while a given tragedy might not.) The wholeness, completeness, and unity of the principal part once established, the part can be divided into its species; hence, for example, Aristotle divides plots into simple and complex, which are different wholes, since the complex plot consists of differentiable parts (peripety and discovery) according to the efficient cause of the change of fortunes with which tragedy is concerned.

"Aristotelian" criticism has frequently centered merely upon this much, to produce mere *Formalismus;* but Aristotle himself goes farther. The principal part is only materially a whole, complete, one, etc.: formally, it has an effect or power of a certain specific order; tragic action, for instance, is not merely action, nor even serious action, but action differentiated by a certain act—the tragic deed committed in a certain way by the tragic hero—and Aristotle, investigating the possibilities of character and action, determines which of these result in the tragic effect, for that effect—the "working or power" of tragedy —is the form. Comparably, the poetics of any species must be addressed to the differentiation of its principal part, since it is this that primarily determines the emotional effect.

Once the principal part has been treated, the subordinate parts can be dealt with in the order of their importance and according to their causes, the final cause of each being to serve its superior part, the formal cause being the beauty of the part itself. The whole analysis, thus, not merely indicates the possibilities

of poetic construction but discriminates among them as better or worse, to exhibit the construction of a synthesis beautiful as a whole, composed of parts of the maximum beauty consistent with that whole, and productive of its proper emotional effects to a maximum degree.

The method—one of multiple differentiation and systematic resolution of maximal composites into their least parts—may obviously be extended to poetic species which have emerged since Aristotle. Aristotle distinguishes broadly and between extremes; later theorists in his method must follow the basic lines and go farther. For example, his poetics, as we have it, deals only with such poetry as has plot, i.e., such as imitates a *system* of actions. These are maximal forms; there are, that is, no "larger" poetic forms or any which have more parts than these; smaller forms, such as the species of lyric, can be treated by carrying such systems back to their elements.

Four kinds of action or behavior can thus be distinguished, without regard to seriousness or comicality, etc.: (1) a single character acting in a single closed situation. By "closed situation" I mean here one in which the character's activity, however it may have been initiated or however it may be terminated, is *uncomplicated* by any other agency. Most of what we call lyric poetry belongs here: any poem in which the character commits some verbal act (threatening, persuading, beseeching) upon someone existing only as the object of his action (Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"), or deliberates or muses (Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale"), or is moved by passion (Landor's "Mother, I Cannot Mind My Wheel"). (2) Two or more characters in a single closed situation. "Closed situation" here means "uncomplicated by any other agency than the characters originally present and remaining so throughout." This parallels the notion of "scene" in French classical drama; here belong all the *real* colloquies of persons acting upon and reacting to one another (e.g., Browning's "The Bishop Orders His Tomb"), although not the metaphorical colloquies, such as dialogues between Body and Soul, etc. (3) A collection of such "scenes" as I have just mentioned about some central incident, to constitute an "episode" (Arnold's *Sohrab and Rustum*). (4) A system of such episodes, constituting the grand plot of tragedy, comedy, and epic which is treated by Aristotle.

These are whole and complete "actions"; hence the first differs from a speech in a play, the second from a dramatic scene, the third from a fragment of a tragedy; nevertheless, it is clear that, *in a sense*, the combination of speeches produces a scene, that of scenes an episode, that of episodes a plot. These classifications must not be confused with species; they are not poetic species but lines of differentation of the object of imitation which must be

taken into account in defining species. Similar analysis of means and manner would extend Aristotle's system to include all poetic forms.

So much for Aristotle's general method and his apparatus for the definition of forms; I shall presently return to such questions again, in order to sketch a special poetics, but for the moment I wish to deal with three more problems of general poetics: those of unexpectedness, suspense, and representation, although we can do little more here than touch on general points.

All emotions are greater if produced from their contraries—for example, fear in one who has been confident—and the unexpected effects just this. Like suspense, it is common to all temporal arts, the parts as well as the wholes, for whatever involves temporal succession may involve anticipation, and wherever we have anticipation we may have the unexpected. Expectation is the active entertainment of the opinion that something is necessary or probable at a given time, place, in certain relations, etc. The audience must infer, and infer incorrectly; they have the premises, so to speak, for otherwise what happens would be improbable; but they cannot connect them to infer correctly, for otherwise what happens would be expected. Since they do not infer the probable, and do infer the improbable, two things must be noted: the causes of wrong inference and the causes of failure to infer rightly. Since the premises must be considered together for inference and since the audience will reason only from premises which they actively entertain and take to be true, failure to infer will be due to (1) forming no opinion or forming a contradictory one, so that one or both of the premises will not be used; (2) failure to collect the premises, although both are entertained; (3) failure to infer correctly, although both are entertained and collected. All these can be developed to show what the poet may possibly do: for instance, opinion can be prevented by the use of remote signs (i.e., such as involve many inferences), or many and apparently contradictory signs, ambiguity of words or acts; acceptance as true can be prevented by the use of unusual consequents, by contrariety to general belief, by dependence upon the words of an apparently untrustworthy character, or by contradiction of an apparently trustworthy one; and so on.

All these things lead to nonexpectation; but the truly unexpected comes about when the thing is not only not expected but contrary to expectation. This will happen if the poet provides premises which seem to prove the contrary. It is best when failure to infer the right thing and the faulty inference are brought about by the same premises. This is effected by the use of qualification. For example, if A happens, B usually follows, except in circumstance C, but if that circumstance happens, the opposite of B results; now if C is bound to happen, but people do not know that, they will expect B after A, whereas the oppo-

site results. Surprise will vary in degree with expectation of the contrary; consequently, the audience will be most surprised when they are most convinced that B will happen. The less important, apparently, the reversing circumstance, the more surprise. Again, since the all-but-completed process makes its end most probable, expectation will be highest here; hence reversal just before the end will be most surprising. This underlies many "hair's-breadth escapes." Most surprising of all is the double unexpected, which occurs when from A comes the unexpected result B, which leads to the previously expected result C, which is now unexpected as the result of B. This is exemplified in Sophocles' *Oedipus*, where the inquiry into blood-guilt leads to the question of parentage, which seems at some remove; but the question of parentage resolves unexpectedly the question of blood-guilt.

Suspense is anxiety caused by extended anticipation—hence (1) by the uncertainty of what we wish to know and (2) by delay of what we wish to have happen, although we know it already. (Gossips are in the first state before they have been told the scandal, in the second until they impart it.) The first results whenever we want to know either the event or the circumstances of the event, whether in past, present, or future time; hence the poet must avoid the necessary, the impossible, or the completely probable, or that which is unimportant either way, for we are never in suspense about these; instead, he must choose the equally probable or else that which is probable with a chance of its not happening, and something which is of a markedly pleasant, painful, good, evil, or marvelous nature. Suspense of the second order is produced by unexpected frustration, by having the thing seem just about to happen, and then probably averting it. The anticipated thing must have importance exceeding the suspense; otherwise irritation and indifference result.

Representation—what parts of the action are told or shown, and how, and what is left to inference—is a question of manner of imitation. Obviously, poets sometimes exhibit more than the action (e.g., tragic poets exhibit events which are not part of the plot), sometimes less, leaving the rest to inference; sometimes follow the plot-order, sometimes convert it (e.g., using flashbacks); exhibit some things on a large and others on a small scale; and there are many other possibilities as well. It is impossible here to do more than suggest; in general, representation is determined by necessity and probability, emotional effect, and ornament, i.e., these are the main reasons for representing something. The poet must represent things which by their omission or their being left to inference would make the action improbable; hence, if an event is generally improbable but probable in a given circumstance, it must be represented in that circumstance (e.g., Antony's speech in *Julius Caesar*). Again, he must omit whatever would contradict the specific emotional effect (hence

disgusting scenes, such as the cooking of Thyestes' children, are omitted, since disgust counteracts pity) or include what would augment the effect (hence scenes of lamentation and suffering in tragedy, since these make us poignantly aware of the anguish of the hero). Masques, pageants, progresses, etc., are ornaments. Representation, whether narrative or dramatic, always makes things more vivid, and the latter is more vivid than the former; and it affords the audience knowledge, whether directly or through inference by signs. In any poetic work the audience must at certain times know some things and not know others; generally the denouement discloses all, except in works which have wonder as their prime effect. Unless the audience knows somewhat, emotion is impossible, for emotion depends upon opinion; and unless it is ignorant of certain things, unexpectedness and some kinds of suspense are impossible. Hence in any work something is withheld until the end: either how the action began or continued or how it ends; the audience is ignorant of one or several of the following circumstances: agent, instrument, act, object, manner, purpose, result, time, place, concomitants. What must be concealed is the primary question; the next is the order in which things must be disclosed; and theory can make available to the poet a calculus of the frame of mind of the audience, of the nature of emotions, etc., to determine the order of representation which will produce the maximum emotional effect.

All these questions can be developed to afford a vast body of working suggestions for the poet and of criteria for the critic; I shall be happy if I have suggested, even faintly, the character of the problems and the method of their treatment.

IV

We have seen that in any special poetics—whether that of tragedy or epic or some kind of lyric or novel—reasoning proceeds from the distinctive whole which is the product of the art to determine what parts must be assembled if such a whole, beautiful of its kind, is to result, and that such terms as "whole," "part," "beauty," etc., must be specified to the given art, because, for example, the beauty of a tragedy is not the same as the beauty of a lyric, any more than the distinctive beauty of a horse is the same as that of a man. Indeed, lyrics and tragedies even have some different parts; for instance, a lyric does not have plot, but plot is, in fact, the principal part of tragedy.

We may illustrate the nature of a special poetics a little further by outlining briefly that of the species to which Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" belongs.[7] It is a species which imitates a serious action of the first order mentioned above, i.e., one involving a single character in a closed situation, and the

7. For a detailed "grammatical" analysis see the (University of Kansas City) *University Review*, VIII (1942), 211–15.

character is not simply in passion, nor is he acting upon another character, but has performed an act actualizing and instancing his moral character, that is, has made a moral choice. It is dramatic in manner—the character speaks in his own person; and the medium is words embellished by rhythm and rhyme. Its effect is something that, in the absence of a comprehensive analysis of the emotions, we can only call a kind of noble joy or exaltation.

There are four parts of this poetic composite: choice, character, thought, and diction. For choice is the activity, and thought and character are the causes of the activity, and diction is the means. The choice, or deliberative activity of choosing, is the principal part, for reasons analogous to those which make plot the principal part of tragedy. Next in importance comes character; next thought; and last, diction.[8]

8. Nowadays when the nature of poetry has become so uncertain that everyone is trying to define it, definitions usually begin: "Poetry is words which, or language which, or discourse which," and so forth. As a matter of fact, it is nothing of the kind. Just as we should not define a chair as wood which has such and such characteristics—for a chair is not a kind of wood but a kind of furniture—so we ought not to define poetry as a kind of language. The chair is not wood but wooden; poetry is not words but verbal. In one sense, of course, the words are of the utmost importance; if they are not the right words or if we do not grasp them, we do not grasp the poem. In another sense, they are the least important element in the poem, for they do not determine the character of anything else in the poem; on the contrary, they are determined by everything else. They are the only things we see or hear; yet they are governed by imperceptible things which are inferred from them. And when we are moved by poetry, we are not moved by the words, except in so far as sound and rhythm move us; we are moved by the things that the words stand for.

A gifted British poet, G. S. Fraser, has objected to these remarks on diction ("Some Notes on Poetic Diction," *Penguin New Writing*, No. 37 [1949], pp. 116 ff.): "I think, on the contrary, that criticism should pay a very close attention to diction. I agree with Mr. Allen Tate: 'For, in the long run, whatever the poet's philosophy may be, however wide may be the extension of his meaning . . . by his language shall you know him.' And I do not find that Mr. Olson's sturdy-looking piece of reasoning stands up very well to my regretful probing. In what sense is it true that we are simply 'moved by the things that the words stand for,' and not by the words themselves? Certainly not in any sense in which other words would do as well: in which the fullest paraphrase, or the most intelligent exposition, would be a substitute for the original poem. And certainly not in any sense in which the situation that the poem refers to, if we were capable of imagining that *without* words—if, for instance, we could draw a picture of it—would be a substitute for the original poem, either. Not, that is, in any sense, in which 'the things the words stand for' means merely the kind of physical object, abstract concept, or emotional state at which the words point. The pointing is the least of it."

I willingly concede what I have never debated: that diction is very important to poetry; that, as Tate suggests, distinction of language is an important index of poetic power (although I cannot agree that it is the sole index or even the prime index); that criticism ought to pay the utmost attention to diction; that, as T. S. Eliot has said, the poet is likely to be extraordinarily interested in, and skilful with, language; that we are not "moved by the things that the words stand for" in any sense that would allow us to dispense with the particular words by which the "things" are constituted for us; and all similar propositions. The point is not whether diction is important, but whether it is more or less important than certain other elements *in* the poem. In one respect, I repeat, it is the most important; the reader, if he does not grasp the words, cannot grasp anything further, and the poet, if he cannot find the appropriate words and arrange them properly, has not written a poem. In another respect, however, the words are the least important, in that they are governed and determined by

The "activity" of the character is thought or deliberation producing choice determined by rational principles; it is thus, as I once remarked, a kind of argument or arguing. But there is a difference between logical proof and such poetic argument as we have here; in logical proof the conclusion is determined by the premises; here it is, of course, mediated by the character of the man arguing, just as argument in a novel or a play is not supposed to be consistent with the premises but with the character. The limits of the activity are the limits of the deliberation; the parts of the activity are the phases of that deliberation, and they are conjoined by necessity and probability.

This species of poem, then, if it is to be beautiful, must have a certain definite magnitude as determined by the specific whole and its parts; and the proper magnitude will be the fullest extension possible, not exceeding the limits mentioned above, and accomplished by phases connected necessarily or probably. This is, it will be noted, different from the magnitude proper to comedy or tragedy, and even different from the magnitude proper to a speech exhibiting choice in any of these; for example, tragedy does not aim at making its constituent speeches or actions as full and perfectly rounded as possible absolutely, but only qualifiedly, in so far as that is compatible with the plot. Hence in properly made drama there are few if any "complete" speeches, let alone speeches developed to what would be their best proportions independently of the whole; this is true even in declamatory drama, where the speeches are of more importance than in the better kinds.

The activity, however, is not merely to be complete and whole, with its parts probably interrelated; it must effect certain serious emotions in us by exhibiting the happiness or misery of certain characters whom we take seriously. Hence the character must be better than we, but not so completely noble as to be beyond all suffering; for such people are godlike and can awaken only our admiration, for they are in a sense removed from such misfortunes as can excite dolorous emotions. Moreover, the choice imitated cannot be any choice, even of a moral order, but one which makes all the difference between happiness and misery; and, since it is choice, it must be accomplished with full knowledge and in accordance with rational principle, or as the man of rational prudence

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every other element in the poem. There is agreement on all hands that words "function" in poetry; there should be no difficulty therefore, no matter how we conceive of the structure of poetry, in seeing that words must be subordinate to their functions, for they are selected and arranged with a view to these. Mr. Fraser himself has no difficulty with this fact, although he is disturbed by my statement of the fact; for he goes on to discuss (pp. 123 ff.) "a wide-scale current use of poetic diction in a really vicious sense to disguise a failure of choice, a confusion of character, or a lack of clear thought"; and he also remarks (p. 126) that "one cannot ask people to express themselves as confusingly as possible, in the hope that their confusions will prove to have a clear underlying structure; for, as Mr. Schwartz truly says, 'if this were the only kind of poetry . . . most poetry would not be worth reading.' " On this whole question see above, pp. 71 ff.

would determine it. Again, it must be choice not contingent upon the actions or natures of others, but as determined by the agent. And there must be no mistake (*hamartia*) here, as in tragedy; for, since this is a single incident, *hamartia* is not requisite to make future consequences probable.

We could proceed indefinitely here, as on all of these points; my intention, I repeat, is the merest illustration.

V

Thus far we have proceeded on the supposition that the imitative poetic arts have as their ends certain pleasures, produced through their play upon our emotions. Certainly, these are ends of art and such as any consideration of art must embrace; but to suppose that art has no further effect and that it may have no further ends relative to these is vastly to underestimate the powers of art. It exercises, for example, a compelling influence upon human action—individual, social, or political—for among the causes of the misdirection of human action are the failure to conceive vividly and the failure to conceive apart from self-interest; and these are failures which art above all other things is potent to avert, since it vivifies, and since in art we must view man on his merits and not in relation to our private interests. It is not that art teaches by precept, as older generations thought, nor that it moves to action; but clearly it inculcates moral attitudes; it determines our feelings toward characters of a certain kind for no other reason than that they are such characters. The ethical function of art, therefore, is never in opposition to the purely artistic end; on the contrary, it is best achieved when the artistic end has been best accomplished, for it is only a further consequence of the powers of art. The same thing is true of any political or social ends of art, provided that the state be a good state or the society a moral society. To reflect on these things is to realize the importance and value of art, which, excellent in itself, becomes ever more excellent as we view it in ever more general relations.

Yet these relations can scarcely be recognized unless we first recognize the distinctive powers of each form of poetic art; these relations are possible, indeed, because art has, first of all, certain powers. And it is to these powers, in all their variety and force, that the poetic method of Aristotle is directed. Indeed, the most distinctive characteristic of Aristotle as critic seems to be that he founds his poetic science upon the emotional effects peculiar to the various species of art and reasons thence to the works which must be constructed to achieve them.