Lecture 04

Literature and Mimesis: Aristotle (I)

Hello and welcome back to this lecture series on Literary Theory. In the course of today's discussion, we will shift our focus from Plato to his most famous student and rival in fame, Aristotle. As you will remember from our earlier lectures, the main term that we are focused on in our discussion of the ancient Greek intellectuals is "mimesis". We have already discussed how the concept of mimesis was at the very heart of Plato's understanding of art in general and literature in particular. In our discussion of Aristotle too we will see that the concept of mimesis plays a key role. And during our lectures on Aristotle we will therefore keep an eye on how his conceptualization of mimesis resembles or departs from Plato's understanding of the term. But before we start discussing about Aristotle's engagement with the concept of mimesis, let me briefly give you some biographical details about the philosopher.

Biography

Aristotle was born in contemporary Macedonia, but as you will know from our previous discussions in this course, our contemporary understanding of the world geography in terms of distinct and separate nation-states is not the right lens through which to approach the world of the ancient Greeks. During the time of Socrates, or Plato, or Aristotle, Greece was simultaneously a smaller as well as a larger entity than what we know as Greece in today's form of a nation-state. It was smaller than today's Greece because politically the whole of Greek peninsula was fragmented into small city states, each having their own independent identity. But on the other hand, this ancient Greece was also a culture sphere which not only included the Greek peninsula, but also stretched across northern Africa, southern Italy and

western Turkey. Aristotle, who was born in Macedonia in 384 BCE, was very much a part of this larger Greek culture sphere. At the age of seventeen, Aristotle came to Athens and joined the circle of researchers and scholars who had gathered around Plato in his Academy. This association between Plato and Aristotle has had a tremendous influence in the history of human thoughts, and as I have suggested at the beginning of today's lecture with reference to mimesis, we see the two intellectuals working on a number of similar concepts which have gone on to form the basis of much of Western philosophy. And in this famous painting by the Italian Renaissance artist Raphael titled The School of Athens, we can see Plato and Aristotle occupying the centre-stage amidst a host of other philosophers. They are completely engrossed in a conversation with each other even as the figures around them look on with awe and veneration.

Between 347 BCE, the year when Plato died, and 335 BCE Aristotle stayed away from Athens most probably because of certain political reasons, and in these twelve years he was associated with another important figure who cast a very long shadow in the human history. Here I am talking about emperor Alexander, who is often referred to as Alexander the Great. A few years into his political exile from Athens, Aristotle was appointed as the tutor of Alexander by his father King Philip. The number of years that Aristotle taught Alexander is uncertain and we also don't know much about the amount of influence that Aristotle might have had over the young Alexander. But it is tempting to make certain connections here. As we have already discussed, Plato, the teacher of Aristotle, was born during a time when in Athens the time tested mode of democratic government was faltering. Indeed, Plato himself was one of the most prominent critiques of the democratic form of government as is evident from his works like *The Republic*. Plato's student was Aristotle and it was Aristotle who

taught Alexander, the man who would comprehensively wipe away the vestiges of democracy from the Greek world and become the founder of one of the largest empires in the world. However, tempting though it might be to connect Plato, Aristotle and Alexander in this way, we really cannot be certain about how much Aristotle moulded Alexander's political views and his desire to establish an empire. What we can be sure of is Aristotle's influence on a later generation of Greek philosophers who gathered in his school Lyceum which he established in Athens after returning back to the city-state in 335 BCE. He again left Athens in 322 BCE and died the same year in a place called Chalcis.

Work

Now that we have a rough sketch of his biographical details, let us move on to his work. One of the earliest catalogues of Aristotle's work that is still extant today was produced by the Greek biographer Diogenes Leartius. Leartius lists about 550 books that were supposedly written by Aristotle. Now this list is not absolutely reliable and in fact it does not mention some of the key works that is today ascribed to Aristotle while mentioning some works which might not have been authored by him. But in spite of these ambiguities, the list bears witness to the staggering achievements of Aristotle as a scholar. What is even more astonishing than the number of books that Aristotle wrote is the number of topics that he covered in them. The scope of Aristotle's work included among other things rhetoric, poetics, sciences, especially the science of biology, politics, ethics, metaphysics…and in all of these subjects, Aristotle remained an undisputed authority for more than a thousand years after his death. It is therefore not surprising that the medieval Christian poet Dante, even while relegating the pagan Aristotle to the zone of hell in his famous book *The Divine Comedy* would nevertheless refer to him as "The master of those who know".

Unfortunately, the writings of Aristotle that have survived is only about one fifth of the total corpus that is mentioned by Leartius. And even more unfortunately, most of the writings that Aristotle consciously prepared for publication has been lost. What survives are mostly lecture notes which are often cryptic in nature and lacks the polished quality of a work that has been expressly prepared for publication and circulation. Thus, reading the available writings of Aristotle after being exposed to the exquisitely wrought dialogues of Plato can come as a disappointment in terms of literary style. However, if we can put aside the question of literary finesse, we are bound to be enthralled by the quality of discourse that we encounter in the surviving writings of Aristotle.

Poetics

The work of Aristotle with which we will specifically concern ourselves in our lectures on mimesis is a volume titled *Poetics*. Like most of his surviving writings *Poetics* too reads like a set of cryptic notes that Aristotle might have prepared for his lectures in Lyceum. Therefore, it has an unvarnished quality and carries a sense of incompleteness because many of the key ideas including mimesis are mentioned but not elaborated. However, *Poetics* has an incomplete character in another very different way. It is assumed that the volume that we are familiar with today is only one part of a larger work. Indeed, the present volume which focusses especially on the literary form of tragedy had a complimentary volume on Comedy which is now lost. So even while we prepare to delve on to the extant volume of *Poetics* dealing with tragedy, I would urge you to read a wonderful mystery novel written by the Italian author Umberto Eco titled *Il Nome della Rosa* or *The Name of the Rose* which has at its heart the quest for the lost volume of *Poetics* that deals with the subject of comedy and laughter.

Poetics division

Now let's commence our exploration of the surviving volume of *Poetics* and see how it relates to the idea of mimesis that we have been discussing in this course. The volume can be divided into three related segments. The first segment which includes Part 1 to Part 5 of the volume acts as a kind of general introduction to artistic mimesis and its classifications. The second segment covering Parts 6 to 22 discusses in details tragedy as a form of mimesis. And then the last segment covering parts 23 to 26 situates the form of tragedy vis-à-vis the form of epic poetry and presents a comparative study of them. It is however important to note at this point that in our discussion of the *Poetics* we are not going to be interested in summarizing the different sections of the work or even in finding out how one part of the book connects to the other. Rather, we are interested to know how *Poetics* contribute to our understanding of mimesis and how it carries forward or alters or even negates the discussion of mimesis and mimetic art that we have encountered in Plato's *Republic*.

Poetics and Plato

It has long been part of the received knowledge that Aristotle's *Poetics* was a conscious effort to challenge the negative views that Plato posed about artistic mimesis in his works like the *Republic*. But it is very difficult to conclusively prove this assertion because the text of *Poetics* itself does not mention either Plato or the *Republic*. In fact, to anyone who approaches this text without having read about Plato's writings on mimesis, *Poetics* will appear to be a perfectly self-sustained work which does not need to be tagged on to an earlier work for better understanding. However, those who are more aware of Plato's writings will glimpse unmistakable traces of Aristotle's engagement with his teacher in the *Poetics* both in what the text mentions and what it neglects to mention. Thus, when Aristotle in his *Poetics* sings high

praise for Homer, it becomes difficult not to read it as a counter to Plato's condemnation of Homer in his *Republic*. This is also true about the more general idea of artistic mimesis. Whereas Plato banished the mimetics and especially the mimetic poets from his ideal republic, Aristotle invites back the poets with open arms and establishes artistic mimesis as an integral aspect of human civilization.

But I think Aristotle's engagement with Plato reveals itself even more interestingly by something that *Poetics* neglects to mention or neglects to elaborate upon. As I have already mentioned, though mimesis is the key focus in *Poetics*, the text does not define what mimesis means. This gives a reader the strange impression of being suddenly thrown into the middle of discussion about mimesis without first getting her bearing right. One of the reasons why mimesis is not defined at the very onset in *Poetics* may be because it was written in the short hand form of a lecture notes where certain things were more or less understood by the intended audience and therefore needed no elaborated. However, I think a more probable explanation is that Aristotle intended *Poetics* to be an engagement with Plato's idea of mimesis. Therefore it was expected that the reader of *Poetics* will already be familiar with the general contours of the discussion about mimesis from the works of Plato and thus would not require an introductory definition. In other words, *Poetics* was conceptualized as a continuation as well as critique of Plato's writings like the *Republic* and not as a separate work with a separate starting point. However, be as it may, Aristotle quite significantly reworks the concept of mimesis and by the time we finish our discussion on Aristotle you will see how different and distinct Aristotle's idea of mimesis is from Plato's.

Poetics against Plato

The first major distinction that we observe while comparing Aristotle's treatment of mimesis in *Poetics* with Plato's treatment of the same idea is the insistence of the former that mimesis is "natural". If you remember our lectures on Plato you will know that for him mimesis was a fake, an illusion, a deceptive copy which was far removed from the true nature of things. In sharp contrast, Aristotle writes in the fourth part of his *Poetics*

> Poetry in general seems to have sprung from two causes, each of them lying deep in our nature. First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated.

These lines closely pack a number of assertions and we will be taking up most of the points made here later, including poetry being a form of mimesis or imitation, and the connection between mimesis and pleasure. But here what I would ask you to note is that Aristotle identifies imitation not only as a natural instinct which is to be found in us but also underlines it as one of the key features which make us what we are as human beings and distinguish us from other animals. Clearly, for Aristotle, mimesis is neither fake nor insignificant.

Mimesis and craft

But this idea that mimesis cannot be simply dismissed as fake comes out even more strongly in the introductory segment of *Poetics* when it emphasizes the fact that mimesis, including the mimetic form of poetry, involves craft. Which means each mimetic form of representation involves its own distinct medium, object, and manner. Let us take the craft of furniture making

for instance. The furniture maker uses implements like chisel or lathe machine to work on pieces of wood in order to produce chairs, tables, beds and cupboards which might resemble the Louis quinze style of furniture or the art deco style of furniture or the Queen Anne style of furniture. Similarly, in the first three chapters of *Poetics*, Aristotle draws our attention to how a mimetic artist depending on what kind of a craftsman he is chooses his medium of imitation like language, tune or rhythmic movements…selects the object which he seeks to express though his mediums of mimesis, be it the actions of exalted individuals or lowly men…and also selects the manner of his craft of imitation. Thus a poet for instance after choosing language as his medium and the actions of exalted men as his object will still need to decide whether he is going to present his imitation in the manner of a play or an epic. This means that depending upon the medium of mimesis, its objet of imitation and the manner employed to imitate the object we will encounter different kinds of mimetic products. And though these may be all forms of artistic mimesis they are not one and the same thing. A tune played on a bamboo flute is a very different kind of mimetic product compared to a picture painted on a canvas using colours or a dance performance accompanied by rhythms played on a drum. At the root of this difference lies the fact that mimesis is a craft; and just like different kinds of crafts produce different kinds of end products, similarly different kinds of mimesis produces different kinds of artistic imitation.

Mimesis and Mirroring

But why is this insistence on the nature of mimesis as a craft important? Let us look at this point by comparing it with Plato's understanding of mimesis. As you will remember from our previous discussion on the Theory of Forms, for Plato, mimesis was primarily understood as a mirroring activity. One of the reasons why mimesis was considered as fake by Plato was because this attempt at transparently mirroring an object was prone to deceptive illusion. According to Plato,

the mimetic artist fails not because he deliberately wants to misrepresent the object, but rather because his very effort to produce a mirror image of the object was dependent on faulty perception. If a stick is immersed in water and the painter paints the stick as bent, then it results in a fake representation of the stick not because the painter deliberately wants to mislead us but rather because he wants to produce a mirror image of what he perceives in front of him. Aristotle's insistence that mimesis is a craft critiques this notion of transparent mirroring.

Let us again take the case of painting. A painting, no matter how realistic it is, is not a mirroring surface. And the reason why even a realistic painting is not a mirroring surface is because the ability of a painter to represent or mimic an object is shaped as well as limited by the tools, mediums and manners of his craft. His canvas, his colours, his palette and all such things that he employs to create his painting shape the kind of imitation that he is able to produce. And therefore a painter's imitation of an object is different from a sculptor's imitation of the same object because these two *crafts* are different. And neither the end product of a painter's craft nor the end product of the sculptor's craft would produce a transparent mirroring of the object.

Which means that to judge a mimesis as a faulty mirroring would be a misplaced judgement. No mimesis is an act of mirroring, faulty or otherwise, and all mimesis are determined, shaped and limited by the requirements of particular mimetic crafts be it flute playing, poetry writing, painting, sculpting, or dancing.

Two important things follow from this change in perspective. The first is that looking at mimetic products as pale and faulty mirror images of the original is incorrect. A mimetic product should be studied and appreciated *by itself* as an instance of a particular kind of craftsmanship. This is in fact highlighted at the very opening of *Poetics* which begins with the words "I propose to treat of Poetry in itself…". The second thing that follows from this reorientation of our understanding of

mimesis is that a mimetic product relates to its object of imitation in ways other than transparent mirroring. But what is this other way or other ways in which a mimesis relates to its object of imitation? If the relationship is not that of mirroring, then what other kinds of imitation is possible? Moreover, in this changed perspective, what happens to the other objection that Plato has against mimesis… namely that mimesis promotes emotional excesses and thereby suppresses the rational faculties of man? We will take up these questions in our next lecture. Thank you