

Lecture 05

Aristotle (II)

Introduction

Hello everyone. Today, in this lecture series on Literary theory we will continue with our discussion on Aristotle and his contribution to the concept of mimesis. As you will know, the text by Aristotle which frames our discussion on this topic is the extant volume of *Poetics*. And in my previous lecture I have already pointed that this text can be read as a sort of dialogue between Plato's concept of mimesis and mimetic art and Aristotle's critique of that concept. Indeed, Plato's conception of mimesis forms a point of departure for Aristotle...and in our previous lecture we had started analyzing how Aristotle, while agreeing with Plato's basic idea that all art is mimetic, defends mimesis against Plato's accusations.

One significant way in which Aristotle critiques Plato's position on mimesis is by redefining the relationship between the mimetic process and the object of mimesis. I have argued in my earlier lecture on Aristotle that he does not consider mimesis as a simple mirroring of an object. Rather the process of mimesis, according to Aristotle, involves a more complex relationship with the object of imitation. This relationship can be best understood through the concept of icon. In other words, whereas Plato presents mimesis as a flawed mirroring, Aristotle presents mimesis as an icon-making process. In today's lecture we will elaborate on this idea of a mimetic product as an icon and we will see how this understanding redeems mimesis from being regarded as a flawed mirroring. After that we will move on to the idea of catharsis and see how Aristotle uses it to counter Plato's argument that mimesis, or more specifically mimetic poetry, is harmful because

it stirs passionate emotions and thereby suppresses the rational faculty of a human being. But let us first start with the issue of mimesis as icon making.

Likeness and Recognition

Here I would like to reiterate the question with which I had ended my previous lecture:

“If the relationship between mimesis with the object of imitation is not that of transparent mirroring, then what other kinds of imitation is possible?” To answer this question, let us first look into these lines which we find in Book IV of *Poetics*:

Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. The cause of this again is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general; whose capacity, however, of learning is more limited. Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.' For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the coloring, or some such other cause.

Note here that according to Aristotle, the chief pleasure that mimesis or mimetic art offers is the pleasure of recognition. A *likeness* is produced through mimesis, and when the audience or the reader or the spectator of this mimetic product confronts the likeness she experiences a rapturous sense of recognition... “Ah, that is he”.

Indeed, without this act of recognition in which likeness of the object of mimesis is located by the audience within the mimetic product, the effect of mimesis seems to fall flat. As Aristotle points out, “if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the

imitation as such, but to the execution, the coloring, or some such other cause". The word likeness here and the stress on the idea of recognition might lead us to believe that Aristotle, like Plato, is here presenting mimesis as a form of transparent mirroring. We might assume that for Aristotle the chief pleasure offered by a mimetic product like a painting of an animal, a horse for example, is provided by the spectator recognizing how accurately the artist has reflected or mirrored a real horse upon the canvas by working on the minutest of details.

This interpretation of Aristotle's view on mimesis is however problematized if we place the lines quoted above from Book IV against these lines that appear in Book XXV:

Within the art of poetry itself there are two kinds of faults- those which touch its essence, and those which are accidental. If a poet has chosen to imitate something, [but has imitated it incorrectly] through want of capacity, the error is inherent in the poetry. But if the failure is due to a wrong choice- if he has represented a horse as throwing out both his off legs at once, or introduced technical inaccuracies in medicine, for example, or in any other art- the error is not essential to the poetry.

Though here Aristotle is talking about the mimetic art of poetry, the kind of reference that he makes to the horse will help us connect these lines with our ongoing discussion of mimesis vis-à-vis painting. In the quoted lines, Aristotle talks about two kinds of errors that we can encounter in mimetic production and classifies them as "essential" and "non-essential". This classification is also a kind of gradation. The latter kind of error is not a very serious one whereas the former can seriously degrade the quality of the mimetic product. What is a non-essential error? Let us take the example of the horse. According to Aristotle, if a mimetic artist represents a galloping horse throwing both of its front legs in the air then it is regarded as a non-essential error. Since horses in real life do not throw their off legs together while galloping, it is an error but

nonetheless an error of a kind that is not essential to the mimetic product. Indeed, in Book XXV Aristotle even excuses the portrayal of such impossibilities by mimetic artists by saying that “If he describes the impossible, he is guilty of an error; but the error may be justified, if the end of the art be thereby attained [...]– if, that is, the effect of this or any other part of the poem is thus rendered more striking”.

Now as far as transparent mirroring is concerned, portraying a galloping horse with both its front legs up, be it in poetry or painting or any other mimetic form, is a grave error. If what is being portrayed is a impossibility then it cannot be called a mirror image of a real life object. Yet Aristotle seems to be perfectly accommodative of such errors as far as mimesis is concerned. He says in Book XXV “not to know that a hind has no horns is a less serious matter than to paint it inartistically”. The inherent error here is the lack of the artistic skill of the painter which may arise for instance if a painter doesn’t know the use of the tools of his craft properly – if let us say he cannot properly paint with a brush or mix the colors. The question of how accurate the painting of the hind is vis-à-vis a hind in the real life is regarded as a less serious or non-essential error.

This clarifies one thing: as far as Aristotle is concerned, the pleasure of the likeness that the mimetic artist produces is not dependent upon the degree of accuracy with which the details of a real life object are portrayed by him. In other words, the way to judge mimesis is not through the lens of strict referentiality. But if such inaccurate depictions of hinds with horns and galloping horses with both of its front legs up in the air are acceptable in mimesis, then what happens to the notion of recognition that we encountered in Book IV. As I have said before, the pleasure of mimesis is derived from recognizing in a mimetic product the likeness of some other object.

How can you recognize the likeness of an original in a mimetic product if the mimetic artist portrays the details inaccurately? It is here that we need to bring in the notion of icon.

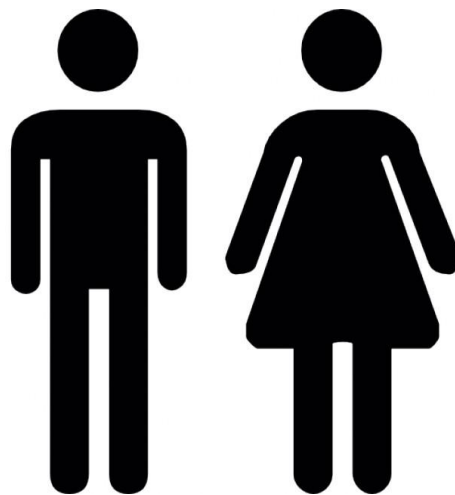
Mimesis as Icon

If you think about it, a mirror image is only one of the many ways in which things can be represented to our consciousness. The semiotician C. S. Peirce talks about three major ways in which representation can be done. They can be done through symbol, through index, and through icon. All of these three things have two constant elements. One is called the signified, which is the object that is being represented. This object can be something concrete like a pencil or a horse or an aeroplane or it can be something abstract like a thought or a concept or a plan. The other constant element is called the signifier which is the visual or auditory mark which is used to represent the signified. Now in case of a symbol, there is no inherent connection between the signifier and the signified. The connection is in fact absolutely arbitrary. An example of a symbol would be any word that we use to refer to the world outside. For instance, when I utter the word “tree” you will immediately recognize that I am talking about a thing rooted in the soil with a brown woody stem supporting a green leafy top. But the word “tree” is a symbol because there is no inherent connection between that word and the thing with a woody stem and green leafy top that it signifies. This is proved by the fact that I can refer to that same signified by using completely different sounding words if I shift from one language to another. If I were to signify the thing in Bangla I would call it a “gaach”...and again if I were to shift to German I would refer to the same thing as “baum”. I can do this shifting and refer to the same thing by using different words like tree, gaach or baum because neither of these three words have any inherent connection with the signified. Rather the connection is culturally learned.

An index is a way of referring to a signified by drawing attention to a mark which establishes its presence. For instance, fire produces smoke. Smoke therefore is a mark of the presence of fire. Smoke is thus categorized as an index of fire. Similarly, a thumbprint is an index of a thumb.

An icon on the other hand is a way of representing in which there is a significant and inherent overlapping between the signifier and the signified. Here let us try and understand the idea by taking an example. Let us say I take a picture of your face. In that case your face will be the signified and the picture will be the signifier. And as you can guess, there will be an inherent connection between the signifier and the signified in this case. The picture would be an exact likeness of your face in all its accurate details...and when you post that picture on social media, the people who know you might derive pleasure from the mimetic product by recognizing the likeness and exclaiming “Ah, that is she”. The picture can therefore be classified as an icon of your face.

But let us look at another kind of iconic image:



These are two images that we regularly encounter on lavatory doors and recognize them as one standing for man and the other standing for woman. The reason why we are able to recognize the

man as man and the woman as woman is because we can recognize their likeness with the signified. However, unlike the photograph, they are not accurate portrayals or mirror images of the object of imitation. Yet how do we then recognize in these iconic signifiers the likeness of the signified? We recognize them because even in this simplified form, the images build upon certain features – the arms, the legs, the round head —that are inherent parts of the signified.

But here notice one interesting thing. In either of these images iconically representing a man and a woman, we do not see the neck. Yet it is impossible to find human beings or at least living ones without neck. So the representation here is of an impossibility that is similar to the images of hinds with horns and horses galloping with both their front legs thrown up in the air. But this does not disrupt the process of recognition. This is because the process of recognizing mimetic production happens within the shared conventions of a cultural matrix that connects the mimetic artist and the reader or the audience or the spectator who recognizes in the mimetic representation the likeness of the object of mimesis. Since the cultural conventions that we share help us perfectly well to understand the two neckless figures to represent man and woman, we do not feel the need to question why the neck is missing. Thus, as you can see from this argument, though mirror images can be part of the vast array of mimetic objects that are possible, factual verisimilitude is not a yardstick to judge the quality of a mimesis. Mimetic products can hold value even without a strict referentiality. Consequently, the Platonic argument that mimesis produces flawed mirror image does not hold because through Aristotle we understand mimesis not as a mirroring activity but as a production of iconic representations.

Probability vs Possibility

At this point, I would briefly like to touch upon the issue of probability and its relationship to plot structure which for Aristotle is the quintessence of poetry as a mimetic product. Now as our

discussion on mimesis as production of icon has revealed, mimesis is an imitation not just of possible things. Mimesis can also be of impossible things like neckless human beings for instance. But in order for it to be a successful mimesis, it has to be recognized as a likeness or a representation of something else. Now whether or not it will be so recognized will depend upon the notion of probability... and the sense of what is probable and what is not is in turn dependent on the conventions that underline the cultural context shared by the mimetic artist and her reader or audience or spectator.

For instance, in the cultural context that is shared by me and my students sitting here in this room, a man biting a tiger is an improbable event. This is not to say that such an event is impossible because there may be some instance of humans biting tigers that we do not know of. But even if such an event is possible it is not probable to us. Aristotle argues that a mimetic production yields the pleasure of recognition because it deals with probability. A Shakespearean tragedy like *King Lear* is a successful mimesis not because we actually know of a king called Lear who had to undergo such torture in the hands of two of his daughters named Goneril and Regan. Rather it is a successful mimesis because the plot narrates a sequence of event that is accepted as *probable*... at least by the people who share the cultural milieu that enables an understanding of Shakespearean tragedies. This probable plot structure can have technical faulty details like horses galloping with their two front legs thrown up in the air. But as you will understand now that that doesn't impede the process of recognition.

According to Aristotle, it is precisely this notion of probability that distinguishes a tragedy from a history. History can only narrate events which has actually happened and which are therefore all in the domain of possibility. A tragedy on the other hand depicts human actions based on probability and not on possibility. Therefore, a man eaten alive by a tiger might find its place in a

tragic plot but a man trying to bite a tiger, irrespective of whether it is possible or not, will perhaps not be very readily incorporated in the plot by a tragic playwright.

Therefore, to judge any mimesis on how accurately it is imitating a real life object is perhaps to miss the point. We must remember that in the Aristotelian world of mimetic art, Monalisa is as valid a representation of human likeness as the gendered images on the doors of the lavatories.

With this in mind let us now move on to the concept of catharsis.

Catharsis

As you know, one of the reasons why Plato complained about mimetic poetry was because it stirred emotions and thereby suppressed the functioning of reason. Here again, Aristotle uses Plato's theory as a point of departure. Referring to tragedy, which is a variety of mimetic poetry, Aristotle argues that it does indeed give rise to such emotions like pity and fear. But he then goes on to argue that the stirring even of such painful emotions like pity and fear does not pose any problem. This is because a rational man experiences a catharsis of these emotions when he encounters them in the form of a mimetic product.

Now here we encounter a problem. What exactly does the word catharsis mean in the context of Aristotle's *Poetics* is a matter of dispute. And therefore, there are a number of differing interpretations regarding why Aristotle regards catharsis as a valuable end product of tragedy. In this lecture I will mention two of the most popular interpretations and then try to see how each of them can be used to critique Plato's complaint about mimetic poetry.

The first popular interpretation of catharsis is to understand it as a process of purgation. And this purgation theory is mostly associated with the German scholar Jacob Bernays who suggested that the pity and fear evoked in a tragedy acts like "pharmakon". The Greek word "pharmakon", from

which the modern English word pharmacy is derived, can be understood both as medicine and as poison. The basic idea behind pharmakon is that the same substance which is poisonous, when administered in well regulated doses can act as a medicine and cure the effects of that very poison. So looking from this perspective someone like Bernays would argue that tragedy by producing emotions like fear and pity in a regulated way helps purge the excess of such noxious emotions.

Another theory regarding catharsis is that it has an educative purpose. Fear and pity, when encountered in real life are problematic to deal with and can easily overwhelm us. However, when experienced in the form of a mimetic product we can observe and study them from a sufficient distance. By repeatedly encountering the emotions like pity and fear that a tragedy evokes the spectator is also able to associate them with the right kind of objects. In fact through such a process of repeated encounter, the spectator gets to know as well as train his emotions in a way which is not possible otherwise in circumstances where the emotion overwhelms that person.

As you can see, each of these two interpretations of catharsis is very different from each other. Yet both of them can be used to produce a critique of Plato. For instance, if catharsis is understood as purgation, then mimetic poetry like tragedy does not suppress reason by arousing emotions. Rather the action of a rational man is made free from the ill effects of noxious emotions through the purgative cleansing of those emotions by catharsis. If on the other hand, catharsis is understood as an education of emotion then also reason is not suppressed. Rather catharsis becomes a training process through which a young spectator might learn to guide his emotions rationally and towards the right objects.

With this we end our discussion on Aristotle and on mimesis. In our next lecture we will move forward in time and see how a first century Roman work titled “On the Sublime” expanded and modified our understanding of literary theory. Thank you.