

Platonic Legacy (4th century BC) - part 2

Wednesday 9 November 2016, by [Pascal Michon](#)

Sommaire

- [Rhythm in Public Speech - \(...\)](#)
- [Rhythm in Literature - Aristot](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

Rhythm in Public Speech - Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (4th cent. BC)

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle addresses an important question that was left open in *The Politics*—that of language in public sphere—and this leads him to consider rhythm in speech and subsequently loosen a little more the Platonic definition of rhythm.

In Book 3, after having dealt with proof, Aristotle focuses on the manner of expressing oneself, elocution (λέξις - *léxis*), “for it is not sufficient to know *what* one ought to say, but one must also know *how* to say it,” and this contributes greatly to the impression conveyed by the speech. This know-how will materially assist the impression of moral “disposition or character” (ἦθος - *êthos*), which the orator wishes to assume, on the minds of the audience.

There are three things which require special attention in regard to speech [περὶ τὸν λόγον - *perì tòn lógon*]: first, the sources of proofs; secondly, [elocution] [περὶ τὴν λέξιν - *perì tēn léxin*]; and thirdly, the arrangement of the parts of the speech [πῶς χρὴ τάξαι τὰ μέρη τοῦ λόγου - *pōs khrē táxai tà méré tou lógon*]. [...] We have therefore next to speak of [elocution] [περὶ δὲ τῆς λέξεως ἐχόμενον - *perì dè tēs léxeōs ekhómenón*]; for it is not sufficient to know what one ought to say, but one must also know how to say it, and this largely contributes to making the speech appear of a certain character. (*Rhetoric*. 3.1.1-2, trans. J.H. Freese, my mod)

In other words, speech involves not only *arguments* but also *manners of elocution*: voice, pronunciation, tone, tempo, etc. (*léxei diathéstai*); and *manners of action*: appropriate gesticulation, management of the hands, arms and entire body, and especially features (*hupókrisis* - playing a part on stage or orator's delivery), which “largely contribute to making the speech appear of a certain character.”

In the first place, following the natural order, we investigated that which first presented itself—what gives things themselves their persuasiveness; in the second place, their arrangement by [elocution] [λέξει διαθέσθαι - *léxei diathésthai*]; and in the third place, delivery [τὰ περὶ τὴν

ὑπόκρισιν -tà perì tēn hupókrisin], which is of the greatest importance but has not yet been treated of by anyone. (*Rhetoric*. 3.1.3, trans. J.H. Freese, my mod)

Thus Aristotle seems first to contrast elocution and action, utterance and bodily movements, but he elaborates further his thought and emphasizes that action or delivery is actually “a matter of voice,” which should be considered in regard to “volume, harmony, and rhythm,” i.e. vocal magnitude, pitch modulation and duration of uttered sounds. Far from opposing elocution and action, Aristotle thus suggests a holistic theory of speech which includes both of them.

Now delivery is a matter of voice, as to the mode in which it should be used for each particular emotion; when it should be loud, when low, when intermediate; and how the tones, that is, shrill, deep, and intermediate, should be used; and what rhythms are adapted to each subject. For there are three qualities that are considered—volume, harmony, rhythm [μέγεθος ἀρμονία ῥυθμός - *mégēthos harmonía rhuthmós*]. Those who use these properly nearly always carry off the prizes in dramatic contests, and as at the present day actors have greater influence on the stage than the poets, it is the same in political contests [law courts and public assembly], owing to the corruptness of our forms of government. (*Rhetoric*. 3.1.4, trans. J.H. Freese)

Thus rhythm initially appears as that aspect of speech regarding duration of utterances, which along with volume and harmony, gesticulations and features, makes up speech delivery manners and conveys a certain character.

A little further down in the same book, Aristotle examines again this aspect but this time in a prescriptive perspective. He contrasts “rhythm” with “meter,” i.e. the organization of the orator’s prose with the arrangement in verse and metrical feet that can be found in poetry. But this distinction is purely practical and not theoretical: “rhythm” is suited for judicial or political speech, “meter” for poetry, and they must be used accordingly without being mixed. Yet they are not different in nature. Meters partake of a more general rhythmic quality: rhythm is “the number belonging to the form of diction, of which the meters with their divisions are part.” Both are ways to give “form” (*skhêma*), “measure” (*rhuthmós/métron*), “limits” (*péraínô/métra*) and number (*arithmós*) to speech.

The form of [elocution] [σχῆμα τῆς λέξεως - *skhêma tēs léxeôs*] should be neither metrical nor without rhythm [μήτε ἔμμετρον εἶναι μήτε ἄρρυθμον - *mête émmetron eînai mête arruthmon*]. If it is metrical, it lacks persuasiveness, for it appears artificial, and at the same time it distracts the hearer’s attention, since it sets him on the watch for the recurrence of such and such a cadence; [...] If it is without rhythm [ἄρρυθμον - *arruthmon*], it is unlimited [ἀπέραντον - *apéranton*], whereas it ought to be limited [πεπεράνθαι - *peperánthai*] (but not by meter [μὴ μέτρῳ δέ - *mê métrōi dé*]); for that which is unlimited [τὸ ἄπειρον - *tò ápeiron*] is unpleasant and unknowable. Now all things are limited by number [περαίνεται δὲ ἀριθμῷ πάντα - *peráinetai dè arithmō pánta*], and the number [ἀριθμός - *arithmós*] belonging to the form of diction [σχήματος τῆς λέξεως - *skhêmatos tēs léxeôs*] is rhythm [ῥυθμός - *rhuthmós*], [of which the meters with their divisions are part] [οὗ καὶ τὰ μέτρα τμήματα - *oû kai tà métra tmémata*]. Wherefore prose must be rhythmical [ῥυθμὸν - *rhuthmòn*], but not metrical [μέτρον - *métron*], otherwise it will be a poem. [Besides, it is not a matter of rhythm in the true sense of the word but of something close

to it.] (*Rhetoric*. 3.8.1-3, trans. J.H. Freese, my mod.)

Clearly, Aristotle here relates “rhythm” to the late Platonic doctrine exposed in *The Philebus* and *The Timaeus*, partly borrowed from the Pythagoreans, according to which “numbers” are the regulating forces which introduce limits, shape, measure, order into a “unlimited,” formless, chaotic mass of sounds, words or movements. In other words, rhythm receives its rhetoric power from the numbers it is made of and which it imposes upon the speech and the movements of the orator.

But this metaphysical detour does not last very long and he goes on by examining, as Plato in *The Republic*, the pragmatic qualities of some common meters (heroic i.e. hexameter, iamb, trochee, paeon)—which he calls, here, “rhythms” because, as we just saw, he considers that meters are only specific kinds of rhythms, among others. But whereas Plato was interested in the educational qualities of the traditional Greek meters, Aristotle seeks, in *The Rhetoric*, to uncover their power to “rouse the hearer.” The criteria of *good rhythm* are proximity with “ordinary conversation,” “language of the many” and rejection of any “undignified” or “tripping” meters.

Of the different rhythms [τῶν δὲ ῥυθμῶν – *tôn dè rhuthmôn*] the heroic is dignified, but lacking the harmony of ordinary conversation [λεκτικῆς ἀρμονίας – *lektikês harmonías*]; the iambic is the language of the many, wherefore of all meters it is most used in common speech; but speech should be dignified and calculated to rouse the hearer. The trochaic is too much like the cordax [a provocative, licentious, and often obscene mask dance]; this is clear from the tetrameters, which form a tripping rhythm [τροχερὸς ῥυθμὸς – *trokheròs rhuthmòs*]. There remains the paeon, used by rhetoricians from the time of Thrasyarchus, although they could not define it. The paeon is a third kind [of rhythm] [ἔστι δὲ τρίτος ὁ παιάν – *ésti dè trítos ho paián*] closely related to those already mentioned; for its proportion is 3 to 2, that of the others 1 to 1 and 2 to 1, with both of which the paeon, whose proportion is 1 1/2 to 1, is connected.

“All the other rhythms are to be disregarded” because they are [too] “metrical,” that is to say too far from ordinary language to be used in judicial or political speeches.

All the other [rhythms] [ἄλλοι – *álloi*] then are to be disregarded for the reasons stated, and also because they are metrical [καὶ διότι μετρικοί – *kai dióti metrikoí*]; but the paeon should be retained, [since from this alone of the rhythms mentioned no definite metre arises] [οὐκ ἔστι μέτρον τῶν ῥηθέντων ῥυθμῶν – *ouk ésti métron tôn rhêthéntôn rhuthmôn*], so that it is most likely to be undetected. [...] the period should be broken off by a long syllable and the end should be clearly marked, not by the scribe nor by a punctuation mark, but by the rhythm itself [ἀλλὰ διὰ τὸν ῥυθμόν – *allà dià tòn rhuthmón*]. (*Rhetoric*. 3.8.5, trans. J.H. Freese, my mod.)

The conclusion brings forward a new definition of eurhythmy. The latter now denotes the quality of a speech that, thanks to its supple global arrangement and way of flowing, produces on the audience the expected effects, be it in judicial court or political meeting. The Platonic metaphysical reference to numbers is not entirely abandoned but it becomes secondary to a more holistic and pragmatic view.

We have now seen that our [elocution] [λέξις - *léxis*] must be [eurhythmic] [εὐρυθμον - *eúruthmon*] and not destitute of rhythm [ἄρρυθμον - *árruthmon*], and what rhythms [καὶ τίνες εὐρυθμον ποιοῦσι ῥυθμοὶ - *kai tines eúruthmon poioûsi rhuthmoî* - lit. "and what rhythms made eurhythmic"], in what particular arrangement [εἴρηται - *eíretai* - lit. "fasten together in rows, string"], make it so. (*Rhetoric*. 3.8.7, trans. J.H. Freese, my mod.)

Then Aristotle, as he is used to do, examines the units of elocution which are superior to meter. He opposes the old and the recent oratory style (λέξις - *léxis* - lit. *elocution*). The old "free-running or loose style," united solely by connection particles, like onions on a string, is "unpleasant because it is endless." It is ἄπειρος - *ápeiros* ; viz. indefinite, continuous, running on without end, and without proper divisions. Instead, the more recent "periodic style," which consists in "periods," i.e. sentences that have "a magnitude that can be easily grasped," is "pleasant and easy to learn" because it has "number by which it can be measured."

The [elocution] [λέξις - *léxis*] must be either [loose] and united by connecting particles, like the dithyrambic preludes, or periodic, like the antistrophes of the ancient poets. The [loose] style is the ancient one. [...] It is unpleasant, because it is endless, for all wish to have the end in sight. [...] The other style consists of periods [περίοδος - *períodos*], and by period I mean a sentence that has a beginning and end in itself and a magnitude that can be easily grasped. What is written in this style is pleasant and easy to learn, pleasant because it is the opposite of that which is unlimited [...] It is easy to learn, because it can be easily retained in the memory. The reason is that the periodic style [ἐν περιόδοις λέξις - *en perídois léxis*] has number [ἀριθμὸν ἔχει - *arithmòn ékhei*], which of all things is the easiest to remember; that explains why all learn verse with greater facility than prose [τῶν χύδην - *tôn khúdên* - lit. *what is poured fourth promiscuously: in flowing, unfettered language*], for it has number by which it can be measured [ἀριθμὸν γὰρ ἔχει ὃ μετρεῖται - *arithmòn gàr ékhei hôi metreítai*]. (*Rhetoric*. 3.9.1-3.9.3, trans. J.H. Freese, my mod.)

In his notes E.M. Cope makes clear that "number" refers here to the simultaneously arithmetical and metaphysical Platonic paradigm which considers rational numbers, "definite proportions," and "symmetries"—in the classical sense, *συμμετρία* meaning *commensurability* in Aristotle and *due proportion* in Plato—as models for the arrangement of speech.

The proportions, or relations of the several parts or members of the period to the whole, and to one another—its symmetrical structure—can be expressed in numbers, like the numerical relations of rhythm. This gives the periodic structure a hold upon the memory, by its definite proportions, which is entirely wanting to the continuous and indefinite succession of the other. (E.M. Cope - notes 1877)

But further explanations show that Aristotle is, here too, also careful not to lose contact with empirical data. Aristotle differentiates between simple periods or sentences consisting of a single member, *μονόκωλος* - *monókôlos*, i.e. without the complication, or elaborate construction of the period, and compound periods, *ἐν κώλοις* - *en kôlois*, which consists of at least two colons or clauses. Therefore, if periodic discourse has number as poetry, this number is not essentially metric,

even if meters can participate in it as we saw above. It depends on empiric and semantic conditions which are not only proportions between parts. First, a period is defined by the limits of a single human “breath”; second, it is a semantic “whole” which bears a complete sense. That distinguishes it from the clauses (*κῶλον* – *kôlon*) it is composed of, which are incomplete until the whole has been expressed, except naturally when it contains only one clause.

A period may be composed of clauses, or simple. The former is a complete sentence, distinct in its parts and easy to repeat in a breath, not divided like the period in the line of Sophocles above, but when it is taken as a whole. By clause I mean one of the two parts of this period, and by a simple period one that consists of only one clause. (*Rhetoric*. 3.9.5, trans. J.H. Freese)

Aristotle provides here only the two superior stories of his theory of meaning: periods and clauses. He will come to its most elementary units, words, in *Poetics*. But we can here already notice that rhythm appears as one of the most important vectors of meaning. Aristotle uses here a pragmatic argument. If the clauses or the periods are without number, i.e. arrhythmic, if they are too long or too short, the meaning is not transferred properly to the hearer. The speaker delivers his/her discourse but the hearer is rapidly lost. Since he/she expects the “measure” of the discourse to go on, if the flow stops abruptly or on the contrary accelerates, he/she stumbles like a horse which is clumsily driven. The motion of meaning has been inefficiently organized, i.e. rhythmized.

But neither clauses nor periods [*τὰ κῶλα καὶ τὰς περιόδους* – *tà kôla kai tàs periódous*] should be curtailed or too long. If too short, they often make the hearer stumble [*προσπταίνειν* – *prosptaíein* – lit. *hurt by striking against*]; for when he is hurrying on towards the measure [*πόρρω καὶ τὸ μέτρον* – *pórrô kai tò métron*] of which he already has a definite idea, if he is checked by the speaker stopping, a sort of stumble is bound to occur in consequence of the sudden stop. If too long, they leave the hearer behind, as those who do not turn till past the ordinary limit leave behind those who are walking with them. Similarly long periods assume the proportions of a speech and resemble dithyrambic preludes. (*Rhetoric*. 3.9.6, trans. J.H. Freese)

We will have to remember this conclusion when we examine the definition of lexical meaning which Aristotle provides in *Poetics* by distinguishing between “proper” and “metaphorical” uses of words. There has been a lot of discussions about this point which has been fundamental for the whole Western rhetoric and semantic traditions up to 20th century, but it has rarely been noticed that these uses are not independent from the overall arrangement, the rhythm, of the discourse in which they are included. Both followers and critics of rhetoric have considered that the meaning of a word is defined by reference to a thing or, in case of metaphorical use, by the relation of its proper meaning to that of the other thing it is applied to. But the previous passages of *Rhetoric* suggest that this lexical meaning does not exist by itself and must be considered as participating in a semantic process involving the whole rhythmic arrangement of speech.

Rhythm in Literature - Aristotle's *Poetics* (4th cent. BC)

Let us now consider the most remarkable *Poetics*. Aristotle commences his essay by putting forward three major assertions. The incipit explains that he will try to figure out the conditions that make “poetic art in itself” (*poiêtikês autês*) “successful,” literally that make it “become beautiful” (*kalôs*

éxein).

1. The central question of poetics will be that of the quality of the artistic works. This will be exposed both in analytical and prescriptive manners.

2. The subject of his reflection will not be poetry as it is commonly conceived of as synonym for verse, but “poetry in itself” as a concept that is still to be elaborated but that has already a place in the theory—something close to what we call nowadays “literature.”

Let us here deal with Poetry [in itself] [περὶ ποιητικῆς αὐτῆς - *perì poiêtikês autês*], its essence and its several species, with the characteristic function of each species and the way in which plots must be constructed if the poem is to be a success [εἰ μέλλει καλῶς ἔξειν ἡ ποίησις - *ei mellei kalôs éxein ê poíêsis*]; and also with the number and character of the constituent parts of a poem, and similarly with all other matters proper to this same inquiry. (*Poetics*, 1447a, trans. W.H. Fyfe, my mod.)

A little further down, Aristotle elaborates this suggestion and proposes to name *poiêsis* (*poetry*) all artistic activities “employing words” which, he notices, constitute an ensemble that remains “up to the present day” with “no name” (*anônumoi*). In the 4th century BC *poiêsis*, as a matter of fact, still denotes only “composition in verse.”

But the art which employs words either in bare prose [λόγοις ψιλοῖς - *lógois psiloîs*] or in metres [μέτροις - *métrois*], either in one kind of metre or combining several, happens up to the present day to have no name [ἀνώνυμοι - *anônumoi*]. (*Poetics*, 1447b, trans. W.H. Fyfe, my mod.)

3. Then, as in the *Politics*, Aristotle characterizes what we call performing arts as “representations” (*mimêseis*).

Epic poetry, then, and the poetry of tragic drama, and, moreover, comedy and dithyrambic poetry, and most flute-playing and harp-playing, these, speaking generally, may all be said to be “representations.” [μιμήσεις - *mimêseis*] (*Poetics*, 1447a, trans. W.H. Fyfe, my mod.)

I endorse here, as I did above, the translation of *μίμησις* - *mímêsis* as “representation” (instead of the most common “imitation”) proposed by W.H. Fyfe but also by Roselyne Dupont-Roc and Jean Lallot in their more recent French translation (Fyfe, 1932, *Poetics*, 1447a, n. 2; Dupont-Roc & Lallot, 1980, *La Poétique*, 1447a, p. 33, n. 3 & 4).

Imitation tends to keep Aristotle’s poetic reflection within the Platonic paradigm. Poetry—and more generally art—would be about copying as faithfully as possible the things as they are in order to reach the original ideas of which they themselves are copies. Its quality would then be relative to its

own transparency and the accuracy of the copy it proposes. Instead, as Roselyne Dupont-Roc and Jean Lallot rightly argue, *representation* emphasizes the creative aspect of the artistic process, even if the original object is never entirely obliterated; art is about uncovering the ideas which give forms to the matter *from within*. It also insists on the role of theater as primary model to understand art, whereas *imitation* tends wrongly, at least as far as Aristotle is concerned, to use painting to this effect.

Like the dramatic play of mime, *mimèsis* is “poetic,” that is, *creative*. Not *ex nihilo*: its basic material is already given, it is the man endowed with character, capable of action and passion, caught up in a network of events. The poet does not imitate this given as one makes a decal: this is the work of the chronicler, riveted to contingent particulars whose memory he records—“what Alcibiades did or what was done to him” (chap. 9, 51b 11). The poet, as *mimètès*, constructs, according to a rationality that partakes of generality and necessity, a “story” (*muthos*) with its functional agents. He imitates only in order to *represent*: the objects which he uses as models—Oedipus, Iphigenia, with the character and adventures that the legend attribute to them—fade behind the objects composed by Sophocles or Euripides—the represented stories which are *Oedipus Rex* or *Iphigenia in Aulis*. *Mimèsis* designates the very movement which starts from pre-existing objects and results in a poetic artifact; hence the art of poetry, according to Aristotle, is the art of this transformation. But even if the “imitated” object is never entirely obliterated—we insist on this in order to categorically distinguish ourselves from the advocates of *mimèsis* as pure creation—the emphasis is on the represented object which must, in order to be successful (*kalôs ekhein*), obey the rules of art (*tekhnè*) as defined by Aristotle. (Dupont-Roc & Lallot, 1980, p. 20, my trans.)

All those moves will prove revolutionary—if for the second much later on—because for the first time in the West, they define *poetry* as *re-presentation of life* and *poetics* as the study of *the conditions that make any language composition*, be it in verse or only in prose, *successful* or *beautiful*.

“Poetry in itself” has nothing to do specifically with verse: for instance Empedocles uses hexameters but is only a “scientist” and “not a poet,” and reversely the “Socratic dialogues,” which are in “bare words,” are nevertheless considered by Aristotle as genuine poetry. Moreover it is different from magic incantation, recited formula, prayer to the gods; it is a representation of characters, experience and actions, be they divine or human. The question naturally arises of what makes a language representation “successful” and worth listening to. This is what “poetics” is about.

Nobody can deny that Aristotle pays more attention in his *Poetics* to character and story than to rhythm and melody. He even contrasts verse making which he deems not sufficient to make poetry, with storytelling which he thinks indispensable to it.

It is clear, then, from what we have said that the poet must be a “maker” not of verses but of stories, since he is a poet in virtue of his “representation,” and what he represents is action. (*Poetics*, 1451b, trans. W.H. Fyfe)

This primacy of storytelling is a very well known fact and a lot has already been written about it, but

I would like to evoke another aspect of the *Poetics* that has been less often noticed. In order to answer the central poetic question—that of the value of the artistic works—Aristotle strikingly starts by comparing the means used by the main performing arts of his time. Dithyrambic poetry, tragic drama and comedy, he says, represent experience, actions and characters through rhythm, tune and language; flute-playing or harp-playing through rhythm and tune; dance only through rhythm.

In the arts which we have mentioned [epic poetry, tragic drama, comedy and dithyrambic poetry] they all make their representations in rhythm and language and tune, using these means either separately or in combination. For tune and rhythm alone are employed in flute-playing and harp-playing and in any other arts which have a similar function, as, for example, pipe-playing. Rhythm alone without tune is employed by dancers in their representations, for by means of rhythmical gestures [διὰ τῶν σχηματιζομένων ῥυθμῶν - *dià tôn skhêmatizoménôn rhuthmôn* - *lit. by giving figures/shapes to rhythms*] they represent both character and experiences and actions [καὶ ἥθη καὶ πάθη καὶ πράξεις - *kai êthê kai páthê kai práxeis*]. (*Poetics*, 1447a, trans. W.H. Fyfe)

This comparison is usually interpreted as showing that art—without forgetting painting of which Aristotle speaks very highly in other passages—is based on *mímêsis*. But it has less often been noticed that it also shows quite indubitably that according to Aristotle *rhuthmós* is the common denominator of all performing arts and, for that very reason, the main means of the *mímêsis* itself (for an exception see Dupont-Roc & Lallot, 1980, p. 147). Technically speaking, as “the art which employs words,” “poetry in itself” is certainly opposed to dance and music. But genetically, Aristotle emphasizes, poetry in its most complete form, i.e. tragedy, derives from dance and song. Moreover, since it uses rhythm and tune it is also clearly similar to the latter and can be considered as a kind of dancing and music playing in language, or performing of rhythm and tune with words.

In this instance, Aristotle’s view is diametrically opposed to Plato’s: whereas the latter viewed mimetic rhythms as extremely dangerous and art as a treacherous activity that should be strictly controlled by the state, art appears to the former as in essence liberating and rhythm as the deepest and most solid basis of *re-presentation*, i.e. endowed with positive ethical and political effects and therefore one of the main concept of poetics.

It is indeed in reference to rhythmic varieties that Aristotle constructs his enumeration of the species of composition whose material is language: prose, characterized by the absence of meter but not of rhythmic rules, as we have seen in *The Rhetoric*, is opposed to the metric genera, which are in turn distinguished from each other by the particular use they make of the meters.

There are certain arts which employ all the means which I have mentioned, such as rhythm and tune and meter [ῥυθμῷ καὶ μέλει καὶ μέτρῳ - *rhuthmôi kai mélei kai métrôi*]—dithyrambic and “nomic” poetry, for example, and tragedy too and comedy. The difference here is that some use all these at once, others use now one now another. These differences then in the various arts I call the means of representation. (*Poetics*, 1447b, trans. W.H. Fyfe)

In chapter 4, Aristotle adds to this some anthropological considerations. He explains that poetry owes its origin to “two natural causes.” Men, he says, have an instinct on the one hand for

“representation” that is accompanied by “enjoyment”; and on the second hand, for “tune and rhythm.” Rhythm, representation, and the pleasure they provide, are all natural aspects of humanity which result in poetry making.

Speaking generally, poetry seems to owe its origin to two particular causes, both natural. From childhood men have an instinct for representation, and in this respect, [man] differs from the other animals that he is far more imitative and learns his first lessons by representing things. And then there is the enjoyment people always get from representations. [...] We have, then, a natural instinct for representation and for tune and rhythm—[for the meters obviously partake in rhythms]—and starting with these instincts men very gradually developed them until they produced poetry out of their improvisations. (*Poetics*, 1448b, trans. W.H. Fyfe, my mod.)

Surprisingly, the pleasure provided by the representation is not aesthetic in the modern sense of the word, i.e. it is not related to our sensibility. It is plainly intellectual, cognitive. Roselyne Dupont-Roc and Jean Lallot have convincingly argued that any mimetic work uncovers a *specific form* (*idían morphèn*, 1454b 10) by disentangling it from the matter with which it is associated in nature. The artist reveals the formal cause of the object and provides the intellect with the opportunity of a *sui generis* activity, a reasoning about causality that is accompanied with a kind of pleasure that is both pleasure of wondering (*θαυμάζειν* - *thaumázein*) and learning (*μανθάνειν* - *manthánein*). (Dupont-Roc & Lallot, 1980, p. 164, n. 2).

Roselyne Dupont-Roc and Jean Lallot claim that since this pleasure is intellectual, it is exclusively related to the story (*muthos*) “which is the representative part of the work *par excellence*,” while rhythm and melody seem to be put aside by Aristotle on the ground that they do not have “independent representative virtues” (1980, p. 164, n. 4). But Aristotle does not say that. He only contrasts in the next passage the pleasure given by the comparison between the representation and the original with that given by the sheer perception without knowledge of the original, which then depends on “technique and color or some other such cause.” He does not imply that rhythm and tune, which he has designated a few pages before as natural causes of poetry, are to be considered as mere “ornamental techniques” simply adding “charm” to the story.

The reason why we enjoy seeing likenesses is that, as we look, we learn and infer what each is, for instance, “that is so and so.” If we have never happened to see the original, our pleasure is not due to the representation as such but to the technique or the color or some other such cause. (*Poetics*, 1448b, trans. W.H. Fyfe)

Even if it hurts our firmest beliefs which put rhythm on the aesthetic side, we must consider rhythm and tune as participating in the intellectual pleasure given by *re-presentation* and *re-cognition*. They both are genuine agents of *mimèsis*. But the reverse is also true: we also must regard this intellectual pleasure as involving the sounds and rhythms of speech. And this is not surprising since Aristotle already noticed in the *Rhetoric* that speech involves not only *arguments* but also *manners of elocution*: voice, pronunciation, tone, tempo, etc. This role given to rhythm and tune on the effects produced by poetry is another revolutionary Aristotelian innovation that should certainly be kept in mind vis-à-vis a large number of contemporary conceptions which still do not recognize it. We will come back to it when we study Diderot.

There is in chapter 6 a passage that constitutes a strong evidence in favor of this theory. I am using here again Dupont-Roc's and Lallot's precious analyses (1980, p. 193, n. 4). Aristotle compares rhythm and tune to "seasonings" of language [*hêdusménôi lógôi*].

Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of a certain magnitude—by means of language [seasoned with all kinds of spices] [*ἡδυσμένῳ λόγῳ* - *hêdusménôi lógôi*], each used separately in the different parts of the play: [...] By "language seasoned with spices" I mean that which has rhythm and tune, i.e., song, [*λέγω δὲ ἡδυσμένον μὲν λόγον τὸν ἔχοντα ῥυθμὸν καὶ ἀρμονίαν [καὶ μέλος]* - *légô dè êdusménon mèn lógon tòn ékhonta rhuthmòn kaì harmonían [kaì mélos]*] and by "the kinds separately" I mean that some effects are produced by verse alone and some again by song. (*Poetics*, 1449b, trans. W.H. Fyfe, my mod.)

Literally the verb *hêdunô* means "to render pleasurable," but the noun *hêdusma* which is applied further down to music (1450b 16) means (as in Aristophanes, Plato or Xenophon) "that which gives a relish or flavour, seasoning, sauce," and in plural "spices, aromatics." Roselyne Dupont-Roc and Jean Lallot rightly underline the fact that this metaphor is a novelty but they conclude, wrongly in my opinion, that "melodic and rhythmic elements (*harmonia* - *rhuthmos*) are thus presented as spices which, when *added* to language, give to it charm/attractiveness." They see in this metaphor an evidence for a dualistic theory of poetic language.

The metaphor of the seasoning clearly entails a theory of poetic language as composed of two quite distinct elements: a basic material, the "bare" language (cf. *logois psilois*, chap. 1, 1447a 29), without additions or ornaments, which performs the denotative function and additional elements, whose function, linked with pleasure (*hêdonè*, from the family of *hêdus*, *hêdusma*), is properly aesthetic. (Dupont-Roc & Lallot, 1980, p. 194, n. 4, my trans.)

I would rather suggest that this metaphor tries to convey a non-dualistic view of poetic language and maybe of language itself. Whereas "ornaments" are superficial add-ons to a unchangeable underlying "structure" as in architecture or in rhetoric, the "seasoning" cooking metaphor evokes a perfect poetic blend where it is precisely impossible to distinguish any longer between the basic material, the "bare language," and the "additions." Moreover, one cannot help noticing that the cuisine comparison links poetic language with the body and especially the mouth, where the words are as much articulated as savored. Thanks to its rhythm and tune, poetry tastes like a good meal.

This is of tremendous importance: maybe for the first time in the West, the language is observed from a non-dualistic poetic viewpoint or better yet, from poetics, which departs from a sheer philosophical view and, by anticipation, from many modern linguistic views. As we will see, after a very long period of scientific oblivion, this revolutionary perspective will reemerge in the 18th century and put again the language in line with the body.

This may also shed some light on the most discussed passage of Aristotle's *Poetics*. This passage is actually included in the previous quote but I purposely kept it aside. It is time to come back to it. As one may know, Aristotle proposes to define tragedy as effecting *κάθαρσις* - *kátharsis*.

Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of a certain magnitude—by means of language [seasoned with all kinds of spices], each used separately in the different parts of the play: it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear [δι' ἐλέου καὶ φόβου - *di' eléou kai phóbou*] it effects relief [περαίνουσα κάθαρσιν - *peráinousa kátharsin*] to these and similar emotions. (*Poetics*, 1449b, trans. W.H. Fyfe)

There are countless interpretations and therefore translations of *kátharsis*. Classical interpretations considers it a “purification” as in religion or a “purgation” as in medicine. W.H. Fyfe (1932) translates it as “relief” which adds a psychological—if not psychoanalytic—nuance that seems to him to be missing in the previous translations. More recent interpretations emphasize that the essential pleasure provided by *mímêsis* is the intellectual pleasure of “learning and inference.” Therefore *kátharsis* appears as an intellectual clarification process that may be only transliterated as “catharsis.” But whatever their perspective, most of these interpretations concentrate on the effects of the “representation” of “men in action” and “emotions” that this representation arouses and cures. Roselyne Dupont-Roc and Jean Lallot, for instance, who belong to the third school, consider it as an aesthetic effect of the process of recognition of the forms presented through the story.

The tragic *katharsis* is the result of a similar process: put in the presence of a history (*muthos*) in which he recognizes the *forms*, cleverly elaborated by the poet, which define the essence of the pitiful and the frightening, the spectator experiences himself pity and fear, but in a quintessential form, and the purified emotion that seizes him then, and which we shall call aesthetic, is accompanied by pleasure. (Dupont-Roc & Lallot, 1980, p. 190, n. 3, my trans.)

This is partly consistent with our previous analyses. Yet, I would like to stress first that the mimetic process itself would not be possible without the mediation of the “language seasoned with all kinds of spices.” In other words, there would be no story, no character, no event, in short no *mímêsis* and no *kátharsis* without the *rhuthmoí* and *harmonías* of the language. Secondly, this condition implies that the *kátharsis* cannot be a mere aesthetic (even conceived as intellectual) phenomenon with no ethical value. Even if it is not triggered, as it has been repeatedly claimed in the classical tradition, by the “edifying examples” shown on the stage, it certainly pertains to *ethics*. As a matter of fact, one wonders why music would be considered, as in the *Politics*, as triggering ethical effects and not poetry. In addition, given Aristotle’s deep interest in the power of language displayed in the *Rhetoric*, it would be very surprising that the conclusions reached in this treaty, which he explicitly links many times with the *Poetics*, would not be paralleled in the latter.

Thus we finally get back to an intuition that we already previously encountered in the *Politics*: 1. The objective of the poetics’ study of the artistic works based “on words” is genuinely *ethical* and *political*. 2. It necessitates to be achieved to study rhythm and harmony in a larger sense than the metric sense. 3. This point will reemerge in the 18th century—provided that further studies do not discover similar cases in between.

To conclude this section I would like to add a comment concerning the concept of μεταφορά - *metaphorá* - *metaphor* which is defined in *Poetics*, 1457b.

Metaphor is the application of an [improper name] [ὀνόματος ἀλλοτρίου - *onómatos allotríou* - lit. *displaced*] either transferred [ἐπιφορὰ - *epiphorà*] from the genus and applied to the species or from the species and applied to the genus, or from one species to another or else by analogy. (*Poetics*, 1457b, trans. W.H. Fyfe, my mod.)

Aristotle's analysis of this particular figure of speech have triggered innumerable comments since Antiquity. Between the 16th and the 19th centuries, it has become the cornerstone of the development of rhetoric. In the second half of the 20th century, it has been given again a great significance by various thinkers. Kofman (1972), Derrida (1972b), De Man (1979) have laid the foundations of a very influential worldview based on a theory of language mainly supported by the concept of metaphor and its generalization through that of trope. This has lead to deconstruction then postmodernism. I do not pretend to discuss here such large and powerful doctrines; I just would like to emphasize a few points in relation with my previous analyses.

First, these thinkers have rightly tried to overcome the dualism here presupposed by Aristotle, who opposes implicitly in this passage and again explicitly in 1457b 31 a "proper" (*oikeíon*) use of words (the unique common referential use) and deviate, transposed or improper uses (*allótrion*) (the numerous metaphorical uses). They wanted to establish, Kofman argues, "a generalized theory of metaphor by eliminating any reference to proper use" (Kofman, 1972, p. 29, my trans.) which would show that the meaning of words never stops shifting under the effect of "*différance*" or "allegory" as Derrida or De Man put it.

However, none of them did really take into account that the metaphor is for Aristotle primarily a *poetic* phenomenon, whose definition he provides in *Poetics*, even if he refers to it also in the *Rhetoric*, 3 which was probably written in the same period. They did not care to look at the larger theoretical frame within which this particular concept was functioning and disregarded the illuminating insights on language and rhythm that our previous analysis brought to light.

None of them noticed either that even in *Rhetoric*, as we noticed above, meaning is described as a process that involves the rhythmic arrangement of speech and its pragmatic and poetic functions. The matter is of such importance that it should be scrutinized again thoroughly, but according to the first evidence that we already gathered, it looks like Aristotle's theory of meaning was not as substantialistic and dualistic it has often been asserted by modern thinkers, without prefiguring either a fully deconstructionist theory of language.

Instead they interpreted the metaphor—not unlike many thinkers from the previous centuries—as a purely rhetorical device in the modern sense of the word. This choice had probably something to do with the difficult relationship between philosophy and poetry that Heidegger tried to clarify so confusingly in the 1950s, first by rejecting poetics and linguistics, then by blurring the limits separating philosophy and poetry. I think that the whole deconstructionist and postmodern paradigm depends on this primordial Heideggerian theoretical decision that resulted simultaneously in a mystifying poetization of philosophy—"philosophy is a form of poetry" wrote Kofman in 1972 (p. 31)—a not better philosophization of poetry and a transformation of poetics into a rhetoric department.

This new philosophical perspective explains why instead of producing a theory of language and an anthropology based on the study of the artistic use of language, they elaborated theories either, in some academic versions, directly from the paradigm of *ornamentation* of public speech in law-court, assemblies, social gatherings and church, or, in more radical version, from a concept of *écriture* devoid of any relation with poetics. Ethically and politically, these theories, whatever their differences, have had significant consequences since they provided a basis as much for a powerful critique of the fixed identities and hierarchies as for a cruel inability to efficiently oppose what we can rightly call the deconstructionist strategies of the new kind of capitalism that emerged in the 1990s and to propose anything positive. This book will try instead to give Aristotle's poetics his due share and thus to escape some of the most burning consequences of deconstruction.

[Next chapter](#)