

## Aristotle's Observation on Poetry as being More Philosophical Than History.

According to Aristotle, because in order to unfold a plot in a manner that is convincing to the audience, the poet must grasp and represent the internal logic, the necessity, of the outcome of those events.

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IN CHAPTER 9 OF THE POETICS, Aristotle famously writes that poetry "is more philosophical and more serious than history: in fact poetry speaks (*legei*) more of universals, whereas history of particulars." (1) As many recent commentators have noticed, the philosopher's choice of words is precise. (2) He does not claim that poetry is philosophy, which occupies the highest place in the hierarchy of the forms of knowledge, or that it "speaks" of universals tout court. (3) Rather, he maintains that it is closer to philosophy than history, because it speaks more of universals. The problem for the student of Aristotle is thus to provide a precise determination of the epistemological standing of poetry and to offer an interpretation of the meaning of the universals of which *poietike* speaks more than *historia*.

While scholars largely agree that the structure of the plot, which links all the events according to causal relations of probability or necessity, is central to the explanation of the philosopher's notion of universal in the context of the Poetics, they offer different accounts of *katholou*. Malcolm Heath, for instance, simply observes that "the historian reports series of events, while the poet constructs a sequence of events. And the poet's construction is subject to a constraint which does not apply to the historian's report: the events must be causally connected.... That is what gives poetic plots their universality." (4) Stephen Halliwell, who understands poetry as a form of fiction, claims that, far from being explicitly stated, "poetic universals" are "embodied and discernible only in and through ... the causally and intelligibly unified" structure of the plot. (5) For this reason they are "on a level between abstraction and common sense experience" and are present in poems "as implicit 'embodied' properties ... not explicit, let alone propositional, elements." (6) James Redfield writes that "the plot is the story conceived ... in terms of relations between ... causes and consequences"; for this reason it shows us the internal logic of the events represented and conveys "some universal pattern of human probability or necessity." (7) John Armstrong maintains that "poetic universals are plots, that is, special sorts of event types consisting of incidents linked by likelihood or necessity," whereas the particulars of history are "action-tokens." (8)

This paper joins the camp of interpreters who try to illuminate the cognitive status of poetry concentrating exclusively upon conceptual resources offered by Aristotle, (9) and attempts to locate this issue in the larger context of his thought. It starts by identifying in the philosopher's writings a general criterion that enables us to compare all forms of knowledge and to determine their closeness to philosophy and its universals, namely, the notion of epistemic limit or determination. On this basis it proposes that both history and poetry are in between experience and philosophy. Specifically, *historia* begins to

move beyond the epistemic indeterminacy of *empeiria*--taken as cognition of facts and particulars--because it brings to light (at least) some causal connections among the events that it reports. At the same time, however, it shares in the factual character of experience, because its function is to provide faithful representations of actual events, which are typically punctuated by chance and fortuitous happenings. Poetry, on the other hand, depicts a fully determined object, that is to say, an action (*praxis*) which is a whole with a beginning, a middle and an end, because *mimesis* is a representation not of human events, but rather of their nature, understood as form and that for the sake of which. A well made plot represents human events perfectly molded by *eidos*, and thus eliminates the accidental and organizes all *pragmata* according to causal relations. It is the essential connection between *mimesis* and form that explains why Aristotle discerns a meaningful kinship between poetry on the one hand, and philosophy and universality on the other. ...