



WALTER SEITTER

Accidentalism in Aristotle? *Poetics* and Ontology

ABSTRACT: My reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* focuses on what Aristotle calls the "mythos" of the tragedy. By "mythos" he doesn't understand the content of the Greek tragedies: family-related stories of Orestes and Electra, of Oedipus and Antigone ... but the precise scenario constructed by the poet, *id est* the "plot". And Aristotle postulates that in the plot of a well conceived tragedy the causal role not only of gods, but also of human actors should be reduced. The strong unity of the tragic action (*praxis*) should result in a close connection of the partial situations, events, turning points. In this sense the substantial agents should be ousted by the "accidents" (Aristotle calls them "*pragmata*"). This artificially unified plot should be the "soul" of the tragedy – thus becoming a souled entity, just as a fascinating animal: a new substance.

KEYWORDS: Tragedy • action • plot • agent-causality • event-causality • *deus ex machina* • network • artificial animal

From 2007 to 2010 the Viennese *Hermesgruppe* undertook a close reading of the Aristotelian *Poetics*: reading, discussing, noting. As a result of that work the following essay tries to show that Aristotle in this well-known little book carried out a suspension of his ontology, an ontology which grants a clear primacy of substance over accidents and other accidental modalities of being. Or did the revision of the ontological order rather inadvertently occur to him? Does the exceptional revolution concern only a very special field of reality?

Since 2011 we have worked on the bulwark of Aristotelian ontology: the so-called *Metaphysics*. In six years we have gone through the first five books: I to V. Also there, the order of things seems less certain than was thought for over two thousand of years. Perhaps we may conceive – with Aristotle – a revised version of the order.

1. Ontology

Aristotelian ontology assembles and subdivides the fundamental determinations of all beings. In *Metaphysics* 1003b 6 et seq. Aristotle defines his “ontology” (this term is post-Aristotelian) as science which considers “the being (*to on*) as being (*he on*) and its inherent properties (*touto hyparchonta*): substance (*ousia*), modification (*pathos*), process towards substance (*odos eis ousian*), destruction (*phthora*), generation (*genesis*), privation (*steresis*), quality (*poiotēs*), relation (*pros ten ousian*), negation (*apophasis*), not-being (*me on*) [...]”. This list is presented without any claim to completeness. There is also the fact that it is quite in a muddle. And it is precisely that, I would suggest, which contributes to the special quality of this list. It includes roughly four of the ten official categories, and also mentions aspects that are far more dramatic than any category. Therefore one could even speak of a “supercategorical” list of heterogeneous “modalities of being”.¹

The diversity of these aspects and the muddle of the cited Aristotelian enumeration must not ignore the fact that it presupposes a certain hierarchy: there is one category that claims to be in the first place, namely the category of substance (*ousia*). The Aristotelian notion of *ousia* is two-fold; or rather there are two interdependent versions of *ousia*: essence and substance (see *Met.* 1017b 23 et seq.). They belong together just as fir-form and existing fir trees, or human nature and a singular human being. An accidental determinations of a fir can be the colour green, which is typical for its appearance, but also its eventual “*pathos*” to be cut down and processed to some kind of furniture (implying his destruction (*phthora*) and later on the production of new, of artificial things). An accidental determination of a man can be his “habit” to be a poet and therefore also the production (*poiein*) of a dramatic poem, his relation (*pros ti*) to it. But not the dramatic poem itself.

2. Tragedy: plot, action

For Aristotle “tragedy is an imitation (*mimesis*) of an action which is serious, complete, and has some magnitude, by means of language which is garnished in various forms in its different parts, by means of dramatic enactment and

¹ The very axiom of the Aristotelian ontology – “to de on legetai pollachos” (*Met.* 1003a 33) – was the subject of Franz Brentano’s dissertation *Von der mannigfachen Bedeutung des Seienden nach Aristoteles* (Freiburg im Breisgau 1862). Brentano expanded the polysemy of being beyond the ten categories just as Aristotle does in the quoted lines. He was one of the first “rediscoverers” of the Aristotelian thinking in the 19th century, became professor in Vienna – and a forerunner of the “Wiener Kreis”.

not narrative, achieving the clarification of how pitiful and fearsome actions cause like things to befall“ (*Poetics* 1449b 24 et seq.)

Aristotle not only gives this definition, he declares it to be a definition in the full sense of the word: as “concept of its essence” (*horon tes ousias*) (1449b 23). It seems obvious that *ousia* here means “essence”. The question whether this essence also has to be a “substance” will be raised at a later stage. For now let’s take a closer look at the inner side of tragedy in order to find its constitutive elements and to determine their possible ontological character.

For understanding what Aristotle does mean by the expression “one action“ we have to consider the fact that Aristotle invents a special theoretical term to insert it between the tragedy as a concrete artefact and its so-called action. This term is called *mythos* and must not be reduced to indicating antique legends. Aristotle’s technical term *mythos* corresponds to the contemporary term “plot”, which means the detailed narrative and topographic disposition of a story. A well-known story such as that about king Oedipus can be boiled down to various plots.² The plot is perhaps the most artificial element of the tragedy which in its totality is already an artefact. “Artefact” and “artificial”: two terms which contain the radical “art” – but this doesn’t mean the arts in the modern sense, it rather refers to the technicality of the tragedy.

Aristotle gives two formal definitions for “plot”: (1) “imitation of action” (again) and (2) “composition of events” (1450a 3 et seq.) The first definition points at the performance of the plot, the second refers more to its creation. Or is it the quality of “number” that distinguishes those definitions? The singular and the plural form? The singular form concerns the *praxis*, the plural stands for *pragmata*. Two words of the same family – we could also say “one big action” and “many little actions” or “partial actions”.

Which aspect is dominating – unity or plurality? The mere plurality of events doesn’t correspond to the necessity of the plot. They have to be composed or synthesized because unity must be produced – even from the multitude.

² I. Sykoutris accepts the neo-greek (non)translation of the Aristotelian *mythos* with *mythos*, but he explains that it means *ypothesi*; see *Αριστοτελους Περι Ποιητικης*, ed. by I. Sykoutris, Athen 2004, p. 127*; and I find the very good French term “intrigue“ in B. Delorme, *Le Christ grec. De la tragédie aux évangiles*, Montrouge 2009, s. 27.

3. Substantial agents, accidental sequences

If a tragedy has to represent a unified action would it not be natural to connect it with the imitation of a strong personality, of a tragic hero performing a great action? Oedipus or Antigone or Medea seem to be persons fulfilling these requirements. But Aristotle would not be satisfied with such a “naturalistic” response. Since the unity of the plot is, as he says, not simply given with the singularity of a person; such a person can do or suffer many things but that may not suffice for a unified action to emerge (see 1451a 19). The unified action is not an effect of the action of a single or dominant person, a so called hero. It is rather a strong connection of events, a sequence of occurrences forming an emotional unit by emotional breaks.

Aristotle is not afraid to proclaim: “A tragedy is an imitation not of human beings but of actions and life.” (1450a 16 et seq.) I perceive this to be, as I have already written, a “bomb of a sentence”.³ By putting it like this Aristotle tends to eliminate the main substantial, the “natural” agents of tragedies, the so-called “tragic heroes”. At least he “dissolves” them into sequences of accidental incidents. And the divine agents who have had their place in the tragedies don’t get better treatment. The proceeding of the dramatic action should be advanced not by some *deus ex machina* but by the steps of the action selves (see 1454b 1).

Of course Aristotle doesn’t completely deny the natural causality which emanates from persons as substances. The character of a person is responsible for a certain stability and predictability of the actions of a person.⁴ But still, the character is not the main factor of the action like in modern literature with its psychological drive, especially in the novels of the 19th century. And when the German scholar Abrogate Schmitt binds his explanation of the Aristotelian theory of tragedy to the character, he seems to ignore that Aristotle bluntly subordinates it to the plot.⁵

The elements which constitute the plot are the steps of the action – called *pragmata* by Aristotle. But he also names them *gignomena*, *symbainonta*, *sympiptonta*, *tychonta* and even *symbebekota*.⁶ The most famous

³ W. Seitter, *Poetik lesen 1*, Berlin 2010, p. 97.

⁴ Some authors are not sure that Aristotle really concedes this impact to the character and they theorize: “In life character causes action, whereas in art action causes character.” *Aristotle’s Poetics*, ed. by L. Golden, O. B. Harrison, Englewood Cliffs, New York 1968, p. 128.

⁵ See: Aristotele, *Poetik*, Übersetzt und erläutert von A. Schmitt, Berlin 2008. No wonder that Schmitt in his very extensive commentary ignores completely the above appointed “bomb of a sentence”.

⁶ See: W. Seitter, *Poetik lesen 1*, *op. cit.*: p. 160, 171 et. seq.

among them however are reversal (*peripeteia*) and recognition (*anagnorisis*): both are turning points, or turning events in the course of action and usually go along with a certain amount of suffering or disaster (*pathos*). The term *pragma* which means also “fact” or “thing” is always used in plural when it indicates “event”.⁷

With *pragmata* Aristotle has invented a new term, a term that is central to his argument but which he did not integrate into his ontological order. It is a disorderly term which must be subsumed under the large category “accident”. Or rather it is a “superaccident”, and to that extent a symptom of a real disruption of the existing order – a real exception.

Where the normal order structured by dominant substances is suspended and disorderly accidents called *pragmata* are the decisive elements there we can speak of an ontological “emergency state” and Martha Husain explains this Aristotelian invention as an “impersonal causal agency”, which is asserted by the Aristotelian conception of tragedy: “While life is focused on an individual (*peri hena*), art is focused on an action (*peri mian praxin*). The artist produces this profound refocusing.”⁸ And to this Martha Husain comments:

It is the causal agency of the actions themselves, unforeseen and yet by necessity or probability, that engenders the specifically tragic emotive content [...]. The impersonal causal agency of the action must be cleansed of all personal agency, whether of human beings or divinities.⁹

4. Which causality?

Analytic philosophy distinguishes between agent-causality and event-causality.¹⁰ In the case of the latter, the cause also consists in an event, not in a substantial agent. We could take World War II as an example. Were its causes persons or processes? But of course these two kinds of causality don’t necessarily have to be mutually exclusive.

Modern science tends more towards event-causality than antique science. What about Aristotle? In his case, in regard to his conception of four

⁷ M. Magnien translates – in French – with “acte accompli“, R. Janko – in English – with “incident“, just a stronger version of “accident“. See: Aristote, *Poétique*, ed. by M. Magnien, Paris 1990, p. 207; Aristotle: *Poetics I with the Tractatus Coislinianus, a hypothetical reconstruction of Poetics II, the fragments of the On poets*, ed. by R. Janko, Indianapolis 1987, p. 218.

⁸ M. Husain, *Ontology and the Art of Tragedy. An Approach to Aristotle’s Poetics*, New York 2002, p. 59, 57.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

¹⁰ See: U. Meixner, *Theorie der Kausalität. Ein Leitfaden zum Kausalbegriff in zwei Teilen*, Paderborn 2001, p. 320 *et seq.*

kinds of causes, the question is rather complicated. Some of his “causes”, especially matter and form, are constitutive elements and not causes in the modern sense. Only his “efficient cause” can be compared with the contemporary concept of cause. But for the plot of tragedy Aristotle postulates a stringent event-causality: each event has to result from the preceding events. Between the partial actions of the whole action a probable-necessary connection has to be established. An inter-accidental causality connects one event with the following ones. The probable and the necessary belong to the series of the logic modalities, which also contains the impossible, the improbable, and the contingent.

How is this causality to be conceived of? Aristotle himself proposes a certain – but extremely distant – with the textile crafts. “Each tragedy consists of complication (*desis*) and resolution (*lysis*)” (1455b 24). These are the two main parts of the plot considered only under the aspect of its composition. When the poet has reached to the end of the part “complication” he must not finish by simply “solving” the work; but he has to continue his knotting work and intensify the causal connection; the micro-causal proceeding from event to event must be synthesized under a larger causal curve. He has to continue with his work of complication so that the strong bond of unity, the probable-necessary bond, bridges even the turning point between the two parts.

“The resolutions of the plots must proceed from the plot itself – and not from some *deus ex machina*” (1454a 38) – as already mentioned. The turning point as starting point of the resolution: an improbable, a more or less “impossible” event which has to be integrated in the “logic cohesion” of the plot.¹¹ The way in this direction has been paved by a statement like “It’s probable, that sometimes arrives also what is not probable.” (1461b 15) That’s the climax of the immanent plot-causality: an “impossible” turning-point giving a new drive towards the end of the drama. “Impossible but probable things must be preferred to possible things without reliability.” (1460a 27 et seq.) That’s what wonders are: “impossible but real”. Admittedly the analogy with the textile crafts is very loose, concerning only the constructive part, the complication or knotting.

Another analogy could be conceived: between the strong bond of unity of the plot and the logical technique of the syllogism (which belongs certainly to the cognitive domain). A syllogism is a concatenation of two propositions so that a third – and new – proposition can and must be produced. If a tragedy is a concatenation of many actions (*pragmata*) with

¹¹ *Αριστοτελους Περι Ποιητικης, op. cit.*, p. 78.

a high degree of probability and even necessity, we could call it a narrative syllogism or a “sympragmatism”. If a syllogism could produce paradox results it would perform the tragic criterion of a surprising development.¹²

A closer analogy exists in the case of the constellation “problem-solution”, which is the pragmatic counterpart to the cognitive constellation “question-answer”. Aristotle himself delivers a good analogy from the cognitive domain: the difficult route from the theoretical impasse or perplexity or knot to a solution.¹³ In his *Metaphysics* he presents the *aporiai* as passage from knots to solutions or releases. Although it is a purely theoretical matter Aristotle speaks about as an existential, a personal problem:

Now for those who wish to get rid of perplexities it is a good plan to go into them thoroughly; for the subsequent certainty is a release (*lysis*) from the previous perplexities, and release is impossible when we do not know the knot (*desmos*). The perplexity of the mind shows that there is a ‘knot’ in the subject; for in its perplexity it is in much the same condition as men who are fettered [...].¹⁴

The passage from cognitive complications to theoretical solutions is certainly different from the course of a tragic action. But here too a kind of dramatic necessity drives the movement from one moment to another – perhaps even from surprising moments to “impossible” ones. And as elements of the tragic action the cognitive moments have a big impact – performances of argumentation (*dianoia*) between such *hamartiai* as blindness and oblivion and such frights as *anagnorisis* and reminiscence.

As mentioned, reversal and recognition are the most important *pragmata* in the plot of a tragedy. In order to illustrate these terms Aristotle himself refers to the Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*.¹⁵ The French philosopher Michel Foucault has proposed an analytical reconstruction of the very same tragedy. It is based on the aforementioned model “problem-solution”. The famous riddle of the Sphinx and Oedipus’ wise answer constitute only the prelude to the complicated situation which has arisen with the catastrophe of the plague at Thebes. The first attempt to solve the problem is a reply coming from the Delphic oracle that demands finding the murderer of the former King, Laius. Oedipus vows to find the murderer and curses him for the plague that he has caused. He engages in the process of inquiry against the unknown murderer – engages himself. A very aporetic situation (aporetic in

¹² See: W. Seitter, *Poetik lesen 1, op. cit.*, p. 129 et seq.

¹³ See: *Met.* 995a 24 et seq.

¹⁴ *Met.* 995a 27 et seq.

¹⁵ See: *Poetics* 1452a 1 et seq.

the sense of *Met.* 995a 27 et seq.) which entails a great number of different “cognitive events” or “truth productions”. Foucault uses the term *symbolon*, which means a “half index”, a “half-truth element”.¹⁶ Each *symbolon* requires another one in order to achieve some truth. And these *symbola* appear on three levels: firstly the level of some god, oracle, seer; secondly the level of the royal family – that is the perpetrators; thirdly the level of servants or slaves. Those *symbola* induce intense conflicts between the involved persons – but finally they produce an inclusive truth (although not a complete one). Following Foucault I compose a list of those “half” or “fragmentary” truth elements or *symbola*: mantic sentence, oracular message, divine knowledge; opinion, investigation, inquisition of the country, interrogation, audition, accusation, oath, discussion, reminiscence, recognition, right statement; visual perception, report, testimony.¹⁷

Therefore with Foucault the Aristotelian composition of the plot can be illustrated like this: coproduction of a strong unity based on multiple accidental incidents. And in a way Foucault also confirms my suggestion of a “syllogistic” character of the tragic plot: production of a cognitive process.

5. A new *ousia*?

The repression of substantial agents in the tragic plot, its arrangement to a probable-necessary, to a solid composition of accidents – does this mean that Aristotle really has suspended his ontology dominated by substance? And if he constructed an “accidentalist” space in his *Poetics*, an “emergency state” with an alternative ontology, did he anticipate modern developments towards an increasing indifference between the categories and between the modalities of being? Towards the priority of the event, of the becoming, of the mass of accidents?¹⁸

Leaving such speculations aside, let us consider the Aristotelian exposition as a stringent analysis of poetic – especially tragic – works. It concerns works of *techne*, where the goal of activity is not in the activity itself. For instance

¹⁶ In Ancient Greece a *symbolon* was a half of a clay piece that refers to the other half and so demonstrates the connection. It has to be subsumed under the term “part”.

¹⁷ See: M. Foucault: *Leçons sur la volonté de savoir. Cours au Collège de France. 1970–1971*, Paris 2011, p. 178 et seq., p. 223 et seq.; *idem: La vérité et les formes juridiques*, [in:] *idem, Dits et écrits*, II, Paris 1994, p. 553 et seq.; *idem, Du gouvernement des vivants. Cours au Collège de France. 1979–1980*, Paris 2012, p. 25 et seq.; *idem, Mal faire, dire vrai. Cours de Louvain, 1981*, Louvain 2012, p. 47 et seq.

¹⁸ Aristotle had to confront such developments of thinking just in his time, see *Met.* 1007a 22 et seq.

the activity of building is realized in the thing that is built, and it comes to be and is at the same time as the house; where, then, what comes to be is something different and beyond (*heteron kai para*) the activity, there the actuality is the thing produced; for example, the activity of building is actualized in the thing built [...] (*Met.* 1050a 28 et seq.)

The end product of a *techné* is an independent thing and therefore at least a possible candidate for the position of a substance. Otherwise it would have to be classified amongst the accidents – but which ones? Should the house be an accident of the architect? Or of its owner, its inhabitant?

For a tragedy the physical evidence of its independent existence may be weaker than in the case of a house. Either because of its more fragile materiality (which today is likely to be mistaken as “immateriality”) or because of its “mimetic” nature.¹⁹ Following Martha Husain I’ll consider this second aspect which gives occasion to underline the difference between Platonic and Aristotelian conception of *mimesis*. While for Plato a painting of a bed is a bed, namely a “lowest” bed, a third-rate bed, for Aristotle it is a painting – that is a being of another gender, and if it is a good painting – a first-rate being.²⁰

Aristotle’s of suggesting the essential feature of the tragedy amounts to construct a unity much more solid than any real history with real persons. The tragedy has to liver a very artificial, an “abstract” (or “concrete”) collage which owes its impact to the fact that it is composed of molecular pieces: a condensation of highest probability-necessity. Similar and diverse accidents are the best matter for such a montage or collage-like composition.²¹ Aristotle opts for a paradoxical way of suggesting the substantial quality of the tragedy as whole.²²

He suggests this by means of a brutal analogy – beginning with a rather soft metaphor. If he claims the first rank of the plot amongst the parts of the tragedy, he appoints to it the first, the biggest, the most important part, “as it were the soul” of the tragedy (1450b 38). In Aristotle the term “soul” has a very precise meaning: soul is the interior form or the

¹⁹ Aristotle treats in detail of the materiality of the tragedy, above all the language. He delivers also a „physics“ of the tragedy.

²⁰ See: M. Husain, *Ontology and the Art of Tragedy*, *op. cit.*, p.p. 23, 31, 71, 90. In the first sentence of *Categories* (which is the sentence 1 in the Bekker counting) Aristotle introduces as an example for “homonymy” the case where a living man and a portrait of man are called the same term, although they differ clearly and vastly in their essences, even genders (Cat. 1) The famous picture *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* and the homonymous book written by M. Foucault confirm Aristotle’s interpretation of this issue.

²¹ The heterogeneous character of the dramatic text supports this kind of composition: statements and replies, individual and choral comments.

²² The essentiality of the tragedy had been declared officially in its definition (1449b 23).

essence of an animal body. So the plot qualifies the tragedy to be something like an animal. It “besouls” it to its substantial quality (*ousia*), to its specific power.

At 1450b 34 et seq. the tragedy is directly compared with the animal as a beautiful and composed thing and therefore with “Aristotle’s strongest and clearest sublunary *ousia*”, the prototype of the substance.²³ And at 1459a 17 et seq. Aristotle claims that the epic poem just as the tragic one must have a strong plot-structure “[...] for being like an animal which is one and whole and can produce its appropriate pleasure”.

I spoke of a brutal analogy because of the etymological sense of “brutal” (which means bestial, animal) and because it works as a counterpoint in relation to the consequent desubstantialization or “dissubstantiation” executed on the interior of the tragedy.²⁴ The accidentalization of the plot makes possible the metaphorical animalization of the tragedy – in order to illustrate poetically the emergence of a totally different substance.

If the tragedy were not a substance it would have to be an accident – but an accident attached to what? Should it be a permanent aspect or part of the poet, eternally dependent on him? That would contradict the structure of the *poietic* production which aims to yield an independent thing. Although Aristotle insists on the productive performance of the poet – as “maker of plots” (1451b 27), he doesn’t elevate the poet to some great unique agent (who he had eliminated from the interior of the plots). The *Antigone* is not a “Sophocles”. Just as the painting *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* is not a “Magritte”.

Aristotle avoids both the romantic enthusiasm of genius and the populism of modern “Rezeptionsästhetik”, which subjects the work of art to any contingent perception and attention of the recipient.²⁵ ∞

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²³ M. Husain, *Ontology and the Art of Tragedy*, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

²⁴ The collage character of the plot seems related to the non-homoeomeric composition of the animal organism: different parts, organs, cavities. See Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*, ed. by J. G. Lennox, Oxford 2001.

²⁵ See: M. Husain, *Ontology and the Art of Tragedy*, *op. cit.*, p.p. 48, 121.

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