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ON THE TRANSMISSION
OF POETICS

L'oeuvre se fait ainsi dépositaire d'une immense, d'une incessante enquête sur les mots.

[The work thus makes itself the repository of a vast unceasing investigation into words.]

Roland Barthes, *Critique et vérité*

The following text is a fragment – an unruly one that seems to defy its own placement within a longer work on the themes of archivization and transmission in contemporary poetics, even as it functions as a generative exemplar and opportunity to consider such themes over an expansive historical arc. In offering a sketch of Aristotle's Poetics in its transmission from initial composition to absorption into Syriac and Arabic compendia, across the Medieval Mediterranean to its "rediscovery" in Europe, this necessarily partial view of a work's manifold histories gives some scope into the fragility, instability, amalgamation, fragmentation, and transformation of texts as they circulate. Each instantiation of the text – as it creates the conditions for an entirely unique interpretive genealogy for the work amid its cultures of reception – points to an infinite set of absences, incompletions, erasures, and overwritings.

It is perhaps fitting, then, for the present text to remain its own discrete fragment – one intended to underlie a critical methodology (a media-historical poetics) for considering the variety of inscriptive media that move into and through digital repositories of poetry and poetics materials such as the Electronic Poetry Center, UbuWeb, and PennSound. Even though I insist this speaks toward that, I find myself, for now, incapable of adequately grafting one onto the other. And so, for the time being, they will remain in adjacent frames, to be taken up on another occasion, open to a possible articulation by a more adept reader, taken in a direction unforeseen at this moment of writing, or abandoned entirely – like so many other inscriptions.

Yet, what this sketch points to is the need for a mode of analysis that accounts for the sites where and techniques by which texts are reshaped, reformatted, and integrated into different contexts and conditions of consumption. Or, to intone a definition of literary production that Terry Eagleton (1978) has put forward, it demonstrates the extent to which the material apparati, technological infrastructures, and social relations that produce a literary artifact are always already a part of a work.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle begins his treatise with an overview of the work. The text, he states, concerns itself with the craft of poetic composition [*poiētikē* (*tekhnē*)] and its various forms, their characteristics in general, their components in the particular. All forms of poetic composition, he writes – though, in the extant text of the *Poetics*, he addresses primarily tragic poetry, and mentions epic, comedic, and dithyrambic poetries – are species of imitation or reenactment, *mīmēsis*. Imitations, he outlines, differ in three respects: the *media* of an imitation, the *object* of an imitation, and the mode (or *manner*) of imitation. Here, it is useful to note the three uses of the adjective *héteros* [different] that Aristotle uses to create this tripartite classification. For the *media* – or, to use the Butcher translation (1895), the "material vehicle" – of imitation, Aristotle uses *héteros genos* [different kinds], employing the dative of means (*dativus instrumenti*). For the *object* of imitation, he uses the plural substantive of *héteros* so as to make it a noun – different "things." And, finally, *héteros trópos* [a different mode] – using the accusative so as to mark it as a prepositional phrase [*in* or *with* a mode that is different than other modes] – for the *mode* or *manner* of imitation.

Following the overview and formal classification of imitations, Aristotle devotes the rest of the first section of the *Poetics* to a discussion of the media of poetic practice. For Aristotle, the different media are constituted by particular articulations (and non-articulations) of cultural techniques that poets utilize to enact imitations. He mentions a remarkable variety of media: rhythm and language and harmony, song, flute playing and lyre playing, dancing or rhythmical movement, prose ("bare language" [*psilos* + *logos*]) and in meter (such as hexameter, iambic trimeters, elegiac couplets), dithyramb, verbal arts without meter such as miming and Socratic dialogue, and other possible combinations of verse forms.

The breadth and inclusivity in Aristotle's conception of poetic media remains pertinent for considering the variety of media and intermedial approaches to poetic composition in the present. Yet, the notable absence of historical inquiry in the *Poetics* is worthy of closer scrutiny. Throughout the *Poetics*, Aristotle organizes and describes the various qualities of the modes of poetic composition, but never their histories. He offers no remarks on the contexts, social forms, and circulations these modes engage with over time. Instead, for Aristotle, the media or means of poetic practice are all equally and simultaneously present and available. One can derive or develop, then, following the example of Aristotle, a media-centered approach that engages specific articulations of the material means and modes of composition. The same can not be said, it seems, for developing a media historical approach that addresses the cultural and technological forms via which poetic works emerge, perform, and circulate.

Though the contents of Aristotle's *Poetics* provide no historicizing engagement with the media of poetic composition, the object of the text does. Consult any available version of the *Poetics* – be it an edition in the "original" Greek of Aristotle, or any of the numerous languages into which the work has been translated. Each one shares an important feature. Every edition of Aristotle's *Poetics* available today is an assemblage of hundreds of manuscripts, editions, versions, translations, copies, paratexts, and commentaries all regarding a text for which there is no extant original. Here, it is worthwhile to detour briefly through aspects of the work's transmission histories.

The *Poetics* was authored in the fourth century BCE, at some point between the death of Plato (c. 347 BCE) and Aristotle's own passing at Chalcis (322 BCE). Here, the use of the passive voice – the text "was authored" – is intentional, since the *Poetics* is one of Aristotle's "esoteric" writings (meaning that it was a technical work specifically intended for advanced students at the Lyceum and not necessarily meant to be distributed beyond that space), and since it is also one of his "acroamatic" works (meaning that Aristotle orally communicated the text to his students). This means there is an ambiguity at the work's inception as to whether an "original" text – one that is no longer extant – could have been Aristotle's own lecture notes, or the notes taken down by one of his students. It's for these reasons that commentaries note the work's "short allusive and elusive sentences" mixed with sections that are "verbose, prolix, and even somewhat repetitious" (Tarán and Gutas 2010, 23), he "not infrequently omits to indicate the connexion of ideas in his sentences and paragraphs, so that the logical relation between them is left for us to perceive as best we can" (Bywater, 1909, v) and that, even compared to the other acroamatic works, the *Poetics* is especially "abrupt, elliptical, [and] sometimes incoherent" (Else, 1967, 10). "Surely," Tarán and Gutas write, "most of his Athenian contemporaries would have found his technical treatises practically unintelligible." The work "presents difficulties to a reader unfamiliar with Aristotle's philosophical thought and technical vocabulary" (Taran and Gutas 2012, 23). Yet, its esoteric and acroamatic qualities are likely the reason why we have versions of the *Poetics* today, since none of Aristotle's exoteric (public) works exist – the ones, for instance, that Cicero, in the *Academica*, described as a "*flumen orationis aureum*" [a "golden stream of eloquence"]. Due to the esoteric and acroamatic works' status of being the core of Aristotelian thought – whether because they were the private written records of Aristotle's thoughts and researches meant for his closest students, or because the works were, as earlier commentators believed, his secret or mystical doctrines – scholars from the Hellenistic to Renaissance periods privileged the esoteric works over the exoteric ones, thereby continuing their storage and transmission.

Yet, Aristotle's treatise on the poetic arts "barely survived antiquity" (Mallette 2009, 584). No commentary on the *Poetics* is known to have been written in ancient times. In fact, in manuscripts of the works of Aristotle from the second and third centuries CE – a time of renewed interest in his writings – "the tradition of the *Poetics* is independent from that of his main philosophical works such as *Physics, Metaphysics*, etc" (Tarán and Gutas 2012, 35), meaning the work was either unavailable and/or not of interest. Tarán and Gutas do exceptional work tracing out possible textual testimonies of the *Poetics*, inferring from them a transmission history. Their history moves forward from Aristotle's own collection of his writings on papyrus rolls; to copies of these rolls in the possession of Eudemus, Theophrastus, and then Neleus after Aristotle's death; to stories of their movement between individuals, libraries, and being hidden in a moist and mothy trench in Strabo, Plutarch, and Athenaeus; to their likely migration into codex form during the second century CE; and, finally, to a discussion of a no longer extant archetype likely dated to the sixth century CE – one written in majuscule letters and in *scripto continua*, meaning without any separation between words, with no accents, breathings, and practically no punctuation – that is the likely source manuscript for the primary witnesses of the *Poetics* we possess today. Though pieced together out of an impressive assemblage of citations and commentaries, much of this history is conjectural. The closest views, chronologically speaking, we have of the *Poetics* are dated from the ninth and tenth centuries CE, over 1200 years after the work's initial composition.

There exists, presently, four primary witnesses – an extant manuscript or translation that does not depend on any other extant manuscript or translation – of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Two of the primary witnesses are Greek manuscripts: the first, *codex Parisinus Graecus* 1741, is dated from the second half of the tenth century; the second, *codex Riccardianus* 46, is dated, at the earliest, the middle of the twelfth century. The third primary witness is a Medieval Latin translation completed by William of Moerbeke in 1278, found in two anonymous manuscripts – *Etonensis 129* (written around 1300) and *Toletanus*, bibl. Capituli 47–10 (written about 1280) – and not published as a critical edition until 1953. The fourth is Abū Bishr Mattā ibn Yūnus's mid-tenth century Arabic translation of a ninth century Syriac version (no longer extant) of the Greek, preserved in *Parisinus Arabus* 2346 from the eleventh century. Each one of these primary witnesses was produced in different contexts of inscription. Each refers to, or emerges out of, different sets of lost manuscripts and archetypes. Each features different contents or versions of the text, and is "complete" or "incomplete" in different ways. Their texts were written using different linguistic, grammatical, and syntactical systems. Their manuscripts were articulated in

different modes – or formats – of publication, dissemination, and storage.

For example, the version of the *Poetics* in the manuscript *Parsinus Graecus* 1741 was published on parchment over 15 folios, collected in a kind of compendium, or codexical repository, of Hellenistic writings that included twenty other works (three of which are no longer extant), including Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. Statements on the folios indicate various historical particularities: a note indicating that the manuscript was a gift from Byzantine nobleman Manuel Angelos to cleric Theodoros Skoutariotes in the late thirteenth century; Italian Francesco Filefo copied the text and included it in another codex (*Laurentianus* 60.21) in the early fifteenth century; someone transported the manuscript from Constantinople to Italy at some point most likely during the mid-fifteenth century where it was kept in the possession of the Greek scholar Basilios Bessarion. Additional marks on the folios bear further traces of its history as a medial object: there is the work of four different scribes in the *Parsinus Graecus* 1741, and that samples of the written text have clear similarities with other manuscripts dated between 922 and 988; some folios are older than others, and, therefore, the quire (or bundle of folios) has been articulated in different ways at different points in time; the folios, as we presently have the manuscript, were not bound until 1603 as they moved from the possession of the Catherine de Medici to the king's library to the Bilbiothèque Nationale de France (Tarán and Gutas 2012, 129-35). This example of the *Parisinus Graecus* 1741 begins to illustrate the various versions of the *Poetics* in varying formats at different historical moments, as well as the numerous actors and sites involved in the text's production, preservation, and transmission.

As a second example, consider the *Parisinus Arabus* 2346 manuscript that includes Abu-Bishr Matta's translation of the *Poetics*. One of the great translators of Abbasid Baghdad, Matta based his Arabic translation of the *Poetics* from a no longer extant Syriac translation made from the Greek before the start of the tenth century. Thus, his translation, entitled *On the Poets*, is the earliest witness we have to the Greek text. Matta's translation underwent at least two revisions (Tarán and Gutas 2012, 144), the first version of which served as the basis for both Ibn Sīnā's (Avicenna) summary and Ibn Rushd (Averroës) commentaries on the Poetics (Mallette 2009, 584). *The Parisinus Arabus* 2346, an eleventh century manuscript copied by different hands from among the member of the Baghdad school, preserves the first revision of Matta's translation, as well as all eight treatises of the Aristotelian Organon. The manuscript has numerous copying errors and omissions, and, as Gutas notes,

> it is obvious that the exemplar from which it was copied must have been heavily annotated in the margins or interlinearly, so that in a number of places in the Paris manuscript version, the same text appears twice. The passages containing such doublets manifestly represent an original form of the text as written by Abu-Bishr and a revised version of the same sentence or phrase originally written in the margin or interlinearly, both of which were then incorporated in the text consecutively by the scribe of the Paris manuscript. (Taran and Gutas 2012, 102)

For these reasons, and on account of the Syro-Arabic translators' and scribes' lack of acquaintance with Greek poetry and theatre, Lucas notes that the Matta translation is "a halting one" (Lucas 1968, xxiii). Taran and Gutas see the haltingness of the translation as being helpful in tracking the content of the *Poetics* in transmission. They demonstrate how the Syriac and Arabic translators of the period attempted to provide very literal renderings of the Greek, to the point of preserving word order and sentence structure even when it did not function properly in their own languages. "They may have made mistakes," they note, "but they did not invent" (Taran and Gutas 2012, 146). Yet, gaps persist. The *Poetics of Parisinus Arabus* 2346 is missing two pages (one folio) near the end of the work, and also the work's final page. The former lacuna is present because of a missing folio in the exemplar from which *Parisinus Arabus* 2346 was copied, the second due to a missing folio in the Paris manuscript itself.

Material gaps work hand in hand with socio-linguistic lacunae to alter a work in transmission. As the Matta translation is taken up in the commentaries of Averroës – commentaries that would travel from Abbasid Baghdad to Renaissance Florence, and become the central points of access to the *Poetics* for scholars in the late Medieval and early Modern eras via their Latin translation made by Hermannus – one detects a number of inventions. For instance, since Averroës was not familiar with the Greek concepts of "tragedy" and "comedy," he translates the former as *madīh*, or "praise," and the latter as *hijāʾ*, or "vituperation." "Yet this is neither the most penetrating nor the most significant of the changes," Mallette writes, "wrought by the medieval translations and commentaries" (Malette 2009, 584). She continues:

> Averroës and Hermannus followed an established tradition by reading the *Poetics* as part of the organon and hence as a work of logic. And because they understood it as a manual for those who intended to use words to effect change in the world, they viewed it in a continuum with ethics; thus the injunction upon the poet – iterated in both the Arabic and Latin versions of Averroës's commentary – to use encomium and vituperation to praise the good and blame the base.

> Aristotle's interrogation of mimēsis (μίμησιϚ), the backbone of his *Poetics*, had long fallen by the wayside. This is scarcely remarkable; as Earl Miner has pointed out, the notion of a literary tradition grounded in mimicry or dramatic imitation – in the narrative representation of an individual human life – is unique to ancient Greece. (Malette 2009, 585)

Additionally, Mallette outlines a number of textual transfigurations Averroës (and Hermannus, following Averroës) made in the *Poetics*. These transfigurations include: Averroës adding citations from poetry – Arab poets, pre-Islamic to modern, as well as citations from the Koran – to the text so as to illustrate specific arguments, as there is a notable absence of poetic examples in Aristotle's text; and altering Aristotle's critique of poetic eloquence – his statements that poets achieve eloquence through clarity and through avoiding rhetorical ornament, and that an overdependence in poetry upon languages other than Attic Greek is "barbaric" – into a section that praises "the linguistic showboating so prized in the Arabic tradition" and the "exhilarating brilliance of linguistic play [made] possible by the Arabic language" (Mallette 2009, 585-6). Thus, in order to construct a more comprehensive analysis of what the *Poetics* is and how it means as a composition, a poetics of the *Poetics*, it is necessary to take into account the witnesses, testimonies, and derivative works – that is, the texts themselves and the contexts of their production, circulation, and use – in transmission from Aristotle's time to our own.

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