The Interpretation of Poetics IX

H. C. BALDRY

In his article on the genesis of Aristotle's text in the last issue of Phronesis Dr. Felix Grayeff put forward the view that 'the additions, critical remarks, etc. which we generally find within short chapters and paragraphs of the Corpus Aristotelicum are of such a nature that they can hardly be assumed to have come from one man. On the contrary, they are often so radically at variance with statements made immediately before or after, and so heterogeneous in purpose and standpoint, that perhaps we must conclude that many peripatetic lecturers contributed to almost every part of what is known as Aristotle's works.' As an example he took the well known passage Poetics IX, 1-9 (1451a37-b32), in which he distinguished four 'phases of the text' drawn from four different sources: the original lecturer, the 'systematising philosopher', 'a school discussion on a more popular level', and the 'editor'. It is strange to reflect, he added, that the doctrine which later centuries have found in this chapter, and which has proved so stimulating and so productive of poetry, 'was arrived at by a slow and tortuous process and almost inadvertently.'

To the present writer such a conclusion seems strange indeed. The first object of this short article is to reconsider this familiar, but admittedly difficult, section of Poetics IX with a view to clarifying the sequence of ideas. I shall maintain that here, at any rate, there is no good ground for Mr. Grayeff's views; on the contrary, the passage in question pursues a single line of thought closely linked with the rest of the Poetics, and presumably the product of a single mind which we may, I think, safely regard as that of Aristotle himself. Secondly, I shall discuss briefly the background, mainly Platonic, from which Aristotle drew some of the ideas involved.

The chapter begins by defining the poet's function: he must describe not tâ γενόμενα, but oîa ãv γένοιτο καὶ τὰ δυνατὰ κατὰ τὸ εἶκός ἦ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον; that this is his task is clear from what has already been said. Mr. Grayeff regards the last nine words of the sentence as added, and anyway nonsensical. He interprets oîa ãv γένοιτο as 'anything that may happen' – a reference 'to the freedom of the poet in inventing situations'; and it is hardly surprising that he finds only a 'rather general' connection with what has been said before. It will be agreed by most students of the
Poetics, however, that this first sentence has a very different meaning and is in fact closely linked with the preceding chapters. ὁ ἐν γένοις means 'the kind of things that are likely to happen', and the rest of the sentence, far from being a nonsensical addition, gives us the very heart of the matter: the poet's concern is not with any possible events, but with possible events that accord with probability or necessity. It is this limitation that supplies the link with chapters seven and eight, where it was made clear that the unity essential to a μοῖρας depends on the probable or necessary connection of its parts, as opposed to the casual sequence of actual events (cf. 1450b27-31, 1451a12-13, 27-28, 32-35). Only the subject-matter described in this first sentence of chapter nine will enable the poet to construct a unified μοῖρας.

The subsequent distinction between historian and poet, with the claim that poetry is more philosophic and of more serious interest than history, involves no shift of thought but is a natural development of the theme of the first sentence. The term τὰ καθόλου is introduced in order to make clearer the relationship between poetry and philosophy, but the definition of καθόλου (1451b8-9) largely repeats the language of the first sentence and shows that the writer has neither more nor less in mind than when he wrote ὁ ἐν γένοις there.

So far (up to 1451b11) most commentators on the Poetics have found the argument clear and consistent. It is after this point that difficulties arise and interpretations diverge. The one I shall follow has at any rate, I hope, the advantage of presenting the thought of the chapter as a single and consistent whole.

According to Mr. Grayeff the contrast between history and poetry now 'develops into a contrast between tragedy and comedy, and it seems to follow that comedy is poetry, but tragedy is not. This is obviously an absurd conclusion, and the rest of the chapter consists in attempts to remove the absurdity.' I cannot see that any such absurdity is suggested or discussed. On the contrary, Aristotle now turns in his own way to the deepest problem in the relationship between philosophy and poetry. Both are concerned with τὰ καθόλου. But the poet differs from the philosopher in that he expresses the universal not in universal terms, but through the individual and the particular. The full significance of this for the poet's art has been realised only in more modern times, and is still under discussion today. Aristotle, the first to raise the point at all, sees it in only a limited, and perhaps superficial, form - the fact that although poetry's subject-matter is τὰ καθόλου, individual names are