CRITICAL NOTICE

An encounter with Aristotle

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Soon after completing this sixth volume of his *History of Greek Philosophy* Guthrie died. It is clear from the Preface that, after a stroke, he perceived the approach of death before finishing the book; with dignity he records that he has not been able to treat the *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* as fully as he wished; and that the *History* will go no further.

In the Preface he also says (p.ix) that, 'on re-reading what I have written I find it intensely personal.' The reader (especially those of us who have grown up reading the successive volumes of Guthrie's work) might expect to find this a valedictory book, revealing in its tone its position as the author's closing words. But in fact the book is as lively, wide-ranging and urbane as its predecessors. One is amazed at the evidence in the footnotes of the way Guthrie tirelessly kept up with recent articles on a vast range of specialist Aristotelian interests, as well as general and philosophical books on central issues. The footnotes, with their varied erudition, polemic, literary allusions and jokes, play an agreeable counterpoint to the clear and even exposition in the text. It is the best tribute we can pay to Guthrie that *Aristotle* can be read entirely without making allowances for the circumstances of its composition; it is, as he says, slightly incomplete, but otherwise as vigorous as ever. It is, indeed, an intensely personal book. With matching frankness I shall say right away that there is a great deal in it with which I deeply disagree; but I do so with the respect which not only this volume but the whole *History* continues to produce.

The book begins with emphatic praise of Jaeger's *Aristotle* as being the most important factor, for Guthrie, in bringing Aristotle alive where first he had seemed rigid and dull. We then have a discussion of 'the genetic approach'. Guthrie is thoroughly sensible in his evaluation of the scope and limits of developmental studies, and in this chapter and the one on Aristotle's 'philosophical pilgrimage' he steers clear of committing himself to the feasibility of tracing any one linear development in Aristotle. Nonetheless, he says, surprisingly, 'Returning now to Jaeger after many years, having in the meantime read many of his critics, I feel no doubt that the *Grundlegung*, the foundations, remain' (p. 4). Guthrie is in fact divided over Jaeger. On the one hand, he accepts Jaeger's reconstruction of the
young Aristotle as totally absorbing Plato’s metaphysics and so much under his spell as to write Platonic dialogues containing Platonic ideas. On the *Eudemus*, *Protrepticus* and *De Philosophia* he flatly rejects all criticisms of Jaeger. But, having got these out of the way, he produces, from p. 89 on, an account of Aristotle’s thought which treats it as a unity and proceeds thematically: after a chapter on ‘The Mind of Aristotle’ we tour the science, logic, metaphysics, psychology and ethics without any further mention of chronological developments. Not only is there no stratifying of the *Metaphysics* and *Ethics*, Guthrie allots little significance to developments in particular fields: he treats the *Topics* as part of the *Organon* without even handling the question of whether it is earlier than syllogistic; he jettisons Nuyens in the psychology without regret (pp. 277-9); he allots hardly a mention to the debate in which he himself has figured prominently, on the development of Aristotle’s theology (pp. 262-3).

Given that most of the book is a straightforward treatment of Aristotle’s philosophy treated as a fully-formed and unified system (cf. p. 350, p. 186 n. 1) why defend Jaeger? What attracts Guthrie is not the project of finding inconsistent layers in single books, or the claim that Aristotle ended up as an empirical scientist (both of these he rejects), but the picture of Aristotle as, for part of his life, a pure Platonist. For Guthrie’s Aristotle is always half a Platonist; and so while all else is tacitly dropped Guthrie retains Jaeger’s Aristotle Platonizing in the Academy, accepting unreservedly a doctrine which according to Guthrie is still important in the surviving works.

It is a pity that the part of Jaeger’s thesis that Guthrie retains is one of the weakest. The evidence for Aristotle as a dutifully parrotting pupil is not strong, and not extensive. The dialogue *Eudemus* contains a character who claims that the soul is immortal; but even if this is Aristotle speaking in *propria persona* this does not prove that he is here merely producing another *Phaedo*. Proofs that the soul is immortal notoriously vary over what exactly is taken to survive our death; indeed some of the *Phaedo* arguments prove only that what survives is the soul understood as pure thinking, not the individual personality, and if that was what the *Eudemus* claimed there would be nothing to retract in the *de Anima* — just as the *de Anima* is not embarrassed by the *Eudemus’* claims that the soul is a form, and is substance. It is slender evidence for Jaeger’s idea that Aristotle ‘was already a master in the realm of method and logical technique at a time when he was still completely dependent on Plato in metaphysics.’ Guthrie accepts this with enthusiasm, finding Platonic Forms in a reference to the soul’s seeing ‘sights there’ on the grounds that ‘the language here is purely Platonic’ (p. 68). In fact it is NeoPlatonic, the source being Proclus (*In