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Poetic Expression and Human Enacted Realities: Plato and Aristotle Engage Pragmatist Motifs in Greek Fictional Representations

Abstract

Poetic expressions may seem somewhat removed from a pragmatist social science, but the history of the development of Western civilization is such that the (knowingly) fictionalized renderings of human life-worlds that were developed in the classical Greek era (c700-300BCE) appear to have contributed consequentially to a scholarly emphasis on the ways in which people engage the world.

Clearly, poetic writings constitute but one aspect of early Greek thought and are best appreciated within the context of other developments in that era, most notably those taking shape in the realms of philosophy, religion, rhetoric, politics, history, and education.

These poetic materials (a) attest to views of the human condition that are central to a pragmatist philosophy (and social science) and (b) represent the foundational basis for subsequent developments in literary criticism (including theory and methods pertaining to the representation of human enacted realities in dramaturgical presentations).

Thus, while not reducing social theory to poetic representation, this statement considers the relevance of early Greek poetics for the development of social theory pertaining to humanly enacted realities.

Keywords

Poetics; Fiction; Classical Greek; Plato; Aristotle; Pragmatism; Symbolic Interaction; Representation; Reality; Literary Criticism

On the surface, it may seem odd that poetic expressions or knowingly fictionalized representations of human situations from the classical Greek era (c700-300BCE) have fostered pragmatist conceptions of community life, but this appears to have been the case.

Indeed, while not proposing that poetic representations be envisioned as viable substitutes for the social science enterprise, the roots of a *sociological* theory of community life may be more appropriately located in some fictionalized texts and analyses thereof that date back to Homer, Plato, and Aristotle and others of the classical Greek era than in the 19th century writings of Comte, Durkheim, Marx, and

Weber. This claim may be unsettling to some, but one finds considerable "sociological" acuity in this realm of Greek literature.

Also, whereas this immediate discussion focuses on "poetics," somewhat parallel arguments can be made for the relevance of classical Greek considerations of rhetoric, religion, philosophy, ethnohistory, politics, and education for a more adequate sociological approach to community life (Prus 2004, 2007a, 2008a).

Developed from a larger, interactionist-informed (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969; Prus 1996, 1997, 1999; Prus and Grills 2003) project that focuses on the relationship of theory to humanly known and enacted realities over the millennia, the present statement is notably partial and vastly understates the significance of the broader corpus of classical Greek literature for contemporary social science.

Recognizing that many readers will have only vague familiarities with the early Greek literature, I have tried to contextualize this material in more general terms. Those more familiar with this material will find that I have exercised little "poetic license" in developing this statement. Focusing on pragmatist thought as signified by *linguistically informed intersubjectivity* and *human enacted realities*, I have relied most centrally on sources that attend to these matters in more explicit (vs. inferential) manners.

As used herein, the term *poetics* refers to knowingly fictionalized representations of things that are intended to have some entertaining qualities. Messages may be presented verbally or developed as texts to be read by audiences. Also, the linguistic statements embedded within may be presented more exclusively on their own or they may be supplemented by other sensory-enabled mediums, such as actions, physical items, sounds or other artistic productions. At a more minimalist level, however, poetic representations differ from other artistic expressions (as in shapes, images, motions, sounds) in that poetic materials are centrally reliant on *linguistic* communications.¹

Notably, thus, while poetic text may be integrated with a seemingly unlimited range of other mediums, it is the deployment of language as an intentional, intersubjective (even if problematic) form of relating to the other that most centrally distinguishes poetics from other expressive representations (such as artwork, photography, movements, music) that may somehow be shared with others. Still, here, as with oral or written text more generally, it should not be assumed that poetic ventures will be interpreted by audiences in ways that the producers of these communications may have intended.²

Whereas all instances of poetic expression presume some knowledge claims, and the most effective fictionalizations may well be those that more extensively incorporate (other) elements that audiences would consider to be sincere or authentic, it is expected that poets would have some freedom or license to represent situations in ways that are knowingly distorted or inauthentic. Poetic representations are not expected to adhere to the requirements of rigor and accuracy normally associated with philosophy, science, law or other attempts to sincerely and closely approximate instances and/or analysis of "what is."

For our purposes, it is comparatively inconsequential whether "poetic" materials are presented in verse, rhyme, or prose. Also somewhat irrelevant, at a base-line level,

¹ See Dewey (1934) and Becker (1982) for two notably extended considerations of art worlds and people's involvements therein.

² It may be observed that all representations are fictionalized in some way; that representations cannot completely capture all essences of the matters that are signified without actually being that which is signified. However, the emphasis here is on those representations that are knowingly misconstrued and intended to have some entertainment value.

are considerations about the length of these statements, the emotive tones (e.g., epic or heroic, tragic, comic) expressed, the number of speakers involved, the subject matters (humans or other objects) that become focal points of these endeavors, and any associated contextual features (e.g., settings, objects, appearances, sounds, motions) that may be invoked to generate particular effects.

Some poetic expressions may be self-directed or appreciated exclusively by the author, but the more general inference is that these statements would provide a means of connecting the thoughts of the author with the mind(s) of the other.

Further, although poets may assume that audiences derive meanings from these communications that correspond with the author's own thoughts, no claims of this sort are made in this statement. Indeed, the connections between intentioned meanings and assigned meanings are presumed problematic in practice.

Symbolic Interactionism: Premises and Practices

While many readers may be familiar with aspects of interactionist thought (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969, Strauss 1993; Prus 1996, 1997, 1999; and Prus and Grills 2003), it is important to establish a set of shared reference points for examining the relevance of classical texts on poetics for the study of human knowing and acting.

Denoting a sociological extension of American pragmatic philosophy associated with Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and (especially) George Herbert Mead, symbolic interactionism may be seen to rest on premises of the following sort.

1. *Human group life is intersubjective.* Human group life is accomplished (and made meaningful) through community-based linguistic interchange.
2. *Human group life is knowingly problematic.* It is through group-based linguistic references (shared symbols and associated concepts) that people begin to distinguish realms of "the known" and (later) "the unknown."
3. *Human group life is object-oriented.* Denoting anything that can be referenced (observed, referred to, indicated, acted toward, or otherwise knowingly experienced), objects constitute the contextual essences of the humanly known environment.
4. *Human group life is (multi) perspectival.* Objects do not have inherent meanings, but take on meanings as people act toward particular things. As particular groups of people engage the world on an ongoing basis, they develop the viewpoints, conceptual frameworks, or notions of "whatness" that serve as the foundations of their senses of reality.
5. *Human group life is reflective.* It is by taking the perspective of the (community-based) other into account with respect to one's own being that people become "objects unto themselves" (and act accordingly).
6. *Human group life is sensory/embodied and (knowingly) materialized.* Among the realms of humanly knowing "what is" and "what is not," people develop an awareness of [the material or physical things] that others in the community recognize. This includes appreciations of the [sensory / body / physiological] essences of human beings (self and other). This involves acknowledging human capacities for stimulation and activity as well as practical (enacted, embodied) limitations and fragility.
7. *Human group life is activity-based.* The interactionists approach human behavior as instances of a meaningful, instrumental or purposive process. Not only is activity

seen as “something in the making,” but human endeavor also is envisioned in anticipatory, reflective, and adjustive terms.

8. *Human group life is negotiable.* Because meaningful human activity is so interwoven with people’s interactions with others, people commonly define, anticipate, and strive to influence others *as well as* accept and resist the influences of others.
9. *Human group life is relational.* People define or make sense of others and themselves (as objects) within group contexts. People act mindfully of, and in conjunction with, the identities they assign to others and themselves.
10. *Human group life is processual.* Human lived experiences (and activities) are viewed in emergent, ongoing, or temporally developed terms. Human group life, thus, is considered in process terms, within the developmental flows of activities (and the interchanges thereof).
11. *Human group life takes place in instances.* Community life is best known through an attentiveness to the particular occasions in which people engage things. Conceptions of human experience are to be developed mindfully of, and tested against, the particular occasions or instances in which people attend to and otherwise act toward self, other, and other objects of their awareness. The associated methodological emphasis, thus, is on studying “what is” by examining the instances in which any and all aspects of community life take place.

What most distinguishes the interactionists from the pragmatist philosophers is the interactionist insistence (following Blumer 1969) on the use of ethnographic research as the essential methodology for achieving substantive familiarity with the actualities of human knowing and acting. Relatedly, interactionist conceptualizations of community life are to be informed by, tested through, and adjusted in ways that are attentive to sustained instances of ethnographic inquiry. The objective, hence, is to develop increasingly more viable understandings of community life by ethnographically examining instances of human group life in broad arrays of life-worlds and using sustained examinations of the instances therein as the foundations for comparative analyses in assessing and adjusting earlier conceptions of human knowing and acting.

Given these theoretical and methodological emphases, it may seem unusual to refer to materials that have been developed over two thousand years ago by people who seem quite removed from contemporary developments in the social sciences. However, as may become more apparent as this statement unfolds, contemporary pragmatist and interactionist theory, as well as the human sciences more generally, are very much indebted to classical Greek thought.

Not only is American pragmatist philosophy grounded in the scholarship of Plato and (especially) Aristotle, but a somewhat broader Greek attentiveness to depictions and analyses of human knowing and acting very much resonates with interactionist scholarship (Prus 2003, 2004, 2007a, 2008b). Thus, following a consideration of some especially pertinent classical Greek texts and a highly abbreviated commentary on some subsequent developments in poetics, the paper concludes with an assessment of conceptual linkages between the ways in which human group life is portrayed in this literature and contemporary interactionist emphases.

Foundational Emphases

As with so many other features of Western scholarship, Plato (420-348BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE) emerge as particularly prominent figures in conceptual considerations of poetics. Still, it is instructive to begin some centuries prior to Plato and Aristotle, acknowledging a broader, albeit, less analytically explicit set of writings.

While Homer and Hesiod are generally taken as the earliest and most consequential Greek poetic authors of record, others notably include the playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, and Menander. Given the parameters of the present statement, only very brief references will be made to their works.

Homer's Iliad and Odyssey

Whereas notions of fictionalized representations appear basic to all known human communities and clearly predate any written records those peoples may have developed, it may be adequate to begin our consideration of classical Greek poetics with *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. These are two rather extensively developed "epic" (heroic account) poems attributed to Homer (c700 BCE).

Iliad and *Odyssey* are intense, adventurous, and complex accounts of people's experiences as they attempt to deal with matters of group life, personal honor, and physical survival, amidst an assortment of superbeings and very human (and mortal) others.

Iliad is developed around the experiences of a Greek warrior/champion, Achilles, a mortal superhero who encounters dramatic battlefield challenges with the Trojans. Still, Achilles also faces the tasks of coming to terms with the interests and maneuverings of a set of (immortal) gods as well as Achilles' own (less than honorable, but very human) Commander-in-chief, Agamemnon.

Presumably taking place after the Trojan War, *Odyssey* revolves around the trials and triumphs of (a Greek) King Odysseus who following a shipwreck initiated by the gods, finds himself thrust into a series of highly novel but mortally perilous adventures. After a series of incredible adventures, Odysseus eventually makes his way home. However, given his prolonged absence (during which time he is presumed dead), Odysseus now has to deal with those who have tried to take advantage of his queen and his position during his voyage.

While among the first, extensively preserved, written Greek texts, these two volumes depict a great many aspects of community life, both through author account *and* extended character dialogue.

Situated within developmental sequences or processes, the human interchange depicted in *Iliad* and *Odyssey* revolves around the matters of adversity, deliberation, agency, deception, affection, loyalty, morality, persona, mortality, and ongoing adjustment. Thus, whereas *Iliad* and *Odyssey* not only have inspired a great deal of classical Greek literature and have been treasured on a variety of literary bases by scholars familiar with their contents, these texts also represent particularly significant reference points for those embarking on scholarly considerations of things "human."

Hesiod's Theogony

While both Homer and Hesiod appear to have generated extended intrigues in religious and entertainment sectors of Western social thought by involving an assortment of gods and superheroes in their writings, it is Hesiod (c 700BCE) who developed a genealogy of the gods and stipulated their interrelatedness with one another and the human world.

Hesiod discusses some matters of divine revelation and interplay in *Work and Days*, but it is in *Theogony* that Hesiod develops these religious motifs in more sustained and comprehensive terms. Claiming instruction from the nine muses or daughters of Zeus, Hesiod's *Theogony* represents one of the most consequential instances of religious fiction in antiquity. Early Greek polytheism may be indebted to Egyptian and eastern sources, but Hesiod specifies the origins, evolution, roles, and relationships of some three hundred Greek gods.

Although Zeus and the Olympian gods (notably including *Poseidon, Hades, Hera, Hermes, Athena, and Apollo*) appear to have received the most attention, Hesiod's genealogy is much more extensive and multifaceted. Hesiod provides an account of the origins of the gods, beginning with *Chaos*. *Eros* (Desire) and *Gaia* (Earth) followed *Chaos* as also did *Tartarus*. Following an incredible assortment of matings and interchanges (alignments, conflicts, and violent encounters) among the gods and their exceptional progeny, it is *Zeus* – through his wisdom, courage, and heroics, who emerges as the ruler of all. Whereas many of the gods that Hesiod describes emerge more distinctively as characters and consequential actors unto themselves, other gods assume roles of more generic sorts, such as Persuasion, Deceit, Evil Tongue, Blame, Harmony, Fate, Forgetfulness, Sleep, Old Age, and Death.

Hesiod's *Theogony* may be seen to objectify or crystallize Greek views on religion and represent important themes in Greek civilization more generally, but it should be noted that Hesiod's views were not shared by the Greek intelligentsia.³ Nevertheless, much like Homer, Hesiod's writings on the gods have inspired many other poets. Notably, this included the lyricist Pindar [c518-445BCE] who extensively blended Greek theology with athletic prowess and the Greek Playwrights

³ Thus, for example, Herodotus (484-425BCE), who in his *Histories* (B2: 50-65) is attentive to wide ranges of wondrous things in Eastern Mediterranean folk accounts, contends that the Greek gods are essentially Egyptian constructions conveyed through the fictions of Homer and Hesiod. Likewise, while Socrates (c469-399BCE; following Pythagoras [c580-500BCE]), and Plato (c420-348BCE; following Socrates) insist on a divine reality, they adopt a very different conception of divinity (especially see *Timaeus*). Others, such as the sophists Protagoras (c490-420BCE) and Gorgias (c485-380BCE) adopt standpoints that are so relativist or cynicist in cast that they do not allow for the existence of divine essences. Divine essences, especially of the sort discussed by Hesiod also receive little credence in works of Democritus and Aristotle. Adopting a materialist stance, Democritus (c460-357BCE) argues that all substances are made up of indivisible physical particles that undergo a continual process of transformation as the objects of which they are composed come and go overtime. Aristotle (c384-322BCE) dismisses the gods of Homer and Hesiod as mythical legacies of the Greek heritage (*Metaphysics* p. 1074b). While Aristotle makes the case for a "first mover," he also argues that this entity would be like nothing that is humanly known (see *Physics* pp. 266a-267b; *Metaphysics* pp. 1071b-1073a). Further, in contrast to Plato who subscribes to two realms of reality (divine and humanly known and a soul-body dualism), Aristotle focuses centrally on the humanly known world and envisions people as biological entities who develop mindedness through capacities for sensation, action, language, recollectable memories and the like. Still, some of the most consequential material on the diversity of Greek thought on divinity and the philosophical stances within can be found in Marcus Tullius Cicero's (106-43BCE) *On the Nature of the Gods*.

whose works not only intrigued the general public but also inspired a great many 16th century Renaissance and subsequent theatrical depictions.

Classical Greek Playwrights

Albeit only a small portion of a much larger and diverse set of classical Greek poets, Aeschylus (c525-456BCE), Sophocles (c495-405BCE) and Euripides (c480-406BCE) are particularly well known for their theatrically-contrived tragedies.⁴

While introducing a variety of innovations to both written text and staged performances, the writings of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides (like those attributed to Homer) are rife with images of living, thinking, acting, and interacting characters. As with Homer, the human characters portrayed in these tragedies often intermingle with (immortal) Greek gods and (other) fictionalized beings, but virtually all participants assume human-like stances (as in possessing reflective, purposive, communicative, and adjustive abilities).

These three authors differ somewhat in their relative emphasis. Overall, Aeschylus and Sophocles express much greater concern about using their work to promote theological viewpoints and community morality. Thus, for instance, Aristotle (1984: 1460b) cites Sophocles as saying that he presents people "as they ought to be" while Euripides presents "people as they are."

Relatedly, whereas Aeschylus and Sophocles honor the gods in their plays and develop character roles in more normative terms, Euripides is considerably less respectful in his portrayals of divinity. He also is less constrained in the ways he presents his human characters. At the same time, though, Euripides seems more intent on producing dramatic (i.e., thrilling, fantastic) effects amidst his practices of generating less divinely inspired scenes and characters.

Variants of these sorts aside, *all* three authors (whose plays appear to represent more common genres of the time) portray a comparatively full range of human association in these texts. This includes an articulated assortment of relationships, viewpoints, activities, influence (and deception) work, and emotional experiences.

Classical Greek poetics are also characterized by a pronounced tradition of "literary criticism," wherein fictionalized materials provide contexts for denunciations and/or endorsements of particular people, activities, customs, and the like.⁵ Relatedly, by Aeschylus' time, it appears somewhat commonplace for authors and performers to compete for various honors at public (religious) festivals wherein their productions were openly assessed by both the spectators at large and selected judges.

Further, the classical Greek playwrights not only display considerable capacities to envision and convey the perspectives of an assortment of others in their written works, but the playwrights also overtly assume self-reflective stances in their texts. Thus, these authors also engage in instances of explicit (audience oriented) communications about their own plays and those of other poets.

⁴ As Oakes and O'Neill (1938: xxviii) observe, although these three authors (among themselves, alone, are thought to have written about 300 plays, the only surviving early Greek tragedies are also those (25) composed by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. While many translations and diverse collections of these playwrights exist, I have relied on the Oaks and O'Neill (two volume) collection which includes not only the full sets of works existing for these three authors but also the surviving works of Aristophanes (c450-385BCE) and Menander (c344-292BCE).

⁵ For more extended considerations of the "history of literary criticism," see Gilbert (1940), Dukore (1974), Kennedy (1989), Sidnell (1991), and Habib (2005).

Another Greek playwright, Aristophanes (c450-385BCE), who is known for having written a number of highly intricate, deceptive, multi-themed comedies, extends literary criticism yet further. Aristophanes not only presents human characters in fuller ranges of expression but also adds other dimensions to his comedies and literary criticism. In *Frogs*, for instance, Aristophanes presents two earlier playwrights (Aeschylus and Euripides) as the primary contestants (and explicitly critical confrontationalists) for the "throne of tragedy" situated within "the enduring world of the departed."

Elsewhere, Aristophanes engages some of the philosophers and political theorists of his time. Especially noteworthy in this respect are *The Clouds* (wherein Socrates is a notable target) and *The Ecclesiazusae* (wherein, a socialist state is satirized at least twenty years before Plato's *Republic* was written [Oates and O'Neill 1938]). Although some likely found humorous Aristophanes' pointedly negative depictions of particular characters (such as Socrates), it should not be assumed that the targets (or their supporters) of Aristophanes' invectives were equally amused.

Moreover, comedy, which seems to have developed somewhat independently of, and been introduced to the theater after the portrayals of, tragedies, was not restricted to irony, satire and sarcasm. As Aristotle (1984) notes, comedy is a mode of imitation, but one that focuses on the dramatization of the absurd. In contrast to tragedies, comedy is not intended to invoke emotions of pain or suffering on the part of audiences. Aristotle observes that some comedies are characterized by humorous invectives directed toward particular targets but explicitly cites Crates (date unknown) as the first Athenian poet to develop comedy around more general sets of human circumstances.

Given the enormous loss of Greek manuscripts, we are fortunate (at least) to have access to three (from about a hundred) comedies written by Menander (c344-292BCE). While commonly contrasted with Aristophanes by reference to the term, "new comedy," Menander represents a more general counterpoint to the invective style signified by the "old comedy" associated with Aristophanes.

Compared to Aristophanes' more critical, often politicized ventures, Menander's works constitute "romantic comedies" of sorts. Whereas Menander introduces considerable intense, somewhat tragic, interchanges in his portrayals of family life, things typically turn out well in the end.

Thus, popular sentiments involving orphaned children, kindly sponsors, affectionate and loyal bonds, and (heterosexual) romantic intrigues are developed and the central figures emerge triumphant amidst various difficult characters, deception, inadvertent confusions, unwarranted assumptions, material losses, and other humanly challenging circumstances.

More generally, too, from Homer onward a great deal of early Greek writings on poetic literature is presented as *dialogue-based* accounts of *human interchange*. People are portrayed as minded, reflective entities who actively (and knowingly) engage one another and other objects (physical conditions and humanly generated associations, practices, and technologies, as well as an assortment of superbeings) in their settings.

These works not only address diverse aspects of human association, such as loyalty and affection, playful and malicious deception, animosity and violence, and ingroup and outgroup relations, but early Greek poetical texts are generally developed in ways that overtly acknowledge participant objectives, intentions, activities, ensuing reactions, and subsequent adjustments and relationships.

Hence, whereas the classical Greek authors assume a variety of artistic styles and presentational formats, people are portrayed very much as *reflective* (although not always wise), *acting*, and *interacting community-based beings*.⁶

Notably, by identifying, emphasizing, and objectifying things *human* through both written records and collective performances, these poetic renderings of human arenas, experiences, folk wisdoms, and reflective enterprise and interchange, from Homer onwards, appear to have contributed to *media-based* representations (and realms of entertainment) and common *cultural motifs* that extend to the present.

Not inconsequentially, too, early Greek writings on poetics appear to have developed somewhat concurrently with the emergence of texts dealing with politics, religion, rhetoric, history, and philosophy.⁷ However, as also is the case in so many other realms of Western scholarship, the works of Plato and Aristotle are remarkably consequential for comprehending the emphases (and debates) one finds in the poetics literature to the present. While not minimizing the relevance of other early Greek authors, it is important to acknowledge the positions that Plato and Aristotle assumed with respect to poetics.

Plato: Addresses Poetic Representation

Since Plato (420-348BCE) (a) formulates his texts in the form of extended dialogues, (b) often questions the possibility of human knowing (and authenticity), and (c) generally presents his material in dialogical or conversational (if not intentionally entertaining) formats, it is tempting to envision Plato as the most poetic of philosophers.

Likewise, given Plato's apparent sympathy to a Socratic position on the impossibility of humanly knowing (i.e., that all human knowledge claims are [merely] mythical, symbolic representations - as expressed in *Cratylus*, *Theaetetus*, *Parmenides*), one might expect Plato to be comparatively neutral, if not highly receptive, to fictionalized representations. Still, Plato's assessments of "poetic expression" are far from uniform or positive.⁸

Notably, thus, Plato's skepticist viewpoint shifts dramatically when he focuses more directly on the task of establishing his model (socialist) states in *Republic* and *Laws*.⁹ With this latter objective in mind, Plato's spokespeople make some very specific

⁶ Readers familiar with Herodotus' *The Histories*, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, and Xenophon's *Anabasis* (or *The Persian Expedition*) will recognize how very central these interactional themes are in these (quasi-ethnographic) historical accounts.

⁷ It should be acknowledged that (a) classical Greek scholarship (which clearly predates Plato) was not one thing, but rather was characterized by a diversity (often contradictory) of theoretical emphases, and (b) early Greek scholars were often highly encompassing in the range of things they considered. Thus, classical Greek "philosophers" often engaged, in more comprehensive terms, a set of domains that we might presently (more exclusively) designate as science, social science, rhetoric, poetics, politics, religion, and morality.

⁸ Even though Plato seems dubious of the value of all human (imaged) representations, the critiques that Plato directs toward poets in many ways parallel the criticisms that he (through his spokesperson, Socrates) directs at sophists (and practitioners of rhetoric) vs. more sincere philosophers (see Plato's *Sophist* and *Phaedrus* as well as *Republic*).

⁹ In developing this statement from Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*, I have relied centrally on Benjamin Jowett's (1937) translations, but also have benefited from Paul Shorey's (Hamilton and Cairns 1963) and G. M. A. Grube's (Cooper 1997) translations of *Republic* as well as A. E. Taylor's (Hamilton and Cairns 1963) and Trevor J. Saunders' (Cooper 1997) translations of *Laws*.

claims about human values, human knowing, human acting, and human accomplishment.¹⁰

As the architect of a "new moral order,"¹¹ Plato approaches things in more instrumentalist, enacted, or pragmatic terms as his spokespeople define their objectives and deliberately assess situations, consider options, and readjust their plans to accommodate an assortment of human circumstances, interests, and practices.

While maintaining some other of Socrates' emphases, namely, forging community relations in ways that truth, justice, and virtue are maximized in both broader and more personal ways, Plato (as a Socratic tactician) notably *relinquishes* the position that the world is humanly unknowable.

Thus, although Plato seems keenly aware that the model societies he addresses in both *Republic* and *Laws* are inevitably fictionalized since they deal with "what could be" rather than "what is," Plato astutely utilizes observations of, and experiences with, actual life-worlds in developing these texts. Even as he develops these fictionalized images of model societies, he builds on existing stocks of knowledge and an "ethnographic wisdom" of sorts (see Prus 2007b, 2007c) by considering more particular variations of societal organization and the comparative implications thereof for achieving social order in his model societies.

In the process Plato clearly and more or less continuously develops what Aristotle (*Poetics*: 1451a) would describe as the philosophic or analytic potential of poetic representations to address the more *generic* features of phenomena – as in components, processes, and interlinkages -- vs. the more singular or isolated specifics of history.

In some cases, Plato's speakers openly acknowledges the artificial (i.e., fictionalized,) nature of certain stories they reference. Likewise, Plato openly displays the contrived nature of the two model societies that his speakers develop. Even though Plato is attentive to "what is" at many points in both *Republic* and *Laws* and Plato's considerations of community life are instructively detailed, his analysis is still presented at a conceptual-prototypic level. This is not to deny the incredible philosophic insights that Plato generates in *Republic* and *Laws*, along with his other dialogues, but to acknowledge the exceptionally enabling quality of "the fictionalized representations" of human knowing and acting that Plato presents in his texts.¹²

Nevertheless, it is in articulating the foundations of a model state in *Republic* and *Laws* that Plato overtly *attacks poetry* and insists on the *ensorship* of artistic

¹⁰ Although Plato is often referenced (and dismissed) as an idealist, those who carefully examine *Republic* and *Laws* will find that Plato not only considers a variety of standpoints on matters of education, scholarship, entertainment, work, religion, politics, intergroup relations, crime, justice, and other aspects of community life but that Plato also attends in considerable detail to the interconnected and problematic features of human group life. In this respect, Plato is considerably more instrumentally "grounded" than are most reformers.

¹¹ Clearly, as indicated explicitly in Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* (and earlier in Aristophanes' *The Ecclesiazusae*), the idea of a socialist state was "nothing new" to classical Greek scholars. Like Plato, Aristotle (*Politics*, *Constitution of Athens*) also explicitly considers the contingencies of succession between oligarchies, democracies, socialist states, and monarchies.

¹² Viewed thusly, whether or not the material in *Republic* and *Laws* might be classified as "poetic representations" would be contingent on the relative emphasis that Plato (as the author) and/or his others (as audiences) might place on these texts as having an entertainment vs. an instructive, educational, philosophical or even a moralistic or remedial quality. Still, as Aristotle (1984) would remind us, these two (or more emphases) are not mutually exclusive.

expression.¹³ This deep disaffection will be the subsequent focus in discussing Plato's views on poetics.

On an overall basis, Plato seems negatively disposed toward poetics because of the practice of people representing things in ways that are not authentic or true to their humanly experienced essences. Still, whereas Plato (following Socrates) intends to defend Pythagorean conceptions of religion and, relatedly, to protect people's spiritual essences from the more sordid depictions of divinity that Plato associates with Homer, Hesiod, and others who derive inspiration from their works, Plato's concerns are more encompassing. These poetic materials, Plato contends, have negative implications for people's education and characters as well as community morality, religion, law, and justice. In short, virtually all realms of human knowing and acting. Still, even in the midst of his criticisms of fictionalized representations, Plato provides some instructive considerations of the poetic venture.

Republic

In developing *Republic* (X: 595a-608b), Plato portrays poetry as an inevitably partial and weak *imitation* of things. In addition to (a) contrasting the limitations of these mirror-like images with the physical objects themselves, Plato also (b) denigrates poetic renderings by contrasting these with the productive activities (and products) of [sincere] craftspeople at work.

Plato contends that poets lack genuine knowledge of how things are produced and that poetic endeavors lack the serious, contributory implications of [other] crafts for community life (especially see *Republic* X: 599a-601b).

Not only, thus, does Plato dissociate poetry from more meaningful productive *and* consumptive (X: 601d) activity, but he also alleges that poetry is removed from the truth (X: 598b). Elsewhere (in *Ion*), Plato claims that poetic renditions are based on emotion rather than knowledge and that these ventures, as such, do not constitute a genuine (meaningfully, knowingly constructed) craft.

Still, even with these failings, Plato (*Republic* X: 607b-608b) observes that poetry can be entertaining or intriguing. However, rather than viewing this engaging aspect of poetics as a more redeeming feature, Plato expresses concern that poetic materials may significantly distract people from pursuing much more important matters, particularly wisdom, justice, and virtue.

Likewise, Plato's speakers (*Republic* II: 376e-401a) express concern about the corrupting potential of poetics for children (and most importantly those children who might later become guardians of the state). Observing that children often learn things through songs and stories, Plato proposes that poets be monitored and censored.

In *Republic*, as well, Plato not only attends to the content of poetic materials (*Republic* II: 377b-392c), but also provides a more detailed analysis of various features

¹³ Notably, even when Plato is not referenced more directly in the writings of later authors (e.g., moralists, scholars, poets), Plato's texts appear to form the bedrock of many statements (and some associated analyses) that would be developed both "in condemnation" (following Plato) and "in defense" (opposing Plato) of poetics. Although only some of these texts have been preserved, it appears that hundreds of scholars may have written materials in analytical prose or other poetic formats (e.g., plays, poems) intended to defend poetic representations (including poets' intentions and virtues; poetic text, theater and other forums of expression; and performers of various sorts) over the millennia (e.g., see Gilbert 1962; Dukore 1974). On the flip side, a great deal of moral criticism (and censorship) of poetic representation in Western social thought, especially from St. Augustine (354-430) onward, reflects the viewpoints that Plato expresses. For a most interesting reversal, readers are referred to [the reputed romanticist] Rousseau's (1758) censorial reactions *against* some Christian clergy who proposed that a monitored form of theatrical entertainment might be beneficial for the citizens (and tourists) of Geneva.

of poetic productions. Thus, he explicitly considers the particular styles (II: 392c) that poets use, the ways they portray various characters (II: 394d-397b), the rhythms they use in their productions (II: 397b-400d), and the specific words (II: 400d-401a) that they employ in developing their expressions.

Plato's emphases shift somewhat in *Laws* (developed after *Republic*), as Plato subsequently focuses on the task of achieving social order through a more extended and explicit regulatory system. This contrasts notably with his concerns in *Republic* about developing a set of "philosopher guardians" who, more autonomously, would serve as managers dedicated to the well-being of the community. Plato will explicitly acknowledge some relativistic and instrumental features of poetic materials in *Laws*, but he remains highly concerned about containing the risks of poetic representations.

Laws

[Athenian]Ath. Is it altogether unmeaning to say, as the common people do about festivals, that he should be adjudged the wisest of men, and the winner of the palm, who gives us the greatest amount of pleasure and mirth?... Now is this a true way of speaking or of acting?

[Cleinius] Cle. Possibly.

Ath. But, my dear friend, let us distinguish between different cases, and not be hasty in forming a judgment: One way of considering the question will be to imagine a festival at which there are entertainments of all sorts, including gymnastic, musical, and equestrian contests: the citizens are assembled; prizes are offered, and proclamation is made that any one who likes may enter the lists, and that he is to bear the palm who gives the most pleasure to the spectators--there is to be no regulation about the manner how; but he who is most successful in giving pleasure is to be crowned victor, and deemed to be the pleasantest of the candidates: What is likely to be the result of such a proclamation?

Cle. In what respect?

Ath. There would be various exhibitions: one man, like Homer, will exhibit a rhapsody, another a performance on the lute; one will have a tragedy, and another a comedy. Nor would there be anything astonishing in some one imagining that he could gain the prize by exhibiting a puppet-show. Suppose these competitors to meet, and not these only, but innumerable others as well-- can you tell me who ought to be the victor?

Cle. I do not see how any one can answer you, or pretend to know, unless he has heard with his own ears the several competitors; the question is absurd....

Ath. If very small children are to determine the question, they will decide for the puppet show.

Cle. Of course.

Ath. The older children will be advocates of comedy; educated women, and young men, and people in general, will favour tragedy.

Cle. Very likely.

Ath. And I believe that we old men would have the greatest pleasure in hearing a rhapsodist recite well the Iliad and Odyssey, or one of the Hesiodic poems, and would award the victory to him. But, who would really be the victor?--that is the question...

Ath... The ancient and common custom of Hellas, which still prevails in Italy and Sicily, did certainly leave the judgment to the body of spectators, who determined the victor by show of hands. But this

custom has been the destruction of the poets; for they are now in the habit of composing with a view to please the bad taste of their judges, and the result is that the spectators instruct themselves;-- and also it has been the ruin of the theatre; they ought to be having characters put before them better than their own, and so receiving a higher pleasure, but now by their own act the opposite result follows.

Plato, *Laws II*: 657-659 [1937, Trans. by B. Jowett]

Although Plato will propose a solution for more viably judging entertainment within his model society, he explicitly acknowledges the *relativity* of people's senses of entertainment in the preceding extract. Definitions of "good entertainment" vary with audience interests (*Laws II*: 652-660).

It is in *Laws II*: 656-660, too, that Plato attends more centrally to the strategic use of poetry as means of socializing the young. Relatedly, given the stringent criteria regarding religion and associated honorable matters of state that his speakers invoke, Plato proposes that a committee of knowledgeable and highly responsible citizens be established to insure quality among any who might be approved to create (educationally-oriented) poetry for the community (*Laws VII*: 801-804; 829).

Still, there is another important undercurrent in Plato's condemnations of poetic representations in *Republic* and *Laws*. In addition to these other, more earthly concerns, Plato also writes as a theologian. Seemingly following Socrates and Pythagoras (c580-500BCE) on these matters, Plato seems especially concerned about promoting a philosophically informed, virtuous religion. Thus, his spokespeople in *Republic* and *Laws* express the more general concern that the gods not only be represented in manners that are consistent with their divine essences (as in virtuous, noble, and caring beings) but also be portrayed in ways that foster cohesion and justice in the community more generally. Likewise, the gods are to be represented in ways that encourage virtuous beliefs and practices on the part of the members of the community. Thus, Plato's spokespeople in both *Republic* and *Laws* insist on the desirability of a more pronounced respect for the religious viewpoints of the state.¹⁴

In sum, Plato depicts poetic representations, variously, as (a) inauthentic, frivolous activities and productions; (b) emotional rather than knowledgeable endeavors; (c) alluring, distracting, tempting and potentially corrupting ventures; (d) reluctantly employed educational devices; (e) focal points for moral censorship; and (f) antithetical to both a more virtuous, philosophically informed theology and a state characterized by higher levels of social (and moral) integration. Plato may be the most poetic of philosophers but he is extremely concerned about the potentially disruptive implications of poetic endeavor that is not stringently monitored by highly responsible guardians of the community.

Still, before leaving Plato's consideration of poetics at this point, it may be instructive to examine Plato's *Ion*. Although one of Plato's shorter dialogues, *Ion*

¹⁴ For materials dealing with divinity in *Republic* and *Laws*, see *Republic II*: 358-392; X: 609-621 and *Laws*, I: 644-645; IV: 709-717; VII: 821; VIII: 828-829; IX: 854-855, 884-448; X: 885-910. While Plato deals with poets and their depictions of the gods most directly in *Republic* and *Laws*, Plato also addresses religion at some length in *Phaedo* and *Timaeus*. Interestingly, although critical of poetic representations of all things, Plato seems comparatively unconcerned with any fictions that he may be invoking with respect to divinity. Thus, while Plato's speakers sometimes preface their materials by saying that these are stories they have heard from other people, Plato does not subject his theological beliefs (i.e., those that his speakers represent) to the same sorts of dialectic (comparative, skepticist) analysis that he applies to other realms of human knowing and acting.

represents a bridge of sorts between Plato's discussions of fictionalized representations in *Republic* and *Laws* and Aristotle's *Poetics*.

*Ion*¹⁵

In the process of questioning the art of the *rhapsode* or someone who presents poetic materials for audiences, Plato (with Socrates as his spokesperson) addresses the matters of knowing, judging, and art (as a technique and, relatedly, a realm of serious study) in succinct but important, fundamental terms.

Engaging *Ion*, a rhapsode who claims great knowledge and skill in his profession, Socrates (1937: 531-535) asks about *the adequacy of Ion's abilities to know and judge* the quality of the poets that he represents as well as Ion's abilities to assess his own performances.

While acknowledging Ion's extended popularity as a performer, Socrates observes that Ion, who has not adequately studied the fuller range of poets, lacks a *comparative base* (and more discerning analytical standards) on which to judge the merits of various poets.

Socrates (*ibidem*: 535-536) subsequently asks about Ion about his more vivid portrayals of the characters he represents. Socrates suggests that when performers relate to audiences in more compelling fashions, they not only take on the role of the persons being portrayed, but also lose their own senses of self. Ion assures Socrates that truly is the case. Further, Ion contends, an accomplished rhapsodist such as himself can take and move his audience in any direction that he desires.

Socrates (*ibidem*: 536-541) then asks about the adequacy of Ion's portrayals of different characters (as in presenting the roles of charioteers, women, slaves, and military generals). After Ion asserts that he can perform all roles with excellence. Socrates questions Ion about basis of his claims. Who, Socrates asks, would be better able to judge the authenticity of Ion's performances? Would it be Ion or the people who actually live those roles? [In the process, Socrates argues for the viability of the *experiential base* of human knowing and judging.]

Ion acknowledges that certain judgmental privileges may be associated with actual lived experience, but he stresses both his exceptional abilities as a performer and his competence to judge his representations of other people. In response, Socrates (*ibidem*: 541-542) states that because poets (and rhapsodes) fail to attend to the comparative and experiential base of knowing (and thus lack well defined standards of analysis and judgment), poets are not to be seen as knowledgeable or credible sources.

Moreover, given their persistent claims, as in Ion's case, regarding human knowing and acting, Socrates contends that poets and rhapsodes are either dishonest or (divinely or emotionally) inspired. Viewing inspiration as the nobler of the two options Socrates has given him, Ion subsequently elects to be among the inspired.

Given Plato's moralistic emphases, his exceptional ability to articulate analytical themes, and his own engaging, "poetic" style,¹⁶ Plato's works have served as highly consequential reference materials for considerations of poetic representations over the

¹⁵ This statement is centrally informed by Benjamin Jowett's (1937) translation of *Ion*.

¹⁶ Whereas Aristotle is generally more direct, analytically precise, and comprehensive in the ways that he engages materials than is Plato, many scholars appear to prefer the more playful expressions that Plato generates to the more focused and incisive analyses that Aristotle provides.

millennia. Still, Plato's considerations of poetics do not provide an adequate base for developing the linkages of theory and action.

It is here that we turn more directly to Aristotle's *Poetics*. While this text provides a highly consequential counterpoint to Plato's treatment of poetics, Aristotle's writings more generally have particular relevance for considerations of humanly known and enacted realities.

Aristotle's *Poetics*¹⁷

While Aristotle's (384-322BCE) *Poetics* is best appreciated within the context of his other writings (especially *Rhetoric*, *Politics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*),¹⁸ wherein he discusses other aspects of human-based knowing, acting, and interacting, Aristotle's *Poetics* is a remarkably analytic, highly instructive statement on literary theory, practice and history.

Thus, although the issues that Plato raises have become pivotal to a great many debates about poetic representations of divine and more earthly matters,¹⁹ Aristotle's *Poetics* is exceptionally central to the analysis of poetic endeavors (theory, direction, representation, and criticism). Still, even though Aristotle's *Poetics* was first translated into Latin in the 1200's (Habib 2005), this text was barely known to Western scholars prior to the 1500's (Butcher [Aristotle] 1951: lxxiii).²⁰

Given the subsequent impact of Aristotle's *Poetics* on Western scholarship, some may be surprised to learn that the material to which we have access not only is a partial text but also mainly deals with Greek drama (tragedies). The section (apparently) dealing with comedy has been lost.²¹

In his typical, conceptually systematic manner, Aristotle approaches poetry in generic terms. Thus, while (a) embedding his analysis within a historical context, Aristotle also discusses the (b) essences, (c) forms, and (d) implications of poetic representation, along with (e) the features of representation and (f) matters pertaining to the ways that poetic materials (as human products) are assembled. These are the elements of great importance to a scholarly consideration of poetics.

Nevertheless, whereas Aristotle provides scholars with a powerful conceptual base on which to generate theory about entertainment motifs of all sorts, he also assumes two other objectives that detract at times from a more purely analytical emphasis.

¹⁷ While particularly indebted to I. Bywater's (see Barnes 1984) translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, I also have benefited from the translations of S. H. Butcher (1951) and Theodore Buckley (1992).

¹⁸ For synoptic, interactionist considerations of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Rhetoric*, see Prus (2007a and 2008a, respectively).

¹⁹ More generally, it might be recognized that Plato often introduces a variety of viewpoints (idealist, moralist, structuralist, and pragmatist) in his theological dialogues.

²⁰ The analysis of Latin-European poetics was largely sustained by Horace's (c65-8 BCE) "On the Art of Poetry" and Longinus' (c100CE?) "On the Sublime" (see Prus 2008b). While there is much of merit in these two Latin texts and these statements are still better known in many academic circles than is Aristotle's *Poetics*, Aristotle's *Poetics* is vastly more philosophically, historically, and conceptually astute.

²¹ We do not know exactly what Aristotle's statement on comedy would look like, but Cooper's (1924) attempted reconstruction, of Aristotle's "theory of comedy" seems highly consistent with what one might expect (judging from Aristotle's works more generally). Not only does Cooper's statement very much parallel Aristotle's treatment of tragedy in *Poetics*, but it is as consistent with Aristotle's other works (e.g., *Rhetoric*, *Nicomachean Ethics*) as one might reasonably achieve.

Hence, in a fashion also generally consistent with his other writings on human affairs (i.e., rhetoric, politics, ethics), Aristotle attempts to (g) encourage the use of poetics to foster personal and community morality as well as (h) provide instruction on how poetic representations could be more effectively developed as a craft or art form.

At a base-line level, Aristotle shares Plato's conception of poetics as a partial imitation or incomplete representation of [something]. However, in sharp contrast to Plato, Aristotle envisions poetry not only as a *meaningfully experienced* realm of endeavor, but also as something that is *purposively (productively and technologically) crafted*.

Aristotle is critical of the ways that much poetic endeavor has been developed and presented, but he evidences comparatively little of the negativity that Plato expresses in *Republic* and *Laws*. Instead, Aristotle insists that poetry be developed in ways that are more technically competent for communicating messages, producing desired audience effects, and promoting community morality.

Envisioning poetics to involve instances of deliberative fictionalization, Aristotle exempts poetics from the rigors of authenticity or correctness associated with politics, law, and other (knowing) arts (Aristotle 1984: 1460b).²² At the same time, though, Aristotle (1461b) explicitly identifies five aspects of poetic endeavor that are likely to engender criticism (i.e., matters around which people often challenge the feasibility of poetic representations). These pertain to allegations that particular expressions involve things that are (unduly) impossible, improbable, corrupting, contradictory, or technically unsound.

Given (a) the broad range of issues that both Plato and Aristotle introduce and (b) their differing positions on the moral and applied relevancies and desirabilities of poetics, the current statement focuses more directly on (c) the more analytic aspects of Aristotle's *Poetics* as these pertain to people's lived experiences with entertainment. It is here that the more sociological features of Aristotle's analysis of poetic endeavor become apparent.

Human Enacted and Represented Realities

Because this immediate statement focuses primarily on the representation of humanly experienced intersubjectivity and enacted realities, it contrasts with most considerations of poetics that one encounters in the literature (wherein debates about poetic morality and the technicalities of form and expression are much more prominent).

Especially important for our purposes, thus, are Aristotle's [pragmatist] attentiveness to (a) *activity*, (b) *generic representations* of the characters or roles signified, (c) authors' capacities of *constructing and shaping people's* (actors and audience) experiences with *emotionally*, (d) the quest for projecting *authenticity* within fictional representations, and (e) the matter of authors explicitly attending to *audience viewpoints* (reflecting on, anticipating, and adjusting to) in developing their materials.

First among these notions is Aristotle's (1984) observation that poetic portrayals of human life (as indicated in tragedies) revolve around *action*:

Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life. [All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is

²² Relatedly, Aristotle's material also is instructive for scholars who attempt to differentiate poetics from other realms of analytical endeavor (ergo, history, philosophy, law, social science).

in our actions that we are happy or the reverse]... In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the characters; they include the characters for the sake of the action. So that it is the action in it, i.e. its plot, that is the end and purpose of the tragedy; and the end is everywhere the chief thing. Besides this, a tragedy is impossible without action, but there might be one without Character. (p. 1450a)

Identifying poetics (along with other realms of artistic expression) as an imitative production, Aristotle (1984: 1447a-1448a) observes that poetic imitation encompasses three things: (a) the means of expression (rhythm, language, harmony), (b) the objects or focal points (actions and moral agents), and (c) the styles of representation (as in narratives or speeches).

Speaking generically, Aristotle (ibidem: 1448b) envisions poetic expression as a rather natural human practice. He attributes poetic expressions, thus, to people's tendencies (a) to be the most imitative of animals and (b) to experience pleasure at learning and comprehending things.

However, Aristotle also posits that more explicit or standardized poetic forms that one finds in particular communities develop somewhat gradually, from more tentative notions to routine practices, and are subject to subsequent improvisations.

As two instances in point, Aristotle (ibidem: 1448b-1449b) makes specific reference to (a) the Greek tendency to divide poetry into tragedy and comedy and (b) the transitions made in terms of the ways that speakers have been incorporated within Greek theater.

Since most of (the preserved text of) *Poetics* focuses on tragedies, wherein human interchanges of serious proportions (signified by pity and fear) are projected, it is useful to acknowledge the features of tragedies that Aristotle introduces here.

Aristotle (ibidem: 1450a-1450b) says that there are six parts to every tragedy: (1) plot, (2) characters, (3) diction, (4) thought, (5) spectacle, and (6) melody. While considering all of these components to be important, he deems melody (music, rhythm; while potentially pleasurable), spectacle (props, attire; while potentially attractive in scenic design), and diction (word choices, versification; intendedly as stylistically engaging) to be much less consequential overall.

For Aristotle (ibidem: 1449b-1450b), tragedy revolves most centrally around a plot, which he insists is an imitation not of (particular) persons but of *action and life*. While cast in specific circumstances, the *characters* are important not for their unique qualities or individualism but because of the *more generic realms* of human experiences, choices, and outcomes that the (particular) characters represent.

Whereas the characters may more routinely make (deliberative, often openly communicated) choices and engage in meaningful, often strategic, interchange (dialogue) in tragedies, Aristotle here uses "thought" more specifically to refer to those instances in which the characters discuss or debate about certain aspects of the situation in more analytical or generic / abstracted terms.²³

Because tragedies attend to more dramatic shifts (particularly losses) in people's circumstances, the success of these representations is to be judged by poets' abilities to evoke emotionality (especially pity and fear) on the part of their audiences.

²³ It might be observed that this reference to "thought" is more situated. More generally, Aristotle and other Greeks of the era tend to use thought in ways that are more synonymous with speech, as implied in the Greek term *logos* (wherein thought and speech are used interchangeably, depending on the context).

Relatedly, Aristotle (ibidem: 1452b-1453a) stresses the importance of achieving careful balances between the moralities of the characters featured and the outcomes they experience. Hence, he observes that because of the excessive disparities between model or idealized citizens and subsequent disasters that might befall these people, authors are likely to generate greater pity on the part of audiences when unavoidable misfortune befalls those who are more typical of people generally (as somewhat imperfect but basically acceptable personages). Similarly, it is those characters with whom particular audiences can most directly identify who make more viable representatives for arousing fear on the part of those audiences.

In developing his analysis, Aristotle not only is attentive to the *deliberative construction* of poetry, but very directly encourages poets to be *mindful of their audiences* (i.e., "take the role of the other;" Mead 1934) in developing and presenting their materials :

At the time when he is constructing his plots, and engaged on the diction in which they are worked out, the poet should remember to put the actual scenes as far as possible before his eyes. In this way, seeing everything with the vividness of an eye-witness as it were, he will devise what is appropriate, and be least likely to overlook the incongruities... As far as may be, too, the poet should even act his story with the very gestures of his personages. Given the same natural qualifications, he who feels the emotions to be described will be the most convincing... (Aristotle 1984: 1455a)

In a related manner, Aristotle also observes that poetic representations are apt to be better received (i.e., achieve greater audience impact) when they convey fuller senses of authenticity. Consequently, he contends that a more compelling poetic portrayal of the impossible is to be preferred over a less convincing account of the probable (ibidem: 1461b).

In more fundamental terms, Aristotle (ibidem: 1460b) notes that poetic imitations may portray things (a) as they were or are, (b) as they are described or envisioned to be, or (c) as they were intended or ought to have been. These distinctions are important for appreciating variations in poetic emphases, licenses, and criticism. However, these delineations are also vital for differentiating emphases (and instances) of poetics from portrayals (emphases and instances) of humans in philosophy, history, and the social sciences.

Because history is intended to provide descriptive accounts of particular instances, while poetic representations can deal with things at more abstracted levels, Aristotle (ibidem: 1451a) observes that poetry may achieve a redeeming universalistic or philosophic quality that history (as a more singular or particularized flow of events) generally lacks.²⁴

At the same time, whereas Aristotle envisions the community as indebted to poetic works for some scholarly insights and fascinations, it should be noted that Aristotle clearly does **not** see poetic representation as a substitute for more careful scholarship regarding the human condition:

²⁴ As Lessing (1962 [1769: 94-95]) notes, "truth in poetry," thus, may be seen as contingent on the extent to which poetic expressions attend to some (projected) generic essence or form of things. Viewed in this manner, highly detailed renderings of specifics (to the extent that they lose sight of consequential generic qualities) may signify "poetic falsity" even while achieving more accurate portrayals of specific instances. The distinction, thus, is between a more adequate fundamental representation of things and a more precise representation of a particular (somewhat less typical overall) instance.

It was naturally the poets who first set the movement going; for words represent things, and they had also the human voice at their disposal, which of all our organs can best represent other things. Thus the arts of recitation and acting were formed, and others as well. Now it was because poets seemed to win fame through their fine language when their thoughts were simple enough, that language at first took a poetical colour, e.g. that of Gorgias. Even now most uneducated people think that poetical language makes the finest discourses. That is not true...

We may, then, start from the observations there made, and the stipulation that language to be good must be clear, as is proved by the fact that speech which fails to convey a plain meaning will fail to do just what speech has to do. (Aristotle 1946, Book III: 1404a-1404b)

Extending the Theaters of Poetic Representation

Despite the highly insightful materials situated within the classical Greek poetic tradition, this literature would be only partially known and utilized over the following centuries. As with much of the classical literature, a great deal of early Greek poetic materials would be lost through natural disasters and decay, the ravages of wars, and a wide variety of human considerations. Relatedly, as with Greek scholarship more generally, the reception of Greek poetical texts would be highly uneven.

This ranged, for instance, from some comparatively open and extended imitations of Greek poetics (especially the works of Homer and the tragedian playwrights) during the classical Roman era (e.g., Plautus [254-184BCE], Terrence [185-159BCE], Virgil [70-19BCE], Horace [65-8BCE]), to more general (often intense) condemnations and censorship on the part of Christian theologians, to comparative disregard of all written text on the part of the various barbarian groups who overran large sectors of the Western Europe (particularly amidst the demise of the Roman Empire and the subsequent Western European "dark ages").

Still, even amidst these comparatively tumultuous conditions, aspects of classical Greek thought (already conceptually embedded in Roman thought) were carried forward in Latin (and Latin Christian) considerations of the ways in which human experiences, activities, and interchanges might be represented in both fictional and nonfictional renderings thereof.

Whereas Greek scholarship dissipated notably with the demise of the Greek empire following the death of Alexander the Great (358-323BCE), it was the Romans who would dominate the poetic productions of record for the next several centuries. These materials represented a synthesis of Roman emphases and expressions with the classical Greek literature. This came about both through longstanding Roman contact with Greek instructors working in Rome as well as other modes of exposure to classical Greek texts, both before and after the Romans took possession of Greece (151BCE).

Interfused with Greek materials, Roman poetics very much imitated the epic or heroic texts of Homer and the works of classical Greek playwrights. Greek templates commonly were used as the base for presenting Roman settings, personages, and lifestyles. By comparison, Roman attentiveness to Greek philosophic texts was much more limited. Notably, too, even though the Roman authors Horace (65-8BCE) and Longinus (circa 100CE) provide highly insightful analytical instruction on the production of poetic materials (Prus 2008b) and cite Greek authors as consequential reference

points, they appear unfamiliar with the exceptionally potent conceptual resources located in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

As another, increasingly important set of participants in the broader European theatre, the Christians did little to sustain the analysis of poetic materials. Indeed, even though the early Christian gate-keepers seemed particularly intrigued with some of Plato's religiously oriented texts (especially *Timaeus*), most of Plato's texts – along with most of those of (the secular philosopher) Aristotle would become lost (disregarded, censored, or destroyed) to scholars in Western Europe for several centuries. In this regard, the writings of St. Augustine (354-430) have been highly instrumental in encouraging a Christian attentiveness to education, philosophy, and rhetoric.

Still, it would only be centuries later that most classical Greek texts would be more directly resurrected. Thus, whereas Latin scholarship barely survived the intervening centuries, a small preserved portion of Latin texts would become the object of more sustained attention as Alcuin (732-804), Charlemagne (742-814), and their associates sought to restore academic life in Western Europe.

Even though the Christian scholars were especially devoted to the preservation of religious texts, an interest in poetic materials appears to have been sustained through some, albeit very uneven, access to pagan materials. Notably, this included Cicero's (106-43BCE) *Rhetoric ad Herennium* and *De Inventione*,²⁵ Virgil's (70-19BCE) *Aenid*, Ovid's (43BCE-18CE) seemingly irrepressible *The Art of Love*, and Martianus Capella's *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*. Collectively, these texts, along with others preserved by the Christian scholars, appear to have provided extended inspiration for works such as Alain de Lille's (1120-1202) *Anticlaudianus*, Andreas Cappellanus' (circa 1150) *The Art of Courtly Love*, and Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun's sequentially developed (circa 1230 and circa 1275) *The Romance of the Rose*. Albeit presented in fictionalized settings (as in dreams), thereby allowing Christian authors some safety of expression, these texts address matters of human knowing and acting in highly consequential ways. Like the texts on which they built, these latter poetic ventures are attentive to human capacities for instruction, reflective thought, purposive activity, strategic interchange, and ongoing adjustment within a community of others.

Although various Greek philosophic texts had been preserved by Islamic scholars who had access to the materials left in Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean region centuries earlier by the Greeks (following the conquests of Alexander the Great), many of these texts would only become known to Latin scholars as a consequence of interchanges between Islamic, Jewish, and Christian theologians following the crusades in Spain. Still, it is not until Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and his associate William of Moerbeke (1215-1286) accessed some of Aristotle's texts that these began to achieve a more explicit presence in Latin scholarship. Whereas William of Moerbeke provided particularly viable translations of several of Aristotle's texts, it was Thomas Aquinas who gave these materials greater profile through his extended commentaries on some Aristotelian texts (e.g., *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *On the*

²⁵ Although rhetoric is focused on winning cases, establishing particular viewpoints, or obtaining certain decisions and commitments, rather than entertaining others in ways that are more typical of poetic endeavors, rhetoric often reflects a blending of "fact and fiction" -- as speakers define situations and contest the definitions of others in attempts to persuade their audiences in more compelling terms. Relatedly, whereas poetical materials often build on rhetorical techniques, so may rhetoric build on materials of more distinctively poetic sorts. Cicero's *Rhetoric ad Herennium* and *De Inventione* are illustrative here as also is Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (Prus 2008a).

Soul). However, given the time of his death Aquinas would not have had access to Moerbeke's translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* [see Habib 2005]).

The ensuing literature on poetics is much too extensive to detail here, but included among the 13th-17th Century Western European scholars who subsequently engaged the representation of human speech, action, and interaction in more explicit, analytical terms are Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), Giovan Giorgio Trissino (1478-1550), Julius Caesar Scaliger (1484-1558), John Heywood (1497-1580), Lodovico Castelvetro (1505-1571), Franciscus Robortellus (1515-1567), Philip Sidney (1554-1586), Francois Hédelin (1604-1676), and John Dryden (1631-1700).²⁶ Even though they worked with a wide range of interests and objectives, and engaged pragmatist motifs in more sporadic rather than systematically sustained terms, these scholars helped maintain a focus on *portraying* and *analyzing* the human lived experiences as realms of minded activity and interchange.

These analytic emphases may have been more occasional and more diffuse than that we associate with the social sciences, but it should not be assumed that the images generated through the theatre and other poetic forums have been inconsequential for broader public and academic conceptualizations of human lived experience. Indeed, and rather ironically, the poetic tradition appears to have been highly consequential for maintaining "an authenticity in representing the human condition" that extends well beyond the factor-driven, mechanistic images of community life that have characterized so much of the social sciences (following Cartesian rationalism and Comtean positivism).

In Perspective

Whereas the present analysis of poetics is informed by Chicago-style interactionism (theory, methods, and ethnographic research), the somewhat related matter of conceptualizing and representing the human condition has been of concern to scholars of "poetics" at least since the writings of Homer and Hesiod (circa 700BCE).

As well, it appears that those engaged in developing and analyzing fictionalized representations of all sorts (e.g., tragedy, comedy, theater, lyrics, prose) have been instrumental not only in helping to preserve the broader intellectual Greek heritage that has been so instrumental in shaping Western civilization, but in helping to maintain an emphasis on *the analyses of human enacted reality* over the millennia.

Thus, although much overlooked in the contemporary social sciences and often mixed with other viewpoints (e.g., religious, moralistic), the classical Greek poetic literature has helped sustain a number of pragmatist insights that are exceedingly central for comprehending community life. While not or systematically directed toward the study of community life or so explicitly expressed, these insights pertain to matters of (1) viewing human group life as taking place in process terms, (2) attending to multiplistic / relativistic viewpoints that people may develop on matters of all sorts, (3) acknowledging the linguistically informed nature of human perspectives, (4) being

²⁶ Some may be surprised that I have not included some well known playwrights (especially William Shakespeare [1564-1616]) in this list but I have focused on people who, in at least some of their writings, addressed poetic productions in more explicit analytic terms. Still, this list only goes to the end of the 17th century and (given my limited familiarity with this broader literature) is apt to be notably incomplete.

mindful of people's capacities for persuasive exchange (and resistances thereof), (5) viewing objects (people, material phenomena, desires, moralities) as important because of the ways that these things are meaningfully incorporated into particular realms of activity, (6) focusing on community life-worlds as realms of activity, (7) recognizing embodied (human) agency, whereby people intentionally, reflectively, and adjustively enter into the causal process as agents, (8) attending to people's capacities for self-reflectivity (and deliberative thought), and (9) addressing knowingly contrived relationships as consequential features of community life. As well, insofar as many of these authors envisioned notions of these sorts to be relevant across varieties of humanly engaged settings, one also witnesses (10) an appreciation of the abstracted, parallel, or transcontextual features of community life.

Approaching poetic representations from an interactionist perspective, a sociological paradigm that is informed by pragmatist social thought and ethnographic research, we may be able to use those poetic texts that deal more directly and extensively with human knowing and acting as instructive (substantive, quasi-ethnographic) comparison points for developing more comprehensive conceptual appreciations of human lived experience in both developmental-historical and in comparative-analytical ways. Given the sparsity of more fully developed ethnographic inquiries from the past, poetical materials may be especially valuable in this regard.

Clearly, there is no attempt to encourage the production of poetical statements on the part of social scientists. Whereas great care needs to be taken in the development of ethnographic research, it is especially important to be mindful of the problematics and limitations of representing the human condition through poetic materials (Schwalbe 1995; Prus 2008c). Still, all resources (ethnographic, historical, poetic, philosophical) pertaining to the study of human knowing and acting, offer greater potential for comprehending community life when these materials are subject to comparative analysis within a broader pragmatist emphasis on learning about people's life-worlds and the activities (and interchanges) they develop therein.

Given its introductory quality, the present statement is just one step in that direction. Hopefully, though, by alerting others to the comparatively untapped resources suggested by the some of the detailed accounts of human group life that one encounters in the poetics literature and other "historically situated" materials, this statement may encourage more sustained considerations of community life "in the making."

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