

## THE QUEST FOR A POETICS OF GOODNESS IN PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

### *La investigación de una poética del bien en Platón y Aristóteles*

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The paper, which compares Plato and Aristotle's different approaches towards artistic activity, is divided into three parts. The first part discusses Plato's *Ion* on mimesis and *technē*, as well as the role that poetry plays in the *Republic*. The second section offers an account of Aristotle's idea of happiness as the end of action. The last section of this study deals with an attempt to reconcile Plato and Aristotle's attitude towards mimetic art in a treatise by a Neoplatonic renaissance thinker, Torquato Tasso.

*Keywords:* aesthetic, goodness, happiness, mimesis, poetry, *technē*.

#### **RESUMEN**

El artículo compara las concepciones de actividad artística en Platón y Aristóteles y se divide en tres partes. En la primera, se discuten la mimesis y la *technē* en el *Ion* de Platón, así como el papel de la poesía en la *República*. En la segunda, se hace un recuento de la idea de felicidad de Aristóteles como fin de la acción. En la última se discute el intento de reconciliación de las posiciones de Platón y Aristóteles realizado por el pensador neoplatónico renacentista, Torquato Tasso.

*Palabras clave:* estética, bien, felicidad, mimesis, poesía, *technē*.

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### **Introduction: *Making Poetry Philosophy***

This study aims to compare the attitudes towards artistic activity of the two major figures of Western thought: Plato and Aristotle. The selection of these thinkers has been motivated essentially by the fact that they complement each other in their judgment on poetry. After a thorough discussion of the value of poetry, Plato banishes it from his republic. Aristotle, on the other hand, rehabilitates mimetic art in his *Poetics* as a very natural human activity. Plato's severe judgment of art stands out as a challenge not to be overlooked by anyone who attempts a defense of poetry and art in general, while Aristotle attempts to raise poetry to the domain of philosophical enquiry about the nature of reality. The last section of this study deals with an attempt to reconcile Plato and Aristotle's attitude towards mimetic art in a treatise by a Neoplatonic renaissance thinker Torquato Tasso.

For Plato, mimetic artists do not excel in any *technē*, that is, they do not have their own field of expertise that would allow them to reach perfection of their craft. They violate the principle of specialization in one *technē*, which Plato advocates for each member of the commonwealth in order to ensure the proper functioning of the body politic. By trying to imitate multiple tasks, painters and poets are unable to reach the level of excellence that would lead them to the stage from which they could contemplate the form of the good. They deliberately appeal to senses creating the illusion of the mastery of a *technē*, but, in fact, the outcome of their activity is a simulacrum of the truth. Like rhetoric, which Plato mistrusts so much, the arts are manipulative in their purpose: artists do not reach that level of ascetic integrity that philosophers alone achieve, but remain within the sphere of appetites, which are deceptive. Mimetic artists appeal to the inferior part of the soul and do not engage the rational part of the soul that is responsible for correcting our beliefs.

Plato's dismissal of the arts comes only after a long deliberation which shows that he is aware of the power of mimesis in public and private life. Art, like sophistry, has an obstructive impact on one's intellectual capacity to transcend the realm of shadows. He recognizes that some arts are more deliberately destructive than the others. Nevertheless, he conceives of all art as a falsifying endeavor in its nature. Painting and poetry ultimately rely on imagination and cannot be trusted for this reason. Imagination seduces the appetitive part of the soul and impedes the rational progress of the individual towards the contemplation of the good. Plato's radical banishment of art from the commonwealth is thus a preventive step that clears the way for reason to make its ultimate ascent towards the truth that only a reason untainted by passions can achieve.

Unlike Plato, who mistrusts altogether the value of empirical enquiry<sup>1</sup> as a method leading to the truth, Aristotle centers his epistemology in the material world; he attempts to examine it through the senses in order to arrive at general laws that operate within the universe and maintain its existence. For Plato, the point of life is to reach the stage from which one can contemplate the form of the good. For Aristotle, the purpose of human life is *eudaimonia*, the term that encompasses activities and things that make one's life fulfilled. Fulfillment means here an integration and proper exercise of any given organism's capacities. In the case of human beings, this involves a rational coordination and integration of one's skills into the environment in which one happens to live. In other words, *eudaimonia* is achieved when one arrives at the understanding of one's own purpose of living, one's *telos*.<sup>2</sup> For both thinkers, the ultimate goal of human life is perfection. They differ, however, in conceiving the means employed towards this goal. For Plato, perfection is achieved through purification of passionate elements that impede one's ascent. For Aristotle, perfection is reachable through the work of practical rationality that takes into account one's individual human predispositions and makes the best use of them in given circumstances.

Thus, Aristotle validates sensory experience as a legitimate epistemological tool. In fact, it is through the senses that one can conceive the perfect forms of things. *Phainomena* or appearances constitute the point of departure for any cognitive endeavor. All we know about the world comes from the contact with appearances of reality. Aristotle dismisses the Platonic notion of the ideal reality beyond the reach of our senses, but does not reject metaphysics; he grounds his metaphysics in the material world. The Prime Mover can be conceived only through a study of things which our senses can examine. What is then the role of the arts in the Aristotelian conception of the universe?

As the *phainomena* possess their proper ontological status, mimetic art can imitate them in their most perfect manifestation. The universe has been conceived logically, and a rational study can discover its underlying orderliness. Art thus collaborates with epistemology by using its discoveries and by applying them to its didactic endeavor of trying to capture and communicate the rationality of the forms of the universe. Moreover, dramatic poetry has the cathartic role often seen as having a therapeutic impact. Catharsis brings about a clarification of our predicament. The experience of represented pity

1 Examples of this attitude are found in the *Republic* 476a, 598b, or 479d.

2 For a definition of *eudaimonia* and its relationship to *telos*, see Hughes (ch. 3 21-51).

and fear leads us to a more genuine understanding of ourselves and our place in the world.<sup>3</sup>

To understand well the development of the Platonic and Aristotelian aesthetic considerations and their assimilation into the modern conception of aesthetics, it is worthwhile looking at the Renaissance reception of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Probably the most emblematic figure for this purpose is Torquato Tasso. He was active in the second half of the sixteenth century at the court of the Este family in Ferrara. The intellectual life of the Italian Cinquecento was marked by a quasi-cultic reverence for the Aristotelian thought regarding the principles of artistic composition. Many of the Italian city states had their own academies where, following the Athenian model, philosophical discussions stimulated the intellectual life of the citizens. Several commentaries on the *Poetics* were published, often adapting Aristotle to the requirements of Christian culture. Tasso participated in these debates and published his own *Discourses on Poetic Art*. He conceived his theory against the poetic practice of a popular author, Ludovico Ariosto, the author of *Orlando Furioso*. Ariosto's poem is a romance filled with non-verisimilar deeds and multiple plots whose structure follows the principle of *entrelacement*, that is, a free juxtaposition of events without a logical link. Appalled by the success of this poem, Tasso discredited it, exposing its unlearned anti-Aristotelian design. He charged Ariosto with creating a "monster" by discarding the laws of nature that must be respected if one is to compose a good poem.<sup>4</sup>

In a Neoplatonic perspective, Tasso's commitment to true art that would emulate the perfection of the God-created world combines both Aristotelian and Platonic threads. Although Tasso does not acknowledge Plato's direct influence, his anxiety about the fragility of good art is more Platonic than Aristotelian. Like Aristotle, he attributes to art a significant cognitive function. However, like Plato he fears that the goodness of art is easily compromised. Artistic dishonesty, fostered by gain of popularity among uncultured audiences, is a permanent temptation. Like Plato, Tasso believes in the need of censorship to guide uneducated audiences in their appreciation of true art. Tasso's struggle found a positive reception among the founders of the French Academy in the seventeenth century, who resented the rise of what one could qualify as "entertainment." Plato might have been right thinking that art and moral philosophy would not make a good marriage. The main claim of this study is that Aristotle and Tasso succeeded in raising art and poetry to the status of philosophy, yet Plato's anxiety about art's

3 On the various interpretations of catharsis, see Nussbaum (388-90).

4 For the background to Tasso's activity, see Rhu in Tasso (15-56).

tendency to entice the senses rather than reason remains a concern that they struggled to overcome by proposing sets of precepts for creating good art.

### Plato's *Ion*: Mimesis and *Technē*

When analyzing Plato's attitude toward art, it is important to keep in mind that Plato is aware of its importance in the life of a polis. This is why he scrutinizes its role and possible impact on the formation of a civic character. His final banishment of art and poetry from the republic is the result of deep reflection. Let us attempt to follow the development of his thought regarding the usefulness of art in the commonwealth. In the earlier dialogues such as the *Ion*, Plato reflects on the question: what is the *technē* of which the poet is an expert practitioner? Each *technē* aims at excellence in its particular field of expertise. What is a poet good at? The *Ion* raises the question of how to judge a given *technē*. The interlocutors of this dialogue are Socrates and Ion, a young rhapsode who specializes in interpreting Homer. As the conversation unfolds, Socrates demonstrates to the young man that his profession is not founded on any particular knowledge. He brings the example of a group of men asked to speak about arithmetic. The man who expresses best the idea of arithmetic is an arithmetician. Socrates charges that there is no objective theme that would allow making the right judgment about poetry ("No one can fail to see that you speak of Homer without any art or knowledge" [532c]). To speak of Homer with knowledge would require expertise in several activities which Homer represents, but this would violate the Principle of Specialization regarding individual citizens' role in the commonwealth.<sup>5</sup>

Subsequently, he demonstrates to Ion that the beauty of poetry has irrational foundations. It is not the result of rational ascent but rather a fruit of inspiration or possession of the senses. To illustrate his claim he uses (paradoxically!) a metaphorical image of a magnetic stone that attracts iron rings conferring upon them some of its power of attraction. Just as the magnet attracts iron, "the Muse first of all inspires men herself; and from these inspired persons a chain of other persons is suspended, who take the inspiration" (533e). It is through this blind subjection to the power of seductive words that poetry and acting operate. The poetic impulse originates in the god who sets up an inspirational chain that then goes to the poet, who, in turn, communicates it to the rhapsode, who, in his performance, subsequently

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5 On the Principle of Specialization in the *Republic*, see our discussion of this dialogue (10).

transmits it to his audience. For Plato, the biggest problem is that the impact of poetry does not occur through a rational process. It happens through the possession of the senses, and this appeal is only possible when the rational control of the senses is surrendered to the power of poetic magnetism. This power deprives the audience of its cognitive capacities by surrendering them to the empire of the emotions. One might wonder why Plato considers it wrong to succumb to divine inspiration. It seems that his most serious issue is the truthfulness of this procedure. Poetry does not teach us about anything precise. Its main goal is the contamination of the audience by some affective qualities that undermine commitment to the truth.

One of the elements that hinder the truth is the need for the rhapsode to leave his real state of mind and enter the one caused by the fictitious situation of the poem he recites. Thus, to move his audience, the rhapsode needs to put himself into the state that corresponds to that of the fictitious reality he tries to depict for the audience. This effort causes a discrepancy between his right mind and that of his audience and the mind the poetic text forces them to espouse. Socrates asks Ion: “Are you not carried out of yourself, and does not your soul in ecstasy seem to be among the persons or places of which you are speaking...?” Ion replies: “I must frankly confess that at the tale of pity my eyes are filled with tears, and when I speak of horrors, my hair stands on end and my heart throbs” (535b-c). There is an additional complication to the integrity of the recitation. To ensure the success of his performance, the rhapsode may not lose control of the effect he produces: he needs to monitor consciously the responses of his audience for, otherwise, his pay might be affected if the outcome of his acting elicits the wrong emotions (“I am obliged to give my very best attention to them; for if I make them cry I myself shall laugh, and if I make them laugh I myself shall cry when the time of payment arrives” [535e]).

These two facts showing that the performer is not consistently and lucidly committed to the truth he tries to express disqualify poetry and its performance as a valid epistemological tool that would eventually lead to the knowledge of the good. Yet the main impediment to the truth is poets’ and rhapsodes’ inability to speak with authority about the chosen topics. Socrates questions Ion regarding what he knows about the *technē* of the charioteer, the physician, or the general. The question reveals that Ion cannot have the same knowledge as the men who exercise these professions for their livelihood. The poet cannot have the basic *technē* that practitioners of any given *technē* have. Poetry is not therefore a *technē*. It cannot be judged according to some general criteria of excellence: its essence lies in the inspiration the poet receives and over which he has no rational control. Goodness

can be applied only to crafts that can be judged objectively. Does this mean, however, that there is no such thing as good or bad poetry?

Plato thinks that good poets are those who can produce beauty or fineness through words,<sup>6</sup> but they do not do it by applying principles of a given *technē*. Poetry owes its goodness to inspiration, and this is what makes it suspicious. The goodness of poetry appears to be in conflict with the truth. Poetry seduces without leading to knowledge by following rational principles. Socrates' last question to Ion is sarcastic, "Which do you prefer to be thought, dishonest or inspired?" (541). If Ion claims that as a rhapsode he possesses a *technē*, he will be dishonest: only those who have a *technē* can claim to be able to ascend towards goodness and truth, and Socrates has shown that Ion has no *technē*. If, on the other hand, Ion states that he is inspired, he will be honest, but knowing that rhapsody is an irrationally inspired activity puts him in conflict with the truth. Socrates forces Ion into a cul-de-sac from which he can exit only by rejecting his craft and resorting to some other activity founded on rational principles. The *Ion* does not clearly condemn poetry as the *Republic* will, but warns against understanding poetry as cognitive.

### Poetry in the *Republic*: Images of Likeness

It is in the *Republic* that Plato expresses his unequivocal condemnation of poetry as a false means of reaching the truth. The majority of Plato's contemporaries believed that poetry was an adequate learning tool (cf. Janaway 82). The *Republic* attacks this opinion by unveiling the possible damage caused by poetry particularly in the domain of education. The interlocutors of the *Republic*, Socrates, Glaucon, Adeimantus, and Thrasymachus, attempt to define morality or justice. The discussion begins by looking for reasons why human life is essentially linked to the life of a group. Socrates comes up with the following answer: "a community starts to be formed, [...] when human beings find that they aren't self-sufficient, but each of them has plenty of requirements which he can't fulfill on his own" (369b). Thus, the need for specialization of tasks motivates human associations into groups that divide labor according to its members' natural predispositions. The Principle of Specialization (cf. Janaway 84) would benefit the community. Its members would thus be able to satisfy their needs more easily, and therefore develop their natural predispositions by exercising and perfecting one *technē* rather than a multiplicity of *technai*.

The interlocutors agree that the specialization of labor in the community would lead to the invention of coinage and the market

6 For a discussion of the possibility of excellence in poetry, see Janaway (34).

as the basic components of a trading system. This new system would necessitate a means of ensuring fairness in commerce among the members of the community. Moreover, basic needs would soon be expanded to more superfluous ones such as “perfumes, prostitutes, and pastry” (373a). To preserve the community from disintegration, it would be necessary to establish a regulating system to keep excessive conduct outside the boundaries of the city. The analogy of the dog as an intelligent animal with learning potential is made to explain the preservation of the polity. Dogs, Plato explains (376a-c), are creatures that love knowledge: they recognize and protect what they have learnt and are hostile at first to unfamiliar things. Loving learning is identical to loving knowledge. This feature of dogs should serve as the criterion for the selection of human guardians who, as lovers of learning, will eventually acquire a philosopher’s love of knowledge.

The interlocutors propose to breed a group of persons who would have the dog-like quality of learning and thus recognize familiar and unfamiliar things. Like dogs, they would be gentle with acquaintances and friends and fierce with strangers. These persons would be the guardians of the community’s order: “Anyone who is going to be a truly good guardian of our community, then, will have a philosopher’s love of knowledge, and will be passionate, quick on his feet, and strong” (376c).

Natural predispositions are not enough to ensure the fitness of the Guardians of the republic. Moral training is necessary so that they may acquire the capacity of right judgment. The discussion turns to the sources of moral education. Plato then gives an overview of what is available for his contemporaries to implement in an educational program. Hesiod and Homer become the targets of Plato’s critical examination of the material to be used in education.

It is chiefly the portrayal of gods in Greek poetry that Plato vehemently rejects. In their depiction of the Greek Pantheon, Hesiod and Homer have no concern, he thinks, for the effect their representation might have on young people. They fabricate images which contradict justice and goodness. Hesiod, for example, depicts Cronos castrating his father Ouranos, and then swallowing his own children, except Zeus by whom he will be defeated. Homer’s gods are no better: they cheat each other, plot against each other, and betray each other. According to the Principle of Specialization the Guardians have only one role in the city and that role would be to preserve the moral integrity of the citizens. If, therefore, their moral education were based on the examples offered by poetry, the whole city would eventually be endangered.

In fact, Plato puts forward some rules for the representation of God. If God were to be represented, he must be shown as he is expected to be.



The main feature of God is goodness (“God must always be described as he really is. [...] Since he is good, [...] he alone must be responsible for the good things, but responsibility for bad things must be looked for elsewhere and not attributed to God” 379ac). Plato does not really argue about his view of divinity; he presents it as a given (*cf.* Else 21).

In the section of the *Republic* dedicated to the formation of the Guardians, Plato pursues his criticism of Homer’s descriptions of deity. He disagrees with the fully anthropomorphic depiction of gods that shows them playing with the destiny of the humans. Zeus, for example, is said to be portrayed mixing the content of two jars containing good and evil, respectively, and then randomly distributing them to the humans (379d). Gods or demigods should not be depicted in ridiculous postures “lamenting and saying things like, Oh poor me! How wretched I am to have borne the noblest of children!” (388b). He proposes for this stage of the Guardians’ formation a prescriptive paradigm of human behavior (*cf.* Janaway 90). Art and poetry can be of use for pedagogical purposes, but they need to restrict the representation to moral appropriateness. Having God’s goodness in mind, poets should put forward examples of goodness that are worth emulating.

In the second half of the book on education Plato gives an overview of the forms of art acceptable for pedagogical goals. Plato points out that the young Guardians’ learning of poetry will be mimetic in nature. The pupils will enact poetic models in studying them. Yet this fact will require some restrictions following what Christopher Janaway calls the Principle of Assimilation (*cf.* 96). This means that actors will come to resemble what they enact. We should also remember here the Principle of Specialization, according to which one role of expertise is performed best by one who has no other role in the city. Mimesis of another role would contradict the Principle of Specialization, leading to a multiplicity that would eventually undermine the moral equilibrium of the body politic. For the moment, Plato does not dismiss mimesis, but warns that the young Guardians should only imitate the traits they are expected to display in their role of Guardians, that is, bravery, self-control, and *pietas*. The possible contradiction, however, between the Principles of Specialization and Assimilation sets the ground for the future expulsion of mimetic poetry from the republic.

Subsequently, Plato discusses the appropriateness of musical modes in connection with poetry. He stresses the relationship between the soul and the speech, rhythm, and harmony produced by artistic expressions. Because of this relationship, the soul can be habituated to harmony and order and thus rise in its goodness. The opposite is also possible, and this is why the state should oversee the proper selection of music to foster the traits of character expected in a Guardian.

At this point of the *Republic*, Plato has reached a certain compromise among arts as a means of teaching about the good. As Iris Murdoch (93-97) has suggested, the good consists in a virtuous ascent toward its perfect form. It requires a progressive denial of self until its death at the moment of the encounter. Can art assume such a role, can it teach selflessness? The morality of life in the republic demands that each and every one of its members strive toward goodness by perfecting their *technē*. Contemporary poetry and art have failed to fulfill this task: Plato provides abundant evidence of this failure in the example of the celebrated Homer. Poetic practice has not observed the Principle of Specialization successfully. Dissatisfied with learning from poetry, Plato undertakes his own attempt to convey the essence of the good. Paradoxically, it is a poetic attempt through a series of allegorical images. In the *Republic*, some of Plato's most famous images are the sun representing the Form of the Good, the eye standing for intelligence, and sight pointing to knowledge (507c-509b). The allegory of the cave (514a-517c) illustrates the state of slavery of all human beings from which only philosophy can free them. By resorting to an indirect mode of representation, that is, metaphor, he is able to suggest the difficulty in attaining the good and its elusiveness. He does not intend to imitate anything, but to point in the right direction. Allegory is a more modest vehicle, which can be contrasted with the pretension of direct mimesis to represent the truth.

In the final section of the *Republic* (Book 10), Plato comes back to the topic of poetry and art and reevaluates his judgment from the section on the education of the Guardians. This time his conclusion will be less conciliatory: he will propose the exclusion of the poets from the republic. He starts his argument by suggesting that mimetic art is not much more than a mirror reflection ("The quickest method [...] is to get hold of a mirror [...]. You'll soon be creating everything [...] that's presumably the kind of craftsman a painter is" [596d-e]). Then he proceeds to analyze the image of a bed. The painter of a bed represents the image of an object which itself is an image, a "shadow" of the form which is the original. Thus the product of the painter's work is the image of a likeness (cf. Janaway 110). Therefore, the image of the likeness is separated in multiple ways from the reality of the original form. Art tries to apprehend the reality of a form through the senses, and, for this reason, its endeavor is doomed to failure. The realm of forms can only be approached through the intellect. The senses are unable to penetrate that far.

Having used the example of painting, Plato proceeds to question mimetic poetry and its cognitive and epistemological value. Here again Homer is the prime target: Plato attacks the belief that Homer's poetry might have any educational benefits leading to knowledge ("Well, does

history record that there was any war fought in Homer's time whose success depended on his leadership or advice?" [600a]). Plato demonstrates that Homer in public and private life had no effect on social or political life. His activity remained on the surface of things, imitating various aspects of life but in no way having any particular knowledge that could be qualified as genuine. The negative evaluation of Homer's contribution to civic life leads to a generalized rejection of mimetic art:

So shall we classify all poets, from Homer onwards, as representers of images of goodness (and of everything else which occurs in their poetry), and claim that they don't have any contact with the truth? The facts are as we said a short while ago: a painter creates an illusory shoemaker, when not only does he not understand anything about shoemaking, but his audience doesn't either. They just base their conclusions on the colours and shapes they can see. [600e-601a]

The section that follows tests further the truthfulness of poetry by putting forward the criteria that verify the poet's expertise in the fields he describes. Plato says that there are two ways of being an expert: one is through manufacturing an object, the second, through the use of this object. The manufacturer and the user of the given object complement each other's knowledge and thus can perfect the object itself and its usage. The maker of the object has the *technē* of design and manufacture, the user has the *technē* of practical application. The question now is how the mimetic artist relates to the expertise of the user and manufacturer. The answer is rather straightforward: he is not an expert in either. If he is not an expert, what then is his motivation in continuing to represent things without knowing their good or bad features? Plato argues that mimetic artists are driven by the prospect of gratifying the irrational side of their audience and their own as well. Audiences are usually composed of a large and ignorant "motley crowd" that uncritically absorbs the untruth offered to them. Poetry and art thus create a consensus based on mutual ignorance that delight senses and dulls the rational part of the souls ("He destroys the rational part by feeding and fattening up this other part" [605b]). In other words, the poet, ignorant and lacking a *technē*, fabricates images of likeness, but not goodness itself, and contaminates his audience with the kind of intellectual laziness that is detrimental to the truth. There is nothing that would justify the presence of mimetic artists in the republic: "If you admit the entertaining Muse of lyric and epic poetry, then instead of law and the shared acceptance of reason as the best guide, the kings of your community will be pleasure and pain" (607a). To reach the state of goodness, we need to sacrifice the pleasure demanded by the senses in order to ascend, which is the intellectual fulfillment of knowing.

In this section of the study we have attempted to demonstrate Plato's concerns with poetry and art. The dialogue *Ion* raises the question of art and poetry as *technai*. Socrates shows to Ion, a rhapsode, that he performs under inspiration poems that have been composed under inspiration as well. This activity is deprived of the rational basis that would foster its betterment, leading to the intellectual contemplation of the form of the good. In the later work, the *Republic*, Plato expands his scrutiny of the arts and concludes that art should be eliminated altogether from the ideal community. Art and poetry teach wrong things about gods by ridiculing them. By attempting mimesis, art is at two removes from reality: it imitates the models that are themselves mere copies of real things. Finally, poetry impedes the intellectual ascetic effort of searching for the truth by awakening passions and emotions within the performers and the audiences as well.

### **Aristotle: Happiness as the End of Action**

Now we will turn our study to the disciple of Plato, Aristotle. We must recall that one of Plato's key arguments against poetry and the visual arts is the fact that the objects of mimesis are not real. Artists imitate on the basis of their sensory perception, yet the senses cannot go beyond the material world which is a mere copy of reality. Aristotle attacks this view and confers on art the status of a branch of philosophy. To understand the importance of art for Aristotle, we need to grasp his notion of the good, which art is meant to imitate. In *Physics*, Aristotle argues that *phainomena* or appearances, which we apprehend through sensory perception, are our only basis for the cognitive investigation of reality. As Martha C. Nussbaum has argued, Aristotle's method is limited to the data of human experience and conforms itself to the limits of this anthropocentric point of view, as opposed to Plato's "god's eye" perspective (cf. 244-245).

This perspective raises the question of the relationship between data and its subsequent analysis. Data is gathered from the natural world and then analyzed by individuals from the same linguistic communities. The experience of the *phainomena* might result in different conclusions. If this occurs, in his *Metaphysics* Aristotle advocates reaching a consensus by following the Principle of Non-Contradiction. The desire to understand the world is fulfilled when we reach consistency in our view about its nature. Aristotle warns, however, against any forced application of logical principles to appearances. Our conclusion of consistency must always be checked back in its relationship to the appearance to avoid any forceful imposition of theory upon it (cf. Nussbaum 247). If we theorize without returning to the appearances, we run the risk of oversimplification. A Platonist would like philosophy to lead one

beyond the ordinariness of existence; an Aristotelian, on the other hand, aspires to grasp the general principles that will eventually unveil the underlying order of the universe in its variety.

Before approaching directly the subject of Aristotle's idea of mimetic art, we must understand the importance he ascribes to motion in the universe because, for Aristotle, mimesis consists primarily in imitation of acting human beings. Happiness or unhappiness of human life is a result of human action in pursuit of an end (*Poetics* [*Poet.*] 50a16-18). If one wants to imitate reality, one must convey its permanent movement towards an aim. In *De Motu Animalium* Aristotle explains that motion is triggered by desires, beliefs, or perceptions. These desires and beliefs are directed towards a goal and are logically and causally connected with it. "Logically" means that we cannot talk about desires or beliefs without their goal, "causally," because the goal is the reason for the action to happen. However, there are some important conditions for the goal-oriented actions to take effect. The desire for an object is accompanied by perception or thought. Perceptions and thinking take into account the limitations of the external world imposed upon the realization of the action. For an action to be effected the good (mentally represented by desire) must meet the possible (envisioned by perception and thought). Sometimes, however, the actions are generated involuntarily when the agent is compelled to act by some external forces that impede the accuracy of perception. In this case the desire and the real goal are disconnected; the outcome of the action might be entirely undesired by the agent. Such a case can be represented by a tragedy.

The consideration of the balance between a goal-oriented action and the possibilities of its fulfillment lead us to the question of *eudaimonia*, Aristotle's term to denote the good or happy human life. Gerard J. Hughes has suggested that the most accurate rendering into English of *eudaimonia* is "a fulfilled life" or simply "fulfillment" (22). By *eudaimonia* Aristotle has in mind the achievement of one's potential. Each living organism has its own particular makeup or *psychē* (rendered in English by "soul"). The properly integrated exercise of an organism's specific capacities (to be found in its soul) is its *telos*. In contrast with other organisms, humans have the capacity to reason at two distinct levels. The first is the practical one which makes it possible to meet one's needs in the complexity of the natural and political world. The second level is theoretical: human beings may reflect on their own actions theoretically, trying to identify the purpose of their life.

To achieve *eudaimonia*, it is not enough to exercise the capacities of the human soul: it is necessary to exercise them properly [(*kat'aretēn*) Hughes 37, notes 14 and 15]. *Aretē* is understood as "excellence." Possessing *aretē* means being good at something. In the

*Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes two types of *aretē*: one type belongs to the moral character, the second, to the intellect. The moral virtues involve a pattern of emotional responses to given situations. They are not just feelings like anger or fear, or natural dispositions such as a digestive system or good vision. They are habitual dispositions; this means that from their basis found in nature they can be developed through appropriate training (*cf.* 55). The virtue of moderation, for example, can be reinforced by a conscious exercise. Courage can be acquired by the exercise of overcoming fear.

The moral virtues are not all that leads an individual to *eudaimonia*, but they work in conjunction with other predispositions that make a fulfilled life possible. Practical wisdom works closely in parallel with moral thinking. Human beings, having received moral training, can use that theoretical background to make decisions in particular situations (*cf.* Nussbaum 305-6). Practical wisdom uses as guidelines the internalized ethical values acquired from a moral training and the individual experience of living in the world. Thus, before making a decision in face of a new situation, one resorts to one's general moral background and to one's life experience. In case of friendship, for example, we affectively connect with people who share our values and whose particular traits are agreeable to us as we discover them through our experience with the person.

The role of virtues in human life is to reduce the negative impact that passionate responses to new situations could cause in our lives. Aristotle's stance on the role of emotions and appetites differs, however, considerably from that of the Plato of the *Republic*. Yet Plato modifies his contemptuous attitude toward appetites in his later dialogue *Phaedrus*. Aristotle develops the ideas expressed in this dialogue and suggests that appetites and emotions are not to be repressed and dismissed but harnessed by virtuous choice. Hence, virtue requires the unity of thought and desire in which desire listens to thought, and thought remains receptive to that desire. It is through this blend that we achieve the wholeheartedness of an action. *Eudaimonia* is thus reached not through the control of appetites and emotions but by the accord of passionate elements with the values we rationally embrace. The particularity of human *eudaimonia* is that it does not consist in a single activity. In its complexity it encompasses the proper individual excellences (virtues) possessed by a given human being and subordinated to the best of them. Yet it is not a self-sufficient action; it takes into account the social and political surroundings of each human being, that is, friends, relatives, and community.<sup>7</sup>

7 See Nussbaum's Appendix to Part III 373-7.

Now we should ask what Aristotle has to say about the actual possibility of reaching *eudaimonia* as he defines it. For Plato, fulfillment of human aspirations implies a masterful application of reason that would make the individual ascent invulnerable to the vicissitudes that constantly alter the state of the appearances. Aristotle's quest for goodness starts within the appearances and postulates that goodness is achievable through the proper rational harmonization of emotions with the view of a goal that our system of values and our "reasoned" desires unveil for us. The fact that we are asked to reach a state of constancy and balance in the reality that is itself unstable renders our enterprise vulnerable. To reduce our vulnerability in the face of surrounding contingency, we undergo a training which we receive from our family and later from civic institutions that prepare us to act in a political community (cf. Nussbaum 346). We become "habituated" to a life of excellence by being stimulated to embrace the virtuous train of life (*The Nichomachean Ethics* x 9). A poetics of goodness is a poetics that provides us with a set of precepts for artistic creativity with the purpose of showing us how to live the best possible life and how to act when faced with events that are beyond our control.

A character formed according to virtues is prepared to act in the world in the way that might lead to fulfillment. Yet having an excellent character does not mean that one is capable of acting excellently. The contingent reality around us might impede the possibility of action. Uncontrolled circumstances might prevent the fulfillment of excellent activity by either depriving us of instruments and resources of action or by suppressing the recipient of our action (cf. Nussbaum 327). Such privation can occur suddenly and then we speak of a reversal of fortune. But a condition of privation may also exist within us from the beginning of our existence such as low birth or physical ugliness. If persons are trained in virtue, however, they can achieve a state that approximates *eudaimonia* and that would remain unaffected by the minor influence of contingencies. Nevertheless, instances of severe misfortune over a longer period of time will have a detrimental effect on *eudaimonia*. Virtues are powerless in the face of repeated severe catastrophes. Then we deal with a dislocation of the person's good character from the possibility of acting (living) well.<sup>8</sup> Bad fortune itself provides poets with subjects for tragedies.

8 As Martha C. Nussbaum reminds us, and as anyone might know, from Plato's and Kant's perspective, bad luck has no effect on a virtuous individual's idea of fulfillment, but such is not Aristotle's view.

### ***Poetics of Eudaimonia***

Having explained the concept of *eudaimonia*, we may now reflect on its relationship to art. We can recall Plato's severe stance according to which art and poetry did not leave the realm of sensory experience and were impediments to the rational ascent of the soul toward the contemplation of the idea of the good. Mimetic art is at two removes from the truth for it imitates things which are themselves copies of the real models. Artists violate the principle of unity by defying the Principle of Specialization that leads to excellence in practicing any single craft; in this sense art is not a *technē*. For Aristotle, whose ethical enquiry into the good life centers on *phainomena*, the good is achieved when the potential for goodness is actualized. In case of animals and humans, the movement is subordinated to a goal defined by each organism's capacities. Human teleology consists in acting reflectively following the principle of natural reason. In the mimetic process, art's function is to foster acting in the world that leads to fulfillment of the human potential, that is, to the state of *eudaimonia*.

Contrary to Plato, who considers literature as a subsidiary of social, moral, and political teachings, Aristotle gives poetry an equal role with other domains of human activity. Far from charging poetic practice with deceit and diversion from the truth, in the *Poetics* Aristotle recognizes in poetry a cognitive and pedagogical tool that fulfills an important function in the formation of virtuous character. One learns, in fact, from poetry because it shows how to live in the world of *phainomena*, and that world is not immune to the impact of contingencies. He explains the genesis of poetic activity as follows: "Representation is natural to human beings from childhood. They differ from the other animals in this: man tends towards representation and learns his first lessons through representation" (*Poet.* 48b5). He further adds that this cognitive activity is accompanied by a certain pleasure of seeing things which in reality are difficult to bear.

What is thus the aim of poetry? It is not to persuade as in the case of rhetoric, but to expose the truth by means of fiction, fable, and tragic *muthos* (plot). The human truth lies in the right action, and the purpose of poetry is to render this truth. In that sense poetry is a handmaid of ethics because its aim is to give instruction on the right conduct in the world of contingencies:

[T]ragedy is a representation not of human beings but of action and life. Happiness and unhappiness lie in action, and the end [of life] is a sort of action, not a quality; people are of a certain sort according to their character, but happy or the opposite according to their actions. [...] Consequently the incidents, i.e. the plot, are the end of tragedy, and the end is most important of all. (*Poet.* 50a16-23)



The statement above shows the connection between action and *eudaimonia*. Fulfillment can be achieved only through action, but the success of an action does not lie entirely in the power of the acting subject. Human activity can be impeded by circumstances beyond the control of the acting individual. Yet poetry as a *technē* helps to bear the weight of existence. How does it do so?

This function is achieved, I believe, through the philosophical dimension of poetry. Comparing poetry to history (51b), Aristotle states that

[history] relates things that have happened, [poetry] things that may happen. For this poetry is a more philosophical and more serious thing than history; poetry tends to speak of universals, history of particulars. A universal is the sort of thing that a certain kind of person may well say or do in accordance with probability or necessity. (51b1-10)

This philosophical understanding of poetry implies that poetry is not a simple copy of reality as Plato had suggested. Mimesis denotes a complex process of making a new thing by using the linguistic (and theatrical) medium. As Paul Ricoeur has it, “making is always production of an individual thing” (38). The function of poetic *muthos* or plot is to order reality according to the principle of necessity or probability. Universalizing ordering is thus the essence of poetic activity. As the outcome of this process we obtain a transposition of human action to a more elevated level. This mimetic process encompasses tensions first between the fidelity to reality and invention, then between unchanged representation and perfecting elevation (*id.* 40).

The teleology of mimesis is to maintain the connection between reality and the object produced by art. Poetry imitates real things in action. And it is through the process of representing them in action that poetry actualizes their potentiality. By doing so, it offers a view of reality which possesses its own ontological status not disconnected from the world of nature that it imitates. Yet through its invention poetry projects the state of things in which their potentiality is actualized. Thus, a fruit of poetic imagination, a poem, has an inner organization that can be judged in its relationship to reality: it can be better or worse. In that sense poetry is a *technē* because it allows the evaluation of the degree of perfection of its product. By representing human action, poetry as a branch of philosophy helps one understand one’s own situation in the world, and shows the way to *eudaimonia* by suggesting ways of acting in the world whose purpose is the fulfillment of one’s human potentiality.

Yet the center of tragic representation is not fulfillment, but the mimesis of some impediment to fulfillment. We have seen that the

foremost objective of mimetic poetry is a cognitive and learning experience and that this experience is accompanied by pleasure. The nature of that pleasure referred to as catharsis has raised many debates among scholars.<sup>9</sup> For Leon Golden (whose interpretation of catharsis appears most relevant for our study), this pleasure of learning from poetry consists in proceeding from the particular to the universal, that is, we watch the story of a specific character in order to gain some knowledge about the human condition in general. More specifically, in the case of tragedy (which is a species of mimetic poetry) we find that the learning process involves learning about fear and pity. Thus, the learning from tragedy consists of “the movement from the particular to the universal in regard to pitiful and fearful situations and leading to the clarifying insight” (Golden 1969 145).

For Plato, art could not reach the stage of “intellectual clarification” (the expression used by Golden) and the idea of doing it through the emotions of pity and fear would have been unacceptable for him. On the contrary, for Aristotle emotions are valuable signs indicating that we must work our way to understanding their sources. The tragedy of Oedipus, for example, shows us his attempt to escape the fate destined to him. These efforts end up involving him in the acts that he was hoping to avoid. Thus, the tragic poet shows us, through this “particular” example, the universal human condition with its fundamental limitation of the human intellect with respect to the divine purpose. We realize that the origin of the particular events that invite pity and fear is in fact “a universal condition of existence.”<sup>10</sup>

We have seen that the paths of Plato and Aristotle regarding art take different turns. Aristotle overcomes the limits conferred by Plato upon art and grants it a philosophical status. For him, art is no longer a diversion or distraction from the rational ascent to the contemplation of the good. On the contrary, art is an ally of ethics that helps one “clarify” one’s predicament in the world and act according to reason. In that sense, art is a *technē* because it has potential for excellence in its effort to convey the universal truth. Like philosophy, art universalizes particular experiences and, through this process, teaches the audience about the universal human condition and its limitation in

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9 As Leon Golden (1962) has explained, catharsis is traditionally defined as “purgation” of emotions of pity and fear from the consciousness of the audience or as the “purification” of these emotions in a moral or ethical sense.

10 Martha Nussbaum has qualified Leon Golden’s view as too Platonic in his insistence on the intellectual aspect of this clarification. According to her, Aristotle’s great merit is to rehabilitate emotions and their cognitive role; emotions and intellect are both part of our character and get involved in our responses to a concrete situation and, therefore, the separation of these two elements is not necessary.

front of the blindness of our destiny. As actors in the play of destiny, we fail to understand, but as spectators we gain that necessary distance that makes understanding possible. In other words, we learn from seeing the example of the suffering of others, and we take pleasure in realizing that we understand what happened to the fictitious characters, and that, if it happened to us, it might not be our fault, for a virtuous person might have done everything in his or her rational potential yet fallen short of *eudaimonia*.

### **Tasso: Affirming Poetry as Philosophy**

Many Renaissance intellectuals, immersed in Neoplatonic thought, tried to borrow Aristotle's insight regarding art and use it to compose treatises on Christian art. To what extent were they faithful to Aristotle? The first Latin translation of the *Poetics*, by Giorgio Valla, published in Venice in 1489, stimulated an unprecedented interest in Aristotle's views on the art of poetry. Italian scholars translated and commented his work throughout the sixteenth century. Torquato Tasso was arguably the most original poet and theorist of art of that time. His poetics implements the Aristotelian conviction that mimesis is the basis of human artistic activity, yet he also stresses the fact that artists have direct access to intelligible reality that goes beyond the imitation of the real perceived by the senses. The underlying principle of the universe is its unity, which a poetics of goodness promoting good art must emphasize.<sup>11</sup>

In his *Discorsi dell'arte poetica* (ca. 1562-65; published in 1587), Tasso eloquently stated his allegiance to Aristotle's *Poetics*: "[Aristotle] arranged under ten headings everything that God and nature enclose in this great cosmos; and likewise, by reducing so many syllogisms to a few small forms, he composed them into a complete brief art" (123-4).<sup>12</sup> According to Tasso, Aristotle offers in the *Poetics* a model of imitation; art as imitation is expected to reduce the complexity of imitated reality to a few essential forms that would be unaffected by changing historical circumstances. This simplification or rectification must be done following the principle of verisimilitude. Nature is the guarantee of this belief in the immutability of the universals: "Nature is most certain in her workings and always advances in a sure and steady manner (even though she seems to change through some material defect or instability)" (*id.* 127). The task of the poet is to extract the essence of reality. Without this selective process of applying the principle of verisimilitude one is not a poet, but a mere historian.

11 For a study of the Neoplatonic idea of beauty, see O'Meara (ch. 9 88-98).

12 In Tasso, *Discorsi dell'arte poetica* I refer to the scholarly translation of the text by Lawrence F. Rhu, published in *The Genesis of Tasso's Narrative Theory: English Translations of the Early Poetics and a Comparative Study of Their Significance*, 1993.

Notwithstanding this explicit affirmation of Aristotle's authority Tasso's theory is, in my view, a conflation of Plato's concerns about poetry's fitness to be philosophical and Aristotle's affirmation of poetry's cognitive and didactic function. In other words, while accepting Aristotle's conviction that mimesis is the basis of learning which legitimizes poetic practice, Tasso adopts absolutist criteria for good poetry that are reminiscent of Platonic forms.<sup>13</sup> In his poetic theory Tasso confers upon poetry a high philosophical task of conveying "the immutability of the universals." In the same way that Plato's philosopher reaches the realm of ideal forms through reason, Tasso's good poet can reach the immutable realm of truth provided that he remains rigorously disciplined in applying reason to his craft. The principles of good art lie somewhere beyond the sensible world, as is the case in Plato's view regarding the form of the good. Moreover, Tasso modifies the way in which the didactic element in poetry operates: learning no longer happens through an "intellectual clarification" of the tragic flaw, but by contemplating an exemplar of virtue which serves as a model of rational behavior in front of the contingent world. Hence, Tasso prefers epic poetry to tragedy.

While discussing the question of good or bad poetry, Tasso had in mind the epic poem *Orlando Furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto, that became a bestseller in the first half of the Cinquecento. The *Furioso* is composed according to the principle of *entrelacement*, that is, it contains multiple plots not necessarily logically connected and is full of obvious fantastic elements in spite of its claims to be based on historical sources. Tasso clearly wrote his *Discorsi* and composed his own epic poem *Gerusalemme liberata* in response to *Orlando Furioso*'s popular success, which he qualified as fraudulent for its disregard of verisimilitude and common sense. He was angered by the *Furioso*'s popularity, which he ascribed to custom, and perhaps to "a prince's or lady's" support (Tasso 118). Some Italian critics called Ariosto's poem a new genre, "romance," but Tasso obstinately saw in it only a bad epic. Ariosto represents exactly the poet whom Plato would swiftly expel from his republic, for he takes delight in explicitly violating rational principles by distracting his readers from the philosophical goal of directing the audience toward the truth.

Like Aristotle in the *Poetics*, Tasso states in the *Discourses* that "poetry, in essence, is nothing other than imitation" (103). This imitation, however, ought to be in conformity with the laws of nature. In that sense, it must follow the principle of verisimilitude, "since imitation means nothing more than making a likeness or a similitude" (*ibid.*). Yet it is

13 On the issue of the Platonic coloration of Aristotle's thought during the Renaissance, see Minsaas (164).

here that we find the major difference between Aristotle and Tasso. For Aristotle, poetry, and above all its particular species, tragedy, operates from the particular to the universal. It shows particular cases of error that are eventually clarified through the climax of catharsis. For Tasso, on the other hand, the historical domain of the particulars needs to be filtered before being considered as a poetic subject. We notice here the influence of Christian decorum. Before the Christian era, poets could imitate customs that are intolerable for the modern Christian sensibility. Even in Homer there are many examples of this kind.

To respond to the new sensibility of the modern age, the role of verisimilitude takes over the role of catharsis among the Greeks. Poetry thus should focus on the imitation of virtue rather than on depicting sudden changes of fortune. While discussing genres, Tasso explicitly disagrees with Aristotle when he Greek says that tragedy and epic are essentially the same. They both have an ennobling impact but achieve it very differently. For Tasso

Tragic illustriousness consists of the unexpected and sudden change of fortune and the magnitude of the events that arouse terror and pity. Heroic illustriousness, however, is based on undertakings of exalted martial valor and on deeds of courtesy, generosity, piety, and religion. (108)

It is quite apparent that the Christian notion of divine Providence causes some difficulties in sustaining a tragic subject, particularly in regard to the capriciousness of fortune that plays tricks on the innocent. We notice here the emphasis on positive values manifested by a well-formed character rather than illustrated in characters responding to the vagaries of fortune.

The didactic role of verisimilitude takes preponderance over veracity of representation. This fact has consequences for the selection of the subject matter; Tasso clearly advocates censorship in this regard:

The epic poet, thus, must take his theme from the history of a religion held true by us. [...] The theme of an epic, therefore, should be taken from chronicles of true religion but not of such great authority as to be unalterable. (105)

In other words, the subject matter should come from the history of Christianity yet, in order to leave freedom for invention within the limits of verisimilitude, this subject matter ought to be distant in time so that adaptation by virtue of the modern decorum might be possible. The poet has the license to rectify the particular historical episode in order to surrender it to the overall epic purpose which is “illustriousness” by exalting martial valor, generosity, and piety, for example.

The historical subject matter must be processed in such a way that it might result in a likeness of truth. The plot as an arrangement of incidents confers upon historical events a verisimilar sequence in which they likely happened.

The plot must be whole or entire because we expect perfection of it [...]. This wholeness will be found in the plot if it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning is that which, by necessity, comes after nothing else; the other things come after it. (Tasso 114)

We notice here the Aristotelian notion of *technē* which Tasso adopts. Poetry, thus, if produced according to the universalizing principles, is a *technē* because its excellence can be determined following universally fixed criteria. The unity of the plot is the most important factor that ensures verisimilitude. The goodness of the poem is determined by how well the poem observes the principle of unity. Oneness is the underlying principle of the existing universe as he explains: “Nonetheless, the earth, which encloses so many and diverse things in its bosom, is one; and its form and essence are one; and one, the knot by which it joins and binds its parts in discordant concord” (Tasso 131). Artistic creation is thus imitation of the primal principle, that of unity.

Yet the principle of unity, the universal feature of good art, is endangered by pressures from ignorant craftsmen and their audiences. In the name of modernity, they violate the eternal principles of art. They surrender universality to the decay inflicted by the mutability of custom. There are things which the poet must accommodate to the modern custom such as ways of fighting, methods of travel. For example, a poem representing the time of the Crusades cannot stage battles from chariots as during Homer’s times. However, the unity of plot is a feature that can never be violated. Nevertheless, some of Tasso’s contemporaries (namely Ariosto) confuse the permanent with the transient components of art. Moreover, their enterprise is compensated by popular success. Unfortunately, this success is due to the ignorance of the vulgar: “common people who misunderstand, because they usually study the incidentals, and not the essentials, of things” (Tasso 129). We see here a Platonic note of mistrust regarding the value of art in conveying the truth. For Plato art cannot transcend the realm of emotions and thus it contributes to obfuscating judgment rather than clarifying it. For Tasso this happens in the case of bad art. The success of the so-called romance feeds on human desires that are diverted from the truth by a disorderly flux of incidents that captivate the audiences’ attention without teaching them anything about life. Variety is good in itself: it creates delight for audiences.

However, disorderly variety leads to multiplicity which is the opposite of unity, and, therefore, of truth.

Tasso's poetics puts forward an idea of goodness that is a conflation of Plato's idealism and Aristotle's pragmatism. In a Neoplatonic fashion he borrowed from Plato the sense of perfection that poetry can reach only through a rational ascetic ascent comparable to the intellectual itinerary of a philosopher. It expresses the desire to preserve the purity of thought from the invasion of the appetitive part of the psyche. From Aristotle, he received the conviction that poetry is a branch of philosophy and is essentially a learning tool about reality. Tasso's Christian perspective downplays the role of chance in human life and concentrates on the representation that follows the principle of verisimilitude. In this perspective, art ought to depict virtue as an exemplar of right conduct. Through a unified plot, poetry arranges incidents in order to reflect nature. Chaotic multiplicity is to be proscribed. Tasso's anxiety of unity might be seen as an expression of the anxiety of an age that was witnessing the split of Christendom and the threat from Islam.

### Concluding Remarks

In this study we have attempted to trace the concept of goodness in art according to Plato and Aristotle. Subsequently we have looked at the way in which a Neoplatonic thinker and poet of the Renaissance, Torquato Tasso, assimilates ideas of Plato and Aristotle in order to formulate a Christian poetics of his own. For Plato, poetry falls short of being able to assume a philosophical function of leading one to the realm of the ideal forms. It diverts attention from the rational disciplined ascent beyond the realm of appetites and desires. For Aristotle, poetry is a branch of philosophy in the sense that it represents acting human beings in their attempts to live a fulfilled life. Catharsis, the climax of poetic enterprise, brings about the intellectual clarification of our view of human condition. In that sense, art is a *technē* that can be perfected in its ability to teach us about the truth. Tasso takes up Aristotle's argument in favor of poetry but keeps in mind Plato's warnings about the vulnerability of poetry to passionate vagaries induced by human weakness to be diverted from the truth and exploited by entertainment at the hands of unscrupulous and clever image-makers. For a Christian Neoplatonic thinker, poets and artists must keep in mind the ideal perfection of the object they intend to represent. A gaze towards the ideal Form that lies beyond the material object itself should be a guiding principle for a poetics that claims to offer the precepts for the practice of good art. Artists must resist the temptation to please the vulgar; they must invite their audience to rise above the common corruption of the world in a disciplined intellectual ascent.

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