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Mimesis and Metaphor – Aristotle and the Poetry of science¹

RESUMÉ

Aristoteles' *Poetikken* synes at give Empedokles en dobbelt status som forfatter: Han er først og fremmest *physiologon*, naturvidenskabsmand, men han er tilsyneladende også digter. Med den aristoteliske distinktion mellem teoretisk og praktisk videnskab in mente, hvor naturvidenskab regnes for teoretisk og poetik for praktisk, kræver denne dobbeltstatus forklaring – hvordan kan det samme skrift være genstand for både teoretisk og praktisk videnskab? Med udgangspunkt i Aristoteles' begreb om metafor foreslår og forsvare denne artikel tre sådanne forklaringer: Én med afsæt i Aristoteles' tænkning om stil, en med afsæt i epistemologiske overvejelser, og en med afsæt i hans skrifter om sproget.

ABSTRACT

The status that Aristotle's *Poetics* gives to Empedocles seems double: He is first and foremost *physiologon*, a natural scientist, but seemingly also a poet. Keeping in mind the Aristotelean distinction between theoretical and practical sciences, where natural science belongs to the former and the study of poetry to the latter, this double status requires explanation – how can the same work be the object of both theoretical and practical science? Commencing from Aristotle's concept of metaphor, this article proposes three such explanations: One rooted in Aristotle's thoughts on style, one in epistemology, and one in his writings on language.

EMNEORD

Aristoteles, poetik, metafor, videnskab, digtning, poesi

KEYWORDS

Aristotle, poetics, metaphor, science, poetry

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*What was the first man, was he a hunter, a toolmaker,
a farmer, a worker, a priest, or a politician?
Undoubtedly the first man was an artist.*

— Barnett Newman

*we must expect [...] poetical application of an insight into
Nature*

— Hans Christian Ørsted

Introduction: Scientist or Poet?

Following both Aristotle himself (*Metaphysics* VI.1.1025b 24–26) and numerous scholars of his work (e.g., Allen 2015, Polansky 2017), Aristotle’s works are characterized by upholding a fundamental division between what he calls the theoretical and practical sciences. According to Aristotle, a science is deemed theoretical or practical by virtue of the object it is investigating and, more precisely, whether the object can be otherwise than it is (whether the object is what it is by way of necessity or contingency). If the object is not capable of being otherwise than it is (i.e., if it is “eternal”), it is the object of a theoretical science (*Ethics*, VI.3 1139b 18–25),² and if it is capable of change (i.e., if it is contingent), it is investigated by a practical science (*Ethics* VI.3 1140a 1–2). We can thus call any science that deals with an object of nature (*physis*) a theoretical science (as Aristotle does in *Metaphysics* VI.1.1026a 6–20) and likewise call practical any science that deals with contingent objects, such as politics and ethics and, more generally, human action (*praxis*) and human production (*poiesis*). As A. E. Taylor (1919: 22) has explained it, a practical science “has to

² All references to Aristotle’s writings follow the standard template of referencing Aristotelean texts, i.e., the title of the work (*Poetics*, *Ethics*, *Rhetoric*, etc.), followed by the book and chapter of the work (if this applies), the Bekker numbering (e.g., 1339b), and finally the line numbers of the referenced passage (e.g., 18–25).

do with relations which human volition can modify, 'things which may be other than they are,' the contingent."

This division of the sciences also makes an appearance in Aristotle's *Poetics*, a work that itself belongs to practical science by virtue of dealing with poetry, a product of human activity. In the first chapter of the *Poetics*, Aristotle points out the principle and defining feature of poetry: it is not that it is language in verse and meter but that it is a mode of imitation (*mimesis*). This leads Aristotle to conclude that "Homer and Empedocles have nothing in common except the metre, so that it would be proper to call one a poet and the other not a poet but a scientist" (*Poetics* 1447b 11–12, transl. Hamilton Fyfe).³ Taking the theoretical–practical distinction into account, this seems to make sense. Empedocles writes about the elements of nature in hexameter verse, and despite his use of a seemingly poetic form, this makes him a writer of theoretical science as the object of his writings is nature itself, an object that, according to Aristotle, does not admit of variation.

However, the original Greek text reveals that things are less simple than they first appear, as closer inspection shows that Aristotle might, in fact, not deny Empedocles the status of poet at all. Following the *Poetics* by the letter, the proper way to style Empedocles is to call him τὸν δὲ φυσιολόγον μᾶλλον ἢ ποιητήν (*ton de physiologon mállon he poiēten*). The crucial word here is μᾶλλον (*mállon*), which does *not* mean "not" or "instead of" but "more than" or "rather than".^{4,5} We can thus read the passage in a very different way: Aristotle does not deny that Empedocles is to be regarded as a poet but merely posits that he should first and foremost be considered a *physiologos*, a natural scientist. Such a reading is further suggested by the references that Aristotle makes to Empedocles, an author of poetry, such as in the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle warns against those who have nothing to say but hide this through their use of poetic

³ Hamilton Fyfe is not alone in translating this passage as such. See, for instance, George Whalley's translation in Aristotle (1997: 49).

⁴ See Ferrari (1999: 184, note 4), where this notion of *mállon* is also used to reinterpret Aristotle's *Poetics*, though with Thucydides rather than Empedocles as the main object of study.

⁵ The "rather than" sense of *mállon* appears in other translations of the *Poetics*; see, for instance, Ingram Bywater's translation in Aristotle (1952) or Malcom Heath's in Aristotle (1996).

style, ποιήσει λέγουσιν (*poiesei legousin*), “after the manner of Empedocles” (*Rhetoric* Γ.V.4, 1407a 35). This now presents us with a challenge: if the division between the theoretical and practical sciences applies, then how can Empedocles be both scientist and poet, *physiologos* and *poietés*? Furthermore, can and should we regard the scientific works of Empedocles or any other works of theoretical science as simultaneously being works of poetry?

I will offer three explanations that allow us to regard Empedocles as a poet without violating the Aristotelean division of the sciences. All three explanations will revolve around Aristotle’s concept of metaphor, and all three of them will serve as arguments for regarding Empedocles (and, with him, perhaps all natural scientists) as a kind of poet. The first explanation will consider metaphor as a part of poetic style (*lexis*). Drawing on the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle’s other major work on human production, I will show that Aristotle does, in fact, claim that there is a specifically poetic style. In this style, metaphor is one of the most commonly used and most effective devices, and in several instances, Aristotle points explicitly to Empedocles as a user of metaphor and, more generally, as a writer of works that are poetic in style. In this purely stylistic sense, Empedocles thus can and should be regarded as a poet without any violation of the division of the sciences in so far as the label of “poetry” is only attached to the style of his writings and not to their subject matter.

To give the second explanation, I will argue that metaphor is what John T. Kirby (1997, 537) has called the “semiotic infrastructure” of poetry. I will show that the plot of poetry, its *mythos*, is what transforms the *mimesis* of poetry and art from mere imitation to a creation (*poiesis*) of something genuinely new. With a well-formed plot, the poet links together a chain of things or events—not as they actually are or as they happened but in such a way that it allows new and universal knowledge to rise from the jumble of singular events and facts (*empeiria*). By representing its object in this manner, not as it actually contingently is or happens but in a way that teaches something new about it, poetic *mimesis* is exactly like metaphor, which names its object in an unconventional way, allowing previously unknown qualities of said object to be known. When Empedocles picks out different phenomena of nature and links them together in new ways, thereby providing new knowledge, he is essentially producing metaphors, exactly like the *mythos* at work in poetry. Accordingly, not only Empedocles but all *physiologoi* can be correctly styled as poets.

Finally, I propose a third explanation, in the same mold as the previous one. Here, I will argue that poetic *mimesis* (and thus metaphor) appears to be the “semiotic infrastructure” of not only poetry but also all names in human language. I aim to show that Aristotle does, in fact, claim our language to be the product of poetic *mimesis*. To do so, I will compare Aristotle’s view on language and metaphor with that of Friedrich Nietzsche, not only to show how Aristotle’s theories seem remarkably modern but also to underscore an important feature of metaphor and language for Aristotle: it provides us with knowledge of the object it describes. The attainment of such knowledge is exactly the goal of a *physiologos* such as Empedocles, but this can never succeed without naming the object of study, and when every new name is a metaphor, every scientist must also be a poet.

The Possible Objects of Poetry

Before I attempt to explain *how* Empedocles can be regarded as a poet, it is first necessary to show how it is even possible *that* he is a poet in the Aristotelean sense. In other words, following Aristotle, can poetry have *physis*, nature not admitting of variation over time, as its object, or must it always deal with human *praxis*?

If Aristotle’s *Poetics* is regarded as authoritative for all kinds of poetry, then it might initially seem true that *praxis* is the only possible object for poetry. Such a view has been adopted by several scholars, for instance Silvia Carli, who gives the following interpretation of how Aristotle viewed poetry: “Poetry [...] depicts a fully determined object, that is to say, an action (*praxis*) [...] A well-made plot represents human events” (2010, 305). My claim is that a reading like this fails to notice something essential about the *Poetics*. While poetry is undoubtedly a mode of imitation according to Aristotle, the *Poetics* contains several passages that indicate the imitation of human action as the specific aim of tragedy and not the general aim of poetry and art.

This is first apparent in the very beginning of the work, where Aristotle enumerates the various genres of poetry and points out their differences: “they differ one from another in three ways: either by a difference of kind in their means, or by differences in the objects, or in the manner of their imitations”

(*Poetics* 1447a 16–18⁶). Different forms of poetry have different objects rather than all of them sharing the same object, that of human action. In Chapter 6, where Aristotle describes the specific characteristics of tragedy, we further learn that “tragedy is not a representation of men but of a piece of action” (ἡ γὰρ τραγωδία μίμησις ἐστὶν οὐκ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλὰ πράξεως) (*Poetics* 1450a 16–17); thus, it is specific to tragic poetry to have human *praxis* as its object. Finally, Chapter 22 concludes with Aristotle equating tragedy with the imitation of action: “Let this suffice as an account of Tragedy, the art of imitating by means of action” (*Poetics* 1459a 15–16). While the different genres of poetry “are all, viewed as a whole, modes of imitation” (*Poetics* 1447a 14–16), specifically tragedy always imitates human life and action. As is now clear, different kinds of poetry can have different objects, and we can thus see that other genres of poetry may have different objects of imitation than the *praxis* imitated in tragedy. This is also emphasized by the fact that the writings of Empedocles, despite being the works of a *physiologos*, are cited twice in the *Poetics* as a source of poetic language (*Poetics* 1457b 24–25 and 1461a 23–25).

This should not be mistaken as a claim that the *Poetics* is not a work of practical science. The object of the *Poetics* itself, poetry, is still a product of human activity, and therefore, following Aristotle’s division of the sciences, it is capable of being otherwise. However, from that, it does not follow that the object of poetry itself must be capable of being otherwise. One can write poetry and make art that is concerned with the soul and with nature just as well as one can write about the doings of humans, and so there is no error in regarding Empedocles as a poet because he writes of *physis* rather than *praxis*.

Since nothing in principle prohibits us from regarding the verse of Empedocles as poetry, we can now move on to investigating *how* his writings can be regarded as poetic.

⁶ Henceforth, all English citations from the *Poetics* are taken from Bywater’s translation in Aristotle (1952).

The Poetic Style – Metaphor as *Lexis*

As mentioned in the introduction, the first explanation I will provide as to how Empedocles can be regarded as a poet is a stylistic explanation: Empedocles makes use of certain stylistic devices that are characteristic of poetry and can thus be regarded a poet. The most important of these devices is metaphor. As mentioned previously, Aristotle makes several references to Empedocles when giving his analysis of the linguistic style (*lexis*) of poetry.⁷ It seems then that Empedocles can be called a poet in virtue of his linguistic style. However, if one only looks to the *Poetics* as the source for Aristotle's views on poetry, it might seem wrong to claim that such a thing as a particular style of poetry should exist. As already mentioned, one of the central claims of the *Poetics* is that rhyme and meter are not distinctive of poetry but that *mimesis* is what distinguishes poetic works. Aristotle even puts forward the claim that to "tack on 'poet' to the name of a metre" is a mistake (*Poetics* 1447b 10–12).

Nonetheless, the *Poetics* also contains a detailed examination of poetry's stylistic devices, and Aristotle furthermore emphasizes that these can be used correctly or incorrectly. For instance, metaphors can be used "improperly" but also have "proper use" (*Poetics* 1458b 13–15), and later in the same chapter, Aristotle states the following claim:

It is a great thing, indeed, to make a proper use of these poetical forms, as also of compounds and strange words. But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor (πολὺ δὲ μέγιστον τὸ μεταφορικὸν εἶναι) (*Poetics* 1459a 5–6)

There is thus a proper and improper way for a poet to apply these stylistic devices. In itself, this is no proof that Aristotle acknowledged the existence of a particular style of poetry; the "proper" and "improper" use of these devices might simply be what distinguishes good poetry from bad rather than poetry from prose.

The *Poetics* is not the only work in the Corpus Aristotelicum that concerns itself with linguistic style. In the third book of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle makes several

⁷ D. W. Lucas, in his extensive commentary on the *Poetics*, points out that Aristotle also regarded Empedocles as "a master of poetic diction." See Aristotle (1968a: 61).

mentions of a distinctly poetic *lexis* that a speechwriter ought to avoid so as not to confuse her audience with a multitude of styles. In Chapter 3, Aristotle, for instance, warns that if epithets are “employed to excess, they reveal the art and make it evident that it is poetry” (ἐξελέγχει καὶ ποιεῖ φανερόν ὅτι ποιήσις ἐστίν) (*Rhetoric* Γ.III.3, 1406a 13–14).⁸ The speechwriter runs the same risk when using compound words: “if the practice is abused, the style becomes entirely poetical” (πάντως ποιητικόν) (*Rhetoric* Γ.III.3, 1406a 38–40). The use of certain stylistic devices will turn prose into poetry, and like in the *Poetics*, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* identifies Empedocles as a writer who makes use of these. We know from the *Poetics* that Empedocles is a famous user of metaphor (*Poetics* 1457b 24–25). In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle goes even further and accuses him of abusing such stylistic devices when he condemns “those who, having nothing to say, yet pretend to say something; such people accomplish this by the use of verse, after the manner of Empedocles” (*Rhetoric* Γ.V.4, 1407a 33–35).

Since style or *lexis* is then clearly integral to poetry and as we have seen Aristotle often emphasize Empedocles as a writer who makes use of this particular *lexis*, I can now formulate the first attempt to explain the statement that Empedocles is not only a *physiologos* but also a *poietes*. Empedocles writes about *physis* and is thus not a poet in the traditional tragic sense, but he writes in verse and metaphors, and he does so to such an extent that Aristotle frequently makes him the paradigmatic example in the examination of poetic language in the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*. In this purely stylistic sense, Empedocles can well be said to be a poet (ἡ ποιητήν).

Metaphor, as we have now seen, is the most important of these devices, and Aristotle presents Empedocles as a user and master of this device. However, I will argue that metaphor should be regarded not only as stylistic garnish, as a part of poetic *lexis*, but also as the form that poetry must have. To make this argument, I must begin with an examination of the concept of *mythos*, the plot of a poetic work.

⁸ All English citations from the *Rhetoric* are from the translation by John Henry Freese in Aristotle (1959).

***Mythos* – the Transformation of Imitation**

From the beginning of the *Poetics*, Aristotle makes it clear that *mimesis* is the principal characteristic of poetry, but in Chapter nine, he adds another important feature: “It is evident [...] that the poet must be more the poet of his stories or Plots [*mythos*] than of his verses” (*Poetics* 1451b 27–28). In Chapter 6, Aristotle defines *mythos* as “the combination of the incidents of the story” (σύνθεσιν τῶν πραγμάτων) (*Poetics* 1450a 15). This is important because *mythos* is what makes the imitation of the poet more than mere imitation. Through *mythos*, the *mimesis* of the poet is also a *poiesis*, a composition and making of something new. Paul Ricœur has explained this more concisely and eloquently than I could hope to:

what makes such imitating [*mimesis*] a *poiesis*, i.e., a productive activity, is the activity of arranging incidents into a plot: the activity of emplotment that Aristotle calls *mythos* [...] Thus, chapter six of the *Poetics* defines *mythos* as *synthesis tôn pragmatôn*, the arrangement of the incidents (1991, 138)

The poet imitates some particular incident(s) or thing(s), the *pragmata*, in a poetic plot and, in this way, produces something, brings something new into existence. Two questions now need to be answered. First, we must examine what is special about the poetic plot: why is this imitation not merely imitation but also production, *poiesis*? Second, what is the purpose of this arrangement of incidents? *How* does it differ from pure imitation?

What is crucial about *mythos* is that it is an active linkage of particular incidents, which is what Ricoeur here calls an “arrangement”. As Aristotle writes, the task of the poet is not to imitate an object as it actually is, or a series of events as they actually happened:

the poet’s function is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen i.e. what is possible [...] its [poetry’s] statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such and such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do [...] by singular statement, one as to what, say, Alcibiades did or had done to him. (*Poetics* 1451a 37–39 and 1451b 6–11)

According to Aristotle, a well-formed poetic plot thus excels by *not* imitating its object as the object actually is or took place, but rather in a way that lets a statement of some universal knowledge reveal itself. A poem about Alcibiades should not concern itself with what actually happened to the man, but rather with conveying this in a way that makes the audience grasp why such and such had to happen or could have happened differently to a person like Alcibiades. As put by Silvia Carli, the aim of the poet is to “compose *muthoi* in which all the events are perfectly organized according to probability or necessity [...] he excludes from his plots [*mythoi*] all accidental happenings and relations, and includes only events that contributes to their orderly actualization” (2010: 319 and 323).

For Aristotle, it is an essential characteristic of poetry that it is not initially limited by facts. A pure imitation of an object shows us nothing that we can't already see for ourselves. Silvia Carli explains this very well by developing an example that Aristotle himself gives in his *Metaphysics*. We are to imagine a person with great factual knowledge, an *empeiros*, who is able to give people medical advice when they fall ill. However, this *empeiros* is not a doctor; he treats individuals, not infirmities: “The *empeiros* is aware of the symptoms that various persons share, not as something that can be abstracted from those individuals [...] rather, he is aware of their common features only as something that is similar and undifferentiated in a plurality of human beings” (Carli 2010: 310). The *empeiros* is thus like the historian, who merely chronicles what happened to this and that person, with no eye for what was necessary about it or what could possibly have been different. The doctor, on the other hand, is like the poet since he is able to look past all the individual and unique facts and instead notice something these have in common: “the doctor's knowledge [...] singles out the defining characteristics of the disease and separates them from the sensible particulars that suffer from it” (Carli 2010: 311). Doctor and poet both have an eye for the likeness shared by a multitude of unique objects, but this likeness is only revealed if one avoids taking all the particulars into account and looks for what is universal. The doctor does this when diagnosing a patient, and the poet does this when writing her plots.

We can now answer the two questions that were raised about *mythos* and *mimesis*. As regards the first question, the *mimesis* of the poet, through a well-formed *mythos*, produces something new by abstracting from what is particular

and idiosyncratic—how the object of the work of poetry contingently is or happens to unfold—and instead looking to and rendering what is universal, necessarily so, and common. This also seems to give us the answer to the second question, namely, what the purpose of this poetic *mimesis* is. As seen above, Aristotle regards the aim of poetry as depicting what an object can or will be rather than describing how it actually and contingently is. In other words, poetry is concerned with revealing something about its object, which only shows itself when said object is imitated through a poetic *mythos*⁹—at showing and teaching us something.

We can see this further emphasized in Chapter 4 of the *Poetics*, when Aristotle writes of the human being that it “is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation” (καὶ τὰς μαθήσεις ποιεῖται διὰ μιμήσεως τὰς πρώτας) (*Poetics* 1448b 7–8). In fact, depending on how one translates “πρώτας”, *prôtas*, this passage might indicate that *mimesis* is not merely the first way, in a chronological sense, that human beings learn but is perhaps the primary way that we do so. If we look elsewhere in Aristotle’s works, the same adjective has, for instance, repeatedly been used to describe a substance as primary in a sense that is metaphysical and not chronological: “τὴν πρώτην οὐσίαν” in the *Metaphysics* (1032b 2) and “τῶν πρώτων οὐσιῶν” in the *Categories* (2b 26).¹⁰ This is, however, a discussion for another time, and I merely point it out to establish beyond any doubt that *mimesis* plays a crucial role in the human attainment of *mathesis* (μαθήσις). Both poetry and (at least) our initial grasp of the world thus commence with *mimesis*, and I will now proceed to argue that they thereby commence with metaphor.

Mimesis and Mythos as Metaphor

As mentioned in the introduction, my claim is that metaphor, at least in the context of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, is what John T. Kirby has called the “semiotic

⁹ This leads G. Ferrari to conclude that the *Poetics* gives no characteristic of *mimesis* and that *mythos* is the central concept at work. Here, I disagree since I think that Ferrari fails to notice the connection between *mimesis* and *mathesis*, which I will elaborate on in the following section. See Ferrari (1999).

¹⁰ See Aristotle (1960) and Aristotle (1968b) for examples of how these have been translated to English as “primary substance” and “primary substances” respectively.

infrastructure” of poetry. Kirby does not himself argue that *mimesis* is what constitutes this infrastructure, but he does note the strong likeness of poetic *mimesis* and metaphor: “Like verbal metaphor, the whole process of artistic *mimesis*—be it in painting, music, or the composition of tragedy—depends upon the artist’s ability to perceive likenesses and to represent them (*mimeisthai*)” (Kirby 1997: 537). I will argue that they are not just alike but that this artistic or poetic *mimesis*, qua *mythos*, is metaphorical.

In the previous section, we saw that poetic *mimesis* had two essential traits. First, it overlooks what is particular and idiosyncratic about its object and instead presents it in a manner that disregards how it factually and contingently is. Second, it does this to reveal something universal or possible that this object has in common with one or several other objects, thus enabling it to tell us something about said object that is not immediately available to our perception.

Let us compare this with the defining characteristics that Aristotle ascribes to metaphor. In the *Rhetoric*, we are presented with an example of a metaphor in “the best tragic style”. Aristotle ascribes this to the sophist Gorgias, who himself draws it from the myth of Philomela, in which a young woman who is horribly abused and has her tongue cut out is transformed into a swallow by the gods, in order for her to escape her abuser. The metaphor is rendered by Aristotle as follows: one day a swallow flew over Gorgias’s head and “let fall her droppings on him”, to which Gorgias responded by exclaiming to the bird, “Fie, for shame, Philomela!” More importantly for our purposes, Aristotle also explains why he regards this as a brilliant example of what metaphor is and does: “The reproach therefore was appropriate, addressing her as she was, not as she is” (ἀλλ’ οὐχ ὁ ἔστιν) (*Rhetoric* Γ.III.4 1406b 18–19).

This shows us two important things about his view of metaphor. The first of these is how metaphor, like *mimesis*, works by looking past the particular way that its object immediately appears to us. According to Aristotle, Gorgias has, by styling the swallow as something that it isn’t (a young Greek woman), made a metaphor of the best kind, even one that Aristotle chooses as a paradigmatic example. The second thing to note here is that for Aristotle, metaphor does not describe a likeness between two objects; it expresses an identity. Gorgias’s metaphor does not say that the swallow that soars above him is *like* or *akin to* Philomela but refers to the swallow *as* Philomela; it refers to the bird as something it *is* not (ἀλλ’ οὐχ ὁ ἔστιν). This is further emphasized by Aristotle’s

distinction between metaphor and simile. While he claims that there is “very little difference” between the two, this allegedly small difference is substantial: “When the poet says of Achilles, he rushed like a lion, it is a simile; if he says, ‘a lion, he rushed on,’ it is a metaphor” (*Rhetoric* Γ.IV.1 1406b 21–23). Unlike the simile, the metaphor does not posit a superficial likeness but an identity, a likeness with respect to the very being of the things described.

This characteristic of metaphor is repeated later in the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle describes what he calls the “practice of Antimachus [...] that of describing a thing by the qualities it does not possess” (*Rhetoric* Γ.VI.7 1408a 1–3), and if we return to the *Poetics*, we also read that “[m]etaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else” (*Poetics* 1457b 6–8). We now have a clear picture of how the *mimesis* of the poet is a kind of metaphor. By arranging the incidents in a plot, poetic *mimesis* overlooks what is particular and characteristic of its object, which we can now recognize as being a metaphoric operation. The poet calls Achilles a lion rather than a man in the same manner that the doctor sees not only an individual in pain but an instance of a common disease that can be cured as well as in the manner that the writings of Empedocles always disregard an object’s unique qualities and instead describe it as a particular combination of the four elements common to all existing objects.

The other characteristic of *mimesis*, its central role in human learning, also indicates that poetic imitation is metaphoric. As seen earlier, human beings “learn at first” (or primarily) through imitation, and this imitation seems precisely to be metaphoric. Aristotle writes the following in his *Rhetoric*:

we all naturally find it agreeable to get hold of new ideas easily: words express ideas, and therefore those words are the most agreeable that enable us to get hold of new ideas [...] it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh. When the poet [Homer] calls old age “a withered stalk,” he conveys a new idea, a new fact, to us by means of the general notion of “lost bloom” (*Rhetoric* Γ.X.2 1410b 10–15)

The word that is here translated as “get hold of new ideas” is *mathesis*, the same word Aristotle uses in the *Poetics* to describe the effect of poetic *mimesis*. Yet another similarity is the agreeable feeling that is here said to arise from metaphor, giving us hold of new ideas. This feeling is also mentioned in the

Poetics: “it is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation” (*Poetics* 1448b 8–9). What should be evident now is that these are not merely coincidental similarities; the new ideas and knowledge that we obtain through *mimesis* are obtained *because* this imitation is metaphoric. It is qua metaphor that the imitation teaches us something and thereby delights us. Thus, when Empedocles writes of *physis* and employs metaphors to describe and discover, he is very much a poet. He overlooks all the individual and idiosyncratic qualities of nature’s objects and instead describes them through the metaphor of the four elements. He imitates them as being something that they are not—not as particular beings but as an amalgamation of earth, fire, air, and water—and in this way, he teaches us about the nature of things. Empedocles and all other skilled *physiologoi* are thus poets indeed.¹¹

The Metaphoricity of Names

So far, I have treated metaphor as a stylistic device of poetry and as poetry’s “semiotic infrastructure”. But metaphor is not married to poetry; it also plays a central role in prose and everyday language. Aristotle states in the *Rhetoric*, “For all use metaphors in conversation, as well as proper and appropriate words” (πάντες γὰρ μεταφοραῖς διαλέγονται καὶ τοῖς οἰκείοις καὶ τοῖς κυρίοις) (*Rhetoric* Γ.II.6 1404b 32–34). This metaphorical element of everyday language sets the course for the third explanation of Empedocles’ status as poet. Here, I will show that metaphor in Aristotle can be seen as semiotic infrastructure of not just poetry but also human language, at least the part of it concerned with naming things. Kirby’s analysis of Aristotelean metaphor is once again a good place to begin:

To make metaphors is, quintessentially, to be able to perceive likeness—and thus, almost by definition, difference. In this respect, metaphor epitomizes or recapitulates in itself all of language—that mysterious, miraculous means by which we mirror the whole world

¹¹ This connection between science on the one hand, and metaphor and poetry on the other, does more than just explaining Empedocles’ status as a poet. It also makes Aristotle’s concept of metaphor highly relevant in modern discussions on scientific models. See, for instance, van Peursen (1992).

around us. (1997: 547)

Here, we find the claim that human language, *logos*, is a metaphoric imitation of the world around us. In other words, language is our way of grasping the world, or as Kirby also puts it: “It is to metaphor, he [Aristotle] says, that we resort when a thing can be named in no other way” (Kirby 1997: 547). Language is metaphorical in the sense that it is a *mimesis* of the world around us, which enables us to name that which we couldn’t otherwise name; in other words, a name is always a metaphor.

I believe that Aristotle indeed advocated such a view of language. Let’s begin with his view on language in the *Politics*. Aristotle here writes that “man alone of the animals possesses speech” (λόγον δὲ μόνον ἄνθρωπος ἔχει τῶν ζώων)” (*Politics* 1253a 10–11), but language is not the only ability that is unique to human beings. As mentioned earlier, the *Poetics* describes *mimesis* as something that is distinctive of humans: “Imitation is natural to man from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world (τῶν ἄλλων ζώων ὅτι μιμητικώτατόν ἐστι), and learns at first from imitation” (*Poetics* 1448b 7–9). Just as other animals can grunt and roar, without having a proper language, Aristotle admits some imitative capabilities to non-human creatures but places human *mimesis* as the highest instance of the ability to imitate the world and to learn about the world through this imitation.

This combined view of metaphor, language, and imitation brings Aristotle very close to a far more modern way of conceiving metaphor and its importance in naming and making known the world around us. This can best be elucidated by comparing Aristotle’s thoughts on the matter with those we find in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, specifically in *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense*, where the “drive to form metaphors” is described as the “fundamental desire in man” (Nietzsche 1989: 254). Like Aristotle, Nietzsche describes the formation of metaphors as the foundation that naming is constructed upon. “What is a word? The portrayal of nerve stimuli in sounds” (1989: 248), writes Nietzsche before elaborating on this process. The creator of language:

designates only the relations of things to men, and to express these relations he uses the boldest metaphors. First, he translates a nerve stimulus into an image! That is the first metaphor. Then, the image must be reshaped into a sound! The second metaphor (Nietzsche 1989: 248)

Nietzsche then goes on to claim that language “works at the structure of concepts” (1989: 254). A creator of language is then a creator of concepts, and Nietzsche’s description of concept formation is of great interest here:

Let us think in particular of the formation of concepts. Every word becomes a concept as soon as it is supposed to serve not merely as a reminder of the unique, absolutely individualized original experience, to which it owes its origin, but at the same time to fit countless, more or less similar cases, which, strictly speaking, are never identical, and hence absolutely dissimilar. Every concept originates by the equation of the dissimilar. [...] Overlooking the individual and the real gives us the concept (1989: 249)

This description of concept formation, which is essentially the formation of a metaphor, sounds almost to a fault like the qualities we have found to be characteristic of poetic *mimesis*: something new is created, in this particular case a concept or a name, by overlooking or abstracting from what is unique about the object(s) subsumed under the concept.

Now we have established that this is the case with poetic imitation, but does Aristotle believe this to be the case for language as a whole? There are certainly clues that point in that direction. Early in Book 3 of the *Rhetoric*, he writes, “The poets, as was natural, were the first to give an impulse to style; for words are imitations (τὰ γὰρ ὀνόματα μιμήματα ἐστίν), and the voice also, which of all our parts is the best adapted for imitation, was ready at hand” (*Rhetoric* Γ.Ι.8 1404a 20-22). All words or at least all names (*onomata*) are imitations, just as described by Nietzsche, who claimed that a word was a sonic imitation of a nerve stimulus. Furthermore, what is common to Aristotle and Nietzsche is not just the notion that language is fundamentally mimetic but also that this imitation begins with the human voice. Metaphor is not only a feature of written poetry; the grunts and gestures of primordial humans and children are also a *mimesis* as they attempt to point out what is apparently the universal qualities of an object and name these, creating words and concepts—just as a poetic plot reveals universals. As seen above, Kirby described how metaphor is what we resort to when “a thing can be named in no other way”. The first word then, the beginning of language, must have been a metaphor, a name that had no other connection to its particular object than being a sound that

represented it, and aimed to reveal something about it or to establish its identity with other particular objects.

This last part is crucial, and here, Aristotle's view of language and reality differs significantly from Nietzsche's. For Nietzsche, language "leads nowhere to the truth, but is satisfied with [...] playing a groping game on the back of things" (1989: 247). As long as we are content with language as it is, we will never know anything about anything:

That is the situation of all of us with language. When we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers, we believe we know something about the things themselves, although what we have are just metaphors of things, which do not correspond at all to the original entities. Like sound in the sand-figure, so the mysterious x of the thing appears first as a nerve stimulus, then as an image, and finally as a sound. In any case, the origin of language is not a logical process, and the whole material in and with which the man of truth, the scientist, the philosopher, works and builds, stems, if not from a never-never land, in any case not from the essence of things (Nietzsche 1989: 249)

Here, the parallel between Nietzsche and Aristotle ends—Nietzsche sees no connection between language and the truth of the world it describes, but Aristotle clearly does. As we have established, *mathesis* is an essential part of metaphor and thus of poetic *mimesis*. We learn something from our use of metaphors; *mimesis* reveals something about its object that we couldn't otherwise have known, and it does so by virtue of being metaphorical and pointing to a likeness that, as we have already established, is posited on the ontological level of identity rather than the superficial level of the simile. This is further emphasized by the rules Aristotle ascribe to the proper use of metaphor: "metaphors must not be far-fetched, but we must give names to things that have none by deriving the metaphor from what is akin" (*Rhetoric* Γ.II 1405a 34–36). This point is repeated shortly after, this time pertaining not only to metaphor but also to all words: "one word is more proper than another, more of a likeness, and better suited to putting the matter before the eyes" (*Rhetoric* Γ.II 1405b 11–12). According to Aristotle, a word can then be more or less useful in describing something; a metaphor can miss its mark. If Homer

had compared Achilles to a housecat or a dog rather than a lion, we would have learned nothing of his anger and courage.

The fact that the same rules govern words and metaphors should come as no surprise since we have seen that all names are mimetic and that they, by virtue of being a *mimesis*, also are metaphors. Though Aristotle and Nietzsche represent two completely different views on metaphor as a source of learning, Nietzsche has helped us point out something that seems equally true of his thoughts on language and the thought of Aristotle: language and naming are fundamentally metaphoric activities. This, of course, means that Empedocles and any other *physiologos* are also writers of poetry. They name things, and thus, they imitate them and render them in a light that disregards any number of their particular qualities. The object of their science may remain constant and thus theoretical, but to represent it and gain knowledge about it, they have to name the things they study, and they have to attempt to name them as properly as possible. They have to be(come) poets.

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