CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THE GENERAL RELATION BETWEEN ART AND CRITICISM: LIMITATIONS OF FORM: METHOD OF THE ESSAY

THE interests of the creative artist and of the critic are fortunately often the same. Conditions of culture and society which benefit the one, will benefit the other, and the bad days of art will be bad days for criticism too. But there is one way at least in which their interests diverge, and it happens that this divergence becomes most apparent when one considers a set subject, such as this of "Realism in the Drama". The divergence is this. The critic's aim is to make himself clear, both to himself, and to others, to arrange his impressions and theories about art in an orderly way; and so he will wish to be clear above all about the meanings of words, of technical terms such as "realism" and "drama". The artist, on the other hand, is concerned with such definitions not at all. He is to express himself not in a rational way, but in any way which happens to occur to him, and the definitions are often a

hindrance to such free expressions. There are many writers, for example, who, if they had not decided to be writers, to accept the definition of literature, and to model themselves upon it, would find themselves happier in painting or music, and many painters and musicians who would express themselves better in some form of literature. To this extent, even the most general notions of the arts may become an obstacle to free expression. Though at the same time it must be recognised that the task of the artist might be even harder if he had no such notions to guide him. And the same is true of the minor notions of the more particular forms of expression in each art, such as "the epic", "the pastoral", "the ode", "landscape painting", "still-life", "the sonata", "the symphony". All these are set forms of expression which may hinder or help the artist. And obviously, they are on the whole more likely to help him if they are not too definite, if they do not prescribe with great exactitude what is expected of him, and more likely to hinder him if they are defined with great rigidity. The critic, on the other hand, prefers the definitions to be as rigid as possible, because in this way his own work is made easier, his

results are made to seem more valuable. Thus in the eighteenth century, when forms were more sharply defined than at any other period, the critics, such as Boileau and Johnson, could pretend to a finality in their judgments which is absent from the decisions of critics of the less dogmatic periods, such as our own. Johnson was able to dismiss *Lycidas* more easily than any modern critic could dismiss a poem which he disliked: "Its form is that of a pastoral, easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting: whatever images it can supply are long ago exhausted; and its inherent improbability always forces dissatisfaction on the mind". In just the same way, he is able to bestow very certain praises on *Paradise Lost*: "By the general consent of criticks, the first praise is due to the writer of an epick poem...", Milton, then, has this praise; further, "Bossu is of opinion that the poet's first work is to find a *moral*, which his fable is afterwards to illustrate and establish. This seems to have been the process only of Milton; the moral of other poems is incidental and consequent; in Milton's only it is essential and intrinsick". In this we see the advantages for the critic in the strict definition of terms such as "pastoral" and "epic". And in the poetry of the same period

we see the corresponding disadvantages for the poet, in the various *Eclogues* of the eighteenth century, of which those of Collins may be an example, and in the dreary epics made in France.

There are some artists, of course, who are able to adapt their personality to a set form of expression so easily that their work suffers not at all, and even gains by the process. We shall have to consider one or two cases of this kind later. But for the most part, our generalisation is true, that the interests of the artist and of the critic diverge in respect of the clarity of definition of the forms of expression.

From this point of view, the history of art, or of any particular art, may be regarded as a conflict between the critics, trying always to define the forms of art on the evidence of past productions, and the artists themselves, who always tend to overleap the present definitions of the critics, and to find new forms of expression corresponding to their own needs, which, in turn, become part of the definitions of later critics, and serve to hinder artists who come after them. I do not say that this is the only way of regarding the history of art, or that it is even a true statement of the view which I have in mind, but it will serve us

as a first approximation, to be modified as we like later.

The first conclusions which I wish to draw from it concern the method by which our examination of realism in the drama will be conducted. In the first place, it will explain my unwillingness to give even a rough general definition of realism. Any such definition will have the disadvantage that it is critical, arbitrary, and only vaguely related to the particular artistic problems and solutions which produce this type of work; and it is very much better to avoid giving such definitions at all. On the other hand, I do not mean to leave my readers in the dark about realism. Only, our method of defining it will necessarily follow from the point of view which we have adopted: it will be historical, will be less a definition than a discussion of past definitions, and of works which may be supposed to exhibit more or less faithfully the principles of realism in the drama. And the scheme of this historical examination will be based on our notion of the conflict between the artist and the critic, between the free expression and the forms to which it is, more or less successfully, adapted.

CHAPTER II

THE GREEK DRAMA

I. THEORY

THERE is, of course, only one theorist of the Greek drama—Aristotle. The critical work of the sophists, of Plato, and of Aristophanes, is directed entirely towards the moral, extra-literary aspects of the drama, and does not come within the limits of dramatic criticism.

It is hardly necessary to repeat the accepted commendations of Aristotle's work in full. It will be obvious throughout this essay, as in any work which deals with the drama, that Aristotle's analysis of the plays of the Greeks brought to light, and named all the essential parts of the drama, and that he said things about them which can hardly be improved upon to-day. We shall talk of the "plot", the "characters", the "diction", and so forth, in very much the same way that Aristotle talked of them, and the fact that we put a different emphasis on them, and disagree with him about their relative importance, in no way diminishes our debt to him.

THE GREEK DRAMA

Aristotle, of course, nowhere mentions "realism" in any sense at all. But he lays down doctrines concerning the relation of drama to real life which are extremely relevant to our purpose. We shall find it convenient to distinguish among them a general doctrine, and certain particular doctrines which apply to the management of plot, character, and diction. First, the general doctrine—this is announced in the well-known passage of the *Poetics*: "From what we have said it will be seen that 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 as being probable or necessary".[1] A little later, a significant proviso is added: "And if he (*sc.* the poet) should come to take a subject from actual history, he is none the less a poet for that; since some historic occurrences may very well be in the probable and possible order of things; and it is in that aspect of them that he is their poet".[2]

In the first of these quotations, we have as good a definition of realism in its most general sense as we are likely to find anywhere. In effect, Aristotle points out that nothing should be

[1] The Oxford translation, ch. 9. [2] *Ibid.*

represented on the stage which is not a possible occurrence according to the standards which each man forms for himself from his daily experience. This is, let us admit at once, an exceedingly general statement, perhaps so general that it is not likely to be of much use to us in a specific way. But at least it serves to raise the whole question of dramatic illusion, which must necessarily occupy our attention in the following pages. And on this question of dramatic illusion, we may note at once, that Aristotle considers the illusion to be attainable only by submitting the plot to the probabilities of daily life. Obviously a difficulty of practice arises from such a theory. For in the drama of the Greeks, upon which Aristotle's theory was based, it is not uncommon for a god to take human shape, to appear among men, and to play a most important part in the action. Is this in accordance with the probabilities of daily life? We shall consider this question more fully in the second part of this chapter, but for the moment we may note that the answer to it is adumbrated in the second quotation which we have given; anything that *has* happened is possible (otherwise it could not have happened), and the plots of many of the tragedies are historical.

That is to say, the standard of probability to which they refer is in the past, and is not to be refuted by any reference to the present. Thus we may expect to find that in the course of our discussion we shall be compelled to consider the case of the so-called historical, or chronicle play, as a special, or even as a general type of realism, unless we can find some good reason for placing it in another category.

So much, then, for the most general principle of realism laid down by Aristotle. In the more particular doctrines, which refer to plot, character, and diction, he approaches somewhat nearer to our modern conceptions of realism.

In the question of plot, we must notice those remarks which later became the basis of the dogma of the Three Unities, but which, in Aristotle himself, are loosely and vaguely expressed. There is, in the first place, the Unity of Plot: "...in poetry the story, as an imitation of action, must represent one action, a complete whole, with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposal or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole".[1] The Unity of Plot, in fact, is deduced

[1] Ch. 7.

from the general principle of realism, and demands that the events of the play shall have a necessary or a probable connection one with another.[1]

In the matter of diction, it would appear from the *Poetics* alone that Aristotle favoured the use of a manner of speech removed from that of daily life,[2] but there he does not deal with the subject very fully. In the *Rhetoric*, on the other hand, we find this very interesting passage:

> We can now see that a writer must disguise his art and give the impression of speaking naturally and not artificially. Naturalness is persuasive, artificiality is the contrary; for our hearers are prejudiced and think we have some design against them, as if we were mixing their wines for them.... We can hide our purpose successfully by taking the single words of our composition from the speech of ordinary life. This is

[1] *Ibid.* "In writing an *Odyssey* he (Homer) did not make the poem cover all that ever befell his hero—it befell him, for instance, to get wounded on Parnassus and also to feign madness at the time of the call to arms, but the two incidents had no necessary or probable connection with one another—instead of doing so he took an action with a Unity of the kind we describe."

[2] Ch. 22, v, especially the commendation of Euripides for the introduction of θοινᾶται for ἐσθίει in the line of Aeschylus:

Φαγέδαινα ἥ μου σάρκας ἐσθίει ποδός,