



ORGANIC COMPOSITION OR *UT PICTURA POESIS*? ΖΩΪΟΝ IN ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS**

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses Aristotle's references to a ζῶιον in his *Poetics* (1450b34–51a4 and 1459a20) and evaluates their implications. The usual interpretation, 'living creature' or 'animal', is one-sided, because the word ζῶιον is Aristotle's paradigm of homonymy, applying as it does to both the human being and the drawing (Cat. 1a1–6). After an examination of the two passages containing such references and their contexts, other passages by Aristotle and earlier writers (Plato, Alcidas and Gorgias) that may shed light on the issue are analysed. The conclusion reflects on the relevance of the interpretation as 'figure' for the premises and purpose of the *Poetics*.

Keywords: Aristotle; *Poetics*; animal; painting; homonymy; organic composition

This paper reflects on the interpretation and translation of Aristotle's references to a ζῶιον in his *Poetics* (1450b34–51a4, 1459a20). Although there is nothing inherently wrong with the usual rendering 'living creature' or 'animal', that happens to be unduly one-sided. Aristotle chose the word ζῶιον as a paradigm of homonymy, since it applies to two entities with different definitions, namely the human being and the drawing (ὁ τε ἄνθρωπος καὶ τὸ γεγραμμένον, Cat. 1a1–6). This homonymy problem, although under-represented in translations, notes and commentaries on the *Poetics*, has of late attracted some interest,¹ and may be consequential for the understanding of Aristotle's argumentation and theoretical framework. I therefore examine, first, the two passages where Aristotle makes these references. Then I discuss the literature in favour of and against the interpretation as 'drawing' or 'figure'. Afterwards, I analyse other passages by Aristotle and earlier writers that may shed light on the issue. I conclude with a reflection on the consequences that a comparison to a figure, instead of an animal, would have for broader issues in the *Poetics*.

I

a) The first passage occurs as an explanation for the claim that the tragic plot (μῦθος) must consist of an action not only complete and whole, but also of a certain magnitude or extension (1450b34–51a4):

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¹ See E. Bouchard, 'Painting as an aesthetic paradigm', in P. Destrée, M. Heath and D.L. Munteanu (edd.), *The Poetics in its Aristotelian Context* (London and New York, 2020), 88–110, at 109; P. Destrée (transl. and notes), *Aristote: Poétique* (Paris, 2021), 196 n. 109. These contributions and others are discussed in section II below.

ἔτι δ' ἐπεὶ τὸ καλὸν καὶ ζῶον καὶ ἅπαν πρᾶγμα ὃ συνέστηκεν ἐκ τινῶν οὐ μόνον ταῦτα τεταγμένα δεῖ ἔχειν ἀλλὰ καὶ μέγεθος ὑπάρχειν μὴ τὸ τυχόν· [...] διὸ οὔτε πάμικρον ἄν τι γένοιτο καλὸν ζῶον [...] οὔτε παμμέγεθες (οὐ γὰρ [1451a1] ἅμα ἡ θεωρία γίνεται ἀλλ' οἴχεται τοῖς θεωροῦσι τὸ ἓν καὶ τὸ ὅλον ἐκ τῆς θεωρίας) οἷον εἰ μυρίων σταδίων εἴη ζῶον· ὥστε δεῖ καθάπερ ἐπὶ τῶν σωμάτων καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ζῶων ἔχειν μὲν μέγεθος, τοῦτο δὲ εὐσύνοπτον εἶναι.²

Moreover, anything beautiful, whether an animal/figure or any object composed of parts, must not only have these arranged, but possess a non-arbitrary magnitude as well [...]; for neither a very small animal/figure would be beautiful [...] nor a very big one (since the perception does not happen at once, but its unity and completeness are lost from the beholders' vision); for instance, if it were an animal/figure ten thousand stades long; consequently, as in bodies and animals/figures, it must have magnitude, and this must be easily seen at once.

The explanation works with both meanings of the homonym ζῶον, separated by an oblique stroke in the translation above.³ None the less, the meaning 'figure' could mitigate misgivings caused by the expression ἐπὶ τῶν σωμάτων καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ζῶων (51a 3–4). Überweg, claiming that the beauty of bodies should not be coordinated with that of living things, emended σωμάτων to σχημάτων, and Christ undid the coordination by excising καὶ ἐπὶ.⁴ For his part, Bywater emended σωμάτων to συστημάτων, arguing that the original reading presents two redundant synonyms, and the change was required for the expression to refer back to ζῶον καὶ ἅπαν πρᾶγμα ὃ συνέστηκεν ἐκ τινῶν at the beginning of the passage.⁵ Leaving aside the need for such a reference, it seems clear that taking ζῶον in the sense of 'figure' eases the redundancy problem: we would have a coordination of (natural) bodies and (artificial) objects.

b) The second passage occurs at the start of the discussion of epic poetry, which is dealt with in constant reference to tragedy. The comparison is therefore repeated:

περὶ δὲ τῆς διηγηματικῆς καὶ ἐν μέτρῳ μιμητικῆς, ὅτι δεῖ τοὺς μύθους καθάπερ ἐν ταῖς τραγωδίαις συνιστάναι δραματικούς καὶ περὶ μίαν πρᾶξιν ὅλην καὶ τελείαν ἔχουσαν ἀρχὴν καὶ μέσα καὶ τέλος, ἴν' ὥσπερ ζῶον ἐν ὅλον ποιῆ τὴν οἰκειαν ἡδονήν, δῆλον (1459a17–21)⁶

Concerning the narrative [viz. poetry] and imitative in verse, it is clear that one must, as in the tragedies, compose the plots so that they are dramatic and about an unitary complete action with beginning, middles and end, in order that it, like a unitary complete animal/figure, causes the proper pleasure.

As in the former case, Aristotle may be illustrating his point with either meaning of ζῶον. The problem here is that the notion of causing 'the proper pleasure' seems to be within the scope of the comparison; but what could possibly be 'the proper pleasure'

² L. Tarán and D. Gutas (edd.), *Aristotle: Poetics. Editio Maior of the Greek Text with Historical Introductions and Philological Commentaries* (Leiden and Boston, 2012), 177.

³ All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

⁴ F. Überweg (ed.), *Aristotelis Ars Poetica* (Leipzig, 1875), 11, 60; W. Christ (ed.), *Aristotelis De Arte Poetica Liber* (Leipzig, 1878), 11. R. Kassel went further, excising καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ζῶων (*Aristotelis De Arte Poetica Liber* [Oxford, 1965], 14).

⁵ I. Bywater (ed.), *Aristotle: On the Art of Poetry. A Revised Text with Critical Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Oxford, 1909), 181 (we shall shortly see Bywater's interpretation of ζῶον). On the other hand, G.F. Else (*Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* [Cambridge, MA, 1957], 285 n. 12) and Tarán (in Tarán and Gutas [n. 2], 253) deny that ζῶον is synonymous with, or explanatory of, σωμάτων in this context. See also the text of Alcidas and Gorgias at §IV.k-1.

⁶ Tarán and Gutas (n. 2), 206–7.

provided by an animal? We shall discuss this later on in connection with another passage by Aristotle (§IV.e). Here let us only note that some have taken exception to this text. Bywater's proposal is rather elaborate: 'if it is permissible to restore ὄλον <ὄν> here, the expression will be equivalent to οὔσα ἐν ὄλον ὡσπερ ζῶον';⁷ that is, assuming genre attraction. Besides, he brings the expression ποιῆ τὴν οἰκειάν ἡδονήν out of the scope of the simile. This leads to the overall meaning: 'so that, being unitary and complete like a living thing, it causes the proper pleasure.'⁸ This is not objectionable, but it is not the text of the *Poetics* either. More simply, Manara Valgimigli, considering it strange to say that a ζῶον—translated as 'un perfetto organismo vivente'—produces τὴν οἰκειάν ἡδονήν, suggested that the logical subject of ποιῆ must be the epic poem.⁹ The problem vanishes if we understand ζῶον as 'figure', since the idea of provoking a 'proper pleasure' is as normal for a painting as it is for a poem.

In sum, nothing in the text of the *Poetics* helps us—even less, forces us—immediately to choose between the meanings 'animal' or 'figure' of the word ζῶον. Certain difficulties in the context pointed to by the literature, however, are less acute under the assumption that it means 'figure'. In the next two sections, I shall discuss further literature that tackles directly the homonymy problem.

II

To my knowledge, Susemihl was first to understand ζῶον as 'figure' in his 1865 edition and translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*. He translated it as 'Gemälde' at 1450b34–51a4 and as 'Bild' at 1459a20; his endnotes refer to other passages by Aristotle about beauty and to scholarly literature on the same topic, without any specific underpinning for his interpretation.¹⁰

In 1895, Hardie discussed certain views on beauty and artistic unity put forward in Butcher's *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*. Butcher had written that Aristotle's notion of unity depends on 'the idea of an organism', and quoted *Poetics* 1459a17–21 as evidence; he added that 'Aristotle took up the hint' from Plato, *Phaedrus* 264c.¹¹ In response, Hardie recalls that ζῶον 'is Aristotle's usual example of a homonym', and he claims that at 1450b34–51a4 it bears primarily the meaning 'picture', with the suggestion of a picture of a living being. Moreover, he states that the same holds for 1459a17–21, where 'it would surely be absurd to talk of an animal as giving an οἰκεία ἡδονή', an objection encountered already.¹² In Hardie's view, Plato's *Phaedrus* must be interpreted in the same sense; we shall see this text later on (§IV.g).

⁷ Bywater (n. 5), 305.

⁸ In Bywater's paraphrastic translation: 'so as to enable the work to produce its own proper pleasure with all the organic unity of a living creature' ([n. 5], 71–3).

⁹ M. Valgimigli (transl. and notes), *Aristotele: Poetica* (Bari, 1964⁴), 186; the same interpretation in M. Hose (ed.), *Aristoteles, Poetik: Einleitung, Text, Übersetzung und Kommentar* (Berlin and Boston, 2022), 360. Cf. M. Heath, *Unity in Greek Poetics* (Oxford, 1989), 48 n. 24.

¹⁰ F. Susemihl (ed. and transl.), *Aristoteles über die Dichtkunst* (Leipzig, 1865), 71, 127, 174. In the second edition, perhaps as a reaction to certain criticism—which I shall discuss below—Susemihl added footnotes to explain that the word translated as 'Gemälde' could also mean 'Tier' ('animal') or 'Organismus' (*Aristoteles' Werke, 4: Über die Dichtkunst* [Leipzig, 1874²], 103, 105, 177).

¹¹ S.H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (London and New York, 1895), 175–7.

¹² R.P. Hardie, 'The *Poetics* of Aristotle', *Mind* 4/15 (1895), 350–64, at 361.

Butcher agreed and modified accordingly the second and third editions (1898, 1902) of his book. Not only does he quote Hardie's paper approvingly, but he also adds that this interpretation, 'moreover, justifies the reading $\sigma\omega\mu\acute{\alpha}\tau\omega\nu$ ' at 1450b3,¹³ thus dispelling the concerns expressed in Überweg's and Christ's editions (and in Bywater's shortly afterwards). Besides, he refers to other passages where $\zeta\hat{\omega}\nu$ means 'painting' or 'sculpture' in Aristotle and especially Plato (*Laws*, *Cratylus*), examined below. Butcher returned, however, to his earliest view in the fourth edition, nevertheless admitting that some references support 'the other interpretation'.¹⁴

Margoliouth's proposal in his edition and translation of the *Poetics* (1911) is both more nuanced and riskier. In the context of a lengthy description of the style of Aristotle's esoteric writing, he states:

One feature of the esoteric style about which it is not easy to convince oneself is that the author by preference uses a word in different senses in the same paragraph or sentence. In [...] the passage 1450b34–1451a4, where the word $\zeta\hat{\omega}\nu$ occurs four times, in the first and fourth it means 'image,' in the second and third 'animal.'¹⁵

Consequently, his translation runs: 'since any composite object, image or other, to be beautiful, must not only have its components in their proper order, [...] there could not be a beautiful animalcule, [...] nor a beautiful monster [...]. Just, then, as the beautiful in the plastic art must, like the beautiful in the case of the original creatures, have some size.'¹⁶ The expression 'in the plastic art [...] in the case of the original creatures' interprets in reverse order the Greek $\acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota\ \tau\omega\nu\ \sigma\omega\mu\acute{\alpha}\tau\omega\nu\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \acute{\epsilon}\pi\iota\ \tau\omega\nu\ \zeta\hat{\omega}\nu$. The other passage under discussion is translated according to the pictorial sense of $\zeta\hat{\omega}\nu$ as well: 'the story should be so constructed [...] that like one complete figure it may produce the gratification for which it is designed'.¹⁷ Here, the $\omicron\iota\kappa\epsilon\iota\alpha\ \eta\delta\omicron\nu\acute{\eta}$ fits smoothly in the context.

Such arguments have failed to convince most scholars. Webster is exceptional in asserting that 'the comparison to a picture is clear'.¹⁸ Some few admit at least that the issue may be open. Both House and Lanza mention in their notes the meaning 'figure', conceding that there is room for doubt, although they incline toward the meaning 'living creature, animal'.¹⁹ More recently, Bouchard, writing on the topic of 'painting as an aesthetic paradigm' in the *Poetics*, uses the translation 'animal' for 1450b34–51a4 and states that the passage lacks 'a clear reference to visual arts' (emphasis original). However, she adds a note with the remark: 'Every occurrence of the word $\zeta\hat{\omega}\nu$ in the passage could equally be translated by "image, picture" (see *LSJ* ad loc.), which would make the reference to visual arts more obvious.'²⁰ Lastly, Destrée translates the text with 'être vivant' and 'animal', but, in an endnote, he suggests

¹³ S.H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (London and New York, 1898²), 187–9.

¹⁴ S.H. Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (London, 1907⁴, repr. 1932), 188.

¹⁵ D.S. Margoliouth (ed. and transl.), *The Poetics of Aristotle* (London / New York / Toronto, 1911), 48.

¹⁶ Margoliouth (n. 15), 164–5.

¹⁷ Margoliouth (n. 15), 210–11.

¹⁸ T.B.L. Webster, 'Plato and Aristotle as critics of Greek art', *SO* 29 (1952), 8–23, at 16.

¹⁹ H. House, *Aristotle's Poetics: A Course of Eight Lectures*, rev. C. Hardie (London, 1956), 49; D. Lanza (transl.), *Aristotele: Poetica* (Milano, 1996⁹), 142. Although D. Gallop admits that ' $\zeta\hat{\omega}\nu$ can mean "picture" as well as "animal"', he discusses these passages of the *Poetics* heedless of the former meaning ('Animals in the *Poetics*', in J. Annas [ed.], *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, vol. 8 [Oxford, 1990], 145–71, at 146, 155–8).

²⁰ Bouchard (n. 1), 98, 109.

that Aristotle could have meant ‘tableau’ as well, playing on the homonymy noted in *Categories*. Besides, he notices that the idea of a proper pleasure is slightly out of context in 1459a20.²¹

III

Let us now proceed to review what has been argued against the interpretation as ‘figure’.²² The most thorough discussion is the earliest, by Teichmüller, in response to Susemihl’s translation.²³ First, he notes that, in *Parts of Animals* 1.5 (645a5–26), Aristotle considers the beauty of actual animals superior to that of their images; and that, in *Politics* 8.3 (1338a40–b2), painting is valued because it prepares people to perceive bodily beauty. We shall analyse afterwards (§IV.e) these parallels; for the moment, we may say that they do not exclude the meaning ‘figure’, since the notion of painting appears in both. Teichmüller argues next that at 1459a20 the comparison with a ζῷον calls for the meaning ‘animal’, because it makes the demand for unity and wholeness stronger and livelier. However, the meaning ‘figure’ would fulfil the same rhetorical role, since Aristotle states that unity in poetry is analogous to unity in the other mimetic arts (1451a30–1),²⁴ and he illustrates repeatedly his points about poetry by means of comparisons to painting (see 1448a5, 1450a26, 1450b1, etc.). We can therefore assume that Aristotle considers the latter more intuitively accessible than the former; otherwise, he would be explaining *obscurum per obscurius*.²⁵ In consequence, Teichmüller’s stricture is not as necessary as he claims.

After that, Teichmüller states the relevance of *Phaedrus* 264c, which has already been mentioned. Lastly, he puts forward the rule that ζῷον must be understood as ‘animal’ unless the context provides a specific hint to the contrary; for instance, a contrast between living and painted things.²⁶ Yet if this were so, it is difficult to see why Aristotle would have chosen that word as a paradigm of homonymy. Besides, the aforementioned concerns with σομάτων and οἰκεία ἡδονή might be such hints, although Teichmüller does not consider them.

Bywater concedes that ζῷον means ‘a picture or statue [...] in a passage not very unlike this in form’,²⁷ namely Plato’s *Statesman* 277b, which we shall see afterwards (§IV.h). In his view, however, this context requires reference to ‘a living, as distinct from an artificial, whole’, a contrast that he finds also in Aristotle’s *Topics* 1.15 (106a20–2). This latter passage will be examined later as well (§IV.d); it may be as ambiguous as the one of the *Poetics*.²⁸

²¹ Destrée (n. 1), 110, 152, 196, 235.

²² I mention only the scholars that deal explicitly with the issue. It would be unrewarding to go over all those who have translated or understood ζῷον as ‘animal, living being’ without further comment.

²³ G. Teichmüller, *Aristotelische Forschungen, 1: Beiträge zur Erklärung der Poetik des Aristoteles* (Halle, 1867), 55–7.

²⁴ ‘What is suggested by the first words of the passage is that a rule of poetics has been imported from the realm of the visual arts’ (Bouchard [n. 1], 98).

²⁵ ‘The explanatory power of Aristotelian analogies often rests on the relative simplicity of the *comparans* in regard to the *comparandum*’ (Bouchard [n. 1], 88); see also S. Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton, 2002), 118, 124–5.

²⁶ ‘So scheint mir doch ohne Antithese des Wirklichen gegen das Gemalte ζῷον zunächst immer als lebendiges Wesen zu verstehen zu sein’ (Teichmüller [n. 23], 57).

²⁷ Bywater (n. 5), 179.

²⁸ Cf. T.H. Irwin, ‘The sense and reference of *kalon* in Aristotle’, *CPh* 105 (2010), 381–96, at 383; Destrée (n. 1), 196 n. 109.

According to Rostagni, it was essential to Aristotle to assimilate the literary work to a natural being; he would be relying on a commonplace put in circulation by rhetoricians and sophists.²⁹ Yet Sicking has shown that there was no such commonplace before Plato.³⁰ In fact, Rostagni's references to certain texts by Alcidas (*On Sophists*), Isocrates (*Against the Sophists*) and Plato (*Phaedrus*) are beside the point; they deal with the contrast of written and spoken discourses, the former being mere figments (paintings or sculptures) in comparison with the living word. Alcidas' text may even be contrary to his purpose, as we shall see (§IV.k).

Else dismisses as 'inappropriate and unnecessary' the idea 'that ζῶον means a painting' at 1450b34–51a4.³¹ He endorses Teichmüller's views on the issue and refers, as Bywater did, to Aristotle, *Topics* 106a20. His final remark that "'an animal a thousand miles long" [...] is less fantastic than the idea of a painting or a statue a thousand miles long', for 'impossibly large animals are not uncommon in legend', adds little strength to the argument. Reasoning from so bold an exaggeration does not seem fruitful, but, in any case, the inverse interpretation is also possible: whereas it is known for certain that no such animals exist, someone could try to make such a figure, with world enough and time.

Lastly, Lucas declares that ζῶον at 50b34 means 'not a picture, though this is a meaning the word can bear [...], but a living being as opposed to the inorganic πρᾶγμα'.³² He refers to Plato, *Phaedrus* 265c, admitting that 'the factor of beauty is not specifically mentioned' there. Then he connects the mention of σῶμα (1451a3) with the word σωματτειδής in *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* (1436a29, 1438b24).³³ This only shows that the analogy to a body supports the same inferences as that to a ζῶον, as explained below (§IV.a), not that the latter is synonymous with the former—something denied by several critics.

No new reasons have emerged in more recent literature, but the sheer mass of opinion seems to have removed the issue from discussion. As we have seen in §II, only a few scholars admit that the meaning 'figure' might be relevant, and most of them abstain from making such remarks in the main text of their works, but restrict them to notes.³⁴ The homonymy problem has dropped from standard scholarly editions, translations and commentaries in the last few decades.³⁵ Moreover, analyses of references to painting in the *Poetics* such as Ciarletta's and Zanker's omit any mention to these passages.³⁶ My claim is that such a consensus does not prove the point, but rather calls for examination. Having already shown that the reasons given lack cogency and rely on unnecessary assumptions—for instance, that only the analogy to an animal could make the notion of unity vivid, or that Aristotle intended a contrast between

²⁹ A. Rostagni (ed.), *Aristotele: Poetica* (Turin, 1945²), 44–5.

³⁰ C.M.J. Sicking, 'Organische Komposition und Verwandtes', *Mnemosyne* 16 (1963), 225–42.

³¹ Else (n. 5), 284–5 n. 9.

³² D.W. Lucas (comm.), *Aristotle: Poetics* (Oxford, 1968), 112–13.

³³ See also Heath (n. 9), 20.

³⁴ Webster (n. 18), House (n. 19), Lanza (n. 19), Bouchard (n. 1), Destrée (n. 1).

³⁵ See C. Gallavotti (ed.), *Aristotele: Dell'arte poetica* (Milan, 1974); R. Dupont-Roc and J. Lallot (edd.), *Aristote: La poétique* (Paris, 1980); S. Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1987), V. García-Yebra (transl. and notes), *Poética de Aristóteles* (Madrid, 1992²); A. Schmitt (transl. and comm.), *Aristoteles Poetik* (Berlin, 2008); Tarán and Gutas (n. 2); Hose (n. 9).

³⁶ N. Ciarletta, 'Note sui riferimenti alla pittura nella *Poetica* di Aristotele', *QUCC* 23 (1976), 127–39; G. Zanker, 'Aristotle's *Poetics* and the painters', *AJPh* 121 (2000), 225–35.

natural and artificial beings—I proceed to examine whether the series of ancient texts mentioned in discussing these passages can bear the burden of proof.

IV

Recall that the purpose of this paper is not to decide that ζῶον must necessarily be understood as ‘figure’ in the two passages of the *Poetics* under scrutiny, but to show that this meaning is as plausible as the prevalent one of ‘animal’, and consequently that the text is ambiguous and must be handled as such. With this in view, I shall examine several excerpts by Aristotle and previous writers where the word ζῶον appears in the context of a discussion of composition, beauty, pleasure and the like, and verify whether they admit the interpretation as ‘figure’ either exclusively or together with the meaning ‘animal’.

a) Aristotle, *On Memory* 1 (450b20–24):

τὸ ἐν τῷ πίνακι γεγραμμένον ζῶον καὶ ζῳόν ἐστι καὶ εἰκόν, καὶ τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ ἐν τοῦτ' ἐστὶν ἄμφω, τὸ μέντοι εἶναι οὐ ταυτόν ἀμφοῖν, καὶ ἔστι θεωρεῖν καὶ ὡς ζῶον καὶ ὡς εἰκόνα.³⁷

the *zōion* painted on the board is a *zōion* and an image as well; and, being the same and one, it is both, but the being is not the same for both, and it is possible to contemplate it as a *zōion* and also as an image.

These lines show that, besides the word being ambiguous, the painting as such possesses a kind of phenomenological ambivalence. We can contemplate it either as a thing in itself or as a representation of something else. It is not decisive which word, ζῶον or εἰκόν, denotes each aspect, as long as the contrast remains clear: ζῶον may mean a figure (in itself) as opposed to a portrait (of something else), or a (painted) animal as opposed to an image (in itself).³⁸ In any case, when a figure represents a body or an animal, both aspects may equally sustain analogies concerning unity or completeness.³⁹ This is the reason why both meanings work equally well in the passages of the *Poetics* under discussion.

b) Aristotle, *Politics* 3.13 (1284b8–13):

οὔτε γὰρ γραφεὺς ἐάσειεν ἄν τὸν ὑπερβάλλοντα πόδα τῆς συμμετρίας ἔχειν τὸ ζῶον, οὐδ' εἰ διαφέρῃ τὸ κάλλος, οὔτε ναυπηγὸς πρύμναν ἢ τῶν ἄλλων τι μορίων τῶν τῆς νεῶς, οὐδὲ δὴ χοροδιδάσκαλος τὸν μεῖζον καὶ κάλλιον τοῦ παντὸς χοροῦ φθεγγόμενον ἐάσει συγχορεύειν.⁴⁰

For neither a painter would let the figure/living being have a foot that outstrips the proportion, even though it were superior in beauty, nor would a shipbuilder make a stern or any other part of the ship [viz. disproportionately big], nor indeed will a trainer of the chorus allow into it someone who sounds louder and better than the whole chorus.

³⁷ D. Bloch (ed.), *Aristotle on Memory and Recollection* (Leiden and Boston, 2007), 32.

³⁸ The first interpretation is preferred by Bloch (n. 37), 33 and Halliwell (n. 25), 182; the second by Hose (n. 9), 36.

³⁹ See Gallop (n. 19), 146. It is indicative of this convergence of the analogies that A. Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton, 2002), 243 connects the organic image in *Phdr.* 264c with the beginning of Horace's *Ad Pisones*, where there is explicit mention of painting.

⁴⁰ W.D. Ross, *Aristotelis Politica* (Oxford, 1957), 96.

Aristotle considers technical correctness or beauty in order to justify by analogy the institution of ostracism. As the painter will not sacrifice the harmony of the whole to the excellence of a single part, the state cannot allow the influence of outstanding individuals. Thus the context makes it plain that the ζῶον is a painted living being, and the focus lies on the proportions of the painting in itself.⁴¹ Aristotle treats the instance as vivid enough to dispense with any further explanation.

c) Aristotle, *Politics* 7.4 (1326a35–8):

ἔστι τι καὶ πόλεως μεγέθους μέτρον, ὥσπερ καὶ τῶν ἄλλων πάντων, ζῶων φυτῶν ὀργάνων· καὶ γὰρ τούτων ἕκαστον οὔτε λίαν μικρὸν οὔτε κατὰ μέγεθος ὑπερβάλλον ἔξει τὴν αὐτοῦ δύναμιν.⁴²

there is also a measure of size for a city, as there is as well for all other things, animals, plants, tools; for each of these, neither being too small nor exceeding the size, will possess its proper potential.

This text, unlike the preceding one, refers to a living being, as the pairing with ‘plants’ makes clear. The topic of these lines is the proper extension of a thing, which concurs with that of *Poet.* 1450b34–51a4. In *Politics*, the focus lies on the optimal size for the thing to be functional, and in the *Poetics*, for it to be perceived as beautiful. Even though functionality and beauty are not completely different for Aristotle,⁴³ there is room for a distinction, as we shall see shortly.

d) Aristotle, *Topics* 1.15 (106a20–2):

ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ τῷ καλῷ τῷ μὲν ἐπὶ τοῦ ζῶου τὸ αἰσχρόν, τῷ δ' ἐπὶ τῆς οἰκίας τὸ μοχθηρόν, ὥστε ὁμώνυμον τὸ καλόν.⁴⁴

Similarly, also, [the opposite] of ‘fine’ as said of an animal/figure is ‘ugly’, but as said of a house is ‘bad’; consequently, ‘fine’ is homonymous.

Aristotle is proposing here a method for disambiguating homonyms. It consists in finding two possible antonyms for a word, so that each of them corresponds to one of the different meanings of the homonym but not to the other. Thus καλός means both ‘beautiful’ and ‘good’, with antonyms αἰσχρός ‘ugly’ for the first meaning and μοχθηρός ‘bad’ for the second. The latter is said of a house, the former of a ζῶον. Bywater stated that here ‘a living, as distinct from an artificial, whole’ is ‘clearly’ meant, and that this solves the ambiguity of *Poetics* 1450b34.⁴⁵ However, the passage admits of another interpretation, namely the contrast between ornamental and useful things: a painting may be beautiful or ugly, whereas a house may be good or bad. The mention of ζῶον in this excerpt is therefore as ambiguous as in the *Poetics*.

Besides, the contrast, whatever its interpretation, suggests that it is possible to distinguish the strictly beautiful from the functional, and precisely in connection with the aforementioned topic of size. In *Eth. Nic.* 4.3, it is in this respect, without regard of function, that Aristotle puts a constraint on the concept of beauty: τὸ κάλλος ἐν μεγάλῳ

⁴¹ R. Robinson translates the word as ‘figure’ (*Aristotle: Politics. Books III and IV* [Oxford 1995], 47).

⁴² Ross (n. 40), 219.

⁴³ See K. Rogers, ‘Aristotle’s conception of τὸ καλόν’, *AncPhil* 13 (1993), 355–71, at 358.

⁴⁴ W.D. Ross (ed.), *Topica et Sophistici elenchi* (Oxford, 1958), 17.

⁴⁵ Bywater (n. 5), 179. Else ([n. 5], 284–5 n. 9) agrees and adds a reference to *Topics* 107a19–31. This, however, is beside the point; Aristotle contrasts there ζῶον and σκευός in order to differentiate the two meanings of ὄνος, ‘donkey’ and ‘windlass’.

σώματι, οἱ μικροὶ δ' ἄστεῖοι καὶ σύμμετροι, καλοὶ δ' οὐ (1123b6–8).⁴⁶ The idea and wording are not unlike the first passage under discussion: οὐτε πάμμικρον ἄν τι γένοιτο καλὸν ζῶον (*Poet.* 50b37–8); in fact, the ζῶον is mentioned in the *Poetics* to stress that τὸ καλόν requires a certain size, μέγεθος. I shall deal with this topic again.

- e) Aristotle, *Parts of animals* 1.5 (645a5–37). This lengthy discussion of the pleasure of studying biology is Teichmüller's main witness for the necessity of understanding ζῶον in these passages of the *Poetics*.⁴⁷ I shall excerpt several lines (7–16, 23–26) that are especially relevant in this context:

καὶ γὰρ ἐν τοῖς μὴ κεχαρισμένοις αὐτῶν πρὸς τὴν αἴσθησιν κατὰ τὴν θεωρίαν ὅμως ἡ δημιουργήσασα φύσις ἀμηχάνους ἡδονὰς παρέχει τοῖς δυναμένοις τὰς αἰτίας γνωρίζειν καὶ φύσει φιλοσόφοις. καὶ γὰρ ἂν εἴη παράλογον καὶ ἄτοπον, εἰ τὰς μὲν εἰκόνας αὐτῶν θεωροῦντες χαίρομεν ὅτι τὴν δημιουργήσασαν τέχνην συνθεωροῦμεν, οἷον τὴν γραφικὴν ἢ τὴν πλαστικὴν, αὐτῶν δὲ τῶν φύσει συνεστώτων μὴ μᾶλλον ἀγαπῶμεν τὴν θεωρίαν, δυνάμενοι γε τὰς αἰτίας καθορᾶν. διὸ δεῖ μὴ δυσχεραίνειν παιδικῶς τὴν περὶ τῶν ἀτιμωτέρων ζῴων ἐπίσκεψιν. [...] τὸ γὰρ μὴ τυχόντως ἄλλ' ἔνεκά τινας ἐν τοῖς τῆς φύσεως ἔργοις ἐστὶ καὶ μάλιστα· οὐδ' ἔνεκα συνέστηκεν ἢ γέγονε τέλους, τὴν τοῦ καλοῦ χάραν εἵληφεν.⁴⁸

For even in those that have no graces for the senses, regarding the observation, however, nature, which fashioned them, gives enormous pleasure to those able to discern the causes and are naturally inclined to philosophy. For it would be unreasonable and strange if we enjoy observing their images, because we appreciate the fashioning skill, be it painting or sculpture, but we would not be more pleased with the observation of the very things composed by nature, at least if we can examine the causes. Therefore, one must not be annoyed childishly by the inspection of the unworthier animals. [...] For in the works of nature there is no randomness but teleology to the utmost; now, the end for which they are composed and come into being belongs in the area of beauty.

These words have a bearing on *Poet.* 1450b34–51a4, with respect to beauty (line 25), and on 1459a20, with respect to pleasure (line 9), but their relevance may be less direct than it appears. Firstly, there is no mention of the topic of size. As we have just seen, in the *Poetics* aesthetic pleasure requires an object big enough to be easily perceptible; whereas here Aristotle is dealing with an intellectual, philosophical pleasure derived from the understanding of function and purpose, and these are the same whatever the size of the animal. Besides, the problem with *Poet.* 1459a20 was the idea of a οἰκεία ἡδονή, and the biologist's pleasures do not seem to be 'proper' to the animals, but dependent on the perspective of the beholder: 'nature gives extraordinary pleasures to the [...] philosophically inclined' (lines 9–10).

Moreover, the long quotation shows how painstakingly Aristotle has to put his point. This suggests that the notion of a pleasure derived from contemplating animals is far from commonplace; on the contrary, most people disregard or detest this subject, and Aristotle fights such attitudes by calling them irrational, absurd and childlike (lines 11, 16). He goes on, beyond the excerpt cited, arguing that such people should feel disgust toward themselves, for they too are made of blood, flesh, bones, and

⁴⁶ J. Burnet, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (London, 1900), 179–80; see Rogers (n. 43), 367; Irwin (n. 28), 389. I owe these references to *CQ*'s reader.

⁴⁷ Albeit it is more often quoted, and with good reason, in connection with *Poet.* 1448b10–15: Bywater (n. 5), 126; S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (Chicago, 1986), 74; A. Capra, 'Poetry and biology: The anatomy of tragedy', in P. Destrée, M. Heath and D.L. Munteanu (edd.), *The Poetics in its Aristotelian Context* (London and New York, 2020), 17–33, at 25.

⁴⁸ I. Bekker, *Aristotelis Opera*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1831).

blood vessels (645a26–30). Thus the rational beauty of animals and the pleasure of contemplating them do not seem to be a clear-cut illustration for experiences with poetry and the arts. The explanation should rather go in the opposite direction, since this very text shows that delight in painting and sculpture is quite popular (line 13), and so is pleasure in poetry; these three are conjoined in *Rh.* 1371b6–7 as examples of pleasant imitation. Similarly, another excerpt mentioned by Teichmüller, *Pol.* 8.3 (1338a40–b2), also shows that Aristotle sees familiarity with the art of painting as instrumental to the appreciation of corporeal beauty, not the other way around.

Thus let us consider, as the last excerpt from Aristotle, another instance of the self-evidence of arguments taken from the art of painting.

f) Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals* 2.6 (743b23–5):

ἅπαντα δὲ ταῖς περιγραφαῖς διορίζεται πρότερον, ὕστερον δὲ λαμβάνει τὰ χρώματα καὶ τὰς μαλακότητας καὶ τὰς σκληρότητας, ἀτεχνῶς ὡσπερ ἂν ὑπὸ ζωγράφου τῆς φύσεως δημιουργούμενα· καὶ γὰρ οἱ γραφεῖς ὑπογράφαντες ταῖς γραμμαῖς οὕτως ἐναλείφουσι τοῖς χρώμασι τὸ ζῶον.⁴⁹

Everything is marked out first in the outlines and later on acquires the colours and softness and hardness, just as if it were produced by nature acting as a painter; for in fact painters, having outlined the figure with lines, paint it thus with the colours.

The development of living beings is illustrated here by an analogy with the procedure of painters, which Aristotle mentions as common knowledge. In the last line ζῶον means ‘figure’ (or is at least ambiguous, as in §IV.a, b), although other tokens of the word in the context mean unequivocally ‘animal’.

In sum, we have considered six passages by Aristotle. The first (*On Memory*) in conjunction with *Categories* shows not only that the word ζῶον is ambiguous, but also that a figure is an ambivalent thing. The second, from the *Politics*, provides an instance of such ambivalence, but the focus is clearly on the aspect of painting; whereas the third excerpt (*Politics* again) only admits the meaning ‘animal’. The fourth (*Topics*) is as ambiguous as the *Poetics*. The fifth (*Parts of Animals*) suggests that an argument referring to animals could be difficult to understand, whereas a reference to painting is much more self-evident, as the last one (*Generation of Animals*) shows. So far, nothing either invalidates the claim that the text of the *Poetics* admits both interpretations, or corroborates the idea that ‘animal’ could be the default meaning.

Let us now examine passages by Plato. The first two, from *Phaedrus* and *Statesman*, are often mentioned in connection to the problem at issue; Butcher referred to the ones from *Laws* and *Cratylus* as support for the meaning ‘picture’. Other uses of ζῶον, such as the contrast between the spoken discourse as a living thing and the written one as a lifeless figure (for example in *Phdr.* 275d–6a), are less directly relevant to this topic.⁵⁰

g) Plato, *Phaedrus* (264c):

ἀλλὰ τότε γε οἱμαί σε φάσκειν ἂν, δεῖν πάντα λόγον ὡσπερ ζῶον συνεστάναι σῶμά τι ἔχοντα αὐτὸν αὐτοῦ, ὥστε μήτε ἀκέφαλον εἶναι μήτε ἄπουν, ἀλλὰ μέσα τε ἔχειν καὶ ἄκρα, πρέποντα ἀλλήλοις καὶ τῷ ὅλῳ γεγραμμένα.⁵¹

⁴⁹ H.J. Drossaart Lulofs, *Aristotelis De Generatione Animalium* (Oxford, 1965), 80.

⁵⁰ See Sicking (n. 30) and Heath (n. 9), 12–27, for a review of passages by Plato on unity and organic composition.

⁵¹ H. Yunis, *Plato: Phaedrus* (Cambridge, 2011), 68.

But I think you would say at least this, that every discourse must be composed like an animal, having its own body, so as to be neither headless nor footless, but to have middles and extremities, designed fittingly in respect to each other and to the whole.

These lines are generally pointed to as the most relevant model for Aristotle's references to a ζῷον in the *Poetics*. Their context consists of a discussion on the composition of discourses, which agrees with the subject of the *Poetics*. Although according to most critics the word means 'animal' here, Hardie claims that a figure is intended, for γεγραμμένα is predicated of the parts both of the ζῷον and of the discourse; other scholars consider both meanings valid in the context.⁵² Thus even this strongest piece of evidence to support the interpretation 'animal' in the *Poetics* is not wholly without ambiguity. It is, moreover, unusual in its relative simplicity, as we shall see.

h) Plato, *Statesman* (277bc):

διὸ μακροτέραν τὴν ἀπόδειξιν πεποιήκαμεν καὶ πάντως τῷ μύθῳ τέλος οὐκ ἐπέθεμεν, ἀλλ' ἀτεχνῶς ὁ λόγος ἡμῖν ὡσπερ ζῷον τὴν ἐξῶθεν μὲν περιγραφὴν εἰκὼν ἰκανῶς ἔχειν, τὴν δὲ οἷον τοῖς φαρμάκοις καὶ τῇ συγκράσει τῶν χρωμάτων ἐνάργειαν οὐκ ἀπειληφέναι πω. γραφῆς δὲ καὶ συμπάσης χειρουργίας λέξει καὶ λόγῳ δηλοῦν πᾶν ζῷον μᾶλλον πρέπει τοῖς δυναμένοις ἔπεσθαι.⁵³

Therefore, we have made the exposition too long, and indeed did not put an end on the story; instead, the discourse just seems to us, like a figure, to be adequate as to the external outline, but not to have received yet distinctness with the paints and the mixture of colours. But, rather than by drawing or any handicraft, it is by speech and discourse that it is convenient to explain a living being to those who are able to follow.

This is a metatextual commentary on the development of the dialogue. To illustrate the office of a king, the speaker has told too long a story and its details have grown randomly. A few lines above (277a), the story was compared to a statue that is too bulky and must be cut down to size. In the excerpt cited, there is a remarkable meaning shift concerning ζῷον. The first instance refers clearly to a painting, with the contrast between the outline and the colours;⁵⁴ the second one, on the contrary, refers to a living being that is the subject of a painting or a discourse.

i) Plato, *Laws* 2 (668d–9a):

ΑΘ. τί οὖν εἴ τις καὶ ἐν τούτοις ἀγνοοῖ τῶν μεμιμημένων ὃ τί ποτ' ἐστὶν ἕκαστον τῶν σωμάτων; ἄρ' ἂν ποτε τὸ γε ὀρθῶς αὐτῶν εἰργασμένον γνοίη; [...] μὴν δοκεῖ ταυτ' ἂν ποτε διαγνῶναι τις τὸ παράπαν ἀγνοῶν ὃ τί ποτ' ἐστὶ τὸ μεμιμημένον ζῷον; [...] τί δ' εἰ γινώσκουμεν ὅτι τὸ γεγραμμένον ἢ τὸ πεπλασμένον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος, καὶ τὰ μέρη πάντα τὰ αὐτοῦ καὶ χρώματα ἅμα καὶ σχήματα ἀπειλήφεν ὑπὸ τῆς τέχνης; ἄρα γε ἀναγκαῖον ἦδη τῷ ταῦτα γνόντι καὶ ἐκεῖνο ἐτοίμως γινώσκειν, εἴτε καλὸν εἴτε ὅπῃ ποτὲ ἐλλίπες ἂν εἴη κάλλους;

ΚΛ. πάντες μεντᾶν ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν, ὃ ξένε, τὰ καλὰ τῶν ζῷων ἐγινώσκουμεν.⁵⁵

Ath.: How, then, if in these things someone would be unaware of what each of the imitated bodies could possibly be? Would he ever know what is correctly executed in them? [...] Surely, it does not seem that anyone could discern all this if he were totally ignorant as to what is the

⁵² Hardie (n. 12), 361; see also Webster (n. 18), 15; House (n. 19), 49 n. 1; Ford (n. 39), 241–2. Sicking considers that the meaning 'figure' is possible, but unlikely ([n. 30], 226).

⁵³ C.J. Rowe, *Plato: Statesman* (Oxford, 2005²), 82.

⁵⁴ This might be a model for *Poet.* 1450b1–3: Lucas (n. 32), 106.

⁵⁵ É. des Places, *Platon: Les Lois. Livres I–II* (Paris, 1951), 61–2.

imitated animal? [...] What if we knew that the imitated or modelled thing is a human being, and that all its parts have received from art colours as well as forms? Is it therefore necessary that someone knowing that knows readily also this: whether it is beautiful, or to what extent it may be deficient in beauty?

Cl.: Indeed every one of us, so to say, Stranger, would know which figures are beautiful.

The meaning shift here goes in the opposite direction. In the context of a discussion on the standards for judging imitations, the Athenian claims that accuracy is more important than pleasure; he introduces the hypothesis of someone who does not know the subject or model—hypothetically a living being (τὸ μιμημένον ζῶον)—and consequently cannot say whether the imitation is well or poorly executed. What if, on the contrary, one both knows the model—now specifically a human being—and discerns its parts, artistically rendered in colours and shapes? Clinias answers that in such case anyone could recognize which figures are beautiful (τὰ καλὰ τῶν ζώων).⁵⁶

j) Plato, *Cratylus* (425a):

καὶ πάλιν ἐκ τῶν ὀνομάτων καὶ ῥημάτων μέγα ἤδη τι καὶ καλὸν καὶ ὄλον συστήσομεν, ὡσπερ ἐκεῖ τὸ ζῶον τῇ γραφικῇ, ἐνταῦθα τὸν λόγον τῇ ὀνομαστικῇ ἢ ῥητορικῇ ἢ ἴτις ἐστὶν ἢ τέχνη.⁵⁷

And in turn from nouns and verbs we shall lastly compose something big and beautiful and complete. Just as, then, the figure by the art of painting, now the discourse by onomastics or rhetoric or whatever the art is.

Socrates discusses at length language by comparison to the art of painting. The analogy had begun with the correspondence of the pigments to the linguistic elements and syllables, and ends here with the final products: the figure (ζῶον) and the discourse.⁵⁸ Notice the predicates καὶ καλὸν καὶ ὄλον, which feature in the *Poetics* as well.

Although I stated above that it would be beside the point to review the commonplace contrast between oral language as something alive and writing as inanimate, we must consider at least an excerpt on this topic by a contemporary of Plato, because of its vocabulary:

k) Alcidamas, *On Sophists* (27):

ἡγοῦμαι δ' οὐδὲ λόγους δίκαιον εἶναι καλεῖσθαι τοὺς γεγραμμένους, ἀλλ' ὡσπερ εἶδωλα καὶ σχήματα καὶ μιμήματα λόγων, καὶ τὴν αὐτὴν κατ' αὐτῶν εἰκότως ἂν δόξαν ἔχομεν, ἦνπερ καὶ κατὰ τῶν χαλκῶν ἀνδριάντων καὶ λιθίνων ἀγαλμάτων καὶ γεγραμμένων ζώων. ὡσπερ γὰρ ταῦτα μιμήματα τῶν ἀληθινῶν σωμάτων ἐστί.⁵⁹

I hold it not to be correct to call 'discourses' the written ones, but, so to say, images and appearances and imitations of discourses; and we could reasonably have about them the

⁵⁶ For this interpretation of τὰ καλὰ τῶν ζώων, see T.J. Saunders, *Notes on the Laws of Plato, BICS Supplement* 28 (London, 1972), 10–11 and S.S. Meyer (transl.), *Plato: Laws 1 and 2* (Oxford, 2015), 304.

⁵⁷ E.A. Duke, W.F. Hicken, W.S.M. Nicoll, D.B. Robinson, J.C.G. Strachan, *Platonis Opera*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1995), 250–1.

⁵⁸ 'Some translate "the living being", which makes no sense' (F. Ademollo, *The Cratylus of Plato: A Commentary* [Cambridge, 2011], 291).

⁵⁹ J.V. Muir, *Alcidamas: The Works & Fragments* (London, 2001), 14–16.

same opinion as about the bronze statues and the stone sculptures and the painted figures; for, just as these, they are imitations of the real bodies.

This passage may have a bearing on the *Poetics*, but not necessarily because of the analogy between a discourse and a living being, as Rostagni claimed.⁶⁰ On the contrary, it is the contrast ζῶον/σώματων that might be relevant, since it could help us understand the expression ἐπὶ τῶν σωμάτων καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν ζῴων at *Poet.* 1451a 3–4 (see §I.a), although the latter lacks the precision γεγραμμένων/ἀληθινῶν which makes the passage of *On Sophists* unequivocal. Since Alcidas uses the latter adjective again shortly afterwards: ἀνδριάντων καλῶν ἀληθινὰ σώματα πολὺ χειρὸς τὰς εὐπρεπείας ἔχοντα ('real bodies having elegance much inferior to beautiful statues', 28), the word σῶμα may be ambiguous as well. This is also suggested, in fact, by the last item in our survey, by Alcidas' master:

l) Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen* (18):

ἀλλὰ μὴν οἱ γραφεῖς ὅταν ἐκ πολλῶν χρωμάτων καὶ σωμάτων ἐν σῶμα καὶ σχῆμα τελείως ἀπεργάσωνται, τέρπουσι τὴν ὄψιν· ἡ δὲ τῶν ἀνδριάντων ποιήσις καὶ ἡ τῶν ἀγαλμάτων ἐργασία νόσον ἠδεῖαν παρέσχετο τοῖς ὄμμασιν.⁶¹

But certainly, when painters produce completely out of many colours and bodies a single body and form, they please the sight; the making of statues and the fabrication of sculptures provide the eyes with a delightful disease.

Gorgias does not use the word ζῶον but illustrates indirectly the problems of ambiguity and of argumentative cogency that I have been discussing. The expression ἐν σῶμα has here the same ambivalence as we found in Aristotle's *On Memory* (§IV.a) concerning ζῶον: it denotes a thing that represents another thing. This fact suggests indirectly that the occasional mention of σώματα in several of the excerpts discussed is not conclusive proof that a living being is meant, unless it be disambiguated as in the case of Alcidas. Besides, the passage is a further instance of the vividness of comparisons taken from the realm of painting and the visual arts.

Let us take stock. We have found that Aristotle's *On Memory* (a) extends the ambiguity of ζῶον beyond lexical meaning to involve the thing itself; the same holds for σῶμα in the light of Gorgias' *Helen* (l). As a result, Alcidas, in *On Sophists* (k), has to remove the ambiguity of the word σῶμα by means of the adjective ἀληθινόν in order to make a contrast with ζῶον or ἀνδριάς. Aristotle's discussion of the pleasure provided by the study of animals in *Parts of Animals* (e) suggests that this domain is not optimal, from a rhetorical point of view, to provide illustration for the topic of the *Poetics*. *The Generation of Animals* (f) shows that painting is a suitable source of examples and that the word ζῶον may have the meaning 'picture' even in a biological context; in the *Politics*, it means the painted animal once (b) and the living one later on (c). In Plato's *Phaedrus* (g), it means probably, but not necessarily, 'animal', and in *Cratylus* (j) certainly 'painting', whereas in *Statesman* (h) and *Laws* (i) there are shifts from the meaning 'figure' to that of 'animal' and conversely. In sum, there are grounds to say that the ambivalence in the use of ζῶον in contexts such as these may be the rule rather than the exception.

⁶⁰ Rostagni (n. 29), 44.

⁶¹ D.M. MacDowell, *Gorgias: Encomium of Helen* (Bristol, 1982), 28.

V

I have undertaken to prove that the references to ζῶον in *Poetics* 1450b34–51a4 and 1459a20 are unavoidably ambiguous. They cannot be made univocal by appeal to models and parallels, because these are disparate and sometimes ambiguous as well; besides, both meanings, ‘animal’ and ‘figure’, lend themselves to similar analogies and conclusions. In their immediate context, it would not make much of a difference to choose one or the other. However, in a larger perspective, certain consequences emerge for the general configuration of the *Poetics* if we understand that Aristotle explains τὸ καλόν and its inherent magnitude (1450b34–7) by comparison to a picture rather than to a living being.

First, the reference to a picture would belong in a network with at least nine other explicit remarks about painting and painters in the *Poetics*.⁶² This sort of underlying coherence makes plausible Elsa Bouchard’s hypothesis that Aristotle may partly have developed his literary ideas on the basis of pre-existing treatises on the visual arts⁶³—in which he would be joining a tradition of associating painting and poetry already in place in the fifth century B.C., and taken for granted by Xenophon and Plato.⁶⁴ This, in turn, supports the reading of ζῶον as ‘figure’.

Secondly, the comparison to a picture implies an intuitive notion of beauty, whereas the comparison to an animal would suggest a more intellectual one; both ζῶον and καλόν are homonyms according to Aristotle. It has been argued that the aesthetic idea of καλόν comprises both beauty and functionality, to which ethical meanings or nuances may be added, such as the ‘noble’ and the ‘praiseworthy’.⁶⁵ However, Aristotle states that καλόν is homonymous even without heeding the ethical meaning (*Top.* 106a20–2). Besides, in *Parts of Animals* (645a) the pleasure taken in the mere appearance of things is distinguished from the one taken in the analysis of their causes, functions and ends (p. 9 above). Although both aspects may be called καλόν, they remain different. There is room, therefore, for a notion of καλόν as that which pleases the senses, disregarding its functionality. This would justify the claim that small people are pretty, but not beautiful (*Eth. Nic.* 1123b6–8).⁶⁶ Indeed, if we shift focus from the function of the component parts to the function of the whole, a large size is functional to the extent that it allows an easier and more prolonged contemplation of the thing, be it a body, painting, or poetic work (cf. *Eth. Nic.* 1122b16–17). Still, the kind of experience presupposed in explaining beauty and size with a reference to a painting is one of immediate apprehension, rather than rational study.⁶⁷

It remains none the less true that Aristotle draws analogies with living beings in the *Poetics*, the neatest being calling the plot the ‘soul’ of tragedy (1450a38).⁶⁸ This does

⁶² 1447a18–19, 1448a5–6, 1448b10–19, 1450a26–9, 1450a39–b3, 1454b9–11, 1460b8–9, 1460b32, 1461b12–13.

⁶³ Bouchard (n. 1), 106.

⁶⁴ Halliwell (n. 25), 118–47.

⁶⁵ Rogers (n. 43); Irwin (n. 28).

⁶⁶ See Irwin (n. 28), 389, who (384) misrepresents Aristotle’s criticism of the definition of τὸ καλόν as that which pleases the sight or the hearing (*Top.* 146a22–31); it is not the idea of pleasing the senses but the disjunction in the definition that he finds objectionable, because it leads to contradictions.

⁶⁷ See Halliwell (n. 47), 67.

⁶⁸ See M. Heath, *Ancient Philosophical Poetics* (Cambridge, 2012), 56–103, especially 83–95; in addition, Gallop (n. 19); Ford (n. 39), 240–4, 265–6; Capra (n. 47).

not contradict the above conclusion, but introduces another level in the reception of poetry. Ford has claimed that Aristotle takes for granted the reactions of the common audience—even though not always approving of it—and endeavours to put the basis for an intellectual approach that suits better the educated citizens.⁶⁹ Thus, whereas the references to painting would reach Aristotle's listeners or readers on the level where they stood, the biological references would lead them to the new, higher standard, where philosophical analysis would provide pleasures of another kind.⁷⁰

A closing reflection is in order about the prevalence in the literature of the interpretation 'animal', despite the shortcomings of the arguments for it. Remarkably, the interpretation 'figure' is precluded from view even when the perspective adopted should favour it. Whereas it is but natural that researches on the biological features of the *Poetics* such as Gallop's and Capra's focus only on the meaning 'animal', it is striking that Ciarletta's and Zanker's works on painting and painters in the *Poetics* do not consider the meaning 'figure' for these passages. Leaving aside the weight of tradition or authority, a reason for this state of affairs may be the appeal of the aesthetic idea of organicism or organic composition. Aristotle has been singled out as the originator of that idea⁷¹—not without some reason, given the biological basis of his approach to poetry. Yet the modern, post-Romantic notion of organicism goes further than the mere analogy between the organization and unity of living beings and discourses or works of art, and subsumes the works of art into the realm of natural beings: a poem should grow naturally out of inspiration or genius, without any part for craft or rules to play in the process.⁷² This runs counter to Aristotle's project of putting together an art, that is, a technical discourse, about poetry. Therefore, the unilateral understanding of ζῷον as 'animal' in the *Poetics* may lead to misconstruing Aristotle's theoretical standpoint.

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⁶⁹ Ford (n. 39), 266–70, 291–2; A. Ford, 'The purpose of Aristotle's *Poetics*', *CPh* 110 (2015), 1–21. He claims that this analysis may help explain the notion of *kátharsis*: A. Ford, 'Katharsis: the ancient problem', in A. Parker and E.K. Sedgwick (edd.), *Performativity and Performance* (New York and London, 1995), 109–32. On intellectualism in Aristotle's approach to poetry, see Butcher (n. 11), 189; Else (n. 5), 129–30, 447–50; Halliwell (n. 47), 77–81; H.J. Fossheim, 'To kalon and the experience of art', in P. Destrée, M. Heath and D.L. Munteanu (edd.), *The Poetics in its Aristotelian Context* (London and New York, 2020), 34–50.

⁷⁰ A possible example may be the discussion of the concepts μέγεθος/μήκος in the *Poetics* and their application in the analysis of plays by L.D. Marsh, *Muthos: Aristotle's Concept of Narrative and the Fragments of Old Comedy* (Göttingen, 2021).

⁷¹ See G.N.G. Orsini, 'The organic concepts in aesthetics', *CompLit* 21 (1969), 1–30, at 24; A. Ford, 'Unity in Greek criticism and poetry', *Arion* 1.3 (1991), 125–54, at 125. Organicism is a leitmotiv in the much-republished *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* by Samuel Butcher (n. 14). However, Aristotle's epistemology is fundamentally logical and analytical, despite its 'association [...] with the organic model'; the latter 'only at the beginning of the nineteenth century did [...] become a systematic and elaborate theoretical paradigm' (L. Doležel, *Occidental Poetics: Tradition and Progress* [Lincoln, NE, 1990], 24, 55).

⁷² See M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London / Oxford / New York, 1971²), 184–225.