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The Greek Concept of '*Mimesis*' Revisited

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1. '*Mimesis*' and '*imitatio*' in ancient aesthetics

The Greek word '*mīmēsis*' is one of the most fascinating but controversial concepts in the history of aesthetics, which is, no doubt, a great heritage of the ancient world. We can discover many hints and ideas about the essence of art and culture in this rich concept. On the other hand, the variety of translations – such as imitation, representation, expression, indication, copying, mimicry, reproduction, replica and portrait in English, and *mohou* 模倣, *saigen* 再現 and *mane* 真似 in Japanese – indicate difficulties in dealing with the concept.[1] Although it is customarily translated as 'imitation', several scholars allude to this as inadequate. In this article, I retain the transliteration '*mimesis*' in order to avoid smuggling the modern concept of 'imitation,' with its negative connotations, into the discussion.[2] On the other hand, we should be aware that its influences on the Western history of aesthetics are deep and monumental, as Halliwell (2002) shows in his full examination of the development of mimetic theory in the modern period, especially in 'aesthetics' established in the eighteenth century.

As we are aware, 'arts' were not clearly identified in antiquity, but the Greek notion of '*mimesis*' provides a good clue for our discussion, since it covers the wide range of what we normally count as 'arts'. In the *Republic*, Plato (427-347 BC) enumerates artists in this way: 'imitators (*mīmētai*), many of whom work with shapes and colors, many with music, – poets (*poiētai*) and their assistants, rhapsodists, actors, choral dancers, contractors –' (373b). This is the first testimony that the notion of *mimesis* symbolizes artistic imitation in general, which includes music, dance, drama, poetry, painting and sculpture (i.e., works with shapes and colors). Therefore, it is a key concept in considerations of ancient aesthetical issues.

On the other hand, we will soon find that '*mimesis*' does not exactly correspond to 'arts' or 'artistic experiences'. '*Mimesis*' and its Latin translation '*imitatio*' played wider roles in ancient cultures. In contrast to the modern discussions concerned mainly with artistic representation and aesthetic experience, more emphasis was put on impersonation and ethical imitation in antiquity. The notion of *mimesis* also has

ontological, epistemological and cosmological dimensions. Accordingly, our first task is to observe the original meanings of this word and how the aesthetic sense developed out of them.

This article takes the following steps: Section 2 examines the *mimesis* vocabulary in earlier examples (before Plato) and shows that it has two major meanings, namely, impersonation (mimicking someone or something) and reproduction (producing images in a material medium, such as pictures). Considering the testimonies, we can assume that the former should be original and basic. Section 3 analyzes Plato's discussion of *mimesis* in several dialogues. While the severe criticism of poetry as mimetic art in *Republic* X attracts much attention from modern readers, Plato puts this aesthetic argument within the wider perspective of how to make oneself as good as possible. Ethical imitation is newly analyzed in terms of the mimetic relation between the original (Forms or god) and the image (the universe, and ourselves). This main concern was transmitted to the later platonic tradition such as Plotinus. Following this, Section 4 deals with Aristotle's *Poetics*, the main text of ancient aesthetics, which develops the central idea of *mimesis* as representing and forming human life by revising the Platonic notion. Finally, Section 5 focuses on one salient feature of *mimesis* and *imitatio* in Hellenistic and Roman times, namely, 'creative imitation'. Ancient authors, such as orators and poets, imitated preceding authors and works of original creation and were critically judged according to this mimetic relation.

This shows that *mimesis* and *imitatio* were located in the center of the aesthetic experiences of ancient cultures. However, they play wider roles, in particular, of forming one's own character on the basis of a perfect model, probably more than in the field of artistic representation. This feature reveals a fundamental difference from our modern aesthetical concerns.

2. The basic meanings of '*mimesis*'

The etymological roots of the Greek word '*mīmēsis*' are controversial. Its relation with Sanskrit '*māya*' has been suggested but without certainty.[3] Noteworthy, however, there is no example of this vocabulary before and in the sixth century BC (Homer, Hesiod, elegy, iambic, etc.), possibly except for the Homeric *Hymn to the Delian Apollo* (163) and Theognis (370), both of which are of uncertain date. Because of the lack of

examples in the Ionic literature, some scholars suggest that the origin may have been in the Dorian region, perhaps in Sicily.[4]

It is normally assumed that the verb '*mīmeisthai*' is a denominative of the noun '*mīmos*', but the meaning of the latter is again far from certain. '*Mīmos*' has something to do with a mimic actor, particularly in Dionysian festivals,[5] but the examination of the early examples in Else (1958), in particular, the fragment of Aeschylus (*Edōnoi*, fr. 56 Radt = 71a Mette), shows that it designates not the actor but the *act* of imitation as equivalent to *mimesis*. From the extant evidence, therefore, it is uncertain whether the specific genre of mime, such as of Sophron, active in Sicily in the late fifth century BC, was the origin.[6] It may rather be the case that the mime play was only a part of the generic notion of *mimesis*, even if '*mīmos*' is etymologically prior.

In the earlier stage, the verb '*mīmeisthai*' (middle deponent) came first. Since the middle voice in Greek signifies the reflexive nature or self-interest, we can assume that *mimesis* basically concerns some reflexive action or one's own interest. It takes the accusative as an object (or a model) of imitation. LSJ says that it sometimes takes a double accusative: 'imitate *one in a thing*' (e.g., Herodotus 5.67). The noun forms, '*mīmēsis*' (act of *mīmeisthai*), '*mīmēma*' (product), and '*mīmētēs*' (person), appear in the mid-fifth century BC (such as Aeschylus) but not before. However, it is probably impossible to draw decisive conclusions from limited evidence.

Different classifications are proposed concerning early examples of *mimesis*. By criticizing Koller (1954), who contrasts between (1) Darstellung, (2) Ausdruck, and (3) Nachahmung, Else presents the following threefold division[7]:

(1) 'Miming': direct representation of the looks, actions, and/or utterances of animals or men through speech, song, and/or dancing (dramatic or prodramatic sense).
(2) 'Imitation' of the actions of one person by another, in a general sense, without actual miming (ethical sense).
(3) 'Republication': an image or effigy of a person or thing in material form (*mimēma* only).

A different classification is suggested in Halliwell[8]:

(1) Visual representation (visual copying or resemblance); (2) behavioral imitation; (3) impersonation; (4) vocal imitation; (5) metaphysical mimesis.

But Halliwell admits that some categories overlap and that some examples are impossible to distinguish. On the other hand, Sörbom avoids any classification, since he sees 'one "scale" of meanings' from the original metaphorical meaning to the naturalized metaphor.[9]

Neither of these classifications satisfactorily explains the semantic structure of the concept, but I hope we can focus on one objective criterion, namely, whether the means and product of *mimesis* are the performer himself, like an actor (which I call Type A), or an external thing, like a picture or a sculpture (Type B). The notion of 'image' covers both, and this distinction will help our understanding of the basic meanings of *mimesis*.

The first basic sense [Type A] of *mimesis* is a performer's making *himself* look like something else (person, animal, etc.) by gesture, voice, bodily movement or any other method. The point is that the very person comes to resemble (some aspect of) the object of imitation. As Koller (1954) stresses (perhaps too much), music and dance (supposedly derived from Damon) is the core of this type of bodily imitation. Perhaps in a slightly wider sense, I call this 'impersonation'.

The second sense [Type B] is derived from the first for it is generally accepted that the meaning of the word group was gradually enlarged from the original sense [Type A] and developed to signify representational art.[10] When something resembling an original or a model is produced outside (i.e., apart from the producer himself), this kind of *mimesis* is reproduction. In this case, the imitated things are independent works made similar to the original or model. As we shall see, Plato was aware of this distinction and used it effectively.

Under this division, we can include Else's groups (1) and (2) in [A], and group (3) in [B]. Indeed, the direct or physical imitation (1) and the indirect or ethical imitation (2) are often difficult to separate clearly, since the former is necessarily partial (and in a way, indirect), while the latter cannot do without some physical resemblance or appearance. Also, Halliwell's first four classes can be divided into [A] (2, 3, 4) and [B] (1). On the other hand, I take (5) 'metaphysical mimesis' as a metaphor or application of the basic meaning and treat it as a special extension.

[Type A] Impersonation

The meaning of 'impersonation' (or mimicking someone or something) has different purposes or effects. We can see three main features: deception, ethical learning, and artistic performance.

[A-1] Deception

When someone pretends and makes himself appear to be someone else, he often intends to deceive others. The disguise of one's identity may mislead others into thinking that he or she is another person. Intentions vary: sometimes one deceives others seriously in order to avoid attack or to take advantage; or sometimes he does it for fun to mock or to surprise others. Since the mistake of identity is a common trick of theatrical drama, it is effectively used in tragedies and comedies. A typical example is seen in Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*, where Orestes plans a plot against his enemies: 'Both of us (sc. Orestes and Pylades) will speak the speech of Parnassus, *imitating* the accent of a Phocian tongue' (563-4). If he succeeds in changing the appearance of his own and deceives others about his identity, his aim is fulfilled. Similar examples are seen in Euripides, *Rhesus* (208 ff.) (mimicking wolf), Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazusai* (275-279, 544-546) (women mimicking men), *Frogs* (108-111) (Dionysus mimicking Heracles), and Xenophon, *Memoralibia* (1.7.2) (a bad flute player mimicking a good one).

[A-2] Ethical learning

Mimicking is not always done to deceive others but also to acquire some features of others. Learning can be positive (if one imitates a superior person or thing) or negative (if one impersonates an inferior person or thing). In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, the servant says that they should avoid the latter kind: 'we should not *imitate* the young when their thoughts are like these' (114-115, trans. David Kovacs). One should avoid mimicking inferior things, lest he should become worse off. By contrast, if one properly impersonates an excellent or superior object, he or she becomes a better person. Thus, *mimesis* has an ethical implication. The difference from [A-1] deception is that the act of mimicking is not necessarily hidden but rather praised or openly condemned.

Moreover, one can imitate another person without physical resemblances. In this case, the representation becomes more symbolic than actual, and the relationship between the model and an image (the impersonating person) is recognized in speech or thought. The symbolic use appears in political discourse. Herodotus explains the way

Cleisthenes behaves as *imitating* his maternal grandfather, Cleisthenes, the tyrant in Sicyon (5.67.1). Thucydides also describes the rule of the Spartan general, Pausanias, as more an *imitation* of tyranny than generalship (1.95.3). This points to some general similarities or correspondences between Pausanias and tyranny but does not imply that he consciously *mimics* it or that he does the same physical actions. In the famous funeral oration, Pericles appeals to the *mimesis* word for ethical superiority: 'our form of government does not enter into rivalry with the institutions of others. We do not *imitate* our neighbors, but are an example (*paradeigma*) to them' (Thuc. 2.37.1).

The importance of *mimesis* in ethics is more explicitly emphasized in the sayings of Democritus: 'One must either be good or *imitate* someone who is good' (DK 68 B39); 'It is bad to *imitate* the wicked, and not even to want to *imitate* the good' (B79). Ethical imitation is concerned with the roles played in society as well as in nature.

[A-3] Artistic performance

If someone mimics another person or thing in order to raise in others, that is, an audience, positive or negative feelings toward or against the object of mimicking, this kind of *mimesis* is called 'artistic performance'. Sometimes, *mimesis* is performed in order to produce laughter in the audience. This comic effect is parody or satire.

Xenophon's *Symposium* (2.21-23) describes the scene when the professional entertainer, Philip, *imitated* (i.e., mimicked) the dancing of both boys and girls accompanied by some flute music. This is done for amusement and contains parody or caricature of the extreme bodily movements of the dancers. He is not an actor in the theatre, but what he does is parallel to it. It is interesting that apart from this example in Xenophon, *mimesis* as artistic performance was rare before Plato. On the other hand, the special kind of performance called 'mime' (*mīmos*) occasionally appeared in this group.

[Type B] Reproduction

The second general meaning of *mimesis* is 'reproduction' or 'replication'. This kind is different from Type A as it produces a product *outside* the producer, i.e., in a material medium. The product of imitation is an effigy, an image, or a copy. The earliest examples are limited to the noun '*mīmēma*' (an imitated thing), such as effigy and portrait, as in Herodotus (2.78 and 2.86). But this type of *mimesis* gradually became common in the context of artistic representation by the time of Xenophon and Plato.

Xenophon (ca. 430-355 BC) reports a conversation between Socrates and the painter, Parrhasius, in *Memorabilia* (3.10.1-8).[11] This is one of the earliest texts discussing paintings (plastic arts) in the name of *mimesis*. A painter *imitates* the body (human body or corporeal thing) and makes images. The mental states of the model, namely emotions or ethical characters, can be represented (*mīmēta*). Also, when Socrates visits the sculptor, Cleiton, he asks whether he could represent the feelings of bodies in some actions.

In this important section, we find three important features of *mimesis* Type B. The first point is that 'imitating' (*mīmeisthai*) is nearly equivalent to 'image-making' (*apeikazein*) or 'likening' (*aphomoioun*). Whereas these three verbs mean either to produce a likeness (an external product) or to make oneself like (to resemble), the latter two are used more in the active voice in contrast with the first, which is a middle verb. Second, it is said that these works of art represent what we see with our eyes, namely, the appearance of the model (see especially 3.10.6). The image reproduces an outward appearance of mental states. Third, the *mimesis* or production of an image causes in beholders some enjoyment in relation to the things represented (3.10.8). Here, we should consider the relations between the four factors, namely, the maker (painter or sculptor), the model, the image, and the spectator. We should also consider that ethical effects are important for spectators.

As scholars tend to see some kind of 'development' among the different meanings, it is likely that Type A, i.e., impersonation, was original and gradually enlarged to mean Type B, i.e., reproduction. Although this has not been proved, we should be content with seeing that the two meanings were already in existence in the early fourth century BC.

3. *Mimesis* in Plato

Plato was the first author to make full use of the concept of *mimesis* in antiquity. However, his multifaceted use makes it difficult to treat this concept within a single, aesthetic viewpoint. A major difficulty comes from the fact that Plato is mainly concerned with the ethical role of *mimesis*. He is often critical of poets as those who lack the understanding of what they speak about.[12] His aim is not to deny the artistic value of their works but to criticize the educational significance of poetry for

philosophy by examining its epistemological status. Although his treatment looks far from systematic, it nevertheless paves the way for artistic theories in later generations.[13]

The importance of *mimesis* lies not only in cultural or artistic concerns but also in the metaphysical foundation. Aristotle (384-322 BC) gives us testimony of the origin of Plato's theory of Forms:

> With regard to 'participation' (*methexis*), it was only the term that he changed; for whereas the Pythagoreans say that things exist by imitation of numbers, Plato says that they exist by participation—merely a change of term. As to what this 'participation' or 'imitation' (*mīmēsis*) may be, they left this an open question. (*Metaphysics* A6. 987b, trans. Tredennick)

This statement raises many questions, since it is uncertain whether Pythagoreans themselves used the word '*mimesis*' for the relationship between things and numbers, and if so, what exactly it means. But it is true that Plato often explains the relationship between transcendent Forms and sensible things in terms of the model and its image in the *Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Cratylus*, *Parmenides*, and *Timaeus*.

Moreover, Plato sometimes compares language to an image.[14] The notion of *mimesis* is used in the philosophy of language of the *Cratylus*, where the name-giver is said to have reproduced (*memīmētai*) each thing in the name (414b). One signifies something (*dēlōma*) by bodily imitation, that is, by means of one's own body or voice and tongue (422e-423b). Then, Socrates explains how one imitates things first in voice to produce imitations, i.e., names. Comparing naming with music and painting (423c-424a), he argues that names represent things in letters and syllables (423e ff.).

Again, in political philosophy, the relation between the ideal system and human laws is analyzed as *mimesis* in the *Statesman*.[15] In *Republic* VI, the philosopher's rule of the best State is compared to the painter's depiction of the ideal model, i.e., Form. In this way, the notion of *mimesis* plays important roles in different contexts outside aesthetics.

Why does Plato base his thoughts so heavily on this notion? It is probably because it provides a theoretical scheme for two major purposes of Plato's philosophy. First, it is expected to illustrate how human beings strive for eternal, absolute reality as the *ideal* model and try to make themselves as similar to it as possible. This ethical concern is associated with metaphysical, epistemological, political, and educational uses. Second,

Plato tries to theorize how to produce better images by rejecting worse ones. This distinction is explained on the basis of the ontological theory in *Republic* X and of the division of image-making art in the *Sophist*.

As we have already seen, the first reference to *mimesis* as 'art' appears in *Republic* II, where the enlarged State is said to include 'imitators (*mimētai*)' (373b, see above in Section 1). It should be noted here that Plato puts both artists of Type A (actor and dancer) and Type B (painter, sculptor and contractor) in a single group. This is also the earliest text that mentions 'poetry' in the group of *mimesis*. Poets as imitators are mentioned in *Phaedrus* (248e) and *Timaeus* (19d-e), but no example is found in Plato's dialogues prior to *Republic* II. The *mimesis* vocabulary were used in the fifth century BC *within* tragic and comedic dramas but not *about* poets (in particular as the producer of dramas); it designates the actions of the characters in the play but not the performance of drama actors. Therefore, Plato's characterization of a poet as an imitator (*mīmētēs*) provides a new perspective on aesthetics and literary criticism.

A poet may be an imitator in either of the two meanings. When a poet himself sings or recites a poetical piece (like a rhapsode), he belongs to Type A, but when he produces a play script or directs a drama performance (as a tragic or comic poet), he belongs to Type B. Indeed, these two aspects are discussed in the two phases of the *Republic*. In Books II and III, the poet (both of epic and drama) is considered mainly as one who *speaks* (Type A). On the other hand, Book X examines the poet as one who *produces* poetical works, i.e., producers of *mimesis* (Type B). This double role of the poet (performer and producer) alludes to one reason why Plato examines poetry in two different stages in the *Republic*.

The concept of *mimesis* first receives attention in Book III when Socrates discusses how to *speak* in relation to the cultural education of children. Three modes are distinguished, namely, narrative (*diēgēsis*), *mimesis*, and their mixture. Here, *mimesis* is defined: 'to make oneself like (*homoioun*) someone else in voice or shape is to imitate (*mīmeisthai*) the person whom one makes oneself like' (393b-c). This second kind of speaking is typically seen in poetic narrative with mimicking (tragedy, comedy, and some epic), which makes a speech as if the poet were someone else (397b). Socrates then criticizes this imitative kind of speech, and suggests that children should avoid imitating many characters (especially inferior people), because it contradicts the basic principle of one-man-one-job (394e-395c). When young children learn the poetry of

the imitative kind, they themselves play different roles in performing poetry and eventually acquire this imitative nature through performance. On the other hand, some kinds of imitation, for instance, of good characteristics (virtues, e.g., bravery), are allowed and even recommended (395c-396c). It is important to note here that imitation includes the listening experience of the audience or spectators.[16] Children first hear poetry as an audience and then become performers in reciting and learning. Therefore, *mimesis* as impersonation is crucial for education, in particular, ethical character-building of the youth.

Republic X resumes the examination of poetry with two new theories. After the initial treatment in Books II-III, the tripartite division of the soul (Book IV) and the theory of Forms (Books V-VII) were introduced. Based on these two, Socrates then examines 'what *mimesis* in general is' (595c). He justifies his severe treatment of poets, i.e., banishment of imitative artists from the ideal State. The critical examination takes four stages: ontological, pedagogical, epistemological and psychological.

First, the painter and poet are defined as makers not of real things (i.e., Forms) but of their sensible images (i.e., the craftsman's products) (596c-e, 597d-e). Also, they make these not as they really *are* but as they *appear* (598a-b). Therefore, this *mimesis* is regarded as the production of the third, removed from the truth and reality (597e). This argument concerning the ontological status of *mimesis* is notorious for modern commentators, because it seems to confine *mimesis* to the narrow object of outward appearances. However, we should consider the whole context, which presents a series of critical considerations for poetry.

Second, the poet is examined in terms of his knowledge of what he speaks (598d-601b). Homer, the greatest poet, is usually believed to possess a wide range of knowledge and expertise, especially concerning war and human education. But he turns out to have produced no good city or pupil. Therefore, a poet is again regarded as a mere maker of images of virtues; like painters, he is not someone who touches truth and reality.

Third, in contrast with the user and the maker of tools, the poet as *mīmētēs* is concluded to stand third away from the truth in terms of how much knowledge each possesses (601b-602c).

And finally, it turns out that mimetic ability appeals to the inferior part of human souls and deceives them. The power of *mimesis* unconsciously draws the soul to

emotions against reason, and therefore, it is too dangerous to be accepted in the ideal State (602c-605b).

This severe attack on poetry and *mimesis*, though the antagonism between philosophy and poetry is intentionally exaggerated (607b-c),[17] raises many controversies among scholars. But we should remember that this argument is expected to supplement earlier arguments on the mimetic aspect of early education in Books II-III. The more philosophical examination of *mimesis* in Book X provides a basic theoretical scheme to distinguish good and bad mimetic education.

The distinction of good and bad images is clearly shown in the later dialogue, *Sophist*, in the inquiry of defining the sophist. The sophist's art is compared with painting and sculpting, and then, their generic concept 'image-making' (*eidōlopoiikē*) (also called 'imitative art', *mīmētikē*) is to be divided into two: one is 'likeness-making' (*eikastikē*), which keeps the true proportions of the original, and the other is 'apparition-making' (*phantastikē*), which distorts them and makes an image appear like the original. The sophist, the object of definitional inquiry, is to be found in the latter kind, which is further subdivided into two: 'the one is making by means of instruments (*di' organōn*), while in the other, the person who makes an apparition provides himself as an instrument (*organon*)' (267a). While the imitator, in a wider sense (such as a painter and a sculptor) [Type B], produces images using external materials (a canvas, paints, a paintbrush, bronze, etc.), the imitator (*mīmētēs*), in a narrow sense [Type A], produces an image out of himself, i.e., by using his own body or voice. On this distinction, the sophist is finally defined as 'an *imitator* of the wise' (268c). The impersonation of the sophist turns out to be deceptive ethical imitation of himself as well as of his pupils. Thus, Plato criticizes poets and sophists in a parallel way by using imitative art (e.g., painting) as an illustration.[18]

Impersonation is crucial in philosophy and education, for to imitate someone else is to shape and mold oneself according to a model (cf. *Rep*. III 396d-e). Therefore, to imitate virtue is to make invisible virtue visible or to visualize and embody virtue in oneself. 'The wise' (*sophos*) that men should truly imitate is the god, since true wisdom can only be attributed to the god.[19] Whereas the sophist imitates the wise by appearing to be wise without really being so, the philosopher endeavors to visualize or embody invisible virtue and make a model of it in himself. Therefore, the philosopher is a person who becomes like a god in respect of wisdom as far as human beings are allowed.

The *Theaetetus* includes the famous digression about the philosopher, which explains that to escape from earth to heaven (a motif of a philosopher in the *Phaedo*) is to become as like a god as possible (176b). A similar expression is found in the *Republic*: 'anyone who eagerly wishes to become just, and who makes himself as much like a god as a human being can by pursuing virtue, will never be neglected by the gods' (X, 613a-b). Another passage of *Republic* VI expresses the same idea as the philosopher's imitating (*mīmeisthai*) what really is (i.e., Forms) to become as divine and ordered as a human being can (500b-d). 'Becoming like a god' (*homoiōsis theōi*) becomes the aim for Platonists in late antiquity. It also becomes one of the origins of the Christian idea of 'imitation of Christ' (*imitatio Christi*).

The Platonic idea of ethical *mimesis* is placed in the context of cosmology. The *Timaeus* presents the universe as being structured by means of *mimesis*. The relation between the Form and the sensible things that partake of it is compared to one between the model (*paradeigma*) and its images (48e-49a). The Demiurge, namely, divine craftsman, makes the universe as the image of the Form; for example, celestial bodies imitate the nature of eternity, and time imitates eternity; therefore, the universe becomes like the perfect intelligible living thing as much as possible (39d-e).

In the human body, the circular motion in the head imitates the divine circular motions of the spherical universe (44d). The physical structure of our body resembles the whole universe, and therefore, the faculty of sight is devised to observe the intelligible circular motions in the heaven. By *imitating* the circular motions of the heaven, we should correct our wandering elements of intelligence (47b-c). In this way, the various movements in the human body imitate the motions of the universe (80b, 81b, 88d). Therefore, the soul imitates the higher nature of the heaven, namely, the soul of the whole universe. Later Platonists, in particular, Plotinus, develop this idea on a larger scale.

Thus, we see that Plato's arguments on *mimesis* chiefly concern impersonation or ethical imitation. It is in order to clarify the importance of this aspect of *mimesis* that he clarifies the generic art of *mīmētikē* and uses representational art as an illustration. In this respect, his concern is alien from the modern interest of aesthetic art.

4. *Mimesis* in Aristotle

Whereas Plato uses the notion of *mimesis* in such a wide range of fields as metaphysics, epistemology, linguistics, ethics, education and politics, Aristotle cautiously confines his argument to a field of aesthetics, namely, the *Poetics*. He scarcely appeals to the *mimesis* vocabulary in such scientific disciplines as physics, cosmology, psychology and metaphysics. In *Ethics* and *Politics*, however, he occasionally uses it for arguments concerning the education of children[20] and ethical imitation.[21] This may be a response to the Platonic discussion of mimetic education in the *Republic*. This striking contrast already indicates the difference between Aristotle's and Plato's treatment of this concept. Probably in this respect, Aristotle tries to dissociate his own thinking from his master's.

The treatise *Poetics* (*Peri poiētikēs*) is the only surviving part of Aristotle's third division of philosophy along with physics and ethics. The word '*poiētikē*' means the narrow field of poetry as well as 'making' in general. Although it focuses on tragedy (and deals with epic in so far as it is contrasted with tragedy), he seems intent on discussing comedy in the second book (lost or unwritten).[22]

The basic trust in *mimesis* as the foundation of his poetical theory lies in the observation of its important role in human nature.

> It is an instinct of human beings, from childhood, to engage in *mimesis*, indeed, this distinguishes them from other animals: man is the most mimetic of all, and it is through *mimesis* that he develops his earliest understanding; and equally natural that everyone enjoys mimetic objects. (4, 1448b, trans. S. Halliwell)

Aristotle appeals to some examples of aesthetic experience: man enjoys contemplating the images of vilest animals and corpses. This pleasant experience is the basis for learning and understanding, since men infer what is represented by looking at images. Therefore, because *mimesis* is a natural ability of human beings, poetry as mimetic activity is developed and completed out of human nature.

In order to define poetry, Aristotle starts the treatise from the generic notion of *mimesis*, which comprises a wide range of artistic activity: epic, tragedy, comedy, dithyramb, music, dance, etc. This general list of mimetic arts shows that he takes over

Plato's treatment of *mimesis* in the *Republic*. Painting and sculpture are also included in a general notion of *mimesis*, and therefore, Aristotle often uses these visual arts as illustration for poetry.[23] This method of illustration is another influence of his master. He classifies it according to the three respects, namely, media, objects, and modes of producing *mimesis* (ch.1).

First, in respect of media, i.e., rhythm, language, and melody, three groups are distinguished. Each of them alone is used in dance (rhythm), prose and metre (language). This is followed by the combination of two: music for flute and lyre (rhythm and melody), epic and elegy (rhythm and language). Only dramas, namely, tragedy and comedy, and dithyramb use all three media.

Second, according to different types of objects, mimetic genres are again distinguished. On the ground that 'mimetic artists represent (*mimountai*) people in action' (4, 1447b), some imitate serious and superior people, some imitate inferior people, and others imitate people in between. This distinction is applied to picture, dance, music, prose, epic, dithyramb and *nomes*. But while these genres contain all three kinds, tragedy and comedy are distinguished according to objects: the former represents superior people, and the latter inferior (ch. 2).

Third, the modes of *mimesis* are distinguished: narrative with direct personation (Homeric epic), invariable narrative voice (other epic), and direct enactment of all roles (dramas) (ch. 3). This tripartite division basically corresponds to Plato's in *Republic* III. With these three respects, then, tragedy is distinguished from the other kinds of *mimesis*, especially comedy and epic.

Based on these considerations, Aristotle presents the famous definition of tragedy in chapter 6:

> Tragedy is *mimesis* of an action which is elevated, complete, and of magnitude; in language embellished by distinct forms in its sections; employing the mode of enactment, not narrative; and through pity and fear accomplishing the purification of such emotions. (6. 1449b)

Then, six components of tragedy are introduced: plot (*mythos*), character (*ēthos*), diction, thought (*dianoia*), spectacle and lyric poetry. Through these, tragic actors

imitate people in action; tragic *mimesis* brings about special psychological effects called *katharsis* in the audience.

Tragedy is the *mimesis* of action and life and not of persons. Therefore, the plot, i.e., structure of events (*pragmata*, i.e. results of action), is the goal and soul of tragedy (1450a). The action (*praxis*) is an intentional choice of a human being, and an event is what is conducted by an agent. The character and thought of a person accompany the action as far as they explain it.

A tragedy, composed in a limited magnitude, represents a unity and whole action, that is, a human life (ch. 9). *Mimesis* is not simply to represent or reproduce a certain portion of life. By means of a plot, it makes a life visible as a structured whole. This consideration of poetic *mimesis*, therefore, provides us with rich possibilities to understand literature as creating our life and reality.[24]

Finally, Aristotle relates tragedy with philosophy. When he argues that the poet is a maker not of verses but of plots, by virtue of *mimesis*, he means that the poet speaks not actual events, but 'the *kinds* of things that might occur and are possible in terms of probability (*eikos*) or necessity (*anagkaion*)' (1451a-b). Since this is *universal*, poetry is deemed more philosophical than history (ch. 9). In contrast to Plato's critical attitudes towards mimetic arts, especially the severe criticism of poetry in *Republic* X, Aristotle opens a new perspective on the philosophical role of *mimesis* in the field of aesthetics.

5. Creative imitation in Hellenistic and Roman authors

While *mimesis* for Plato and Aristotle means representation of objects, such as things, human actions and characters, another dimension of *mimesis* becomes more important in Hellenistic and Roman times: that is, *mimesis* or *imitatio* of other authors and works in oratory and literature. This is called 'creative imitation'.[25]

Scholars in the Hellenistic world studied and appropriated the great works of Greek poets and prose writers from the Archaic and Classical eras. Homer and Hesiod were no doubt major objects of such appropriation. Apollonius of Rhodes (third century BC) carefully studied Homeric epic in the Library of Alexandria and composed the *Argonautica* modeling on Homer, while his teacher, Callimachus (ca. 310/305-240 BC), doubted whether they could still work on the same style or scale as the great epic poets. But when Aratus (ca. 315/310-240 BC) wrote *Phaenomena* on the model of Hesiod's

Works and Days and took some themes from the *Theogony*, Callimachus explicitly pointed out this modeling in his praise of Aratus in *Epigram* 27.[26] Hellenistic authors were particularly concerned with styles, since the Greek language had already undergone much change from the Archaic and Classical periods. The theorists of Greek rhetoric, such as Dionysius of Halicarnassus (in Augustan Rome, first century BC), praised the Attic style and recommended the study of Classical authors and an imitation of their style, a trend called Atticism.

Latin authors had to be sensitive in their relationship with Greek predecessors. Since they started artistic activities when the literary genres were already firmly established in the Greek world, they first borrowed the themes, styles, and even vocabulary from their Greek models in epic, tragedy, comedy, history, oratory and philosophy. One of the greatest Latin literatures, *Aeneas* of Virgil (70-19 BC), was a single original work modeled on Homer's *Ilias* and *Odyssey*.[27] Already among his successors, literary critics and grammarians, such as Valerius Probus (ca. 20-105), were excited to compare Virgil and his models.[28] In this way, modeling or appropriation became not only a preeminent method of creation but also a common topic for literary criticism. They judged the technique and originality of each work in relation to its model(s).

Imitatio (a Latin word for '*mimesis*', etymologically related to '*imago*') was particularly emphasized in the rhetorical tradition. Cicero (106-43 BC), in *De Oratore* (55 BC), discusses how to become an ideal orator and has Antonius, a main speaker of the dialogue, say:

> Let this then be my first counsel, that we show the student whom to imitate (*quem imitetur*), and to imitate in such a way as to strive with all possible care to attend the most excellent qualities of his model. (II.90, trans. E. W. Sutton)

Cicero finds it crucial to examine whom to choose as a model and then what qualities of the model to attain (II.92). He introduces some Roman orators, including Crassus, his own model and a main speaker in *De Oratore*, but soon moves to the Greek authors, because there remained more writings in Greek for judgment of style than in Latin: some speeches recorded in Thucydides (Pericles and Alcibiades), and the works of Lysias and Isocrates are recommended.[29] He insists that they must have had some single model for imitation to keep the uniformity of style, i.e., the Attic style. On the

other hand, when this imitation faded, a new style of 'less spirited and lazier styles of speaking' (i.e., the Asian style) flourished (II.95). In this way, Cicero regards imitation of good models as the proper way of practicing oratory and keeping the good tradition.

In rhetoric, this concern about *whom* to imitate is more extensively discussed by Quintilian (ca. 35-100) in the *Institutio Oratoria* (written around 95), Book X, chapters 1 and 2. In the discussion about becoming an ideal orator, Quintilian introduces several model authors as objects of imitation and then insists that 'we must form our minds on the model of every excellence'. This claim is based on the observation that a main task of artists is to imitate whatever has been invented with success (X.2.1). While the importance of *imitatio* is obvious, he warns that one should select the good models for imitation: whom to imitate and which elements of authors to imitate (2.14). Also, each student should be aware of the limits of his own ability (2.19). *Imitatio* alone is not sufficient, for he says: 'the greatest qualities of the orator are beyond all imitation, by which I mean, talent, invention, force, facility and all the qualities which are independent of art' (2.12, trans. H. E. Butler). While each literary genre has a different rule, we should imitate the common elements of all forms of eloquence (2.22). We should use more than one model (2.24), and imitation should not be confined to words, but situations and persons should be carefully observed so as to be able to imitate the models with accuracy (2.27).

It is usually assumed that Quintilian bases this consideration on the treatise *De Imitatione* of Dionysius of Halicarnassus. This treatise originally consisted of three books, but only a few fragments of Book I and an epitome of Book II remain.[30] There, Dionysius discusses *mimesis* as an important method of educating rhetors. He defines: '*Mimesis* is an activity reproducing the model by means of theoretical principles. *Zēlos* is an activity of the mind, roused to admiration of something believed to be beautiful' (fr. 2, trans. Russell). Here, *mimesis* and *zēlos* (emulation) are not contrasted but complement each other.[31]

Thus, *imitatio* means not a mere copy of the model; it is a literary competition to produce better works. As Cicero is clearly aware of Latin authors' relation to Greek, *imitatio* is an essential factor in the field of rhetoric. However, apart from this cross-cultural relationship, rhetorical teaching had already been based on imitating excellent models. Isocrates (436-338 BC), in the pamphlet *Against the Sophists*, claims:

> The teacher must in himself set such an example (*paradeigma*) of oratory that the students who have taken form under his instruction and are able to pattern after him (*mīmēsasthai*) will, from the outset, show in their speaking a degree of grace and charm which is not found in others. (17-18, trans. George Norlin)

The Isocratic teaching of *mimesis* probably originates from Gorgias' teaching, reported in Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations*, (ch. 34), i.e., to learn many examples of rhetorical speech by heart.

By contrast, the Platonic notion of *mimesis* is revived in the rhetorical education of Cicero's later work, *Orator* (46 BC). Cicero investigates the possibility of the perfect orator with reference to Platonic Forms. The ideal may never exist; nevertheless, the consummate and perfect style of oratory can be achieved by conceiving the ideal of perfect eloquence in mind through imagination, although we catch only the copy with our ears (ii.8-iii.9).

Molding oneself after the prefect model is also discussed in *On the Sublime* by 'Longinus' (first century AD?). To attain sublimity of thought and expression, the author urges us to imagine how great authors, such as Homer, Plato, Demosthenes and Thucydides, would have said or thought. 'Emulation (*zēlos*) will bring those great characters before our eyes, and their shining presence will lead our thoughts to the ideal standards of perfection' (14.1, trans. W. H. Fyfe and D. Russell).

Imitatio is deemed creative in contrast with *interpretatio*. Horace (65-8 BC), in *Ars Poetica*, clearly states this principle:

> In ground open to all you will win private rights, if you do not linger along the easy and open pathway, if you do not seek to render word for word as a slavish translator (*interpres*), and if in your copying (*imitator*) you do not leap into the narrow well, out of which either shame or the laws of your task will keep you from stirring a step. (131-135, trans. H. R. Fairclough)

Thus, *mimesis* or *imitatio* was a recommendable form of creative production both in oratory and literature in late antiquity. First, the knowledge of predecessors was a necessary training for any author or orator to acquire a good style and skills. Second, the imitation of excellent, selected models produces good and eventually original

products. Third, *mimesis* makes a tradition and keeps it alive. Thus, whereas modern Romanticist views make a sharp contrast between creativity and imitation, and thereupon devaluate the latter, ancient writers tend to see the good combination of the two as a key to literary or educational success.

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[1] See for example, McKeon (1952), Lucas (1968), Appendix I.
[2] For example, Verdenius (1949) defends Plato against criticism from Romanticism.
[3] See Beekes (2010), on '*mīmos*'.
[4] E.g., Else (1958, 78).
[5] This is suggested by Koller (1954).
[6] *Pace* Sörbom (1966).
[7] Else (1958, 79, 87).
[8] Halliwell (1986, 111-116), Halliwell (2002, 15).
[9] Sörbom (1966, 38-40).
[10] Cf. Else (1958), Sörbom (1966).
[11] For the analysis, see Sörbom (1966, 80-98).
[12] Cf. *Ap*. 22b-c, *Ion* 533e-534e, *Men*. 99c-d, *Tim*. 72a, *Lg*. 801b-c.
[13] Cf. Panofsky (1924).
[14] Cf. *Phd*. 99e-100a, *Tim*. 47b-c, *Crit*. 107b-c.
[15] Cf. Notomi (2017).
[16] Adam (1902, vol. 1, 150).
[17] Cf. Most (2011).
[18] Cf. Notomi (1991), Notomi (2011).
[19] Cf. *Sph*. 233a; cf. *Ap*. 20c-23c, *Phdr*. 278d; cf. *Symp*. 204a-b, *Lys*. 218a-b.
[20] *Pol.* VII.17, 1336a, b; 8.5, 1340a.
[21] *EN*. III.7, 1115b; IV.3, 1124b; IX.11, 1171b.
[22] Cf. Janko (1984).
[23] E.g., *Po*. 1448b, 1450a, 1454b, 1460b,14 61b.
[24] For example, Ricoeur (1983) interprets the *Poetics* for his 'threefold mimesis'.
[25] Cf. West and Woodman (1979).
[26] Cf. Russell (1979, 2).
[27] This aspect is carefully studied by Knauer (1979).
[28] Cf. Russell (1979, 7-9).
[29] Cf. Fantham (1978).
[30] Cf. Aujac (1992).
[31] Cf. Russell (1979).

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