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## LITERARY CRITICISM AND THE CONCEPT OF IMITATION IN ANTIQUITY

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THE term "imitation" is not prominent in the vocabulary of criticism today. In such use as it still has, it serves to segregate the bad from the good in art rather more frequently than to set the boundaries of art. Yet as late as the eighteenth century imitation was the mark and differentia of the arts, or at least of some of them. To the critics of that century, literature and painting were imitative arts, and it was still important to debate whether or not music was an art of imitation.<sup>1</sup> The term had begun to slip into disrepute in writings on the philosophy of art even before critics of art found it cumbersome or inappropriate, and substitutes for it with more familiar philosophic justification have long since been found; if it does occa-

<sup>1</sup> Thus, James Harris, in the second of his *Three treatises* (first published in 1744) entitled "A discourse on music, painting, and poetry," treats poetry, painting, and music as three types of imitation differing in their media and modes of imitation (2d. ed. [1765], pp. 55 ff.), although he goes on to say that poetry disposes of the charm of "numbers" as well as imitation (p. 92) and music possesses, besides the power of imitation, the power of raising affections (p. 99), "whereas Painting has pretence to no Charm, except that of Imitation" (p. 92). Thomas Twining, on the other hand, in the dissertation "On poetry considered as an imitative art," which he prefaced to his translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* (first published in 1789), distinguishes four senses of imitation as applied to poetry: imitation by the sounds of the words, by description, by fiction, and by dramatic imitation; and he argues (2d ed. [1812], I, 35) that, since the last is the proper sense of imitation, it is incorrect to say that all poetry is imitation; only dramatic poetry is properly imitative. Moreover, in the second dissertation prefaced to his translation, "On the different senses of the word, imitative, as applied to music by the ancients, and by the moderns," Twining concludes his argument by quoting with approbation from James Beattie's treatise *On poetry and music* the statement that music should be stricken off the list of the imitative arts (p. 91) and by maintaining further that painting, sculpture, and the arts of design in general are "the only arts that are obviously and essentially imitative" (p. 92).

sionally return to use, with the proper protection of a warning that it does not mean literal representation of its object, it is seldom extended to include music or literature.<sup>2</sup>

The defense, such as it is, of "imitation" as a term applicable to poetry or suited to apply to all of the arts, has in our times fallen largely into the hands of historians of aesthetics and criticism; and although the fortune varies in the debate, the discredit which the term has suffered in modern criticism tends to be found earlier and earlier. "That the 'Imitation' doctrine of the *Poetics* is in some respects disputable need not be denied," according to Saintsbury,<sup>3</sup> "and that it lent itself rather easily to serious misconstruction is certain. But let us remember also that it is an attempt—perhaps the first attempt, and one that has not been much bettered in all the improvements upon it—to adjust those proportions of nature and art which actually do exist in poetry." "It is natural," Bosanquet says,<sup>4</sup> "that the earliest formula adopted by reflection should be strained to the breaking point before it is abandoned." "Aristotle, as his manner was," according to Butcher,<sup>5</sup> "accepted the current phrase and interpreted it anew. True, he may sometimes have been misled by its guidance, and not infrequently his meaning is obscured by his adherence to the outworn formula." Atkins writes:<sup>6</sup>

Moreover the statement [i.e., Plato's statement of the relation of the arts to each other and to the universe in *Laws* 889B-D] helps to explain why "imitation" (and not "creation" or "expression") had been adopted as the process common to all the arts. To the Greeks before Plato, devoid of a mystical sense of an invisible order of realities, the plain and obvious fact was that the artist did not produce the objects of real life, but their appearances only; and it was therefore inevitable that the impression produced on their minds was rather that of imitative representation than of creation, interpretation, or the like.

The practice of historians of literary criticism would be conclusive, even if their evidence from the writers of antiquity were not impres-

<sup>2</sup> Thus George Santayana, in *Reason in art*, Vol. IV of *The Life of Reason* (New York, 1917), pp. 144 ff., discusses sculpture, acting, and painting as modes of imitation. Music, poetry, prose, and architecture had, however, been treated in earlier chapters before the concept of imitation was introduced.

<sup>3</sup> George Saintsbury, *A history of criticism and literary taste in Europe* (New York, 1900), I, 54.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Bosanquet, *A history of aesthetics* (4th ed.; London, 1917), p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle's theory of poetry and fine art* (4th ed.; London, 1923), p. 122.

<sup>6</sup> J. W. H. Atkins, *Literary criticism in antiquity* (Cambridge, 1934), I, 52.

sive, in establishing the variety of the meanings which the term "imitation" has assumed in the course of its history. Yet that diversity of meaning is seldom the direct object of critical attention: the term is vague, inadequate, primitive, and its use involves a play on words when it does not lead to self-contradiction. But when one returns to the ancient writers on which these historical labors are employed, it is difficult to retain a sense of the limitations and deficiencies with which scholarship has enriched the term. Instead, constant vigilance is required to discover the ineptitudes which should result from the use of so inept a word. For all the attempts that have been made to define "imitation" and for all the care that has been exercised in examining the statement in which it occurs, the philosophical contexts in which the word "imitation" is used and methodological questions as they apply to its use have received little scrutiny. Yet the meaning of a word will alter with a change in either context or peculiarities of method, notwithstanding that the definition may be retained; and if these remain unchanged, it is possible for the doctrine of imitation to persist in all essentials, even when the term has disappeared. If the critical views in which the word "imitation" appeared, no less than methodological devices peculiar to the systems in which the term was used, have survived the discredit of the term itself, the attempt to distinguish among the critical approaches of antiquity may not be without relevance to the modern analogues that have replaced them.

The word "imitation," as Plato uses it, is at no time established in a literal meaning or delimited to a specific subject matter. It is sometimes used to differentiate some human activities from others or some part of them from another part or some aspect of a single act from another; it is sometimes used in a broader sense to include all human activities; it is sometimes applied even more broadly to all processes—human, natural, cosmic, and divine. Like most of the terms that figure prominently in the dialogues, "imitation" as a term is left universal in scope and indeterminate in application. The dialectical method is used to determine its meaning in particular contexts, sometimes bringing out a meaning according to which any given statement in which it may occur is true, sometimes with equal force the meanings in which

the statement is false; not infrequently both ends are accomplished in a single dialogue. Of existent objects, Plato says,<sup>7</sup> there are three things necessary for knowledge: the name (*ὄνομα*), the reason (*λόγος*), and the image (*εἶδωλον*); knowledge and the object itself are apart from these. Whether or not Plato wrote the epistle in which those distinctions are made, his practice seems to conform to it. "For as yet," the Stranger says at the beginning of the *Sophist*,<sup>8</sup> "we have in common concerning him only the name." He suggests that he and his interlocutor doubtless have the thing in mind as well; but they must come to an agreement concerning the thing by means of reason, not by the mere words without the reason. Somewhat later, in discussing angling, they arrive at agreement not only concerning the name but also concerning the reason or definition of the thing itself.<sup>9</sup> But when the search for the Sophist grows into an inquiry into being and non-being, pursued by way of word and reason, the Stranger remarks that in the case of being, as in that of every single thing which is supposed to be one, we call the single thing by many names and treat it as many.<sup>10</sup> Not infrequently the speakers in the Platonic dialogues have reason to complain of the opposite difficulty, that many things are found to have the same name. It is probable that no small part of Plato's distrust of the written word is caused by the margin of independence which obtains between words, things, and reasons but which can be controlled in conversation by a skilled dialectician.

In any case, to require Plato to conform to an Aristotelian conception of definitions or terms in which words are assigned univocal meanings would be to distort his inquiry and make nonsense of much of his dialectic. It is invalid criticism to point out that a term like "imitation" has many meanings in Plato, and for the same reason it is questionable defense of the Platonic position to resolve the many meanings into one.<sup>11</sup> The word might be said to be defined in the

<sup>7</sup> *Epist.* vii. 342A-B.

<sup>8</sup> *Sophist* 218C.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 221B.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 251A-B. Consequent on this relation of names to things, Socrates frequently reproaches his respondents for finding many things where one is sought (as in *Meno* 72A or 77A), or again he is reproached by them for changing the meanings of his terms (as in *Gorgias* 483A); and on the other hand, speakers are praised for reducing many or infinite things to one name and for finding appropriate names for each subdivision (as in *Theaetetus* 147C-148B).

<sup>11</sup> J. Tate thus finds two kinds of imitation in the *Republic*: imitation in the literal sense, the mere copying of sensible objects; and imitation in an analogical sense, such that poetry in which imitation of this sort occurred could be considered non-imitative ("Imi-

course of the dialogues, but it receives no fixed meaning. The discussion proceeds by applying things and reasons to the elucidation of words, and in that process "imitation" and all like words suffer extensions and limitations. Unless the list is made indefinitely long to include infinite possible meanings, it is hardly accurate to say that the word has "several senses." From one point of view, "imitation" has only one meaning in Plato; from another, it has infinite meanings.

The methodological considerations which are so prominent in the use of words, and which control their meanings in what Plato would call a strange and wonderful fashion, may be stated in a way that has excellent Platonic precedent by setting forth the things to which Plato applied the word "imitation" and the other words which Plato applied to the same things—the many words which are applied to one thing, and the many things to which one word is applied. Without such considerations, on the other hand, inasmuch as they underlie some of Plato's most esteemed devices for displaying the meanings of words, it is difficult to know how the Platonic doctrine of poetry (to mention only one application) can be stated, or how its relation to later theories can be estimated, or how the condemnations which Plato passed on poets can be judged. In one of its narrowest senses Plato used the word "imitation" to distinguish poetic styles into three kinds: pure narrative, in which the poet speaks in his own person without imitation, as in the dithyramb; narrative by means of imitation, in which the poet speaks in the person of his characters, as in comedy and tragedy; and mixed narrative, in which the poet speaks now in his own person and now by means of imitation.<sup>12</sup> In the *Repub-*

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tion' in Plato's *Republic*," in the *Classical quarterly*, XXII [1928], 23). In a later article ("Plato and 'imitation,'" *ibid.*, XXVI [1932], 161–69), Mr. Tate refers to this as a distinction between a good and a bad sense of the term "imitation": poetry which is imitative in the bad sense is excluded from the ideal state, while poetry which is imitative in the good sense can be called non-imitative rather than imitative, depending on the sense in which the term "imitative" is used. In this second article Mr. Tate finds support in the remaining dialogues for his earlier interpretation of imitation in the *Republic*. W. C. Greene contrasts the "literal kind of imitation" implied in the tenth book of the *Republic* with the imitation in the second and third books of the *Republic* which involves an attenuated form of the doctrine of ideas and which is criticized on ethical grounds in a not-unfriendly spirit ("Plato's view of poetry," in *Harvard studies in classical philology*, XXIX [1918], 37–38). In Book x, according to Mr. Greene, Plato begs the question by assuming that the definition of imitation will cover the aim of poetry (p. 53). Imitation in its broadest sense was a metaphor to which Plato resorted, with evident dissatisfaction, to explain the relation of the world of sense to the world of ideas (p. 66).

<sup>12</sup> *Republic* iii. 392D–394C.

*lie* the preference among poets is for the unmixed imitator of the good, since the guardians of an ideal state should be educated to imitate only what is appropriate to them.<sup>13</sup> Even this discussion of style and the manner of imitation involves a distinction of objects of imitation into worthy and unworthy in terms of the scale of their perfection of being. Moreover, previous to the discussion of style, the examination of the tales themselves, limited to proper subjects among gods, heroes, and men, led to a distinction not between worthy and unworthy but between true and false. The truths of poetry are imitations of the good. Falsehoods in words are likewise imitations, but the objects of such imitations have no external existence. False tales are imitations (*μίμημα*) of a lie in the soul, an after-rising image (*εἶδωλον*) of it. Poetry, even false, is not an unmixed falsehood, but requires the antecedent lie for its explanation.<sup>14</sup>

The terms alternative to "imitation" (*μίμησις*) begin to make their appearance in the discussion of falsity. A lie occurs when one copies (*εἰκάζειν*) the true nature of gods and heroes badly; it is comparable to a portrait which bears no resemblance (*ὁμοία*) to the painter's model.<sup>15</sup> The argument concerning imitation may, moreover, be applied to the form in which it is itself stated, for the lie of the poet is explained by the image and likeness of the painter. Even at this early stage "imitation" may be applied to poetry in several senses; according to one, dramatic poetry is imitative of the speech of the characters; according to another, false poetry is imitative of a lie in the soul; according to a third, true poetry is imitative of the good. The lawgiver will lay down laws and patterns (*τύπος*) to which the poet will be required to conform;<sup>16</sup> and as soon as the philosopher is given his function in the perfect state, he too enters into the imitative process. He imitates the things which truly are and assimilates (*ἀφομοιοῦσθαι*) himself to them. He should, moreover, be compelled to mold (*πλάττειν*) human nature to his vision; no city is happy unless its lineaments have been traced by artists who used the heavenly model (*παραδείγμα*).<sup>17</sup> Through these varying applications the term "imitation" indicates a constant relation between something

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* iii. 397D.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* ii. 382B.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* ii. 377E.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* ii. 380C.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* vi. 500C-E.

which is and something made like it: the likeness itself may be good or bad, real or apparent. When, consequently, poetry is examined again in the tenth book of the *Republic* and is found to be imitative, it is incorrect to suppose that the word "imitation" has been unduly extended or that it has been given a new literal sense. The imitator (μιμητής) is defined as a maker of images (εἰδωλου ποιητής) and is contrasted to the maker of realities; unlike the latter he has no knowledge of being but only of appearances.<sup>18</sup> Both varieties of maker, moreover, stand in contrast to an eternal reality. Like the painter who paints the picture of a couch, the imitator makes a product at three removes from nature, for he imitates not that which is but that which seems to be, not the truth but a phantasm.<sup>19</sup> Poetry, therefore, at that removal from truth, attains only a small part of the object, and the part it attains is not the object itself but an image (εἶδωλον) capable of deceiving. If the poet were able to produce the things he imitates instead of making only images, if he had knowledge of the truth, he would abandon imitation.<sup>20</sup> Truth and falsity, knowledge and opinion, reality and appearance delimit at each step the scope of "imitation"; but as its application has varied, it has marked consistently a contrast between the work of imitation and something else which is, in comparison with it, real.

Even when limited to poetry and analogous activities, then, the concept of imitation may expand and contract. It may embrace a part of poetry, or all poetry, or even philosophy as well. But it also extends to other human activities. All the arts are imitative. The painter is comparable to the poet in his imitative character;<sup>21</sup> a good picture is one which reproduces the colors and figures of its subject.<sup>22</sup> Music is an imitation (μίμησις), a representation (ἀπεικασία), a copy (εἰκαστική); good music possesses a standard of rightness and is a likeness of the beautiful (ὁμοιότης τοῦ καλοῦ).<sup>23</sup> The entire art of dancing is the result of imitation of what is said in song or speech.<sup>24</sup> Since values are determined either by the adequacy of the representa-

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* x. 601C.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* x. 597D-598B.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* x. 599A.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* x. 596E; *Sophist* 234B.

<sup>22</sup> *Cratylus* 431C.

<sup>23</sup> *Laws* ii. 668A-B; cf. vii. 798D-E; *Cratylus* 423D.

<sup>24</sup> *Laws* vii. 816A.

tion or the character of the object imitated, the standards in dance and song may be stated in moral terms: figures and melodies which are expressive of the virtues of body or soul, or of copies (εἰκῶν) of them, are good.<sup>25</sup> Or the term "imitation" may be expanded in another direction from poetry. All verbal accounts, including the dialogues themselves, are imitations. At the beginning of the dialogue which bears his name, Critias remarks that all discourse is imitation (μίμησις) and representation (ἀπεικασιά); and he complains that his task is more difficult than the one that Timaeus performed, inasmuch as image-making (εἰδωλοποιία) is subjected to closer criticism when it represents well-known human subjects than when it represents divine things in which we are content with a small degree of likeness.<sup>26</sup> But in the *Timaeus* Socrates finds a difficulty in discourse almost the contrary to that of which Critias complained. To bring out the competence of the speakers in the succeeding dialogues, Socrates had been developing the contrast, in terms of the degree of their knowledge and the nature of their discourse, of philosophers and statesmen to the imitative tribe of poets and the wandering Sophists; the defects of his own presentation in the *Republic*, comparable to a defect he finds exemplified by the poets, arise from the fact that familiar things are easy to imitate, but what is unfamiliar is difficult to imitate in action and even more difficult in words.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the component parts of poems, discourses, and dialogues are imitations. Words imitate things in a fashion distinct from that of music or design,<sup>28</sup> and the letters of which words are composed are themselves means of imitation. From letters and syllables, the lawgiver forms a sign (σημείον) and a name (ὄνομα) for each thing; and from names he compounds all the rest by imitation.<sup>29</sup> When the nature of things is imitated by letters and syllables, the copy (εἰκῶν) is good if it gives all that is appropriate, bad if it omits a little.<sup>30</sup>

Not only arts, philosophy, and discourse are imitation. Human institutions must be added to the list. All governments are imitations of the true government,<sup>31</sup> and the laws themselves, source of the true

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* ii. 655B ff.; cf. vii. 812C.

<sup>26</sup> *Cratylus* 423C–424B.

<sup>27</sup> *Critias* 107B–C.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 426C–427C.

<sup>29</sup> *Timaeus* 19D–20B.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 431D.

<sup>31</sup> *Statesman* 293E; cf. *ibid.* 297C. It is significant, once more, that the nature of that imitation of the true government is explained by recourse to an image or figure (εἰκῶν, σχῆμα) in which the king is represented (ἀπεικάζειν) as pilot and physician.



government, are imitations of particulars of the truth which are written down, so far as that is possible, from the dictation of those who know.<sup>32</sup> But the expansion of the word "imitation" passes beyond human products, actions, virtues, and institutions; it extends to things themselves. All things change, imitating and following what happens to the entire universe; and the imitation conforms to its model even in conception, generation, and nutrition.<sup>33</sup> It extends finally to the first principles of things. The universe is distinguishable into three fundamental forms: the model form (*παραδείγματος εἶδος*), the imitation of the model (*μίμημα παραδείγματος*), and the Space or Receptacle in which Becoming takes place. Figures enter and depart in the Receptacle, as in a lump of gold which is curiously manipulated, in imitation of eternal figures, stamped (*τυποῦν*) from them in a marvelous fashion.<sup>34</sup>

In its expansion and contraction, the word "imitation" indicates the lesser term of the proportion of being to appearance: if God is, the universe is an imitation; if all things are, shadows and reflections are imitations; if the products of man's handicraft are, his representations of them are imitations. If imitation is to be avoided, it is because of the danger of imitating, through error, ignorance, or falsehood, that which is not or that which is less than it might be or is less than that which imitates it. As confined to the arts, therefore, imitation is not coextensive with the productive arts; rather, it is a part of them, for they are divided into those which produce things which are and those which produce images (*εἰδωλον*); the latter is the imitative art. Even when art is contrasted to nature and chance, the arts are divided into those arts which produce images (*εἰδωλον*), related to each other but bearing little relation to truth, like music and painting, and those arts which co-operate with nature, like medicine, husbandry, and gymnastic.<sup>35</sup> The divine art suffers a like division, for in addition to natural objects which are the result of God's art, there are visions (*φάντασμα*) seen in dreams and waking, shadows (*σκία*), and reflections seen in polished surfaces.<sup>36</sup>

Man likewise makes things which are, and he makes images. His

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 300B-C.

<sup>35</sup> *Laws* x. 889A-D.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 274A.

<sup>36</sup> *Sophist* 266B.

<sup>34</sup> *Timaeus* 48E-49B; 50A-C.

imitative or image-making art (εἰδωλοποιικὴ τέχνη) is divided into two parts, the copymaking art (εἰκαστική), which follows its original in length, breadth, depth, and color, and the fantastic art (φανταστική), in which truth is abandoned and the images are given, not their actual proportions, but such proportions as seem beautiful. The products of the second branch of the imitative art are appearances or phantasms (φάντασμα), and they are no longer even like things which are.<sup>37</sup> The proportion of being to appearance may be pursued to even greater refinements; that portion of that fantastic art in which the artist uses his own person as his instrument, making his figure and voice seem similar to another's, is called imitation (μίμησις);<sup>38</sup> and the return is complete to the sense of imitation by which dramatic poetry was distinguished from other kinds in the third book of the *Republic*. The proportion of truth to falsity, and the proportion of knowledge to opinion, as might be expected, play as constant a rôle in the discussion of imitation as the proportion of being to appearance. The art of midwifery which Socrates practices on Theaetetus to bring forth his ideas is employed to distinguish the image from the real offspring,<sup>39</sup> and it is unsuccessful when it produces mere lies and images (ψευδῆ καὶ εἰδωλα).<sup>40</sup> If statesmen had no knowledge of what they were doing, they would imitate the truth but would imitate it badly; if they had knowledge, the imitation would be the truth itself and no longer an imitation.<sup>41</sup> If a man had genuine knowledge of the things he imitated, he would abandon the fashioning of images and devote himself to real things and actions rather than to imitating them.<sup>42</sup> Yet, on the other hand, by imitation of the unvarying revolutions of the God, we may stabilize the variable revolutions within ourselves;<sup>43</sup> and there is intellectual delight in the imitation of the divine harmony manifested in mortal motions.<sup>44</sup>

Even in a hasty adumbration of the infinite gradations of meaning and application which the term "imitation" undergoes in the

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 235B-236C. Cf. *Republic* x. 598B, where painting is said to be an imitation, not of that which is as it is, but of appearance as it appears; it is an imitation of a phantasm, not of truth.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 267A.

<sup>39</sup> *Theaetetus* 150A.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 150E.

<sup>41</sup> *Statesman* 300D-E.

<sup>42</sup> *Republic* x. 599A.

<sup>43</sup> *Timaeus* 47C.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 80B.

Platonic dialogues, it is apparent that a great many similar terms undergo similar variations and approximate similar meanings in the succession of subjects on which imitation is brought to play. Several such terms have been necessary for the preceding exposition. Imitation is the making of images (εἰδωλον). The art of image-making may produce copies (εἰκόν) or phantasms (φάντασμα), the difference between the two being that a copy is like its object, a phantasm is not. Yet a copy, to be correct, must not reproduce all the qualities of that which it copies. The painter makes a copy when he represents (ἀπεικάζειν) the color and form of his subject.<sup>45</sup> The control of poetic copies was to be the specific object of the supervision of poets and other artisans in the third book of the *Republic*. They were to be compelled to embody in their work copies of the good and to be prohibited from setting forth copies of the evil.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the competent critic in any of the arts must know, first, what the copy is; second, how correctly it has been presented; third, how well it has been executed in words, melodies, and rhythms.<sup>47</sup> Even philosophic arguments are copies, for the solution of the question, whether injustice is profitable to the completely unjust man, in the *Republic*, is arrived at by fashioning a copy of the soul in discourse<sup>48</sup> (εἰκονα πλάσαντες τῆς ψυχῆς λόγῳ) in order to show the propounder of that view precisely what he is saying. There are copies (εἰκόν) and likenesses (ὁμοίωμα) of ideas in which few, unfortunately, can see the nature which they copy;<sup>49</sup> and finally the universe itself is a copy of the intelligible (εἰκὼν τοῦ νοητοῦ).<sup>50</sup>

As these fundamental terms are expanded, others are added to the list. An image (εἰδωλον) is defined as a thing made in the likeness (ἀφομοιοῦν) of the true thing, but only after a preliminary skirmish in which images in water and in mirrors are invoked to explain images.<sup>51</sup> Reflection in mirrors and in water is a constant device by which Plato clarifies his use of images and copies: the images and phantasms of men and other things are seen in water preliminary to examining men and things in their true natures;<sup>52</sup> one's eyes would be

<sup>45</sup> *Cratylus* 432B.

<sup>46</sup> *Republic* III. 401B.

<sup>47</sup> *Laws* II. 669A.

<sup>48</sup> *Republic* IX. 588B.

<sup>49</sup> *Phaedrus* 250B.

<sup>50</sup> *Timaeus* 92C; cf. *ibid.* 29B ff.

<sup>51</sup> *Sophist* 239D-240A.

<sup>52</sup> *Republic* 516A-B.

ruined if one looked at the sun directly instead of at its copy in water or in something else of that sort;<sup>53</sup> one should make one's thought clear by means of verbs and nouns, modeling (*ἐκτυποῦν*) opinion in the stream that flows through the lips as in a mirror or in water;<sup>54</sup> the versatility of the imitative artist which produces the appearance, though not the reality, of all things is explained by comparison to a mirror;<sup>55</sup> the liver is so fashioned that the power of thought, proceeding from the mind, moves in the liver as in a mirror which receives impressions (*τύπος*) and provides images (*εἰδωλον*), and the spleen is like a wiper for the mirror.<sup>56</sup>

Images and copies, however, as the metaphor would suggest, provide no satisfactory substitute for reality, though they are a necessary stage in the approach to reality. To understand the image we must know the reality; but to know the reality we must dispose of images. If there are copies (*εἰκῶν*) of letters in water or in mirrors, we shall never know them until we know the originals, and we shall never be true musicians until we know the forms of temperance, courage, liberality, and the rest.<sup>57</sup> He who studies things that are in arguments and reasons (*λόγος*) is as distinct from him who looks at them in copies (*εἰκῶν*) as he is from him who considers them in their operations and works (*ἔργον*).<sup>58</sup> There are many variants to the figure. The mirror may even appear in a text in which the mind is like a block of wax,<sup>59</sup> on which perceptions and thoughts are impressed (*ἀποτυποῦσθαι*) like the imprint of signet rings (*δακτυλίων σημεία*);<sup>60</sup> they persist as memorial imprints in the soul (*μνημεῖον ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ*), impressions (*τύπος*), seals (*σφάγεις*),<sup>61</sup> imprints or signs (*σημεῖον*),<sup>62</sup> and even footprints (*ἵχνος*);<sup>63</sup> and we remember as long as the image (*εἰδωλον*) lasts.<sup>64</sup> The soul is likewise a book in which memory, perception, and feelings inscribe copies (*εἰκῶν*).<sup>65</sup> Analogies might be multiplied or the list of terms further extended; but in that development, even in an attenuated form, the discussion turns, as is inevitable if the thesis

<sup>53</sup> *Phaedo* 99D.

<sup>54</sup> *Theaetetus* 206D.

<sup>55</sup> *Republic* x. 596D-E.

<sup>56</sup> *Timaeus* 71B; 72C.

<sup>57</sup> *Republic* iii. 402B-C.

<sup>58</sup> *Phaedo* 100A.

<sup>59</sup> *Theaetetus* 193C.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 191D.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 192A.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 192B.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 193C.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 191D.

<sup>65</sup> *Philebus* 38E-39B.

is correct, from the specific doctrine of imitation to embrace the entire philosophy of Plato and from the process of imitation to the devices of dialectic. Even the figure of the divided line is in terms familiar to the doctrine of imitation, although the movement is from copies to reality rather than from reality to copies: all things are divided into the visible and the intelligible, and each of these parts in turn is divided into two classes. The first of the two classes of visible things is the class of copies (*εἰκόνων*), which includes shadows (*σκία*) and reflections of phantasms in water (*τὰ ἐν τοῖς ὕδασι φαντάσματα*).<sup>66</sup> The second class of visible things is that of which the previous is a likeness or copy, that is, natural things, and the proportion between the likeness (*ὁμοιωθέν*) and that of which it is a likeness is the proportion between the objects of opinion and the objects of knowledge. But the soul, when it comes to investigate the first portion of the intelligible part of the line, must treat as copies the things which were imitated in the first part of the line; it is for that reason that the geometer draws squares and diagonals.<sup>67</sup> Once the discussion pursues this direction, it is only a step from "imitation" to the terms which guard the loftiest reaches of the Platonic dialectic, to recollection (*ἀνάμνησις*),<sup>68</sup> to presence in (*παρουσία*),<sup>69</sup> and participation (*μέθεξις, κοινωνία*).<sup>70</sup>

To elaborate the full significance of the term "imitation," consequently, more is required than the simple enumeration of the list of other words equivalent to it or used in its explication. Each of the terms of that lengthy list varies with the variation of "imitation." The set of significances employed in the dialogues may indeed be conceived as a huge matrix composed of all the words of a language, each possessed of an indefinite number of shades of meaning, the particular meaning of a word at any given time being determined by the meanings of other words drawn from that matrix in conjunction with which it is used. It is inevitable that the doctrine of imitation invade the philosophic enterprise and the dialectical method. All discourse is an imitation, and the interlocutors of the dialogues are constantly using,

<sup>66</sup> *Republic* vi. 509E-510A.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 510B-511A.

<sup>68</sup> *Phaedo* 72E, 92D; *Phaedrus* 249C; *Laws* v. 732B.

<sup>69</sup> *Gorgias* 497E; *Phaedo* 100D.

<sup>70</sup> *Sophist* 256A, 259A; *Parmenides* 132D.

discussing, and complaining of images, likenesses, metaphors, and copies. " 'Your question,' I said, 'requires an answer expressed in an image [εἰκών]. 'And you,' he said, 'of course, are not accustomed to speak in images.' " <sup>71</sup> The image is frequently successful, frequently bad. <sup>72</sup> Even more important, the proportion of being to appearance, of truth to probability, obtains in discourse as in other things. It is proper to conceive all things as imitations; yet imitation should be avoided. All discourse deals in likenesses; yet one must be on one's guard against likenesses (δμοιότης). <sup>73</sup> Used with knowledge, however, there is no danger in imitation, whether the imitation be of lesser things or of greater; and so, too, dialectic may move in either direction, it may clarify the lesser by the greater, or the greater by the less. <sup>74</sup>

The criteria of good, true, and beautiful derive from the same proportion of being to appearance which operated throughout the doctrine of imitation. If the artificer of any object uses the uniform and eternal as his model, the object so executed must of necessity be beautiful; but if his model is a created object, his work so executed is not beautiful. <sup>75</sup> Discourse concerning the abiding and unshakeable should be, as far as possible, irrefutable and invincible; but accounts of that which is copied after the likeness of the model are themselves copies and possess only likelihood, for as Being is to Becoming, Truth is to Belief. <sup>76</sup> In like manner and for like reason the Good gives truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing, and is itself more beautiful even than they. <sup>77</sup> The pursuit of beauty does not follow a different path from that which leads to truth and goodness. It is no accidental consequence, therefore, and it is no evidence of an inexplicable insensitivity to poetry in a great writer, that poetry should fall so low in Plato's analysis or that the poet should have no place in the perfect state. Criteria of truth and morality are ap-

<sup>71</sup> *Republic* vi. 487E. Cf. *Laws* 644C; *Gorgias* 517D; *Symposium* 215A, and *passim*.

<sup>72</sup> *Phaedo* 99E.

<sup>73</sup> *Sophist* 231A.

<sup>74</sup> Thus, in the *Republic* ii. 369A, Socrates proposes first to treat of the state and then to seek the likeness (δμοιότης) of the greater in the lesser, whereas in the *Sophist* 218D the lesser is used as the model (παράδειγμα) for the greater. Cf. *ibid.* 221C, 226B.

<sup>75</sup> *Timaeus* 28A-B.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 29C.

<sup>77</sup> *Republic* vi. 508E.

plied as a natural course to the poet's work. He is permitted even in the ideal state to tell his tales, properly censored, as an incident of education and as a means of inculcating virtue. He may tell tales concerning the gods, to teach men "to honor the gods and their fathers and mothers, and not to hold their friendship with one another in light esteem";<sup>78</sup> he may tell tales concerning heroes to inspire the virtues of courage and self-control or temperance; but the discussion of the one remaining subject of his tales, men, is interrupted because justice would properly be inculcated by such tales, and, since the nature and value of justice has not yet been determined in the dialogue, instructions concerning the limitations of his poems are not yet ready for the poet.<sup>79</sup> Before that is possible the one remaining virtue, wisdom, which is left for expression to the scientist and the dialectician, since the poet can make no contribution to it, must be examined. If then one seeks tales about men, that is, tales by which men may learn justice, the *Republic* itself is such a tale, one long dialectical poem written for the elucidation of justice. In the *Laws*, where the concern is no longer with an ideal state but with one which is second best,<sup>80</sup> the function of the poet and the musician, still rigorously censored, is enlarged. In the *Republic* he found himself in competition with the dialectician, sadly handicapped by his lack of knowledge; in the *Laws* he is in competition with the Lawgiver, for the whole state is an imitation of the best and noblest life, which is the very truth of poetry.<sup>81</sup> It is not its imitative character but its lack of truth and knowledge which brings poetry to its low estate. Homer and all the poetic tribe are imitators of images of virtue (*μιμηταὶ εἰδῶλων ἀρετῆς*) and of other things, but they do not lay hold on truth.<sup>82</sup> Poetry is a kind of madness comparable to the art of divination or prophecy, or to the art of purification by mysteries, or to that higher madness which seizes the soul when it contemplates in true knowledge, like that of the gods, essence, formless, colorless, intangible. But we are told that when the soul falls from such contemplation it passes first

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* iii. 386A.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* iii. 392A-C.

<sup>80</sup> *Laws* v. 739A; vii. 807B.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* vii. 817B. "You are poets and we are poets in the same things, your rivals as artists and actors in the fairest drama, which true law and that alone can carry out, as our hope is."

<sup>82</sup> *Republic* x. 600E.

into a philosopher or a lover; second, into a king or warrior; third, into a householder or money-maker; fourth, into a gymnast; fifth, into a prophet or mystic; sixth, into a poet or imitator; and there are but nine stages in this progressive degradation of the soul.<sup>83</sup> The poet, like the interpreter of the poet, may be inspired by a divine gift;<sup>84</sup> but like the statesman, who is similarly inspired, he possesses at best only right opinion which is short of knowledge,<sup>85</sup> and like Ion, his interpreter, he is repeatedly given the rhapsode's final choice between inspiration and injustice.<sup>86</sup>

In Aristotle's usage, not only does the term "imitation" have a different definition than it had for Plato but, much more important, Aristotle's method of defining terms and his manner of using them have nothing in common with the devices of the dialogues. There is a double consequence of these differences. Whereas for Plato the term "imitation" may undergo an infinite series of gradations of meaning, developed in a series of analogies, for Aristotle the term is restricted definitely to a single literal meaning. In the second place and as a consequence of the first difference, whereas for Plato an exposition of the word "imitation" involves an excursion through all the reaches of his philosophy, "imitation" for Aristotle is relevant only to one restricted portion of the domain of philosophy and never extends beyond it. For Plato dialectic is a device by which words, normally opaque, may be made translucent so that a truth and a beauty which are beyond words may shine through them. Though it is a device formulated in terms of words and conceived for the manipulation of words, it is the thing which is held constant; and it is the thing to which the attention of the mind is directed, while the word, on the other hand, varies and is to be discarded once it has served its function as a stage in the progress to truth. Things can be learned, Socrates says,<sup>87</sup> either through names or through themselves; but although one may learn from the name, which is a copy (*εἰκὼν*), both whether it is a good copy and the truth of which it is a copy, it

<sup>83</sup> *Phaedrus* 244A-245A; 248C-E.

<sup>84</sup> *Ion* 533D-E.

<sup>85</sup> *Meno* 99A-E.

<sup>86</sup> *Ion* 542A.

<sup>87</sup> *Cratylus* 439A-B.



is better to learn from the truth both the truth itself and whether the copy is properly made. The end of the dialectical process may in a sense be said to be the definition of words, but any word may have many definitions. For Aristotle, on the contrary, the definition of terms and the establishment of principles are the beginnings of the scientific enterprise. Words may have many meanings, and Aristotle frequently enumerates divergent senses of a given word. But in science they must be terms and must therefore be univocal. A term is a word plus a meaning. Consequently, although the Aristotelian sciences are distinguished according to their subject matters, it is the term which is held constant; and a given object, under different aspects isolated by different terms, may move from science to science. As mind, man would be a subject for psychology; as animal, a subject for biology; as natural thing, a subject for physics; as moral agent, a subject for ethics; as tragic actor, a subject for poetics. There results from these two differences a third difference in the fashion in which Plato and Aristotle use words, among others the word "imitation." Plato may ask concerning a given thing in different contexts whether or not it is an imitation, and may arrive in two places, without inconsistency, at two answers, that it is an imitation and that it is not an imitation; for Aristotle, if a given thing is an imitation, it cannot *not* be an imitation.

The method of Aristotle, then, proceeds by the literal definition of terms and by the division of the domain of knowledge into a number of sciences: the theoretical sciences—metaphysics, mathematics, and physics; the practical sciences or the sciences of action—ethics and politics; the "poetic" sciences or the sciences of making; each with its proper principles and, in the case of subordinate sciences, principles derived from superior sciences. Imitation functions in that system as the differentia by which the arts, useful and fine, are distinguished from nature. Art imitates nature, Aristotle was fond of repeating,<sup>88</sup> and, at least in the case of the useful arts, the deficiencies of nature are supplemented in the process of that imitation by art following the same methods as nature would have employed. "Generally, art partly completes what nature cannot bring to a finish, and

<sup>88</sup> *Physics* ii. 2. 194<sup>a</sup>21; *Meteor.* iv. 3. 381<sup>b</sup>6.

partly imitates her."<sup>89</sup> Thus, if a house were a natural product, it would pass through the same stages that it in fact passes through when it is produced by art; and if natural products could also be produced by art, they would move along the same lines that the natural process actually takes. The fine arts differ from the useful in their means of imitation, and consequently in the end of their imitation, for they have no end beyond the perfection of their product as determined by their object and the means they employ. Apart from such differences they are imitations of nature in the same sense as the useful arts. The term, therefore, does not have the scope of application which it possesses in Plato; and such accidental coincidences of verbal expression as occur are in a limited region of philosophy, particularly in the discussion of poetry and most striking in the discussion of dramatic poetry. For Aristotle imitation is not, at one extreme, the imitation of ideas, such as philosophers and the Demiurge indulge in according to Plato; nor is it, at the other extreme, the imitation of appearances themselves imitations, such as satisfies the Platonic poet. Imitation, being peculiar to the processes of art, is not found in the processes of nature or of knowledge. For the natural is that which has an internal principle of motion, whereas the change which is effected in artificial objects is from an external principle. Moreover, for Aristotle imitation is not an imitation of an idea in the mind of the artist; such a statement would be meaningless in the context of the Aristotelian system, though one might properly point out that the forms of the things which proceed from art are in the mind of the artist.<sup>90</sup> Rather, imitation is of particular things; the object of imitation, according to the statement of the *Poetics*<sup>91</sup> which seems to be intended to apply to all the fine arts, is the actions of men.

Aristotle says relatively little concerning the process of imitation, and that little has been subject to great differences of interpretation; yet what he says of natural objects and their production and of artificial objects and their making affords sound basis for reconstruction of his theory of imitation. The natural object, composite of form and matter, acts according to the natural principle of its being; in imi-

<sup>89</sup> *Physics* ii. 8. 199<sup>a</sup>15.

<sup>90</sup> *Metaphysics* vii. 7. 1032<sup>a</sup>32-34.

<sup>91</sup> *Poetics* 2. 1448<sup>a</sup>1.

tation the artist separates some form from the matter with which it is joined in nature—not, however, the “substantial” form, but some form perceptible by sensation—and joins it anew to the matter of his art, the medium which he uses. The action which he imitates may be “natural” to the agent, but the artist must attempt to convey not that natural appropriateness and rightness, but rather a “necessity or probability” suitably conveyed by the materials of his art. It is for this reason that “a likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility.”<sup>92</sup> The analysis might be illustrated from the various arts. The man who sits for his portrait assumes a posture which is determined by the laws of gravitation, by the anatomy of the human body, and the peculiarities of his habits; the painter must justify the line he chooses not in terms of physics or anatomy, but in terms of the composition which appears in the colors and lines on his canvas. A man performs an action as a consequence of his character, his heritage, his fate, or his past actions; the poet represents that action as necessary in his medium, which is words, by developing the man’s character, by expressing his thoughts and those of men about him, by narrating incidents. For Aristotle, consequently, imitation may be said to be, in the fine arts, the presentation of an aspect of things in a matter other than its natural matter, rendered inevitable by reasons other than its natural reasons; in the useful arts it is the realization of a function in another matter or under other circumstances than those which are natural. It is no contradiction, consequently, that the artist should imitate natural things, and that he should none the less imitate them “either as they were or are, or as they are said or thought to be or to have been, or as they ought to be.”<sup>93</sup> Art imitates nature; the form joined to matter in the physical world is the same form that is expressed in the matter of the art. Art does not abstract universal forms as science does, but imitates the forms of individual things. Yet, just as the form of man differs from man to man, so the actions of the historical Orestes differ from the actions presented as probable or necessary for Orestes in the plot of a play; and if Orestes had no historical counterpart, the play would still, in this sense of imitation, be an imitation of the actions of men.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* 24. 1460•26.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* 25. 1460•10–13.

Whereas the word "imitation" and related words appear in almost every dialogue of Plato, the incidence of the term "imitation" in Aristotle is limited, with the exception of one passage in the *Politics*, almost entirely to the *Poetics*. It is the imitative element in his work that makes the poet a poet.<sup>94</sup> The various arts and the various kinds of poetry may be distinguished as modes of imitation; and therefore, approaching the problem in his accustomed scientific orderliness, Aristotle considers the arts according to the differences in the means, the objects, and the manners of their imitations. In the *Poetics* he has occasion to treat only of the arts which use rhythm, language, and harmony as their means of imitation, though color and form are mentioned as other means.<sup>95</sup> Flute-playing and lyre-playing use a combination of harmony and rhythm. The dance, with only rhythms and attitudes, can represent men's characters as well as what they do and suffer. The mime and the dialogue imitate by language alone without harmony. Other arts, including the dithyramb, the nome, tragedy, and comedy, combine all three means—rhythm, melody, and verse—differing from each other, however, in their manner of employment of these means. The object of imitation is the actions of men. With the differences of agents, the actions themselves are differentiated; and painters, musicians, and dancers can be distinguished and described according to the characters they represent. In this respect tragedy differs from comedy in that it makes its characters better rather than worse than the run of men. Given the same means and object of imitation, finally, two poems may differ in manner of imitation. One poet may speak at one moment in his own person, at another in the person of his characters, as Homer did; another poet may speak in a single person without change throughout; or in the third place the imitators may represent the whole story dramatically, as though they were actually doing the things described.<sup>96</sup> The familiar classification of the kinds of poetry thus recurs much as it appeared in Plato, and on this most concrete of the levels of Plato's dialectic Aristotle seems to come closest to the statement of his master. Yet, important distinctions must be made between the two statements. For Plato it is

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* 9. 1451<sup>b</sup>28; 1. 1447<sup>b</sup>15.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 1. 1447<sup>b</sup>18 ff.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* 3. 1148<sup>a</sup>19.

a classification of three kinds of poetry: that which is effected by pure narrative, that which is effected by imitation, and the mixed kind which is effected by both. The preference is for the "unmixed imitator of the good."<sup>97</sup> Aristotle's distinction is among the manners of imitation in poems whose object and means of imitation are the same; to the other aspects of poetic imitation one further imitative characteristic is added. The question of preference among the various types is reserved for a later place,<sup>98</sup> and takes the form of the question whether the epic or the tragic is the higher form of imitation, the unmixed form not being considered. Moreover, the choice is made, not on moral but on literary grounds, because tragedy attains the poetic effect better than the epic. Aristotle is engaged in making literal distinctions, within the field of imitative art, of imitative devices and characteristics; dramatic imitation is one further imitative device to be added to other aspects of poetic imitation; his terms do not change their meanings, and his criteria are derived from a restricted field of discussion without reference beyond. Plato, on the other hand, applies the word "imitation" by means of the proportion of the real to appearance: relative to the narrative, drama is imitation; relative to the good, narrative too is imitation. No restricted field of literature with criteria peculiar to itself is indicated; rather, the proportions mark off at each application portions of the whole of things, real and apparent, and the criteria, envisaging the perfection of being which man might attain in that whole, are moral.

These primary distinctions serve a function in Aristotle's analysis comparable to that of the first principles of a science, although poetics is not a theoretic science and, like ethics and politics, it has no first principles in the precise sense in which Aristotle uses that term. These, however, are fundamental distinctions derived from the subject matter with which the inquiry is concerned, and they supply the apparatus about which the analysis of poetry is organized. There are six "parts" of tragedy: three—plot, character, and thought—determined by the object of imitation; two—diction and melody—determined by the means of imitation; one—spectacle—determined by the manner of imitation. For Aristotle, as for Plato, the object of

<sup>97</sup> *Republic* iii. 387D.

<sup>98</sup> *Poetics* 26. 1461<sup>b</sup>26 ff.

imitation is of primary importance; but that statement has a different significance in the context of Aristotle's analysis. In the dialogues it directed our attention from earthly things to eternal objects of imitation; in the *Poetics* it focuses discussion on the plot as an imitation of the actions of men. The plot is "the first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of Tragedy."<sup>99</sup> The poet must be more the poet of his plots than of his verses, for he is a poet by virtue of the imitative element in his work, and it is actions that he imitates.<sup>100</sup> Character and thought follow in importance in the order named, and of the remaining three parts of the tragedy only diction is given extended discussion. The conditions of art, therefore, by which its representations are rendered necessary or probable are derived primarily from the object of imitation, and the discussion of tragedy in the *Poetics* is concerned largely with plot and character. Even the unity so essential to the work of art is not unrelated to its object of imitation, since "one imitation is always of one thing."<sup>101</sup> Some of the conditions of art, as derived from the actions of men, pertain to the nature of art in general; some, derived from actions of a given kind, are specific to the art forms that are devoted to that kind; some conditions derived from the means of imitation, similarly, are generic to several kinds of art, as the devices of rhythm are used in poetry, music, and the dance; some are specific to particular arts, tone to music, words to poetry, color to painting.

In Plato it proved to be impossible to consider art without regard to its moral and political effects. Aristotle is no less aware of those effects and their implications; but in virtue of his method, whatever pertains to the subject of a particular science is reserved for treatment in that science. Tragedy may be used as a political instrumentality in the state or it may reflect political doctrines or motivations in its speeches: in either case, it does not function as a work of art but is properly treated among the problems of politics and rhetoric. Art in the state and thought in the drama are subjects which Aristotle apparently does not consider parts of the subject matter of the *Poetics*, for the first would need to be referred to the principles of political

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* 6. 1450•38.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* 9. 1451•27-29.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* 8. 1451•31.

science, and the second, since thought is "the power of saying whatever is appropriate to the occasion,"<sup>102</sup> falls within the scope of rhetoric and is referred to the Art of Rhetoric for treatment. Aristotle adds dryly that the older poets make their characters discourse like statesmen, and the moderns like rhetoricians. In the *Politics*<sup>103</sup> he treats the arts as instruments for teaching virtue and forming character. His attention centers almost entirely on music in the portion of the discussion of education which survives in that book. Rhythm and melody supply likenesses (*ὁμοίωμα*) of anger, gentleness, courage, temperance, and other qualities of character as well as their contraries; and the feelings of pleasure and pain at mere representations are not far removed from the same feelings about realities. The objects of senses like taste or touch furnish no likenesses to the virtues. There are figures in visible objects which do have that characteristic, but only to a small degree; and all people do not share in the feeling they occasion, for they are signs (*σημείον*) rather than likenesses of moral habits, indications which the body gives of states of feeling. The connection of painting or sculpture with morals is therefore slight. But even in simple melodies there are imitations (*μίμημα*) of moral habits, and the same is true of rhythms. It is primarily music among the arts which has the power of forming character; and Aristotle urges, therefore, that it be introduced into the education of the young.

If analogies are to be drawn between Plato's views on imitation and those of Aristotle and if the latter is to be assimilated to his master, as having effected either a distortion and retrogression or an advance and specification of the doctrines he learned in the Academy, the most fertile grounds for such comparison are found in the brief section in the *Politics*, for art is there discussed as a political force and politics is an architectonic science, limited by its practical character to the use of the analogical method. But even in the *Politics* the word and the method of its use falls short of the scope which it has in Plato's dialectic. Art, moreover, is there considered not as art but as a political device. To cite what is said concerning art in the *Politics* in refutation or in expansion of what is said on the same subject in the *Poetics*, without recognizing that the one is a political utterance, the

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* 6. 1450<sup>b</sup>6; cf. 19. 1456<sup>a</sup>33.

<sup>103</sup> *Politics* viii. 5. 1339<sup>b</sup>42-1340<sup>b</sup>13.

other an aesthetic utterance, would be an error comparable to looking for evolution or refutation between the statements of the *Republic* and the *Laws*, without recognizing that the one has reference to a perfect state, the other to a state possible to men as they are. In the Aristotelian approach the aspects of things are distinguished from each other and treated independently; the major branches of the sciences are separated, and within each branch the major subdivisions; and since imitation is the differentia of art, and since the fine arts are further differentiated from the useful arts by their ends and their means, and since finally the fine arts are distinguished from each other by their respective means and the objects appropriate to those means, it follows not only that there is a branch of knowledge whose subject matter is the products of the arts, but also that each of the arts may be the subject properly for like investigation. The *Poetics* is such an examination of poetry in itself, not in its relation to education, morals, statesmanship, nature, or being. In Plato's analysis, on the other hand, art cannot be considered in isolation; it is one of the numerous strands of man's life and takes its importance and meaning from those strands; it bears analogies to all the other arts, to the phenomena of nature and the actions of the gods; distinctions in art parallel those of education, of science, of moral, social, and political life; in the dialectical examination of all these activities the same contraries are employed, the one and the many, being and becoming, the true and the false, knowledge and belief, the fair and the foul, and all of them involve imitation. Art is, therefore, never dissociated in the Platonic approach from the full context of life; and it is always subject to moral, political, educational, and scientific criticism, for there can be no other, no purely aesthetic, criticism of art.

The Platonic and the Aristotelian approaches to the consideration of art differ, therefore, not in the manner of two doctrines which contradict each other, but rather in the manner of two approaches to a subject which are mutually incommensurable. Even more, the differences of the two approaches and the peculiarities of the two methods indicate no superiority of the one over the other, nor are problems soluble by the one which are impervious to the analysis of the other. Although there is no place for distinct sciences, independent of each other, in Plato, there are none the less abundant devices by which to



make distinctions; and likewise, although all problems are assigned to their proper scientific context in Aristotle and although each science has its proper domain, its proper scope, and frequently methodological devices peculiar to itself, knowledge is not hopelessly atomized, for there are devices by which to consider phenomena in the context of all the varieties of problems. There are complementary dangers, moreover, in cross-references from one work of either of these philosophers to another. Plato never employs one dialectical strand alone: in the *Republic* and the *Laws* poetry is treated by means of analogies drawn successively from the numerous strands of political life; in the *Phaedrus* the analogies bind it to the other arts, particularly to the art of rhetoric; in the *Ion* it appears in connection with the divine gift of inspiration. Moreover, even between the *Republic* and the *Laws* the analogies have shifted—as indeed they shift from book to book within each of those works—for the context of one is the idea of a perfect state, the other the construction of a state short of perfection with specific social, economic, and political characteristics.

What is said about poetry in one of these contexts cannot be taken to be literally the same or literally contradictory to what is said of poetry in any of the other contexts. Just as the meaning in each dialogue is brought out by a dialectical development, so the translation from dialogue to dialogue requires similar dialectical modification. The doctrine of Plato concerning poetry cannot be built up by collecting quotations in which the word “poetry” appears throughout his works; the result of such an enterprise indeed is no doctrine whatever but, as the history of criticism has abundantly illustrated, a collection of inconsistent statements. Contrariwise, whereas in Plato’s treatment the concepts of art and imitation are generalized or particularized to various dialectical contexts, in Aristotle the treatment of art and imitation, considered in their own right and in their proper science, may be supplemented by a consideration of them as they impinge on the problems of other sciences, on grammar, rhetoric, logic, ethics, politics, physics, psychology, or metaphysics. But to collect from the works concerned with the various sciences quotations in which the words “imitation” or “poetry” or “art” appear, with the intention to place them one after the other and so find in them a

coherent doctrine, results in an assemblage of statements as confused as the corresponding collections from the dialogues of Plato. As the statements of Plato require dialectical approximation to each other, the statements of Aristotle require the intrusion of proper principles from the appropriate sciences to permit transition from one to the other.

In Aristotle the term "imitation" is given a literal meaning and is limited in application to works of human art; in Plato the meaning is developed and contracted in analogies so that the word cannot be said to have determined application but is sometimes more general, sometimes more restricted, than any use in Aristotle. The word was used in still other senses by other writers in antiquity, but considerations of method are not so important in the fashions of their usage, and the systematic implications are not subtle. None of the writers on literature employed the dialectical method of Plato in any but a highly attenuated and faltering manner. Their definitions are literal like those of Aristotle, but in their writings the term "imitation" does not appear in a context of subject matters distributed in various scientific disciplines. Rather, the meanings in which they use the term are derived for the most part from one of the meanings which it assumed in Plato's dialogues, usually degraded and rendered static or, what amounts to the same thing, in a meaning which "imitation" might have had if Aristotle had used it in some other work than the *Poetics*, as, for example, the *Rhetoric*.

A third variant to the meanings of Plato and Aristotle may therefore be said to derive from the tradition of writers on rhetoric. In age, this view is at least contemporary with the other two, and it has perhaps an even longer and certainly less distorted history since the age of Plato. "For the rest" Isocrates says,<sup>104</sup> "he [the teacher] must in himself set such an example (*παράδειγμα*), that the students who are molded (*ἐκτυποῦν*) by him and are able to imitate (*μιμήσασθαι*) him will, from the outset, show in their speaking a degree of grace and charm greater than that of others." Though Aristotle wrote a *Rhetoric* (and, if Cicero and Quintilian are correct, justified himself in teaching rhetoric by turning a scathing epigram against Isocrates),

<sup>104</sup> *Against the Sophists* 18.

he confines his attention to the analysis of the means of persuasion available to the orator and finds no place for aphorisms concerning the imitation of past orators. He does say that man is the most imitative of animals and learns at first by imitation;<sup>105</sup> he distinguishes repeatedly in his works between sciences, which are acquired by learning; virtues, which are acquired by habituation; and arts, which are acquired by practice (*ἀσκησις*). It would be easier to find analogies in Plato for Isocrates' use of the term; but for Plato it would have that meaning only as applied to early education, for in maturity one would imitate, not the poet but him who knows. Strictly even then imitation is of the virtues and the truth, not of the wise man. Yet imitation in this rhetorical sense, imitation of other artists, continued to be used in the writings of rhetoricians and orators. Cicero frequently recommends the imitation of good models, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus composed a treatise *On imitation*, preserved unfortunately only in fragments, which he tells us consisted of three parts, the first on imitation in general, the second on the choice of writers for imitation (including poets, philosophers, historians, and orators), the third on the proper methods of imitation. The last subject, which was never completed by Dionysius, is one to which Quintilian returns,<sup>106</sup> for to his mind there are three essentials in the formation of the ideal orator—power of speech, imitation, and diligence of writing.<sup>107</sup> Imitation alone, to be sure, is not enough,<sup>108</sup> for invention must precede imitation, and the greatest qualities of the orator, including invention, are beyond imitation.<sup>109</sup> One should consider, Quintilian says, first whom to imitate, second what to imitate in the authors chosen.<sup>110</sup> Imitation, he reminds us, should not be confined merely to words; one should consider also the appropriateness with which orators handle circumstances and persons, their

<sup>105</sup> *Poetics* 4. 1448<sup>b</sup>8.

<sup>106</sup> *Institutio oratoria* x. 2. 1–28.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.* x. 1. 3. Cf. *Rhetorica ad Herennium* i. 2. 3 (ed. Marx), in which three aids to proficiency in oratory are enumerated: art, imitation, and exercise. "Art" is preception which gives a certain way and reason of speaking. "Imitation" is that by which we are impelled with diligent reason to be similar to some model in speaking. "Exercise" is assiduous use and custom in speaking. Cf. Cicero, *De oratore* ii. 22–23.

<sup>108</sup> *Institutio oratoria* x. 2. 4.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* x. 2. 12.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* x. 2. 14, 27.

judgment and their powers of arrangement, their concentration of all parts of the speech to the end of victory. Yet his own treatment of imitation is confined almost wholly to the question of style. According to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, imitation is "a copying of models with the help of certain principles," but it involves a kind of psychological elevation as well: it is an "activity of the soul inspired by the spectacle of the seemingly beautiful."<sup>111</sup> Longinus regards zealous imitation of the great historians and poets of the past as one of the roads which leads to sublimity.<sup>112</sup>

We, too, then, when we are working at some passage which demands sublimity of thought and expression, should do well to form in our hearts the question, "How perchance would Homer have said this, how would Plato or Demosthenes have made it sublime, or Thucydides in his history?" Emulation will bring those great characters before our eyes, and like pillars of fire they will lead our thoughts to the ideal standards of perfection. Still more will this be so, if we give our minds the further hint, "How would Homer or Demosthenes, had either been present, have listened to this passage of mine? How would it have affected them?"<sup>113</sup>

Imitation of past authors, however, though it may be useful as a device for training orators or as a touchstone for sublime passages of prose and poetry, will not supply an object of imitation or a subject matter for poetry. To be sure, as an English poet was later to suggest, to imitate Homer was to imitate nature, but nature has become too generalized to supply the function exercised in the object of imitation as conceived in Plato or Aristotle. In the Platonic usage, the object of imitation is consistently that which is, or being, through all the variations of the meaning of the word. For Aristotle the object of imitation in poetry is the actions of men, though some of the arts may imitate character and passion as well. According to Aristotle the plot, the soul of the tragedy, gives unity to the work. Plot is seldom discussed by the later writers; but instead character, thought, or even natural things become the chief object of imitation. According to Dionysius, poets and prose writers must keep their eye on each object and frame words to picture them or borrow from other writers words which imitate things. Nature, however, is the great originator

<sup>111</sup> *On imitation* A. iii (28).

<sup>112</sup> *On the sublime* 13.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

and teacher in these matters and prompts us in the imitation of things by words, as when we speak of the bellowing of bulls,<sup>114</sup> or in the arrangement of words, as when Homer reflects the effort of Sisyphus rolling his rock uphill in the verses in which he describes it.<sup>115</sup> Plutarch marks this transition to the imitation of natural objects most explicitly. Imitation, he says, is of actions or works (ἔργον) or things (πράγμα),<sup>116</sup> and apparently these terms are equivalent in his usage. One of the problems to concern him most is that imitations of ugly or even disgusting objects should be pleasing, a subject on which Aristotle touched for an opposite purpose in treating the origin of poetry, for he argued that imitation is natural to man since he finds even the imitation of disgusting objects pleasing.<sup>117</sup> The young should be taught to praise the genius and the art which imitates such subjects, according to Plutarch, but to censure the subjects and actions themselves, for the excellence of a thing and the excellence of its imitation are not the same. For him, as for Dionysius, the grunting of a hog, the noise of pulleys, the whistling of the wind, and the roaring of seas are the instances from which a discussion of imitation takes its natural beginning. But while poetry is based on imitation, in this sense, and employs embellishment and richness of diction suited to the actions and characters, Plutarch adds the warning, somewhat Aristotelian in language but Platonic in the development he gives it, that it does not give up the likeness of truth, since the charm of imitation is probability.<sup>118</sup> Imitation has the same significance for Longinus when he is not using the term to recommend the imitation of great writers: just as people who are really angry or frightened or worried or carried away by jealousy or some other feeling speak incoherently, "so, too, the best prose writers by use of inversions imitate nature and achieve the same effect. For art is only perfect when it looks like nature and nature succeeds only by concealing art about her person."<sup>119</sup> Demetrius cautions against crude imitation of the poets.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>114</sup> *On literary composition* 16.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* 22.

<sup>116</sup> *Essay on poetry* 3.

<sup>117</sup> *How a young man should study poetry* 3.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* 7.

<sup>119</sup> *On the sublime* 22.

<sup>120</sup> *On style* ii. 112.

The dictum of Aristotle, that art imitates nature, has suffered a like degradation with the transformation of the word "imitation."

Although nature still supplies the object of imitation, imitation is no longer the central concept, either in the sense of Plato or in that of Aristotle, about which the analysis of poetry is organized. Occasionally, one of the later writers, like Plutarch, will take up the question of the truth of poetry and puzzle over the intentional and unintentional falsifications of the poets; but although the men who followed Plato learned from him to worry concerning lies about the gods, the Platonic proportions of truth to falsity, of being to appearance, do not play upon poetry again in antiquity. Truth, if it is discussed, is usually measured in these later times by asking whether or not the event took place, and whether the object was such as it is represented. On the other hand, what later writers learned from Aristotle applicable to literature, they derived from the *Rhetoric* rather than from the *Poetics*, as indeed might be surmised, since it was a period which held rhetoric in high esteem and most of the writers in the tradition were professed rhetoricians. Yet that change marks them as significantly different from Aristotle, since to confuse rhetoric and poetics would in his system be a Platonizing error. He, himself, distinguished the two disciplines sharply: only two of the six "parts" of tragedy—thought and diction—are properly treated in rhetoric; and only one of them—thought—receives the same treatment in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*. Aristotle's concern with action therefore and the emphasis he puts on plot, the soul of the composition, with its beginning, middle, and end, are not repeated in later writers.<sup>121</sup> With the gradual disappearance of plot, the Aristotelian scheme of the parts of the poem breaks down and the most prominent of his critical principles become irrelevant. Principles and criteria must be supplied from the tradition of rhetoric, and imitation moves to a place of comparative unimportance in the analysis of poetry. Rhetoric, according to Aristotle, is the faculty by which in any subject we are able to win belief in the hearer. That belief is produced by means of invention, disposing of three means: the character and behavior of

<sup>121</sup> Horace's brief treatment of plot, which includes the enjoinder that the middle harmonize with beginning and end, is typical of the few remnants of the treatment of that aspect of the poem. See *Art of poetry*, ll. 119–52.

the speaker, the character and passions of the hearer, and the proofs which are alleged in the words of the speaker. If some other effect in the hearer is substituted for belief, as Longinus substituted ecstasy, such an analysis might be suited to any branch of literature. The time might even come when invention might take the place of imitation, as indeed Quintilian had recognized its greater importance while protesting it was not a subject of art. The "parts" with which the analysis deals gravitate about thought and diction, or some variant of the elements of rhetoric. According to Dionysius, two things require attention in all forms of composition: ideas and words, subject matter and expression.<sup>122</sup> According to Longinus, there are five sources of the sublime: power of thought and emotion, which proceed from natural genius; and figures, diction, and arrangement, which proceed from art.<sup>123</sup> According to Demetrius, each of the four kinds of style consists of thought, diction, and arrangement.<sup>124</sup>

The consequences of these changes for the analysis of literature would be too long to enumerate. Whereas Plato considered poetry in the context of the total activity of man or in the context of the eternal ideas, poetry came to be considered more and more in isolation. On the other hand, the Aristotelian mode of analysis was not followed, for the work of art was not considered, in itself, objectively. Rather, it was the poets who were the subject of consideration in an environment of other poets whom they imitated and of audiences whom they pleased. The Hellenistic and Roman literary critic was sometimes a Platonist whose universe was limited to the literary world, sometimes an Aristotelian engaged in the rhetoric of poetry and prose. Since the plot had lost the central importance it had for Aristotle, imitation is of persons, actions, and things. Where Plato could be led by his dialectic to moral indignation at the imitation of the roll of thunder, the squeak of pulleys, the bleat of sheep,<sup>125</sup> or Aristotle could limit imitation to the actions of men and invoke aesthetic principles for the comparative judgment of kinds of poetry differentiated by the characters of the men imitated, later critics found occasion only to insist on the

<sup>122</sup> *On literary composition* 1.

<sup>123</sup> *On the sublime* 8. 1.

<sup>124</sup> *On style* II. 38, etc.

<sup>125</sup> *Republic* III. 397A-B.

difference between the imitation and the object imitated and to separate admiration of the technique by which the one was produced from approbation of the other. Moreover, as criticism ceases to turn largely on action and the plot, the work of art as a whole passes out of the purview of the critic and attention is concentrated on analyzing the characteristics and determining the effectiveness of individual passages.

The kinds of poetry, moreover, which Aristotle was careful to distinguish in terms of the means and object of imitation, are treated without distinction; and citations are drawn not only from poets of different kinds but from historians, orators, and philosophers as well. But most important of such differences, containing them as consequences, is the fact that after Plato and Aristotle, who judged literature primarily by reference to its object of imitation, there grew up a generation of critics, of numerous and long-lived progeny, who judged literature by considering its effect on the audience. Not that Plato or Aristotle was averse to considering the pleasure afforded by an object of art, but they subordinated such consideration to that of the object of imitation; and while the good work of art will be pleasurable to the mind prepared to understand it, pleasure as such, without consideration of person and object, would furnish no criterion for art. But the natural center of gravity in rhetoric is the audience, and the fourth variation of the meaning of imitation is marked by the disappearance of the term from its central place in criticism. For while a poet may imitate that which is, or the actions of men, or other poets, he pleases rather than imitates audiences. "It is not enough for poems to have beauty," Horace says,<sup>126</sup> "they must also be pleasing and lead the listener's soul whither they will. . . . If the speaker's words are inconsistent with his fortunes, a Roman audience, high and low will roar with laughter." The nature and origin of poetry is to please the mind.<sup>127</sup> "Poets desire either to improve or to please, or to unite the agreeable with the profitable. . . . The centuries of the elders reject plays without a moral; the haughty knights dislike dull poems."<sup>128</sup>

<sup>126</sup> *Art of poetry*, ll. 99-112.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 377.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* 333-43. Cf. Plutarch, *How a young man should study poetry* 1, 2, 3, 7, and 14 for another view in which pleasure and improvement vie; but for a contrasting view of the place of audience and pleasure in the judgment of art see Plato's *Laws* ii. 658A-659C and 668A-669B, or *Gorgias* 501D-502D.



Horace's criticism is directed in the main to instruct the poet how to keep his audience in their seats until the end, how to induce cheers and applause, how to please a Roman audience, and, by the same token, how to please all audiences and win immortality. But although imitation does not supply or illuminate these ends, it does help further them. The well-informed imitator is advised to take his models from life and custom and to derive from them a language faithful to life.<sup>129</sup> He should also study the Greek models;<sup>130</sup> the Socratic dialogues will supply matter, and words will follow quickly once the matter is seen;<sup>131</sup> but the imitator is cautioned not to translate too literally lest his own style suffer.<sup>132</sup> Imitation has been reduced to the imitation of other artists or to reflecting actual conditions or customs.

A fifth meaning for the term "imitation" of the same quixotic sort, that is to say, a meaning which, like the proportion of poet to audience, made the term unnecessary or impossible, remains to be indicated. Words may imitate thoughts, as Horace suggests; and if the analysis of poetry in terms of pleasure is an outgrowth of the rhetorical tradition, the analysis of poetry in terms of thought and diction is in a sense the lessened form which the Aristotelian poetic analysis took for later ages. Writers like Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Demetrius, when they limit themselves to relevant questions of words and their arrangements in relation to the thoughts they express, have in common with Aristotle the ideal of discussing the work of art in its own terms without reference to the universe, to authors, or to audience. But the object of imitation has been cut down to thought, and the subtlety of analysis is expended almost entirely on diction. Moreover, literature is considered in short passages, rather than whole works, and prose and poetry are treated together more or less indiscriminately. The problem of literature turns on propriety and the need to find distinguished thoughts and distinguished expressions

<sup>129</sup> *Art of poetry* ll. 317-18.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* ll. 268-69.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* 310-11.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.* 133-35.; cf. his disdain for the servile herd of imitators and his statement of the fashion in which he followed Archilochus, *numeros animosque secutus Archilochi, non res et agentia verba Lycamben*, and tempered the versification of Archilochus with Sappho and Alcaeus; the imitation was limited to measures and structure of verse, and did not extend to subjects or arrangement (*Ep.* i, 19. 19-29).

and to clothe thoughts in appropriate words. These are problems which the term "imitation" was apparently not suited to embrace, and the writers in that tradition continued to speak only of the imitation of poets by poets and of things by words.<sup>133</sup>

Notwithstanding our changed attitude toward imitation, it requires no great alteration of terminology to recognize the tendencies of modern criticism in some of these five ancient attitudes, and there is much that is perhaps clearer in their example which might be considered with profit in the discussion of the nature of literature or the canons, tenets, or principles of criticism. Literature may be considered as a part of the social structure, and we have critics who engage in such social criticism today. It may be considered in terms purely of style, or in terms of the great writers and great works of the past, or in terms of the character and demands of audiences of the present and of posterity. It seems apparent that each of these approaches and each of their variants is distinct from the others. If its full intention is stated clearly, it is difficult to understand how one of them could be constituted the contradiction of the other, except in the sense that a given critic might prefer one to all the rest. Much that passes for differences of taste in literature consists in reality of differences of taste in criticism, of differences in the preferred approach to literature. A critic is seldom satisfied to make his own approach without having shut off all other roads. Such jealousy of one's own truth is not difficult to explain, for what I say, when I consider it my critical function to tell my experiences before works of art, may be expressed in words related to those you will use when you tell of art's social function; and those words will probably be used as in contradiction. What is needed is more than a definition of terms, for the terms used in definitions also vary in the context of the larger method and system in which criticism functions; ultimately contradictions and confusions are resolved by the exploration of the full philosophic implications of the attitude which the critic finds himself justified in assuming. It is not, perhaps, excessive to remark that the

<sup>133</sup> Cf. nn. 111, 114, 115, 120 above. Demetrius returns frequently to the problem of onomatopoeia and the imitation of actions by words. Cf. *On style* ii. 72, 94; iii. 176; iv. 221. Sometimes, however, he uses imitation in the sense of dramatic imitation in connection with the style of dialogues (*ibid.* iv. 226, 298).

philosophic sweep in recent criticism has not been broad, nor has the interplay of implication been subtle. There have been few writers in the whole history of thought able to manipulate the Platonic dialectic; and of them, few have turned their attention to literature. There are few studies of literature in terms of its medium, of the forms which are suited for expression in that medium, and the manner of such expression. It is hardly profitable or pertinent to regret that there have been few Platos and few Aristotles; but it is appropriate to remark on the misfortune, since there are so few, that we should neglect so signally to profit by their examples of method, but should be content in our studies and histories to find imperfections which they seem to possess only when their sentences are read without the logical and dialectical devices they supply to guide interpretation.

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