

The Creative Launcher

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Aristotle's Mimesis or Creative Imitation

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Abstract

The present paper explores in totality the Mimetic or Creative imitative power in creative writers and visual painters. Giving a befitting reply to his master, Plato condemned poets and painters on the grounds that they lack originality. They are mere imitators and their creation is thrice removed from truth and reality. Aristotle in his magnum opus, *Poetics*, starts with this mimesis thing and goes at length telling that Mimesis or Imitation is central to existence. We human beings are better developed than brute beasts primarily because we have the highest imitating power. Plato and Aristotle both take into consideration the poets. Plato criticizing him and Aristotle accolade him on grounds on mimetic arts. As it delves deeper into the idea it explores that besides imitation, it is instinctual in nature and the other instinct is for rhythm and harmony. Persons endowed with these two natural gifts ultimately give rise to poetry. Poetry after its birth diverged into two directions the graver spirits imitated the lives of nobler men and trivial ones the actions of meaner men. Thus was born tragedy and comedy.

Keywords- Mimesis, Poetry, Originality, Tragedy, Comedy

Imitation is natural to man from childhood upwards. One of the things that make him superior to brute beasts is the fact that he is the most imitative of all animals, and begins to learn by way of imitation; and it is moreover natural for all human beings to delight in works of imitation. Experience demonstrates the truth of this later point: though the objects themselves be offensive to sight, we enjoy viewing the most realistic representation of them in art, the forms of the lowest animals dead bodies etc. (J. Warrington, 8). Aristotle's *Poetics* talks about so many aspects of literature in which Mimesis or Creative Imitation is one. Different art-forms differ from each other in respect of (a) Subject (b) Medium (c) Method of Imitation.

For as there are persons who, by conscious art or more habit, imitate and represent various objects through the medium of colour and form, or again by the voice; so in the arts above-mentioned, taken as a whole, the imitation is produced by rhythm, language or harmony; either singly or

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combined (Butcher, 8). It was under the influence of platonic thinking that Aristotle elaborated both a general notion of mimesis as a fictional representation of the material of human life, and also a more technical sense of mimesis as the enactive or dramatics mode of poetry.

Mimesis, then, is only a major connection between the Platonic and Aristotelian views of poetry and art, but also a pertinent instance of the subtle, revisionist position which Aristotle was capable of adopting towards his predecessor's arguments. The questions and issues which Plato had raised were too insistent to be simply evaded and Plato's fervent exploration of them was too urgent for Aristotle to want to counter him on every point.

Yet it will be absurd to deny that the two philosophers present widely divergent impression in their attitudes of poetry and the other arts, and this divergence has much to do with the ways in which they employ the language or mimesis. The Fundamental point to be made is that Plato strongly tends to judge mimesis by wholly external and objective standards of veracity. Mimesis is taken to be crudely parasitic on reality: the artist's aim according to a passage of Rep. 10 "which gives us the first occurrence of an idea with a long European Legacy, is to produce the effect of a mirror held up to the world of the senses". Plato, moreover, usually writes as though he regards the poet as directly responsible for, and assumes him to affirm, everything to be found in his work. Mimetic works are fake pseudo reality, they deceive or are intended to deceive; their credentials are false, since they purport to be what they are not. Despite maintaining the analogy between poetry and visual art, Aristotle reacts against this view of mimesis by releasing the artist from the obligation of transcribing or reproducing reality in any straight forward way. Imitation, then, is one instinct of our nature. Next there is the instinct for harmony and rhythm, metres being manifestly sections of rhythm. Persons, therefore, starting with this natural gift developed by degrees their special attitudes, till their rude improvisations gave birth to poetry. Poetry, now diverged in two directions, according to the individual character of the writers. The graver spirits imitated noble actions, and the actions of good men. The more trivial sort imitated the actions of meaner persons, at first composing satires, as the former did hymns to the gods and the praises of the famous men. (Butcher, 16-7)

A poem of the satirical kind cannot indeed be put down to any author other than Homer; though many such writers probably there were. But from Homer onward, instances can be cited – his own Margites, for example, and other similar composition. The appropriate metre was also here introduced; hence the measure is still called the Iambic or Lampooning measure, being that in which people lampooned one another. Thus the older poets were distinguished as writers of heroic or of lampooning verse.

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Since there are persons who, by conscious art or more habit, imitate and represent various objects through the medium of colour and form or again by the voice; so in the arts above-mentioned taken as a whole, the Imitation is produced by rhythm, language or harmony, either singly or combined. (Butcher, 7)

Thus in the music of the flute or the lyre ‘harmony’ and rhythm alone are employed; also in other arts, such as that of the shepherd’s pipe which are essentially similar to these. In dancing rhythm alone is used without harmony; for even dancing imitates character emotions, and actions by rhythmical movement. There is another art form which imitates by means of language alone, and that either in prose or verse.

There are, again, some arts which employ all the means above-mentioned namely, rhythm tune and metre. Such are dithyrambic and Nomic poetry, and also Tragedy and Comedy; but between them the difference is that in the first two cases these means are all employed in combination; in the latter, now one means is employed, now another. Such, then are the differences of the arts with respect to the medium of imitation. Since the objects of imitation are men in action, and these men must be either of a higher or a lower type (for moral character mainly answers to these divisions, goodness and badness being the distinguishing marks of moral differences) it follows that we must represent men either as better than in real life, or as worse or as they are. It is the same in painting. Polygnotus depicted men as nobler than they are, Pauson as less noble, Dionysius drew them true to life.

Now it is evident that each of the modes of imitation above-mentioned will exhibit these differences, and become a distinct kind in imitating objects that are thus distinct. Such diversities may be found even in dancing, flute playing and lyre playing. So again in language, whether prose or verse unaccompanied by music. Homer, for example makes them better than they are; Cleophon as they are; Hegemon the Thasian, the inventor of parodies, and Nicochares, the author of Deiliad, worse than they are. The same thing holds good of Dithyrambs and Nomes, here too one may portray different types as Timotheus and Philoxrnus differ in representing their Cyclopes. The same distinction marks off tragedy from comedy; for comedy aims at representing men as worse, Tragedy as better than in actual life.

There is still a third difference – the manner in which each of these objects be imitated. (Butcher, 13) Given both the same means and the same kind of object for imitation, a poet may either speak one moment in narrative and at other in an assumed character as Homer does, or he may remain

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the same throughout, without any such change. His imitation may take the form of representing the whole story dramatically and his personages as actually doing the things described. (J. Warrington, 6).

Stephen Halliwell, in his introductory chapter of Aristotle's *Poetics* puts mimesis on the central place. According to him "Mimesis can at any rate here be noted as a point of convergence for a number of strands in Greek thinking about poetry, as well as about the other arts, and it was therefore inevitably a point on which both Plato and Aristotle chose to focus much of their theorizing about the subject. (Stephen Halliwell, 13-14)

Almost the same idea is developed in the later chapter which is entirely devoted to Mimesis itself. Halliwell traces the root of the idea of Aristotle's mimesis in Platonic background. The writer expresses his inability to offer a systematic analysis scheme for the semantic development of the mimesis word group to be successively traced. (Stephen Halliwell, 109)

Speculation about the original sense of mimesis and its Cognates is not found particularly profitable and so Halliwell begins by mentioning this issue only in order to note the danger, which the endeavour of reaching back to tell the story above easily brings with it, of unnecessarily limiting the interpretation of mimesis language on surviving texts. This can be demonstrated from the work of those who have argued both that the original

Sense of mimesis was choreographic or dramatic enactment and that the word to the reproduction of appearances first occurs in Plato. As a counter example of this latter claim instance of Herodotus is cited. (Halliwell, 110)

Halliwell distributes the material in the following categories:

1. Visual representation
2. Behavioural imitation
3. Impersonation
4. Vocal imitation
5. Metaphysical mimesis

Halliwell finds pre-platonic range of Mimesis vast and so have got some preliminary indication of potential difficulties in developing such a flexible word group for the purpose of strict theory. Halliwell analyses the most comprehensive type of Mimesis found in Plato, which is referred by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* on his comparison between Platonic and Pythagorean philosophy and suggests that the difference between the two doctrines is only of terminology. (Stephen Halliwell, 116). Plato, posit s mimetic correspondence between the material and the metaphysical is demonstrated above all in the *Timueus*.

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On the basis of the dialogue of 'Timueus' Halliwell is forced to conclude that "Mimesis is both the Means by which the eternal produces and fashions the world and correspondingly the means by which the human mind can ascend or aspire in its search for knowledge" and thus carries as active philosophical and theological significance. (Stephen Halliwell, 118). Plato has put emphasis on the mimetic character of art. It is hardly surprising that the concept should have occupied a place at the centre of Aristotle's thinking on the subject. Aristotle's earlier work *Protrepeticus* has some obvious effect of Plato, but by the time of the *Poetics* direct dependence on his predecessor is much less prominent. If Plato's attitudes to mimesis are problematic because of their fluctuations, Aristotle causes imperative difficulties for rather different reason that little is explicitly said about the meaning of mimesis and much appears to be left tacit (Stephen Halliwell, 122). Halliwell opines, "a first step towards elucidation of Aristotle's position, if we approach it from Plato, is to recognize that his focus is narrower than Plato's and more firmly held.

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