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Aristotelian Mimesis Reevaluated

STEPHEN HALLIWELL

IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE to construct substantial sections of a history of European aesthetics and art criticism around the Greek idea of mimesis and its conceptual legacy. Such a history would embrace at least three major phases—early, classical elaboration; a long process of transmutation during periods of Greco-Roman and, from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries, neoclassical theorizing; reaction and ostensible rejection in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, resulting in the broadly unsympathetic, but somewhat ambivalent, climate of modern critical theory and opinion.¹ In this whole story, Aristotelian mimesis has played a fundamental role, though one often mediated through adaptation and misinterpretation. While my primary purpose in this article is a fresh consideration of some aspects of the concept of artistic mimesis in Aristotle's own writings, I hope thereby to help to disentangle his views from the larger, more amorphous mass of ancient and neoclassical variations of mimeticism, and hence indirectly to clarify one dimension of the history of categories of artistic representation.

In the eyes of many, mimesis has the status of a venerably long-lived but now outmoded aesthetic doctrine—a broken column, perhaps, of an obsolete classical tradition. But if all varieties of mimeticism can be classed as conceptions of representation, it is hard to see how any such conviction of a clean break be-

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¹ The reaction against neoclassical mimeticism is documented by, e.g., J. W. Draper, "Aristotelian 'Mimesis' in Eighteenth Century England," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 36 (1921): 372–400 (but unreliable on Aristotle himself); M. Iknayan, *The Concave Mirror: From Imitation to Expression in French Esthetic Theory, 1800–1830* (Saratoga: 1983). For some reflections on the persistence of mimeticist assumptions see J. Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (London: 1981), 161–68.

tween past and present can be cogently maintained, since, however problematically, representational assumptions still serve a central, if not always acknowledged, function in most forms of discourse about literature and art. It is partly for this reason that recent years have seen a number of efforts to rehabilitate mimesis at various levels of aesthetic thought.² If such efforts are worthwhile, they require accuracy of historical discernment, and it is in this respect that the present paper too aims to vindicate the critical integrity of the most influential of all conceptions of mimesis. It is a preliminary but indispensable step towards such vindication to grasp firmly at the outset the dangerous inadequacy, for the understanding of Aristotle at least, of the neoclassically established and still current translation of mimesis as "imitation." The semantic field of "imitation" in modern English does not closely enough match, though it partially overlaps with, that of the ancient Greek word family to which the noun mimesis belongs. To suppose that "imitation" has any priority as a literal equivalent would be to fall into confusion over the nature of translation by compounding misunderstandings of both Greek and English.

A valuable further step towards a fresh appraisal of Aristotelian mimesis (though the point has wider applicability) is to recognize that we are not addressing a clearly unified idea, or a term with a "single, literal meaning,"³ but rather the nodal point of a rich locus of aesthetic issues. We will benefit, therefore, from holding in mind two distinguishable angles of approach to artistic representation, whether as a whole or in particular art forms:

- (a) Views, often more or less explicitly philosophical, of the possibility and nature (perceptual, cognitive, logical, semantic) of representation.
- (b) Views, sometimes though not necessarily prescriptive, of the content, value, use, and effects of representation.

The first category embraces such questions as the character of visual depiction, musical expression, and literary fictions, as well as the relation of representation to concepts of resemblance, symbolism, and reference. Ideas in the second category—common among critics, propagandists, and ideologues, as well as among the ordinary recipients of art—include convictions about the meaning and truthfulness (or otherwise) of particular art works or of entire genres of art.

The fact that views in either category may have implications for, or cross-

² See C. Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis* (Cambridge: 1986); P. Ricoeur, "Mimesis and Representation," *Annals of Scholarship* 2 (1981): 15–32; H.-G. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, (Cambridge: 1986), chaps. 5 and 7; A. D. Nuttall, *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality* (London: 1983).

³ R. McKeon, "Literary Criticism and the Concept of Imitation in Antiquity," in R. S. Crane, ed., *Critics and Criticism* (Chicago: 1952), 160.

fertilize, those in the other, does not deprive the distinction of real usefulness. Plato's frequent concern with mimesis, for instance, significantly varies between, while sometimes superimposing, these two focuses. In *Republic* 2–3, where he sketches a critique of the ethical and psychological consequences of poetic fiction in the educational practices of a culture, his thoughts belong principally in category (b), though Bk. 3's famous distinction between narrative and personative modes provides an example of (a). The metaphysical perspective on mimesis employed in the first part of *Republic* 10, on the other hand, places the arguments there in category (a), even if psychological conclusions in category (b) are subsequently added to them. Instances of the two kinds of concern could equally be found in the history of Christian debates over both the nature of images and their use.⁴ More recently, doctrines of naturalism and socialist realism exemplify normative views of the value of representation [i.e., (b)], while some theories in the semiotic tradition, rejecting belief in the "illusion" of representation, are sceptical and relativist members of the first category. A notable coalescence of the two angles on representation, combining dramaturgical technique and political commitment, occurs in the "alienation effects" of Brecht's theory of epic theatre.

It is not my intention to press the claim that Aristotle had a *theory* of mimesis which could be characterized wholesale in either of these ways. But it should become apparent that he possessed tenets and principles which illustrate, and could be theoretically translated into, both the types of position cited. I shall contend in Part 1 that it is legitimate to describe Aristotle's version of mimesis, with due qualification, as a form of signification, but not one which posits a relation of "copy" to "original." In Part 2 I shall suggest that we can discern an Aristotelian tendency towards interpreting mimesis as properly "iconic" in character, and I shall try to explain how and why this view is present though not fully sustained in the *Poetics*. In Part 3, I shall argue that mimesis is an aesthetic idea of dual aspect, which functions for Aristotle as a means of holding artistic patterns or semblances of possible realities in constructive tension with the status of art works as objects possessing a distinct rationale of their own.

1.

Aristotle introduces the mimesis word group in a variety of contexts, but my virtually exclusive interest is in its central attachment to a particular set of artistic activities—poetry, painting, sculpture, music, dance. This is, in fact,

⁴ I. P. Sheldon-Williams, "The Philosophy of Icons," in A. H. Armstrong, ed., *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: 1967), 511–12; C. Osborne, "The Repudiation of Representation in Plato's *Republic*," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 33 (1987): 53–73.

the primary sense of the mimesis family in Aristotle, as illustrated by *Poetics* 1.1447a13–28, and *Rhetoric* 1.11.1371b4–10. The wider application of mimetic terms to nonartistic forms of human or animal behavior, or sometimes to inanimate objects, sheds little light on what mimesis means for artistic practices and products.⁵ Since the group of arts which Aristotle counts as expressly mimetic comprises just those whose affinities were taken by Batteux and others in the eighteenth century to constitute the “fine arts,” I see little risk of confusion in referring generically to “art(s)” in this context. In this respect there is greater foundational continuity with modern conceptions of art than is sometimes perceived.⁶

Aristotle speaks of mimesis both as an intrinsic property of works of art and as the product of artistic intentionality; the subject of the verb *mimēisthai* can be an individual work, a genre, an artist, or a performer of art. Mimetic attributes belong to art works in their own right, not merely as communicative intermediaries between artist and audience. The mimeticist idiom involves no perpetration of a crudely intentionalist fallacy, for the intentionality on which mimetic works are founded is an “anthropological” datum about their standing as cultural practices, and does not rest on the contingent hypothesis of individual intentions in particular cases. Moreover, while the mimetic arts are classifiable as forms of *poiēsis* or productive craft, it is essential to separate this fact from the larger Aristotelian principle that productive craft as a whole, in its ordered pursuit of ends, “follows the pattern” (*mimēisthai*), or perhaps “imitates,” nature. Ancient mimeticism subsequent to Aristotle conflated these two ideas into a single aesthetic principle, “the imitation of nature,” which is as they remained in later neoclassicism. There is no excuse for continuing to conflate them in interpreting Aristotle, for there is no reason to take the larger principle as bearing on the expressly or internally mimetic character of the group of arts in question.⁷

Since individual arts possess structured means and procedures, within their particular media, for rendering and conveying intelligible configura-

⁵ Cf. nonartistic mimesis as a relation of causal dependence (*Meteorology* 346b36), visual similarity (*History of Animals* 502b9), analogy (*History of Animals* 612b18, *Metaphysics* 988a7, *Politics* 1261b3), and behavioral imitation (*History of Animals* 597b23–26 [animal], *Nicomachean Ethics* 1115b32). Aristotle compares artistic and nonartistic mimesis at *Poetics* 1448b4–9, where I take him to be thinking of children’s play-acting (cf. *Politics* 1336a33–34).

⁶ This continuity was partly obfuscated by P. Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Fine Arts,” *Renaissance Thought and the Arts* (Princeton: 1980), 163–227, at 200; the remarks on Aristotle at 172 are unsatisfactory.

⁷ Cf. S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, 4th ed. (London: 1907), 116–18; but Butcher himself, 154–58, later has problems with the distinction, because of his idealistic interpretation of mimesis in art (cf. p. 510 below). Recent instances of the conflating occur at E. Schaper, *Prelude to Aesthetics* (London: 1968), 61; McKeon, “Literary Criticism,” 131; and Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis*, 41–42.

tions of human experience, their mimetic standing can be provisionally formulated as a mode of signification. Aristotle himself, unlike Plato, does not connect or compare mimesis to his specific (linguistic) concept of “signifying,” *sêmeinein*, though he does appear to have thought that the use of “likeness,” which we shall find is basic to his reading of mimesis, can be used to mediate significance.⁸ If something like this is true of mimesis, it will count as a description of what is implied by the form of locutions which, for example, use the verb *mimeisthai* transitively (*x mimeitai y*), or use other members of the word group with an objective genitive (*x* as mimesis/-etic of *y*). This suggests that mimetic works might be thought of as having a relational character, ostensibly construable as some form of correspondence: given that *x* is a mimesis of *y*, at least some of what is conveyed by *x* must, by virtue of that very fact, be predicable of *y*. If a picture is a mimesis of Achilles after the death of Patroclus, then what the picture exhibits (a state, say, of traumatic grief) would be predicable of just such a real Achilles after the death of Patroclus. As this conditional formulation intimates, *y* need not be an independently existing state of affairs; it need only be one which could be imagined and understood as existing. Aristotle is in no doubt that the “objects” of mimetic artefacts need not be actual (*Poetics* 25.1460b8–11). This already complicates the question of what it might mean to talk of relational significance in such cases, and encourages the alternative of treating mimetic works as only “internally” or “intensionally” relational to their content.

Interpretation of these problems must take account of Aristotle’s adherence to the old Greek idea that mimetic works are, or contain, “likenesses.”⁹ At *Politics* 8.1340a, Aristotle claims first that melodies and rhythms contain “likenesses” (*homoiômata*, 18) of character, then that they are mimetic (that they contain *mimêmata*, 39) of character. The two terms are here clearly synonymous, and this is confirmed by the use of “likenesses” (*homoia*, 23) in the same passage as a compendious description of mimetic artefacts.¹⁰ In accepting the translation “likeness” for such expressions, we should divest the word of its special association, in modern English, with the visual, though we shall shortly

⁸ *Topics* 140a8–10, referring to metaphor. Cf. *sêmeinein* and *mimeisthai* at Plato, *Cratylus* 422eff. One view, perhaps too clean, of Aristotelian signification is given by T. H. Irwin, “Aristotle’s Concept of Signification,” in M. Schofield and M. C. Nussbaum, eds., *Language and Logos* (Cambridge: 1982), 241–66.

⁹ It is an old motif, found in Homer, Hesiod, etc., that poetry can offer things “like the truth”; a similar phrase is used of painting in Empedocles, fr. 23; cf. Pindar, *Olympians* 7.52; Xenophanes, fr. 15; Euripides, fr. 372 Nauck; and Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.10.7 for visual “likenesses.” *Dissoi Logoi* 3.10 applies a version of the old phrase to both poetry and painting. The association of mimesis and likening occurs in various contexts: e.g., Plato, *Cratylus* 423a, *Republic* 393c; Isocrates 9.75; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.10.1–2. On likeness and plausibility cf. n. 49 below.

¹⁰ Cf. *Poetics* 1454b10; pseudo-Aristotle, *De audibilibus* 801a33, for other references to mimetic likenesses.

see that the visual is important in other ways for Aristotle's view of mimesis. The force of the language of "like" and "likeness" in Aristotle's vocabulary is essentially logical, not pictorial. Likeness is a matter of common or similar attributes and qualities (e.g., *Categories* 8.11a15–18), and as such can subsist in a variety of modalities, not exclusively those that are visually cognizable.

The mimetic artist produces "likenesses" in his particular medium or media; he makes an artefact that, within a framework Aristotle allows to be both cultural and natural, can be perceived and understood as possessing in a fictive form, and in that sense signifying, properties of the same kinds as belong to things in the world. (Elucidation of what it is for mimetic works to possess properties in this sense will be attempted in Part 2). Not all likenesses are mimetic, since not all likeness has the intentional grounding which is a necessary condition of artistic mimesis. Aristotle alludes to this last point at *Metaphysics* 1.9.991a23–6, in the course of criticizing (as "empty talk and poetic metaphor") the Platonic account of metaphysical Forms as "paradigms" in which ordinary things "participate." Aristotle rejects the existence of Forms which things can be said to resemble, and he observes additionally that anything can be like anything else without being deliberately rendered like it or made in the other's image (*eikazomenon*).¹¹ Although Aristotle's concerns are here logical and ontological, what he says about likeness and causal relationships has implications for his use of the concept elsewhere, and corroborates that intentionality, embodied in culturally evolved practices, underwrites the significance which mimetic works carry for both their makers and audiences.

The verb *eikazein* used in this passage of *Metaphysics* is associated especially with painting and sculpture,¹² the prime producers of "images" (*eikones*), and the connection between mimesis and images has further pertinence to my argument. At *Topics* 6.2.140a14–15, in a context referring to both metaphorical and literal images, Aristotle states that an image (*eikôn*) is produced by means of mimesis. Artistic images provide instances of visual mimesis, but in addition they furnish for Aristotle, I suggest, a kind of paradigm for all artistic mimesis. This emerges, for example, at *Poetics* 25.1460b8–9, where Aristotle readily illustrates a point of general application to mimesis by reference to painting and other forms of image-making. Other passages in the *Poetics* (e.g., 1.1447a18–19, 4.1448b15–19) confirm the exemplary value which Aristotle attaches to the mimetic nature of the visual arts: the treatise contains eight references to these arts, and one metaphor drawn from them; in every case a

¹¹ The copy-paradigm relation of particulars to Forms had already been criticized at Plato, *Parmenides* 132c–133a: see G. L. Owen, *Logic, Science and Dialectic* (London: 1986), ed., M. C. Nussbaum, 69–71. Cf. Owen, chap. 9 on Aristotle, fr. 187, and note *Eudemian Ethics* 1217b9–10 for "participation and likeness."

¹² E.g., *Poetics* 1447a19 (the compound form only here in Aristotle), 1448a6.

positive comparison is involved. The implications of this point will recur. It is necessary here, however, to bear in mind a distinction between two meanings of *eikôn* (a distinction Plato sometimes blurs when talking of images for meta-physical purposes)—(a) a portrait or other illustration of particulars, (b) a visual image *tout court*.¹³ This is a version of the familiar aesthetic contrast between portrayal and depiction. While sense (a) logically involves a relation to a specifiable model or subject, (b) need not.

The immediately important consideration is that Aristotle regards all images, in either of these senses, as equally mimetic. The “likeness” in virtue of which art works are mimetic need not involve a reproductive or duplicating relationship to an “original”; those works which *are* of this kind—e.g., portraits—form only a subclass of the category, and their mimetic status is *independent* of this fact about them. Similarly, a poem which incorporates historical details is not for that reason mimetic, according to *Poetics* 9, but only insofar as it works these into a dramatized pattern of action which exhibits “universals.” This position diverges sharply, therefore, from the influential Platonic idea of artistic representation as a *mirroring* of the world. Equally, the distinction sometimes drawn between mimesis and imagination (a commonly cited text from antiquity being Philostratus’s *Life of Apollonius* 6.19) has no obvious relevance to Aristotle’s case, since his understanding of mimesis does not exclude, indeed it explicitly embraces (cf. *Poetics* 25.1460b8–11 once more), the imaginary or imaginative.

Mimetically rendered “likeness” is, then, typified by the model of picturing, but free of any strictly referential function in relation to particulars. Thus, the status of a mimetic artefact is not, after all, an overtly relational quality.¹⁴ Its significance, rather, must be construed as its sense, which is contained in the intelligible pattern of human experience that it artistically manifests and hence represents. This significance is intrinsically artificial or fictive: Aristotle takes it that one can always distinguish between a “likeness” and the equivalent reality, if only on functional grounds.¹⁵ Yet full apprehension of the mimetic work

¹³ For (a) see *On Memory* 450b21–451a15, *Rhetoric* 1361a36, 1397b29, *Politics* 1315b19, *Poetics* 1454b9; for (b), *Poetics* 1448b11, ?1448b15, 1450b3, 1460b9, *Meteorology* 390a13, *Parts of Animals* 645a11, *Politics* 1254b36. Aristotle, fr. 187 (Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Commentary on Metaphysics* 82.11) shows the term fluctuating between the two senses.

¹⁴ Cf. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful*, 121: “mimesis . . . does not imply a reference to an original as something other than itself, but means that something meaningful is there as itself.” Gadamer offers this as representing his own position, which he broadly contrasts with “the classicist aesthetic of imitation.”

¹⁵ E.g., *On the Soul* 412b20–22, *Parts of Animals* 640b35–641a3, *Meteorology* 390a10–13. When Aristotle contrasts mimesis with “the truth” at *Politics* 1281b12, 1340a19, 24, he is using a common Greek formulation (to which the passages in n. 9 above are relevant): cf., e.g., Alcidas, *On Sophists* 27; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.10.7; *Dissoi Logoi* 3.10; Plato, *Laws* 643c2.

requires one to grasp the way in which it presents a possible or supposed reality—a point to which I shall return. Plato had sometimes accused mimetic artists of striving to erase this difference between representation and “presence,” and to deceive by the creation of a duplicitous pseudo-reality. Aristotle shows no concern that the difference could ever be erased.¹⁶

2.

If artistic mimesis amounts to a mode of signification, we nonetheless need a more precise characterization of what, for Aristotle, makes a poem, painting, or piece of music mimetic rather than significant in the way in which language is.¹⁷ In attempting to construct an answer to this question, I turn first to the comments on musical mimesis at *Politics* 8.5.1340a12–39, where we are told that the tonal and rhythmical elements of music contain likenesses (*homoiômata*) or representations (*mimêmata*) of character.¹⁸ Aristotle explains that such “likenesses” are strictly possible *only* in audible percepts, not in other sensory media, but his point should certainly not be paraphrased as the claim that music is simply the “most mimetic of the arts.”¹⁹ In visual media one can have signs or symbols (*sêmeia*) of character, but not (or only to a slight degree: Aristotle equivocates) mimetic representations of it.²⁰ A painter may portray bodily indications or correlatives of “character,” i.e., of ethical feelings, but this does not fully meet the criteria of mimesis.

We can draw two basic conclusions from *Politics* 8.5: first, that mimetic

¹⁶ On semiotic grounds, the difference strikes some as illusory: pictures and poems are not unreal but simply one way of constructing meanings in the world; cf. the “incarnational” theory of Osborne, “Repudiation,” §5. But such a view denies itself the capacity to say how a picture of a man differs from a flesh and blood man.

¹⁷ The suggestion at *Rhetoric* 1404a20 that all language is mimetic is, I believe, either an early Platonism or a piece of loose argument; otherwise, Aristotle’s distinctions in *Poetics*, chaps. 1, 9, 24 (see p. 499 ff.) would be void. R. Janko, *Aristotle: Poetics* (Indianapolis: 1987), 136, uses this *Rhetoric* passage to accompany his confused claim that metaphors are words which “represent” other words (cf. 220). Note also that the ordinary signifying function of words in poetry is independent, and not determinative, of a poem’s mimetic status.

¹⁸ “When listening to mimetic works, all men share the emotions, through the very rhythms and tones apart from (the words). . . . Rhythms and tones contain likenesses that are very close to the true nature of . . . ethical feelings. . . . Our souls are changed as we listen to such music. No other percepts . . . contain likenesses of character, except to a slight degree in visible things. . . . Besides, these are not likenesses of character, but their shapes and colors are rather signs of character, bodily correlations of the emotions . . . but in the very tones there are mimetic representations of character” (*Politics* 8.5.1340a12–39). Pseudo-Aristotle, *Problems* 919b26–37 supports Susemihl’s textual supplement, which I consider essential, at 1340a13. Cf. W. D. Anderson, *Ethos and Education in Greek Music* (Cambridge, MA: 1966), 126, 186–88.

¹⁹ E.g., Butcher, *Aristotle’s Theory*, 129. Aristotle did not think *all* music mimetic: *Poetics* 1447a15.

²⁰ For the contrast of “likenesses” and “signs” cf. *On Interpretation* 16a3–8, where the former appears to involve a formal equivalence or correspondence: see J. Ackrill, *Aristotle’s “Categories” and “De Interpretatione”* (Oxford: 1963), 113.

works may contain signs or symbols; second, that it is not in virtue of such signs that they *are* mimetic. Not everything, then, in a mimetic work need itself be mimetic—a point perhaps also implied by the phrase “taken as a whole” at *Poetics* 1.1447a16. The distinction between mimesis and *sêmeia* gives us a clue to the nature of the former. In Aristotle, a sign is related to that of which it is a sign by providing a reason for an inference, either probable or necessary, about the signified. Thus, perceptible states of the body may be signs of emotional and ethical qualities, as the passage from *Politics* 8 indicates and as Aristotle observes in more detail elsewhere (*Prior Analytics* 2.27.70b7 seq.). Even if this relationship is construed as natural and necessary, as it might be by Aristotle, it would still be a matter of “signs,” not of mimesis. Mimesis must involve something more, or other, than a basis even for necessary inferences.

Aristotle asserts that there are likenesses of ethical emotions “in” the tonal figures and the rhythms of music. Musical mimesis is diagnosed as an intrinsic capacity to represent affective aspects of character: the very patterns of music have properties “like” the emotional states which can, for that reason, be the objects of their mimesis. As evidence for this Aristotle cites music’s power to put its audiences into states of mind which contain, or are characterized by, these same emotions. But since we might be put into an affective state by viewing a picture which portrayed the physical “signs,” as Aristotle calls them, of an emotion,²¹ there must be something distinct about the way in which this is achieved in music, if the case is to hold. It seems hard to escape from the formulation that this is a matter of experiencing emotions which are not just indicated or symbolized (as they might be, on Aristotle’s view, in a painting) but are directly matched and enacted by qualities “in” the art work. These qualities are, it seems, a matter of movement (*kinêsis*, cf. 1340b8–10), perceived not as spatial change but as the experience of affective sequences or dynamics, which elsewhere too Aristotle sometimes describes as “movements of the soul” involved in emotion.²²

Comprehending the view sketched in this passage of *Politics* 8 is impeded by our meager knowledge of the culture of musical experience to which it belongs. Though he is in part contending for a potential of purely instrumental music, Aristotle’s view was influenced by a tradition in which music characteristically accompanied and matched a verbal text, the two elements reinforc-

²¹ Aristotle allows that pictures may arouse feelings of pleasure at beauty, *Politics* 1340a25–26, but *On the Soul* 427b23–24 seems to rule out the arousal of strong emotions by paintings: E. Belfiore, *Classical Quarterly* 35 (1985): 357–58, gives a different interpretation of this latter passage.

²² E.g., *Prior Analytics* 70b11, *On Memory* 450b1, *Rhetoric* 1369b33, *Politics* 1342a8. If we take account of *On the Soul* 408b1–33, such *kinêsis* is not properly “of” the soul, but seems to be semiphysiological. Cf. the “movements” of character at *Nicomachean Ethics* 1128a10–12, and pseudo-Aristotle, *Problems* 920a3–7.

ing one another. Yet the central idea is that there is a systematic and formal equivalence between musical percepts themselves and certain psychological patterns of feeling. In addition, Aristotle claims, or assumes, that the power of musical mimesis is naturally rooted. He refers to a natural human kinship with tones and rhythms (1340b17–18), in the same way that Plato does at *Laws* 653d–54a (which is not necessarily earlier in date). Plato suggests that this conviction was common, and this is the point at which to acknowledge that *Politics* 8 itself reflects the theories of specialist “musicologists,” to whom Aristotle defers at, e.g., 1340b5–6, 1341b27–29. The naturalistic basis of musical mimesis is, however, also of distinctively Aristotelian interest, since it connects with *Poetics* 4.1448b5–9, where *all* mimesis is alleged to be grounded in natural causes. But this naturalistic doctrine would not alone, it must be stressed, serve to distinguish mimesis from other forms of signification, since “signs” too can be natural (*Prior Analytics* 2.27.70b7 seq.). Nor, conversely, does the naturalistic premise rule out extensive and elaborate cultural development of artistic forms, conventions and genres: of this we can be confident from the cognate aspects of the *Poetics*.

I conclude that in this passage of *Politics* 8 Aristotle is committing himself to what might arguably be thought implicit in the idiom of “like” and “likeness” itself, namely, an interpretation of mimetic significance as “iconic,” to use Peirce’s much-borrowed term.³³ But if the term is modern, the idea is not; Aristotle must have known the explicit occurrence in Plato’s *Cratylus* of the principle that mimetic likenesses by nature share some of their properties with the things which they signify.³⁴ The iconicity of musical mimesis in *Politics* 8 rests, accordingly, on just those features of Aristotle’s position to which I have drawn attention, that is, the allegedly *intrinsic*, as well as the naturally rooted, significance of the “likenesses” embodied in musical works. Without attempting a full-scale defense of Aristotle here against the decidedly antinaturalist cast of much modern aesthetics, I would urge two points briefly in elucidation: first, Aristotle does not deny the relevance of cultural traditions within which musical significance evolves and finds organized means of realization, so his position is not vulnerable to a charge of naive naturalism; second, it is anyway the intrinsic rather than the natural which seems central to the argument, and the notion of the intrinsic can perhaps be best explicated by the negative principle that, if music is experienced as colored by emotion, there is nothing outside the musical work (say, the composer’s mind) to which this property can be referred.

³³C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss, eds., *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Cambridge MA: 1931–35), vol. 2, §§274–82; vol. 5, §§73–76. Peirce himself sometimes uses “likeness” as a synonym of “icon.” On Aristotle and iconicity cf. A. Rey, “Mimesis, poétique et iconisme,” in P. Bouissac, et al., eds., *Iconicity* (Tübingen: 1986), 17–27.

³⁴See esp. *Cratylus* 433d–434b.

Musical iconicity, moreover, involves a directness of effect upon listeners—“our souls are changed,” as Aristotle puts it, in the act of attending to musical texture and design—and this is seen as evidence of precisely the intrinsic qualities which constitute mimetic significance. Approaching Aristotle’s remarks in *Politics* 8 from a long-term aesthetic perspective, it is tempting to infer that this view of musical mimesis embraces a notion of expression, and I believe that this is a justifiable judgment, despite the strong hold of the assumption that mimesis (or representation) and expression are sharply distinct concepts. Yet if there is a notion of expression at work in this passage, the posited link between music’s mimetic power and its effect on hearers might strike some aestheticians as a case of a mistaken reading of expression, since expression is a property of an art work which needs to be logically distinguished from effects which the work may have on us. But if failure to draw this distinction is a mistake, it is not in fact one which Aristotle makes. The mimesis of emotion is said unequivocally to inhere in the very materials and forms of music, in a way which Aristotle implies is parallel to the inherent visual significance of a picture (see below). It is as evidential support for this claim that Aristotle appeals to music’s effect on a listener. His position seems to be this: that we simultaneously recognize the emotion *in* the music and are taken through its sequence in a response of “sympathetic” psychological enactment. Historically, emotive and iconic theories of musical significance have sometimes been opposed, or seen as alternatives,²⁵ even though it is arguable that a successful theory of music would need to integrate elements of both kinds of view. Aristotle’s sketch of a musical aesthetic in this passage does not *identify* mimetic significance with emotive effect (i.e., it is not a simple “arousal” theory), but it does posit an important, because causal, relationship between the two things.

This relationship, furthermore, is not peculiar to music. Although Aristotle distinguishes music from painting in respect of their capacities to mediate the mimesis of character, he directly compares their mimetic standing in other terms. The experience of emotion (forms of pleasure and pain) towards mimetic works is, he says, very close to responding emotionally “to the truth,” so that our pleasure at a human form depicted in visual art entails that such a form instantiated in a real body would give a closely equivalent pleasure. Painting and sculpture would, accordingly, seem to be iconic, as the *Cratylus* had suggested, in the sense that their likenesses fictively incorporate those attributes and qualities which they represent.²⁶ A painting of a man, whether

²⁵ Cf. P. Kivy, *The Corded Shell* (Princeton: 1980).

²⁶ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.10.3—where Parrhasius maintains that only the visible can be captured by visual mimesis—suggests that issues of this kind were discussed in artistic circles. Cf. Plato, *Statesman* 285d–86a, with Owen, *Logic, Science*, chap. 7.

or not a real individual, represents him mimetically just insofar as it puts before our eyes something which we can perceive in ways that formally (though of course incompletely) match our perceptions of the appearance of real men.²⁷ This view—a “resemblance view,” perhaps badly so-called, of visual depiction—parallels the case put for music, whose tonal and rhythmical patterns enact “movements” that are experienced as affective. In painting as in music Aristotle believes that mimetic representation is a formal equivalent of an imaginable reality, though the aspects of reality which can be captured through such mimetic “isomorphism” differ *naturally* in accordance with the character of the two arts. And in visual art as in music, the significance of a mimetic work is causally productive of, and closely associated with, a particular kind of experience in the attentive recipient.²⁸

I submit that the import of this passage’s combined comparison and contrast of music and visual art suggests two components of a general Aristotelian construction of artistic mimesis: a view of mimetic significance as iconically dependent on, and inherent in, a matching affinity between medium and “object”; and a construal of the integral relation between a mimetic work’s properties and the correct experience of that work.²⁹ I shall shortly turn to poetry, where Aristotle’s working views of mimesis are fullest, to test the first of these claims, but it can be indicated at once, if with unavoidable brevity,³⁰ that what is said in the *Poetics* clearly confirms the second. For there the emotions which partly define tragic poetry are not conceived as somehow extrinsic to the work proper, but as a necessary dimension of the comprehending experience of what a tragedy *contains*: thus, at *Poetics* 14.1453b10–14, Aristotle can say that the tragic effect should be “embodied” (*empoiêteon*) in the events of the play, and a similar formulation recurs later (19.1456b2–7). Pity and fear in the spectator (or hearer) are the consequence of apprehending the pitiful and fearful within the work itself.

To return to the question of iconicity, however, one must face a possible

²⁷ As this formulation indicates, I take representational properties to be explicable in terms of the perception or cognition to which they are accessible. A similar consideration underlies the vindication of “resemblance theories” of depiction in F. Schier, *Deeper into Pictures* (Cambridge: 1986). Cf. also K. Neander, “Pictorial Representation: A Matter of Resemblance,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 27 (1987): 213–26.

²⁸ The notion of attention, an active openness to what the work has to offer, is assumed by Aristotle’s argument. The idea of “sympathy” (*sumpaschein*), as at *Politics* 1340a13, is germane; it denotes a close correlation of feelings (being used often of the relationship of body and soul in states of emotion).

²⁹ Two broader and largely nonartistic kinds of mimesis (mimicry, whether vocal or visual, and general behavioral imitation) can both be easily accommodated to the iconic model, since both belong to the same medium as their “objects.”

³⁰ I attempt a fuller analysis in “Pleasure, Emotion and Understanding in Aristotle’s *Poetics*,” in A. Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle’s “Poetics”* (Princeton: forthcoming).

objection. Although in *Politics* 8 Aristotle denies mimesis of character to the visual arts, or at least severely limits their scope in this respect, elsewhere, even in the *Politics* itself, he shows no hesitation in attributing character (*êthos*) to the works of painters.³¹ Is this because he did not, after all, consistently hold the criteria of mimesis indicated in the passage I have been considering, or because he did not distinguish rigorously between mimesis proper and the use of nonmimetic “signs” when making judgments on arts which were predominantly mimetic in character? Neither of these explanations seems to me apt. In addition to the fact that even in *Politics* 8 Aristotle does allow some capacity for visual mimesis of character, we need to remember that the comments on music are concerned with the *feelings* involved in ethical states; it would be absurd to suppose that Aristotle believed music to have the mimetic scope to represent *all* features of ethical character. Elsewhere, we can therefore assume, his observations on painting presuppose a broader understanding of character which will allow for painting’s mimetic access to visually cognizable character, i.e., character as a qualitative aspect of depicted *actions*. So the iconic hypothesis is not in fact damaged by this ostensible discrepancy, and there is nothing in Aristotle’s more general remarks on visual art (*Poetics* 1.1447a18–19, 25.1460b8–11) which is incompatible with it.³²

In now turning to poetry, we shall find, I think, that Aristotle’s commitment to an iconic conception of mimesis was here qualified in ways which grew out of the more thorough and intricate treatment which he gave to this particular art. This conclusion will emerge from a reappraisal of the three passages of the *Poetics* in which Aristotle advocates a firm separation of poetic mimesis from practices which he knows to be sometimes confused with it.

- (a) 1.1447b13–20: mimesis is a necessary condition of poetry, but its centrality has been obscured by the habit of classifying poets according to metrical forms. (We can notice in passing that metrical form is not regarded as a sufficient basis for generic categories, though it is accepted as *one* factor in the conception of genres such as tragedy and epic: see 4.1449a21–8, 24.1459b31–60a1.) On this criterion Homer and Empedocles would belong together, but for Aristotle they have nothing in common *except* their meter, and Empedocles is to be regarded not as a poet but as a natural scientist (*phusiologos*).
- (b) Chap. 9 offers a further distinction (while reiterating the inessential status

³¹ *Poetics* 1448a5–6, 1450a26–29, ?1461b12f., *Politics* 1340a37.

³² Aristotle’s notion of musical *êthos* was influenced by the existing “musicological” use of the term: cf. Anderson, *Ethos*, and C. Lord, *Education and Culture in the Political Thought of Aristotle* (New York: 1982), 203–19. One remaining art, dancing, is, on the evidence of *Poetics* 1447a27–28, consistent with an iconic conception of mimesis: its combined rhythmic and visual forms overlap with the representational fields of painting and music.

of metrical criteria), this time between the poet and the historian. Aristotle does not formulate this directly by reference to mimesis, but in terms of the particulars/universals dichotomy. But he concludes by saying: "So it is clear that the poet should be a maker of plot-structures rather than of verses, insofar as he is a poet in virtue of mimesis, and the object of his mimesis is actions" (1451b27–9). This seems to confirm that the poet is distinguished from the historian too by the mimetic status of his work,³³ while suggesting a possible connection between mimetic status and universals.

- (c) 24.1460a5–11 praises Homer for speaking very little "in his own voice [or 'person']," unlike other epic poets, for it is not when or by speaking himself that the poet is a mimetic artist.

These three passages demarcate poetic mimesis from (a) philosophy/science, (b) history, (c) speaking in one's [the poet's] own person. What do they tell us?

The first, duly generalized, asserts that mimesis is not concerned with aspects of the world embraced by bodies of technical or expert knowledge (e.g., those covered by natural science or medicine), though elements from such spheres may enter "accidentally," as Aristotle would say, into a poem. This point is elaborated in *Poetics*, chap. 25, where poetry is exempted from the need invariably to satisfy the criteria of truth holding within specific domains of knowledge.

From the second passage we learn that there are other aspects of the world with which mimesis engages *only* insofar as they furnish plausible material, or quasi-universals, for its purposes. So historical events, *qua* history, are outside its ambit, though they may provide material that poetry can still use—shorn, as it were, of their historicity. This contrast with history can be read as a particular application or extension of the previous demarcation of mimesis: history as such is excluded from poetry on at least one of the same grounds as underlie the exclusion of natural science, i.e., because of its distinct status as a discipline of inquiry.

The third and final contribution to the delimitation of poetic mimesis is the differentiation of its use of language from the mode of affirmative or declarative propositions about the world. Poetry, for Aristotle, does not consist of propositions with a determinate truth-value (though such propositions may belong, again "accidentally," to poetry, e.g., when a poem contains a correct historical statement or a well-founded observation on human behavior). But at 24.1460a5–11, Aristotle supplies the positive corollary of this exclusion by suggesting that the proper mode of poetry is personative or dramatic.

³³ On the later notion of historiographic mimesis see V. Gray, *American Journal of Philology* 108 (1987): 467–86.

These three points help to adumbrate an Aristotelian conception of poetic mimesis, though the distinctions they draw look at first predominantly negative in thrust. One way of turning this thrust in a positive direction is by saying that Aristotle is working out a notion of the fictional or fictive (in the older and basic sense of the feigned and invented),³⁴ and marking off its boundaries both from particular *areas* of knowledge and inquiry (history, natural science, philosophy) where canons of truth would obtain, and from the *logical status* of the discourse which belongs to such fields. It is interesting that Aristotle eschews the term *pseudos* (falsehood) in characterizing fiction.³⁵ A telling contrast can be drawn with Plato, *Republic* 2–3: there Plato gives *pseudos* something like the status of “fiction,” when he declares all stories and myths to be essentially *pseudeis* (376e–77a), but he goes on to undermine any positive value for this conception by bringing emphatic charges of falsehood against Homer and other poets. It may be precisely because of the ambiguities associated in Plato with the idea of poetic *pseudos* that Aristotle avoids the term, and instead allows a notion of fiction to emerge from the cumulative determination of the properties which differentiate poetic artefacts from other uses of language.

“Fiction,” in its Aristotelian version, furnishes the poetic equivalent of painting (an analogy which, we have seen, receives repeated emphasis in the *Poetics*): it is the representation through significant verbal structures, ideally in a dramatic or personative mode, of imaginary or hypothetical, not real, actions and events. But one immediate difficulty is the discrepancy between 24.1460a7–11, with its insistence that even the epic poet should properly be a dramatist,³⁶ and the earlier categorization of modes of mimesis in chap. 3, where enactment was given no preference over narrative. In chap. 24 Aristotle is pressing a more stringent requirement for epic mimesis than elsewhere, and is doing so in order to emphasize Homer’s superiority over other epic poets. But why, even so, should the dramatic be considered preferable to the narrative mode? Aristotle’s answer is that personative representation is more strictly mimetic than narrative, and we can only, I think, interpret this as meaning that an enactive or dramatic mode will more directly *exhibit* the imagined actions and events of the poem—for the dramatic mode employs, indeed it can be defined as the use of, speech to represent speech. If speech and action seem to lack the directness of match by which paintings and the appearances of things are deemed to be related, it must be remembered that

³⁴ For an early neoclassical association of mimesis and fiction see Sir Philip Sidney, *A Defence of Poetry* [publ. 1595], ed. J. van Dorsten (Oxford: 1966), 24, where the phrase “imitation or fiction” occurs. The equation, which was colored by rhetorical ideas of *inventio*, recurs in many neoclassical writers.

³⁵ 1460a18–26 is no real exception to this statement.

³⁶ See also the praise of Homer as “dramatic” at 1448b35–38; cf. 1459a18–19.

significant human action, on Aristotle's account, is strongly intentional in cast, and that is why the speech of dramatic poetry can give mimetic access to its dynamics, including its ethical motivations (character).

Aristotle's normatively expressed preference for the enactive mode of dramatic speech will consequently give us, for his view of poetry, that factor of iconicity which appears in his remarks on musical and visual mimesis in *Politics* 8. Poetic narrative is an inferior mode of imaginative representation of action, by this reckoning, both because it is less immediate or vivid, and because it is harder in principle to distinguish its status from that of other declarative types of discourse, not least other uses of narrative. Thus the implications of this section of *Poetics* 24 turn out to be complementary to those passages in chaps. 1 and 9 where we see Aristotle's thought working under the pressure of a need to delimit a distinctive domain for poetry, and to disengage it from kinds of writing to which it might, in the context of historical Greek culture, be assimilated. Such assimilation, it must be noticed, would tend to allow Platonic criteria of truth and goodness a strong purchase on poetry. The dramatic mode, in Aristotle's perspective, recommends itself by erasing the poet's own voice from the interior of the poem, thus making it easier to say, against Plato and with Sir Philip Sidney: "the poet nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth." On this reading, part of the importance to Aristotle of the "picture-model" of mimesis, to which I referred in Part 1, may well have been the idea, stressed for example by Ernst Gombrich,³⁷ that a visual image lacks the intrinsic semantic articulation of a statement, though it may of course be made to function contextually as one. Likewise, it appears, a dramatic poem has a significance which lacks the syntax of a statement (though again the possibility remains of responding to it as if it were one).

If we ask why Aristotle presses the restriction of mimesis to the dramatic mode only in chap. 24,³⁸ two reasons can be discerned: first, that it is only when dealing with epic that he needs to make this point, and second, that the criterion of mode is not the only means for distinguishing poetic mimesis from other kinds of discourse. On the criteria which he indicates in the other passages addressed above, epic is just as eligible as tragedy or comedy to count as poetic mimesis. This is another way of saying that in the *Poetics* iconicity has become only one component in a fuller, more complex conception of a mimetic art than we were given in *Politics* 8. Yet unless we are prepared to

³⁷ E.g., *Reflections on the History of Art* (Oxford: 1987), 246–47; cf. R. Scruton, *Art and Imagination* (London: 1974), 196–97. For an account of fiction close to my reading of Aristotle see N. Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Oxford: 1980), 231–34.

³⁸ But the downgrading of lyric poetry in the *Poetics* perhaps betrays the same attitude: on this see S. Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London: 1986), 276–85.

discount the explicitness of that passage in *Poetics* 24, iconicity remains material to the understanding of Aristotle's mimeticism as a whole.

If this aspect of Aristotle's view of poetry has often been underestimated by modern interpreters of the treatise, it is not surprising that its significance was glimpsed by Lessing, in a letter of 1769 written against a background of recurrent eighteenth-century interest in the distinction between natural and arbitrary signs. This distinction had already been approached by Lessing in his exploration of the representational capacities of poetry and painting within the mimeticist aesthetic of *Laocöon*, where we encounter the principle that "signs used [in art] must have a definite relation to the thing signified" (§16). In the letter of three years later he returns to the question. But whereas in *Laocöon* narrative had been accepted as a "natural" mode of poetic signification, because of its sequential correlation with the actions it recounts, Lessing now turns to the Aristotelian precedent in the *Poetics* to support a new insistence that natural signification requires the dramatic mode. He cites both Aristotle's preference for dramatic over epic poetry and his characterization of the virtues of epic at its best as likewise dramatic. "The reason he [Aristotle] gives for this," says Lessing, "is not mine, it is true; but it can be reduced to mine, and only reducing it to mine ensures it against being applied falsely."³⁹ In fact, if I am right, Aristotle's reasons anticipated the considerations which moved Lessing even more than Lessing realized.

If Aristotle's position in regard to the dramatic and narrative modes of poetry might be compared to the contrast, familiar in criticism of the novel, between "showing" and "telling,"⁴⁰ it could be asked why he did not carry his principles to what looks like the logical conclusion of seeing poetic mimesis ideally embodied in the *performance* of drama. There is, I think, more equivocation in the *Poetics* on the status of performance than is sometimes appreciated,⁴¹ but even so Aristotle is quite explicit that dramatic poetry does not require theatrical realization. Whatever else we may make of this attitude, it does not involve any essential qualification on the iconicity of poetic mimesis. This is because Aristotle makes a clean conceptual separation between poetry (mimetic language) and performance (which would, of course, involve mimetic use of voice and movement); dramatic poetry is dramatic, by his mimetic criteria, not because it is commonly written for the theatre, but because it uses a formally equivalent (iconic) mode of representation—speech representing

³⁹ Lessing to Nicolai, 26 May 1769; translated in H. B. Nisbet, *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann etc.* (Cambridge: 1985), 133–34. On the cultural context see D. Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocöon* (Cambridge: 1984), 191–227.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., W. C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: 1961), 93.

⁴¹ See Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, Appendix 3.

speech. In the strictest terms, therefore, there is no more reason why Aristotle should see theatrical performance as necessary to the dramatic mode of poetry than an advocate of the technique of "showing" in the novel should press for the performance of novels.

The dramatic mode and quality which Aristotle values so highly, and which he discerns as a pretheatrical achievement in Homer, is a matter of representational technique in the *verbal* structures of poetry, and, by virtue of that technique, a means of achieving an immediacy of imagined "actions and life." There remain several qualms one might have about the purity of this position, as well as about the unqualified sharpness of the contrast drawn with narrative (whose own varieties of "voice," technique, and point of view receive no recognition from Aristotle, nor, it must be said, from ancient criticism generally).⁴² But one will at least understand Aristotle's motivation, if I am right, when we see the complexion of his mimeticism as involving an attempt both to deny to poetry the use of direct statements about the world (for such statements belong to nonmimetic discourse, and can claim no privileged exemption from the requirement of truth-telling), yet equally to leave intact art's freedom to encompass and dramatize possibilities of experience which go beyond events known actually to have occurred in the world.

3.

The arguments of the preceding section have allowed us to glimpse some of the ways in which Aristotle's approach to mimesis is adjusted to take account of the media and modalities of individual arts. Although he regards the mimetic arts as generically characterized by the potential to embody likenesses (intelligible renderings) of features of imagined reality, Aristotle interprets this representational potential through a sense of the types of significance accessible to the materials and structures of particular arts. But it is only in the *Poetics* that we can observe the detailed implications of this point of view at work.

One of the most striking consequences of this Aristotelian perspective on mimesis can best be judged as a contrast to the "transparency," in Alexander Nehamas's term, that Plato attributes to mimesis.⁴³ For Plato, mimesis comes to be perceived, and condemned, as a kind of pseudo-reality—a masquerade or mirage whose nature may actually deceive, on the psychological and moral level if not on the sensory (though Plato is happy to use the latter as an

⁴² The narrative-drama dichotomy remained standard in antiquity (e.g., pseudo-Longinus, *On the Sublime* 9.13). Extensive rhetorical interest in "narrative" did not encompass the narratological issues indicated in my text.

⁴³ On "transparency" see A. Nehamas, *The Monist* 71 (1988): 219.

analogue of the former), and be mistaken for the reality which it mimics. The supreme symbol of this mimetic duplicity is the mirror of *Republic* 10 and the *Sophist*. But the idea of the mirrorlike status of mimesis, which was to become a standard notion among later proponents of mimeticism, was not invented by Plato. We know that the sophist Alcidamas, probably earlier in the fourth century than the composition of the *Republic*, had called the *Odyssey* a “beautiful mirror of life,” and we know this because Aristotle quotes the phrase as an example of frigidity of metaphor, which means, given his reading of metaphor as itself dependent on “likeness,” that he saw no reason to take seriously the thought which it expressed.⁴⁴

Aristotle rejected the Platonic conception of mimetic transparency—art’s alleged aspiration to be a counterfeit reality, and hence the possibility of treating its artefacts *unconditionally* as we would the reality itself. At first sight, it might seem that the notion of iconicity which I have been stressing is Aristotle’s own way of emphasizing the closeness of mimetic contact with reality. Yet the *Poetics* enables us to say that Aristotle’s view of mimesis, even where it requires iconicity, involves as much a sense of artistic media and their properties, as of art’s imaginative contents. In the place of Platonic transparency, I wish to claim that Aristotle put an understanding which acknowledges the dual aspects of mimetic representation: its status as created artefact, as the product of artistic shaping of artistic materials, as well as its capacity to signify and offer to the mind the patterns of supposed realities.

Plato was not simply blind to the first of these dimensions of mimesis, but he heavily subordinated it to his sense of the power of mimesis to draw us dangerously close to, and mold us according to, its simulated visions of the world. But for Aristotle it is an aesthetic axiom that mimesis constitutes the internal, material identity of art forms, at the same time as it designates the significance of their contents. Where Plato insists that it is enough to respond to, and judge, these contents as one would the equivalent realities, Aristotle accepts that we need ways of talking about works of art—methods, vocabularies and standards of criticism—which keep the artefact and its significance, the “materials” and the “object” of mimesis, *conjointly* in focus.

It follows that the contrast between Plato and Aristotle is not a simple antithesis between respective conceptions of the heteronomy and autonomy of art. Aristotle does not react to the absolutism of Plato’s aesthetic by defining a realm of pure artistic self-sufficiency. And that is precisely because he retains, and indeed rests his case on, a reinterpreted mimeticism. Among the several major dimensions of thought in the *Poetics* which reflect this dual-aspect mimeticism, one of the most important is the explication of formal unity as a

⁴⁴ *Rhetoric* 1406b4–14; for metaphor and likeness cf. *Poetics* 1459a8, *Topics* 140a8–10.

factor which is both inseparable from the substance, scale, and internal relations of a poem (form inheres in the poet's organization of his materials), and yet also an aspect of the imaginative fabric of the work. Another is the way in which the notion of aesthetic pleasure (pleasure in mimesis) both embraces and qualifies an understanding of our responses, especially our emotional responses, to equivalent realities *outside* the work of art, so that the psychological premise of Platonic fundamentalism, positing a uniform correlation between responses to life and responses to art, is modified but not simply discarded.⁴⁵ But I would like briefly to pursue some other ways in which we can see the argument of the *Poetics* holding a duality of perspective between features of the poetic art work as such and features of the kind of reality which it invites us to imagine.

In the analysis of the "parts" of tragedy, which provides the basis for the entire examination of the genre, Aristotle declares his key tenets that the plot structure (*muthos*) of a play is "the mimesis of the action," while characterization is "that in virtue of which we say that the agents have certain qualities" (6.1450a3–6). These statements rest on the same principle as the observations on the mimetically expressive properties of music which I examined earlier, namely, that there are components of the art work which are formally significant of an imagined ordering of reality. In a work of music one can talk of tones, rhythms, melodies, and much else besides, but one can also talk, according to Aristotle, of the emotional qualities which can be recognized "in" them and which constitute their significance in the developed forms of the musical art. Similarly, in a tragedy one has a plot structure, which is the intelligible design produced by the playwright (it is what he above all *makes*: 9.1451b27–28), and just as one can frame technical descriptions of a musical structure, so one can produce categorizations of a particular plot (that it is "simple," "complex," "double," to use some of Aristotle's own terminology), or about its specific properties (its proportions, its unity, its dénouement, and so forth). But one can also speak of the actions and agents signified by the play, and for this one relies, according to the other half of the mimeticist premise, on the same range of concepts as one would use in life outside the work of art—concepts of purpose and choice, success and failure, prosperity and suffering, good and evil, guilt and innocence. And we do not, on this model, just speak of the work in these terms; we *experience* it through an understanding which depends on them, and respond to it with strong feelings that presuppose that understanding: hence the affective facet of the theory (see above, p. 498).

This suggests, as Paul Ricoeur has argued,⁴⁶ that the *Poetics's* interpreta-

⁴⁵ See Halliwell, "Pleasure."

⁴⁶ Ricoeur, "Mimesis and Representation," 18–20.

tion of mimesis requires the preexisting intelligibility of action and life in the world: mimetic art may extend and reshape understanding, but it starts from and depends upon already given possibilities and forms of meaning in our perceptions of the human world. Yet that does not imply, to reiterate an earlier point, that mimetic significance duplicates or mimics the nature of the social world. Aristotle's terms and standards of analysis throughout the *Poetics* are irreducible either to a reading of the poetic work as a surrogate of the world (a reading which had generated moralism such as Plato's), or to aesthetic absolutisms of the contrary kind—aestheticism, formalism, the semiotics of the autonomous text—which claim or assert a self-sufficiency for the art work's internal procedures. Instead, they are suspended between the dual functions of allowing the poetic structure to be treated as an artefact with properties distinctive of and intrinsic to its design within particular media, and acknowledging the kinds of reality signified by and enacted within that design.

This duality of perspective is a point of basic orientation, but it does not guarantee cogency in the treatment of particular details. It can consequently be found even in some of the more schematic and unsatisfying passages of the treatise, for example in chap. 15's four canons of characterization—goodness, appropriateness, likeness (i.e., here, essential humanity),⁴⁷ and consistency. Aristotle's statement of these requirements, at least in its present compressed form, seems unlikely to cope with all the questions that might be posed about character in tragedy, but my present point is that the requirements themselves exemplify a mimeticist duality. For each of them presupposes a poetic contact with recognizable realities of human status, motivation, and disposition, and hence the legitimacy of critical propositions about dramatic character(ization) which use some of the categories that apply to the understanding of persons in the world; indeed, the very concepts of action and character as they are used in the *Poetics* assume such critical legitimacy at a foundational level. But the requirements of chap. 15 also collectively refer to the internal relationships and coherence of the art work, so that to employ such standards in making critical judgments is not to appeal directly to matters of truth or morality in the Platonic manner, but rather to assess features of the poetic fabric and organization: this is even true of "goodness," which is not required for moralistic reasons but because Aristotle believes this to be a dramatic necessity for the kind of tragic plot-patterns which are qualitatively constitutive of the genre.

It is worth developing a little further this distinction between moralistic criteria for works of art, and criteria which, though requiring reference to life values for part of their application, rest on a sense of the independent identity and rationale of poetic genres. In chap. 4 Aristotle sketches a view of the

⁴⁷ On this vexed point see Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 159–61.

development of poetry from its primitive types to the highly evolved forms of tragic and comic drama in his own time. The historical basis for this reconstruction, which I believe to have been tenuous, is not at issue here. What is of interest is the way in which Aristotle posits only at an early and long superseded stage in the process of cultural evolution the existence of artistic types (praise- and blame-poetry) which Plato had seen as paradigmatic of poetry's social and psychological functioning *in the present*. The original impulses to celebrate or denigrate in poetry and song have been, in the *Poetics's* account, absorbed and transformed into poetic genres, tragedy and comedy, in which they are no longer readily recognizable as such: for though Aristotle suggests that comedy is a mimesis of base and inferior characters (the same types of people who were the targets of primitive blame-poetry, it seems), he does not lead us to suppose that the dramatic genre is overtly moralizing in its treatment of them; and the point is unquestionable in the case of tragedy, which is evidently not regarded as celebrating or praising great men in any straightforward sense.

The quasi-historical narrative of this chapter implicitly rebuts a major premise of Plato's approach to the purposes of poetry. It does so by reasoning in terms of the internal dynamics of poetic traditions, whose character overrides and replaces the primitive impulses of praise and blame behind the serious and comic branches of poetry.⁴⁸ Aristotle perceives a process of evolution constituted by active experiment and concern with representational modes, metrical forms, stylistic registers, and other intrinsic matters of poetic resources. In this way the relation between epic and tragedy, for example, which for Plato had been a matter of a shared (and defective) moral vision, assumes a place in a story whose terms are indefeasibly artistic. It is not that the element of morality has disappeared, for the treatise as a whole keeps ethical categories central to the substance of human action which poetry dramatizes. But *Poetics 4* indicates how, within Aristotle's terms of reference, the ethical has been taken up into the complex historical development of the cultural practices of poetry.

This particular contrast with Plato can, if I am right, be traced back to the radical difference between a dominant belief in the transparency of mimesis and Aristotle's dual-aspect conception of artistic representation. But to see this one needs to reckon with Plato's further conviction that art, by purporting to show how things are in reality, implicitly *endorses*, or reinforces acceptance of, what it exhibits, and to set against this the Aristotelian determination, which I

⁴⁸ The medieval Arabic commentators attempted to foist this dichotomy back onto Aristotle: for Averroes, see A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c. 1100–c. 1375* (Oxford: 1988), 282–84, 289.

discussed in section 2, to erase the declarative and referential from poetry and to replace it with the fictional and the dramatic. Since mimetic images possess a significance which is humanly intelligible,⁴⁹ they must, for Aristotle, remain open in certain respects to ethical understanding and judgment, but this fact is equally conditioned by the sense that the images of poetry are constituted in artistic materials and forms which carry with them requirements and standards of value of their own. Aristotle argues this last point most directly in chap. 25, where he explicitly connects his rejection of Platonic moralism to his understanding of the wide imaginative scope which is open to mimetic art. The guiding principle here is that because a poem or painting is an artefact of a particular kind, and one whose nature is fictively depictive not declarative, it should be assessed by criteria that acknowledge its internal aims and nature. We can see here, as clearly as anywhere, that in contrast to Plato's constriction of artistic imagination in the interests of the supreme values of the soul and the State, the Aristotelian conception of mimesis is inherently liberal, though not for that reason, of course, necessarily preferable.⁵⁰

A thorough survey of the long history of attitudes towards the *Poetics* would disclose that many interpreters have tended, without consciousness of distortion, to deny the equipoise which comes from the dual-aspect mimeticism I have traced in the treatise. The result has been, at different times, the weighing down of its critical balance either on the side of a doctrinal didacticism or on that of some kind of formalist concern with the wholly self-contained satisfactions of poetic art. But both these aberrant readings lose touch with the way in which Aristotle sees the meanings of the art work, and the artifices which constitute and mediate it, as facets of a single substance.

Aristotelian mimesis has suffered at the hands both of its ostensible friends and of its enemies. During the period of neoclassicism, it was often misread as authorizing and epitomizing tenets such as the "imitation of nature" or "the mirror of nature." This association, with the excessively canonical status it entailed, has in turn been exploited by more recent critics, who have made the *Poetics* bear the brunt of general objections to naturalistic and illusionistic creeds in the theory and practice of art. It is ironic that some of these critics, both of Marxist and of semiotic affiliations, have themselves been motivated by heavy ideological convictions, and have displayed commitment to radical absolutisms which unwittingly recreate the Platonic model of art's inescapably

⁴⁹ Intelligibility depends above all, for Aristotle, on the "probable" or plausible: it is therefore worth noting that probability is glossed at *Rhetoric* 1355a14–18 as "like the truth" (cf. n. 9)—i.e., "true to" reality *in general*.

⁵⁰ See my "The Importance of Plato and Aristotle for Aesthetics," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 5 (1989): 321–48.

assertive function. It has not been my purpose to rebut directly either these or any other (mis)interpretations of the *Poetics*, but to restore some integrity to Aristotle's concept of mimesis by showing that it is still open to coherent interpretation, and still merits serious respect, in the light of a historically informed understanding of the issues which surround all approaches to artistic representation.

Seen in this way, Aristotelian mimesis appears as a much less inflexible concept than it has often been taken to be. It does not, for example, predetermine disagreements over the rivalry of the real and the ideal in representational art. The *Poetics* acknowledges questions of this kind in connection with both poetry and the visual arts (e.g., in chap. 2), but it accommodates them as matters of stylistic and generic variation within its larger mimeticist framework. It is therefore quite wrong to suggest, as Butcher influentially did, that Aristotle holds an intrinsically idealistic notion of mimesis. Butcher confused the recognition and advocacy of idealization in particular types of mimesis—tragedy, epic, certain kinds of painting—with a definition of mimesis as such, even though Aristotle indicates clearly enough that mimesis is just as capable of coarse realism as of idealization of its subjects.⁵¹ What this means is that while some of the arguments of the *Poetics* do belong in the second of the categories which I defined near the outset (p. 488), there is no *global* Aristotelian view of the kinds of possibility which artistic mimesis should be used to portray. In this way, the treatise is less vulnerable to charges of ideological impetus than the story of its reception would lead one to believe.

In other respects too, which I have scarcely been able to touch on (such as the complex relation between notions of representation and expression), *idées reçues* and conventional verdicts on Aristotelian mimeticism and its legacy are in need of some reappraisal. Not only should the effort of such reappraisal prove worthwhile for students of Aristotle himself; it remains a prerequisite for a more accurate and illuminating account than we yet possess of the entire history of concepts of artistic representation.

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⁵¹ Butcher, *Aristotle's Theory*, chap. 2. Butcher's interpretation has (unacknowledged) ancestors in the idealizing thought of writers like Bellori and Winckelmann, who assimilated snippets of the *Poetics* to ideas found in Neo-Platonists such as Proclus. On this tradition see, in addition to E. Panofsky's classic work, *Idea* (New York: 1968), L. I. Bredvold, "The Tendency towards Platonism in Neo-Classical Esthetics," *Journal of English Literary History* 1 (1934): 91–119.