The Doctrine of Imitation

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Imitation is a critical term applied to a process of artistic production. The doctrine of imitation which is found in Aristotle’s Poetics is an attempt “to adjust those proportions of nature and art which actually do exist in poetry.” Aristotle’s Poetics has been very influential in criticism since its rediscovery in the Renaissance. Also, the criticism of Aristotle has been frequently misunderstood. The purpose of this paper is to show what Aristotle meant by imitation, and how the theory of imitation was developed in the Renaissance and neo-classic periods.

At the beginning of the Poetics, Aristotle says that the different forms of poetry “are all in their general conception modes of imitation.” Aristotle also says “the objects of imitation are men in action.” In another passage of the Poetics, regarding character, Aristotle says that it must be true to life. This imitation of nature came to be regarded frequently as a realistic portrayal of life. The term ‘imitation’ even in the time of Plato and Aristotle connotated the absence of creative freedom and literal copying.

George Saintsbury says “by Imitation, whatever Aristotle did mean exactly, he most certainly did not mean mere copying.” In this discussion of imitation, Saintsbury says that art is not a mirror reproducing nature slavishly without selection: “the artist selects, adapts, adjusts, and if necessary alters.” There are passages in the Poetics which lend support to this interpretation. Aristotle states the problem confronting the artist in the phrase whether to represent men “as better than in real life, or as worse, or as they are.” In a later passage of the Poetics, Aristotle praises Homer for not including all the adventures of Odysseus in the Odyssey. This might be interpreted as praising the selectivity of Homer.

Aristotle evidently did not mean that nature should be copied literally, for he cites the example of good portrait-painters who “while reproducing the distinctive form of the original, make a likeness which is true to life and yet more beautiful.” Perhaps following Plato’s concept that the world of reality is an imitation of the higher world of ideas, Aristotle says that:

The poet being an imitator, like a painter or any other artist, must of necessity imitate one of three objects,—things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be.
The artist through intuitive powers is able to perceive this world of "things as they ought to be." The artist then tries to create a new thing, not patterned after the world of reality, but rather after the ideal world. Nature is itself rarely or never successful in reaching the ideal which is discovered by the artist. The ideal is what the real would be if it were not for the obstacles of chance. The ideal form present in real objects is imperfectly revealed, except to the artist, who tries to give the ideal form a more complete expression. Imitation in this sense is then creative rather than a servile copying. In the passage from the Poetics which says "the poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities," Aristotle shows that poetry does not necessarily deal with the world of reality.

The Poetics of Aristotle was evidently lost during the Middle Ages, for the criticism of this period reveals nothing of its influence. Also, the sixteenth century regarded it as having been "abandoned and neglected for a long time." Then in 1536, a Greek text of the Poetics was published by Trinchelli, and a Latin version and edition was published by Pazzi.

The critics of the Renaissance formulated their concept of imitation from the following passage of the Poetics:

It is evident from what has been said that it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history; for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. The universal tells us how a person of given character will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in giving expressive names to the characters.

The first allusion in modern literary criticism to the Aristotelian notion of ideal imitation is found in the Poetica of Daniello, published in 1536. Daniello practically paraphrases the passage from the Poetics, but his Poetica shows that he did not completely understand the ideal element in Aristotle's conception.

Later, Robortelli says the poet, in imitating things as they ought to be, may either use actual facts, or he may invent his material. If he uses actual fact, he narrates the truth
not as it really happened, but as it might or ought to happen; while if he invents his material, he must do so in accordance with the law of possibility, or necessity, or probability and versimilitude.

The ideal in Aristotle's conception of imitation appears for the first time in a Renaissance critic in 1555. Fracastoro says the poet attempts to depict things in their essence, not by copying things as they appear in the world of reality, "but the idea of things clothed in all their beauties."

The later Renaissance in its literary criticism always conceived of aesthetic imitation in this ideal sense. Tasso says that art becomes most perfect as it approaches most closely to nature. But here he is talking of the appearance of reality rather than reality itself. Renaissance critics doubtless stressed the element of probability because of the impossibilities in mediaeval literature. Imitation remains for them, however, the imitation of the ideal, or of things as they ought to be. Minturno says that the nearer art approaches nature in her essential laws, the better it does its work.

Scaliger in his Poetics expresses a common Renaissance point of view.

Wherefore the basis of all poetry is imitation.

—Imitation, however, is not the end of poetry, but is intermediate to the end. The end is the giving of instruction in pleasurable form, for poetry teaches, and does not simply amuse, as some used to think. Thus Scaliger makes delightful instruction the test of poetry in place of imitation as Aristotle had said.

It was not until 1623 that a translation of the Poetics appeared from an English press. Up to this time, most English critics had obtained their knowledge of the Poetics chiefly from Italian commentaries. It is believed that Sir Philip Sidney had examined the text itself. Sidney says that poetry is an art of imitation and that it is an idealization of nature. Thus Sidney's concept of imitation is that of the ideal. Speaking of the poet he says,

only the Poet . . . dooth growe in effect, another nature, in making things either better then Nature bringeth forth, or quite a newe formes such as never were in Nature . . .

Ben Jonson, usually regarded as the forerunner of neoclassicism in England, accepted the Renaissance concept of poetry as imitation. However, he thinks of imitation as the ability to "convert the substance, or Riches of another Poet, to his own use." Jonson says he does not mean servile imitation by this, but emulation in the sense in which Virgil imitated Homer.
The Pleiade was an important force in the French criticism of the Renaissance. The imitation of the classics as a literary principle was brought into France by the Pleiade. Du Bellay was the first to formulate this principle. He says, ... the great part of art is contained in imitation: and as it was for the ancients most praiseworthy to invent well, so it is most profitable well to imitate them. Ronsard, too, advises the poet that he is "to study the writings of good poets." However, Ronsard's concept of imitation contains something of the Aristotelian concept, for he says, "the poet is to imitate, invent, and represent—things which are, or which may be—in a resemblance to truth." During the Renaissance period, classical literature was revived, studied, and imitated. An important result of the imitation of the classics was that this imitation became a dogma of criticism, and radically changed the relations of art and nature in so far as they touch letters and literary criticism. Thus Vida says that the poet must imitate the ancients in order to attain perfection. For Scaliger, "the basis of artistic creation is imitation and judgment; for every artist is at bottom somewhat of an echo." John Sturm, the Strassburg humanist, also had an influential concept of imitation. According to Sturm, imitation is not the servile copying of words and phrases; it is 'a vehement and artistic application of mind,' which judiciously uses and transfigures all that it imitates. Sturm's theory of imitation is not entirely original, but comes through Agricola and Melanchthon from Quintilian. Quintilian had said that the greater part of art consists in imitation; but for the humanists imitation became the chief and almost the only element of literary creation, since the literature of their own time seemed so vastly inferior to that of the ancients. The doctrines of imitation developed by Vida, Scaliger, and Boileau show the development of the neo-classic concept of imitation. For Vida, the imitation of the classics is a necessity even though he also tells the poet to copy nature. Vida evidently requires this imitation of nature because it was required by the ancients. Scaliger advocates the imitation of the classics because the nature created by the ancients is more perfect nature than that found in the world of reality. In place of the ideal world which is the object of poetic imitation in the Aristotelian concept, Scaliger substitutes the world of art created by the ancients. The ultimate neo-classical concept of imitation is found in the doctrine of Boileau. For him, truth is the test in poetry, and nothing is true that is not found in nature. Nature should therefore be imitated. But
in order to imitate nature correctly, the ancients are to be imitated because they knew how to imitate nature. Boileau thus shows that there is nothing arbitrary in the authority of the ancients.

Thus the neo-classic doctrine of imitation culminates in the doctrine of Boileau. For the neo-classicists, imitation of nature is to be achieved through the study and imitation of the classical writers. This doctrine is the result of the interest in classics which started to develop in the Renaissance. The Renaissance critics had accepted Aristotle’s theory of imitation in the ideal sense, but Aristotle’s meaning had not been fully grasped by some of them.

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Port Moresby
Gilbert J. Otto

Perched high on the side of a lush, green, tropical hillside nestled the almost forgotten town of Port Moresby. As our lugger, Sea Spirit glided swiftly toward the island, I found my curiosity concerning the town rising to a feverish pitch. From the time I was a little boy I had heard stories of the gold island, and in each story some of the magic of Port Moresby had filtered in and set my imagination on fire. Little did the old traveler who used to stop at our house realize how much the words that rolled so easily from his lips were to mean someday to me. And now, at last, after years of dreaming and planning, I was actually going to see, and hear, and feel—yes, even taste Port Moresby.

Standing on the battered teakwood deck of the lugger, I watched my dream town come closer. While we were still beyond hailing distance, I could see the old mission standing on the top of the hill like an old but still serviceable hat on one of its monks. How many head-hunters and cannibals had been converted here? How many white men came here to their last church service of this world? Down from the church garden a few rods the old Hotel Kongrow beckoned with an air of invitation to welcome the weary traveler. While we