

The Concept of *Mimesis*: Evolution From Plato to Longinus

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Abstract

This essay traces the time-honored literary concept “mimesis” from Plato to Longinus, mainly dealing with four classical critics from the Greco-Roman period—Plato, Aristotle, Horace and Longinus. Through comparison and contrast, it focuses on the “hard-core” essence of each critic’s position on and attitude toward “literary imitation”, as well as their inheritance in the history of literary criticism. The point is to highlight the emphasis of each of them, and shed some light to their succession and innovation of this important literary concept.

Key word: Mimesis; Literary imitation; Reality; Tradition; Classical criticism

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INTRODUCTION

Since Nietzsche’s iconoclastic declaration of God’s death in the 19th century, an overwhelming doubt has gradually sunk in among the modern intellectuals that whether there is any ultimate Truth or Reality literary figure in the modern world, a world shaped and reshaped by manifold forces, such as power and knowledge, mass media and mass consumption, new technologies, etc. However, when people’s attention is shifted to the boyhood of western civilization—the Greco-Roman days, it is the Truth, the

Reality that has towered above all as the most sacred topic ever discussed and meditated by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, who form their stance on poetry and poets mainly in accordance with their view on the Truth. It is against such a context that comes into being the concept of mimesis, a concept which is originally closely related to philosophy rather than poetry.

Mimesis, or imitation, the classical concept derived from Plato’s ontology and epistemology as well as his position on poetry, is further discussed by Aristotle in his influential treatise on poetry—*Poetics*, which serves an important purpose in his philosophy as a whole. Later on two outstanding literary figures in the Roman period, Horace and Longinus, resume the discussion of the ancient topic and narrow down the concept of mimesis to its literary aspect; the former recognizes the importance of imitating nature in a unified harmonious way, but puts emphasis on the imitation of the methods or techniques of the earlier writers, so as to “put the newly made wine into the old bottles”; the latter, however, upholding the sublimity of great thought and “the echo of a great soul” (Longinus, 2006, p.98), attaches greater importance to the inhalation of “divine vapor” of the great men of old and the emulation of the great spirit of others, which in essence is also called “imitation”, only that the emphasis is shifted from technical copy of the objective to the spiritual expression of subjectivity of the writer himself. It is Longinus who extends the concept of mimesis to an elevated level and lays the foundation for the Romantic criticism.

1. PLATO: POETS PUT IN EXILE FOR THEIR IMITATION OF SHADOWS OF THE IDEAL

“It is Plato who bequeaths to the tradition of literary criticism of the concept of imitation or mimesis, dominant

in literary criticism well into the eighteenth century.” (Adams & Searle, 2006, p.8) In *The Republic* the concept of imitation is given two meanings: A broadly philosophical one dealing with Plato’s ontology and epistemology which argues that the world of sense-perceptions is but a poor shadow and imitation of a higher world where the “Ideals” abound; the other concerning literary techniques, namely, the pure imitative form where the poet has his *personae* speak instead of himself.

In regard to the first sense of imitation, it is necessary to come back to the topic of where to locate the Truth. In Plato’s philosophical system, the world is divided into two domains: the phenomenon and the noumenon, or the world of sense-perceptions and the world of Ideals. The former is an ephemerally ever-changing one where “the becoming” is happening at every moment; while the latter is eternal and changeless, one that the Truth or the Being is its essence. In *The Republic* through Socrates’s mouth, Plato locates Reality in what are called Ideals or Forms rather than in the world of appearances or phenomena perceived through senses, the latter being mere copies or derivatives of the former, thus the unreliability of perceptions gained through senses. He continues by arguing that the true knowledge can only be attained by the rational power exercised in dialectical search which would finally lead to the Truth. In Book X he illustrates his insistence of banishing the poets from his Republic through the example of three “bed”: The Ideal of “bed”; the bed made by a carpenter and the “bed” by a painter. The bed by a carpenter is a particular derivative from the universal and abstract Ideal of “bed”, but the “bed” by a painter is more inferior in that it is copied merely by “turning a mirror round and round” (Plato, 2006, p.30) and therefore an imitation of appearance, or an imitation of imitation, thus “thrice removed from the king and from the truth.” (Plato, 2006, p.31) Then Plato makes an analogy to the poets:

And now we may fairly take him and place him by the side of the painter, for he is like him in two ways: first, inasmuch as his creations have an inferior degree of truth—in this, I say, he is like him; and he is also like him in being concerned with an inferior part of the soul..(Plato, 2006, p.35)

Derived from Plato’s point on the Ideals, the theory of Book IV that the human soul is constructed in three levels accounts for another reason for the exile of the poets. Human soul is according to him divided into three parts: the rational, the spirited, and the emotional or the impulses, the first being the highest part and the third being the lowest. He explains that the imitative poet “is not by nature made, nor is his art intended, to please or to affect the rational principle in the soul; but he will prefer the passionate and fitful temper, which is easily imitated.” (Plato, 2006, p.35) Hence Plato’s banishing the poets from his Republic is justified in an ethical

sense because the poetry appeals to the lowest part of human soul and has the power of “harming even the good” :

...therefore we shall be right in refusing to admit him(the poet) into a well-ordered State, because he awakens and nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason. As in a city when the evil is permitted to have authority and the good are put out of the way, so in the soul of man, ..., the imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less.... (Plato, 2006, p.35)

The second meaning of Platonic concept of imitation is the technical one. Plato has Socrates speak of Book III of the three modes of telling a story:

...what you failed to apprehend before is now made clear to you, that poetry and mythology are, in some cases, wholly imitative—instances of this are supplied by tragedy and comedy; there is likewise the opposite style, in which the poet is the only speaker—of this the dithyramb affords the best example; and the combination of both is found in epic, and in several other styles of poetry.... (Plato, 2006, p.25)

The “wholly imitative” form, where the poet has his *personae* speak (thus imitates his *personae*), as in the drama, is the most deceptive of the three because the author never speaks in his own voice, thus creating an effect of authorial detachment and a space for the autonomy of the characters. Such a literary technique (though not in a strict sense) as first in details discussed by Plato has exerted a great influence on the Western literary history. Later writers such as Robert Browning, with his dramatic monologue in our mind, and T. S. Eliot, with his theory of “depersonalization” and “objective correlative”, who claims that “poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape of personality” (Eliot, 2006, p.807) can all trace their inheritance to Plato’s theory of *mimesis* as a literary technique.

Nevertheless Plato himself cannot completely resist the charm of poetry, he spares a little room for the return of poetry and comes with a challenge in the last few paragraphs of Book X:

...let us assure our sweet friend and the sister arts of imitation, that if she will only prove her title to exist in a well-ordered State we shall be delighted to receive her... Let them (lovers of poetry) show not only that she is pleasant but also useful to States and to human life, and we will listen in a kindly spirit; for if this can be proved we shall surely be the gainers—I mean, if there is a use in poetry as well as a delight? (Plato, 2006, p.36)

Later on Plato’s challenge is first accepted by his student Aristotle, who, based on his own philosophical elaboration on the Truth and the concept of *mimesis*, justifies the existence of poetry (not just “hymns to the gods and praises of famous men” as proposed by Plato, see Book X, Plato, 2006, p.35) and the return of the poets.

2. ARISTOTLE: IMITATION JUSTIFIED AS A WAY TO ATTAIN THE TRUTH

While the Platonic world of phenomena is one that cannot lead to the Truth but only to sense-perceptions, Aristotle views the world as an ever-changing process in which the Reality is located and manifested by the inward principle of order of either a natural or an artificial product. He denies the existence of Platonic Ideals apart from the particular things and believes that the changing process itself is a fundamental reality; any natural process, as raining, or artificial process, as the making of a house, is pregnant with the Truth and itself a manifestation of Reality. Consequently the process of imitation is not one that involves the slavish copy of appearances or images, but one that involves the inward principle of order and hence the Truth. He gives an example of making a house in his *Physics*:

...Thus if a house, e.g., had been a thing made by nature, it would have been made in the same way as it is now by art; and if things made by nature were made also by art, they would come to be in the same way as by nature.... (Aristotle, 2006, p.50)

In this example, a natural process is perfectly identified with an artificial process. So an analogy can be made to a poet's imitation. A poetic imitation is first of all a process which involves the inward principle of order of the work itself. The poet "takes a form from nature and reshapes it in a different medium." (Adams & Searle, 2006, p.48) This can be best exemplified by what Aristotle calls "the soul of tragedy"—the action or plot: "... Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of actions and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action...." (Aristotle, 2006, p.55) The action is a natural process itself; by imitating the action, the tragedian takes a form from nature and reshapes it in a different medium, that is, primarily language and words. Poetry, along with other artistic forms such as painting or music, is thus an improvement on nature in that "the poet has brought to completion what nature, operating with its own principles, is still developing." (Adams & Searle, 2006, p.48) From such a sense poetic imitation is not only justified as a process in which the Truth locates, as against Plato's position that poetic imitation is "thrice removed from the king and from the truth", but also further elevated as a way to make improvement on what nature is still developing.

Apart from the view that imitation is itself a natural process where Reality locates, Aristotle furthers his point in *Poetics* that poetic imitation is superior to history in reflecting truth by proposing his principle of probable or necessary:

..The one (history) describes the thing that has been, and the other (poetry) a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do—which is the aim of poetry...

... And for this reason: What convinces is the possible....
(Aristotle, 2006, p.57)

He argues in his preference of poetry that what has happened (history) only deals with the particulars and the accidental, whereas what will probably or necessarily happen (poetry) relates to those which are of a universal nature. So through poetic imitation, the poet handles those events which comply with the principle of probable or necessary and therefore advances in truth, a notion referring to what things should be rather than what things are or have been. So imitation is justified also as a process of creation, the poet also the creator.

Another point Aristotle holds in his *Poetics* concerning imitation is that it is not only a part of human nature, but also brings delight to man:

It is clear that the general origin of poetry was due to two causes, each of them part of human nature. Imitation is natural to man from childhood,...that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns at first by imitation. And it is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation.... (Aristotle, 2006, p.53)

The second point is proved by general human experience, for example, though the dead body is painful for the human eyes, it is a great delight to see them most vividly and authentically represented in paintings. So is the poetic imitation. Aristotle not only justifies the delight brought by tragedy, but also advances to make efforts to lay rules for this form of imitation: he, like a well-trained physician, devotes several chapters discussing what kind of plot is best for a tragedy, and, how the imitation can achieve a moralizing effect, namely, by "arousing pity and fear accomplish its catharsis of such emotions". (Aristotle, 2006, p.55) Through such efforts he remotely opposes to Plato's dismissal of poetic imitation as a way to corrupt the mind of his citizens through its appeals to the lowest part of human soul.

As a conclusion for Aristotle's contribution to the concept of imitation, two points should be noted: first it is he who, in opposing to his mentor Plato, locates Reality in the process of imitation, thus making justice to poetry as an legitimate art form; then he suggests it is part of human nature to imitate and delight in the works of imitation, and in answering Plato's doubt about the positive function of poetry, ("Is there a use in poetry as well as delight?", see Book X of *The Republic*, p.36), he proposes catharsis of emotions brought by tragedy, hence defending poetic imitation from an ethical (or practical) point of view, hinting that poetry has a social effect of emotional purgation.

3. HORACE: IMITATION AS REFERENCE TO TRADITION AND THE ANCIENT

To the Greeks, who desired only glory, the Muse gave genius and greatness of style. Our Roman youth, however, learns how to divide the *as* into hundred parts.... When this interest

in commercial gain has stained the soul, how can we expect to have poems worthy of being preserved in cedar oil and kept in cypress cases? (Horace, 2006, p.83)

Horace's confusion is just an epitome of the whole Roman society which had undergone a great change from the previous Greek period. The utilitarian social climate also extends its sweep to the literary arena. The eulogy "To the glory that was Greece, and the grandeur that was Rome" (Allan Poe's lyric *To Helen*) cannot be well justified when it comes to literary criticism of the Roman period, especially when compared with its Greek predecessors. Falling short of philosophic depth and metaphysical meditations, the Roman critics focus more on technical issues such as rhetoric and composition. Horace's interpretation of literary imitation is no exception in sharing the intellectual ethos of his age. Unlike Plato and Aristotle, he shifts the object of imitation from Ideals or Nature to the exemplary craftsmanship of the ancient great, that is, the ancient Greeks such as Homer and the great tragedians. In his *Art of Poetry*, Horace unreservedly shows his great love for Greek literature and a eager mind to instruct his contemporaries: He proposes to "serve as a whetstone which, though it cannot itself do any cutting, is able to sharpen steel" and to "teach the duty and office of the poet, instruct him where to get his materials...." (Horace, 2006, p.83) In order to steer Roman poetry to the eminence of that of its Greek counterpart, he makes himself clear on the relationship between following the ancient tradition and making their own invention:

Either follow tradition or else make what you invent consistent.... It is hard to treat a commonly known subject in an original way.... In publicly known matters, you will be able to achieve originality if you do not translate word for word, nor jump into a narrow imitative groove, from which both fear and the rules followed in the given work prevent your escape. (Horace, 2006, pp.80-81)

It is quite obvious that Horace does not attach as much importance to originality as the latter writers and critics do. Instead he puts emphasis on the literary tradition and advocates the emulation of the ancient great. However, his concept of imitation of or reference to the ancient masters denies a way to translate word for word, or the slavish copying of what has been known, but advocates a method of infusing into the tradition one's own invention, therefore it is a sort of re-creation. In his praise of Homer's great mastery of handling epic plots, Horace further explains his viewpoint on imitation and creation: "he (Homer) leaves out what he is afraid he cannot make more illustrious with his touch, and he invents, mixing fiction with truth, in such a way that the beginning, middle, and end are all appropriate with each other." (Horace, 2006, p.81)

All in all, Horace has in *Art of Poetry* reduced the concept of imitation to a technical process of either following the great method of the old or making one's own invention based on literary tradition and principles. His

doctrines for the young learners of the art of imitation—"turn to life and real manners as his model, and draw from there a living language" (Horace, 2006, p.83)—are basically concerned with methods or craftsmanship of writing, emphasizing art over genius, which is also a telling evidence of the literary climate of his time.

4. LONGINUS: IMITATION AS A SPIRITUAL INTERACTION WITH THE ANCIENT

Longinus, being a Greek living in the Roman period (He, 2012, p.83), bears the mark of both the Roman pragmatics and the depth of Greek thought ; the former in the sense that his view on literary imitation serves first and foremost the purpose of how to achieve the effect of sublimity; the latter in the sense that though he also propose to learn from the ancient masters, he puts emphasis on the emulation on the spiritual level rather than in a technical sense, thus more profound than Horace.

In his famous critical essay *Tradition and Individual Talent*, T. S. Eliot points out that the position of a poet is based on his interaction with the past great masters:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. (Eliot, 2006, p.807)

Different from the positions of the above-mentioned three, Longinus's concept of imitation is closely related to his theory of *sublimity*, and can too be identified as a spiritual interaction with the ancient great minds, which involves the subjectivity or imagination of the writer himself and can be accordingly divided into three stages—the passive reception of sublimity of the old; the internalization of sublimity, and the active creation of sublimity of one's own.

The first stage is to expose one's soul to the spiritual influence of the old masters. It is a passive process which echoes with Plato's term of "divine madness", (see *Phaedrus*, Plato, 2006, p.36) but different from it in that here the imitative poet does not completely lose himself and become a mouthpiece of the divinity. Longinus identifies the imitative poet in this first stage with a passive female image who becomes pregnant when she inhales the "divine vapor":

For many men are carried away by the spirit of others as if inspired, just as it is related to the Pythian priestess when she approaches the tripod, where there is a rift in the ground which (they say) exhales divine vapor. By heavenly power thus communicated she is impregnated and straightway delivers oracles in virtue of the afflatus. (Longinus, 2006, p.103)

Then an analogy is made to the imitative poet who bears the spiritual influence of the ancient great, whose noble soul and thought are likened to the main

stream and whose spiritual inheritance becomes a sort of “effluence.” So the imitative poet, no matter how little likely to be possessed, is “thereby inspired and succumb to the spell of the others’ greatness.” (Longinus, 2006, p.83) Even Plato, who had long ago banished the emotion-stirring poets from his ideal commonwealth, “from the great Homeric source drew to himself in numerable tributary streams.” (Ibid) In this first stage, the subjectivity of the imitative poet is not involved; he only acts as a passive receptor of the “afflatus”, preparing for the next stage when the real poet, rather than the mouthpiece of a mystic divine force, is gradually taking shape.

The second stage involves a process in which the poet’s subjectivity, or imagination, is projected to the impression (“This proceeding is not plagiarism; it is like taking an impression from beautiful forms or figures or other works of art”, see Longinus, 2006, p.103) that has already been made on him on the first stage. It is an internalization of what has been transported to him under the influence of “the others’ greatness”. In this stage the poet’s imagination, or *phantasia*, acts as a major medium through which the imitative poet can communicate and interact with the past masters. Meanwhile the poet himself becomes an actively responsive processor of the “effluence”: he has first made what he has received as sublimity an integral part of his own creative inspiration, and then by the employment of imagination he is ready to create new sublimity; he is a receptor of sublimity as well as an agent and creator of sublimity. Longinus argues in his discussion of images that “imagination is applied to every idea of the mind, in whatever form it presents itself, which gives birth to speech.” (Longinus, 2006, p.103) Such is the process in which a new great piece of literary work is made.

The last stage of this interaction with the ancient great minds is the most direct and fierce among the three. If the first stage is called a passive and feminine acceptance of the “divine vapor”, the second a quiet and gradual internal interaction between the poet and the “divine vapor”, then the third can be rightfully deemed as, first, a conversation whispered through ages between the imitative poet and the past great minds as well as the future posterity, and then, an intense contention or fight between them on the vase battlefield of time and space.

Concerning the first analogy, Longinus proposes a remote dialogue between the imitative poets and the ancient greatness. He reminds the poets that when conceiving their pieces of sublimity, they should bear in mind what the true noble soul would have done or said before them if faced with the same situation. Thus he suggests that the poets should have a discourse established between the present and the past:

When elaborating anything which requires lofty expression and elevated conception, (the poet) should shape some idea in

our minds as to how perchance Homer would have said this very thing, or how it would have been raised to the sublime by Plato or Demosthenes or by the historian Thucydides. For those personages, ...will carry our minds in a mysterious way to the high standards of sublimity which are imaged within us. (Longinus, 2006, p.103)

And then he continues his proposal that the works of imitation should be placed and valued in a historical context, with the past, the present and the future interacting with one another in the same arena:

What sort of hearing would be Homer, had he been present, or Demosthenes have given to this or that when said by me, or how would have been affected by other? The the ordeal is indeed a severe one, if we presuppose such a tribunal and theatre for our own utterances, and imagine that we are undergoing a scrutiny of our writings before these great heroes, acting as judges and witness. ... In what spirit will each succeeding age listen to me who have written thus? (Longinus, 2006, p.103)

He suggests that the contemporary poets and their works cannot be indulged in themselves and their petty creations; they should bear in mind the “high standard of sublimity” of the ancient masters; literary imitation is never of a particular age, the voice of the poet is echoing through all ages.

Then the interaction becomes more and more intense when Longinus makes Plato a “young champion” contending with and fighting against his predecessor, thus placing the two interacting parties “face to face” within a confrontation full of masculine intensity:

...unless he (Plato) had with all his heart and mind struggled with Homer for the primacy, entering the lists like a young champion matched against the man (Homer) whom all admire, and showing perhaps too much love of contention and breaking a lance with him as it were, but deriving some profit from the contest none the less. (Longinus, 2006, p.103)

And by a quotation of Hesiod, Longinus admits that “this strife is good for mortals” and the interaction evolves to a stage where the imitative poet, with the “divine vapor” inhaled and internalized as an integral part of him, stands tall and struggles for primacy with the ancient great on the literary arena of all ages.

As the conclusion of Longinus’ part it should first be noted that his perception of literary imitation has been closely intertwined with his theorization of the sublime. His phraseology such as “divine vapor”, “afflatus” and “effluence” is remotely echoing with Plato, but in his further argumentation he deviates by putting great emphasis on the subjectivity of the imitative poet himself, as opposed to Plato’s assumption that the poet is merely a mouthpiece of the divine will. His concept of imitation is somewhat similar to Horace but more profound in that he focuses on the spiritual level, rather than the technical level. And his proposal of a spiritual interaction between the contemporaries and the ancient masters has inspired certain studies in various fields of humanities.

CONCLUSION

Tracing the evolution of the concept of mimesis from Plato to Longinus, this essay has respectively dwelt upon the thought of the four critics, namely, Plato's position that the phenomenal world is an imitation of the Ideals and the poets imitates the shadows of the Ideals, Aristotle's justification of imitation as a natural process in which Reality locates and manifests itself, and Horace's emphasis on imitating the ancient great in respect to their methods and art, and Longinus' proposal to a spiritual imitation and interaction with the ancient masters. As a time-honored concept in the history of literary criticism, imitation has been an essential topic ever discussed by numerous writers and theorists, among whom, these four had paved the road for their successors and left their mark on the eternal rock of literature.

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