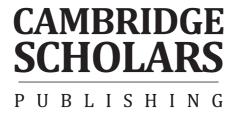Rethinking Mimesis

Rethinking Mimesis:
Concepts and Practices of Literary
Representation

Edited by

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Sanna Nyqvist, Merja Polvinen and Riikka Rossi

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Introduction: Rethinking Mimesis

The continuing relevance of debates about mimesis derives from the conviction that art and literature are concerned with the world we live in and deal with the realities we acknowledge. Despite some modern and postmodern trends that dismissed the questions of representation from the theory of art in favour of language-games or purely formal considerations of some other kind, the interest in artistic and literary representation has not diminished. The challenges presented by modernism and postmodernism have, however, led to a rethinking of some of the foundational assumptions concerning representation, and in recent times interest in mimesis has been gaining ground.

In this revival of the debate, the updated history of mimesis contributed by Stephen Halliwell in *The Aesthetics of Mimesis* (2002) has been seminal. It brings into view the full spectrum of conceptions of aesthetic mimesis and opposes the still current habit of equating mimesis with realism or with some form of copying of reality. Such a correlation hides the other side of the coin, or the second aspect of the dual concept Halliwell discerns in the history of mimesis: the conceptions and discussions where the creative, *poietic*, qualities of literature or other art forms have been connected to mimesis. Halliwell shows how this other aspect of mimesis already informs Aristotle's conceptualisation, thus contesting the traditional foundations of the theory of mimesis as simply mirroring reality.

This volume presents a selection of new contributions to both the theoretical debate on mimesis and to its up-to-date critical practice. The central questions of mimesis entail a number of complex issues, from fictionality to the essence of a linguistic sign, and to the cognitive, emotional and ethical dimensions of literature. In order to approach those questions from a productive angle, the volume *Rethinking Mimesis* not only considers various aspects of the concept and its history, but it also brings together the interconnected though often separately studied questions of mimesis and style. It examines the ways in which a variety of literary texts from different periods engage the world through referential *and* stylistic means, including intertextuality, narrative structure and choice of genre. These essays explore how literature produces its peculiar reality effects and negotiates its relationship to the value systems that connect it to the world of everyday experience and ethics.

The tradition of aesthetic mimeticism from its beginnings in Plato and Aristotle can be understood in terms of various attempts at juxtaposing, contrasting or balancing two fundamental views of art or two conceptions of mimesis. Halliwell (2005, 5) describes the two views as follows: (1) "the idea of mimesis as committed to depicting and illuminating a world that is (partly) accessible and knowable outside art, and by whose norms art can therefore, within limits, be tested and judged," and (2) "the idea of mimesis as the creator of an independent artistic heterocosm, a world of its own." Halliwell opposes any simplified accounts identifying mimesis predominantly with the first view and seeing the second view, the fundament of the romantic emphasis on the productive imagination, as inherently "anti-mimetic." It is true that the dominant romantic views formed at the end of the eighteenth century and in the early decades of the nineteenth century led to depreciative notions that essentially identified literary and artistic mimesis with "imitation" and "copying" in the two senses current in classicism: mimesis as a mirror of reality, and mimesis as an imitation of classical authors. But not even the periods before romanticism understood mimesis (or imitation) in simple or uncreative terms, and clearly the romantic emphasis on productive imagination was itself compatible with the idea of literary worldmaking and creativity in the second sense of mimesis.

Therefore, the "dual-aspect mimeticism" Halliwell proposes not only gives a much more balanced and convincing view of ancient poetics, where the concept of art was practically formed under the nomination "the mimetic arts," but it also enables us to see the continuity of representational and creatively mimetic considerations within aesthetics and art theory throughout the centuries. Even though the world-reflecting and world-making aspects have sometimes been juxtaposed to each other, the most interesting and rewarding approaches in rethinking mimesis seem to derive from attempts to combine the two.

From the point of view of studies of realism or realistic mimesis, Erich Auerbach's magnum opus *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (1946, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*) remains a classic whose vast panorama over realistic practices during the last three thousand years in Western literature has few if any rivals. In his unconventional study Auerbach postpones any systematic theory of realism and works inductively, with an interpretative acumen. Drawing out the essence of an entire period from the reading of a single text, Auerbach offers an inspiring analysis of realism as a perennial style that evolves from its early forms towards a new kind of portrayal

of individual and social reality in nineteenth and early twentieth-century literature. In his epilogue, Auerbach argues that the essence of modern realism lies in its emancipation from the classical doctrine of levels of representation, which led to a serious and tragic representation of everyday life of ordinary people. Thus Auerbach's humanist interpretation of realism as a movement striving toward "the elementary things which men in general have in common" (Auerbach [1946] 2003, 552) is sensitive to the idea that the very basis of representation rests on humanly and socially shared understanding of reality.

If Auerbach's study has been criticised for its non-problematical approach to realism and for barely touching on the theory of mimesis, a more theoretical view of realism was developed in the French structuralism of the 1960s and early 1970s. French critics, Roland Barthes at the head, discarded the traditional idea of mimesis as representation of reality and instead emphasised the overarching textuality of cultural objects. Barthes's (1968) seminal notion of the "reality effect" suggests a conception of realism predicated upon an illusion of the referential nature of the sign, where the sense of the real is an after-effect spontaneously projected by narrative syntax. While the structuralists' methods greatly enriched the study of realism by questioning the naïve faith in a realist text's direct access into actual reality, and by developing innovative concepts to analyse the "literariness" of a realist text, their strong focus on the verbal structure has also been considered as a pitfall which dissociates the (realist) text from actual reality, closing the literary world in the "prison-house of language."

One way out of that prison-house is to understand mimesis as a mediating phenomenon between literature and lived experience. Thus recent theories such as post-classical narratology, cognitive poetics and the study of fictional worldmaking explore the interaction between real and fictive worlds by focusing on meaning-making processes that have their roots in the ways in which human beings encounter their everyday reality. A central figure in this discussion is Paul Ricœur, one of the most important contemporary theorists to have reintroduced the notion of mimesis in narrative theory in an original way. His monumental three-volume *Temps et récit* (1983–1985, *Time and Narrative*) is an inspiring and profound theoretical approach to narrative, both historical and fictional, and attempts, among other things, a synthesis of the most important literary theories of his time. Ricœur's philosophical work stems from the hermeneutical and phenomenological tradition, and it gives a central place to the concept of mimesis. The model of three-fold mimesis it proposes and the idea of mimesis as mediation have been widely influential in cultural studies,

and in literary studies the model and its application to literary works has gained new relevance with the rise of (cognitive) studies of fictional worlds and literary worldmaking. The recent studies have, however, partly neglected Ricœur's Aristotelian background as well as the more profound philosophical tenets related to his conception of mimesis. These new approaches should perhaps be combined with the rethinking of mimesis initiated by Halliwell's work to yield significant new insights to literary studies.

All these various theories have paved the way for a different approach to language and literature, and have also opened up new kind of discussion on the ways literary texts engage ethics and ideology. Representations are never innocent or natural, but betray a number of choices and emphases which have implications to how we experience and understand ourselves and the world around us. While in antiquity the ethical aspects of representation were discussed in terms of mimesis, contemporary approaches to literature, including narratology, genre studies, and political approaches such as gender studies and ecocriticism have developed concepts of their own to tackle the complex questions of, for instance, agency, influence and exclusion that pertain to representation. In this volume, however, the concept of mimesis is again brought to bear on these issues.

The two often interlinked criticisms against representation hold that it alienates us from reality (or "truth") and that it in some essential ways distorts or violates its object. Plato suggested that mimesis can be seen as a potentially dangerous illusion that diverts us from the truth of the ideas, and a similar logic informs the postmodern criticisms of historical mimesis as nostalgic pastiche that effaces the sense of historical distance between the present and the past, and turns the past into an empty simulacrum, as Fredric Jameson (1984) has argued. On the other hand, when mimesis is used to render meaning to unique events that elude signification, it transforms them in a way which loses their specificity. Such flattening and distorting effects of mimesis have drawn attention to the difficulty of representing, for example, the radical trauma of the Holocaust. In dialogue with these views, the articles in this collection explore the possibility of redemption through the literary representation of difficult topics. The ethical power of literature is analysed for instance in terms of language and imagination: in representing characters and actions, literature foregrounds the transformational power of language. This discursive "capaciousness" makes it a privileged site for ethical exploration, or even a necessary supplement for philosophical ethics.

In contemporary discussions, the term "mimesis" itself is also used

in contexts that are situated outside the directly aesthetic considerations. For example, in the writings of René Girard or Michael Taussig we are today witnessing developments where mimesis refers to psychological or anthropological phenomena, such as adaptive behaviour, rather than the arts. These uses reflect, in fact, the history of the term—or the family of terms. The array of concepts and questions that have been discussed under "mimesis" cannot be condensed to any simple formula. Even—or perhaps especially—in its beginnings in ancient Greece, the family of terms deriving from the same root had several meanings, and the debate about mimesis was equally multifaceted. The remaining pre-platonic fragments testifying to the oldest uses of the term or its family point towards these multiple senses, and show mimesis at work in the contexts of visual representation, behavioural imitation, impersonation, vocal imitation and metaphysics (Halliwell 2000, 111, 116–121).

This variety and extent of the areas in which mimesis is still being actively discussed attest to the continuing relevance of the concept. Thus, while this volume maintains its focus on the specific questions of literary representation, it also connects to the debates concerning representation in fields such as the cognitive sciences, ethics, historiography and other forms of non-fiction writing, which form a part of a larger interdisciplinary dialogue between literary studies and other fields of research.

Contents of This Volume

This volume approaches mimesis by foregrounding the principles of knowledge, understanding and imagination that have been associated with the concept since Aristotle's *Poetics*. The new emphasis in *Rethinking Mimesis* stems from its focus on the notion of mimesis interpreted as *poiesis*—as a world-creating activity, which explores the possibilities of the real within the imaginary. In addition to discussing the history and the theory of the concept, the articles also examine the limits and possibilities of mimesis through detailed textual analyses that present acute challenges to our current understanding of literary representation, including issues such as sensory representations and the experience of trauma.

By offering re-readings of the classical conceptions of mimesis, the first part of the volume, "Concepts of Mimesis," presents new insights to how literary representation can be conceived of as a combination of construction and reflection. The articles discuss the roots of the concept in the works of Aristotle and extend the principles found there through the works of Paul

Ricœur and into present-day discussions on narratology and the cognitive sciences.

In his article on "Aristotelian Mimesis between Theory and Practice," Stephen Halliwell explores some of the problems which arise from the use of the vocabulary of mimesis in the *Poetics*, and which are further discussed in continuing debates about literary representation. Halliwell first claims that there is no easy way of defining Aristotle's concept of mimesis, but it certainly should not be equated just with "imitation of nature." What Aristotle did was to separate poetry from other discourses, especially those of philosophy and history, by using the concept of mimesis. Halliwell shows how Aristotle stipulated mimesis (rather than verse-form or other poetic qualities) as the essential condition and defining feature of poetry and how, according to this reading, poetry and philosophy stand in an asymmetrical relationship to mimesis, since poetry cannot exist without mimesis. Aristotle's further argument was that even when poetry takes its materials from history it must transform them into poetic plots—this transformative operation Aristotle considered as a function of mimesis. Halliwell concludes that in Aristotle's thinking mimesis had an inbuilt capacity to remodel the world through narrative shaping.

The readers of Aristotle's *Poetics* have always been puzzled by his ambiguous remarks about tragic *katharsis*. According to the conventional discussions of catharsis, which Humberto Brito in his essay calls the "injunctive picture" of the *Poetics*, tragic poetry and mimetic art were meant to produce some beneficial kind of change in the world or in the human being. Brito argues against seeing catharsis as a universal effect of perfect tragedies, but maintains that there is a shared reaction to a good tragedy that takes place in a given *ethnos*. Building on the Aristotelian concepts of mimesis and *poiêtikê technê*, Brito's aim is to provide an account of how Aristotle's technical description of tragedy in the *Poetics* establishes the conceptual leeway for a rational description of the existence of a shared ethos in a given ethnos. Brito's eulogy views Aristotle's treatment of the craft knowledge of tragedies, his *poiêtikê technê*, as a praiseworthy philosophical tool which gives insight into how human expectations and rationality work.

Pirjo Lyytikäinen discusses Paul Ricœur's idea of configurative mimesis which stresses the central role of plot in narrative worldmaking. By tracking the breaking points of the theory of plot in the accounts of the modernist literary narratives presented in *Time and Narrative*, she is challenging Ricœur's time- and plot-centred theory from the point of view of literary studies—by showing the aporias within the theory. Lyytikäinen

also discusses the alternative "non-temporal" orderings of narrative, which could accommodate the recalcitrant fictional worlds of (modernist) experimental fiction. In this connection she draws on Monika Fludernik's notion of "experientiality" and Ricœur's own theory of metaphor, which is brought forward as a possible basis for "spatial" forms.

Bo Pettersson's contribution sheds light on the understanding of mimesis within narratology by examining "unnatural narratology," one current approach within that field. The widespread understanding of mimesis in the limited sense of imitation, as well as differences in emphasis on mimetic concerns in narratology and in other fields of literary studies have led to an overly restricted view of what counts as "natural" or "unnatural" in terms of storytelling. Drawing on developmental psychology, Pettersson argues that unnatural narratology misleadingly suggests that non-realistic elements form an obstruction for readers' understanding of a story. In his critique, Pettersson thus questions both the use of terms such as "unnatural" and "anti-mimesis," and the unnatural narratologists' underlying assumptions about the nature of fictional narration.

While Pettersson focuses on the consequences of a partial view of mimesis to the specific project of unnatural narratology, Merja Polvinen analyses cognitive approaches to the experience of literature, especially those discussing immersion and engagement. Many of these approaches rely on an understanding of mimesis that focuses too exclusively on life-like worlds and believable characters, and this has led them to downplay the role of the artefactuality of fictions in their explanations. In contrast, Polvinen suggests that even explicit metafiction should not be seen in opposition to mimesis, but that emotional engagement can continue throughout if that text takes as its own starting-point a conceptualisation of mimesis as a complex representational phenomenon. As an example of a metafictional text that builds on such a more complex view of mimesis, Polvinen analyses John Banville's novel *The Infinities* (2009).

While the first part of the volume focuses on complicating our conceptualisation of literary representation through the vision of mimesis as both world-creating and world-reflecting, the second part, "Conceptual and Perceptual Realisms," deals with realism as a style and a period of writing that presents particular challenges to the dual concept of mimesis.

Questions of literary realism lie at the heart of the concept of mimesis, but many scholars from Auerbach to Barthes and Christopher Prendergast have suggested contrasting views about the mimetic practices of realism. In her article, Riikka Rossi continues the discussion by examining how the

realist narrative anchors itself to experiential repertoires and knowledge
structures, which produce the reality effect. By using Erving Goffman's
idea of frame analysis in the understanding of social reality, Rossi suggests
that a reading of a realist text activates a particular frame of reference: the
frame of the "everyday," which evokes the sense of familiarity, readability
and transparency that has been attached to realist discourse from Barthes
to Philippe Hamon. Rossi demonstrates the idea by analysing Flaubert's
novella *Un cœur simple* (1877, *A Simple Heart*), in which the everyday
shapes up the experience of reality from the very beginning of the story.

In addition to conceptual frames such as the everyday, the perception
of the work-world connection can also be influenced by genre. Instead of
bringing forth a disinterested representation of a markedly fictional world,
a purposeful novel represents a reality-like world that is composed with a
view to conveying some social or moral vision. In Nordic literatures of the
nineteenth century, such novels were usually referred to as *tendensromans*,
and they were widely discussed. Saija Isomaa's article explores this debate
through a key text: an academic treatise entitled *Om Tendens-Romanen*
(1851) by the Swedish critic Edvard Flygare, which puts forth the idea that
a writer of a *tendensroman* aims at having an effect on the reader by making
the representation as persuasive and affective as possible. Isomaa argues
that whether or not there are theoretical grounds for reading a fictional text
as representing and taking stance on our reality, a cultural convention may
link the two in a specific manner, as in the case of *tendensroman*, and thus
justify the reading.

Yael Balaban's contribution aims to shed light on the ways in which the
effects that texts have on readers function through sensory representations.
Such representations include "corporeal, emotional and textual elements"
that have their roots not only in our embodied being and evolutionary
development, but also in our cultural and personal histories. The "double
mimesis" thus describes the process whereby readers are engaged in
interpreting in themselves the sensory representations created by authors.
Balaban's argument draws on Roman Ingarden's "schematized aspects,"
which enable the readers' understanding and recreation of represented
sensory experiences, and on Theodor Adorno's emphasis on the ethics of
representation.

Kaisa Kaakinen's article investigates the layered reality of Peter
Weiss's novel *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (1975–1981, *The Aesthetics of
Resistance*) and focuses on the elusive but pivotal structure of historical
reference in the novel. By building on Stephen Halliwell's presentation
of the twofold nature of mimesis, Kaakinen demonstrates how the

novel's realistic, world-reflecting mode grounds historical reference in an active, situated reader, but strives toward a world-creating, coherent entity, independent of historical reality. The documentary realism of the novel is ruptured by diverse stylistic elements, a montage poetics and the "untimely" references, which help the reader go beyond established and received historical narratives. Kaakinen shows how below its uniform and almost gapless visual surface, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* begins to look like an excellent site for exploring the relationship between the lingering historical narratives of the twentieth century.

The third part of this volume presents essays that specifically engage the ethics of mimetic representation. The contributions range from historical analyses of concepts such as aesthetic redemption and academic plagiarism to detailed and contextualised readings of contemporary literature. In addressing the ethical concerns that arise from the representations of sensitive topics, such as human suffering, or from ethically problematic ways of composing a text, these essays examine the transformational power of mimesis.

Robert Doran explores how mimesis can be thought in light of the idea of redemption, relative to art's presumed power to transform human reality. Doran begins with the brief but influential mention in Aristotle's *Poetics* of the pleasure we experience in mimetic representations even when the represented objects themselves are disgusting or terrifying. Surveying the historical fortunes of this idea in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century aesthetic thinking, in the work of Nicolas Boileau, Abbé Dubos, Edmund Burke, and Immanuel Kant, he shows how a concept of redemption is deeply intertwined with modern notions of mimesis. In Dubos's and Burke's thinking, the role of the represented object itself is emphasised, and mimesis is seen as merely mitigating the effect of reality rather than as fundamentally transforming it, as in Aristotle. Kant, on the other hand, emphasised the idea of the redemptive power of fine art and of "beautiful" mimesis, rejecting the idea of an aesthetic pleasure taken in real human suffering. After thus clarifying the background of contemporary debates, Doran examines the views of literary critic Leo Bersani and philosopher Richard Rorty, who represent diametrically opposed positions in their conceptualisations of redemption as it relates to a broader cultural context.

The return of realism as a central narrative and stylistic mode in British literature is discussed in the following two articles by Marco de Waard and Sanna Nyqvist. De Waard points out how Ian McEwan has explicitly dismissed postmodernism, but still employs techniques and motifs

associated with it—and herein, according to de Waard, lies the problem. The presence of self-reflexiveness has been too easily taken as a guarantor of subversion and emancipation, whereas in some cases the "new historical realism," exemplified by McEwan, actually uses the same techniques to present an essentialist view of human nature and to reintroduce the idea of history as an ontological category. In order to bring out these elements in McEwan's writing, de Waard contrasts the ethical position of his novel *On Cecil Beach* (2007) with John Fowles's postmodern classic *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969).

For her part, Sanna Nyqvist reads A.S. Byatt's complex short story "Raw Material" (2003) against the recent discussion of the ethical significance of realism in contemporary writing. By both endorsing and satirising the conventions of accurate description, Byatt offers a fictionalised account of the conflicting impulses which underlie attempts at reconciling the tradition of Victorian moral realism with the postmodern suspicion of representation. Nyqvist interprets "Raw Material" as a poetic manifesto that evokes the question of the writer's ethical responsibility through the negation of the highlighted aesthetics.

Steve Larocco discusses the challenges in representing radical trauma, drawing his examples from Holocaust memoirs. Despite the general belief that what happened in the Lagers is so traumatic as to be beyond representation, the Holocaust is promiscuously amenable to mimetic representation in certain specific ways. Drawing on Aristotle's notion of the pleasures of mimesis, Larocco argues that the narration of radical trauma typically works to efface its desubjectifying force, attempting to deliver both trauma and any attendant shame in a way that, paradoxically, gives pleasure. Larocco illustrates the complexities of trauma narratives by analysing the faux Holocaust memoir *Bruchstücke* (1995, *Fragments*) by Binjamin Wilkomirski. Although purely fictive, these fragmented childhood memories were experienced as a real testimony even by actual Holocaust survivors. The mimetic strategies of trauma narratives allow us to believe that we are witnesses to radical shame and trauma, even when the narratives circumvent the real experiences or are, as in Wilkomirski's case, entirely fabricated.

Mimesis can also be discussed as the imitation and following of literary models. Even if there is consensus that instead of simply transcribing nature, art by necessity refers to previous texts and exemplary forerunners, the boundaries and rules of legitimate imitation have been debated from the very beginning. In her study of early modern poetics, Sari Kivistö examines how far identifying one author or text with another was allowed

to go. Kivistö shows how critics began to identify criteria by which to distinguish admirable imitation from what was disapproved and deceptive imitation, or plagiarism. These seventeenth-century discussions on the morals of imitation are useful in illuminating the rhetorical aspects of mimesis, especially the different forms of repetition and the idea of creative transformation, thus contributing to our understanding of the ethics of literary imitation and artistic deception.

Finally, David Miller explores the background of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, emphasizing the seminal role that Auerbach's earlier work on Dante's *Commedia* had in his thinking. Miller shows how the "earthly" form of allegory which Auerbach finds in Dante functions as the guiding vision for *Mimesis* by providing the model of ethical realism that culminates in nineteenth-century Western realist literature. Dante's new form of allegory not only breaks the rule of decorum and inaugurates the mixed style so important to Auerbach's ideal of realism but, Miller claims, it also manages to combine the description of earthly life with the perspective and possibility of ethics. This vision of ethical realism is, accordingly, the core of Auerbach's emphasis on literary realism that blends high and low, breaking the rules of *prepon*. It was Dante who first realised this literary form—a form which does justice to the given while also projecting "a cosmos filled with ethical hope."

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The Editors

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I

Concepts of Mimesis

Aristotelian Mimesis between Theory and Practice

Stephen Halliwell

> La narration ne peut en effet recevoir son sens que du monde qui en use:
> au-delà du niveau narrationnel, commence le monde . . .
>
> <div align="right">Roland Barthes[1]</div>

Aristotle's conception of mimesis has had a long, tenacious life in the history of poetic and aesthetic theory. But like so much else in the *Poetics*' vocabulary and system of ideas, it has suffered the fate of being viewed, at different times, in starkly opposed ways: as a source, on the one hand, of canonical doctrine, and a bastion, on the other, of outmoded ways of thinking. The positive reception of the *Poetics*, not least its model of mimesis, was especially important in helping to create a new ferment of literary theorising in 16th century Italy; and at the other end of the arc of neoclassicism, in the mid-18th century, Aristotelian assumptions helped shape the process by which the category of the "fine arts" (*les beaux-arts*) was codified in the writings of Batteux and others, paving the way for the (superficially) unified concept of "art" *tout court* which emerged later in that same century. Despite a succession of severe critiques launched against Aristotle-inspired thinking, including notions of literary and artistic mimesis, from the period of German Romanticism up to our own time, the *Poetics* itself has remained an obstinate presence on the landscape of literary theory—an ancient monument badly worn and even, perhaps, disfigured by the ravages of time, but one nonetheless resistant to attempts to demolish it altogether.[2]

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[1] "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits" (Barthes 1994, II 98), "Narration can only receive its meaning from the world which makes use of it: beyond the narrational level begins the world . . ." (English translation from Heath 1977, 115).

[2] An alternative trope, that of Bakhtin (1981, 8), would see the *Poetics* as "so deeply embedded" in certain areas of literary theory (Bakhtin is speaking specifically of genre theory) that its continuing influence is "almost invisible." Halliwell (1992) provides an overview of changing attitudes to the *Poetics* since the Renaissance. For the Aristotelian spur to genre theory in 16th-century Italy, see Javitch (1998); for some modern dealings with mimesis, Halliwell (2002, 344–81).

As a consequence of the conflicting evaluations to which the currents of cultural history have exposed Aristotle's work, the idea of mimesis has become symbolic of the uncertain position of the *Poetics* in the factionalised world of modern literary theory. Coming to terms with the theoretical credentials of mimesis is central to the predicament which confronts contemporary readers of the treatise. The peculiarly heavy burden of the past which the *Poetics* now carries with it makes it difficult for anyone to be straightforwardly Aristotelian any longer. At the same time, the protracted and contested history of interpretation accumulated by the work has inevitably left its scattered traces in many areas of critical discourse. If one asks, then, what can be done today with the *Poetics*—what use it might be to anyone who wants to think, in particular, about the nature and possibilities of literary representation—no simple, uncontroversial answer presents itself. My own conviction is that we should try to engage with the tightly packed ideas of the *Poetics* in a self-consciously dialectical spirit, perpetually aware of the mixture of assimilation and resistance which has characterised the reception of those ideas since the Renaissance. One thing this means is that however far removed in intellectual and cultural space Aristotle may now be from us, we may still find it hard to escape from the grip of unresolved issues whose ancestry leads back to him. Another way of putting that point is to say that if we choose to argue with Aristotle, it may turn out that at some level we are arguing with part of ourselves. I shall return to this thought in the last section of my paper.

The kind of dialectical interpretation I am espousing here is further complicated by my belief that making sense of Aristotle's own idea of mimesis is much more challenging than many interpretations—both *pro* and *contra*—have been willing to accept. That is why the aim of this paper is not so much to offer a comprehensive statement of Aristotle's conception of mimesis as to explore some of the problems thrown up by the *Poetics*' use of the vocabulary of mimesis and inherited, in modified form, by continuing debates about literary representation. It is one of my contentions that while Aristotle's understanding of mimesis rests on a (partly concealed) foundation of philosophical theory, it also incorporates a pragmatic recognition of the complex variations exhibited by mimetic practice: variations for Aristotle himself, of course, exclusively within the products of Greek culture, but to which we can now add an immensely expanded stock of cases from a much longer stretch of literary and artistic history. Aristotle does not go very far in the *Poetics*, however, in turning that pragmatic recognition of variant practices into a fully worked-out exercise of critical analysis: whatever else it is, the *Poetics*, after all, is not

to any sustained extent a work of "close reading" or "practical criticism." As a result, Aristotelian mimesis finds itself somewhat uneasily suspended, at any rate as seen from a modern vantage point, between the formulation of abstract theoretical principles and, on the other hand, an acknowledgement of poetry's (and, more generally, literature's) open-ended possibilities of practice. But while this instability to some degree reflects Aristotle's compression of thought and terseness of writing in the *Poetics* itself (what Stephen Dedalus, in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, calls its "slender sentences"),[3] it may also, I suggest, be a symptom of deeper, lasting tensions between the domains of poetic/literary theory and practice. If we are not in a position to give anything like a complete account of Aristotelian mimesis, that may be in part because we ourselves still cannot confidently answer all the questions which underlay Aristotle's own need for that concept.

It is important to bear in mind from the outset that nowhere in the *Poetics* does Aristotle offer a (stipulative) definition of mimesis. Still less does he equate mimesis, *qua* poetic and related forms of representation, with so-called "imitation of nature": the widespread belief that he does so is itself a good example of the sort of entanglements in which interpretation of the *Poetics* since the Renaissance has frequently become caught up. Not only does Aristotle never use such a formula, either inside or outside the *Poetics*, with reference to those practices which in Chapter 8 of the *Poetics* (1451a30) he collectively calls "the mimetic arts" (principally poetry, painting, sculpture, music, and dance). When he *does* appeal, in the *Physics* and elsewhere, to the principle conventionally translated as "art imitates nature" (a principle with a thorny place of its own in the history of ideas), it is in contexts concerned not with the mimetic arts of the *Poetics* but with human activities such as medicine, architecture, and cookery in which Aristotle discerns teleological processes parallel to the workings of nature in its own right. The tenet "art imitates nature" accordingly sheds no light on the concept of mimesis found in the *Poetics*. Aristotle believed that medicine, for instance, was a kind of supplement to nature, correcting or completing its work where nature lapses or falls short in particular cases: he did not believe anything of the kind where poetry or painting is concerned. By the same token, while he believed that poems and paintings are intrinsically and essentially mimetic, he did not at all think of medical

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[3] Joyce (1916, ch. 5) in Levin (1963, 190): ". . . only a garner of slender sentences from Aristotle's poetics and psychology."

cures or house-building as instances of mimesis in that same sense.[4]

There is, then, no easy way of encapsulating Aristotle's concept of mimesis in the *Poetics*. If the treatise can be said to contain a theory of mimesis, it is a theory which is simultaneouly rather reticent about its own foundations but also built up, bit by bit, on several levels of argument, each of which brings with it its own complexities of interpretation. To help explain what I mean by these claims, let me offer a basic diagram, so to speak, of what I see as the scaffolding of this theoretical structure (and there are good reasons to think of the *Poetics*, in its condition as a set of notes for Aristotle's own teaching, more as "scaffolding" than as a completed intellectual edifice). At the lowest level of the structure stands a philosophical anthropology of mimesis, a conception of *homo mimeticus*. Chapter 4 of the treatise succinctly but unequivocally identifies a mimetic instinct in human nature: "to engage in mimesis is an inborn human trait, which manifests itself from childhood onwards; and humans differ from other animals by virtue of being the most mimetic of species . . ." (4.1448b5–7). This is an instinct, moreover, with cognitive, emotional and ethical ramifications; I shall say a little more about these later. Above that level (though preceding it in the *Poetics*' order of treatment) Aristotle puts in place a classification of the group of human practices which he later calls "the mimetic arts" (8.1451a30, see above). This classification, set out in Chapters 1–3, consists of an analysis in terms of the "media," "objects" and "modes" of mimesis: media *qua* materials of representation (language, visual forms, musical patterns etc.); objects *qua* aspects of human experience (actions, emotions, ethical qualities) as conveyed by the use of those materials; and modes *qua* (re)presentational techniques (such as different narrative voices or points of view). The analysis, therefore, brings with it several clusters of implications, not all of which Aristotle pursues very far: some of these, for example, involve brief but significant gestures in the direction of genre (and Aristotle indicates that genres can possess *multiple* points of affinity with, and/or distinction from, one another in their mimetic attributes), while others leave intriguing questions unanswered (such as how far the idea of mimetic "mode" has any application beyond the distinction, drawn in Chapter 3, between first- and third-person narrative presentation). A further element which emerges from this initial classification and is reinforced later in the treatise, especially by

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[4] On the difference between mimesis in the *Poetics* and Aristotle's teleological principle that "art imitates [or, better, 'emulates the processes of'] nature," see Halliwell (2002, 153–4).

Chapter 9's famous distinction between poetry and history, is a concern with the special discursive status of mimesis, including problems one might now pose in terms of the logic of fiction. From the very first chapter of the *Poetics* Aristotle is preoccupied with separating mimesis from other categories or uses of discourse, especially those of philosophy/science and history, though we shall see that there are nuances in his position which are far from straightforward to grasp.

Above the level of analytical classification of artforms is a crucial but often neglected dimension of Aristotle's model of mimesis which allows for variations in what might be called the depictional frame of reference of individual works (and/or genres). This dimension stands out most explicitly in Chapter 25's statement that mimetic art (and Aristotle here expressly brackets together poetic and visual forms) has available to it a spectrum of possibilities extending from the actual to the ideal: from "the sorts of things which were or are the case," as Aristotle puts it, to "the sorts of things which ought to be the case," and encompassing, in between those two, the large amorphous zone of "the sorts of things people say and think." This last range of possibilities makes room for all the mixed materials of popular mentalities and traditional beliefs, including the whole field of what we now call Greek mythology.[5] There is an important sense in which Aristotle can be taken to recognise the scope for mimesis to adopt substantially different perspectives on the world—even, in a sense, to depict "alternative worlds," since he is prepared to defend the poetic representation of, for instance, anthropomorphic gods, even though such gods have no part to play in his own philosophical worldview.[6] This consideration underlines that there is nothing in Aristotle's theory as a whole which ties mimesis to a simple, consistent notion of realism, let alone limiting it, as Doležel alleges, to "actual human experience."[7] But this in turn complicates a further question: namely, what Aristotle means in Chapter 6 of the *Poetics* by calling tragedy a "mimesis of life." The pertinence of that question is sharpened by the fact that Aristotle never explains exactly how the idea of a mimesis "of life"

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[5] *Poetics* 25.1460b8–11.

[6] For Aristotle's defence of anthropomorphic gods in poetry against Xenophanes (and by implication against Plato too), see *Poetics* 25.1460b35–61a1. This point of principle needs to be kept apart, however, from the ways in which Aristotle's theory of tragedy minimises the need for the involvement of gods in the best plots: see Halliwell (1998, 230–7).

[7] Doležel (1998, x; cf. 6–10) wildly criticises the very idea of mimesis as supposedly shrinking the vast, open fictional universe "to the model of one single world, actual human experience."

is to be squared with the emphasis laid in Chapters 7–8 on the difference between the special conditions of unity he demands of tragic drama (and of mimetic art more generally: 8.1451a30–35) and the fragmented diffuseness he thinks typical of life itself (8.1451a16–22). Since it is clear that nothing like raw, circumstantial verisimilitude can satisfy Aristotle's criteria of a unified plot-structure, what is it which qualifies a work for the description of "mimesis of life"?

To recapitulate, then, what I have so far argued: the *Poetics'* conception of artistic mimesis brings together, first, a philosophical *anthropology* which relates mimesis to the instinctive propensities and workings of the human mind; secondly, a *classification* of a specific set of mimetic artforms, and with it an analytical schema with implications for, among other things, the mimetic properties of different genres; thirdly, the treatment of mimesis as a distinct *discursive* category, defined by contrast with science/ philosophy (Chapter 1) and with history (Chapter 9); fourthly, a recognition of variations in depictional *frame of reference* which mark positions on a spectrum running from the actual to the ideal via the indefinite possibilities of "what people say and think"; and, finally, a judgement (unexplained but implicitly complex) on the mimetic relationship between tragic drama and "life." This amounts to both an ambitious and yet, in its execution, an incomplete structure of mimetic theory.

At this juncture I would like to give some thought to why the *Poetics* assigns no prominent role in its model of mimesis to one further factor, that of *style*. It is not that Aristotle lacks an awareness of the expressive significance of stylistic choice and variation. In Chapters 21–2, the *Poetics* incorporates a survey of word types which carries with it an understanding of style (*lexis*) as a patterning of linguistic traits on an axis of conformity with or divergence from the register of "standard" or normal usage (within a given speech community, 22.1457b3–6). The last book of the *Rhetoric* supplements this material and makes the general but important statement that style imbues or colours language with particular qualities: *lexis*, Aristotle says there (*Rhetoric* 3.1, 1403b17–18), "contributes greatly to giving discourse (*logos*) the appearance of certain qualities," by which he means above all qualities of (the speaker's) "character" (*êthos*) and emotion (*pathos*).[8]

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[8] Although Aristotle is concerned here primarily with oratorical style, in which case the qualities *lexis* gives to *logos* will be principally those conveyed by the speaker himself, the basic model of style in question (which Aristotle uses many poetic examples to illustrate in *Rhetoric* Book 3) locates such qualities *in* the discourse as such: style is therefore here, *au fond*, a form of linguistic expressiveness. *Rhet*. 1403b17–18 is

One could in principle superimpose this understanding of style onto the *Poetics'* conception of the discursive, generic, and imaginative parameters of mimesis. It seems plausible, for instance, that there should be mutual implications between Aristotle's description of epic and tragedy as genres which represent characters "better than us" (in his shorthand formula: Chapter 2 etc.) and the kinds of stylistic features (with considerable scope for "elevation" above ordinary speech) which he regards as typical of those genres. There are, however, complications: Aristotle does not judge the styles of epic and tragedy to be wholly akin (22.1459a8–14; see below); nor does he regard the characters of tragedy as all of the same kind (see e.g. the contrast between Sophocles and Euripides adduced at 25.1460b32–5, an illustration of variation in the depictional frame of reference of mimetic works even within a single genre). We know from the contest of tragedians in Aristophanes' *Frogs* that such complications were already a source of critical debate well before the *Poetics* was written. In *Frogs*, the great antithesis—later to prove so influential on Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*—between larger-than-life Aeschylean heroism and the "bourgeois realism" of Euripides is correlated with an equally sharp (and, of course, comically exaggerated) opposition between the (supposedly) "grand" and "quotidian" *verbal* styles of the two playwrights' works.[9]

Aristotle himself does very little in the *Poetics* to explore the interplay between his other parameters of mimesis and the expressive-cum-tonal variables of verbal style. But perhaps the most valuable clue that such silence is a contingent incompleteness, not a theoretical shortcoming,[10] comes from the fact that the passage in Chapter 25 which I have already quoted for its spectrum of depictional frames of reference (the actual, the ideal, "what people say and think") is immediately followed by

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poorly translated in the Oxford translation (by W. Rhys Roberts) reproduced in Barnes (1984, II 2238): "much help is thus afforded towards producing the right impression of a speech." This makes the formulation misleadingly normative. For one discussion of the passage, see Rapp (2002, II 806–9).

[9] Halliwell (2011, ch. 3) offers a new reading of this and other aspects of the poetic contest in *Frogs*.

[10] Paradoxically, something similar is true of Roland Barthes' very different (anti-mimetic) theory of narrative: Barthes refers to the final layer of narrative as "the writing" (l'écriture) itself, yet his structural analysis leaves this wholly to one side; see Barthes (1994, II 101). By contrast, Auerbach's *Mimesis* is pervasively concerned with the interplay between verbal style and what I have called depictional frames of reference, yet his project largely eschews an attempt to theorise that relationship.

this: "and these things are presented in verbal expression (*lexis*) which includes loan words, metaphors, and many other stylistic peculiarities; for these are options we allow poets" (25.1460b11–13). Despite its extreme compression of ideas, this passage seems to involve something more than a juxtaposition of quite separate points. It looks, rather, as though Aristotle thinks of variations of mimetic frame or perspective and those of stylistic expression as distributed along *cognate* and interrelated spectrums of poetic choice and register. If that is right, we might expect some signs of this cognate relationship to occur in the chapters on *lexis* itself. Those chapters admittedly have a semi-independent status as a pioneer exercise in grammar and stylistics which does not for the most part feel fully enmeshed with the larger poetic theory of the treatise. Even so, there is one passage which does, I believe, yield some support for the claim I have made above: as it happens, it is the only passage in this section of the work where the vocabulary of mimesis actually occurs.

In drawing his discussion of *lexis* in the *Poetics* to a close, Aristotle states that all the special classes of words he has identified have some suitability for the hexameters of epic, whereas the iambic trimeter (the metre of dialogue in tragedy, as well as in comedy), "because so far as possible it represents (*mimeisthai*) ordinary speech [*lexis*, here in a narrower sense than 'style' in general]," lends itself best to the kinds of words used also in prose, including standard terms and metaphors (22.1459a10–14).[11] This statement, which in context is primarily designed to contrast tragedy with epic, is more intricate than appears at first sight. Aristotle is here correlating three things—genre, metre, and (lexical) style. But he is at the same time simplifying somewhat, since we know that he does not think that tragedy's (or even comedy's) use of the iambic trimeter strives to be stylistically indistinguishable from prose; just a few sentences earlier, in fact, he had rebuked someone called Ariphrades for failing to realise why tragedy justifiably employs stylistic features *divergent* from ordinary language (1458b31–59a4).[12] Nor does Aristotle think that tragedy and comedy, despite sharing the same basic metre, are themselves stylistically alike in all respects. When he uses the verb *mimeisthai* in this passage for the relationship between poetry in iambic trimeters and ordinary speech, Aristotle is making a broad generalisation about the (relatively) "realistic"

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[11] For the closeness of the iambic trimeter to (the rhythms of) ordinary speech, see also *Poetics* 4.1449a23–8, *Rhetoric* 3.8, 1408b32–5.

[12] Note also that at *Rhetoric* 3.1, 1404a28–9 he explicitly states that the styles of prose/oratory and poetry are (essentially) different, even though the same passage (ibid. 29–34) claims that fourth-century tragedy had become more prosaic in style.

representation of speech and dialogue in tragedy: he had anticipated this claim much earlier, at 4.1449a21–28.[13] But the most important point for my purposes is that the passage betrays, however fleetingly, an awareness that the domain of style cannot be strictly separated from the total mimetic effect of a particular work or genre. Where mimesis is concerned, the sense in which "*lexis* contributes greatly to making *logos* convey the appearance of being of a certain kind" (*Rhetoric* 3.1, quoted above) will have implications for the position on the spectrum of mimetic frames of reference (even "worlds"), from the actual to the ideal, which any given work occupies. So while Aristotle does not pursue the mimesis-style nexus very far, we can still see that there is room, indeed a necessary place, for it within the scope of his mimetic theory.[14] We cannot convict him of supposing that language itself is a neutral or transparent medium of literary representation.

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It is time now to address more closely, though in selective detail, some of the other problems which arise from the blueprint of mimetic theory that I have traced in the *Poetics*. There are puzzles to be faced right at the outset of Aristotle's classification of a set or family of mimetic arts. The set embraces six kinds of practice, which it is worth listing with some preliminary annotation: first, several genres of poetry (epic, tragedy, comedy, dithyramb), but without any general reference to either choral or monodic lyric, a large segment of Greek poetic tradition (is this a deliberate omission? is Aristotle unsure whether to count lyric poetry as mimetic?);[15] secondly, music (but, again, not *all* music—"most music," Aristotle says, without explaining where or why he draws the boundary; and even his discussion of music in the last book of the *Politics*, which clarifies his understanding of musical mimesis as a form of emotional expression, does not settle that point); thirdly, visual art (i.e., for Aristotle, the production of figural images); fourthly, vocal impersonation (by which Aristotle appears to mean the actor's art of role-playing—something of which he himself,

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[13] When speaking of tragedy Aristotle uses *lexis* to mean (the language of) the spoken parts as opposed to (choral) lyrics (which he calls *melopoiia*): see esp. 6.1449b33–6, 1450b12–16.

[14] My position here to some extent modifies Halliwell (1998, 344–9); cf. Halliwell (1993) on the treatment of style in the *Rhetoric*.

[15] A subtle but inconclusive attempt to find a place for lyric in the distinctions of mode in *Poetics* Chapter 3 is made by Lattmann (2005).

as we know from other evidence, was very appreciative);[16] fifthly, dance (which Aristotle describes, in a pregnant phrase, as converting rhythm into visual forms/figures); finally, certain prose genres, including "mime", *mimos* (i.e. subliterary drama), and the Socratic dialogues of Plato and others.

To ask what all these things have in common is immediately to be caught not only in the gap between Aristotle's text and his background assumptions (some of which, though not all, rely on an existing Greek cultural consensus: see below) but also in a whole history of aesthetic classification and debate—an unfinished history, what's more, since we ourselves have no stable way of connecting into a single category the varieties of practice mentioned by Aristotle. Our own tendency to use the category of "representation" in much the same way (if controversially where music is concerned) as the start of the *Poetics* uses the concept of mimesis replicates, without resolving, the problems latent in Aristotle's classification. Equally, Aristotle's family of mimetic practices is actually the long-range ancestor of the category of "art" ("Kunst" etc.) which crystallised from the grouping of the "fine arts" in late eighteenth-century Europe. That synthetic category of "art", however, is one whose coherence, after only one hundred and fifty years of seeming self-evidence, was undermined both theoretically and experimentally in the twentieth century. What for Aristotle, then, is an unquestioned but very cursorily theorised starting-point has become for us a fundamental uncertainty and instability of conceptual categories.

The difficulties lurking behind the initial premises of the *Poetics* are multiplied in a way more directly related to this volume's concerns with "literary representation" by Aristotle's attempt, further on in Chapter 1, to demarcate mimesis from other forms of discourse. Here he makes the deliberately contentious move (which he does not, in fact, always adhere to rigorously himself in other contexts)[17] of treating mimesis rather than verse as the essential condition of poetry: this allows him, contrary to prevailing Greek usage, to count Homer but not Empedocles as a poet, even though both employ the same hexameter verse (and also have a good deal of traditional epic language in common). We cannot simply say that Aristotle wants here to establish a clear-cut distinction between (poetic) mimesis and (natural) philosophy, for in this same passage he explicitly cites Socratic

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[16] For Aristotle's appreciation of fine acting, see his reference to the tragic actor Theodorus at *Rhetoric* 3.2, 1404b18–24, with my discussion in Halliwell (2003, 60–1).

[17] See *Rhetoric* 3.8, 1408b30–1: if prose is metrical it will become poetry.