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DE IMITATIONE

One of the inescapable features of Latin literature is that almost every author, in almost everything he writes, acknowledges his antecedents, his predecessors – in a word, the tradition in which he was bred. This phenomenon, for which the technical terms are *imitatio* or (in Greek) *mimēsis*, is not peculiar to Latin; the statement I have just made about Latin writers would also be true very generally of Greek. In fact, the relationship between the Latin genres and their Greek exemplars may best be seen as a special case of a general Greco-Roman acceptance of imitation as an essential element in all literary composition. Of course, the business of translation was difficult, and victory over the *patrii sermonis egestas* a notable thing.[1] The boast of having given Rome her own *Aeolium* or *Ascraeum carmen* was made with justifiable pride.[2] But we must not make too much of this. The *exemplaria Graeca* of Horace (*Ars poetica* 268–9) were to be thumbed night and day not because they were Greek but because they were good. Horace (ibid. 132ff.) warns the would-be poet against slavish copying of tradition:

> nec uerbo uerbum curabis reddere, fidus
> interpres, nec desilies imitator in artum
> unde pedem proferre pudor uetet aut operis lex.
>
> *Nor will you take pains to render word for word, like a scrupulous interpreter, or jump down, as you imitate, into some little hole from which shame or the rules of the work won't let you escape.*

He is not thinking here primarily of the translator, but, as the context makes clear, of any poet who lacks the power to make what he inherits his own, whether he is writing in the same language or a different one. And the poet cannot help being *imitator*; that is his inevitable status. What he can avoid is getting into impossible situations through the meticulous adherence to verbal and superficial features of his model.

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In another place (*Epistles* 1.19.19) Horace attacks his own *imitatores* as 'a pack of slaves', *seruum pecus*: he is not here condemning them because they copied him, which might of course be flattering, but because they did so in superficial and trivial respects.

The traditional character of classical Greek literature needs no exposition here. It can be seen not only within genres like epic and tragedy, but also between genres, where it tends naturally to be a matter of content rather than of form. Aeschylus, we recall, called his plays τεμάχη, 'slices', of Homer's great banquets (Athenaeus, *Dipnosophistae* 7.348e). That poetry had a language, or rather several languages, of its own, was accepted and not questioned. Aristotle, despite the fundamental quality of his thinking about poetry, took these traditional characteristics of the *technē* for granted. He defined the differentia of the language of poetry as elevation (λέξιν ... μὴ ταπεινήν) and examined its use of archaic and foreign words and freshly invented compounds (*Poetics* 1458a). He also rationalized the tragedians' restricted range of plots, alleging that it was only the stories of certain families that were suitable for the proper effect of tragedy (*Poetics* 1454a). Comedy also was very 'imitative'; scenes and characters were freely borrowed and improved, and it is easy to see that Plautus and Terence played the game on much the same terms, language apart, as their Greek predecessors.[3] All this was in the age of classical Attic literature. The Hellenistic period which followed, with its blend of changing ideas and archaic forms, gave quite a new perspective to the use of models and tradition. It turned it into a matter not so much of continuity as of revival: *mimēsis* became μίμησις τῶν ἀρχαίων, 'imitation of the ancients', no longer simply of one's predecessors. Callimachus' praise of Aratus gives the new ideal in concise form:

> Ἡσιόδου τό τ' ἄεισμα καὶ ὁ τρόπος· οὐ τὸν ἀοιδῶν
>   ἔσχατον, ἀλλ' ὀκνέω μὴ τὸ μελιχρότατον
> τῶν ἐπέων ὁ Σολεὺς ἀπεμάξατο· χαίρετε λεπταὶ
>   ῥήσιες, Ἀρήτου σύμβολον ἀγρυπνίης.   (*Epigram* 27)

> *Hesiod's is the song and the manner; the man from Soloi has reproduced not the worst of poets, and I suspect he has hit off the sweetest part of his verses. Hail, ye delicate utterances, token of Aratus' wakeful nights!*

In other words, one should mould oneself on the ancients, choose a good model, and select his best features.

But already in Hellenistic times, and still more under the Roman

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domination, there was an ingredient in Greek *mimēsis* which was present only in a much weaker form in Latin: linguistic archaism. It is true that Latin developed, both for poetry and for many kinds of prose, a literary language which diverged widely from the vernacular and was maintained by educational effort from generation to generation. But this tendency was very much stronger in Greek, and indeed has remained strong almost to the present day. During the whole period in which Greek and Latin literature existed and developed side by side – say from 200 B.C. to A.D. 400 – Greek poets continued to write in their ancient dialects and with their ancient techniques, making no concession to linguistic changes, except at the very end of the period, when accentual rules began to be observed. Prose went through a slightly different development. In Hellenistic times, to judge from our scanty remains, there was a good deal of innovation, especially in vocabulary; but a reaction followed, and critics like Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who lived and worked at Rome under Augustus, violently attacked the stylistic standards of their immediate predecessors, and advocated a return to the manner of the fourth-century Attic classics, from Thucydides to Demosthenes. Linguistic *mimēsis* of these models thus became an essential element in rhetorical teaching. We find the corpus of acceptable models referred to as 'the books', *ta biblia* ([Dionysius] *Ars rhetorica* 298.1) – an interesting pagan parallel to the Jewish and Christian term for the scriptures. The rhetorical culture of the first four centuries of our era was indeed a civilization of 'the books'.

The term *mimēsis* and its cognates, destined to play so vital a part in the classicizing poetics and rhetoric of Hellenistic and Roman times, had entered the world of literary theory in a different sense. These were the words by which it was usual to describe not the relationship between one work of literature and another, but the relationship between literature, or any other representational art, and the world. The basic sense of *mimeisthai* is apparently 'to mimic', as when one mimics bird-song or assumes an alien dialect; and it was easy enough for Plato (as in the tenth book of the *Republic*) to represent poetry, because it is a 'mimetic art', as the purveyor of psychologically dangerous illusions. Nor perhaps was it too difficult for Aristotle to answer this by pointing out that mimicry and copying are roads to knowledge (as they evidently are for children), and that poets need to have some generalized understanding of character and emotion if they are to produce anything worth-while.

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Now it is, I suspect, natural to think that the sense of *mimēsis* in which the philosophers tried to use it to describe the kind of human activity of which literature is an instance has nothing to do with the imitation of one author by another. It is surely just a homonymous use of the word. But I fear this may be too simple. Of course, the notion of literary copying is perfectly well conveyed by *mimēsis* and its cognates in their everyday sense. But once these terms had been used in an attempt to explain what in general poetry does and is, their later literary uses could not fail to be affected by the associations they had thus acquired. Words have this sort of power to influence ways of thinking. At any rate, there are features in the Hellenistic and Roman concept of literary imitation which strongly recall the apparently homonymous use of these terms in general poetic theory. The analogy between the mimetic relationship of works of literature to each other and their mimetic relationship to the outside world proved suggestive. In one sense, all poets were *imitatores*, in another this was true only of those who did not (like Homer) stand at the beginning of a tradition. It was possible even to play with the two senses. In the line of the *Ars poetica* quoted above – *nec desilies imitator in artum* (133) – it is difficult to believe that Horace did not mean us to have both senses in mind. Again, there is the assumption sometimes made that the copy is bound to be inferior to the model. Plato had always emphasized this; for him, the product of imitation (the *mimēma*) was less 'real', just as the visible world was less 'real' than the world of Forms on which the creator modelled it. So in literature also, *semper citra ueritatem est similitudo* (Seneca, *Controuersiae* 1 *praefatio* 6; cf. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* 10.2.11), a reflection which naturally struck a responsive chord in generations habitually looking back to a greater past. However, there were at all periods those who did not despair of surpassing their predecessors. They had to think of countervailing considerations. Acquiescence in inferiority is an impossible attitude. Nor indeed was it at all common: even Statius' farewell to his *Thebaid* (12.816–17) –

> nec tu diuinam Aeneida tempta
> sed longe sequere et uestigia semper adora
>
> *make no assault on the divine Aeneid, but follow at a distance, and worship its footsteps* –

is coupled with a proud assertion of posthumous fame. Commoner by far is the hope of improving on the models. There seemed to be plenty

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of evidence in the history of literature that this could be done. As Philodemus wrote:[4]

> πολλάκις τοὺς εἰληφότας ἀμείνους τῶν προκεχρημένων,
> ἂν τὸ ποιητικὸν ἀγαθὸν μᾶλλον εἰσενέγκωνται.
>
> [*We often find in the treatment of myth*] *that those who take over a story are better than its previous users, if they make a greater contribution of poetical excellence.*

There is thus no reason to despair if you find you have many predecessors:

> condicio optima est ultimi: parata uerba inuenit, quae
> aliter instructa nouam faciem habent. (Seneca, *Epistulae* 79.6)
>
> *The last comer is best placed. He finds the words to hand; differently arranged, they take on a new look.*

We shall see more of this attitude later; but what Seneca says in that sentence to Lucilius – which is meant to encourage him to write about Etna – is of some considerable significance. The novelty which the 'last comer' can seek lies not in the subject, nor even in the words, but in the mysterious 'arrangement' (σύνθεσις, *compositio*) which for many ancient critics was the most decisive, and most difficult to analyse, of the elements of literature.

The extant theoretical discussions of *imitatio*, of which we must now take account, make two central points. One is that the true object of imitation is not a single author, but the good qualities abstracted from many. Only the late second-century rhetor Hermogenes says something different; his elaborate argument to show that all virtues and excellences are to be found in Demosthenes is well worth study.[5] The second point, related to the first, is that the *imitator* must always penetrate below the superficial, verbal features of his exemplar to its spirit and significance. The analogy between these points and those made by Aristotle in his account of general poetic *mimēsis* is, I think, clear: in Aristotelian theory, all poetry deals in generalities (*Poetics* 1451b7), and requires not only verbal skill but, more importantly, understanding of character and plot.

We have two fairly extensive treatments of *imitatio*, both rhetorical, and closely related to each other. Dionysius of Halicarnassus wrote three books on the subject: the first discussed the nature of the process,

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the second listed desirable models, the third explained how it should
be done. We have some fragments of the first, a good deal of the second
(which is the source of Quintilian's list of desirable Greek models),
nothing of the third. It is to Dionysius that we owe the anecdote which
purports to demonstrate the benefits of collecting good features from
a range of models:

> The story goes that a farmer, who was an ugly man, became
> afraid of fathering children who took after him. Fear, how-
> ever, taught him a technique of having handsome offspring. He
> showed his wife some beautiful pictures, and got her into the
> habit of looking at them. He then went to bed with her, and
> succeeding in begetting good-looking children.
>
> (*De imitatione* fr. VI, p. 203)[6]

Better known than Dionysius is of course Quintilian's detailed list of
useful authors, and the accompanying general reflections (*Institutio
oratoria* 10.1–2). For the Greek material, he relies almost word for
word on Dionysius, and is very much himself the *fidus interpres;* in the
Latin part of the chapter, on the other hand, he airs his own views,
especially his dislike of Seneca, whom he reserves for a place of dis-
honour at the end. His general theory is on the lines we should expect,
and he may well be more heavily dependent on the lost parts of
Dionysius' treatise than we can tell. *Imitatio*, says Quintilian, is a
necessity for most of us, since very few have the natural abilities
to enable them to equal the classical models.[7] But it is not enough; if
there were nothing else, *nihil fuisset inuentum.* In fact many vital quali-
ties of an orator – invention, spirit, personality – are no more attain-
able by *imitatio* than they are by any other technique of the *ars.*
Nor is successful *imitatio* a mechanical affair. It needs critical intelli-
gence, an understanding of *why* the model is so good. It needs a
capacity for abstracting from literature of all kinds the common
quality (*commune*) which is going to be of use. It needs the power to
comprehend thoroughly not only the words of the models but their
purposes and methods. The *perfectus orator* will not follow in anyone's
footsteps; he will rise on his predecessors' achievements to supply
their deficiencies.

Dionysius and Quintilian thus share a concept of *imitatio* consistent
with a certain confidence in literary progress – Dionysius was aggres-
sively optimistic about his own generation[8] – and immune to the
cruder attacks that could be made on a mere technique of reproduction.
Both, however, are concerned exclusively with the teaching of rhetoric,

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and particularly with the acquisition of verbal facility. And neither –
in the texts we possess – gives us examples of good and bad *imitatio*.
They thus assert their case without advancing evidence. To supple-
ment them, we must turn elsewhere. But where?

An obscure and despised Greek writer named Dorion composed a
Metaphrasis of Homer in which he wrote of the rock the Cyclops
hurled into the sea ὄρους ὄρος ἀποσπᾶται ('from mountain mountain
is wrenched'), and καὶ χειρία βάλλεται νῆσος ('and, gripped in the
hand, is thrown an island'). It was the view of Maecenas, according to
the elder Seneca (*Suasoriae* 1.12),[9] that these passages, which were
corrupta and *tumida*, were to be contrasted with the *magna et sana* of
Virgil's adaptations, viz. *haud partem exiguam montis* (*Aeneid* 10.128)
and *credas innare reuolsas | Cycladas* (*Aeneid* 8.691–2). Maecenas is
evidently defending Virgil against a charge of *tumor*, 'bombast',
by setting his *sententiae* against the obviously grosser ones of Dorion.
But his arguments are unimpressive. In the first instance, we are told,
he praised Virgil for 'keeping size in mind without ill-advisedly depart-
ing from credibility' – by changing the whole mountain into 'no small
part' of one. In the second, *non dicit hoc fieri sed uideri*, i.e. Virgil
replaces a statement of fact by one of visual impression, so that the
hyperbole disappears. Successful *imitatio* thus improves on its 'models'
by correcting faults like bombast or unrealistic hyperbole. Maecenas
was a great patron; this anecdote gives no very favourable notion of
his capacity as a critic.

Most of the Latin examples of this kind of criticism relate (like this
one) to Virgil, about whom a large literature gathered from an early
date. We have for instance the remarks of the grammarian Valerius
Probus on the resemblances between Homer's comparison of Nausicaa
with Artemis (*Odyssey* 6.102ff.), and Virgil's simile of Artemis and
Dido (*Aeneid* 1.498ff.).[10] 'In Homer', said Probus (or so his pupils
reported),

> 'the girl Nausicaa, playing about in a solitary place with girls
> of her own age, is correctly and appropriately compared with
> Diana hunting in the mountain ridges among goddesses of
> the wild; but what Virgil did was in no way appropriate,
> because Dido, walking in the centre of the city among the
> Tyrian lords, with dignified dress and gait, "intent on the work
> and the kingdom to come" (as he says himself), is incapable of
> filling any of the points of comparison that suit the sport and
> hunting of Diana. Secondly, Homer frankly and honourably

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asserts Diana's enthusiasm and pleasure in the hunt; Virgil on the other hand says nothing about her hunting, but only makes her carry a quiver on her shoulder, like a load or a piece of luggage . . .'

He went on to point the contrast between Homer's simple expression of sincere joy γέγηθε δέ τε φρένα Λητώ ('and Leto rejoices in her heart') and the half-hearted pleasure of Virgil's Latona: *Latonae tacitum pertemptant gaudia pectus*.

What concerns us here is not so much the validity of Probus' arguments, as their nature and presuppositions. They are polemical, and consistency is not to be expected. The first rests on the notion of *decorum*: the essence of it is that this simile was not suitable for Dido, who is a more dignified personage than Nausicaa. The second and third, on the other hand, complain of a loss of the very vivacity which the first argument regards as inappropriate. There seems to be little perception here of the subtlety with which Virgil has tried to make the simile *priuati iuris*,[11] or of the positive value of the refinements he has added. We may prefer Homer, as Probus obviously did; but we must find better reasons.

There are many such critiques to be found in Gellius and Macrobius. The second-century sophist Favorinus of Arles takes the descriptions of an eruption of Etna in Virgil (*Aeneid* 3.570ff.) and in Pindar (*Pythian* 1.21ff.), and comes down heavily in Pindar's favour.[12] The criticism resembles that of Probus – on whom indeed it has been thought to depend – and is partly factual, partly stylistic. Pindar distinguishes the smoke seen by day from the fire seen by night; Virgil confounds the two. In describing a cloud as *turbine fumantem piceo et candente fauilla*, Virgil must be guilty of one of two errors: either a vulgar misuse of *candens* for 'hot', or a self-contradiction between the 'white-hot' ash and the 'pitchy' whirling smoke. That Pindar's description is more vivid and precise would, I suppose, be our common feeling; but once again, the kind of sharpness with which the grammarian establishes his point falls far short of any proper discussion of the *mimēsis*. So too in some cases where Virgil is said to have improved on his model. Homer had written (*Iliad* 16.33ff.):

γλαυκὴ δέ σε τίκτε θάλασσα,
πέτραι τ' ἠλίβατοι, ὅτι τοι νόος ἐστιν ἀπήνης

and it was the grey sea that bore you, and the towering rocks, so remorseless is your heart.

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Virgil in his adaptation (*Aeneid* 4.365ff.) adds a new idea: *Hyrcanaeque admorunt ubera tigres.* Why did he do this? Because, Favorinus tells us,[13] character is the product of *nutricatio* as well as of birth. Homer's *criminatio morum* is thus defective in a respect which Virgil supplied. The defect is both ignorance of a truth of ethics and failure to apply the rule of rhetoric which expects *vituperatio* (ψόγος), like *laus* (ἐγκώμιον), to cover not only birth (γένεσις) but upbringing (ἀνατροφή).

A somewhat better example is the comparison between *Aeneid* 1.198ff. and *Odyssey* 12.108.[14] Here, Virgil's encouragement of his shipwrecked companions is represented as rhetorically more effective than Odysseus' corresponding speech.

> Ulysses reminded his friends of one trouble [the Cyclops], Aeneas encourages his men to hope for an end to their present woes by alluding to the issue of two episodes [Scylla and Cyclops]. Ulysses says somewhat obscurely καί που τῶνδε μνήσεσθαι ὀΐω ('I am sure you will remember these happenings'), Aeneas more plainly *forsan et haec olim meminisse iuuabit*, 'it will give you pleasure one day to remember even this'. But the addition which the Roman poet has made marks a more potent consolation. Aeneas heartens his men not only by an example which illustrates escape, but by the hope of future happiness, promising them not only *sedes quietas* as a result of their hardships, but also *regna*.

This is perhaps as satisfactory an example of these comparisons as we can find; and it shall close this brief selection.[15] The criteria of realism, moral appropriateness, and grammatical correctness strike us inevitably as superficial and unhelpful. The more detailed rhetorical analysis of the last example raises hopes of something more perspicacious. But on the whole, if this were the best that we could learn from the ancient critics about the criteria for judging *mimēsis*, we might as well follow our own poor wits. Fortunately, there is something which is at least a little better.

'Longinus' opens the subject of *mimēsis* at 13.2, and devotes the rest of chapters 13 and 14 to it. He is here listing ways of achieving 'sublimity' of thought; questions of style and diction are to come later. Plato showed the way; and for us too ἡ τῶν ἔμπροσθεν μεγάλων συγγραφέων καὶ ποιητῶν μίμησίς τε καὶ ζήλωσις ('*mimēsis* and *zēlōsis* of the great prose-writers and poets of old') is 'a road to the sublime'.

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Why these two terms, *mimēsis* and *zēlōsis*? They correspond to *imitatio* and *aemulatio* in Latin. The question inevitably arises whether there is any difference between them, for it is natural to think that they may represent essentially different attitudes, the one more negative, the other more independent. Now we do find a sharp distinction made in the fragments of Dionysius' treatise on *mimēsis* (p. 200 Usener–Radermacher), if we can trust our reports of what he said:

> μίμησίς ἐστιν ἐνέργεια διὰ τῶν θεωρημάτων ἐκματτομένη τὸ παράδειγμα· ʒῆλος δὲ ἐστιν ἐνέργεια ψυχῆς πρὸς θαῦμα τοῦ δοκοῦντος εἶναι καλοῦ κινουμένη.[16]

> Mimēsis *is an activity reproducing the model by means of theoretical principles.* Zēlos *is an activity of the mind, roused to admiration of something believed to be beautiful.*

It is clear that for Dionysius *zēlos* is at any rate the more spontaneous of the two, the less amenable to rule. But it is important to remember that both are means to the same end; they are not exclusive, they complement each other, rather like *ars* and *ingenium* in Horace's account of their function in poetry:

> alterius sic
> altera poscit opem res et coniurat amice.[17]

And it is clear that in 'Longinus' also the two terms represent aspects of the same process. He later (13.4) expounds it further, and commends a healthy 'strife' between imitator and model. What he says in that connection refers to the whole complex idea of '*mimēsis–zēlōsis*', not to *zēlōsis* without its partner. It is thus wrong, or at least false in terms of this evidence, to treat 'imitation' and 'emulation' as fundamentally different, the one passive and negative, the other positive and original. Professor Brink rightly says[18] that 'in one sense . . . no literature is more imitative than Augustan poetry, in another none is more creative than Virgil's or Horace's work'. It would be wrong to connect the 'creative' element here with *aemulatio*, and the 'imitative' with *imitatio*. The two always complement each other; the process they denote may be either well or badly done, and the difference lies, not in more or less *mimēsis* or more or less *zēlōsis*, but in the choice of object, the depth of understanding, and the writer's power to take possession of the thought for himself.

We noticed that 'Longinus' introduces his recommendation of *mimēsis* by the instance of Plato, who, he says, himself 'broke a lance'

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