

ARISTOTLE AND NIETZSCHE ON ART AS IMITATION OF NATURE

MARK P. DROST

The concept of *art as imitation of nature* refers both to art objects that represent something in nature and to the process by which art objects come into being. It is a concept that is central to both Aristotle's and Nietzsche's theories of art. Both theories are worth comparing because each tells us that *art is the complement of nature*, since each theory is founded upon a different conception of nature, the theories of art are consequently different. In the first two sections I outline Aristotle's and Nietzsche's positions (respectively), and in the third section their positions are brought together to further the understanding of the complementary nature of artistic imitation in general.

1

—*Nature's song is the song of innocence;
art's the song of experience.*¹

Aristotle's classical concept of "art as imitation of nature"² refers both to the aesthetic *representation* of a form of nature through an image (or some other artifactitious representation), and to the *process* of art which is an imitation of the creative process of nature. All art is

¹ R. G. Collingwood, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), p. 55.

² The clause "art imitates nature" can be found in several passages in the Aristotelian corpus: *Phys.* 194^a21, 199^a17; *De Mundo* 396^b12; *Poetics* 1447^a14–17, 1448^b4–24. All references (except *De Mundo*) refer to Richard McKeon's *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, (New York: Random House, 1966).

imitative and productive—even if it does not result in mimetic artifacts. Artistry, which is an imitation of nature, is a process by which something comes into being, and it is distinct from the artifact that is a product of imitating nature. A sculptor can shape a piece of stone into an image of a man, but his activity depends upon imitating a natural process or force of nature. The process of art is an imitation of the process of nature, but not necessarily in the sense that the artifact imitates the product of nature. For example, a piece of music is not an imitation of a product of nature, but the process of creating music is an imitation of nature. In order to understand Aristotle's theory of art, one must take into account both senses inherent in the clause "art as imitation of nature."

Aristotle considers nature to be "a cause that operates for a purpose" (*Phys.* 199^b32). The productive capacity of nature is goal-directed and because art is an imitation of nature, artistic productivity is goal-directed as well. Since the teleological character of artistic productivity is more obvious than nature's goal-oriented productiveness, Aristotle turns to artistry to comprehend nature's teleological activity. Let us first contrast artistic coming-into-being to natural coming-into-being.

Artistic production is analogous to natural coming-into-being since the creative agency is a moving or efficient cause of the artifact. Like nature and chance, art is a moving cause (*Metaph.* 1032^a12), but the coming-into-being of natural substances, e.g. man begetting man, is a process in which the moving cause is the same in form as what is produced.³ In natural coming-into-being, it is not a form *in* the soul that is an agent, but it is actually what the agent is. In the case of artistic productivity, the artist has the form of the artifact in his soul, i.e. he has knowledge of the material and formal causes needed to bring the artifact into being, and this fundamentally differs from natural coming-into-being since the artist has the one form (the rules of art) in his own form (his soul). Natural coming-into-being does not require knowledge of the rules of production. The artist's knowledge is a universal principle consisting of the rules of production by which other artifacts with a similar form can be produced, but the form in the artist's mind is not the same as the form in the material that is produced. The cause of the

³ "In some cases indeed it is even obvious that the begetter is of the same kind as the begotten (not, however, the *same* nor one in number, but in form), i.e. in the case of natural products (for man begets man)..." (*Metaph.* 1033^b29–32)

artifact's coming-into-being is the artist's knowledge, whereas the cause of natural coming-into-being is the agent who shares its form.

Artistic knowledge is based upon having the form of the artifact in the mind in such a way that the artist knows what he desires to produce. This reasoning process is described by Aristotle in two stages:

Of the productions or processes one part is called thinking and the other making—that which proceeds from the starting point and the form is thinking, and that which proceeds from the final step of thinking is making.

(*Metaph.* 1032^b15–17)

The artist begins with the form and reasons back from it to the materials immediately within his power. Understanding nature's productive activity requires that one know the particular natural form in the same manner as the artist understands the artifact, viz. from the perspective of the formal cause which enables him to reason back to the proper materials with which to realize it. According to Aristotle, "we think art more truly knowledge than experience is; for artists can teach, and men of mere experience cannot" (*Metaph.* 981^b8–9). The artist knows in a specific manner why something works, and his experience of detail enables him to provide an account of his artifact, thus giving evidence of his knowledge. Aristotle often turns to the productive sciences in order to explain a less obvious activity of nature. Even though knowledge proceeds from what is most knowable to oneself to what is most knowable in itself (*Metaph.* 1092^b3–11),⁴ knowing the form(s) of natural substances is a difficult end to attain. Through a consideration of the procedure of "making" (ποίησις) one can grasp more abstract knowledge, and the metaphysician uses the artistic process as a model to illustrate the way in which the forms of nature come into being.⁵ Few arrive at what is ultimately explanatory, viz. matter, form, potentiality, and actuality, not because these notions are unintelligible, but for their not being immediately evident.

⁴ Cf. *Nich. Eth.* 1095^b1–3.

⁵ The productive arts proves useful throughout Aristotle's general description of the moral virtues: "the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well" (*Nich. Eth.* 1103^a28–1103^b2). The account of how we learn to be virtuous is stated nearly in the same terms as the explanation of how we learn the skill for a productive capacity.

Art imitates nature in the sense that art requires the realization of a form in a material substratum that unfolds over time in accordance with formal and teleological character. The artistic process consists of a series of steps which exist for the sake of an end, and it is through a consideration of the artistic process that one can come to know natural coming-into-being. Aristotle expresses this point in the subjunctive mood:

...if things made by nature were also made by art, they would come to be in the same way as by nature. Each step then in the series is for the sake of the next; and generally art completes what nature cannot bring to a finish, and partly imitates her. If, therefore, artificial products are for the sake of an end, so clearly also are natural products.

(*Phys.* 199^a14–17)⁶

Aristotle talks sometimes as if nature works like an artist producing beautiful forms. Although nature's productive activity is not artistically productive, thinking about it as if it were enables us to understand the less obvious fact of its teleological characteristic. Having an immediate apprehension of the formal cause of an artifact and the steps necessary for its production, the artist is in a superior position to give an account of his work, but on Aristotle's view, the metaphysician has ultimate comprehension of both natural forms and artifacts, and he can use the knowledge of one to complement his account of the other. The role of art in theoretical science (e.g. physics, metaphysics) is a heuristic role that enables the philosopher to comprehend more abstract and higher forms of knowledge. Since natural coming-into-being is analogous to artistic coming-into-being, comparing their accounts in this way makes nature all the more intelligible. For purposes of understanding, Aristotle claims that the process by which natural forms come into being is like the formative process of an artist who brings a work of art into existence. Analogically referring nature's activity to artistic productivity transforms an abstract metaphysical thesis about the world into an easily

⁶ This point is echoed in *Parts of Animals* (641^a8–17) where Aristotle admonishes the physiologists to explain the animal forms as the artist would proceed to explain his artifact: "to explain what is both in substance and in form, and to deal after the same fashion with its several organs; in fact, to proceed in exactly the same way as we should do, were we giving a complete description of a couch."

recognizable truth. Nature does not imitate art, but an account of nature often imitates the account of artistic productivity.

The idea that artistic activity is analogous to and imitates the productive capacity of nature is one that is presupposed in the *Poetics*, which includes a discussion of the nature of mimetic representations and their relation to mimetic pleasure. Under the term μίμησις there is included an array of artistic activity:

Epic poetry and tragedy, as also comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and most flute-playing and lyre-playing, are all, viewed as a whole, modes of imitation.

(*Poetics* 1447^a14)

Poetic imitation itself appears to have two causes. First, imitation is natural to man from childhood (*Poetics* 1448^b5). Man is the most mimetic of creatures, and in childhood he learns by imitating the people, things, and events around him. For example, a child comes to know something about soldiers either by making images of them or by imitating their appearance or action. The recognition of an imitation presupposes some form of cognitive acquaintance with the thing imitated. Imitation is not simply contemplative for it is animated by acting out a role. Second, because he learns through them, man takes delight in seeing the images of things and recognizing that they are imitative (*Poetics* 1448^b9). Since the pleasure of such recognition is so great, one can in fact take delight in seeing images of things which are painful to see in their original (*Poetics* 1448^b10). The former cause yields pleasure from the knowledge of the original while the second cause yields pleasure because one knows it is not an original. Thus the knowledge that what is being witnessed is an imitation is the basis for the experience of mimetic pleasure. If one has not seen the original, the pleasure one experiences is something different from the pleasure one takes in imitation (*Poetics* 1448^b17). Artistic imitation requires that there always be a sufficient difference between the representation and the original to allow for knowledge and the mimetic pleasure subsequent to it. Since an imitation would be indistinguishable from its original without this acknowledged difference, it would fail to be art. Artistic imitations are distinguishable in terms of their means, their objects, and their manner of representation (cf. *Poetics* 1447^a17) and, in general, the aim

of mimetic representation includes the awareness of an artistic medium which,⁷ according to Aristotle, comes under the heading of “means”.

Although by perceiving an imitation we learn of the thing imitated, it is not essential to the concept of imitation that there actually and empirically exist an original event or figure which explains the content of the imitation. Apparently according to Aristotle, when one refers to a fictional entity (such as Oedipus), one in effect refers not to some nonexistent entity, but to the account or the story in which Oedipus is portrayed or discussed. Hence, though the concept of imitation is a relational concept, it is not in the sense that there must be an originally existing personage or state of affairs against which we may measure the accuracy of the mimetic representation. The formula for poetic imitation abstracts from the individual and focuses on an action and a character type which gives qualitative content to the action (cf. *Poetics* 1450^a17).

Plato objected to poetry and art in general on the grounds that they are imitations of phantoms, and thus the pleasure in imitation belongs to the exercise of our lowest psychic faculties, far removed from the pleasure that the soul would derive from the contemplation of Forms. As imitators of phantoms, the poet and other image-makers “do not lay hold on truth” (*Republic* 600e) and because of its distance from truth, art exerts a corrupting influence. Unlike his teacher, Aristotle envisions art as producing images which serve to complement the natural forms of the actual world. This complementary function is evinced by the poet who

...describ[es] not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen ...hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.

(*Poetics* 1451^b5-9)

The poet's statements are of the nature of universals insofar as they describe an ideal type of character and the action he will perform in a

⁷ Arthur Danto refers to these artistic mediums as “conventions of dislocation”: “mimesis itself, providing that the conventions of dislocation are clear to the audience, in fact inhibits just those beliefs that would be activated without those conventions.” (*The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 23.

given situation. Poetic imitation comprehends the universal as a complement to the individual by exemplifying the individual's ideal aspect. For example, tragedy need not be tethered to a particular object or event in the way history is, but it may illustrate a pattern which is never in reality fully and perfectly exemplified. Tragedy does not simply turn a mirror upon life in order to reveal a particular biographical truth in the way history mirrors its particular events, but it shows us what *would* happen to someone who possessed a character similar to the tragic figure. When an actor brings a "character to life", his performance is an instantiation of the universal character in much the same way that a shapeless piece of clay is envisioned as an instantiation of a heroic figure in the sculptor's mind. Both the actor and the sculptor know the rules of their art and thus know the proper material in which to embody the form. The actions of an Agamemnon or an Oedipus are subjects of the actor's mimetic activity, yet *in themselves* they are representations of idealized characterizations of actions and personages which develop through the course of a literary history. Because the universal is presented in a particular embodiment, the character or event *might* exist. Poetic imitation does not let us merely see again something that we already saw, but it provides an image of what might not have been seen at all. Mimetic activity is singular, yet the particular visible form of the representation lets the universal, the possible, and the intelligible shine through.

Aristotle's discussion of imitation distinguishes two (2) senses of imitation: a) the production of an artifact which is imitative of something actually or possibly existing, and b) the imitation which although not producing a physical image, is itself a process imitative of a creative force of nature. The imitative product is created by and is dependent on an imitative process. In general, imitation complements our knowledge of natural things or events by exemplifying their ideal aspects and enables us to comprehend nature in accord with principles or art. This complementary character of artistic imitation significantly enters into Nietzsche's theory of imitation, to which we now turn.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*⁸ Nietzsche reinterprets the Aristotelian concept of imitation through the Apollinian and Dionysian artistic impulses which express themselves as distinct attitudinal tendencies in the arts: "every artist is an 'imitator', that is to say, either an Apollinian artist in dreams, or a Dionysian artist in ecstasies" (p. 38). Through a consideration of these artistic impulses and their corresponding attitudes "we shall be in a position to understand and appreciate more deeply that relation of the Greek artist to his archetypes which is, according to the Aristotelian expression, 'the imitation of nature'" (p. 38). These artistic impulses reached their highest development when "they appeared coupled with each other, and through this coupling ultimately generate an equally Dionysian and Apollinian form of art — Attic tragedy" (p. 33).

Both Aristotle and Nietzsche would agree that the artist imitates nature in at least two senses: (a) the artist produces an image which complements something in nature, and (b) the way in which the artist does this is dependent on the way in which nature produces forms. However, Nietzsche's reinterpretation of this second sense reveals a dimension of the mimetic process that is not found in Aristotle's account. A sculptured piece of stone can represent a heroic person, whereas an actor can act like a heroic person by stepping into the envisaged image of that person. The sense in which a sculpture is an imitation and the sense in which a man in the state of ecstasy is an imitation are two distinct modes of imitation. The production of an artifact toward which psychic distance is maintained in (Apollinian) contemplation is one sense of imitation; the imitation which creates an ecstatic (Dionysian) embodiment through the collapse of psychic distance is another. The Dionysian is Nietzsche's innovative concept of a mimetic impulse that has, I believe, no analogue in the Aristotelian theory of imitation, and it signifies a unique contribution to the theory of art as imitation.

Rather than turning to a conceptual analysis of imitation, Nietzsche borrows his adjectives from the Greeks' "embodiments of art." Through the figures of Apollo and Dionysus there are revealed basic artistic

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967). All page references refer to this edition.

energies, “*artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, without the mediation of the human artist*” (p. 38). Since art is an imitation of nature, any opposition inherent in the works of art is derived from the fundamental opposition between the two basic energies of nature.

Through Apollo and Dionysus, the two art deities of the Greeks, we come to recognize that in the Greek world there existed a tremendous opposition, in origin and aims, between the Apollinian art of sculpture, and the nonimagistic Dionysian art of music.

(p. 33)

In contrast to all those who are intent on deriving the arts from one exclusive principle, as the necessary vital source of every work of art, I shall keep my eyes fixed on the two artistic deities of the Greeks, Apollo and Dionysus, and recognize in them the living and conspicuous representatives of *two* worlds of art differing in their intrinsic essence and in their highest aims.

(p. 99)

The opposition specifically reveals itself as being between a mimetic impulse which culminates in the production of images which are artifacts imitative of natural forms and an impulse which does not produce images as imitations, but which is itself an imitation of the productive capacity of nature.

Nietzsche understands the Apollinian impulse through the figure of Apollo himself: “the deity of light... ruler over the beautiful illusion of the inner world of fantasy” (p. 35). As a symbol of brightness, he reigns over appearances and the plastic energies in the arts that give rise to individual shapes (p. 35).⁹ “We might call Apollo himself the glorious divine image of the *principium individuationis*” (p. 34). The Apollinian impulse is an energy that operates through dreams by impelling the dreamer to live-through those images in an act of contemplation. The dream images shine in such a way that we take immediate delight in them, yet within the dream image there is an element which betrays that the image is an image:

We still have, glimmering through it, the sensation that it is *mere appearance*... We must keep in mind that measured

⁹ For a further characterization of Apollinian mimesis, see John Sallis, “Apollo’s Mimesis,” *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 15 (1984): 16–21.

restraint,...that calm of the sculptor god. His eye must be "sunlike," as befits his origin; even when it is angry and distempered it is still hallowed by beautiful illusion.

(pp. 34f.)

The dream image shines forth in a way that installs the psychic distance necessary for the character of restraint and calm. This contemplative distance is the very measure of the Apollinian state.

Since the Apollinian image is a representation of the perfection of the everyday incomplete and imperfect world, the dream image is considered superior to the imitated object. It is an image within which a "higher truth" (p. 35) shines: "for it is only as an esthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified" (p. 52).¹⁰ The Apollinian dream image recreates the mundane world of man on a level that shines in a higher truth, just as man sees himself shine more brightly in the Olympian gods.

The Apollinian artist acts from the creative impulse of nature so that we can say Apollinian art imitates nature in two senses: (a) the artist produces an artifact (including images) which resembles something in nature, and (b) the way in which the artist does this is dependent on the way in which nature produces forms. The artist reproduces images that are like those perfections naturally produced in the dream state (p. 41). The images of the gods created by Homer and the Greek sculptors serve as transfiguring mirrors in which man's life is reflected back in a glorified way. The gods are images, "accents of an exuberant, triumphant life in which all things, whether good or evil, are deified" (p. 41). In addition to its production of natural forms in the world, nature produces the imagistic forms of our dream state. The process by which the artist

¹⁰ The inverted order by which an image is taken to be "higher" than its original is, on Nietzsche's view, asserted as a condition of art and is expressed as "inverted Platonism". Inverted Platonism is, in part, a criticism of Plato's subordination of art to truth: "Art is the highest task and the truly metaphysical activity of this life" (pp. 31-32). This concept is outlined in a section of Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* (in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books 1954) entitled "How the True World Became a Fable." Apparently, Nietzsche interprets Plato's ontological theory (of Forms) as a psychological theory expressing man's desire for stability and immortality, (i.e. Being) over and against his experience of coming-into-being. "The true world —unattainable, indemonstrable, unpromisable, but the very thought of it— a consolation, an obligation, an imperative" (p. 485). In *The Birth of Tragedy* the theory of Forms is interpreted as the Olympian gods and figures that are contemplated in the Apollinian dream state.

brings his artifact into existence is like the activity by which nature produces the images of our dream state. The formative process of a plastic artist whose artifact reflects his dream state is similar to and dependent upon the process by which a natural form comes into being.

As a god of wine, Dionysus is associated with effects that wine can produce: ecstasy, savagery, and inspiration in poetry. He is a god who breaks all bonds and exceeds all measure and limit. Just as the Apollinian is exemplified in dreams, the Dionysian is exemplified in intoxication (*Rausch*). The Dionysian state is a state of being outside of oneself in such a way that the limits which constitute an interior self are disrupted. As the Dionysian impulse increases in intensity, this subjective element vanishes into forgetfulness (p. 36). The boundaries separating man from man and man from nature erode (p. 37) as the limits and measures of one's interiority are displaced.

All the rigid, hostile barriers that necessity, caprice or 'impudent convention' have fixed between man and man are broken...in these paroxysms of intoxication the artistic power of all nature reveals itself to the highest gratification of the primordial unity.

(p. 37)

The result is an ecstatic vision in which everything that was previously individuated now "suffers the dissolution of nature in his own person" (p. 69). In the throes of the Dionysian impulse, the artist begins with an ecstatic insight and transforms himself as an imitation of that state of ecstasy. Since the artist has "already surrendered his subjectivity in the Dionysian process" (p. 49) and suffers a loss of determinate individuality, he is not so much the creator of a work of art as he is himself a product of nature's impulses (p. 37). Nietzsche's claim that the artist is a product of nature's impulses re-instates in a most radical way Aristotle's conception of man as the most imitative of creatures. We learn through imitating, that is, through the self-abandoning activity of Dionysian mimesis subjectivity is revealed to be a malleable feature of nature that can embody other forms. This self-abandoning act is present both in the origin of man's learning process and (as we shall see) at the origin of drama.

Art is an image of nature. Artistic activity is a reflection of nature's activity, but as an activity it does not necessarily culminate in a static, imagistic representation. The mimetic character of the Dionysian artist is a reflection in which the state of ecstasy is made manifest while it does

not employ the medium of an image or produce an artifact. As an imageless reflection (*bildloser Widerschein*) it occurs as music. Nietzsche does not view music as the imitation of a product of nature; the process of creating music is itself an imitation of a creative impulse of nature. Although music itself is imageless, it does have the capacity to give birth to images (p. 103). By singing his poem and playing his lyre, the lyric poet invokes an image in the imagination, thereby making the music visible. Early tragedy was much like lyric poetry in which the Apollinian image was invoked in the imagination by words, but in its fully developed form the Apollinian image was made visible as the world of the stage.

The imitative character of the Apollinian artist is discerned in the product of his art, which is an image which imitates. As an image-making impulse, the character of the Apollinian clearly indicates that it is an imitative art, but it is not the case that any imitative art is *ipso facto* Apollinian. The Dionysian artist does not produce an imitative image; his activity, in and for itself, is imitative of a creative impulse of nature. We shall now see how the Apollinian imitative product or image is created by a process of Dionysian mimesis.¹¹

As an Apollinian artist, the poet visualizes in an intensified manner what the painter depicts through an art form whose medium guarantees the psychic distance necessary for aesthetic contemplation. The dramatic actor combines poetic vision with a re-enactment of that vision in dramatic action. This is a mimetic act which Nietzsche claims stands at the beginning of the origin of drama. "This process...is the dramatic proto-phenomenon: to see oneself transformed before one's own eyes and to begin to act as if one had entered into another body, another character" (p. 64). This primal phenomenon is an ecstatic vision intertwined with a re-enactment of that vision. The proto-phenomenon reveals the plasticity of human nature: 'character' and 'individuality' are shaped by artistic forces of nature.¹² "Considered more deeply, the role

¹¹ For an analysis of the role of Nietzsche's concept of Dionysian mimesis in ancient tragedy see Mark P. Drost "Nietzsche and Mimesis," *Philosophy and Literature*, 10, 2 (1986), pp. 209-17.

¹² Apparently, Nietzsche denies that man is an artistic agent: "we may assume that we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author, and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art—for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified*" (p. 52).

has actually become character; and art, nature.”¹³ The dramatic actor transforms himself as an imitation of his vision and is revealed as a work of art.¹⁴ The vision is not merely an object of contemplative gazing, but it is animated by an imitation of the appearance through a self-abandoning, distance-destroying act. The actor imaginatively sees himself in the role to such an extent that he himself is displaced.

3

The aim of artistic imitation is to complement nature. The classical theory of “art as imitation of nature” is made possible through the knowledge of the difference between the mimetic representation and its original object. The knowledge of this difference must be presupposed in both the account of artistic coming-into-being as a complement of the account of natural coming-into-being, and in the mimetic pleasure which one derives through an artistic medium which is never completely transparent. The work of art complements our knowledge of nature, and the limits of and pleasure in imitation are made possible by this knowledge: “to be learning something is the greatest of pleasures not only to the philosopher but also to the rest of mankind, however small their capacity for it” (*Poetics* 1448^b13–15). According to Aristotle, since the aim of imitation includes the awareness of an artistic medium which is never completely transparent, the difference between a mimetic representation and its original is always presupposed. Art complements nature by (a) creating an image that perfects the appearance of a form of nature and by (b) rendering nature more intelligible by analogically referring its activity to artistic productivity.

On Nietzsche’s view, the knowledge of the difference between the mimetic representation and its original is present insofar as an

¹³ *The Gay Science* (Trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 302. Both Aristotle and Nietzsche understand “character” as the “sort of” (ποιός) individual one is as a result of a process of making (ποίησις), but the agent of character is in each case different. On Aristotle’s view, an individual is ultimately the agent responsible for the sort of character he has (cf. *Nich. Eth.* 1114^a4–11) whereas on Nietzsche’s view, the agent of character, like the agent of art, is not something in the individual (see § 15); character development does not seem to be the responsibility of an individual agent who acquires it.

¹⁴ *The Gay Science*, p. 302. The dramatic actor, according to Nietzsche, embodies “the inner craving for a role and mask; an excess of the capacity for all kinds of adaptation” (p. 316).

Apollinian image limits the degree of self-displacement caused by the proto-phenomenon of Dionysian mimesis. The Apollinian artist produces an image through which nature itself is rendered “clearer, more understandable, more moving than the everyday world and yet more shadowy” (p. 66). Nietzsche insists that art is not merely an imitation of nature (p. 140). His theory of art inverts the mimetic system in which the image is subordinated to the original by claiming that art acts as a “complement” to nature:

The same impulse which calls art into being, *as the complement and consummation of existence*, seducing one to a continuation of life, was also the cause of the Olympian world which the Hellenic “will” made use of as a transfiguring mirror

(p. 43)

In its complementary role, art is not discontinuous with nature; rather, the “metaphysical intention of art is to transfigure” nature (p. 140). Art perfects man’s existence through the transfiguring mirror of the Olympian dreamworld. The transfiguring illusion of art invests the mundane world with the shining illusion of the imitated dreamworld. The complementary character of imitation offers us a vision of art that is wholly continuous with nature: art fulfills man’s existence by providing a vision of himself in a transfiguring image. The limits of imitation are the limits of the complementary power that art yields to nature.

Aristotle and Nietzsche consider art as an image which accommodates our understanding of nature.¹⁵ Aristotle considers nature as intelligible and relies on art to supplement the account of nature’s activity, whereas Nietzsche considers nature’s intelligibility as a product of the Apollinian drive, a necessary illusion in the service of life. On Nietzsche’s view, as long as we partake of the “wisdom of illusion” (p. 36) the intelligibility of nature remains. “What is required...is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial—out of profundity.”¹⁶ However,

¹⁵ Nietzsche asserts the aesthetic condition as a condition of knowledge: “The aesthetically sensitive man stands in the same relation to the reality of dreams as the philosopher does to the reality of existence; he is a close and willing observer, for these images afford him an interpretation of life, and by reflecting on these processes he trains himself for life” (p. 34).

¹⁶ *The Gay Science*, p. 38.

according to Aristotle, knowledge proceeds from the superficial and the immediate (e.g. images, sensations, artifacts, and experience,) in order to arrive at the more difficult goal of theoretical wisdom —what is most knowable in itself (*Nich. Eth.* 1095^b1–3). Aristotle’s metaphysical view of nature consists of formal and material principles that determine the activities and limitations of individual substances, and it is obviously different from Nietzsche’s view; accordingly, their notions of wisdom are different. Aristotle’s concept of wisdom is theoretical: wisdom consists of knowledge of first principles and ultimate causes (*Metaph.* 982^a1). Nietzsche envisions nature in terms of its inherent artistic productivity, and his concept of wisdom is based on nature’s productive capacity: “art is the highest task and the truly metaphysical activity of this life” (pp. 31–32). Nietzsche would celebrate *poiesis* as the ultimate science of human wisdom.

These are profoundly different intuitions, but despite their fundamental differences the complementary nature of art is essential to both theories. The complementary character of artistic imitation can transform a vision of the horrible into one of aesthetic delight. The unity of the Apollinian and Dionysian mimetic impulses, according to Nietzsche, gives birth to tragedy which provides “metaphysical comfort” (p. 59; cf. p. 104).¹⁷ This comfort makes the vision of the ugly, the dissonant, and the tragic an endurable one, just as Aristotle indicates when he says we can take delight in seeing the images of things which are painful to see in their original (*Poetics* 1448^b10).

On Aristotle’s view, nature is not artistic, but men are artists and their activity imitates nature’s activities and products. The productive capacity of nature is original and it is not artistic for the reason that it does not imitate. Aristotle would certainly take issue with Nietzsche’s theory concerning “artistic energies which burst forth from nature herself, without the mediation of the human artist” (p. 39). Nietzsche seems to deny the difference between the realization of a form by nature and the realization of a form through art. The productive capacity of art, according to Aristotle, is not embodied by nature independently of man since the source of such a capacity is a form in the artist’s mind, that is, a form that results from the knowledge of the rules of art.

¹⁷ In his later writings Nietzsche rejects the concept of metaphysical comfort and adopts a theory of “this-worldly comfort” (Cf. *Attempt at a Self-Criticism*, p. 26).

We might characterize Nietzsche's conception of nature as the inversion of Aristotle's theory of art. Aristotle's conception of art is a naturalistic conception of art whereas Nietzsche's theory of nature is an artistic conception of nature.

The limits of artistic imitation, on Aristotle's view, are the limits of human nature —the formal and material boundaries which define man's nature. Whether it is a work of art coming into being or a natural thing coming into being, there always remains a principle of individuation by which mover and moved are distinguishable. That is, the formal and material limitations of nature do not admit the ecstatic displacement of one form into the "primordial unity" of nature (p. 37). According to Nietzsche, art offers the "joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in augury of a restored oneness" with nature (p. 74). The ecstasy of Dionysian mimesis collapses the principle of individuation, the principle according to which one form is ontologically separate and distinguishable from other forms of nature.¹⁸

University of Rochester

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