Poetry as *mimēsis* in Aristotle's *Poetics*

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In the opening of the Poetics, Aristotle suggests that mimēsis, rather than verse, is the defining feature of poetry. This article aims to show both the vagueness and the implausibility of this basic claim of Aristotle's account of poetry.

Introduction

Aristotle begins his discussion of poetry with polemics about what the defining feature of poetry is. He rejects the view, apparently widely held, that identifies poetry with versed discourse and that thus counts among poets also those who make compositions in verse on medical or natural matters, for example Empedocles. Against this view, Aristotle argues that "Empedocles and Homer have nothing in common apart from verse" and that Empedocles should be called "a natural scientist rather than a poet" (*Po.* 1, 1447b17–20). Later, Aristotle will similarly dismiss verse as a differentiating element between the poet and the historian: as he argues in Chapter 9, if Herodotus' works were put into verse, they would be history all the same – and not, as is evidently implied, poetry (*Po.* 9, 1451b2–4). Instead of verse, Aristotle famously indicates *mimēsis* as the defining feature of poetry. The Greek term *mimēsis* is in English commonly rendered as "representation", or "imitation". In this paper, however, I shall leave this term and its cognates un-translated, so as to avoid predetermining their meaning; for one of the questions I shall address is precisely how *mimēsis* is understood by both Aristotle and the authors before him. In the course of the discussion, it will also emerge in what aspect the Greek notion of *mimēsis* differs from our notion of representation.

At the opening of the *Poetics*, Aristotle characterises all kinds of poetry as "being on the whole *mimēseis*": of these kinds, he cites the composition of epics and tragedy, comedy, the composition of dithyramb and the

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music for *aulos* and *kithara* (*Po.* 1, 1447a13–16).[1] Importantly, for Aristotle the presumed *mimetic* character of a poet's activity is not only a feature common to all kinds of poetry, musical and non-musical, but also a feature that distinguishes the discourse of poetry (*i.e.* poets' verbal compositions) from medical and naturalist discourse, and supposedly also from other kinds of discourse. He in fact suggests calling someone (supposedly, a composer of discourses) a poet "*because of* mimēsis", rather than "because of verse", further arguing that any verbal composer who creates an instance of *mimēsis*, regardless of the metrical form of his composition, should be called a poet. Following this criterion, Aristotle does not include Empedocles' versed compositions in poetry, while he does seem to include even "Socratic discourses", namely prose compositions (*Po.* 1, 1447a 28–b20; cf. 9, 1451b27–29).[2]

However, neither in the *Poetics* nor anywhere else in his works does Aristotle explain what he means by *mimēsis*, nor does he explain exactly in what sense poetry should be understood as *mimēsis*. Despite this lack of explanation, Aristotle's characterisation of poetry as *mimēsis* has not been questioned frequently. In fact, it has commonly been taken for granted that his notion of poets' *mimēsis* roughly corresponds to our notion of literary representation, *i.e.* representation of men, their actions, events, etc. in works of literature. Moreover, it has commonly been assumed that poets' *mimēsis* was understood in these terms, if not already by pre-Platonic authors, at least by Plato in some discussions, notably in *Republic* X, where poetry in general is characterised as *mimēsis*.[3]

By contrast, this understanding of poets' *mimēsis* seems alien to Plato. I cannot here discuss Plato's intricate characterisation of poetry in general as *mimēsis* in *Republic* X. However, as I have suggested elsewhere, in *Republic* X the notion of poets' *mimēsis* does not at all correspond to our notion of "representation" of men, events, etc. in poets' works, but consists of something quite different: deceptive *mimēsis* of persons competent in the matters about which poets speak. The characterisation of poetry as *mimēsis* of this kind is thus as such discrediting.[4] But in this paper, I shall examine Aristotle's characterisation of poetry as *mimēsis*. As we shall see, while this characterisation is influenced by the earlier tradition and in particular by Plato's discussions of musical and dramatic poetry, in my view it is in this general form ("all kinds of poetry are on the whole *mimēseis*") first found in Aristotle's *Poetics*. My aim will be to show that this characterisation is neither clear nor unproblematic. As I shall argue, in characterising all kinds of poetry as *mimēseis*, Aristotle uses the term *mimēsis* to refer to two quite different activities of poets, which I shall call "figurative representation" (characteristic of musical and dramatic poetry) and "non-figurative repre-

sentation" (which is typically found in epics). Furthermore, I shall aim to show that by characterising poets' non-figurative representation as *mimēsis*, Aristotle's indication of *mimēsis* as a feature that distinguishes poetry from other kinds of discourse no longer holds. Finally I shall point out further evidence in the *Poetics* that shows Aristotle's loose understanding of what poets' *mimēsis* consists of.

Before examining the *Poetics* though, I first need to consider how the activity of *mimēsis* is understood by authors preceding Aristotle. Then I shall clarify in what sense poetry is understood as *mimēsis* by Plato, since Aristotle's account of poetry is certainly influenced by him.

The Activity of *mimēsis* in Pre-Aristotelian Texts

The use of the verb *mimeisthai* and cognate terms is relatively well documented from the sixth century BC onwards. While it is not possible to discuss here the history of these terms, relying on these occurrences we may attempt the following definition of *mimēsis*: doing or making something that is intentionally like something else in one aspect or another; or slightly differently, doing or making something by imitating something else in one aspect or another.[5] The first distinction that may be drawn regarding the activity of *mimēsis* is ontological: *mimēsis* can be either figurative or non-figurative.[6] (This distinction is not to be confused with the above distinction between figurative and non-figurative representation, which will be discussed later on.) To understand the difference between the two, consider first an example of non-figurative *mimēsis* from Euripides' *Electra*: Clytemnestra justifies her betrayal of Agamemnon, saying that "when […] a husband does wrong, rejecting his wife at home, the woman is apt to *mimeisthai*, 'imitate', the man and acquire another lover" (*Electra* 1036–38). It is clear from the context that the woman's activity is an instance of adultery no less than her husband's, the activity imitated. We may thus say that the woman does something *like* her husband's adultery in the way that her activity constitutes in its turn a *true* (or *real*) adultery. The activity performed is in this case *essentially* like the activity imitated, *i.e.* it is like it in the aspect by virtue of which an activity *is* a (true) instance of adultery.

Contrast now this case of *mimēsis* with the following example from Plato's *Republic*: laying down a model of a just state, the interlocutors consider whether the prospective guards[7] of this state should, in the course of their literary education, do *mimēsis* of various craftsmen and specialist workers, including a *mimēsis* of rowers of triremes (*Rep.* III, 396a8–b2). As is again clear from the context, by imitating, *i.e.* doing something like, row-

ers of triremes, the children will not in their turn *truly* be rowing (*i.e.* pro-pelling a boat with oars in a water), meaning that their activity will not be *essentially* like that of rowers; instead, they will, for instance, merely move *like* rowers do, doing so on the dry ground. But crucially, this activity will constitute a "*figure*" of rowing: that is to say, it will "stand for", or "refer to" rowing. The children's activity will have this figurative nature precisely by virtue of being *like* the activity of rowing in some non-essential aspect of this activity, such as the manner of movement. The children's activity may thus be characterised as *mimēsis* of the figurative kind, as opposed to the earlier case of the woman's adultery, which is an example of non-figu-rative *mimēsis*.

As mentioned earlier on, the activity of *mimēsis* can also consist of mak-ing – that is to say, it can be an activity that has a material result. Such ac-tivities are painting, sculpture, embroidery, which are as such all *mimēseis* of the figurative kind. Consider the well-known example of painting a couch from Plato's *Republic* X. In this case, the material product of a painter's activity, *i.e.* a painting, is like something else, namely a couch, in its visual appearance (and thus in a non-essential aspect of a couch): by virtue of this visual likeness, the painting constitutes a figure of a couch. The differ-ence between the children's activity and the painter's activity, which both feature as *mimēseis*, is that the children's activity itself constitutes a figure of rowing (and children themselves constitute figures of rowers), whereas it is only the *product* of the painter's activity that constitutes a figure of a couch (and the activity of painting does not constitute a figure of a carpen-ter's activity, nor of any other activity).

Another question concerning figures constituted by *mimēsis* is what kind of objects they denote, or stand for. For instance, exactly which row-ers and which couch do the figures from the above two examples denote respectively? It is evident that the figure of rowing need not denote any particular activity of rowing that has actually taken place and, likewise, that the figure of a couch need not stand for any particular couch that has been previously manufactured. Of course, it is possible for a figure to be a figure of an existing particular thing or individual, or even of a specific event that has actually taken place. For example, a painting may constitute a figure of Socrates; or even more specifically, a painting may constitute a figure of Socrates who is about to drink hemlock (a modern example of which is Jacques-Louis David's 1787 "The Death of Socrates"), and thus denote an event that in fact took place. In a similar way, an actor may enact Socrates on a particular occasion of his life (for example, playing Socrates' part in Plato's *Apology of Socrates*); his activity will thus constitute a figure that denotes an individual who truly existed and an event that truly

took place. However, figures constituted by *mimēsis* may just as well *not* denote any thing or individual that has previously existed or occurred. From here, complex questions arise as to what the ontological status of objects denoted by figures is and how these objects relate to figures constituted by *mimēsis*. However, as these questions do not substantially bear on the present argument, they will not be discussed here.[8]

Poets' *mimēsis* in Plato's Dialogues

Aristotle's account of poetry in various aspects evokes Plato's treatment of poetry as *mimēsis*, yet it also differs significantly from it. My aim here is to present an outline of Plato's treatment. Plato's arguments about poetry and *mimēsis* are notoriously intricate. Plato speaks of poets as doing *mimēsis* in various discussions: as I have argued elsewhere, in these discussions, it is not one and the same, but different activities by poets that are characterised as *mimēseis*, where these *mimēseis* are again of different kinds.[9] Relying on this analysis, I shall here indicate the three activities of poets that feature as *mimēseis* in Plato's dialogues and try to show that, by characterising each of them as *mimēsis*, Plato uses the term *mimēsis* with the meaning indicated above: *i.e.* "doing something that is intentionally like something else in one aspect or another". As we shall see, the term will not always have this meaning in Aristotle's characterisation of poetry as *mimēsis*.

Book III of the *Republic* and Books II and VII of the *Laws* both present the account that conceives of *musical* poetry as *mimēsis* of men's characters and modes of conduct; in the *Republic*, the account is associated with the musicologist Damon[10] while in the *Laws* it is introduced as a generally known and accepted one.[11] Aristotle adopts this musical "theory" both in the *Poetics* and the *Politics* (VIII 7, 1342a33–34), in the latter explicitly referring to the *Republic*.

This arguably pre-Platonic account may well seem alien to our perception of music. According to it, a performance of a particular musical piece (which may involve singing, playing instruments, dancing) constitutes, for example, a *mimēsis* of lamentation (*Rep.* III 398e1–2), or of courageous fight, or again of temperate conduct (*Rep.* III 399a5–8).[12] More precisely, a musical composition would constitute such *mimēsis* through harmony (or musical mode) and rhythm, the two musical elements of a composition (the non-musical element being *logos*, discourse), which are considered as constituting *mimēseis* of different types of character and conduct.[13]

Now, although we can only imagine exactly how the music discussed by Plato actually sounded, we can nonetheless understand in what sense

it is characterised as *mimēsis*. As is made clear in the argument, harmonies and rhythms constitute *mimēseis* of particular actions and conduct by virtue of their *likeness* with the "sounds" of such actions and conduct. For example, a particular musical mode will sound *like* women's lamentation (*Rep.* III 398e1); similarly, a particular rhythm will sound *like* soldiers' marching sounds. Further, by virtue of this acoustic or also kinetic (dancing) likeness, composition and performance of a particular musical piece will constitute a *figure* of women's lamentation, or in the other case, of soldiers' marching (as opposed to being another instance of such conduct). The characterisation of musical poetry as *mimēsis* thus agrees with the above meaning of the term *mimēsis*; for musical composing is (intentionally) like a particular kind of action or conduct, where this likeness is obviously figurative.

Another activity of poets characterised as *mimēsis* by Plato is poets' impersonation of characters about whom they narrate. In *Republic* III, it is introduced employing an example from Homer's *Iliad*: when Homer speaks "as if he were" (*Rep.* III 393a8 and c1), *i.e.* impersonates, Chryses imploring the Achaeans to release his daughter (*Il.* I 17–21); the poet does a *mimēsis* of Chryses (*Il.* I 17–21).[14] By contrast, when Homer narrates about Chryses as himself, *i.e.* as Homer, as he does just before that, he does not do a *mimēsis* of Chryses or of any other individual about whom he is narrating; his narration is "simple", *i.e. "without mimēsis".*

The characterisation of poets' narration through impersonation as *mimēsis* is presented as a novelty,[15] and this justification is provided for it: Homer's speaking as if he were Chryses is a kind of "likening oneself to someone else", and such "likening oneself to someone else either in voice or gesture [is] a *mimēsis* of the person to whom one is likening oneself" (*Rep.* III 393c5–6).[16] Relying on this justification, we may conclude that the characterisation of poets' impersonation as *mimēsis* agrees with the above meaning of the term: for Homer's "likening himself in voice or gesture" to Chryses can also be described as an activity (narrating) that is intentionally like another activity, *i.e.* Chryses' imploring the Acheans to release his daughter. As is again obvious, the likeness of Homer's activity with Chryses' is figurative (as opposed to essential): by virtue of this likeness, Homer's speaking constitutes a *figure* of Chryses' speaking, and Homer himself constitutes a *figure* of Chryses.

It may be added that in *Republic* III, the distinction between narration "through" and "without" *mimēsis* is next applied to various kinds of poets' compositions: tragedy and comedy consist of narration that is entirely "through *mimēsis";* dithyramb is entirely without it; and finally the epic is occasionally through *mimēsis* (*Rep.* III 394b8–c5). In the case of tragedy and comedy, a poet's verbal composing will thus in turn constitute a figu-

rative *mimēsis* of speaking and acting by one character or another, or by a group of them (chorus). As we shall see, the distinction between narration through and without *mimēsis* will feature in a modified form in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

In addition to the two activities of poets characterised as *mimēseis*, there is a third kind of *mimēsis* Plato attributes to poets. In the first, "epistemological" argument of *Republic* X, by and large all poetry is characterised as *mimēsis*; importantly, however, poetry is approached as discourse on matters related to various arts, such as medicine, generalship, carpentry, leatherwork; for example, when in the *Iliad* Homer narrates how Hecamede prepared *kikeon* for the wounded Machaon, he speaks about matters to do with medicine.[17] It is then assumed that poets are not competent in these arts, and thus in the matters of which they speak, and it is observed that poets nonetheless seem to many people to "speak well" about their subject matter and thus to be competent in this. It is only once poetry has been presented in this way that poets are characterised as being in fact *mimētai* and their activity *mimēsis*.

The *mimēsis* attributed to poets thus appears to be, more precisely, deceptive *mimēsis* of persons competent in matters about which poets speak. For when Homer speaks about matters to do with medicine, he "likens himself" to someone competent in medicine. But importantly, by virtue of this likeness, Homer seems to many people to speak well about it and to be in fact competent in medicine, and not just to be *like* someone competent in this art; thus, Homer constitutes a *deceptive figure* of someone competent in medicine. (By contrast, when Homer "likens himself" to Chryses, he is not perceived as the true Chryses; the figure of Chryses Homer constitutes is thus non-deceptive.)

Accepting this interpretation, Plato's characterisation of poetry as *mimēsis* in *Republic* X thus again allows us to attribute the above-indicated meaning to the term *mimēsis*: for by narrating about matters related to arts, poets speak *like* those who are in fact competent in these arts. This likeness is such that it makes poets wrongly appear to be competent in their subject matter; their narration thus constitutes a deceptive figure of competent discourse.

Thus interpreted, the *mimēsis* attributed to poets in *Republic* X has nothing to do with "literary presentation", *i.e.* representation of men, their actions, events, etc., through poets' narration, although it is commonly so understood. Moreover, the characterisation of poetry as *mimēsis* in *Republic* X does not seem to be reflected in Aristotle's *Poetics* at all: for even without yet establishing exactly what Aristotle means by poets' *mimēsis*, it is clear that his characterisation of poetry as *mimēsis* is *neutral* (as opposed to *dis-*

crediting, as Plato's is) and unrelated to any assumption concerning poets' competence in their subject matter.

So far, I have aimed to show that in the pre-Aristotelian texts the term *mimēsis* and its cognates denote an activity that is intentionally like, *i.e.* imitates, another activity in one aspect or another; by virtue of this likeness, this activity can either be another instance of the same kind as the activity imitated (*i.e.* be essentially like it), or it can constitute a figure of the activity imitated. I have then indicated three activities of poets that are characterised as *mimēseis* by Plato and aimed to show in what way each of them is *mimēsis* in the above sense. All three activities have appeared to be of the figurative kind: musical composing and impersonation will constitute non-deceptive figures (the former of a particular kind of character, conduct or action, the latter of an individual's discourse or action), whereas poets' narrating "about arts" constitutes a deceptive figure of competent discourse. I shall now turn to examining Aristotle's notion of *mimēsis* and his characterisation of poetry as *mimēsis*.

Mimēsis in Aristotle's Works

On most occasions, Aristotle uses the term *mimēsis* and its cognates in the same way as authors before him – that is to say, the meaning of the term *mimēsis* indicated above (*i.e.* doing or making something that is intentionally like something else in one aspect or another) applies to the majority of instances of these terms found in Aristotle's works. Consider an example from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle argues that one should do *mimēsis* of a virtuous man in all things and thus also in not involving one's friends in one's suffering (*EN* IX 11, 1171b12). As is clear from the context, Aristotle speaks here of emulating conduct of a virtuous man, *i.e.* of conduct that is *like* a virtuous man's conduct so that it is in its turn an instance of such conduct (as opposed to constituting a figure of such conduct). In this case, Aristotle's usage of *mimēsis* therefore accords with the above-indicated meaning of the term. The same applies to cases in which Aristotle speaks of the activity of painting as *mimēsis* (see, *e.g.*, *Po.* 1, 1447a18–19 and 4, 1448b17–19), since, as has been observed earlier, the activity of painting as such is a kind of making the product of which, *i.e.* a painting, is *like* something else in a visual respect and by virtue of this likeness constitutes a figure of it.

In spite of this, it is precisely in Aristotle's characterisation of all kinds of poetry as *mimēseis* that the meaning of the term *mimēsis* becomes unclear. More specifically, epic poetry, which Aristotle characterises as *mimēsis* to-

gether with all other kinds of poetry, *cannot* be as such described as doing something that is intentionally like something else in one respect or another. By characterising it as *mimēsis*, Aristotle must thus mean something else by this term. Let us then consider Aristotle's treatment of epic poetry more closely.

Non-Figurative Representation as *mimēsis*

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle characterises epic poetry as *mimēsis* through narrating, opposing it to tragedy and comedy as *mimēseis* through enacting (counting all of them as *mimēseis* through discourse). Thus for Aristotle, Homer and Sophocles differ in the mode in which they do *mimēsis* (narrative *vs.* dramatic), yet they are similar in that they both do *mimēsis* of "noble men" and their actions (as opposed to composers of comedy, whose objects of *mimēsis* are "base men"; *Po.* 3, 1448a25–27). With regard to narrative mode, specific to the epic, Aristotle further distinguishes between poets' narrating by "becoming someone else", *i.e.* impersonating someone, and "as himself" (*Po.* 3, 1448a21–23).

Aristotle seems to adopt here Plato's distinction in *Republic* III between Homer's speaking as himself and "as if he were" someone else, yet accounting for it differently: while according to *Republic* III, Homer's narration about Chryses and his actions will count as *mimēsis* of Chryses *only* when by narrating Homer speaks "as if he were" this individual, for Aristotle, Homer's narrating *about* Chryses seems to count as *mimēsis of* Chryses *regardless* of whether by narrating, Homer "becomes" Chryses or speaks as himself. It thus seems that for Aristotle a poet's narration about something *as such* counts as *mimēsis of* it. This is in fact confirmed in a passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this passage, Aristotle illustrates a specific point he has made about the notion of choice by mentioning "ancient forms of government, which Homer *emimeito*", *i.e.* did a *mimēsis* of (*EN* III 3, 1113a7–8). Here it is clearly Homer's *narrating* about "ancient forms of government" as such to which Aristotle refers as a *mimēsis* of them. The term *mimēsis* thus cannot have the above-indicated meaning here. For it does not make any sense to describe Homer's *mimēsis* of "ancient forms of government" as Homer's doing something that is intentionally *like* "ancient forms of government" in one aspect or another, nor, by consequence, as Homer's constituting a *figure of* these. *Mimēsis* is here evidently not understood as an activity involving likeness and likening oneself to someone or something. But what does Aristotle mean by *mimēsis* when he characterises poets' narration as such as *mimēsis*?

Observe that when Homer narrates, as himself, about Chryses and his actions, his narration does have something in common with his narration through "becoming" Chryses. By narrating, as himself, about Chryses, Homer *denotes* Chryses and his actions, or we may say, *make* Chryses' actions *present to mind*: although Homer does not do so by constituting a *likeness* and therefore a *figure of* Chryses, he brings Chryses before the mind simply by narrating *about* Chryses. If this "denoting" and "presenting something to mind" through discourse is the feature by virtue of which poets' narration is *mimēsis* for Aristotle, his notion of poets' *mimēsis* seems to correspond to our notion of representation through discourse. We can in fact characterise Homer' narrating, as himself, about Chryses as a "representation" of Chryses, and as such group it together with, for example, someone's impersonation of Chryses and a painting of Chryses. These count for us as three different representations of Chryses, narrative, dramatic and pictorial. Supposedly, they are representations of Chryses for us in so far as they each *denote* this individual, or make him present to mind;[18] however, only the latter two do so by constituting *figures* of Chryses.

We may call these two kinds of representation "non-figurative" and "figurative" respectively. Note that "figurative representation" corresponds to what has been above described as figurative non-deceptive *mimēsis*, *i.e.* an activity or its product that constitutes a non-deceptive figure of something by virtue of its likeness with it. Thus, poets' musical composing and poets' impersonation can be accounted for as figurative representations. By contrast, a poet's narration as himself constitutes a non-figurative representation. As seen above, Plato characterises poets' figurative representation as *mimēsis*, yet not their non-figurative representation; whereas Aristotle characterises also poets' non-figurative representation as *mimēsis*.[19]

It is important to note, however, that the instances in which the term *mimēsis* (or its cognate) refers to poets' non-figurative representation are not found only in Aristotle, but also in some other authors contemporary with Aristotle or succeeding him, though they are very rare. Consider the following example from the speech *Against Leocrates* by the Athenian orator Lycurgos (396–323 BC), Aristotle's contemporary; in it, Lycurgos contrasts "the laws" with poets, suggesting that by being concise the laws do not teach, but order what one must do, whereas poets, by doing *mimēsis* of (*mimoumenoi*) human life, choose the finest of deeds and thus persuade men through argument and demonstration" (*Leoc.* 102, 6 – 103, 1). Just beforehand, Lycurgus has talked about Euripides and Homer, here he refers to poets in general: by "poets' *mimēsis* of human life" he thus supposedly refers to their speaking

of human life, regardless of whether or not it constitutes figurative representation of it; while Euripides' poetry constitutes figurative representation entirely, Homer's poetry involves also non-figurative representation.

Figurative Representation as *mimēsis*

But let us now consider other kinds of poetry besides epics, which Aristotle also characterises as "being on the whole *mimēseis*" in Chapter I of the *Poetics*; these are tragedy, comedy, dithyramb, and, "for the most part, music for *aulos* and *kithara*" (*Po.* 1, 1447a13–16). As noted above, each of these kinds of poetry constitutes figurative representation, either through musical elements or through impersonation.

When in the *Poetics* Aristotle characterises these compositions as *mimēseis*, he clearly refers to the very same figurative elements of them as Plato. Consider first music for *aulos* and *kithara* (and other instruments). In a very brief and sole treatment of it in Chapter I, Aristotle characterises it as a kind of poetry that does *mimēsis* by employing only harmony and rhythm, but not *logos*, discourse. Pointing out that dance does *mimēsis* by means of rhythm alone, he specifies that "dancers too do *mimēsis* of characters, affections and actions through rhythms put into movement" (*Po.* 1, 1447a27–28), thereby implying that musical composers and performers also do *mimēsis* of this kind. Just as Plato, therefore, Aristotle considers musical poetry as *mimēsis* of characters, affections and actions *insofar as* it constitutes *figures* of these by virtue of its acoustic and kinetic *likeness* with them (as mentioned earlier, this understanding of music is more extensively presented in Book VIII of the *Politics*).

As to tragedy and comedy, in Chapter II of the *Poetics* they are classified as *mimēseis* that employ both verbal and musical elements in distinct parts; however, Aristotle is mainly concerned with them as verbal compositions. Like for Plato in *Republic* III, as seen above, for Aristotle tragedy and comedy are *mimēseis*, insofar as they constitute a poet's (virtual) or actor's (actual) impersonation of individuals about whom the poet speaks, and therefore, *figurative* representation of these individuals.

We may assume that other kinds of poetry, mentioned in the *Poetics* only in passing – for example composition of dithyramb or nomes (both kinds of musical poetry, performed by chorus) – are for Aristotle *mimēseis* by the same criteria, *i.e.* insofar as they constitute figurative representation through harmony and rhythm or also through discourse (*i.e.* by impersonation), or again, insofar as they constitute non-figurative representation through discourse.

It may be added that various important arguments in the *Poetics*, which declaredly concern poetry in general, can apply *only* to poets' *figurative* representation. Thus in Chapter I, Aristotle defines poetry as *mimēsis* "in rhythm, discourse and harmony", comparing it with two other activities, to which he refers to as *mimēsis* "by making images with colours and shapes" and *mimēsis* "through voice"; the two activities are painting and, presumably, vocal mimicry, which both constitute *figurative* representation, pictorial and vocal (*Po.* 1, 1447a18–23). And again in Chapter IV, Aristotle indicates two causes of poetry: the first is the congeniality of *mimēsis* to humans from childhood (as suggested, children take their first lessons through doing *mimēsis*) and the second is the pleasantness of *mimēmata* for everybody, which is illustrated with pleasantness of painted figures, and therefore with figurative representation (*Po.* 4, 1448b4–9). None of these arguments seem to be relevant for poets' non-figurative presentation through discourse.

Mimēsis as a Distinctive Feature of Poetic Discourse?

And finally, if we grant Aristotle the thus extended understanding of poets' *mimēsis*, which includes their figurative as well as non-figurative representation, a problem arises in his account of poetry. In fact, non-figurative representation through discourse does not seem to be found only in poetry; any narration and discourse, inasmuch as it refers to, or brings before the mind, whatever it is about, constitutes a non-figurative representation of this; presumably, it can thus be characterised as *mimēsis* (of this subject matter) in Aristotle's sense. But if that is so, Aristotle's insistence in the opening polemics that *mimēsis*, rather than verse, fundamentally distinguished the discourse of poetry from other kinds of discourse (such as medical and naturalist) seems to be ungrounded. If *mimēsis* involves also non-figurative representation through discourse, should then not Empedocles' discourses on nature be considered as *mimēseis* of nature? Or again, on this understanding of *mimēsis*, should not a historian's discourse, which consists, for example, of narration about "what Alcybiades did and what happened to him" (*Po.* 9, 1451b11), not be considered as a *mimēsis* of Alcybiades; just as Homer's narration about what Odysseus did and what happened to him counts as a *mimēsis* of Odysseus?

In fact, when in Chapter 9, Aristotle famously compares the poet with the historian, he does not say that only the former does *mimēsis*, but defines the difference between the two in other terms: as he argues, the historian speaks of things that have happened, whereas the poet speaks of things

that can happen (*Po.* 9, 1451b4–5). Accordingly, Homer's narration about Odysseus will in some sense count as a discourse about "things that can happen". While this argument cannot be examined here, it is important to note that *mimēsis* is not mentioned as a feature that distinguishes poetry from history.

And as a matter of fact, while all Aristotelian instances of *mimēsis* that denote non-figurative representation through discourse refer to poetry, there are a few post-Aristotelian instances of *mimēsis* that do refer to *historical* discourse and clearly denote non-figurative representation through discourse. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*fl.* I BC) discusses thus Herodotus' and Thucydides' *"mimēsis* of characters and affections" (*Epistula ad Pompeium Gemium* 3.18.1–2): by this, he must mean *non-figurative* representation of characters and affections through narration (for even though both historians occasionally impersonate the individuals about whom they narrate, such impersonation cannot be referred to as *"mimēsis* of characters and affections").[20]

It must be concluded, then, that insofar as Aristotle counts also non-figurative representation through discourse as *mimēsis*, his indication of *mimēsis* as a feature that distinguishes poetry from medical, naturalist and historical discourse is flawed. Admittedly, it may seem pretentious to accuse Aristotle of inconsistency in the core of his account of poetry. Yet, strong evidence for such inconsistency is in my view provided in Chapter 24 of the *Poetics*, where Aristotle surprisingly introduces a different definition of poets' *mimēsis* through discourse. Having turned from the discussion of tragedy to the subject of epics, Aristotle singles out Homer as being superior to other poets of epic compositions, suggesting that Homer is the only one who "does not ignore what he must compose as himself. A poet must in fact speak as himself as little as possible; for he is in fact not a *mimētēs* because of this. Other poets are on the whole acting as themselves, doing *mimēsis* briefly and rarely; whereas he, having made a brief preamble, at once introduces a man or a woman or some other character; and none of them are characterless, but each of them has a character" (*Po.* 24, 1460a6–11).

The argument is in striking contrast with the earlier claims in the *Poetics* about poets' *mimēsis*. Aristotle here argues that a poet (of epics) *must* avoid narrating as himself and justifies this requirement by claiming that a poet is not a *mimētēs* by virtue of such narration, but (as is implicit) only by virtue of impersonation. According to the argument, therefore, Homer's narrating *as himself* about ancient forms of government, or again about noble men and their actions, *cannot* be *as such* characterised as a *mimēsis* of them. The argument seems to be a patent revision of the earlier claim that poets'

narration *as such* constitutes *mimēsis*, and thereby also the implicit rejection of the earlier understanding of non-figurative representation through discourse as *mimēsis*.

Conclusions

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle proposes to replace verse with *mimēsis* as a defining feature of poetry; however, as I have tried to show, at the same time he displays a rather lax understanding of what poets' *mimēsis* consists. If Aristotle considers also non-figurative representation through discourse as *mimēsis*, other kinds of compositions that Aristotle does not count as works of poetry will have to be characterised as *mimēseis*, for example historical discourses; if, on the other hand, Aristotle does not consider non-figurative representation through discourse as *mimēsis* (as in Chapter 24), some compositions that Aristotle counts as works of poetry, for example epic compositions that do not involve impersonation, cannot be characterised as *mimēseis*.

In the reflection of poetry and literature after Aristotle up until the present, the term *mimēsis* has continued to feature, just as it has continued to designate different concepts from one author to another. However, none of these authors seem to follow Aristotle in considering *mimēsis* as a defining feature of poetry. By providing the definition of poetry as *mimēsis* in rhythm, discourse and harmony, Aristotle presumably aims to neatly differentiate poetry from other human practices; yet, his attempt has here appeared too ambitious.

NOTES

[1] The noun "poetry" is a habitual translation of the Greek *poiēsis*, from which it is derived. The Greek term, however, had a wider application than "poetry" does: *poiēsis* included both recited and musical (vocal, instrumental, or combined) composing, as is clear also from the kinds of poetry listed by Aristotle above.

[2] "Socratic discourses" were the dialogues featuring Socrates, of which only those by Plato and Xenophon have been preserved. Aristotle's suggested inclusion of some kinds of prose compositions (because of their *mimēsis*) in poetry seems to have been a daring one, given that these compositions lack what was commonly considered the very distinctive feature of poetry: metre. However, Aristotle does not discuss the matter further.

[3] The wide acceptance of this view is testified in *Oxford English Dictionary*: "mimesis, n. [...] b. Imitation; *spec.* the representation or imitation of the real world in (a work of) art, literature, etc. Sometimes used with reference to Aristotle *Poetics* 1447a or Plato *Republic* 598b [...]".

[4] Marušič 95–179.

⁵ Among the many studies of the notion of *mimēsis*, the less known work by Ledda has in many aspects been the basis for my account of *mimēsis*.

⁶ This ontological distinction has been pointed out already by Russell 101, followed by Ledda 19, n.36.

⁷ Here I adopt Burnyeat's translation of *phylakes* in place of the traditional "guardians"; see Burnyeat 257, n.3. As he points out (following Malcolm Schofield's suggestion), the *phylakes* are not only a defensive organ (against the external aggression), but exercise also internal control and repression (in case of disobedience of the law; *Rep.* III 415e and IV, 424b–d); the latter aspect is better rendered with the term "guards".

⁸ Some in my view illuminating studies of these questions are Goodman 21–26, Doležel and Ledda 18–24.

⁹ Marušič 95–128.

¹⁰ See *Rep.* III 400b1 and 400c4. Another reference to Damon is made in *Rep.* IV 424c6.

¹¹ The account is presented in *Rep.* III 398c6–401a8, and *L.* II 655a4671b1, VII 795d6–e1 and 813a5–817e3. The general acceptance of the account is indicated at *L.* II 668a6–7 and 668b9–c2.

¹² Plato as well as Aristotle speak of musical and verbal composition as if poets were at the same time performing what they are composing. In accordance with this view, we may consider composing as a kind of virtual performance of what is being composed.

¹³ *Rep.* III 399a5–c4; cf. Aristotle, *Pol.* VIII 7, 1342b12–14.

¹⁴ In the argument, the question of Chryses' historical existence is never raised; he is not treated any differently from existent (unspecified) individuals, who are also considered as objects of *mimēsis* (*Rep.* III 395b8–396e2).

15 *Contra* Halliwell 51, n.35.

¹⁶ As suggested earlier on, Homer's performance and thus his enacting the character Chryses can be understood as virtual (as opposed to an actual performance, for example, by a rhapsode).

¹⁷ This episode from the *Iliad* (XI 630, 639–640) is quoted in *Ion* 538c2–3 as an example of Homer's speaking about medicine.

¹⁸ Cf. Oxford English Dictionary: "represent, v. […] 2. a. To bring clearly and distinctly before the mind, esp. (to another) by description or (to oneself) by an act of imagination".

¹⁹ *Non-figurative* representation is not to be confused with the earlier discussed non-figurative *mimēsis*, such as the woman's *mimēsis* of her husband's adultery considered above: non-figurative *mimēsis* consists of an activity that is of the same kind as the activity imitated and constitutes neither a figure nor a non-figurative representation of it.

²⁰ Cf. Dionysius Halicarnassus, *De Thucydide* 45, 37–39. In earlier instances of *mimēsis* that refer to historical narration (Duris, IV–III BC), it is not clear whether or not they denote non-figurative representation. Cf. Gray.

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