

BEAUTY & IMITATION

BEAUTY & IMITATION

A PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTION
ON THE ARTS

DANIEL McINERNY

The logo for Word on Fire Academic features the words "WORD on FIRE" in a serif font, with a stylized flame icon above the letter "O" in "WORD". Below this, the word "ACADEMIC" is written in a smaller, all-caps sans-serif font, flanked by two horizontal lines.

WORD *on* FIRE.
ACADEMIC

Published by Word on Fire Academic, an imprint of
Word on Fire, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007
© 2024 by Word on Fire Catholic Ministries
Printed in the United States of America
All rights reserved

Design and layout by Rozann Lee, Cassie Bielak, and Clark Kenyon.

Except Psalm 19, all Scripture excerpts are from the *Revised Standard Version of the Bible*, Second Catholic Edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), © 2006 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Psalm 19 is from *The Psalms: A New Translation* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 1963), © 1963 Ladies of the Grail. All rights reserved.

All efforts have been made to supply complete and correct credits and locate copyright holders; if there are errors or omissions, please contact Word on Fire Academic so that corrections can be addressed in any subsequent edition.

Except for brief quotations in critical articles or reviews, no part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission.

For more information, contact
Word on Fire Catholic Ministries
PO Box 97330, Washington, DC 20090-7330
or email contact@wordonfire.org.

ISBN: 978-1-68578-985-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022943567

This book is dedicated to my students,
past, present, and future,
at Christendom College.

And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.
Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	xi
PART I: THE NATURE OF THE MIMETIC ARTS	
1 The Way of Beauty Is the Way of Imitation	3
2 Mimetic Art Is the Way of Story	34
3 Story as Moral Argument	63
4 The Catholic Imagination	95
5 Imitation as Inquiry and Intelligence	130
PART II: THE MIMETIC ARTS AND MORAL TRANSFORMATION	
6 Mimetic Art as Delight in Knowing	163
7 Mimetic Art as Knowing Delight	182
INTERLUDE	
Sunday Afternoon in the Town Museum	205
PART III: A GUIDED TOUR OF SOME MIMETIC ARTS	
8 The Soundtrack of the Theo-Drama	231
9 Poetry's Marvelous Inevitabilities	257
10 The Painted Argument	279
11 Capturing Beauty in Motion Pictures	302
12 Staging the Theo-Drama	324
13 A Reading of Jane Austen's <i>Northanger Abbey</i>	350
14 What's Entertainment?	372
Exeunt	394
Bibliography	399
Index	414

Acknowledgments

It is an honor for me to publish this book with the academic imprint of a ministry I have come to admire so much. To Jason Paone, the editor of Word on Fire Academic, I owe my first and special thanks for his immediate enthusiasm for the project. It also must be noted that no one at Word on Fire did more work helping improve the manuscript than David Augustine, who has been an unflagging source of support, encouragement, and expert editorial advice. I am also grateful to James O’Neil, who put in a yeoman’s stint helping edit the manuscript, and to Matthew Becklo, publishing director at Word on Fire, and Brandon Vogt, senior publishing director, for their assistance in shepherding the book to its completion.

To the two anonymous peer reviewers of the manuscript, I owe a debt of gratitude for the criticisms that helped me to sharpen my arguments.

My wife, Amy, deserves a special word of thanks. In the summer of 2022, when I was bearing down on the draft of the manuscript, she created space for me to think and write even as we were moving houses—indeed, even as she was organizing the move of *two* houses, both ours and her father’s house. This was a prodigious act of patient generosity for which I will always be grateful. Thank you, Miss Amy, for once again and always being my sturdy shelter, and for being such a precious way of beauty.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

And to the students at Christendom College, to whom this book is dedicated, I thank you for our years of conversation and friendship and for helping me feel so much at home in our extraordinary community. Thank you especially for being so open to my courses. Many of the ideas in this book, and even drafts of chapters, were first developed and studied in my Philosophy of Art & Beauty course and in my course on Ethics & Imagination. I hope this book will enable us to continue our conversation about art in even more fruitful ways.

Daniel McNerny
Hume, Virginia
Feast of St. Pius of Pietrelcina

Introduction

The human person is an agent of truth, and one of the most important ways in which the human person seeks truth is through the arts. The enjoyment we experience both in making and in appreciating arts such as music, painting, literature, and the like is not merely emotional. The enjoyment certainly involves the emotions, but it is above all a joy in the mind's coming better to understand, at least in some small part, the nature of the human predicament. The arts, I want to suggest, are forms of inquiry, of investigation, as the beauty that we find in them illuminates the truth about ourselves. My philosophical inquiry in this book thus affirms "the way of beauty" insofar as it affirms how beautiful works of art help us realize our agency as truth-seekers.¹

1. I take the striking definition of the human person as an "agent of truth" from Robert Sokolowski, who develops it in his *Phenomenology of the Human Person* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). The modern revival of the theme of beauty as a "way" of truth and moral and spiritual transformation is often credited to Dostoevsky, whose character Prince Mishkin, in chapter 5 of *The Idiot*, is quoted as saying, "Beauty will save the world." *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Dover, 2003), 334. Solzhenitsyn famously meditates upon Prince Mishkin's remark in his acceptance speech for the 1970 Nobel Prize in Literature: "Nobel Lecture," trans. Alexis Klimoff, in *The Solzhenitsyn Reader: New and Essential Writings 1947–2005*, eds. Edward E. Ericson Jr. and Daniel J. Mahoney (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), 512–26. On the theme of the way of beauty, see also Josef Pieper, *The Philosophical Act*, in *Leisure: The Basis of Culture and The Philosophical Act*, trans. Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2009); Pope John Paul II, "Letter to Artists," especially §16, where he also meditates on Prince Mishkin's remark; and Pope Benedict XVI, "Meeting with Artists, Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI." Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, explicitly speaks of the *via pulchritudinis*, the "way of beauty," which he sees as a means of "touching the human heart and enabling the truth and goodness of the Risen Christ to radiate within it. If, as Saint Augustine says, we love only that which is beautiful, the incarnate Son, as the revelation of infinite beauty,

I just called my inquiry a philosophical one. What does it mean to think about art philosophically?

Consider an ordinary experience of enjoying a work of art: sitting with family or friends watching a movie. Notice that as we watch the movie, we are not calling the movie into question; we are simply taking it in. When we philosophize about art, however, we step back from this ordinary experience. Or, to adjust the image, we swing away, in our thinking, from our seat in front of the flatscreen to a position that is figuratively “above” or “at a right angle” to the flatscreen. That is, we *reflect* upon our watching of the movie. We ask what it means for human beings to make movies (and how they are different, for example, from paintings); we ask what it means to watch movies (as opposed to watching human beings doing things in real life); we ask whether art is primarily “imitative” or “expressive”; we ask about the nature of beauty and about how beauty can function as a “way” to the intelligibility of human action, and perhaps even a way to realities that transcend the physical world. These are all philosophical questions, questions about the very nature of art. They are not questions that the art historian or art critic takes up, except when the historian or critic becomes philosophical.²

In pursuing my inquiry, I will be developing a philosophy of art inspired by the thought of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. Even taken together, these two giant intellects wrote relatively little about art, but what little they wrote provides the principles of a coherent, highly stimulating, and sometimes surprising understanding of what human beings do when they make pictures of themselves and their reality in the form of poems, novels, paintings, films, music, and the like.

That is the idea at the center of the Aristotelian-Thomistic

is supremely lovable and draws us to himself with bonds of love” (§167). Francis directs us to St. Augustine’s *De Musica* 6.13.38 and *Confessions* 4.13.20.

2. For a lucid statement on the difference between the natural attitude and the philosophical, or phenomenological, attitude, see Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), chap. 4.

approach to art: that art is a picturing or *mimēsis* of reality. The Greek term *mimēsis* is typically translated as ‘imitation’ or ‘representation’ or simply left untranslated in the English word mimesis. In his treatise on the art of poetry, the *Poetics*, a slim, fragmented, massively influential treatise composed sometime in the middle of the fourth century BC, Aristotle speaks of mimesis as natural to human beings. We learn our first lessons, and no doubt many subsequent ones, through imitation of various models.³ Mimesis is thus linked to understanding. We see this natural inclination to imitate in a little boy doing exactly what his father does as his father performs chores around the house, just as we see it in Michelangelo’s painted imitation of his heavenly Father’s creative act on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Mimesis is one of the ways in which we human beings naturally try to make sense of our world, and I agree with Stephen Halliwell, who claims that “mimesis, in all its variations, has quite simply proved to be the most long-lasting, widely held and intellectually accommodating of all theories of art in the West.”⁴ Indeed, I think it is plausible to consider mimetic art as the default understanding of art and all other understandings as declensions from this primary one. Throughout my inquiry, unless otherwise qualified, I will use the term “art” in the sense of “mimetic art.” I will not use the phrase “fine art” or only in special, qualified ways use the term “aesthetics,” as such terminology derives from a modern tradition of the arts that is, in important ways, antithetical to the Aristotelian-Thomistic one.⁵

3. Aristotle, *Poetics* 4 (1448b4–19).

4. Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 5–6. This work by Halliwell is a key resource throughout my inquiry.

5. Though Halliwell, in *Aesthetics of Mimesis*, especially in the introduction and chapter 12, argues that the break with mimesis in the eighteenth century and beyond is not as sharp as many have taken it to be, I nonetheless maintain that the break is sufficiently sharp to warrant a rejection of the eighteenth-century terminology. M.H. Abrams’s *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) remains a classic account of the “changing metaphors of mind” that characterize the shift, during the Romantic period, from a mimetic to an expressive model of art. See also C.M. Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

In the first seven chapters of my argument, as well as in the interlude that follows them, I present the main outlines of the Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding of mimetic art. I explain the nature of mimetic art according to Aristotle's own theory of the four causes or sources of explanation. Chapters 1–4 take up the formal and material causes of mimetic art in setting forth what is involved in picturing the formal realities of human existence in the media of mimetic art. Chapter 5 takes up the efficient cause of mimetic art, the artist-agent who brings the work into being, by considering the artist's creative process, or "sub-creative" process as Tolkien would have it, as a kind of inquiry seeking insight. Chapters 6 and 7 consider the final cause, the end or goal, of mimetic art, a goal that is at once cognitive (i.e., involving some knowledge of reality) and appetitive (i.e., involving a response by the passions or emotions and by the will).

More specifically, the structure of my argument is as follows. In chapter 1, I undertake to explain further the notion of imitation in art. Imitation is a potentially misleading translation of *mimēsis* because it tempts us to think of mimesis as mere copying. But mimesis is a far richer notion than that. It involves the re-presentation of an object in the alien matter of a particular artistic medium for the sake of making that object delightfully intelligible to an audience. The painted portrait of Churchill does not merely present a sensible likeness of the UK prime minister. It goes beyond resemblance to manifest the intelligibility of the man himself, his essence: *what it was to be Churchill* at the time he sat for the portrait.⁶ We need to dismiss from the outset the idea that mimesis is primarily about achieving verisimilitude (though I will take up the "copying" objection again in chapter 1).

6. I depend here upon Robert Sokolowski's distinction between a likeness and a portrait: "A likeness is a mere copy of a person; it shows what he looks like. It gives you enough to be able to identify a person. A portrait is more than this; it is a depiction of an essay at beatitude. It presents, poetically, someone's shot at happiness and self-identity." Sokolowski, "Visual Intelligence in Painting," *The Review of Metaphysics* 59 (December 2005): 333–54, at 344. Along with Sokolowski's *Phenomenology of the Human Person*, this essay will play a key role throughout my argument.

Next, in chapter 2, I explore more deeply what is depicted in art. Aristotle says that the object of mimetic art is “human beings in action,” and we know that according to Aristotelian ethics, action is always undertaken for the sake of *eudaimonia*, or ultimate fulfillment.⁷ Mimetic art, therefore, depicts the human agent as wayfarer, as someone in quest of that ultimate fulfillment we commonly call happiness. To portray Churchill is, in a way, to sum up his pursuit of the good life. As Robert Sokolowski has written, a portrait is “a presentation of a whole life in its significant, articulated parts.” A portrait “enfolds what the life unfolds.”⁸ This function of art is especially evident in narrative art or story. A novel, for example, offers images of a human protagonist seeking to achieve some important good taken to be necessary to, or constitutive of, the protagonist’s happiness. By the end of the story, the protagonist either succeeds or fails or at least achieves some ironic mixture of failure and success. But the very attempt is what Sokolowski calls an “essay at beatitude.”⁹ Even an art such as painting, which we don’t typically think of as a storytelling art, shows us some aspect of the human quest for happiness.

The story of a protagonist’s quest for happiness is not simply the account of a delightful adventure. It is also, as I develop in chapter 3, a moral argument. A story, as we often remark, is supposed to “say” something. It has a “point” or “moral,” though we would be gravely mistaken if we reduced a story to a bald statement of its moral. A story shows us a protagonist endeavoring to work out his or her happiness, but in so doing, a story attempts to prove something about the nature of happiness in the choices the protagonist makes. One of my chief claims in this book is that all the mimetic arts, in their different media, not only have a narrative dimension but also, in their narratives, present moral

7. *Poetics* 2 (1448a1).

8. Sokolowski, “Visual Intelligence in Painting,” 347.

9. Sokolowski, 344.

arguments. In part 3, I will make good on this claim when I examine an array of specific mimetic arts.

The ultimate good for human beings, on the Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding, is not just one kind of good. It is multi-form and hierarchical. It consists in an ordered set of virtuous activities (activities of temperance, courage, justice, and prudence, among other virtues) culminating in the activity of the highest virtue, wisdom, which is ordered to the contemplation of the divine. As the Aristotelian ethical picture is taken up into Christian theology by Aquinas, the contemplation of the divine available to us in this life itself becomes subordinated to the contemplation of God's very essence available to the blessed in heaven. A complete picture of the Aristotelian-Thomistic approach to mimetic art, therefore, requires a theological horizon. This theological horizon serves as a backdrop for the specifically Catholic imagination, the fulfillment of art's mimesis of the human quest. But what exactly does this phrase "Catholic imagination" mean? I understand the phrase to mean the way in which a Catholic believer—or someone who, like the author Willa Cather, has deep sympathy with Catholic belief—takes in the world through images formed by that belief. This "taking in" is a form of "seeing," of intellectual insight, that grasps reality by images enriched by the narrative that is salvation history and the traditions of art it has inspired. When this way of seeing, this "imagination," combines with excellence in artistic craft, there results a work that realizes the best possibilities of mimesis. A discussion of the Catholic imagination will be my focus in chapter 4.

I round out this first part of the book by turning, in chapter 5, to the situation of the artist. The way of beauty is, for the artist, no solitary way. When, for example, in the Renaissance, a master painter took on an apprentice, he introduced him to an entire way of life within the practice of painting. Drawing upon the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, I situate art within the social contexts of practices and tradition. Once we situate art within these

contexts, we are in a better position to see the life of the artist as a participation in an inquiry pursued by a community of artists over time. This communal inquiry prizes the mimesis of models but also, as we shall see, allows for new insights and approaches. A discussion of the role of insight, or intelligence, in artistic creativity will round out this chapter.

In part 2 of the book, comprising chapters 6 and 7, I examine the question of art's impact upon its audience. I argue that the function of art is to move its audience by beauty's peculiarly cognitive or intelligible delight and, in so doing, incline the sensible and rational appetites of its audience to moral transformation. But, by this, I do not mean the simplistic claim that any given individual, after enjoying a work of art, is necessarily a better person. My point, rather, is that in the contemplative space in which we enjoy beautiful works of art, our soul's powers enjoy a simulation of moral choice that can incline or attract us to future virtuous action. Chapter 6 takes up the cognitive or intellectual aspect of this experience, while chapter 7 addresses the effect of beautiful art upon our sensible and rational appetites.

Between parts 2 and 3 is an interlude in the form of a dialogue between two imaginary characters on the question of art's transcendence. On one side of the argument is the claim that because art has the power to make human life delightfully intelligible, we can speak of it as having a transcendent purpose—understanding “transcendence” in a sharply defined way. Even as it enralls our sensations and emotions, a great work of art transports us beyond what Jacques Maritain calls our sense needs and sentimental selves and into the realm of the intelligible.¹⁰ This is why art is so immensely attractive to us: it invites us to see the intelligible *in* the sensible and, therefore, without ever leaving the sensible behind, to achieve insight or intelligence into what something is.

10. Maritain uses the phrase I mention in his discussion of beauty in *Art and Scholasticism*, trans. J.F. Scanlan (Providence, RI: Cluny, 2016), 34.

But on the other side of the argument is the claim that art has, for its proper end, “Beauty” considered as a transcendental property of being, a property found wherever being is found. On this understanding of art’s transcendence, art would be an arm of metaphysics. Its aim would be not only to make human life intelligible but also to map the very fabric of reality itself.¹¹

The dialogue ends by rejecting the latter view in favor of a much humbler, though still endlessly fascinating, view of art. Aquinas describes poetry as the *infima doctrina*, “the least of doctrines.”¹² He speaks of it as having a *defectus veritatis*, a “defect of truth,”¹³ because the intelligibility it manifests in human action is only probable, not necessary. I am moved by Hamlet’s meditation “To be, or not to be,” not in the way my mind assents necessarily to the proposition twice two makes four, but in the way Aquinas calls an *existimatio*, a kind of conjecture or estimation, a tenuous assent of the intelligence—intelligence as carried away by the passions and the senses—to the truth portrayed by the artistic image.¹⁴ The assent is tenuous because it is not based on insight into *necessary* truth of the kind that drives mathematics but on the insight that a character in Prince Hamlet’s predicament would, in such highly constrained circumstances, very likely, though not necessarily, contemplate taking his life. What Aquinas says about poetry applies to all art: it deals with the probable in human action, the probable communicated not through demonstrative or rhetorical arguments but through pleasing images. Mimetic art, again, pictures the humble stuff of human agents endeavoring,

11. Maritain has propounded this view in both *Art and Scholasticism* and *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Meridian, 1957). A major source not only for my understanding of the deficiencies in Maritain’s account of art, but also for my positive understanding of the Aristotelian-Thomistic account, is Thomas Dominic Rover’s *The Poetics of Maritain: A Thomistic Critique* (Washington, DC: Thomist, 1965).

12. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.1.9 obj. 1.

13. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* 1.1.5 ad 3.

14. Thomas Aquinas, *In Posteriorum Analyticorum* 1, prologue, no. 6. Rover translates *existimatio* as “conjecture” (*Poetics of Maritain*, 93). Deferrari suggests *existimatio* could also be translated as “estimation,” “valuation,” “notion,” or “idea.” See *A Latin-English Dictionary of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1986), 373. Aquinas in fact calls it a *sola existimatio*, which Jason Paone has suggested to me might best be rendered “a conjecture and nothing more.”

sometimes quite hopelessly, to work out their happiness. It is not metaphysics, but it is no less crucial to our lives for that.¹⁵

Parts 1 and 2 and the interlude make up the main philosophical work of my inquiry. By the end of the interlude, we will be poised to move into more focused investigations of particular arts. Part 3, therefore, comprising chapters 8–14, considers music, poetry, painting, cinema, drama (with an emphasis upon the art of acting), and the novel. In chapter 14, I discuss the nature and political importance of the more popular forms of these arts in what we typically call “entertainment.” The point of these chapters is not to answer every substantive philosophical question concerning these arts but to show, in light of a particular work or set of works, how each of these mimetic arts instantiates the Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding of art and its central idea of mimesis.

It should be abundantly clear that this book is not a survey of various approaches to the philosophy of art but rather an inquiry into the principles and resources of one definite tradition. Neither is my argument intended to be a dialectic between the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition of mimetic art and rival traditions. Though, from time to time, I touch upon a distinction between the mimetic approach of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition and other traditions of art, I do so mainly to clarify what the Aristotelian-Thomistic approach is all about, not to pretend that what I say is a complete argument against those rival traditions. When it comes to the Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding of mimetic art, it is my view that it remains most inadequately understood and so deserves an independent and comprehensive exposition. A dialectic with rival traditions of art is of crucial importance, but it is pointless to take it up before the voice of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition has been registered clearly

15. My understanding of the probable character of mimetic arguments is deeply indebted to Rover, *Poetics of Maritain*.

INTRODUCTION

in contemporary conversation.¹⁶ So, with those caveats in place, let us turn now to a discussion of what it means for an artist to imitate reality.

16. I make a contribution to the dialectic I speak of in my unpublished essay "Literature as Tradition-Constituted Inquiry."

Part I
The Nature of the
Mimetic Arts

1

The Way of Beauty Is the Way of Imitation

The celebrity comes on the late-night program. He is known for his skill at doing voice impressions of other celebrities, and the host asks him to show his stuff. The celebrity obliges, and soon we are delighted to hear the voices of other celebrities coming out of this celebrity's mouth.

Impressions of the late British actor Alan Rickman and the American actor Christopher Walken are favorites of impersonators, as their voices were and are so quirky and distinctive. Voice impressions never fail to give delight, and it is interesting to think about why. Why is it so entertaining to listen to one person mimicking the voice of another person we know well? Why is it even more entertaining than listening to Rickman's or Walken's voice coming out of Rickman's or Walken's own mouth? Doubtless, it is enjoyable to listen to Rickman and Walken speak. In and of themselves, their voices are absorbing—Rickman's nasal baritone, Walken's weirdly syncopated New Yorkese. Yet we seem to find it even more entertaining to listen to someone else "doing" Rickman's or Walken's voice. Rickman's or Walken's voice *coming out of someone else's mouth*: that is what we enjoy. What we find so entertaining, in other words, is the imitation of a form. When it comes to impressions, the form in question is chiefly the distinctiveness of someone's voice, its unique timbre and delivery. St. Thomas Aquinas calls this kind of form a "sensible form," which

simply means a quality discernible by the senses. When the sensible form or quality of someone's voice comes out of the mouth of someone else—when the sensible form, that is, shows up in another medium—we take delight.

Doing voice impressions is just one of the ways we human beings engage in that strange yet captivating activity Aristotle calls *mimēsis*, a word from which we derive our English words “mimicry” and “imitation.” In his *Poetics*, Aristotle says that imitation is a natural activity of human beings.¹ And this cannot be denied. We see the imitative impulse bursting forth in childhood play-acting and dramatic games—play that Aristotle suggests has a natural connection to the making of mimetic art. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha Karamazov has a conversation with Kolya, a thirteen-year-old boy who is embarrassed to have been caught playing “robbers” with some younger kids. To convince Kolya that he has no need to feel embarrassed, Alyosha provides a defense of mimetic play:

And a game of war among youngsters during a period of recreation, or a game of robbers—that, too, is a sort of nascent art, an emerging need for art in a young soul, and these games are sometimes even better conceived than theater performances, with the only difference that people go to the theater to look at the actors, and here young people are themselves the actors. But it's only natural.²

Aristotle calls human beings the most imitative of animals and observes that we learn our first lessons by imitation. When it comes to learning a new language, a new sport, or a new artistic skill, we begin by imitating what we see the teacher, the coach, or the master artist doing. When we look at how artists develop,

1. See the opening lines of *Poetics* 4 (1448b4ff).

2. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volkhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), bk. 10, chap. 4, 538. This text was brought to my attention by Halliwell, *Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 178–79n5.

furthermore, we see that imitation characterizes not only their apprentice work but also their masterwork. Shakespeare's imitation of his sources, even in his most mature writing, is legendary.³ And it was Voltaire who said, "Originality is nothing but judicious imitation," even as Virginia Woolf observed: "We are a world of imitations." Eleanor Catton, Booker Prize-winning author of *The Luminaries*, captures the importance of imitation for her writing in the following way:

I believe really strongly in imitation, actually: I think it's the first place you need to go to if you're going to be able to understand how something works. True mimicry is actually quite difficult. . . . You want to enlarge your toolbox, and enlarge what is available to you as a writer."⁴

As the mimetic arts are understood in the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, they are all different kinds of imitation. Whether we are talking about imitation that makes use of visual images in drawing, painting, photography, and sculpture, or imitation that involves impersonation or enactment of human behavior such as we find in stage plays, opera, ballet, cinema, television, as well as in many video games, or whether we are talking about imitation by way of language alone, as in works of fiction, or language joined with rhythm, as in poetry, we are talking about an activity in which some feature of the world is made present in another medium. In this chapter I would like to explore more deeply what it means for an artist to imitate the world.

3. For an engaging discussion of Shakespeare's imitation of his sources and the power of imitation in general, see the chapter "Of Imitation" in Scott Newstok's *How to Think Like Shakespeare* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

4. The quotations from Voltaire, Woolf, and Catton are from Newstok's discussion in *How to Think Like Shakespeare*.

IMITATION AS A KIND OF PICTURING

I start by suggesting that mimetic art is a kind of *picturing*. There are pictures that have nothing to do with human making—reflections in water, echoes, idle daydreaming—but in this discussion I am going to focus on the picturing that occurs when human beings make art.⁵ It might seem strange at first to think of arts such as music or poetry as picturing, but I invite you to expand your sense of this word and to think of picturing as a useful way of understanding all the arts. Of course, it is natural and best to think first of literal pictures—drawings, paintings, photographs—before you begin to extend the concept of picturing to other arts.

Robert Sokolowski distinguishes four elements that belong to any kind of picture. First, of course, there is the picture itself, the constructed thing, and second, that feature of the world that is pictured by the picture. But a third element, one that Sokolowski warns is often overlooked, is the audience that takes the picture *as a picture*:

We do not think of what makes the invisible difference between this colored paper and this colored paper as a picture. We take it for granted that this is a picture and think only about what it depicts, its composition, the fidelity of its depiction, or its condition as a product; we do not ask what grants it its being as a picture. To ask what lets it be a picture at all, and what it is for it to be a picture, is to raise a philosophical question.⁶

Raising that philosophical question is what we are doing now, asking what it is that lets a picture be a picture at all, and realizing that identifying the audience that takes a picture as a picture is essential

5. For this understanding of mimetic art as a kind of picturing, I rely upon Sokolowski's essay "Picturing," from his book *Pictures, Quotations, and Distinctions: Fourteen Essays in Phenomenology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1992). For a discussion of the distinctions between the various kinds of picturing, see "Picturing," esp. 6–7.

6. Sokolowski, "Picturing," 8.

to what picturing is. The fourth element of picturing is the activity of the maker of the picture: for example, Kolya and the kids playing “robbers,” the teenager snapping a photo on her cell phone, or the songwriter composing a new song.

In all kinds of picturing, the relationship between the picture and that which is pictured is the most important relationship. When it comes to the mimetic arts, the relationship between the picture and that which is pictured involves invention and construction. But however much inventiveness occurs, there remains a fundamental correspondence between the picture and the pictured, between the work of mimetic art and that feature of the world being pictured. If this correspondence failed to exist, the audience would not achieve the sense of recognition, the sense of the picture as a picture, that is essential to picturing.

Let us apply all this to voice impressions, which are minor works of mimetic art.⁷ We said that when we hear a good voice impression, we take delight in it; we are entertained by it. Experiencing the sensible form of someone’s voice in another medium makes us smile and laugh. Aristotle contends that human beings delight in imitations, even of things that are in themselves distressing, “because what happens is that, as they contemplate them, they learn and reason out what each thing is, for example that ‘this image is of so-and-so.’”⁸ His point seems to be that when we, the audience, hear someone doing an impression of Walken, our delight is based on the fact that our minds are able to recognize the correspondence between the voice coming out of the celebrity’s mouth (a kind of picturing) and the voice that comes out of Walken’s mouth (the pictured). In enjoying the Walken impersonator,

7. Aristotle refers generally to vocal imitation in *Poetics* 1 (1447a20).

8. *Poetics* 4 (1448b15–17). Aristotle makes the same point in nearly the exact words at *Rhetoric* 1371b4–10. Translations from the *Poetics* are by Halliwell, as found in *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), though in certain instances I make emendations of my own using Kassel’s Oxford text, found in D.W. Lucas, *Aristotle: Poetics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986). In making emendations I have consulted, especially, Lucas’s commentary and the translation by Seth Benardete and Michael Davis in *Aristotle: On Poetics* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s, 2002).

the mind does what the mind so often enjoys doing: identifying or recognizing a sameness within a difference, a presence within an absence.

The interplay between presence and absence is very important for an understanding of mimetic art. Sokolowski observes that “things are identities in their presence and absence.”⁹ One and the same thing can manifest itself in different ways or according to different “intentionalities.” Most basically, a thing can manifest itself as present (Christopher Walken actually present as a guest on the late-night show), and a thing can manifest itself as absent (another celebrity doing an impression of Walken). In the latter case, Walken is not on the show; he may not even be in New York; he may be shooting a film on the other side of the world. And yet, while physically absent in the entirety of his being, one particular aspect of his being—the formal quality of his voice—*is*, in a sense, present on the show when the other celebrity does his Walken impression. When the other celebrity does his Walken impression, Walken is present-in-his-absence. It is the *same* Walken, present-in-his-absence, who might, in other circumstances, have been wholly and completely present as a guest on the show.

I have said that, when it comes to picturing, the relationship between the picture and that which is pictured is the most important relationship. Yet a proper understanding of this relationship is a challenging one to get right. We need two more distinctions to help better clarify this relationship: first, that between a picture, or mimetic image, and an ordinary case of resemblance; and second, that between a mimetic image and an instrumental sign.

MIMETIC ART AS IMAGE AND SIGN

The actor doing the Walken impersonation makes us smile because he is able to make the sound of his voice so much *like* that of Christopher Walken. In light of this, we might be inclined to

9. Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person*, 139.

define imitation as the making of a kind of picture that is like, or that resembles, that which it pictures. Before we do so, however, we first need to recognize that not every likeness is an image. My wife and I both drive red Honda CR-Vs. The two cars *resemble* one another quite closely, but neither is an *image* of the other. Nor are the eggs in the egg carton images of one another, though the eggs look very much alike. However, though not every likeness is an image, it is the nature of an image to show a likeness. Aquinas says that “similitudo,” likeness or resemblance, belongs to the very idea of image.¹⁰ Then how is an image different from the likeness that we find between two red Honda CR-Vs or the dozen eggs in the egg carton? Because, as distinct from these more ordinary resemblances, the likeness of an image involves the idea of something being taken as *origin and exemplar*—that is, as *source* of the likeness. One egg is not the exemplar or source of another. Nor is my red Honda CR-V the exemplar or source of my wife’s red Honda CR-V. The Honda manufacturer might take a certain set of plans as an exemplar for all the Hondas that are made; nonetheless, no single Honda is an exemplar or source of another. An image comes about when something is taken as the source of the likeness found in the image—as when my face is taken as the source of the image in the mirror, or the line of trees is taken as the source of the image of the trees in the glassy surface of a lake.

So an image involves both the idea of likeness or similitude as well as the idea of having an exemplar or source. Let’s go a bit further, now, and consider what it means for a mimetic image, in particular, to be “like” what it images. Aquinas says, speaking generally about all images, that an image is like the form or essence of something, or at least the “sign of some form.”¹¹ I am translating as “form” or “essence” Aquinas’s Latin term *species*. A form, or that which is essential to a thing, is that which is necessary for the thing

10. *Summa theologiae* 1.35.1: *de ratione imaginis est similitudo*. For bringing this text to my attention, and for insight into the distinctions that follow in the rest of this section, I am indebted to Rover, *Poetics of Maritain*, chap. 6, sec. C, entitled “Imitation in *significando*.”

11. *Summa theologiae* 1.35.1.

to be what it is. The idea of form seems to take us “deeper” than the mere appearance of a thing, “down” to what is most enduring about it, to what persists through change. Yet it is interesting, given our discussion of the mimetic image, that *species* also has the sense of “semblance” or “appearance” and even of “splendor” and “beautiful appearance.” An image, accordingly, can be “like” its source either in regard to the essence of its source or in regard to the source’s appearance. A son is the image of his father because the son is like the father in sharing the father’s essence, both in terms of the father’s essence as a human being and in terms of the father’s particular genetic endowment. A work of art, a painting for example, can also image a father, though not because the painting shares the essence of a father but because the painting images, in Aquinas’s words, the “sign of some form”—that is, a father’s appearance. The most evident sign of the form of a material thing is found, Aquinas adds, in the “figure” (*figura*) or shape of that thing. The painting of a father images the father in showing the father’s figure, not only in terms of the outline of the father’s body, but also in terms of the figure or shape of the father’s particular features (nose, eyes, mouth, ears, eyebrows, wrinkles, hairline, etc.).

Mimetic art makes its source or exemplar present-in-its-absence through the manifestation of form. A voice impersonation of Alan Rickman images the sensible form of his voice and no doubt something of Rickman’s character as well.¹² Even more evidently, *The Brothers Karamazov* images sensible forms but also suggests deeper truths about the best form of human life.

We need now further to clarify the relationship between a

12. A good voice impression is akin to a portrait of someone, and as such, it is, as Sokolowski says about all portraits, “an essay at beatitude”:

[A portrait] presents, poetically, someone’s shot at happiness and self-identity. It presents what Aristotle would call a ‘first substance,’ an individual entity, an instance of the species man, but it does not present that substance as a mere compound; it presents that entity as an essence, with a necessity and a definition. This definition is individualized (it is a *first* substance), but it is also able to be universal, that is, it can flow back on life, and more specifically, it can become identifiable with the persons who view it, the other individuals who are also an issue for themselves, who are also engaged in beatitude. (“Visual Intelligence in Painting,” 344)

picture, or mimetic image, and what is pictured or imaged, by distinguishing the mimetic image from an instrumental sign. A stop sign at the corner, a mileage sign on the highway, smoke as a sign of fire—these are all instrumental signs. They are mere vehicles, the first two conventional, the third natural, for leading the mind to some other reality beyond the sign. About instrumental signs and pictures, or what he calls “pictorial intentions,” Sokolowski says:

There are differences between signitive and pictorial intentions. In signification the “arrow” of intentionality goes through the word [or artifact] to an absent object. It is outward bound. It goes away from me and my situation here to something somewhere else. In picturing, however, the direction of the arrow is reversed. The object intended is brought toward me, into my own proximity; the presence of the object is embodied before me on a panel of wood or a piece of paper. Signitive intentions point away to the thing, pictorial intentions draw the thing near.¹³

Making the same point in another context, Sokolowski writes:

The general’s flag on his limousine indicates that the general is in the car; but the general is in no way in his flag. We move away from the flag when we think of the general. But in picturing we do not move away from the image; what is depicted is presented, as an individual, in the picture itself. The peculiarity of pictorial presencing and representation is that pictures do not merely refer to something, but make that something present. I see Janet in her picture, I do not, in the picture, see a sign of Janet.¹⁴

13. Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 82.

14. Sokolowski, “Picturing,” 21.

As signs, the mileage sign on the highway and the flag on the general's limousine are solely intended to lead us away from themselves to some other reality. By contrast, the portrait of Janet is not meant to lead us *away* from the painting to knowledge of Janet. The portrait of Janet, rather, invites us to contemplate Janet *re-presented in the painting*. The brush strokes of Janet's portrait do not point us away from the canvas in the way that the sign saying "Los Angeles 250 Miles" points us away toward the city of Los Angeles. No, the brush strokes constitute a new way of seeing Janet.

An instrumental sign, to put the distinction another way, is only meant to be a vehicle for factual information.¹⁵ It is not meant to manifest the form of what it signifies. The mileage sign "Los Angeles 250 Miles" gives us a fact about the distance to Los Angeles, but it does not tell us anything about what is essential to the city of Los Angeles or what the city might mean for us. The portrait of Janet, however, illuminates her sensible forms, such as the particular auburn of her hair, as well as the deeper intelligibility of what it means to be Janet, at this age, having this experience, with this amount of the weight of the world on her shoulders.¹⁶

I take Sokolowski in the passages just quoted to be concerned with the distinction between pictures and instrumental signs. Yet Aquinas calls images "signs" of their sources. Are Aquinas and Sokolowski in contradiction? We need not think so if we take Aquinas to be using the term sign in this context, not in the sense of an instrumental sign, but in the sense of a *formal sign*, the kind of sign that makes a form present. This kind of formal "signing"

15. Granted, over the course of time, a given instrumental sign, like a flag, might be hung in a museum for its historical significance, and even for its beauty. But when it is "in service" as an instrumental sign, the flag's function is to announce a piece of factual information.

16. Mortimer Adler frames the distinction between instrumental signs and artistic images in this way: "The work of art is an object of knowledge and not a medium of knowledge; it is something to be known and not that whereby something is known, although in knowing it as an imitation, the spectator knows not only it but its relation of similitude to the already known object of imitation." Adler, *Art and Prudence: A Study in Practical Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1937), 598n19.

is just what picturing is.¹⁷ Mimetic art, we can thus say, is a fabricated formal sign or picture.

Let me sum up our discussion so far, then, with this definition of mimetic art:

Art is imitation, the making of a picture of some feature of the world; art thus images, or re-presents, for our delighted contemplation, one or more formal aspects of its source or origin.

Notice the centrality of *re*-presentation to this definition. Again, mimetic art, as a kind of picturing, makes some formal aspect of its source present-in-its-absence. And the more vividly an art can make something present, the more mimetic it will be. This is no doubt why Aristotle favors what Stephen Halliwell calls a “dramatic” or “enactive” sense of imitation, a preference Aristotle makes evident in the praise of Homer he makes in the following passage from the *Poetics*:

Among Homer’s many other laudable attributes is his grasp—unique among epic poets—of what a poet ought to make. For the poet himself should speak as little as possible in his own voice, since when he does so he is not engaging in mimesis. Now, other epic poets “compete” throughout the whole, and engage in mimesis only little and seldom. But Homer, after a short preamble, at once ‘brings onto stage’ a man, woman,

17. See Rover’s discussion of mimetic art as sign in *Poetics of Maritain*, 105–9. Though I disagree with Rover that mimetic art is “clearly an *instrumental* sign,” I acknowledge the qualification of the claim he immediately makes: “[Mimetic art also] has in its instrumentality something of the immediacy of the *formal* sign. It attains the signified not as something distinct from the sign but as conjoined to the sign and contained in it” (108, emphasis in original). This sense of mimetic art as formal sign seems to be what Adler is after in the passage quoted in note 16, as well as what Halliwell is after when talking about mimetic art as an “iconic” sign. See *Aesthetics of Mimesis*, chap. 5.

or some other figure (and his agents are always fully characterized).¹⁸

Other epic poets “compete” by interjecting their own narrative voices. But Homer, for the most part, simply brings his characters “onto stage” and allows them to act. Such dramatization is what mimesis is, Aristotle insists in this passage. Which is why a mimesis that is even more vividly dramatic than an epic poem, such as a tragedy or comedy enacted on a stage, is an even more perfect sample. Now, as Halliwell points out, this passage from the *Poetics* jars against an earlier passage, where Aristotle has no problem calling mimetic a straightforward narration of a story, one without any dramatic characterization or performance.¹⁹ The best way to deal with this apparent discrepancy, it would seem, is to recognize a hierarchy of vividness in mimetic art, with purely dramatic or enactive mimesis occupying the highest spot, and arts that are less vividly dramatic, like painting, occupying the lower places. But the point of even thinking about a ranking of the various mimetic arts according to their dramatic ability is to emphasize, once again, the power of mimetic art to bring the formal aspects of what it pictures “into the presence” of its audience. This power affords us human beings tremendous pleasure, a pleasure that Aristotle, in the passage from the *Poetics* earlier touched upon, relates to contemplation, learning, and understanding.²⁰ But be-

18. *Poetics* 24 (1460a5–11). Halliwell discusses Aristotle’s privileging of enactive mimesis both in *Aristotle’s Poetics* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press), chap. 4, and *Aesthetics of Mimesis*, chap. 5.

19. *Poetics* 3 (1448a19–24), where Aristotle, beyond calling purely enactive poetry mimetic, also calls mimetic *both* an epic poetry that alternates between narrative and dramatic impersonation (as an example of which he also cites Homer) *and* a poetry that relies wholly upon narration. About the text at *Poetics* 24, Lucas writes: “This is a restricted sense of *mimēsis* (at 1460a8) as in Plato, *Republic* 392dff. According to Aristotle’s normal usage the epic poet is a *mimētēs spoudaiōn* [an imitator of the serious or weighty character] regardless of whether he uses direct speech” (*Aristotle: Poetics*, 226).

20. Aristotle’s account of the vividness of metaphors is also pertinent here, not least in the way he links it to the same process of learning and understanding that he speaks of at *Poetics* 4 in connection with mimesis. For a discussion of this account, see Halliwell, *Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 189–91.

fore we can pursue those relationships further, we need first to consider the most common and pressing objection to the whole idea of art as imitation.

IS IMITATION COPYING?

Giorgio Vasari, that great chronicler of the lives of Renaissance painters, remarked of the *Mona Lisa*'s smile that what made it "divine" was that it was "an exact copy of nature."²¹ Leonardo da Vinci, who painted that smile, himself remarked that "the mind of the painter should be like a mirror which always takes the color of the thing that it reflects and which is filled by as many images as there are things placed before it."²² Vasari and da Vinci understood painting as a mimetic art whose task was to represent nature as faithfully as possible.

In talking about the natural pleasure human beings take in imitation, Aristotle himself says that people take pleasure in looking at pictures or images

because what happens is that, as they contemplate them, they learn and reason out what each thing is, for example that "this image is of so-and-so." Since, if by chance one has not seen the subject-matter of the imitation before, the image will not produce pleasure *as imitation* but on account of the workmanship or the color or on account of some other cause such as these.²³

Aristotle here clearly identifies imitation as a symmetrical relationship, an "isomorphism," between a formal feature of something in

21. Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists* 2.164, as quoted in Étienne Gilson, *Painting and Reality* (New York: Pantheon: 1957), 248. Gilson's book is based upon his Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts delivered in 1955 at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC.

22. Leonardo da Vinci, *Notebooks* 2.254, as quoted in Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, 248. The comparison of mimetic art to mirroring is also deployed by Hamlet in his famous advice to the players, where he advises the players to "hold as 'twere the mirror up to Nature." See *Hamlet* 3.2.1–43.

23. *Poetics* 4 (1448b14–19), emphasis added.

the world and some picture made by an artist.²⁴ This means that when we look at the painted portrait of Harry and recognize that it is a picture of Harry, we experience the delight proper to imitation. If we have never seen Harry, Aristotle says, we may admire the artist's use of color, but that is another thing, *not* the properly mimetic delight.

Later painters resisted this understanding of painting as an essentially mimetic art. The French Romanticist Delacroix threw down the gauntlet with these words: "The impression caused by the fine arts has no relation whatever with the pleasure that is caused by any kind of imitation."²⁵ Delacroix also speaks of what he takes to be the not-uncommon experience of entering a room and being seized by a painting, even when one is still a considerable distance from it. What is the cause of such an emotional response? Surely not what the painting imitates or represents because we're too far away from the painting to *know* what it represents. For Delacroix, what seizes us from that distance is the "music" of the painting, a kind of "magical accord." Paul Gauguin liked this passage from Delacroix so much he transcribed it into one of his own notebooks. Gauguin—who abjured the painting of shadows because a shadow was the *trompe-l'oeil* of the sun.

Modern painting—that is, the tradition of painting that began to emerge in Europe in the early nineteenth century—gradually emancipated itself from what it saw as the strictures of imitation. The philosopher Étienne Gilson describes the revolution this way:

Even in imitational art, the poetic element had consisted in discovering, selecting, stressing, and integrating with a structured whole the elements of reality that effectively please the eye. In doing so, painters had to take along with plastic elements

24. I borrow the application of the term "isomorphism" to mimetic art from Halliwell, *Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 163. Given that mimetic art pictures the forms, sensible and intelligible, of the objects it pictures, describing mimesis as isomorphism is particularly apt.

25. Eugène Delacroix, *Oeuvres littéraires* 1.66, as quoted in Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, 252n18a.

a large number of merely representational elements without any aesthetic significance. Obviously, the intensity of the effect produced by a painting should increase in proportion to the plastic purity of its structure. Why not, then, eliminate all that, being merely representational, has no plastic value, and constitute a new type of painting containing nothing else than pure plastic elements?²⁶

What Gilson calls “plastic elements” are simply the compositional elements of a painting: its use of line, shape, volume, color, shading, and light—the very things that Aristotle takes to be secondary. But these “plastic elements” are what make up what Delacroix calls the “music” of painting, and these, and not the object being imitated, are what, for many modern painters, make up whatever “intensity of effect” a painting is able to conjure. In his still lifes, Cézanne self-consciously abandons traditional rules of perspective that would allow his paintings to closely mimic the three-dimensionality of nature. In his *Nature Morte au Crâne*, the piece of fruit seems to hover over, rather than sit on, the plate in the middle of the canvas, and the white tablecloth does not drape over the edge of the table but seems to float toward the observer. Henri Matisse similarly toys with traditional perspective, as well as with the naturalistic use of color, in his painting *The Music Lesson*, as does Marc Chagall in *Abraham and the Three Angels*. Mark Rothko goes even further. His purely abstract paintings present sheer gradations and juxtapositions of tone without any apparent concern for correspondence with some feature of the world.

To speak of art as imitation, then, beginning with examples from the art of voice impersonation, as I have done in this chapter, will strike many as an offense against art’s proper grandeur. “Art,” it will be objected, “cannot be imitation. At least not art in the highest and best sense. For imitation is mere copying. No doubt, it requires a great deal of skill to produce a faithful copy of something.

26. Gilson, *Painting and Reality*, 252.

The great masters of mimicry and trompe d’oeil have skill worthy of praise. But we shouldn’t mistake what they do for art. The ability to paint a window that fools people into thinking it is a real window in no way rivals the ability of a Delacroix or Cézanne or Chagall. True art is concerned only with the compositional, the purely ‘aesthetic’ elements, of a work.”

Versions of this objection have raged through the history of modern art, and not only in regard to painting. A response to it calls for two distinctions that will help better define the nature of art as imitation.

The first distinction is one we discussed earlier: that between an instrumental sign, like a stop sign, and the kind of picturing we find in mimetic art. When a work of art is taken as a picture, we do not regard it as we do the stop sign, as a mere vehicle for information, something our minds “pass through” in order to gain knowledge of something else, but rather as a re-presentation of what is being pictured. This distinction is important because it keeps us from thinking of the artistic image as a mere means for knowing what the image signifies. If the artistic image were no more than a means for knowing the signified, if it were no more than a mirror of the real, then we wouldn’t be inclined to attend to its beauty as an image. When it comes to painting, for example, we wouldn’t be inclined to attend to what Gilson calls the “plastic” or compositional elements of the painting—any more than we would be inclined to attend to the compositional elements of a stop sign. But I can and should attend to the way in which Cézanne uses color and design in his still lifes, quite apart from what his still lifes tell me about the human habitat. It is interesting to note in this context that Aristotle mentions harmony and rhythm, two of the foremost compositional elements of poetry, as things for which we have a natural inclination. But because we have a natural inclination for them, it only makes sense that we would want to appreciate them in a work of poetry for their own

sake, as distinct from the subject matter of the poem.²⁷ Art as imitation, in sum, appreciates the artistic image on its own terms, as distinct from appreciation of what the image signifies.²⁸

But Vasari praises the *Mona Lisa* as an “exact copy of nature.” And da Vinci uses the metaphor of mirroring in order to describe artistic imitation. So the question might still be pressed: Doesn’t a mimetic approach to art encourage re-presentation that is as exact as possible—in short, “copying”—so that what is pictured can best be identified and known?

It does not. It is perhaps unfortunate that Vasari chose to describe the *Mona Lisa* as an “exact copy of nature,” but imitation has nothing essentially to do with copying or naturalistic depiction. But, it will be objected, Aristotle says that if we are not able to discern in an artistic image that “this image is of so-and-so”—that is, if we are not able to identify in the picture what is being pictured—then we will not experience the properly mimetic delight. That is true. But here I come to the second key distinction in my response to the challenge of those who take mimesis for copying: the ability both to identify and to understand the exemplar or source of an imitation does not require anything like an exact likeness.

Recall our distinction between an image and a likeness or resemblance. A picture might resemble what is pictured, sometimes with great accuracy, yet a picture is always something more than mere resemblance. “Being a picture,” Sokolowski argues, “is not just being like something else, it is being the presentation of what is depicted. If I see a picture of Harry Truman, I see Truman depicted, in his individuality; I do not just see something that looks like him.”²⁹ Admittedly, some artists seek to make images that

27. See *Poetics* 4 (1448b20–24). I owe to Rover the connection of this passage to Aristotle’s appreciation of the compositional elements of a work of art for their own sake (*Poetics of Maritain*, 152–54).

28. The way in which Aristotle departs from Plato’s own use of mirror imagery to describe mimesis is discussed by Halliwell in *Aesthetics of Mimesis*, chap. 5, pt. 3.

29. Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 84.

bear a remarkably close resemblance to what is being imitated. Exact likeness is a big part of the effect they are trying to produce. But exact likeness is not necessary to the special mode of re-presentation that is imitation. Sometimes, in fact, a picture that closely resembles its object leaves us cold, as it lacks the vivid “re-presencing” we expect from art. A less naturalistic picture, such as a cartoon caricature, can often make its object come alive in an unexpectedly exciting way.³⁰ When we realize that imitation is not foremost about resemblance but about re-presentation of form, we can welcome artistic experiments that sacrifice close resemblance for the sake of alerting us to the formal qualities of something that we might otherwise have been insensitive to. We don’t dismiss Cézanne’s still life because his fruit hovers over rather than sits on the plate. Rather, we ask him what he is trying to say about the arrangement of the items in the still life that he does not think can be said by the conventional rules of perspective.³¹

Aristotle’s general description of mimetic art, found in the passage from the *Poetics* quoted above, emphasizes the connection between imitation and learning. His example of how learning occurs through imitation—by our recognizing that “this image is of so-and-so”—is admittedly a simple one, though surely not intended to cover the full complexity of our experience of mimetic art. Most art does not involve such a simple act of identification. When I watch a performance of *Hamlet*, it is not that I am trying to identify a real medieval Danish prince or even

30. “There are pictures that barely resemble what they picture: some sketches or statues, for example, may be so contrived that we would never say that this object resembles the thing it represents unless we knew that the object is to be taken as a picture. Its being taken as a picture allows us to find a similarity that we would not otherwise have seen” (Sokolowski, “Picturing,” 5).

31. In chapter 8 of *Painting and Reality*, “Imitation and Creation,” Gilson considers imitation only in the sense of close resemblance. He unfortunately fails to illuminate any of the nuances of the Aristotelian understanding. Maritain, also, undermines the power of mimetic picturing when he declares: “Art, as such, consists not in imitating but in making, in composing or constructing . . . and to allot to it for essential end the representation of the real is to destroy it” (*Art and Scholasticism*, 56). An excellent discussion of the nuances of the Aristotelian understanding of mimesis is in Halliwell, *Aristotle’s Poetics* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), chap. 4, and *Aesthetics of Mimesis*, chap. 5.

the mythological figure from Saxo Grammaticus's Scandinavian legend or Belleforest's French version of the same tale. The identification Shakespeare invites me to make is rather that between his character Hamlet and the human condition, a condition in which circumstance often presses upon our weakness in ways that lead to disastrous consequences. The play *Hamlet* "re-presences" the human condition not by copying nature but by putting on display a picture that aspires to manifest something of the form or intelligibility of that condition.

The deeper point in Aristotle's "this image is of so-and-so" remark is that art affords the pleasure of learning about and contemplating a world that we need to see afresh by a new form of presentation. A closer look at Aristotle's discussions of mimesis, moreover, clearly shows that he understands imitation in a flexible way. He names the art of the flute and that of the cithara, as well as the art of dance, as mimetic arts. What are the objects of their imitations? Aristotle says "characters, passions, and actions."³² But do the flute, the cithara, and the dance imitate "characters, passions, and actions" with anything like close similarity? Does the sound that comes out of the flute resemble the emotion I feel? Not evidently.³³ And this is not even to mention Aristotle's central concern with tragic drama as an imitation. The tragic actors somewhat resemble human beings doing things and talking to one another. But tragedy also depicts human action in neat, two-hour packages that only suggest the flow of real human life. Resemblance is always approximation. A certain level of "abstraction" from close resemblance does not undermine the work of imitation. Indeed, the poet and painter David Jones argues in his essay "Art and Sacrament" that *all* art is abstract and that

32. *Poetics* 1 (1447a23–28).

33. At *Politics* 8.5 (1340a-b19), Aristotle also speaks of music as imitative of qualities of moral character. About this text Halliwell observes: "But it is important to notice that Aristotle does not restrict [mimetic] likeness to a sensory or perceptual match. If he did, he could not regard musical sounds and rhythms as standing in mimetic relationship to qualities of ethical 'character' (which are themselves patently not audible phenomena)" (*Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 156).

all art re-presents. For all art re-presents a given reality in matter *other* than that in which it is naturally at home, and this is a kind of abstraction.³⁴

Still, some experience of likeness, and thus of recognition, is bound up with the notion of art as imitation. This is the case even when the object imitated doesn't exist in real life, like Hamlet or Tolkien's elves, orcs, and dwarves.³⁵ Observes Sokolowski: "I have a painting of a copper kettle, and it remains a picture of a copper kettle even though there may never have been a real kettle of which this is the copy. I can still refer to 'the' kettle depicted in my painting, and when I do so I need not refer to a kettle in some storage cabinet; I mean the one in the painting."³⁶ This is true, but if the painting were not in some sense representing a reality with which I am familiar—the world of copper kettles or kitchen utensils in general—then I would not be able to enjoy a properly mimetic response. I would not be able to refer to "the" copper kettle in any sense. To change the example, Tolkien's elves, orcs, and dwarves help me contemplate not elves, orcs, and dwarves in the real world but *human* realities with which I already had some familiarity before I read Tolkien.³⁷

I conclude my response to the objection that imitation

34. David Jones, "Art and Sacrament," in *Epoch and Artist: Selected Writings by David Jones* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), 143–85, see esp. 173.

35. "The cognitive pleasure afforded by the contemplation of mimetic works is accordingly a pleasure in the recognition and understanding of likenesses. But a likeness need not be of an individual or specifiable model. Most mimetic works are not. . . . Yet all mimetic works are likenesses, and they are so by virtue of having been made to represent imaginable realities in the perceptual and semantic properties of their particular media. . . . It is accordingly possible to discern in them features of the kind possessed by, or predicable of, things in the world" (Halliwell, *Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 188).

36. Sokolowski, "Picturing," 21.

37. In the context of his interpretation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, Halliwell also concludes that mimetic art depends upon a background sense of familiarity with the world that makes possible a certain sense of "recognition": "Mimetic art may extend and reshape understanding, but it starts from and depends on already given possibilities and forms of meaning in its audiences' familiarity with the human world" (*Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 174). Halliwell's remark assumes an answer to the question of whether mimetic art really leads to new knowledge, whether it is a real *inquiry*. Halliwell believes that Aristotle's understanding of art, at least, extends and reshapes understanding. The present chapter provides some hints of my view that mimetic art in general is a real inquiry leading to new knowledge, but I will take up the question more fully later, in chapter 5.

is copying by reiterating two important characteristics of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition of art as imitation: first, that it appreciates, along with devotees of modern abstract modes of art, the compositional elements of a work of art for their own sake; and second, that it recognizes that the mimetic image, in re-presenting the formal qualities of its source, need not be limited to exact likeness. But how far can abstraction go before it ceases to be mimetic? Many modern works of abstract art, visual and otherwise, might be said to be mimetic in the minimal sense that they endeavor to capture some feature of the world, if only the psychological state of the artist. Yet there is a point where even this minimal sense of imitation yields to a mindset that is decidedly anti-mimetic, a mindset we see, for example, in the movement in modern painting to treat the painted canvas as a mere object, one that might provoke a response in the viewer, but which is not intended to be a picture of anything. But for its part, the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition of art is committed to more than a minimal mimeticism. It aspires not only to picture but to picture forms that manifest the truth of human existence. Let us now begin to see how this is so.

ART AS CONTEMPLATIVE “WAY” STATION

The delightful congruence between a picture and what is pictured makes space for learning and contemplation. A vocal impersonation of Christopher Walken gives us, the audience, the opportunity to marvel at what is distinctive, say, about Walken’s voice. What the impersonator of Walken does is, in a sense, “frame” Walken’s voice for us; or, to switch the metaphor, the impersonator puts Walken’s voice on a “slide” that we can then examine under the “microscope” of our contemplation. The impersonator allows us to focus on the idiosyncratic syncopation of Walken’s voice in a way that is harder to do when we engage with Walken’s voice directly, without the benefit of

imitation. Mimesis can often afford us a *better* insight into the formal quality of something than does the direct experience of the thing.³⁸ Before we hear them imitated, we will typically experience the oddities of Walken's speech patterns as an undifferentiated, albeit compelling, whole. What the imitation of Walken's voice enables us to do is make distinctions regarding that undifferentiated whole: to understand, for instance, that the ungrammatical pauses Walken inserts into his speech, along with the unexpected emphases he places on certain words, are key elements of his distinctive way of speaking—and even hint at the quality of his character and his pursuit of ultimate fulfillment. No one is claiming that this is contemplation of the highest order, but it is contemplation, nonetheless. It is a delightful turning over in the mind of one fascinating display of human reality. Thus, mimetic picturing brings to light what Sokolowski calls “a deeper intelligibility,” the intelligibility of what a thing essentially is.³⁹

But here is where things get somewhat complicated. We human beings make and enjoy works of mimetic art because we love to think about and delight in the world—*this* world of sensible particulars right outside our window. Paradoxically, it is because we want to understand and take pleasure in our actual physical world that we make up tales about imaginary worlds.

Yet the sensible world only becomes intelligible when the intellect gets involved. The sensible world is sensible, memorable, and able to be imagined by our external and internal senses. But a sensible thing only becomes intelligible, an object of contemplation, when our intellect grasps its formal reality, what it means to be the kind of thing it is.

Again, when our mind grasps the formal reality of some-

38. “Some of the essentials of a tree might show up more vividly in a picture or a painting than in the tree itself as it is perceived” (Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person*, 138).

39. Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person*, 137. In chapter 9 of this work, Sokolowski returns to the question of how we know things in their absence through pictures, imagination, and words.

thing, we grasp what *must* belong to a thing for a thing to be what it is. If it is a certain tone of red in a painting or a certain vocal quality like Rickman's nasal baritone, we reflect on what it means to be that tone of red or to have that vocal quality. If it is *King Lear*, we reflect, for example, on what it means for the play to be a tragedy. To grasp what must belong to a thing is to grasp what is *essential* to all instances of that thing. It is to grasp a kind of *universal*.

The grasp of the essential is the product of an act of abstraction on the part of the intellect.⁴⁰ Aquinas calls this abstracting power of the intellect the *agent intellect*. It is from the *phantasm*, the complex sensory image of a thing, that the intellect "abstracts" or distinguishes what is essential from what is merely accidental to that thing.⁴¹ From the phantasm I have of my house, along with the phantasms I have of many other houses, I can distinguish what is essential to all houses, what must be present for a house to be what it is. But doesn't this abstractive activity of the intellect take me far away from the sensible particular (Christopher Walken's voice) that I want to contemplate? I don't want to contemplate a universal; I want to contemplate a sensible particular. But the contemplation of the sensible particular, like a work of mimetic art, is possible because the intellect is able to take the essential knowledge of a thing and *apply it back* to the sensible particular.⁴² In my life, for example, I have heard syncopated rhythm many times (including by watching Christopher Walken's performances), and from this sense experience, I have formed a phantasm, a complex sense image of syncopated rhythm, and from that phantasm, my intellect has distinguished what is essential to syncopated rhythm. Due to this experience, I can apply my understanding of the essential nature of syncopation back to Walken's voice.

40. See *Summa theologiae* 1.79.3.

41. *Summa theologiae* 1.84.7 and 1.85.1.

42. *Summa theologiae* 1.84.7.

In this roundabout way, I make Walken's voice intelligible and available for contemplation. And what is most fascinating for our purposes, and the reason why we have gone into these details regarding the Aristotelian-Thomistic theory of knowledge, is that mimetic art facilitates this roundabout way of knowing the sensible world.

Now, some mimetic art imitates real particulars and is only interested in leading an audience to a delightful contemplation of the sensible forms of those particulars.⁴³

But most mimetic art—including, I would say, a good voice impression—is more ambitious than this. Such art invites us to contemplate something more than the sensible features of an individual substance. It invites us to contemplate formal realities embodied, say, by a real or imaginary person, but which also transcend him. Alexander Gardner's 1865 photographic portrait of Abraham Lincoln affords us a unique focus on Lincoln as he was in 1865, at about the age of fifty-six. In contemplating the photograph, we can enjoy viewing the sensible features of Lincoln. We can delight in seeing what he *really* looked like. But we can also contemplate formal realities that he embodies but which also transcend him, realities such as "nobility" or "courage" or even just "immense fatigue." The portrait might even be read as an icon of political leadership, one that invites us to reflect upon the virtues it demands and the tremendous physical, emotional, and spiritual toll it takes.

At these various levels of formal reality, mimetic art enables us to understand and contemplate the world of sense particulars. Art imitates those particulars in a way that lifts us above the merely particular and makes possible the grasp of a kind of universal, an essential knowledge that can be applied back to

43. The text we considered from *Poetics* 4 (1448b15–17) indicates that Aristotle recognizes the mimesis of particulars. See also *Poetics* 9 (1451b14–15), which mentions the poetry that lampoons individuals. I am grateful to Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 133n38 and 55n15, for drawing my attention to these passages.

the work itself and what it pictures.⁴⁴ The reason why we love mimetic art so much is that it suits us so perfectly as embodied spirits: it combines both the sensible delight we take in sense particulars and the rational delight we take in grasping the intelligibility of things.⁴⁵

In light of this, consider what Flannery O'Connor says about the art of fiction. "Fiction operates through the senses," she observes in one of her essays,

and I think one reason that people find it so difficult to write stories is that they forget how much time and patience is required to convince through the senses. No reader who doesn't actually experience, who isn't made to feel, the story is going to believe anything the fiction writer merely tells him. The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and touched.⁴⁶

44. But it is worth noting again that we also bring previously acquired universal knowledge to our appreciation of a work of art. As Halliwell argues:

According to Aristotle, we make sense of poetic fictions by interpreting them in the light of the general or universal concepts derived from our cumulative experience and understanding of human life. Because this experience rests ultimately on actual particulars in the world, Aristotle would not deny that we frequently employ universals (or, at least probability) in our cognitive response to real events. But what he does deny, in *Poetics* 8 and 9, is that raw life can often produce whole structures of action capable of satisfying probability in an entirely unified fashion. So in contemplating poetry (or other works of mimetic art) we draw on our real experience of the world, but we do so in order to understand events which possess a special degree of coherence and, therefore, significance." (*Poetics of Aristotle*, 107)

45. "The mind takes a distinctive pleasure in this constructed probable because such a way of knowing uniquely combines the perfection of sensible knowledge and of intellectual knowledge. The object of this unique knowledge and knowledge-making is neither the singular as singular; rather, it is, as we have seen, the typical or the poetic probable, i.e. the singular as it is brought to a state of imperfect knowability by the selective or inventive activity of the artist. Sense is pleased by the proportion to the singular, intellect by the quasi-abstraction, both by the image-idea, the universal-singular, the common concrete. In this way does the imitative artifact satisfy the mind's desire to know things as they are, the nature in the individual, the essence in the existent" (Rover, *Poetics of Maritain*, 199).

46. Flannery O'Connor, "Writing Short Stories," in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 91.

This comment firmly grounds the art of fiction in the five senses. The writer's first task, as Joseph Conrad famously put it, is to make the audience "see" the world in a more perceptive way. All great writers possess what Nabokov credited to Tolstoy: a "fundamental accuracy of perception." In the essay of O'Connor's just quoted, she discusses how she came to write her short story "Good Country People," a story in which, in O'Connor's own paraphrase, "a lady Ph.D. has her wooden leg stolen by a Bible salesman whom she has tried to seduce."⁴⁷ "When I started writing that story," O'Connor recalls, "I didn't know there was going to be a Ph.D. with a wooden leg in it. I merely found myself one morning writing a description of two women that I knew something about, and before I realized it, I had equipped one of them with a daughter with a wooden leg."⁴⁸ This peek behind the curtain of O'Connor's writing process is illuminating. The two women O'Connor began writing about that morning eventually turned out to be Mrs. Hopewell, the lady Ph.D.'s mother, and her friend Mrs. Freeman, the wife of a farmer Mrs. Hopewell employs to work her land. In the first two-and-a-half pages of the finished story, O'Connor gives us vivid portraits of these two women: the nosy, conceited, resentful Mrs. Freeman and the sly, long-suffering, sentimental Mrs. Hopewell.⁴⁹ O'Connor does not present us with broad "types." She gives us individuals clearly rooted in a particular time and place, with a particular and most distinctive way of speaking, with settled patterns of thinking and acting. In these paragraphs, we learn their morning routines, that Mrs. Hopewell keeps the gas off at night, and that Mrs. Freeman enjoys delivering a daily report on how many times her

47. O'Connor, 98.

48. O'Connor, 100.

49. As printed in Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 271–73.

fifteen-year-old, married, pregnant daughter has vomited in the past twenty-four hours.

And yet—Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman are also, in a sense, types. Not to the point that they are purely allegorical. But to the point that we recognize them, or certain aspects of them, as among the kinds of things we've noticed before in the people we have met. We have met the passive, vapid, and eminently malleable; and we have met, if only in the mirror, the conceited person with too many strong opinions. What O'Connor has done in imagining these two women is this: she has embedded "universal" or "general" characteristics of human beings into imagined sensible particularities. Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman are each a "universalized singular" or "singular universal."⁵⁰ Each is a hybrid of a universal characteristic, such as "slyness" or "conceitedness," and a collection of imitated or pictured singulars. We can learn a lot about reality by looking at so much of it summed up in one place: the singular, imaginative, mimetic universal.⁵¹

Interestingly, both philosophy and mimetic art have contemplation as their aim, but they achieve contemplation in different ways. Philosophy proceeds in a purely abstractive way. By "abstractive way," I mean that philosophy involves thinking about things essentially, in abstraction from things in their sensible concreteness. The philosopher thinks about "human nature" and "justice" and "mimetic art," not this or that instance of human nature or justice or mimetic art. The philosopher is forever in quest of a *definition* of whatever he or she is thinking about. At the beginning of Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*, his protagonist

50. I borrow these terms from Rover, *Poetics of Maritain*, 51. This part of my argument leans heavily on Rover's excellent discussion of the definition of mimetic art in chapter 3 of his work.

51. In a discussion of poetry, Rover also calls the mimetic universal a "quasi-universal": "The universals of poetry, then, are not equivalent to the universals of science. Rather, they are the quasi-universals that we call 'possibles' or 'probables.' The poet is concerned with events that 'conform to the laws of the probable and the possible.' These probables, moreover, are not the real probables of science nor the constructed probables of scientific hypothesis; they are *the contrived or constructed probables of poetry* which depend as much on invention and creative intelligence as on conformity to objective truth" (*Poetics of Maritain*, 52; emphasis in original).

Socrates asks the self-proclaimed expert in religious matters, Euthyphro, what the definition of piety is. Euthyphro's first response is to point to the specific action he is involved in when he encounters Socrates. Surprisingly, he is on his way to court to prosecute his own father for the murder of a household slave. But Socrates tells Euthyphro that he didn't ask him to provide an instance or an example of a pious action; Socrates wants to know what piety is "in itself," in abstraction from all particular acts of piety. What Socrates tries to get Euthyphro to see is that the philosophical quest for definition is always a quest for what is essential to a thing.

But open the pages of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and immediately one discovers something very different from a philosophical dialogue, even one, like the *Euthyphro*, with characters involved in an intellectual drama. The reader of *Crime and Punishment* is plunged deeply into a world of imagined concrete singularity: it is the world of the impoverished ex-law student Raskolnikov, who is considering getting his hands on some money by murdering an elderly pawnbroker. As he walks the streets mulling over the possibility of committing this terrible crime, the reader follows Raskolnikov from a third-person point of view, but one that hugs closely to the contours of his perspective. Throughout the novel, Dostoevsky never adopts the pure stance of the philosopher; his task is not to seek a definition of justice. Granted, as the reader experiences Raskolnikov's thoughts and his conversations with others, the reader witnesses much philosophizing. Dostoevsky was, in a very real sense, the most philosophical of novelists. But whatever explicitly philosophical thoughts occur in *Crime and Punishment*, they are situated in the minds and conversations of *his characters or of his narrator*. They are not presented as definitions and propositions and arguments offered by Fyodor Dostoevsky himself. The enjoyment of mimetic art, with its full immersion in sensible

particularity, would seem to be the very opposite of the philosopher's quest for definition.

But this is not the whole story concerning mimetic art, for we can also say about all the examples just noted that they inspire big ideas in their audiences. The glory of *Crime and Punishment* is that it helps us think deeply about whether justice is a mere convention of human beings or whether it is woven into the natural fabric of the human good.

So again, there is a strangely hybrid character to the work of mimetic art. It invites us into the experience of sensible particularity even while it invites us to contemplate ideas and meanings. It can do this because its object is not the sensible particular *as such* but, as we recognized in discussing the O'Connor story, the "singular universal" or what has alternatively been called the "poetic universal" or "probable universal."⁵² Because the mimetic arts embody a universal, or at least something very general, I will refer to this universal as the *mimetic universal*. This notion of the mimetic universal is drawn from this famous passage in Aristotle's *Poetics*:

It is clear from what has been said that to speak of that which has come to be is not the function of the poet, but rather such as *could* come to be, i.e., the possible according to the likely or necessary. For the historian and the poet do not differ by speaking in meter or without meter (since it would be possible to place the writings of [the historian] Herodotus into meter and they would not be inferior history with meter than without meter). But history and poetry differ in this: the one speaks of that which has come to be, while the other speaks of the sort of thing that could come to be. On which account poetry is more

52. The two latter terms are also borrowed from Rover, *Poetics of Maritain*, 51–52. Rover again nicely describes the hybrid character of much mimetic art: "The knowledge aimed at in the imitative arts, the knowledge embodied in the imitative artifact itself, is a knowledge which shares in universality and individuality alike. It partakes in some way of the universality of abstractive knowledge without losing its share in the perfection of sense knowledge. *This* man is known insofar as he is *this kind* of man" (*Poetics of Maritain*, 51).

philosophical and weightier than history: for poetry speaks of the universal while history speaks of the particular.⁵³

At this point in his argument Aristotle is not talking about mimetic art as a whole but about *poiēsis*, a word that can be construed sensibly enough as “poetry” as long as we don’t limit the meaning of the word to what we tend to think of in our day when we hear the word “poetry”—namely, lyric poetry. By *poiēsis* Aristotle doesn’t exclude lyric poetry, but he is thinking above all of what were in the ancient Greek world the major genres of the poetic art: epic and tragedy. But what Aristotle says about poetry in this passage is a truth, I contend, that can be extended to the other mimetic arts. What is that truth? That poetry is more philosophical and intellectually weightier than history because it speaks of the universal or the essential understood as the mimetic universal. History deals with “that which has come to be”—that is, with *facts*—while poetry deals with “the sort of thing that could come to be.” *Given* such a character placed in such a situation, the storyteller promises to us, this is the *kind of thing* the character would say or do. A kind of universal, a kind of truth, is thus offered to our contemplation.⁵⁴

* * *

In discussing mimetic picturing in this chapter, we have been considering how mimetic art makes the world intelligible for contemplation. But we might still ask: What is it exactly that mimetic art pictures and makes intelligible? I have answered this question, so far, only very generally. I have talked about art as

53. *Poetics* 9 (1451a36–b7).

54. As Rover puts the thought: “The Philosopher [Aristotle] goes on to explain what the poetic universal is—not that nature or essence which is the result of a perfect abstraction from the material singular but, rather, the probable or typical or inevitable in singular character and in singular events” (*Poetics of Maritain*, 51–52). Rover then refers to Aristotle’s explanation at *Poetics* 9 (1451b8–10).

picturing “the human condition” and the “mimetic universal as manifest in the sensible particular.” I want to suggest, now, that all these descriptions of the object of mimetic art presuppose a notion of human beings caught up in the story of their lives. Hamlet advises the players “to hold as ’twere the mirror up to Nature”—why? “To show Virtue her feature, Scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.”⁵⁵ Hamlet advises the players, that is, to imitate the story of the human quest for happiness, a quest that, according to the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition that Hamlet is drawing upon, succeeds when one lives out the virtues and fails when one succumbs to vice. The mimetic universal that characterizes the greatest art, such as we see in the conceitedness of O’Connor’s Mrs. Freeman, aspires to reveal something true about how well such a character is living out the quest for happiness. But do *all* the mimetic arts picture the human story? How can that be? How can music tell a story? How can a statue, an inert piece of stone, tell a story? How can the movement and gesture of dance, where no words are spoken, where no background narrative is present, tell a story? These are all important questions. Yet, in the face of them, I submit that the mimetic arts are all, in analogous ways, storytelling arts.⁵⁶ The defense of this claim will require the rest of my argument to develop. But the first and most necessary step in that task is to show how the arts that are most explicitly narrative—fiction, epic poetry, drama on both stage and screen—picture the essentially narrative structure of human life itself. And to this task I now turn.

55. *Hamlet* 3.2.22–24. I use the text of the play edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006).

56. By way of preview, it is worth noting that Aristotle at *Poetics* 2 (1448a1) doesn’t say that only “poets” imitate human beings in action. He speaks generally of “imitators” [*hoi mimoumenoi*], and given that when he makes this remark he has just finished, in *Poetics* 1, a brief survey of the various media of the mimetic arts, and names specifically among these arts painting, music, and dance, it is reasonable to conclude that he thinks *all* mimetic art imitates human beings in action—and thus, as I will discuss in chapter 2, the human story.