

CHAPTER IV
OF IDEAS OF IMITATION

FUSELI, in his Lectures,¹ and many other persons of equally just and accurate habits of thought (among others, S. T. Coleridge), make a distinction between imitation and copying, representing the first as the legitimate function of art—the latter as its corruption; but as such a distinction is by no means warranted, or explained by the common meaning of the words themselves, it is not easy to comprehend exactly in what sense they are used by those writers. And though, reasoning from the context, I can understand what ideas those words stand for in their minds, I cannot allow the terms to be properly used as symbols of those ideas, which (especially in the case of the word *Imitation*) are exceedingly complex, and totally different from what most people would understand by the term. And by men of less accurate thought, the word is used still more vaguely or falsely. For instance, Burke² (*Treatise on the Sublime*, part i. sect. 16) says: “When the object represented in poetry or painting is such as we could have no desire of seeing in the reality, then we may be sure that its power in poetry or painting is owing to the power of *imitation*.” In which case the real pleasure may be in what we have been just speaking of, the dexterity of the artist’s hand; or it may be in a beautiful or singular arrangement of colours, or a thoughtful chiaroscuro, or in the pure beauty of certain forms which art forces on our notice, though we should not have observed them in the reality; and I conceive that none of

§ 1. *False use of the term “imitation” by many writers on art.*

¹ [See his *Works*, ii. 312, and in vol. iii. of the same, Aphorisms 101–102, 187.]

² [For another reference to Burke, see below, p. 128.]

these sources of pleasure are in any way expressed or intimated by the term "imitation."

But there is one source of pleasure in works of art totally different from all these, which I conceive to be properly and accurately expressed by the word "imitation;" one which, though constantly confused in reasoning, because it is always associated, in fact, with other means of pleasure, is totally separated from them in its nature, and is the real basis of whatever complicated or various meaning may be afterwards attached to the word in the minds of men.

I wish to point out this distinct source of pleasure clearly at once, and only to use the word "imitation" in reference to it.

Whenever anything looks like what it is not, the resemblance being so great as *nearly* to deceive, we feel a kind of pleasurable surprise, an agreeable excitement of mind, exactly the same in its nature as that which we receive from juggling. Whenever we perceive this in something produced by art, that is to say, whenever the work is seen to resemble something which we know it is not, we receive what I call an idea of imitation. *Why* such ideas are pleasing, it would be out of our present, purpose to inquire; we only know that there is no man who does not feel pleasure in his animal nature from gentle surprise, and that such surprise can be excited in no more distinct manner than by the evidence that a thing is not what it appears to be.* Now two things are requisite to our complete and most pleasurable perception of this: first, that the

resemblance be so perfect as to amount to a deception; secondly, that there be some means of proving at the same moment that it *is* a deception.

The most perfect ideas and pleasures of imitation are, therefore, when one sense is contradicted by another, both bearing as positive evidence on the subject as each is capable of alone; as when the

* Artist. Rhet. I. II. 23.¹

¹ [Eds. 1 and 2 omit the footnote reference to Aristotle; while ed. 3 adds to it the quotation, "sullogismoV estin, otitouto ekeino," omitted in cds. 4 *et seqq.*]

eye says a thing is round, and the finger says it is flat: they are, therefore, never felt in so high a degree as in painting, where appearance of projection, roughness, hair, velvet, etc., are given with a smooth surface, or in wax-work, where the first evidence of the senses is perpetually contradicted by their experience. But the moment we come to marble, our definition checks us, for a marble, figure does not look like what it is not: it looks like marble and like the form of a man, of then it *is* marble, and it *is* the form of a man. It does not look like a man, which it is not, but like the form of a man, which it is. Form is form, *bonâ fide* and actual, whether in marble or in flesh—not an imitation or resemblance of form, but real form. The chalk outline of the bough of a tree on paper, is not an imitation; it looks like chalk and paper—not like wood, and that which it suggests to the mind is not properly said to be *like* the form of a bough, it *is* the form of a bough. Now, then, we see the limits of an idea of imitation; it extends only to the sensation of trickery and deception occasioned by a thing's intentionally seeming different from what it is; and the degree of the pleasure depends on the degree of difference and the perfection of the resemblance, not on the nature of the thing resembled. The simple pleasure in the imitation would be precisely of the same degree (if the accuracy could be equal), whether the subject of it were the hero or his horse.¹ There are other collateral sources of pleasure which are necessarily associated with this, but that part of the pleasure which depends on the imitation is the same in both.

Ideas of imitation, then, act by producing the simple pleasure of surprise, and that not of surprise in its higher sense and function, but of the mean and paltry surprise which is felt in jugglery. These ideas and pleasures are the most contemptible which can be received from art. First, because it is necessary to their enjoyment that the mind should reject the impression and address of the thing represented,

§ 4. *The pleasure resulting from imitation the most contemptible that can be derived from art.*

¹ [For "subjects of it were the hero or his horse," eds. 1 and 2 read, "subject be a Madonna or a lemon-peel." See above, p. 98 *n.*]

and fix itself only upon the reflection that it is not what it seems to be. All high or noble emotion or thought is thus rendered physically impossible, while the mind exults in what is very like a strictly sensual pleasure.¹ We may consider tears as a result of agony or of art, whichever we please, but not of both at the same moment. If we are surprised by them as an attainment of the one, it is impossible we can be moved by them as a sign of the other.

Ideas of imitation are contemptible in the second place, because not only do they preclude the spectator from enjoying inherent beauty in the subject, but they can only be received from mean and paltry subjects, because it is impossible to imitate anything really great. We can "paint a cat or a fiddle, so that they look as if we could take them up;² but we cannot imitate the ocean, or the Alps. We can imitate fruit, but not a tree; flowers, but not a pasture; cut-glass, but not the rainbow. All pictures in which deceptive powers of imitation are displayed are therefore either of contemptible subjects, or have the imitation shown in contemptible parts of them, bits of dress, jewels, furniture, etc.³

Thirdly, these ideas are contemptible, because no ideas of power are associated with them. To the ignorant, imitation, indeed, seems difficult, and its success praiseworthy, but even they can by no possibility see more in the artist than they do in a juggler, who arrives at a strange end by means with which they are unacquainted. To the instructed, the juggler is by far the more respectable artist of the two, for they know sleight of hand to be an art of an immensely more difficult

¹ [Eds. 1 and 2 add, "and one precisely of the same order and degree, whether it be received from the bristles of a boar or the tears of a Magdalen."]

² [Sir Joshua Reynolds, in *The Idler*, No. 79.]

³ [In one draft of this chapter, Ruskin added the remark:—

"One would fain hope that such [*i.e.* deceptive imitation] was not the criterion of art among the more enlightened of the ancients, and yet, as far as my own reading goes, I remember scarcely a passage of any author, not himself an artist, which does not point to mere deception as the sole end of art, and I cannot but fancy that even the gold and ivory and glass eyes of Phidias can have been good for little else."]

acquisition, and to imply more ingenuity in the artist than a power of deceptive imitation in painting, which requires nothing more for its attainment than a true eye, a steady hand, and moderate industry—qualities which in no degree separate the imitative artist from a watchmaker, pin-maker, or any other neat-handed artificer. These remarks do not apply to the art of the diorama, or the stage, where the pleasure is not dependent on the imitation, but it is the same which we should receive from nature herself, only far inferior in degree. It is a noble pleasure; but we shall see in the course of our investigation, both that it is inferior to that which we receive when there is no deception at all, and why it is so.

Whenever then in future, I speak of ideas of imitation, I wish to be understood to mean the immediate and present § 7. Recapitulation. perception that something produced by art is not what it seems to be. I prefer saying “that it is not what it seems to be,” to saying “that it seems to be what it is not,” because we perceive at once what it seems to be, and the idea of imitation, and the consequent pleasure, result from the subsequent perception of its being something else—flat, for instance, when we thought it was round.¹

¹[With this and the following chapter compare *Stones of Venice*, vol. iii. ch. iv. §§ 20 *seqq.*, where Ruskin places the case against direct imitation “on a loftier and firmer foundation”—namely, that just as great art “is the work of the whole living creature, body and soul,” so also “it addresses the whole creature,” and falls in the scale of nobility if it does not make appeal to “the beholding imagination.”]

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CHAPTER VI

OF IDEAS OF BEAUTY

ANY material object which can give us pleasure in the simple contemplation of its outward qualities without any direct and definite exertion of the intellect, I call in some way, or in some degree, beautiful. Why we receive pleasure from some forms and colours, and not from others, is no more to be asked or answered than why we like sugar and dislike wormwood. The utmost subtlety of investigation will only lead us to ultimate instincts and principles of human nature, for which no farther reason can be given than the simple will of the Deity that we should be so created.¹ We may indeed perceive, as far as we are acquainted with His nature, that we have been so constructed as, when in a healthy and cultivated state of mind, to derive pleasure from whatever things are illustrative of that nature; but we do not receive pleasure from the *because* they are illustrative of it, nor from any perception that they are illustrative of it, but instinctively and necessarily, as we derive sensual pleasure from the scent of a rose. On these primary principles of our nature, education and accident operate to an unlimited extent; they may be cultivated or checked, directed or diverted, gifted by right guidance with the most acute and faultless sense, or subjected by neglect to every phase of error and disease. He who has followed up² these natural laws of aversion and desire, rendering them more and more authoritative by constant obedience, so as to derive pleasure always from that which God originally intended should give him pleasure, and who derives the

§ 1. *Definition of the term "beautiful."*

¹ [With this passage cf. *Letters to a College Friend*, vii. § 4, Vol. I. p. 450.]

² [In his copy for revision Ruskin here also considerably curtails. He substitutes, "The judgment and enjoyment of art belong only to those who have followed up . . . constant obedience," and then deletes to the end of § 3.]

greatest possible sum of pleasure from any given object, is a man of taste.

This, then, is the real meaning of this disputed word. Perfect taste is the faculty of receiving the greatest possible pleasure from those material sources which are attractive to our moral nature in its purity and perfection.¹ He who receives little pleasure from these sources wants taste; he who receives pleasure from any other sources, has false or bad taste.

And it is thus that the term "taste" is to be distinguished from that of "judgment," with which it is constantly confounded. Judgment is a general term, expressing definite action of the intellect, and applicable to every kind of subject which can be submitted to it. There may be judgment of congruity, judgment of truth, judgment of justice, and judgment of difficulty and excellence. But all these exertions of the intellect are totally distinct from taste, properly so called, which is the instinctive and instant preferring of one material object to another without any obvious reason, except that it is proper to human nature in its perfection so to do.

Observe, however, I do not mean by excluding direct exertion of the intellect from ideas of beauty, to assert that beauty has no effect upon, nor connection with the intellect. All our moral feelings are so interwoven with our intellectual powers, that we cannot affect the one without in some degree addressing the other; and in all high ideas of beauty, it is more than probable that much of the pleasure depends on delicate and untraceable perceptions of fitness, propriety, and relation, which are purely intellectual, and through which we arrive at our noblest ideas of what is commonly and rightly called "intellectual beauty." But there is yet no immediate *exertion* of the intellect; that is to say, if a person receiving even the noblest ideas of simple beauty be asked *why* he likes the object exciting

¹ [Cf. next volume, sec. i. ch. ii. § 8. The words "Perfect taste . . . perfection" are combined (by a connecting "but") with the words in § 1, above, "why we receive . . . wormwood," to form the first paragraph, "Principles of Art," in *Frondes Agrestes*.]

them, he will not be able to give any distinct reason, nor to trace in his mind any formed thought, to which he can appeal as a source of pleasure. He will say that the thing gratifies, fills, hallows, exalts his mind, but he will not be able to say why, or how. If he can, and if he can show that he perceives in the object any expression of distinct thought, he has received more than an idea of beauty—it is an idea of relation.

Ideas of beauty are among the noblest which can be presented to the human mind, invariably exalting and purifying it according to their degree; and it would appear that we are intended by the Deity to be constantly under their influence,¹ because there is not one single object in nature which is not capable of conveying them, and which, to the rightly perceiving mind, does not present an incalculably greater number of beautiful than of deformed parts; there being in fact scarcely anything, in pure undiseased nature, like positive deformity, but only degrees of beauty, or such slight and rare points of permitted contrast as may render all around them more valuable by their opposition—spots of blackness in creation, to make its colours felt.

§ 5. *The high rank and function of ideas of beauty.*

But although everything in nature is more or less beautiful, every species of object has its own kind and degree of beauty; some being in their own nature more beautiful than others, and few, if any, individuals possessing the utmost degree of beauty of which the species is capable. This utmost degree of specific beauty, necessarily coexistent with the utmost perfection of the object in other respects, is the ideal of the object.²

§ 6. *Meaning of the term "ideal beauty."*

Ideas of beauty, then, be it remembered, are the subjects of moral, but not of intellectual perception. By the investigation of them we shall be led to the knowledge of the ideal³ subjects of art.

¹ [Ruskin's copy for revision reads after this point, "because there are few objects in nature which are not capable of conveying them, and which, to the rightly perceiving mind, do not present a greater number of beautiful than of deformed parts." The rest of the paragraph is deleted.]

² [With this passage *cf.* the letter in reply to criticisms, in Appendix ii. p. 643.]

³ [In the copy for revision the words "or pure" are here inserted.]

boat meets the shore.¹ In the Chaise de Gargantua² we have the still water, lulled by the dead calm which usually precedes the most violent storms, suddenly broken upon by a tremendous burst of wind from the gathered thunder-clouds, scattering the boats, and raising³ the water into rage, except where it is sheltered by the hills. In the Jumièges and Vernon⁴ we have farther instances of local agitation, caused, in the one case, by a steamer, in the other, by the large water-wheels under the bridge; not, observe, a mere splashing about the wheel itself, this is too far off to be noticeable, so that we should not have ever known that the objects beneath the bridge were water-wheels, but for the agitation recorded a quarter of a mile down the river, where its current crosses the sunlight. And thus there will scarcely ever be found a piece of quiet water by Turner, without some story in it of one kind or another; sometimes a slight but beautiful incident; oftener, as in the Cowes⁵, something on which the whole sentiment and intention of the picture in a great degree depends; but invariably presenting some new instance of varied knowledge and observation, some fresh appeal to the highest faculties of the mind.⁶

Of extended surfaces of water, as rendered by Turner, the Loch Katrine and Derwentwater of the Illustrations to Scott, and the Loch Lomond vignette in Rogers's Poems⁷, are

¹ [Eds. 1 and 2 read:—

“meets the shore. But it is only by persons who have not carefully watched the effect of a steamer's wake when she is running close by shore that the exquisite accuracy with which all this is told and represented is at all appreciable. In the . . .”]

² [Plate No. 12 in *The Seine and the Loire*. The original drawing is No. 130 in the National Gallery.]

³ [Misprinted “razing” in previous eds.]

⁴ [Jumièges, Plate No. 11 in *The Seine and the Loire*. The original drawing is No. 155 in the National Gallery; for another reference to it, see above, p. 400. “Vernon,” Plate 24 in *The Seine and the Loire*; original drawing, No. 153 in the National Gallery.]

⁵ [See above, § 12.]

⁶ [Eds. 1 and 2 add:—

“There is always a deep truth, which must be reasoned upon and comprehended in them before their beauty can be felt.”]

⁷ [At p. 205 of the *Poems*; the original drawing is No. 240 in the National Gallery. Loch Katrine is in vol. viii. of Scott's *Poetical Works*; “Derwentwater” (“Skiddaw”) in vol. ii.; for other references, see pp. 315, 421, 467.]

characteristic instances. The first of these gives us the most distant part of the lake entirely under the influence of a light breeze, and therefore entirely without reflections of the objects on its borders; but the whole near half is untouched by the wind, and on that is cast the image of the upper part of Ben Venue and of the islands. The second gives us the surface, with just so much motion upon it as to prolong, but not to destroy, the reflections of the dark woods, reflections only interrupted by the ripple of the boat's wake. And the third gives us an example of the whole surface so much affected by ripple as to bring into exercise all those laws which we have seen so grossly violated by Canaletto. We see in the nearest boat that though the lines of the gunwale are much blacker and more conspicuous than that of the cutwater, yet the gunwale lines, being nearly horizontal, have no reflection whatsoever; while the line of the cutwater, being vertical, has a distinct reflection of three times its own length. But even these tremulous reflections are only visible as far as the islands; beyond them, as the lake retires into distance, we find it receives only the reflection of the grey light from the clouds, and runs in one flat white field up between the hills; and besides all this, we have another phenomenon, quite new, given to us,—the brilliant gleam of light along the centre of the lake. This is not caused by ripple, for it is cast on a surface rippled all over; but it is what we could not have without ripple,—the light of a passage of sunshine. I have already (Chap. I. § 9) explained the cause of this phenomenon, which never can by any possibility take place on calm water, being the multitudinous reflection of the sun from the sides of the ripples, causing an appearance of local light and shadow; and being dependent, like real light and shadow, on the passage of the clouds, though the dark parts of the water are the reflections of the clouds, not the shadows of them, and the bright parts are the reflections of the sun, and not the light of it. This little vignette, then, will

§ 16. *Turner's painting of distant expanses of water.—Calm, interrupted by ripple;*

§ 17. *And rippled, crossed by sunshine.*

entirely complete the system of Turner's universal truth in quiet water. We have seen every phenomenon given by him,—the clear reflection, the prolonged reflection, the reflection broken by ripple, and, finally, the ripple broken by light and shade; and it is especially to be observed how careful he is, in this last case, when he uses the apparent light and shade, to account for it by showing us in the whiteness of the lake beyond, its universal subjection to ripple.

We have not spoken of Turner's magnificent drawing of distant rivers, which, however, is dependent only on § 18. *His drawing of distant rivers;* more complicated application of the same laws, with exquisite perspective. The sweeps of river in the Dryburgh (Illustrations to Scott) and Melrose are bold and characteristic examples, as well as the Rouen from St. Catharine's Hill, and the Caudebec, in the Rivers of France.¹ The only thing which in these works requires particular attention is, the care with which the height of the observer above the river is indicated by the loss of the reflections of its banks. This is, perhaps, shown most clearly in the Caudebec. If we had been on a level with the river, its whole surface would have been darkened by the reflection of the steep and high banks; but, being far above it, we can see no more of the image than we could of the hill itself, if it were actually reversed under the water; and therefore we see that Turner gives us a narrow line of dark water, immediately under the precipice, the broad surface reflecting only the sky. This is also finely shown on the left-hand side of the Dryburgh.

But all these early works of the artist have been eclipsed by some recent drawings of Switzerland. These latter are not to be described by any words; but they must be noted here, not only as presenting records of lake effect on a grander scale, and of more imaginative character, than any other of his works, but § 19. *And of surface associated with mist.*

¹ [For the "Rouen," see above, note, p. 388; for "Caudebec," p. 464. "Dryburgh Abbey" is in vol. v. of Scott's *Poetical Works*; "Melrose," in vol. vi.; for another reference to the latter, see p. 315.]

expression of force in falling or running water by fearless and full rendering of its forms. He never loses himself and his subject in the splash of the fall, his presence of mind never fails as he goes down; he does not blind us with the spray, or veil the countenance of his fall with its own drapery. A little crumbling white, or lightly rubbed paper, will soon give the effect of indiscriminate foam; but nature gives more than foam, she shows beneath it, and through it, a peculiar character of exquisitely studied form bestowed on every wave and line of fall; and it is this variety of definite character which Turner always aims at, rejecting, as much as possible, everything that conceals or overwhelms it. Thus, in the Upper Fall of the Tees,¹ though the whole basin of the fall is blue and dim with the rising vapour, yet the attention of the spectator is chiefly directed to the concentric zones and delicate curves of the falling water itself; and it is impossible to express with what exquisite accuracy these are given. They are the characteristic of a powerful stream descending without impediment or break, but from a narrow channel, so as to expand as it falls. They are the constant form which such a stream assumes as it descends; and yet I think it would be difficult to point to another instance of their being rendered in art. You will find nothing in the waterfalls even of our best painters, but springing lines of parabolic descent, and splashing shapeless foam; and, in consequence, though they may make you understand the swiftness of the water, they never let you feel the weight of it; the stream in their hands looks *active*, not *supine*, as if it leaped, not as if it fell. Now water will leap a little way, it will leap down a weir or over a stone, but it *tumbles* over a high fall like this; and it is when we have lost the parabolic line, and arrived at the catenary, when we have lost the *spring* of the fall, and arrived at the *plunge* of it, that we begin really to feel its weight and wildness. Where water takes its first leap from the top, it is cool,

§ 20. *His drawing of falling water, with peculiar expression of weight.*

§ 21. *The abandonment and plunge of great cataracts, how given by him.*

¹ [See above, p. 486.]

and collected, and uninteresting, and mathematical; but it is when it finds that it has got into a scrape, and has farther to go than it thought, that its character comes out: it is then that it begins to writhe, and twist, and sweep out, zone after zone, in wilder stretching as it falls; and to send down the rocket-like, lance-pointed, whizzing shafts at its sides, sounding for the bottom. And it is this prostration, this hopeless abandonment of its ponderous power to the air, which is always peculiarly expressed by Turner, and especially in the case before us; while our other artists, keeping to the parabolic line, where they do not lose themselves in smoke and foam, make their cataract look muscular and wiry, and may consider themselves fortunate if they can keep it from stopping. I believe the majesty of motion which Turner has given by these concentric catenary lines must be felt even by those who have never seen a high waterfall, and therefore cannot appreciate their exquisite fidelity to nature. — end

In the Chain Bridge over the Tees¹, this passiveness and swinging of the water to and fro are yet more remarkable; while we have another characteristic of a great waterfall given to us, that the wind, in this instance coming up the valley against the current, takes the spray up off the edges, and carries it back a little torn, reverted rags and threads, seen in delicate form against the darkness on the left. But we must understand a little more about the nature of running water before we can appreciate the drawing either of this, or any other of Turner's torrents.

When water, not in very great body, runs in a rocky bed much interrupted by hollows, so that it can rest every now and then in a pool as it goes along, it does not acquire a continuous velocity of motion. It pauses after every leap, and curdles about, and rests a little and then goes on again; and if in this comparatively tranquil and rational state of mind it meets with any obstacle, as a rock or stone, it parts on each side of it with a little bubbling foam,

§ 22. *Difference in the action of water, when continuous and when interrupted. The interrupted stream fills the hollows of its bed;*

¹ [England and Wales, No. 24; cf. above, p. 489, and below, p. 587.]