



Genius and Imitation: Kant's Examples and Impasses

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the contradiction in Kant's writings concerning genius as both continuous and discontinuous with imitation, focusing primarily on whether genius imitates. While originality without any imitation is inconceivable and impossible, an original artwork is not imitative, as imitation is servile and entirely opposed to genius's freedom. Some scholars have attempted to resolve this contradiction by selectively reconstructing Kant's concepts of imitation, while others have reduced his thought to one side of it. Focusing on Kant's evaluation of his own examples of genius (Milton, Shakespeare, and Michelangelo) and non-genius (Klopstock) in his lectures and handwritten notes, this essay proposes that his thinking about imitation and genius remains irresolvably contradictory. It also reflects on how this impasse shapes Kant's conception of (in)imitability, deformity, tradition, and convention in art.

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Should one avoid imitating to produce an original artwork, or is originality impossible without imitation? Immanuel Kant's responses to this question revolve around incoherencies in his theory of artistic genius. While he considers 'imitation' (*Nachahmung*) to be 'the [true] guide [*Leitfaden*] of the genius', he also holds that 'genius is an original spirit [*Originalgeist*] who produces consummate products without imitation [*Nachahmung*]'.¹ This latter claim corresponds to Kant's exclusion of imitation from the production of beautiful art in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*: 'everyone agrees that genius is entirely opposed to the spirit of imitation' (*Nachahmungsgeiste*; *CJ*, 5:308).² This article aims to reveal this contradiction in Kant's writings between genius as continuous with imitation (= genius imitates) and discontinuous with it (= genius does not imitate at all).

While examining Kant's general theory of genius, I will focus on his own examples of genius – primarily John Milton but also William Shakespeare and Michelangelo – as well as his example of non-genius, Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, in *Lectures on Anthropology*, *Lectures on Logic*, and his handwritten notes.³ Kant's remarks on Milton are of particular importance, as his unclear distinction between servile imitation as rule-following and Milton's free imitations further complicates the issue.⁴

The pervasiveness of the contradiction between continuity and discontinuity in Kant's writings has been overlooked in Kantian scholarship. Some scholars have engaged only with selected versions of Kant's claims, as in Martin Gammon's reading of the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, while others, such as Paul Guyer, in a recuperative mode, have attempted to render them coherent. This essay argues that these efforts have failed: across the full range of Kant's writings, his thinking about imitation and genius remains irresolvably contradictory.

After addressing the continuity and discontinuity between genius and imitation in the first two sections, I will critique scholarly attempts to resolve this contradiction and to reduce Kant's thought to one of its poles. Lastly, I will examine how Kant's contradictory views shape his distinction between genius and non-genius, particularly his reasoning for deeming Milton a genius but not Klopstock. Taken together, these analyses converge on the claim that this impasse both establishes and destabilizes fundamental concepts and distinctions in Kant's philosophy of art.

1 Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Reimer/De Gruyter, 1900–), 24:321, 15:340. Hereafter: AA. Except for *Logik-Vorlesung: Unveröffentlichte Nachschriften*, vol. 1 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1998), all references to Kant's original German works will follow the Akademie edition, cited by volume and page number. When English edition is not referenced, translations from the AA are my own.

2 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5:308. Hereafter: *CJ*.

3 Besides Milton, Kant's prominent examples of genius include Frederick the Great of Prussia (*CJ*, 5:315), Johann Philipp Lorenz Withof (*CJ*, 5:316), Christoph Martin Wieland (*CJ*, 5:309), Michelangelo, Homer, Cicero, and Shakespeare (AA, 25:1057); Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Anthropology*, trans. Robert R. Clewis et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 25:1311, 25:557. Hereafter: *LA*.

4 In a footnote, Gammon points out Kant's unclear distinction between 'slavish' and 'free imitation'; Martin Gammon, "'Exemplary Originality': Kant on Genius and Imitation", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35 (1997): 573. Derrida refers to it in his interpretation of Kant as 'servile imitation'; Jacques Derrida, 'Economimesis', trans. Richard Klein, *Diacritics* 11 (1981): 9.

The third *Critique* elucidates genius in § 46 as follows, under the title ‘Beautiful Art Is Art of Genius’: ‘Genius is a talent for producing that for which no determinate rule can be given, not a predisposition of skill for that which can be learned in accordance with some rule, consequently [...] originality must be its primary characteristic’ (CJ, 5:307). Kant’s use of the word ‘genius’ switches back and forth between genius as a talent and geniuses as particular individuals who produce beautiful artworks. This production does not follow any pre-given rules. Learning and applying such rules cannot define the work of genius, as originality requires freedom from rules and imitation (CJ, 5:243). Genuine originality does not stem from imitation:

Since there can also be original nonsense, its products must at the same time be models, i.e., exemplary, hence, while not themselves the result of imitation [*selbst nicht durch Nachahmung entsprungen*], they must yet serve others in that way, i.e., as a standard or a rule for judging [*Richtmaße oder Regel der Beurtheilung*]. (CJ, 5:308)

Exemplary originality is distinctive of genius, as a beautiful artwork must be both original and exemplary. An exemplary artwork serves as a model for other artists, providing the standard (*Richtmaß*) for producing and evaluating other works of art. Kant contrasts exemplary originality with imitation and rule-following, asserting that a genius produces without imitation (*Nachahmung*). For instance, Kant considers Michelangelo a genius because of his ‘completely new invention[s]’, a remark meant to exemplify his claim that ‘genius does not imitate rules’ (LA, 25:1310–11).

Which notion of imitation is at stake here? Kant’s two main words for imitation are *Nachahmen* and *Nachmachen*, which can be used interchangeably in German. Kant draws a distinction between them in his handwritten notes later published as *Reflections on Anthropology*. *Reflection* 920 indicates that ‘*Nachahmen* presupposes originality in invention but similarity in manner. *Nachmachen* [...] is in both [respects] copy [*copie*]. *Nachäffen* [is] mere similarity in manner without the capacity to imitate [*nachahmen*] the content, e.g., words, expressions, Yorick’ (AA, 15:405).⁵ While *Nachahmen* is the imitation of style with originality in content, *Nachmachen* refers to copying both the style and the content.⁶ Neither is proper for a work of genius since the creation of beautiful art requires the ‘proportion and disposition’ of genius’s mental powers (imagination and understanding), which ‘cannot be produced by any following of rules [*keine Befolgung von Regeln*], whether of science or of mechanical imitation [*mechanischen Nachahmung*]’ (CJ, 5:318). ‘Mechanical’ refers to that ‘which can be grasped and followed according to rules’ (CJ, 5:310). For Kant, rules of meter exemplify rules of mechanical imitation, as they prescribe fixed patterns, such as requiring an equal syllable count in the lines of a poem.⁷ As found in *Anthropology Friedländer*, genius’s production is opposed to mechanical imitation as rule-following: ‘The state of imitation [*Nachahmung*] is contrary to genius, just as the awkward

5 In “‘Exemplary Originality’”, 575, Gammon translates *Nachmachen* as ‘replication’. Following Guyer and Matthews, I will translate *nachmachen* as ‘to copy’. I will return to Kant’s understanding of aping [*Nachäffen*] later. I should note that the context of this quotation is not specifically artistic originality.

6 Kant also states that *Nachahmen* is not copying: ‘imitation is something entirely other than copying’ (AA, 15:34). I will return to this perplexity.

7 Kant’s examples are meter and prosody, yet he affirms their use in genius’s poetry (CJ, 5:304). I will discuss this later in detail.

observance of rules is also contrary to genius; hence too, mechanism, or proficiency in producing something according to rules, is contrary to genius' (LA, 25:557).

The reason why mechanical imitation is contrary to genius is that it destroys spirit:

the product of a genius (in respect of that in it which is to be ascribed to genius, not to possible learning or schooling) is an example, not for imitation [*Nachahmung*] (for then that which is genius in it and constitutes the spirit of the work would be lost), but for emulation [*Nachfolge*] by another genius, who is thereby awakened to the feeling of his own originality, to exercise freedom from coercion of rules [modified translation; *Zwangsfreiheit von Regeln*] in his art. (CJ, 5:318)

In this passage, Kant opposes imitation to free emulation (*Nachfolge*). The originality of a genius must serve as a role model for others, but not in the sense that other geniuses are supposed to imitate a genius's work. Rather, it provides an example of how to produce a work of art by taking inspiration from a genius's originality with the aim of bringing forth one's own originality.⁸ *Nachfolge* (emulation or succession) designates this.⁹ In contrast, *Nachahmung* is not proper for producing beautiful art because spirit is absent in an imitative work.

Imitation constitutes mechanical and spiritless art: 'If one knows it is imitated, then one regards it only as a machine and resists one's impressions. Hence eloquence is an art with spirit. The arts devoid of spirit one also calls mechanical.' While beautiful art is free 'from coercion of rules', mechanical art is subservient to rules: 'Arts devoid of spirit are all handicrafts, for they follow only determinate rules and models' (LA, 25:783). Thus, the contrast is between spiritless, imitative, and mechanical art and beautiful art, which is spiritful and free from imitation.

What does Kant mean by 'spirit'? 'The word spirit [*Geist*] means nothing other than the principle of life' (AA, 25:366). In the context of aesthetics, however, it takes on a more specific meaning:

Spirit [*Geist*], in an aesthetic significance, means the animating [*belebend*] principle in the mind. That, however, by which this principle animates the soul, the material which it uses for this purpose, is that which purposively sets the mental powers into motion, i.e., into a play that is self-maintaining and even strengthens the powers to that end. (CJ, 5:313)

The mental powers in question are imagination (the mental faculty which provides intuitions) and understanding (the mental faculty of concepts). For Kant, the experience of beauty consists in a 'purposive' harmony between these two faculties, which he refers to as a free play (CJ, 5:317).¹⁰ Animation refers to engendering this experience.

8 *Nachfolge* implies succession, as in assuming a predecessor's role. Geniuses, in this sense, are successors rather than imitators.

9 As Gammon notes, the distinction between following and imitating an exemplary role model relates to Kant's engagement with imitation and *Nachfolge* in his ethical writings and his pre-critical reflections on the 'imitative faculty' (*Nachahmungsvermögen*), a concept introduced by empirical psychologists; Gammon, "Exemplary Originality", 565–66.

10 A detailed inquiry into this controversial issue exceeds the limits of this essay. For a comparison of interpretations of free harmony in Kant, see Paul Guyer, *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 102–4.

What, then, does it mean that the spirit is the principle for this animation?¹¹ Kant does not provide a clear answer but holds that ‘the spirit [...] alone animates the work [*das Werk belebt*]’ (CJ, 5:304). Here, the object of animation is not the mind or its faculties; rather, spirit animates the work, endowing it with life. Kant’s point is that, without spirit, a work is nothing but ‘a mechanism’ (*Mechanismus*) and ‘body’ (*Körper*; CJ, 5:304). In § 49, Kant exemplifies spiritless body through mere materiality: ‘the aesthetic idea is a representation [...] the feeling of which animates the cognitive faculties and combines spirit with the mere letter of language’ (*mit der Sprache, als bloßem Buchstaben, Geist verbindet*; CJ, 5:316). Designating pure letter (*bloße Buchstabe*) as materiality without spirit, Kant puts the mere letter in the place of the body. The mechanical manipulation of mere materiality defines servile artistic production. The lack of spirit in imitative-mechanical art, then, lies in its failure to produce anything beyond mere materiality – and thus in its inability to engender the experience of beauty.

Logic Philippi strictly opposes genius’s freedom to imitation:

Genius is an original spirit [*Originalgeist*] who produces consummate products without imitation [*Nachahmung*]. The original distinguishes himself from others, is distinctive [*karakteristisch*]. An original spirit is 1. one who has no equal, 2. one who is skillful by himself [*durch sich selbst*], not by imitation [*durch Nachahmung*]. [...] the original [...] means only that which does not imitate [*nachahmen*]. (AA, 24:321)¹²

The originality of genius consists in not imitating. Note that this aligns with the third *Critique*: ‘everyone agrees that genius is entirely opposed to the spirit of imitation’ (*Nachahmungsgeist*; CJ, 5:308). This total opposition between having skill by oneself (*durch sich selbst*) and through imitation relies on Kant’s distinction between spontaneity and receptivity, as given in *Anthropology* Pillau:

The talents for skill can be distinguished into natural aptitude and spirit [*Geist*]. The former is passive, the latter active. A human being has a natural aptitude to learn something, which is receptivity [*Receptivitaet*]; but he has the spirit to invent something or to produce it, which is *spontaneity* [*Spontaneitaet*]. (LA, 25:781)¹³

Learning is receptive and passive because ‘learning is nothing but imitation [*Nachahmen*]’ (CJ, 5:308). It is the sole talent required for mechanical art: ‘mechanical art’ is ‘a mere art of diligence and learning’ (CJ, 5:310). In contrast, a genius possesses the talent for beautiful art independently (*durch sich selbst*) and produces spontaneously. Only such free activity is proper to genius; this freedom excludes imitation.

Imitation is even detrimental to genius, as one finds in *Logic Bauch*:

There are [...] rules whose use precedes realization [*Erkenntniß*]- this is imitation [*Nachahmung*] [...] This imitation is very harmful [*schädlich*]. As

11 For Kant, ‘spirit’ is ‘moving force’ (*bewegende Kraft*) and ‘ground for life’ (LA, 25:18).

12 For an alternative translation, see Sanford Budick, *Kant and Milton* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 103.

13 For an examination of the opposition between passive imitation and spontaneity in Kant’s thoughts on history of philosophy, see Robert Piercey, ‘Active Mimesis and the Art of History of Philosophy’, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 43 (2003): 29–42.

long as one is taught in schools by imitation [...] there will be no geniuses, but only imitators [*Nachahmer*], because the spirit of imitation [*der Geist der Nachahmung*] seriously spoils [*verdirbt*] natural talent. Great men, e.g., Leibniz, Wolff, and Milton, have brought about great benefits indeed, but for this reason- because they were great- they have been imitated, and consequently, on this side, they are as detrimental [*nachtheilig*] as they were beneficial on the other side.¹⁴

Imitation is ‘harmful’ because rule-following destroys genius: ‘In aesthetics, it is not good to teach someone according to rules’ since ‘rules constitute criticism and thus, eradicate [*ausrotten*] the natural genius’.¹⁵ Rule-following imitation is harmful (damaging and detrimental; *schädlich*) because it corrupts and ruins (*verderben*) genius. Geniuses are detrimental (*nachtheilig*) for the same reason they are of good use: geniuses urge others to imitate them, and this is the detrimental influence of geniuses over non-geniuses. Intriguingly, Kant even considers the urge to imitate to be itself detrimental because it contributes to the propagation of imitation in schools and art education. When imitation becomes prevalent, it prevents the proper education of geniuses:

[I]f a certain mechanism is introduced into instruction, then genius is thereby suppressed. This is the failing of all our schools, and the reason why few geniuses come out of them. The introduction of mechanism first makes genius dispensable [*entbehrlich*], and finally even causes it to be forfeited [*verlustrig*] [...] one must procure a free exercise for talent; then genius manifests itself. Mechanism arises out of habit, habit first produces facility [*Leichtigkeit*], and afterwards necessity [*Nothwendigkeit*]. (LA, 25:557–58)

This ‘free exercise for talent’ refers to genius’s spontaneity, which Kant contrasts with the unfreedom of necessity. Necessity, such as being compelled to produce according to certain rules, impairs the exercise of genius. Therefore, Kant regards imitation as something to avoid, particularly if one aims to protect one’s genius from its harmful effects.

Taken together, the reading of Kant developed in this section suggests that genius and imitation are not only discontinuous but *must* be discontinuous if genius is to remain genius.

III. GUIDED BY IMITATION: CONTINUITY

In Reflection 778, imitation is necessary for the originality of genius:

Germans are talented imitators [*Nachahmer*]. This designation has a worse reputation than it deserves. Imitation [*Nachahmen*] is entirely something other [*ganz was anderes*] than copying [*copieren*], and it is

14 Kant, *Logik-Vorlesung*, 5–6, my translation. For an alternative translation, see Budick, *Kant and Milton*, 257. With the exception of Budick, Kant’s reflections on Milton have received little attention. For a critique of Budick’s main arguments, see Daniel Shore, ‘Milton and Kant?’, *Milton Quarterly* 48 (2014): 26–38.

15 Kant, *Logik-Vorlesung*, 13, my translation. For an alternative translation, see Budick, *Kant and Milton*, 258.

something other than aping [*nachäffen*]. Imitation [*Nachahmen*] is not as far from genius as one might think. There is no progress of spirit [*Geist*], no invention, without imitating [*nachahmen*] what is already known in a new connection [*Beziehung*] [...]. Imitating examples is the [true] guide [*der wahre Leitfaden*] of the genius [...]. Milton imitated [*nachahmen*] the great poets, but not as a copy [of] the original, but rather as an apprentice [of] the teacher, in order to surpass [*übertreffen*] them. Imitation is the modest and secure course of the genius, who judges the path [*Weg*] it undertakes according to the attempts others have made. There has never been a great master who did not imitate [*nachahmen*] and no invention that cannot [...] be considered as a relation, one that is not similar [*gleichmäßig*] to a precedent [*Vorhergehenden*]. Everything stands under the laws of continuity [*continuität*], and anything that is entirely broken off [*ganzlich abgebrochen*], with a chasm [*Kluft*] established between it and the old, belongs to the realm of fantasy [*Hirnschweberei*]. (AA, 15:340–41)¹⁶

Kant affirms that *Nachahmung* is not only proper but even necessary for a genius to produce a beautiful artwork. In this passage, Kant attributes a different sense to *Nachahmung*: Milton imitates other poets without mechanically following rules but instead imitates ‘in new connections’. This means that, unlike mechanical imitation, this kind of imitation does not exclude originality and freedom.¹⁷ Imitation, then, is not an obstacle to originality but its very condition, since a genius must first apprentice himself to earlier geniuses in order to ‘surpass’ (*übertreffen*) them. In educating oneself in the fine arts, imitation is inevitable. More than this, imitation is necessary to produce an original artwork; otherwise, an artwork has no similarity with the preceding works of art, no precedent (*Vorhergehenden*). If an original poem is devoid of any repetition of rules, then it is completely discontinuous with the entire tradition of poetry, as if it were an absolute rupture like a cleft (*Kluft*).¹⁸ For Kant, this kind of originality is inconceivable because ‘laws of continuity’ apply to everything. Thus, he denies a strict opposition between genius’s originality and imitation. He even asserts that genius must imitate in order to be original for two reasons: (1) imitation is essential for a genius to surpass their masters and (2) imitation ensures continuity between an artist’s invention and a tradition.

In *Anthropology Collins*, the problem of continuity between genius and imitation extends beyond the imitation of other artists:

One may read Milton in the journey of the angel; what one will find in the poet is the manner and way of things, but not things themselves, only their silhouettes [*Schattenbilder*]. He imitates [*nachahmen*] the voice of a virtuous one without being virtuous himself [...]. A poet will not have a character of his own, but he will be very skilled at imitating [*nachahmen*]

16 For an alternative translation, see Gammon, ‘Kant on Genius’, 578.

17 Budick claims that Kant attempts to formulate ‘an original kind of imitation (Milton’s or of Milton)’; Budick, *Kant and Milton*, 257. However, he could not develop this issue sufficiently, as he does not discuss this passage.

18 I am aware that this art-historical notion of (dis)continuity is conceptually distinct from my main problem – the (dis)continuity between genius and imitation. I will later analyse their distinction, their logical relationship, and Kant’s concepts of artistic tradition and convention.

the character of all people and adopting [*annehmen*] their appearance [*Schein*]. (AA, 25:164–65)¹⁹

Milton imitates (*nachahmen*) a virtuous voice without being virtuous himself and imitates the characters of all people without having a character of his own. Here, ‘poet’ refers to the *poetic I*, as Kant would not consider Milton to be without character or virtue. The *poetic I* has no character or attribute, which potentially implies its impartiality. Milton imitates (*nachahmen*) all characters in general through appearances (*Schein*). While *Schein*, in certain contexts, means appearance that does not correspond to reality, in poetry *Schein* is free of deception: ‘[The art of poetry] plays with illusion [*Schein*] [...] without thereby being deceitful’ (CJ, 5:326–27).²⁰ This clarifies that silhouettes (*Schattenbilder*) are appearances in this sense of the term. Milton produces such silhouettes of characters by imitating all characters and presenting appearances and modes of things rather than things themselves. Kant illustrates this through a virtuous action that corresponds to no actual act of virtue. Rather than imitating any real action, Milton’s work conveys the way and manner (*Manier und Art und Weise*) of virtuosity. This requires thorough observation and a deep understanding of characters, which is irreducible to rule-following.

This kind of imitation is compatible with the originality and freedom of genius, distinguishing it from mechanical imitation. This unelaborated notion of free imitation could resolve the contradiction between continuity and discontinuity: if genius does not (and should not) imitate mechanically but instead do so freely, then genius remains continuous with free imitation while being discontinuous with mechanical imitation. However, the third *Critique* precludes such a reconciliation because genius must produce in continuity with mechanical imitation:

[T]here is no beautiful art in which something mechanical, which can be grasped and followed according to rules, and thus something academically correct, does not constitute the essential condition of the art. (CJ, 5:310)

[I]t is not inadvisable to recall that in all liberal arts there is nevertheless required something compulsory [*etwas Zwangsmäßiges*], or, as it is called, a mechanism [*Mechanismus*], without which the spirit, which must be free in the art and which alone animates the work [*das Werk belebt*], would have no body at all and would entirely evaporate (e.g., in the art of poetry, correctness and richness of diction as well as prosody and meter). (CJ, 5:304)

19 In *Anthropology Parow*, one finds a similar claim: ‘A poet possesses no single character, but he must be able to copy [*nachmachen*] and adopt all other characters, just as sealing wax in itself has no particular shape [*Gestalt*] but is capable of adopting all shapes’ (AA, 25:365). I translate *nachmachen* as ‘to copy’ for consistency with other Kant translations; however, ‘to imitate’ would be more appropriate here, as Kant does not adhere to his own distinction between *nachmachen* and *nachahmen*.

20 He also refers to it as *Erscheinigung* besides *Schein* (AA, 25:365). Meerbote provides a reading of deceptive and nondeceptive illusion in Kant; Ralf Meerbote, ‘Introduction to Kant’s “Concerning Sensory Illusion and Poetic Fiction”’, in *Kant’s Latin Writings*, ed. Lewis White Beck (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), 193–201. For the distinctions between deception (*Betrug*), illusion (*Illusion*), and semblance (*Schein*) in Kant’s aesthetic thought, see João Lemos, ‘Kant on the Deceitful Art of Rhetoric’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 65 (2025): 187–203. For deception (*Betrug*) and illusion (*Schein*) in Kant’s ethical writings, see Patrick Frierson, ‘The Moral Importance of Politeness in Kant’s Anthropology’, *Kantian Review* 9 (2005): 115–17.

Genius must follow academic rules; otherwise, the spirit does not materialize and ‘would entirely evaporate’. As Dennis Dutton remarks, academic ‘rules provide a springboard for the activity of genius’, serving as ‘enabling conditions’ for producing beautiful art.²¹ In this sense, imitation provides the body of the spirit, the mechanism of the artwork, and genius’s production is continuous with imitation. Yet this contradicts Kant’s claim that genius produces without imitation, even if the reference is only to mechanical imitation. Beyond describing genius’s activity incoherently, Kant’s position is contradictory at the normative level as well: genius must avoid imitation to remain genius but must imitate to produce an original artwork.

Are these contradictions resolvable? If not, why is Kant’s thought so incoherent regarding imitation and genius? The next section will address these questions.

IV. THE IMPASSE AND FALSE EXITS

Locating this contradiction in the third *Critique* eliminates a potential counterargument that seeks to resolve the inconsistency through a genetic account for how Kant’s thinking developed over time: although Kant maintains a strict opposition between genius and imitation in his earlier writings and notes, his later work reconciles continuity and discontinuity. But is it a plausible suggestion?

Kant explicitly defends the discontinuity between genius and imitation in 1775–1776 (as stated in *Anthropology Friedländer*: ‘imitation is contrary to genius’; LA, 25:557) and again in 1777–1778 (as one finds in *Anthropology Pillau*: ‘if one knows it is imitated, then one regards it only as a machine’; LA, 25:783). As Gammon points out, Kant’s position shifts in the late 1770s, particularly in Reflection 778, where ‘imitation’ is said to be ‘the [true] guide of genius’ (AA, 15:340).²² However, Gammon also argues that the third *Critique* ultimately returns to Kant’s earliest stance, reaffirming the discontinuity between genius and imitation: ‘In the Third Critique, therefore, the artistic genius is precisely accorded the position Kant had earlier repudiated: the genius [...] breaks off from the lines of convention and continuity.’²³ This reduces the interpretation of the third *Critique* to one side of the contradiction I have formulated.²⁴ As I read it,

21 Denis Dutton, ‘Kant and the Conditions of Artistic Beauty’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 34 (1994): 233. As Zammito similarly notes, ‘[t]he mechanical [...] is indispensable in the artist’s creation of a work’; John H. Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 141. This issue extends to Kant’s distinction between free and adherent beauty: while free beauty is ruleless, adherent beauty depends on conceptual rules. Delving into the debate on whether the beauty of an artwork is free or adherent exceeds the scope of this essay. Scarre finds Kant’s distinction vague and argues that an artwork’s free beauty is a necessary condition for its dependent beauty; Geoffrey Scarre, ‘Kant on Free and Dependent Beauty’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 21 (1981): 351–52, 360. For further complications regarding the applicability of Kant’s general conception of free beauty to art, see Robert Stecker, ‘Free Beauty, Dependent Beauty, and Art’, *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 21 (1987): 89–99. For the relationship between *parergon*, free beauty, and adherent beauty, see Martin Gammon, ‘*Parerga* and *Pulchritudo adhaerens*: A Reading of the Third Moment of the “Analytic of the Beautiful”’, *Kant-Studien* 90 (1999): 148–67.

22 Gammon, ‘Kant on Genius’, 577.

23 Ibid.

24 Similarly, though in a less nuanced way, Herrera reduces Kant’s position to discontinuity: ‘Kant declared himself clearly against imitation in art. In this respect he agrees with the critics of classicism’; Mónica Herrera, ‘The Concept of Work of Art and the Failure in the Imitation of the Classics’, in *Recht und Frieden in der Philosophie Kants: Akten des X. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses*, ed. Valerio Rohden et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 627.

Gammon overlooks Kant's claim about the continuity between genius and imitation in the third *Critique*. This text embraces both positions simultaneously: rule-following imitation is entirely opposed to and yet inevitable for genius's art.

Besides this reductive reading of the third *Critique*, Paul Guyer offers a different kind of resolution to the contradiction: he seeks to reconcile continuity with discontinuity. To examine Guyer's argument for their compatibility in detail, I will take a brief detour into the question of artistic tradition in Kant, as this is the context of Guyer's argument. Before doing so, a distinction between different kinds of (dis)continuity is necessary. In Gammon's comment on the third *Critique*, the continuity in question is historical, that is, between genius and artistic tradition. This form of (dis)continuity logically follows from the (dis)continuity between genius and imitation, since how one characterizes the activity of genius determines whether a genius produces in continuity with an artistic tradition.

Kant's main term for artistic tradition is *school* (of art): '[Genius's] example for other good minds gives rise to a school, i.e., a methodical instruction in accordance with rules [...] and for these beautiful art is to that extent imitation [*Nachahmung*]' (CJ, 5:318). As non-geniuses, imitator-artists derive rules from geniuses' works, using them for instruction and artistic production. Kant's primary target here is academic rules for producing an artwork, which in *Menschenkunde* he calls 'conventional rules' (*conventionelle Regeln*): 'The genius is the master of rules, not their slave [*Sclave*]. If rules are merely conventional [*bloß conventionell*], then one can depart from these first.'²⁵ Kant's example is the unity of place as a convention of French theater, from which Shakespeare entirely departs: 'Shakespeare [...] has written his theatrical pieces in such a way that they defy all rules [*allen Regeln Trotz bieten*]' (AA, 25:1057).

These considerations constitute Kant's very minimal engagement with art history. This is where Paul Guyer intervenes to resolve the opposition between genius and imitation. He states that, for Kant, genius's originality is 'freedom from constraint by any rule'; genius transforms artistic standards by providing a new model.²⁶ As Guyer further clarifies, no true originality (exemplary originality) can be achieved unless it can be integrated into society's taste and artistic standards.²⁷ Kant demands both: his radical notion of originality destabilizes the classical canon with its established artistic conventions and standards, but only such stability can guarantee the

25 As Tuna puts it well, for Kant, rules of artistic production extend beyond conventions: '[T]he genius displays originality insofar as the creation of aesthetic ideas comprises not only breaking with the laws of association and the rules of artistic convention but also establishing new associations that have not been imagined by others'; Emine Hande Tuna, 'Kant on Informed Pure Judgments of Taste', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 76 (2018): 169. Appelqvist also interprets Kant through artistic convention; Hanne Appelqvist, 'Beauty and Rules: Kant and Wittgenstein on the Cognitive Relevance of Aesthetics', in *Beauty: New Essays in Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art*, ed. Wolfgang Huemer and Ingrid Vendrell Ferran (Munich: Philosophia, 2019), 43–70.

26 Paul Guyer, 'Autonomy and Integrity in Kant's Aesthetics', *Monist* 66 (1983): 181. Some scholars complicate this picture; for instance, Tuna notes that 'these contrastandard properties, which will become standard with respect to the amplified category or the new category, are constitutive of the aesthetic idea expressed by the work'; Tuna, 'Kant on Informed Pure Judgments', 171. This distinction between standard and contrastandard properties derives from Kendall L. Walton, 'Categories of Art', *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970): 334–67; see esp. 339–40, 352. Within the scope of this paper, I cannot explore Walton-inspired readings of art history in Kant. For details on how Walton's framework aligns with or diverges from Kant's view of tradition and novelty in art, see João Lemos, 'Kant and Recent Philosophies of Art', *Kantian Review* 24 (2021): 567–82.

27 Guyer, 'Autonomy and Integrity', 181.

continuation of tradition. Drawing on this remarkable observation of him, Guyer concludes: '[Kant's] combination of demands cannot be expected to be satisfied by a stable canon of classics. Instead, it can only be expected to produce a history of artistic revolutions, efforts to break the grip on society exerted by the very works which are models for those efforts.'²⁸ He does not refer to Kant's most explicit defense of continuity between tradition and genius (in Reflection 778) but his emphasis on 'artistic revolution' does not exclude continuity either. Such continuity is secured through rule-following – Guyer's examples of the rules that geniuses follow are iambic pentameter and the three-quarter time of the waltz.²⁹ The resolution attempted here is between genius's revolutionary production and *Nachahmung*, affirming that, for Kant, servile rule-following does not threaten genius's originality. If so, continuity and discontinuity apply to his work compatibly.³⁰

To render Kant's thought coherent, Guyer considers imitation as proper to genius: 'So by "imitation" – perhaps not the best translation of *Nachahmung* – Kant does not mean merely replicating what someone else has done, but rather being inspired by the originality of the predecessor or teacher to do something original of one's own.'³¹ It is important to emphasize the radicality of this statement, which blurs Kant's distinction between imitation (*Nachahmung*) and emulation (*Nachfolge*). Owing to his reading of the following controversial passage in § 47, Guyer even questions whether *Nachahmung* should be translated as 'imitation':

Since the gift of nature must give the rule to art (as beautiful art), what sort of rule is this? It cannot be couched in a formula to serve as a precept, for then the judgment about the beautiful would be determinable in accordance with concepts; rather, the rule must be abstracted from the deed, i.e. from the product, against which others may test their own talent, letting it serve them as a model not for copying but for imitation. (CJ, 5:309)³²

In this translation, Guyer and Matthews follow the Akademie edition of Kant's *Collected Works*, where the passage reads: 'not for copying but for imitation' (*nicht der Nachmachung sondern der Nachahmung*; AA, 5:309). In the Meiner edition of the original German text, the phrase appears as 'not for imitation, but for emulation' (*nicht der Nachahmung sondern der Nachfolge*).³³ The source of this disagreement is that, as Pluhar notes in his translation of the third *Critique*, Kant's original manuscript

28 Ibid.

29 Paul Guyer, 'Kant's Theory of Modern Art?', *Kantian Review* 26 (2021): 623.

30 Similarly, Vattimo claims that rule-following is compatible with Kant's conception of art history as discontinuous productions: 'For Kant himself, moreover, this distinction between two kinds of historicity ['discontinuity' and the 'continuous stream of normal history'] exists more in principle than in reality: the genius cannot authentically exist without a sure sense of taste and without the technical ability to produce truly exemplary works which are epoch-making, and therefore technical rules and procedures are for him a necessary link with the history produced by mechanical heads'; Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 94.

31 Guyer, 'Kant's Theory of Modern Art?', 625.

32 I must note that Kant also explicitly states that 'the product of a genius [...] is an example, not for imitation' (CJ, 5:318).

33 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2009), 195.

reads: 'nicht der Nachahmung, sondern der Nachahmung'.³⁴ Assuming that this is a typographical mistake, these two variants represent the main possible corrections. Supporting the Akademie edition, Kieseewetter, Kant's proofreader for the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, notes in a letter from March 1790 that Kant intended to write *Nachmachung* in the first instance (AA, 11:138). In contrast, the Meiner edition interprets the genius as a model of emulation (*Nachfolge*) rather than imitation (*Nachahmung*), which aligns with his argument for the discontinuity between genius and imitators. The Akademie edition and Kieseewetter support the continuity between them, suggesting that, while Kant condemns mere copying (*Nachmachung*), he approves of *Nachahmung*. Jacques Derrida, for instance, interprets Kant in this way and endorses this correction, though he does not mention the manuscript issue: 'The difficult nuance which relates good to bad imitation, good to bad repetition, is briefly encapsulated in the opposition between imitation and copy [*contrefaçon*], between *Nachahmung* and *Nachtmachung* [sic!].'³⁵ Gammon addresses this issue with less certainty than Derrida: 'Kant's difficulty in elaborating this terminological distinction between slavish and "free" imitation is perhaps evident in the first draft he made of this passage.'³⁶ If *Nachahmung* is servile imitation, the Meiner edition better reflects Kant's views; if it signifies 'free' imitation, Guyer's and Derrida's interpretation is correct.

Both positions are present in Kant's writings, including the third *Critique*, without a clear resolution. Both sides have sufficient textual evidence to support their corrections and presumed interpretations.³⁷ I think this is not merely a typographical issue. Rather, Kant's confusion with this passage is a symptom of the contradiction between continuity and discontinuity, primarily between genius and imitation and, consequently, between genius and artistic tradition. In his reading of the third *Critique*, Gammon reduces Kant's position to discontinuity. Guyer, on the other hand, attempts to reconcile the opposition between genius and imitation by selectively reconstructing Kant's notion of imitation. The shortcomings in both approaches strengthen the main argument of this essay: across Kant's corpus, the contradiction between continuity and discontinuity remains irresolvable.

A resolution would require reconciling what Salim Kemal terms 'a romantic rejection of all past forms and standards' with classicism's rule-based conceptions of artistic creation.³⁸ While neither of these generic categories fully captures his position, Kant maintains both that beautiful art is not imitative – that is, it breaks with all rules – and that it must be imitative since rules secure the continuation of tradition. Kant's concept of imitation precludes any reconciliation between these two tendencies. He upholds a hierarchy in which imitation is condemned as mechanical, passive, and servile rule-following, while rule-deviating genius is associated with spontaneity,

34 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 416.

35 Derrida, 'Economimesis', 11.

36 Gammon, 'Kant on Genius', 573.

37 Lewis addresses this manuscript issue, from which the sole conclusion he draws is that there is 'a lack of clarity in his [Kant's] thinking' about how a genius influences future artists; Peter Lewis, "'Original Nonsense": Art and Genius in Kant's Aesthetic', in *Kant and His Influence*, ed. George MacDonald Ross and Tony McWalter (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1990), 133.

38 Salim Kemal, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory: An Introduction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), 136–37. Lewis makes a very similar claim, framing these as 'neo-classical' and 'romantic' notions ("'Original Nonsense'", 127).

activity, freedom, and spiritfulness. His concept of free imitation is irreducible to either side and could transform and subvert this hierarchy, but he never fully articulates this concept, as he remains bound by these oppositions. Any resolution – or dissolution – of this contradiction requires putting into question the very hierarchy and the opposition between the mechanical and the spontaneous, which is constitutive of Kant's concept of genius. Without a radical transformation of his concepts of genius and imitation and their underlying presuppositions, no reconstruction can resolve the contradiction. All reductions and reconstructions remain false exits out of Kant's impasse, which is embedded in his 'condemnation of imitation'.³⁹

Building on these conclusions, the next section will examine the criteria of Kant's distinction between genius and non-genius, which are imitability and deformity.

V. INIMITABLE DEFORMITY: GENIUS AND NON-GENIUS

Reflection 914 implies that imitating Milton's originality is more difficult than imitating someone who lacks originality altogether, such as Klopstock:

What is peculiar [*das Eigentümliche*] to the genius is [that] [...] what [he] accomplishes [*leisten*] could not have been done [*leisten*] by many others but could have happened only through him; the other is called the *vulgar*. Idiosyncrasies [*Eigenheiten*] are adopted manners by which one differs [from others] and which others can copy [*nachmachen*] if they want. [Overly] enthusiastic [*Schwärmende*] manner of writing is of the eccentric [*Sonderling*] but has no originality because many can copy it. The originality of the genius is based on a special disposition of talents that is rarely encountered in another and yet harmonious. Klopstock can be imitated [*nachahmen*] very well, but Milton with difficulty because his images are original. (AA, 15:399–400)⁴⁰

What is unique to genius is the production of beautiful art – 'beautiful art is possible only as a product of genius' (CJ, 5:307). While such activity and achievement are inimitable, the works themselves can be imitated; indeed, Milton's images are imitable, though 'with difficulty'. Milton is difficult to imitate because his images are original, whereas Klopstock's images lack originality because they are easily imitable. The less imitable an artwork is, the more original its images (*Bilder*). This is not simply a binary opposition between the imitable and the inimitable. Kant thus establishes a circular relationship between originality and imitability. Does originality presuppose being not easily imitable, or does the difficulty of imitation merely reflect originality? Kant provides no answer.

Why is it more difficult to imitate original images? In § 49, Kant writes:

But this imitation [*Nachahmung*] becomes aping [*Nachäffung*] if the student copies everything [*alles nachmacht*], even down to that

39 I borrow Derrida's terminology: 'Implied by the whole third Critique, even though the explicit theme, even less the word itself, never appears, this kind of *mimesis* inevitably entails the condemnation of imitation, which is always characterized as being servile' ('Economimesis', 9).

40 For an alternative translation, see Budick, *Kant and Milton*, 15–16.

which the genius had to leave in [zulassen müssen], as a deformity [Mißgestalt], only because it could not easily have been removed without weakening the idea. This courage is a merit only in a genius, and a certain boldness in expression and in general some deviation from the common rule is well suited to him, but is by no means worthy of imitation [nachahmungswürdig], but always remains in itself a defect [Fehler] which one must seek to remove, but for which the genius is as it were privileged, since what is inimitable in the impetus of his spirit [das Unnachahmliche seines Geistesschwunges] would suffer from anxious caution. (CJ, 5:318)

What, then, is the inimitable? As the adjective *unnachahmlich* suggests, it refers to something so unique or incomparable that it defies imitation. The initial clue in this passage is that the inimitable lies in *Geistesschwung*, the force and impetus of the spirit (*Geist*). Yet Kant does not specify what exactly is inimitable within this *Schwung*, leaving the referent of *das Unnachahmliche* undecided. The surrounding context helps clarify the issue: imitation becomes mere aping (*Nachäffung*) when the imitator copies (replicates without changing anything) everything in the genius's artwork. Copying, however, changes the status of genius's inventions. For example, when copied, deformity is a mere error (*Fehler*), though it has a necessary role in the genius's work – since removing it would weaken the (aesthetic) idea. For this reason, it is not 'worthy of imitation' (*nachahmungswürdig*): in the genius's work, a deformity has a function for the idea, whereas in the imitator's it is simply a defect, as deformity is 'in itself a defect' when it lacks a functional role.

The genius alone holds the privilege of what I call *functional deformity*, 'that which the genius had to leave in'. But how, and why, is it functional? No clear answer to this question is to be found in the third *Critique*, as Kant offers no example of such a deformity there. The comparison of Milton with Klopstock, which appears in the *Anthropology* *Mongovius*, however, can be interpreted as precisely that:

The poets have *licentiam poeticam* in that they can invent new words and use audacious expressions. They are allowed to do this in order to compensate [entschädigen] them for the coercion [Zwang] that the syllabic measure imposes on them, but only for the purpose of *genuinely reaching, and not ruining*, the language [um die Sprache wirklich zu erreichen aber nicht zu verhunzen]. Klopstock here makes the error of powerfully *distorting* the language [gewaltig verdreht], but he did not have a literary gift, for he mostly speaks the language of one who is astounded or terrified, and he arouses admiration through sympathy rather than arousing admiration through the depiction of objects, as Milton does. (LA, 25:1282; translation modified)

Rule-deviation compensates for genius's unfreedom, counteracting the threat that servile imitations of poetic meters pose to free art: while rules of syllabic measure impose coercion (*Zwang*) upon the genius, deviations from common rules and the invention of deformities manifest free production. Shakespeare, for instance, breaks with the conventional rule for the unity of place in theater because 'his power of imagination had to have a wider space [weiten Spielraum]' (AA, 25:1057). In the work of a genius, rule-deviation always serves a purpose. A similar double standard applies to invented words: in Milton's work, they allow for a genuine arrival at language (um die Sprache wirklich zu erreichen), meaning they express something better than

existing words. In Klopstock's work, by contrast, they merely 'distort' and 'pervert' language – as the verb *verdrehen* indicates. Whereas in a genius's poetry neologisms form better expressions than common language, in the non-genius's work deformity is not functional and thus remains a mere error.

Although this double standard rests on Kant's decision that Milton is a genius and Klopstock is not, he presents the functionality of deformity as the criterion for distinguishing genius artists from non-genius ones. This reasoning is circular: he offers no textual analysis to demonstrate why deformity functions in Milton's poetry but not in Klopstock's. If, independently from this criterion, it is determinable that Milton is a genius and Klopstock is not, the contrast based on deformity and imitability holds. Otherwise, Kant relies on a presupposed evaluation of their work rather than determining who is genius through an actual study of their poetry. Though I cannot explore this in detail here, I think this stems from Kant's failure to provide experiential criteria for distinguishing the experience of beautiful art from other experiences.⁴¹ In the absence of such criteria, the functionality of deformity and its inimitability take their place. However, these criteria presuppose the very distinction between genius and non-genius they are meant to establish. These vicious circularities – between (in)imitability and originality, and between Kant's decision and its criteria – render the distinction between genius and non-genius inoperative.

For Kant, geniuses are permitted to deform, provided that deformity serves a function. Likewise, productiveness (*Fruchtbarkeit*) grants genius the privilege of being ruleless: 'one cannot claim that rulelessness [*Regellosigkeit*] is a good aspect of genius – no, it was a mistake [*Fehler*]; but the fertility of genius compensates for it' (*die Fruchtbarkeit des Genies ersetzt ihn wieder*; AA, 25:1057). Kant hesitates to endorse genius's discontinuous production without reservation. Even if rulelessness serves genius's fruitfulness, it remains a mistake. Ruleless and deformative production is inherently a defect that must always be counterbalanced. For this reason, he takes compensatory measures each time: rule-deviation compensates for (*entschädigen*) genius's unfreedom, and genius's fertility compensates for (*ersetzen*) rule-deviation. Since rule-deviation must both compensate and be compensated for, Kant simultaneously elevates and degrades discontinuity.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Kant's thought on genius and imitation is irresolvably contradictory on multiple levels: genius both imitates and does not imitate (descriptive of artistic production); genius both must imitate and should not imitate (normative); genius produces both independently from and in continuity with imitators (art-historical). This essay locates these in Kant's general theory of genius and his comments on Milton, Shakespeare, Klopstock, and Michelangelo. At the root of these contradictions lies Kant's opposition between genius's spontaneous activity and mechanical imitation as rule-following. His hierarchical distinction between servile imitation and free originality prevents him from proposing a concept of free imitation, even as his theory of genius requires

41 As Zuckert clarifies, for Kant, the feeling of pleasure is the only 'sign' by which one can decide whether this pleasure arises through personal taste or through harmony of faculties. Only if the latter is the case is it evident that what gives pleasure is beautiful artwork. However, feeling of pleasure itself cannot ensure whether a harmony of faculties initiates it; Rachel Zuckert, 'Is There Kantian Art Criticism?', in *Kant und die Philosophie in weltbürgerlicher Absicht: Akten des XI. Kant-Kongresses*, ed. Stefano Bacin et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 4:335–36.

it. Kant's unelaborated notion of free imitation is an implicit attempt to reconcile genius's freedom with the servility of imitation, which could conclude that genius produces in continuity with free imitation and discontinuously with mechanical imitation. However, his insistence on the necessity of mechanical imitation for genius's production precludes this resolution. Scholarly attempts to either reduce or resolve these contradictions only reinforce my argument: without a radical transformation of Kant's thought, there is no exit from his impasses in reconciling genius with imitation, offering a compatible account of art history, and distinguishing genius from non-genius.

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