

THE POWER OF *MIMESIS* AND THE *MIMESIS* OF POWER: PLATO'S CONCEPT OF IMITATION AND HIS JUDGMENT ON THE VALUE OF POETRY AND THE ARTS

El poder de la mimesis y la mimesis del poder: el concepto de imitación en Platón y su valoración de la poesía y las artes

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Abstract

For Plato *mimesis* is the appearance of the external image of things. In his view, reality was not to be found in the world of the objects but in the realm of the Ideas. Therefore, Plato sees in the arts an occupation that is inferior to science and philosophy, but that is also a potential source of corruption. His concept of imitation, although it evolved throughout time, led him to take an increasingly dogmatic and intolerant position regarding artistic creation. His notion that poetry is morally dangerous establishes the foundations for a didactic critique, which tends to flourish in societies undergoing political crises. Plato wrote his works during an age of instability and decline; an age when the role of Athens as the leading power in the Mediterranean was beginning to be questioned. Through an analysis of *Ion* and Books II, III, and X of *The Republic*, this essay explores the epistemological and moral—rather than aesthetic—nature of Plato's judgment on the value of Poetry and the Arts.

Key words: Plato, *Ion*, *The Republic*, mimesis, poetry, arts.

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Resumen

Platón señala que la mimesis es la apariencia de la imagen exterior de las cosas. Para el filósofo ateniense la realidad no se encontraba en el mundo de los objetos, sino en el ámbito de las Ideas. Por lo tanto Platón ve en las artes una ocupación inferior a la ciencia y la filosofía, pero también una fuente potencial de corrupción. Su concepto de imitación, aunque evolucionó a lo largo del tiempo, le llevó a adoptar en sus últimas obras una posición cada vez más dogmática e intolerante en relación con la literatura y las artes. Su noción de que la poesía es moralmente perniciosa establece las bases para una crítica moral que tiende a florecer en sociedades que atraviesan crisis políticas. Platón escribió sus obras en un periodo de inestabilidad y decadencia, un periodo en el que el liderazgo de Atenas en el Mediterráneo estaba empezando a ser cuestionado. A través de un análisis de *Ion* y de los Libros II, III y X de *La República*, el presente ensayo subraya el carácter epistemológico y moral de la valoración que Platón hace de la poesía y las artes, por encima de cualquier consideración estética.

Palabras clave: Platón, *Ion*, *La República*, mimesis, poesía, artes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Plato belongs to a mimetic tradition that considers art as a copy or imitation of the natural world. The main concern of this tradition is the study of the relationship between art and nature². Plato's theses must be understood within the corpus of his idealistic philosophy. For the Athenian, reality was not to be found in the world of the objects but in the realm of the «Ideas» or «Forms». Plato developed an idealistic doctrine which opposed the permanent ambit of the eternal forms to the mutability of the material world. In this context the artist's goal would be the reproduction of the

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2. M.H. Abrams (1953) distinguishes four basic orientations in the history of literary criticism: the mimetic, the pragmatic, the expressive, and the objective. In mimetic-oriented criticism «the poem is considered an imitation, a representation, or a copy». Although in Plato's dialogues this notion of *mimesis* has a derogatory connotation, it gave rise to a current in criticism intimately associated with philosophical idealism. Generally speaking, «this group of critics regard external objects as a world of mere appearances, of dead matter, to be brought to life only by the mythopoeic power of the philosopher poet» (Selden 1988: 9). Among the authors belonging to the mimetic tradition Adams points to: Plato, Aristotle, Horace, Philostratus, Calvesvetro, Sidney, Mazzoni, Bacon, Hobbes, Corneille, Dryden, Boileau, Pope, Johnson, J. Reynolds, Kant, Schelling, Bradley, Tate, Stevens, Cassier, Vivas, Crane, and Gombrich.

universe of appearances that we perceive through our senses. Access to the superior realm of the Ideas is the exclusive privilege of the philosopher. The artist is simply an imitator of imitators.

Plato's concept of imitation, however, is alterable; nor are his judgments upon the value of poetry and the arts unchanging. If we restrict ourselves to the chronology of his dialogues about the topic (*Ion* and the Books II, III, and X in *The Republic*) we note a progression toward an increasingly dogmatic and intolerant position regarding artistic creation, leading to his final rejection of the imitative arts in Book X³. The paradoxes and contradictions that follow from Plato's opinions on art have led to constant manipulation of his ideas, interfering with an unbiased reading of the dialogues.

2. *ION*: THE POSSESSED ARTIST

The first problem in the exegesis of this dialogue stems from its ironic tone. In *Ion* Socrates ridicules the work of the rhapsodist, a reciter of epic poetry. His goal is to make Ion recognize his ignorance about art and the irrational nature of his activity.

Ion pretends to be the major living expert in Homer's poetry but he admits to being unskilled in other authors' works. Socrates maintains that it is impossible to be knowledgeable about a writer without knowing all authors belonging to a common tradition. Ion cannot know Homer and ignore, at the same time, all which is mentioned in the Greek poet's works. From Socrates' comments, we deduce his refusal to consider the work as an autonomous object, liable to be analyzed as a totality. On the contrary, Plato understands epic poetry as a series of narrations which are imitations of the ideas they refer to. In Socrates' opinion the craftsman is better qualified to discuss this topic. Literature is seen as a collection of pieces comprising different areas of specialization in everyday life. According to Plato, nobody can judge a single aspect of the poem if he or she has not the expertise on that specific matter⁴.

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3. Though there is no conclusive evidence about the dates of composition of Plato's dialogues, Wimsatt and Brooks (1957:5) suggest that *Ion* was one of his early works, written sometime in the first decade of the fourth century, whereas *The Republic*, according to H. Adams (1971:19), was composed about 373 B.C.
 4. As T. Sanders states in his «Introduction to *Ion*,» «Plato therefore concentrated his attacks on the poets at the point at which they (and rhapsodists) are demonstrable most vulnerable: technical expertise» (Plato 1987:44).

In the dialogue, Ion reveals himself as an incompetent technician. His activity, and to a larger extent that of the artist, can only be understood in non-rational terms. Thus, Socrates uses the powerful metaphor of a magnet transmitting divine inspiration. Ion's ability to talk about Homer is not reached through knowledge, but is transmitted by the gods. The Muses inspire the poet, who, in turn, inspires others to share his initial enthusiasm. Thus a chain is formed, allowing, as with the magnet, the final transmission of that divine energy to the audience. From this point of view, poets are but «interpreters of the gods». Although this seems to be a positive commentary at first glance, it is not, in light of Plato's rationalism. The poet is enraptured, out of his senses. He has been carried away from reason, which is the only way of access to the superior realm of the Ideas. Inspiration is equated with a sort of madness, keeping the poet away from the world of reality («Ideas»), sending him wandering in the world of appearances. Although he is able to write poetry, he is not competent to rationalize his activity. From Plato's standpoint, there is no such thing as a technique or an art of poetry, only inspiration. In this way, poetry and philosophy are isolated into two different fields.

This dialogue foreshadows Plato's concept of *mimesis*, which he will develop at length in *The Republic*, Books III and X. The problem of truth in art and literature is already present in the underlying message of *Ion*. Poets must understand the truth as the accurate representation of reality. But, at the same time, this truth is denied to the poet. Poets ignore the truth. The gods inspire them: «your tremendous eulogies of Homer come by divine dispensation, not skill» (536d).

In *Ion*, however, there is no open rejection of poetry, only of the poets. The attack is harsher in *The Republic*⁵. But in both dialogues the underlying motif of Plato's tirade has to be found in its historical context.

3. *THE REPUBLIC: ART AS PRODUCTION OF SIMULACRA*

Plato's most thorough discussion of art appears at the end of the second and the beginning of the third Books, and, more precisely, in the third

5. D.H. Richter offers an enlightening explanation of the contradictory views of art in *Ion* and *The Republic*, regarding the different contexts that the two texts relate to: «In *Republic* Socrates is imagining a perfect state, one that must be designed to run without benefit or chance, luck, or divine intervention. Its rulers must therefore act rightly out of the permanently dependable knowledge, not occasional inspiration. In the *Ion* Socrates is discoursing about the actual world, where poets may be generally foolish and ignorant, but can sometimes be heard to speak holy truths in tongues given them by the gods» (1989:20).

Book of *The Republic*. Book II concerns education. For this reason, the problem of the truthfulness or falsehood of poetry is at the core of this dialogue. Here Plato openly criticizes Homer's work. According to Plato, the ancient poet falsifies the gods' lives, presenting them not as examples of virtue but as models of depravity. The corrupting influence of literature upon the youth and uneducated people moves Socrates to propose the establishment of censorship for the writers of fiction. The great guilt of literature springs from saying what is false, and this falsehood is the direct consequence of wrongly representing the nature of God and the heroes.

In those cases in which the account is truthful but «dangerous» for the education of the young, i.e., when the gods «or heroes» deeds are scabrous, the poet should have recourse to the «mystery» (religious rite) in order to portray them. The scandalous stories reproduced in traditional mythology must not be admitted in the state, whether they have an allegorical meaning or not, since the youth is unable to distinguish what is allegorical from what is not. What should be learned by the students at the early stages of their education are models of virtuous behavior⁶.

In Book II there are also some ideas that prefigure the Platonic concept of «the essential Form of Goodness». Only what is good can be attributable to God (he is not, therefore, the author of everything). Likewise, everything that is good (be it done by art or nature) is less liable to change. Everything belonging to the gods remains completely and forever under the same form. Socrates' words prepare the way for the discussion between the divine and immutable world of the ideas and the world of becoming, which corresponds to the realm of the physical objects and appearances. The concept of God's perfection points in the same direction. Plato's a priori argument is that God is perfect. The behavior of gods and heroes in conventional mythology, in showing imperfections and vices, is fundamentally false. The Platonic attack on Homer's poetry, which is reflected these imperfections, will grow in the following dialogues.

6. As D. Lee suggests in the notes to his translation of Plato's *Republic*, we have to keep in mind the particular idiosyncrasy of education in Plato's times. Before Plato, education in Athens was considered as «a matter of the private individual». In making it a concern for the state, Plato was being innovative (even though there was already a public concept of education in Sparta.) One of the subdivisions of education was literary education, regarded as secondary in rank. It consisted of the study of the works of the poets (main source of Greek theology) and was followed by military training at the age of eighteen. Plato's preoccupations on morality in Homer's poetry are, therefore, explained by the tremendous impact he attributed to it in the education of young people (Plato 1954:129).

Book III opens with a discussion of the topics art should deal with: the singing of virtues such as courage, obedience, and temperance, all showing a utilitarian conception of art in the service of the State. By the middle of the book, a change in Plato's perspective can be detected. After commenting on the subjects for the ideal art, Socrates discusses matters of style at length. According to Plato, narration can be: 1) simple narration, 2) imitation, or 3) a combination of both.

The notion of *mimesis* is first discussed in this book. At this stage, however, Plato does not use it in the same way as in *Ion* or in book X in the *Republic* (imitations as copies of copies of the Platonic ideas), but in order to distinguish narrative techniques. In simple narrative the poet speaks by himself (he does not try to distract us by assuming the voice of the characters). In the case of imitation, on the contrary, the poet tries to make us believe that he speaks not as the poet but as a character. This happens in tragedies and comedies. Finally, there exists the possibility that both narrative models can become integrated in the same work, as is the case in Homer.

In Plato's view nonmimetic discourse is much preferable. On the one hand, Imitation is a low art form; since it destroys human integrity (the imitation ends by converting itself into a habit and becomes second nature). On the other hand, man is unable to imitate many things properly. Anybody who tries to play his assigned role in life successfully cannot attempt to imitate any other role without confronting failure.

The structure of Book III itself shows a division between form and content, in which Plato values the latter over the former. Socrates' discussion is always based on the moral values that can be conveyed through the different kinds of narration. The Platonic contempt for rhetorical artifice and defense of simplicity in style underline, again, the didactic and utilitarian value that Plato grants to literature in his ideal State.

Book X in the *Republic* offers a wider discussion of the concept of *mimesis* in relation to Platonic idealism. The Athenian philosopher now uses *mimesis*, signifying imitation, in the much wider sense of representation as copying reality. In this way, art is restricted to the production of simulacra: the creation of objects that resemble other objects. Plato considers all poetic imitations as ruinous for the audience: hence, his decision to banish the imitative artist from his utopian republic.

But, in order to better understand the interrelation between *mimesis* and the arts, we should examine them in connection with the hierarchy of knowledge proposed by Plato in Book VI. Through the much-discussed

«Myth of the Divided Line», Plato illustrates the four stages of cognition. The lowest of these stages, named *eikasia*, refers to the perception of the external appearances of the objects. The highest stage, *noesis*, allows access to the underlying principles of reality, the Ideas themselves, on which the other modes of cognition depend. The two intermediate levels correspond to the making of material objects (those which serve as a model to the imitative artist) and to the formulation of mathematical principles or other technical activities involving the use of logic.

The confusion originates in deciding if Plato's tirade is directed at art in general, or just at the level described as «mimetic» from the outset. There is a large bibliography supporting both of these alternatives, clearly the result of contradictions existing in the text itself. The ambiguity is even more flagrant if we compare Plato's theses in the *Republic* which those expressed in other works.

Though, at the beginning of Book X, Socrates manifests his refusal to admit imitative poetry and insists that all poetic imitations are ruinous for knowledge, his definitions of imitation and of the artist's activity seem to suggest a rejection of art in general. In his new definition of the concept of *mimesis*, he uses two simple physical objects, a bed and a table, as metaphors to convey his idea: there are many beds and tables in the world, but there is only a single idea of a bed and of a table. The craftsman produces each of these two objects according to an idea, but it is not the idea itself which is produced. There is another kind of artisan: he who seems to reproduce all the objects of all the craftsmen as if he passed a mirror before them. What would appear reflected in the mirror would be mere appearances. But what is produced by this artisan (Plato refers to the poet and the artist) is false: it is not an idea or an object, it is only a simulacrum. Therefore, Plato concludes his metaphoric definition by saying that there would be three beds or tables: one existing in nature (made by God), another created by the carpenter, and a third one which is the copy of an appearance (the one produced by the painter). According to these three activities, the existence of three artists is predicated: God, the craftsman, and the painter. But the painter, unlike the other two, is not a real creator but a simple imitator of imitators.

The notion of the production of simulacra, which characterizes the painter's work, can be extended to the tragic poet: «And so if the tragic poet is an imitator, he too is thrice removed from the truth. So are all other imitators», Socrates says. The painter and the poet try to imitate what already existed in nature. Their creations, if they create at all, are limited

to the production of artifices. Another shortcoming of the artist's work stems from the restricted point of view implied in the process of imitation. Every object is inexhaustible from the point of view of its representation. The artist can only reduce reality to certain points of view (aspects) that never contain the totality. The artist becomes an artisan, producing something superfluous. All the poets, of whom Homer is the first, are only imitators who may copy images of virtue but who have no direct contact with the truth. The craftsman's job is more praiseworthy, since he knows the materials that the artist and the poet ignore. Plato comes to the conclusions that there are three arts that comprise all cases: one which uses, another which makes, and a third one which imitates.

These comments by Plato insist, again, on the utilitarian value of the art that he is searching for in his republic. The important thing is what art is used for; in Plato's scheme, that is the praising of civic virtues. Art, Plato admits, has a magical effect upon us, but this effect translates itself into a weakening of human spirit. In order to counteract such a pernicious effect, Plato proclaims the value of calculus and measure (mathematics), the third of the steps leading to the ideal world of the Forms and Ideas. Everything opposing this is probably an inferior principle of Nature.

4. OTHER VALUATIONS OF ART, OTHER CONCEPTS OF *MIMESIS*

If, in Book X of *The Republic*, *mimesis* is the target of Plato's frontal attack, in all his other works he takes a less derogatory tone when talking about art. What is more, *mimesis* appears as a fundamentally positive value in Plato's theory of education. The education of the character and of the civic spirit, outlined in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, rests heavily upon *mimesis* and mimetic art. Even education for the leader, a severely intellectual discipline, does not preclude the help that *mimesis* can offer. Book III in the *Laws* provides an exhaustive commentary on the importance of the arts in the service of education. According to Plato, the arts are important because they reinforce the discipline of the feelings of pleasure and pain in adult life. The implicit idea is that when we attend a performance, we feel compelled to imitate the performers. Thus, art should represent «good» men in an attractive way and give a scornful portrayal of the «bad». The arts, therefore, affect our moral behavior and personalities but they are not inherently corrupting. In the *Laws* Plato recommends «good use» of the imitative arts, to be regulated by rigid censorship (already discussed in Book II of the *Republic*). One of the criteria in the evaluation of the work

of art is fidelity to the original, taking for granted that the themes relate to the concepts of beauty and goodness⁷.

In his *Plato's Theory of Art* (1953) R.C. Lodge proposes a classification of the concept of *mimesis* as it relates to Plato's judgments on poetry and the arts. Lodge's categorization reproduces the four stages of cognition that Plato discusses in Book VII of his *Republic* in an attempt to synthesize the concept of *mimesis*:

1. The lowest level is the one pertaining to the world of images and conjecture. The artist at this stage imitates, copies or reproduces the superficial appearances of things. He pays attention to what the thing resembles but not to what it really is in itself. The copy can be good, poor, or bad, the latter corresponding with those imitations that fail even at the level of pure mimicry. At rate, the reproduction of superficial appearances remains at the level of *eikasia* (the superficial play of images.) Entertainment art would be an example of this kind of elementary *mimesis*. This art could have a place in the republic, but it would lack any prestige.
2. A step above in the levels of *mimesis* corresponds to craftsmanship. Instead of imitating the superficial aspects of an object, we can produce a fictive replica of it. This kind of art is obviously useful, and Socrates is not critical at all when dealing with it. The artisan plays a worthy part in the ideal state.
3. The poet can also go beyond the copy of the external or physical appearances of an object. He can penetrate deeper into the essence of nature, following a mathematical or quasi-logical system. Thus, the poet becomes a professional artist. A characteristic of *mimesis* at this level is its permeation by the higher kind of reality: the reality of the «idea». The only criterion for the evaluation of art at this stage comes from the writings of the technicians, and especially those of the legislators.

7. The value of mimetic art in Plato's educational project has been analyzed by J.T. Saunders. As he comments in his notes to *The Laws*: «The arts are important because they reinforce this discipline in adult life. The assumption here —a very prominent one in Plato— is that when we enjoy the representation of men and their actions in the various art forms (whether we compose or perform ourselves, or see others performing), we are fired with the desire to imitate them. It is therefore vital that art should portray «good» men attractively and «bad» men unattractively, and if a poem or a play does this it is conforming to «good» and «correct» standards» (Plato 1970:83).

4. The world of the Ideas and the universal principles is the highest level that can be attained by human reason when appropriately endowed and educated. Unlike the empirical truth, which is transitory, variable, and relative to concrete circumstances, ideal beauty is permanent and absolute. Access to this realm of ideal beauty can only be achieved by means of knowledge.

Lodge's subdivision of the stages of *mimesis* has to be understood as an effort to reconcile some of Plato's contradictory theses about the arts with his hierarchy of the mental and physical universe. According to Lodge, *mimesis* and the arts are to be found at all four levels of cognition. What Lodge seems to ignore, however, is one of the most remarkable deficiencies in Plato's thought: his judgment on poetry is based on technological, moral and, above all, philosophical criteria. As E.A. Havelock points out: «this is to degrade the standards of poetic creation by submitting them to criteria which are unworthy or at least improper and irrelevant» (1963:27). Any attempt to see in Plato a theoretician of art is bound to fail. Others besides Havelock have denied any theory of art to Plato⁸. The importance of Plato's writings rests on its potential, i.e., on the fact that they inaugurate «systems or points of view which have become commonplace in the criticism of later ages» (T.S. Dorsch in Aristotle 1965:14)⁹. It will not be until Aristotle that a notion of aesthetics, as a distinct discipline, will be developed.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The concept of *mimesis* as it relates to the valuation of poetry and the arts does not remain constant in Plato's works. Different, if not antithetical, definitions of imitation can be found from one dialogue to another. If the

8. Among those who do not consider Plato's opinions on art as consistent enough to constitute a «theory of aesthetics,» Havelock numbers Wilamowitz, Shorey, Cassirer, and Friedlaender (1963:33-5).

9. Dorsch points out the influence of Plato: 1) On Aristotle's subdivision of genres. The distinction between epic, lyric, and drama is already hinted at in *The Republic*. 2) On the Aristotelian concept of tragedy. In *The Laws* (817) he speaks of the true tragedy as that representing the best and noblest type of life. In *Phaedrus* (268) «pity» and «fear» are the characteristic emotions to be awakened by tragedy. In *Philebus* (47-48) he draws the notion of «tragic pleasure», a very contemporary issue. 3) On other critical matters, such as the nature of comedy (largely commented in *Philebus*), the mannerisms in style (*Symposium*), the misguided methods in criticism (Protagoras), the sensationalism of tragic playwrights and the abuse of the *deus ex machina* in tragedies (*Cratylus*), etc. («Introduction» to Aristotle 1965:14).

target of Plato's attack is a particular kind of art, described as mimetic in *The Republic*, Book III, he extends the scope of the term *mimesis*, and the implied critique, to the total act of representation (Book X).

In Socrates' dialogues, art's seductive power, as well as its artificial qualities, is described. Unlike the beauty of nature, which discloses to us the spectacle of the divine, the beauty of art is unable to reproduce the world of the Ideas. It is an imitation of imitations. The artist creates nothing but simulacra. Plato's point of departure is obviously equivocal. The artist's activity is compared to the craftsman's, the mathematician's, and the philosopher's; however, this comparison is never established as aesthetical, but rather in technological and philosophical terms.

Furthermore, in those dialogues dealing more directly with *mimesis* Plato sees in the arts not just a lower occupation, as compared to science and philosophy, but also a potential source of corruption. The notion that poetry is morally dangerous lays the foundations for a didactic critique, which tends to flourish in societies undergoing political crises. Plato wrote his works during an age of instability and decline for Greece (the first half of the fourth century). By that time the role of Athens as the leading power in the Mediterranean was beginning to be questioned¹⁰. In order to keep the approaching decadence in check, artists, as well as others in society, were required to play an active role in the service of the state. They were compelled to mimic what the establishment wanted them to: heroic virtues and righteous behavior.

In short, Plato's judgment on the value of poetry and the arts is epistemological and moral. It stems from premises that exclude the value of art itself. Plato's concerns are metaphysical, political, educational, but not aesthetical. Art cannot compete in a field which is not its own.

10. J.W.H. Atkins describes accurately what seems to be a paradox at first sight –the flowering of philosophy in Athens coincides with an age of political and artistic decadence: «It was a time of political decline and dissolution, in which nevertheless the intellectual supremacy of Athens was finally established. By the beginning of the century the wonderful flowering-time of Greek art was over, and the creative impulse had practically ceased. An age of reflection followed, in which philosophers and orators were the leading spirits; and with the discovery of the new dialectic which put an end to the earlier speculative thinking, with the perfecting also of an artistic prose, efforts were made to explore the whole realm of knowledge, and incidentally some of the outstanding problems of a literary kind» (1952:33).

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