PLATO

In the introduction to Plato in our textbook, the author mentions the famous statement by the philosopher Alfred Whitehead (1860-1947) that "the history of philosophy is but a series of footnotes to Plato." He goes on to say that what Plato has to say about art is no less important. Plato is famously critical of art. In *The Republic*, Socrates and his friends are not sure whether they should even allow artists into the ideal society, as art is in some ways dangerous. And yet, Plato is an artist in some respects—his dialogues are incomparable dramatic achievements, in which we find he uses many literary devices, especially irony. Despite this, Plato sets up an opposition between philosophy and art that has a profound impact on the development of Western thought. In short, philosophers have the serious task of discovering the truth, while artists play with fictions. Is gaining knowledge and truth (philosophy and the sciences) more important than art? Or can art also be a way of obtaining knowledge?

In the postmodern critique of Plato, begun by Nietzsche and then developed by thinkers like Foucault and Derrida, it is suggested that philosophy cannot really distance itself from art. Nietzsche's response to Plato is to say something like: sorry, Plato, we philosophers have always been artists playing with fiction! Nietzsche uses a metaphor from painting to suggest the philosopher as artist: "Is it not sufficient to assume degrees of apparentness and, as it were, lighter and darker shadows and shades of appearance different "values," to use the language of painters? Why couldn't the world *that concerns us*—be a fiction?"[1] There is a series of binary oppositions which structures Plato's thought and which turns out to be tremendously influential in the development of Western philosophy and culture, beginning with the opposition between *appearance* and *reality*, the *dreamworld* and *waking reality*, *fiction* and *truth*, *art* and *philosophy*. In addition to this, Plato privileges *speech* over *writing*, since in living dialogue there is less chance of miscommunication, more chance to make sure the truth is communicated between the speaker and the listener. Plato puts writing over on the side of the dreamworld, fiction, and art, including painting, as it operates at greater distances, sometimes thousands of years in the case of understanding ancient texts. Nietzsche closes one of his most troubling books, with a reflection about what he has just written, and in this closing address, he raises the question about the status of the philosophical text:

> Alas, what are you after all, my written and painted thoughts! It was not long ago that you were still so colorful, young, and malicious, full of thorns and secret spices—you made me sneeze and laugh—and now? You have already taken off

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 46-47.

> your novelty, and some of you are ready, I fear, to become truths: they already look so immortal, so pathetically decent, so dull! And has it ever been different? What things do we copy, writing and painting, we mandarins with Chinese brushes, we immortalizers of things that can be written—what are the only things we are able to paint?[2]

Here Nietzsche is letting us know that what he has just written goes on the side of writing and painting, subverting Plato's discourse in which philosophy leads out of the dreamworld, upward toward waking reality and truth. Derrida picks up on this, pointing out that Plato, of course, was never able to escape the problem with writing. Although he writes dialogues, in order to get as close as possible to living speech, Plato's dialogues are still written texts. "Now, *on the one hand*, Plato is bent on presenting writing as an occult, and therefore suspect power. Just like painting, to which he will later compare it, and like optical illusions and the techniques of *mīmēsis* in general."[3] Part of Derrida's main project in his work is to point out how the texts of philosophy cannot avoid this problem with writing, and thus the boundary between philosophy and art somewhat collapses or dissolves. This might be regarded as the starting point of postmodern thought. It turns out that in postmodern thought, philosophy becomes more like art, literature, perhaps even painting, while in postmodern art, art becomes even more philosophical. We see this breakdown of the boundary between philosophy and art even in Plato's dialogues. Plato presents a number of views on art, but the dramatic form of Plato's dialogues make it impossible to tell what position is Plato's own.

The Republic

The word "republic" is from Latin: *Res publica,* from *res* ‘concern’ + *publicus* ‘of the people, the public’ thus meaning "public matters" or "the state." In Greek, the title was the *Politeia* (πολιτεία), from *polis* ‘the city,’ organization of, thus *Government* or *Constitution*. Plato’s central concern in the *Republic* is justice—*dikaiosyne* (δικαιοσύνη). In the dialogue, Socrates proposes an analogy between the soul and the state, in which the three parts of the soul—the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive correspond to the three classes of citizens in the state—the rulers, the guardians, and the producers. Plato, of course, thinks the rulers should be rational. It is in Book V of *The Republic* that Socrates makes the famous statement that there will be no end to wars and no peace in the world until either kings become philosophers or philosophers become kings. Much of the dialogue concerns just what philosophy is and thus what the education of the rulers must consist in. Since the rulers will be chosen from the best of the guardians, the education of the guardians becomes crucial.

Book II

Where the selections in our reader begins, Socrates and his friends are discussing the education of the guardians. It is agreed that their education should consists of gymnastics for the body and music for the soul. It turns out that by 'music' they are referring to poetry and literature in addition to music. The stories, or folk songs, would be told with accompanying music. Socrates is worried

[2] Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 236.
[3] Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (1972) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 97.

that these stories can be dangerous, corrupting to young minds, and so the education of the guardian children must be guarded from this corrupting influence. Socrates thus declares "the first thing will be to establish a censorship of the writers of fiction, and let the censors receive any tale of fiction which is good, and reject the bad." It turns out the problem with these writers is "the fault of telling a lie" and Socrates compares this with the problem of painting: "[w]henever an erroneous representation is made of the nature of the gods and heroes,—as when a painter paints a portrait not having the shadow of a likeness to the original." Here, Plato is emphasizing that painting is to be judged by the standard of *mīmēsis*, imitation. The stories Socrates is worried about are like bad paintings, they lie and give a distorted view of the subject, thus corrupting the youth. Socrates thinks that the stories of Homer and Hesiod in which the gods are often quarreling, and doing outrageous things, are dangerous and thus must be censored in the education of the guardians. Plato would include also the poets, especially the tragic poets, the writers of tragedies like Aeschylus and Sophocles. Plato has the view that God has to be wholly good (a view which later shapes the Christian conception of God) and thus cannot be portrayed the way the gods are portrayed in these stories. Since true reality, Socrates assumes, is unchanging, God cannot be portrayed as a magician, changing shapes. Since God is wholly good, the poets lie when they tell stories of gods lying.

Book III

Continuing this discussion about the necessity of censorship, Socrates is worried about the danger art poses to the education of the guardians. These stories will lead them to fear death and lose courage.

> "Then we must assume a control over the narrators of this class of tales as well as over the others, and beg them not simply to revile, but rather to commend the world below, intimating to them that their descriptions are untrue, and will do harm to our future warriors."
>
> "Then, I said, we shall have to obliterate many obnoxious passages…" (17).

Socrates goes on to give some examples of the verses that should be censored, stories that tell of a fearful underworld where souls are but flitting shades. The stories are not bad because they are "unpoetical, or unattractive to the popular ear, but because of the greater poetical charm" (17). They will have to get rid of these stories "of the weepings and wailings of famous men" (18). They will even have to ban laughter: "Neither ought our guardians to be given to laughter . . . persons of worth, even in only mortal men, must not be represented as overcome by laughter" (19).

Then Plato introduces the idea of the Noble Lie:

> "Again truth should be highly valued; if, as we were saying, a lie is useless to the gods, and useful only as a medicine to men, then the use of such medicines should be restricted to physicians; private individuals have no business with them. . .
>
> Then if any one at all is to have the privilege of lying, the rulers of the state should be the persons; and they in their dealings either with enemies or with their own citizens, may be allowed to lie for the public good" (20).

So the rulers can lie to the people for the public good, but for a private person, lying for the public good is even a worse fault than not doing one's duty, as when a sailor doesn't inform his captain about something wrong on the ship. Such a practice is "equally subversive and destructive of ship or State" (20). This perhaps makes one wonder whether Plato's philosophy, his arguments for the immortality of the soul, the vision of truth as ultimately beautiful, even if painful at first, after ascending out of the cave into the bright light of the Sun in the upper world, might all be a noble lie on Plato's part. The guardians must also be educated in temperance, "obedience to commanders, and self-control in sensual pleasure" (20). Socrates goes on to more examples of stories that should be censored:

> "And let us equally refuse to believe, or allow to be repeated, the tale of Theseus son of Poseidon, or of Peirithous son of Zeus, going forth as they did to perpetrate a horrid rape, or of any other hero or son of a god daring to do such impious and dreadful things
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> "We will not have them trying to persuade our youth that the gods are the authors of evil, and that heroes are no better than men−sentiments which, as we were saying, are neither pious nor true"
>
> And further they are likely to have a bad effect on those who hear them; for everybody will begin to excuse his own vices when he is convinced that similar wickedness are always perpetrated by− the kindred of the gods" (22).

The poets also lie when they tell stories in which the wicked end up happy and the good miserable, and "that injustice is profitable when undetected" (23). Then Socrates turns the subject of the discussion from poetry (what is said) to the "style" in which it is presented. For example, in a drama a character may narrate the events or "imitate" them—that is to say, act out the part. There is a problem with tragedy, where actors have to play bad characters, and this might have a negative impact on the actor as well as the audience. So Socrates comes to the question of whether they are even going to allow the performance of tragedies in the ideal state. As both tragedy and comedy are imitative, the question turns on whether or not imitation of any kind is allowed:

> "In saying this, I intend to imply that we must come to an understanding about the mimetic art—whether the poets, in narrating their stories, are to be allowed by us to imitate, and if so, whether in whole or in part, and if the latter, in what parts; or should all imitation be prohibited?" (25).

The only imitation that will be allowed, Socrates leads his friends to agree, is the "imitation of virtue" (28). Here we see the crucial concern with *arête* (ἀρετή), rendered here as "virtue" and elsewhere as "excellence." Socrates and the Sophists shared this primary concern with *arête*, as opposed to the metaphysical speculations of the pre-Socratics. But against the Sophists, who held that "man is the measure of all things," Socrates and Plato were convinced there must be a universal truth of *arête*, a pattern or Form that is the standard or measure. The optimism of Plato's philosophy is that the truth will set one free. If one is able to gain true knowledge, and then know the truth of virtue (*arête*), then the soul will be liberated from the prison of the body and earthly existence and have eternal life. The only imitation that will be allowed is thus imitation of *arête*, but the problem remains how the imitation can be anything more than a poor copy. If art is to be allowed at all, it must at the least aspire to the accurate imitation of *arête*.

There follows a long section on music, what should be allowed and what censored. There is an interesting recognition of the power of music, that it somehow can get deeply into the soul:

> "And therefore, I said, Glaucon, musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward place of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful, or of him who is ill-educated ungraceful…" (32).

Book X

Here we have the famous section on Plato's condemnation of art. Notice how Socrates has to put it: "Speaking in confidence, for I should not like to have my words repeated to the tragedians and the rest of the imitative tribe" (32). Artists would certainly not like to hear his words, as he goes on to say that "all poetical imitation are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers" (32). In order to explain his condemnation of art, Socrates then goes on to inquire into the nature of imitation in general. All art (*tékhnē*), for Plato is *mīmēsis*, but what exactly is *mīmēsis*? Socrates explains by using the common examples of beds and tables. The true, unchanging reality are the Ideas or Forms, and the carpenter makes a bed, imitating the Idea of bed. Being changeable and multiple, each visible bed is a poor copy of the unchanging Idea, and then the painting of the bed is a poor copy of the poor copy. So there are three beds, the Form or Idea of bed made by God, the bed one sleeps in made by a carpenter, and then the painting of the bed. Like the painter, the tragic poet is an imitator, and thus, "like all other imitators, he is thrice removed from the king and the truth" (35). Thus, art is not going to be allowed because, confined to the sensible, visible realm, it can only produce poor copies of poor copies. They are, Socrates explains "but imitations thrice removed from the truth, and could easily be made without any knowledge of the truth, because they are appearances only and not realities" (36).

The chiefest and noblest subjects of his poems concern military tactics, politics, and education, but Socrates asserts that Homer did not really have knowledge of these concerns. The carpenter must at least have some knowledge in order to make a bed, but the painter only paints a poor copy, from a particular perspective, and may not know anything about the making of a real bed. Just so, Socrates argues, Homer is not like the carpenter, only in the second remove from truth, but rather like the painter, thrice removed from truth. Socrates suggests that Homer has not really been able "to educate and improve mankind" (37).

Again, Socrates suggest something about the power of music: "And I think that you must have observed again and again what a poor appearance the tales of poets make when stripped of the colours which music puts upon them" (37).

Whereas the carpenter can at least gain "correct belief" or "true opinion" of the bed, the painter "will have no more true opinion than he will have knowledge about the goodness or badness of his imitations" (38).

Thus the poet, writers of tragedies, are like the painter in two ways: "his creations have an inferior degree of truth...and he is also like him in being concerned with an inferior part of the soul" (42).

But the worst danger is "the power which poetry has of harming even the good" (42). This happens through arising the passions. Whereas men should be *manly*, the poet stirs our feelings, making one more like a *woman*. Poetry, Socrates explains, "feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue" (43).

In summing up, Socrates tells of the "ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (43). If poetry is to be allowed she must prove to be useful, not just pleasant. Socrates warns that we should "not fall away into the childish love of her which captivates the many" (44). Socrates then concludes:

> "At all events we are well aware that poetry being such as we have described is not to be regarded seriously as attaining to the truth; and he who listens to her, fearing for the safety of the city which is within him, should be on his guard against her seductions and make our words his law" (44)