

PLATO THE REPUBLIC (c.370 BCE) III

Plato. The Republic. Trans. Francis Macdonald Cornford. Oxford: OUP, 1941.

Chapter XXXV: How Representation in Art is Related to Truth

In Book III, Plato had urged “not on any account to admit the poetry of dramatic representation” (324), in other words drama, something about which Socrates, notwithstanding his liking for the works of writers like Homer or Sophocles, has his suspicions. Having just “distinguished the several parts of the soul” (324) in Book IV Chapter XIII, this is something about which Socrates feels strongly. The reason for excluding poets, he argues, is that poetry is “injurious to minds which do not possess the antidote in a knowledge of its true nature” (324).

Here, Socrates first turns his attention to the issue of “representation in general” (324), focussing on both the *content* and the *form* of representation. He begins by arguing that it is safe to assume that there is a “single essential nature or form for every set of things which we call by the same name” (325). There are, for instance, “any number of beds or of tables, but only two Forms, one of Bed and one of Table” (325), which each kind of furniture shares. When a craftsman makes either a bed or table, he “has before his mind the Form of one or other of these pieces of furniture” (325). Though pieces of furniture are the work of such workmen, the “Form itself is, of course, not the work of any craftsman” (325). By ‘form,’ or as it is translated elsewhere ‘essence,’ Socrates has in mind not the object’s shape but the essential properties which constitute what the thing (e.g. a bed) by definition is and which differentiates it from other kinds of objects (e.g. tables). Socrates then asks Glaucon to imagine the possibility of having the God-like power to produce in addition to “any kind of artificial thing” (325), “all plants and animals, himself included, and earth and sky and gods and the heavenly bodies and all the things under the earth in Hades” (325), a power that is really not so far-fetched. Socrates suggests that one instrument one could use to accomplish this is a “mirror” (326) which could, when spun around in all directions, in no time at all reproduce all the objects mentioned. Glaucon stresses that what is reproduced in this way would only be “in appearance, but not the actual things” (326). Socrates agrees and says that a “painter is a craftsman of that kind” (326) who, like the mirror, reproduces the appearances of things but not the things themselves.

Even the craftsman, Socrates emphasises, who makes a particular bed produces “not the reality, but only something that resembles it” (326), that is, “not what we call the Form or essential nature of Bed” (326) but a reflection of this Form. An “actual bed is a somewhat shadowy thing as compared with reality” (326). Socrates summarises:

We have here three sorts of bed: one which exists in the nature of things and which . . . we could only describe as a product of divine workmanship; another made by the carpenter; and a third by the painter. (326)

God, he argues, “made only one ideal or essential bed” (326) after which the material beds are patterned. He is the “author of the true nature of Bed” (327) and all his works constitute the true nature of things” (327). The carpenter is the “manufacturer of a bed” (327) while the painter is the artist who “represents the things which the other two make” (327). The “work of the artist” (327), Socrates concludes, is therefore “at a third remove from the essential nature of the thing” (327). Because the tragic poet is also an “artist who represents things” (327), albeit in a form different from the painting, this will also apply to him: “he and all other artists are, as it were, at a third remove from the throne of truth” (327). To put this another way, the artist (painter or writer) seeks to “represent” (327) not the “reality that exists in the nature of things” (327) but the “products of the craftsman” (327) and of nature

(trees, mountains, etc.) as these appear to the onlooker.

Socrates' point is that art aims at reproducing an object not "as it is" (328) but the "appearance of it as it looks" (328). It is not a "representation of the truth" (328) but "of a semblance" (328). This is why, he argues, art is "a long way from reality" (328). Moreover, Socrates argues, there is a "reason why there is nothing it [art] cannot reproduce" (328): "it grasps only a small part of any object, and that only an image" (328). A painter may paint a picture of a shoemaker, for example, or other craftsman at work "without understanding any one of their crafts" (328). This is why Socrates resents the claim often made that poets like Homer "understand not only technical matters but also all about human conduct, good or bad, and about religion; for, to write well, a good poet, so they say, must know his subject; otherwise he could not write about it" (329). Art, he contends, "is at the third remove from the truth, nothing more than semblances, easy to produce with no knowledge of the truth" (329). Artists have no "real mastery of the matters on which the public thinks they discourse so well" (329) for the simple reason, he contends, that "if a man were able to do the things he represents as well as to produce images of them" (329), he would not "seriously give himself up to making these images and take that as a completely satisfying object in life" (329): the "memorials he would try to leave after him would be noble deeds, and he would be more eager to be the hero whose praises are sung than the poet who sings them" (329).

Socrates then asks a famous question of the archetypal poet Homer:

If your knowledge of all that concerns human existence was really such as to raise you above him to the second rank, and you could tell what courses of conduct will make men better or worse as individuals or as citizens, can you name any country which was better governed thanks to your efforts? (329-330)

The answer implied to this rhetorical question is no, leading Socrates to conclude:

all poetry, from Homer onwards, consists in representing a semblance of its subject, whatever it may be, including any kind of human excellence, with no grasp of the reality. . . . [T]he poet, knowing nothing more than how to represent appearances, can paint in words his picture of any craftsman so as to impress an audience which is equally ignorant and judges only by the form of expression; the inherent charm of metre, rhythm, and musical setting is enough to make them think he has discoursed admirably about generalship or shoemaking or any other technical subject. (331)

The audience, he argues, is seduced by the form of art and is thereby misled into thinking that the artist has some deep knowledge of his subject matter. He concludes: "Strip what the poet has to say of its poetical colouring, and I think you must have seen what it comes to in plain prose. It is like a face which was never really handsome, when it has lost the fresh bloom of youth" (331).

This failing is worsened, Socrates argues, by the fact that there is a difference between the "art of using it, the art of making it, and the art of representing it" (332), that is, the manufacture and representation of an object and the use to which it is put. He is of the view that neither the craftsman who makes a bridle nor the painter who paints its picture knows as much about it as the horseman who must use it. From this it follows, he argues, that the "excellence or beauty or rightness of any implement or living creature or action has reference to the use for which it is made or designed by nature" (332). The "user must know most about the performance of the thing he uses and must report on its good or bad points to the maker" (332). This is not the case with the artist, however:

Has he either knowledge or correct belief? Does he know from direct experience of the subjects he portrays whether his representations are good and right or not? Has he even gained a correct belief by being obliged to listen

to someone who does know and can tell him how they ought to be represented?
 . . . If the artist, then, has neither knowledge nor even a correct belief about the soundness of his work, what becomes of the poet's wisdom in respect of the subjects of his poetry?

However, the artist's ignorance fails to stop him from seeking to represent things which he know nothing about, "reproducing only what pleases the taste or wins the approval of the ignorant multitude" (333). He concludes that the artist "knows nothing worth mentioning about the subject he represents, and that art is a form of play, not to be taken seriously" (333).

Chapter XXXVI: Dramatic Poetry Appeals to the Emotions, Not to the Reason

Having established that the "content of . . . poetical representation is something at the third remove from reality" (334), Socrates then turns his attention to the question of its impact on the audience: "On what part of our human nature . . . does it produce its effect?" he asks.

In answer to his own question, Socrates asserts that appearances can be deceiving in that, for example, an "object seen at a distance does not look . . . the same size as when it is close to hand; a straight stick looks bent when part of it is under water, and the same thing appears concave or convex to an eye misled by colours" (334). His point is that every "sort of confusion like these is to be found in our minds; and it is this weakness in our nature that is exploited . . . by many tricks of illusion, like scene-painting and conjuring" (334). In other words, it is our empirical senses (our sense of sight, smell and so forth) which can be deceived in this way as opposed to our reason or logical side (what he calls the "calculating or reasoning element in our soul" [334]) which is responsible, through mathematics and related skills, "for dispelling these illusions by measuring, counting, and weighing. We are no longer at the mercy of apparent differences of size and quantity and weight; the faculty which has done the counting and measuring or weighing takes control instead" (334).

There exists, in short, most often a conflict between what is reported by the senses and what our reason concludes: "when this faculty has done its measuring and announced that one quantity is greater than, or equal to, another, we often find that there is an appearance which contradicts it" (334). This leads Socrates to speculate on the divided nature of human beings, positing the existence of at least two parts on the grounds that

it is impossible for the same part of the soul to hold two contradictory beliefs at the same time. Hence the part which agrees with the measurements [the reason] must be a different part from the one which goes against them [the senses]; and its confidence in measurement and calculation is a proof of its being the highest part; the other which contradicts it must be an inferior one. (334)

Socrates theorises that it is the latter "element in our nature which is accessible to art and responds to its advances" (335), something "true not only of visual art, but of art addressed to the ear, poetry as we call it" (335).

Socrates then turns his attention to "that part of the mind to which the dramatic element in poetry appeals" (335). He contends that drama represents the acts and fortunes of human beings. It is wholly concerned with what they do, voluntarily or against their will, and how they fare, with the consequences which they regard as happy or otherwise, and with their feelings of joy and sorrow in all these experiences. (335)

The question consequently arises: how does the audience react to these ups and downs portrayed? In "all these experiences has a man an undivided mind?" he asks. "Is there not an internal conflict which sets him at odds with himself in his conduct, much as we were

saying that the conflict of visual impressions leads him to contradictory judgements?" (335).

Socrates considers in this regard the example of a "man of high character who will bear any stroke of fortune, such as the loss of a son or anything else he holds dear, with more equanimity than most people" (335), especially in the "presence of others" (336). He argues that what

encourages him to resist his grief is the lawful authority of reason, while the impulse to give way comes from the feeling itself; and, as we have said, the presence of contradictory impulses proves that two distinct elements in his nature must be involved. One of them is law-abiding, prepared to listen to the authority which declares that it is best to bear misfortune as quietly as possible without resentment, for several reasons. . . . By this I mean reflection on what has happened, letting reason decide on the best move in the game of life that the fall of the dice permits. Instead of behaving like a child who goes on shrieking after a fall and hugging the wounded part, we should accustom the mind to set itself at once to raise up the fallen and cure the hurt, banishing lamentation with a healing touch. (336)

That "part of us which is ready to act upon these reflections is the highest" (336) while "that other part which impels us to dwell upon our sufferings is unreasonable, craven, and faint-hearted" (336).

It is this "fretful temper" (336) which "gives scope for a great diversity of dramatic representation; whereas the calm and wise character in its unvarying constancy is not easy to represent, nor when represented is it readily understood" (336) by a "promiscuous gathering in a theatre, since it is foreign to their habit of mind" (336). This "steadfast disposition does not naturally attract the dramatic poet" (336) who "must address himself to the fretful type with its rich variety of material for representation" (336). Socrates concludes that the poet is like the painter in that

his creations are poor things by the standard of truth and reality, and his appeal is not to the highest part of the soul, but to one which is equally inferior. So we shall be justified in not admitting him into a well-ordered commonwealth, because he stimulates and strengthens an element which threatens to undermine the reason. As a country may be given over into the power of its worst citizens while the better sort are ruined, so, shall we say, the dramatic poet sets up a vicious form of government in the individual soul: he gratifies that senseless part which cannot distinguish great and small, but regard the same things as now one, now the other; and he is an image-maker whose images are phantoms far removed from reality. (337)

In short, drama "has a most formidable power of corrupting even men of high character" (337).

Chapter XXXVII: The Effect of Dramatic Poetry on the Character

Socrates is concerned with the fact that the audience is encouraged to identify emotionally with the sufferings depicted on stage in tragedies:

When we listen to some hero in Homer or on the tragic stage moaning over his sorrows in a long tirade, or to a chorus beating their breasts as they chant a lament, you know the best of us enjoy giving ourselves up to follow the performance with eager sympathy. The more a poet can move our feelings in this way, the better we think of him. And yet when the sorrow is our own, we pride ourselves on being able to bear it quietly like a man, condemning the behaviour we admired in the theatre as womanish. (338)

The reason for this is that the poet “ministers to the satisfaction of the very part of our nature whose instinctive hunger to have its fill of tears and lamentations is forcibly restrained in the case of our own misfortunes” (338). He causes the “noblest part of us, insufficiently schooled by reason or habit” (338) to relax its “watch over these querulous feelings” (338). Few, he argues, ‘are capable of reflecting that to enter into another’s feelings must have an effect on our own: the emotions of pity our sympathy has strengthened will not be easy to restrain when we are suffering ourselves” (338).

The same thing applies to comedies as well where humour has the effect of stirring up feelings and inducing behaviour otherwise best suppressed:

There is in you an impulse to play the clown, which you have held in restraint from a reasonable fear of being set down as a buffoon; but now you have given it rein, and by encouraging its impudence in the theatre you may be unconsciously carried away into playing the comedian in your private life. Similar effects are produced by poetic representations of love and anger and all those desires and feelings of pleasure and pain which accompany our every action. (338)

Poetry “waters the growth of passions which should be allowed to wither away and sets them up in control, although the goodness and happiness of our lives depend on their being held in subjection” (338-339).

This is why Socrates encourages Glaucon to ignore those “admirers of Homer” (339) who claim that he is the “educator of Hellas and that on questions of human conduct and culture he deserves to be constantly studied as a guide by whom to regulate your whole life” (339). He advocates literary censorship: “we can admit into our commonwealth only the poetry which celebrates the praises of gods and of good men” (339). To allow the “honeyed muse in epic or lyric verse” (339) to remain will mean that “pleasure and pain will usurp the sovereignty of law and of the principles always recognised by common consent as the best” (339). However, Socrates leaves the door open for the readmission of poetry into his ideal state, saying that “if the dramatic poetry whose end is to give pleasure can show good reason why it should exist in a well-governed society, we for our part should welcome it back, being ourselves conscious of its charm” (339):

before returning from exile poetry should publish her defence in lyric verse or some other measure; and I suppose we should allow her champions who love poetry but are not poets to plead for her in prose, that she is not mere source of pleasure but a benefit to society and to human life. (339-340)

Sir Philip Sidney, like many others, would attempt later to do just that by writing a defence of poetry.