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A Possible Ambivalence in Plato's Approach to *Mimesis* and Poetry

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ABSTRACT. This paper explores the complexity of Plato's approach to *mimesis* and poetry, focusing on his critique in *Republic* Books II, III, and X. While Plato dismisses poetry as ethically and epistemologically flawed, his arguments reveal a deeper tension between philosophy and artistic representation. Through an analysis of Plato's tripartite division of reality, the critique of imitation, and the ethical concerns surrounding poetry's influence, the paper examines whether his rejection of art is absolute or if it leaves room for an alternative poetic function. Drawing on Stephen Halliwell's interpretation, the study highlights how Plato's stance is shaped by a broader philosophical concern with truth, knowledge, and the role of art in society. The analysis considers whether Plato's discussion of *mimesis* is not merely an attack on art but part of a larger philosophical negotiation over the intersection of aesthetics, morality, and epistemology.

Keywords: Plato, *mimesis*, ethics, poetry, epistemology

Introduction

Plato's *Republic* is widely regarded as the most comprehensive work of his middle years, which focuses on some of the most fundamental problems of his philosophy and of philosophy in general: ethics, moral psychology, political philosophy, metaphysics, education and art. Beyond these fundamental topics, the dialogue's method itself is significant. The form of dialogues in which fors and againsts are brought to each topic by passionate participants truly involved in debating these issues, established a model for how academic philosophy should be approached and practiced.

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Reading this text offers us at least two advantages in matter of alternative conceptualisations of philosophy itself: "a Socratic conception of philosophy as a reasoned examination of our own and others' beliefs about how we should live, and a more comprehensive and constructive effort to build theories that can help us understand the world around us and our place in it"[1]

One of the striking aspects of the *Republic* is the extensive discussion of poetry, particularly in two substantial passages in Books II, III, and X. This placement of poetry within what is primarily a political work is itself unexpected, as poetry is generally associated with personal experience rather than the broader concerns of governance and societal structure. Even though the main topic seems to be one regarding political theory and the nature of justice, Plato's interest in poetry shows us how much of the public space poetry occupied in classical Greek culture, and the importance it has for the ›polis-model‹ itself. The parallelism between the soul and the city is present in the whole book and it is the reason why the dialogues encompass this wide variety of topics.

We generally hear two things about the *Republic*, in popular culture to say the least: that Plato outlines an extremely authoritarian state in this text, and that he kicks the poets out of the city imagined by him. By analyzing the text of Books II, III and X, I hope to be able to offer at least some insights into what Plato's position actually was. Is his approach really regrettable, or is the way in which it is interpreted arguable? One important thing comes to be understood if we parse the whole dialogue. Plato does not set out to offer an ideal type of state, but rather an ideal type of human.

In this paper I want to discuss the reason why Plato made imitation the general principle of art and the way in which he theorized this. I will take into account the fact that most of the modern criticism of Plato in relation to this theme has as its main reasoning the fact that Plato's rationalism prevents him from recognizing a specific character of artistic creation. Considering the critique he brings to poetry, I will see if we are really entitled to impute to Plato the fact that he relates to art within a ›framework of scientificity‹, expecting from art the same ›fidelity‹ in terms of imitation of nature: "He is said to have forgotten that true art does not copy an existing reality, but that it creates a new reality arising from the artist's own phantasy, and that it is the spontaneous character of this expression which guarantees the independent value of purely aesthetic qualities"[2].

[1] Gerasimos Santas, *Understanding Plato's Republic*, New-Jersey: Willey-Blackwell, 2010, p.1.
[2] Willem Jacob Verdenius, *Plato's doctrine of artistic imitation and its meaning to us*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962, p. 2.

Plato's first criticism of poetry is expressed in Books II and III and focuses primarily on the influence that poetry has on the youth, on the minds of those who are in a fragile phase of development, at a stage of life where these future guardians of the city are more easily influenced. Plato argues that young people should be exposed from an early age only to stories that instill in them a desire for virtue and a balanced life, because these stories heard so early in life have the capacity to sediment values that are difficult to displace: "Don't you know that the beginning is the most important part of every work and that this is especially so with anything young and tender? For at that stage it's most plastic, and each thing assimilates itself to the model whose stamp anyone wishes to give to it."[3]

1. The Muse and the metaphysical aspect of *mimesis*

W. J. Verdenius considers two key questions essential to understanding Plato's theory of aesthetics: whether Plato regarded imitation as merely a servile replication and whether modern critics are justified in rejecting the imitative approach in art, which is fundamentally rooted in phantasy.

In some of his texts, Plato speaks of the type of inspiration that poets have, when they feel the urge to create. He says the god takes the minds of poets and uses them as a means to convey something to other people, so that when they hear it, they do not hear the poet but the god himself. He is perceived as the one who addresses the hearer through the poet's mouth and not the poet himself. Inspiration is not just simply given to the poet, like a gift, but is a compelling force, to be followed blindly, which is completely withdrawn from his control: "This induces us to interpret his sitting on the tripod of the Muse mentioned above in a more literal sense than our modern outlook might be inclined to do. Exactly like the Delphic priestess he opens himself so fully to his Muse that her inspiration pervades him entirely and takes complete possession of him"[4] The poet is seen as the one who only transmits what the god dictates to him. How is it possible then, this being the case, that a god deceives himself or inspires the poet with things that are *not virtuous*? A possible theory would be to contend, on the one hand, that the poet erroneously conveys what the god inspires him. On the other hand, it can also mean that his state is not entirely possessed by the god: the Muse or the god does not completely, but only partially, direct his thoughts, thus leaving room for the poet's own interpretation or addition.

[3] Plato, *The Republic,* trans. Allan Bloom, New york: Basic Books, 1968, 377a-b.
[4] W. J. Verdenius, p.4.

Plato wants to emphasize the poet's dependence on the Muse, but does not insinuate that he is only a vehicle through which one is spoken. The poet does not lose his human will and character he once had. Verdenius makes a relevant connection in this regard, interrelating passages from *Ion* and *The Laws*.[5] If we look at these passages we notice that Plato calls the poet an *›interpreter‹*. Divine inspiration can only reach people through the *›interpretation‹* of the poet. Thus, although a poem is perceived as something beyond human control, its form is not the result of the mechanical reproduction of a divine message, but is the result of the encounter between the divine and the human.

Interpretation, however, is the process that depends on human activity and therefore any imperfection will be attributed to the poet, and to his human weakness, not to the god. Plato says that, in some sense, the poet doesn't know what he is talking about, in that, he is not aware of the *weight* of his own words. He lacks truly grounded knowledge: "Being absorbed in a flow of successive impressions he is unaware of their general connections and implications, for his state of possession precludes him from passing an independent judgment on the images which present themselves to his mind. He can only register these images without deliberately arranging them into a well considered whole"[6] Plato argues that in our relation to poetry, and in the process of interpreting the meaning it conveys, we should not search and we should not expect to be able to to extract paradigmatic truths from it. It is precisely around this insufficiency, that Plato will construct his theory of art, in an attempt to overcome the lack of knowledge. Can we see in this approach signs of a systematic view on art?

It is often said, especially in modern research, that Plato's theory of art is constantly disguised underneath his interest in the rational well being of poetry listeners, or in his interest in the pedagogical effect of art in general. These points might lead the way to uncover what might constitute ›the systemic‹ in Platons approach to art. One might say, on the contrary, that one could not speak of a theoretical system of art in Plato's philosophy. Plato's aesthetics might not be espressed in a systematic manner, but this is characteristic of his dialogical approach to philosophy. The fact that a certain kind of knowledge is not conveyed in a systematic way, does not necessarily imply that the knowledge in question cannot be inherently systematic.

In order to gain a clear perspective of how Plato relates to a particular type of art or aesthetics, we have to construct a theory in a systematic way, by gathering information from several dialogues by ourselves that deal with these issues. In the book mentioned earlier, Verdenius offers some examples of how Plato saw the poet's

[5] Ibidem, p. 5.
[6] Ibidem, p. 6.

relationship with Muse, even though we will not dwell too much on the theme of inspiration. Although Plato does not reject the idea of divine inspiration in the poet's creative process in any of his textx, irony is not absent from his discourse when referring to it (especially in *Ion* and *Meno* 99d-c). The poet is guided by this Muse in order to be able to *imitate* situations and experiences from ordinary life that people face within the polis. Why does he need to be guided? Because, Verdenius concludes, the Muse wishes for the poet to express something that is more than the simple, immediately palpable reality of everyday life. If the bare representation of everyday life as it unfolds were the sole purpose of imitation, then the possibility that it would be able to deliver something questioning and resourceful would be out of the question.

Why does Plato, in this situation, then speak of the poet contradicting himself? Can this be possible if his art is based on imitation? One might think that imitation and contradiction are mutually exclusive. That the poet fails in his endeavor, is because art also refers to something that is not directly observable or describable. It refers to something universal with regard to life, to the ultimate principles of human character and actions:

> These [the ultimate principles] lie so far from his natural range of thought that he needs the help of divine inspiration. Unfortunately, the ecstatical condition which brings him into contact with the Muse also precludes him from fully understanding her intentions. He can only register his impressions, or in other words, imitate the images which present themselves to his mind. Consequently, his representations are lacking in articulateness: they remain tentative suggestions, in which the general and the particular, the abstract and the concrete, the essential and the accidental are blended so much that the work taken as a whole appears to be inconsistent[7].

Considering the contribution of the poet's relationship with the muse, we can conclude that in Verdenius' analysis, poetic imitation cannot be a faithful copy of nature and its principles. It remains permanently *incomplete* and defective because it takes as its object of representation something that is only partially familiar: "Imitation implies transformation, and transformation implies confusion, if it is determined by a sphere of reality (in this case, the poetical mind) inferior to its object. This conception has its roots in the general spirit of Plato's philosophy. The world is called a divine work of art (Tim. 28a-29a, 37c)" [8]

[7] Ibidem, p. 13.
[8] Ibidem.

Thus, the world itself is an image of "something else", an imitation of something superior that seems not to be entirely encompassed in the process of artistic creation. We can speak of the metaphysical character of artistic imitation, which does not simply reproduce the world, itslef already an imitation, but encounters the principles mentioned above. It seems that Plato does not reject the idea of divine inspiration in the process of the creation of representational art precisely because this would further emphasize his conviction in Books II, III and X of the *Republic* that imitative art is neither founded on knowledge nor does it transmit knowledge through any of the forms in which it is represented.

Although the concept of inspiration does not receive particular attention in consistent passages in Plato's work, the fact that it is not clearly refuted does lend some support to the criticism it makes of the lack of rational knowledge in poetry. For this and other aspects related to the concept of *mimesis* we will focus further on the texts of the *Republic*, with emphasis on the Book X, where reality is structured in three levels: ideal forms, visible objects and images.

The subject matter of this book can be divided into three categories: (1) a new discussion of poetry, an art form that used to be analyzed earlier, in Books II and III, strictly according to the level of education it offered, (2) an argument for the immortality of the soul and (3) the myth of Er. I will not insist much on a thorough analysis of these other two books. Some of the basic ideas found in them are however useful for the understanding of the new considerations on mimetic / representational art, that are set out in Book X.

2. The ethical focus of the socratic critique of poetry

In his book, *Plato Republic 10,* Stephen Halliwell explains that Plato returned to the subject of poetry in Book X simply because of the internal structure of the *Republic*, even though the relation between this Book and Books II-III could be placed in a wider Platonic perspective. In analyzing the Platonic approach to poetry it is important to further consider elements of Socratic influence.

Socrates appears in several dialogues as a great connoisseur of poetry, especially the poetry of Homer, which he often refers to in his philosophical debates. And we can see that Plato continues to attribute this characteristic to Socrates in many dialogues, including Book X of the *Republic*. This means that we can insinuate a genuine interest of Plato towards poetry, awoken through the persona of Socrates. On the contrary, Socrates views poets with a certain skepticism, and if we look at the passages outlined by Halliwell (*Ion* and *Meno* 99c-d), we are forced to note that Socrates spoke with some irony about the inspiration of poets. The fact that they

could not justify in a rational way the method by which they created poetry, led to the conclusion that their knowledge has an irrational source of inspiration. However, in Book X this topic does not appear at all: "It should be added that poets' lack of rationally accountable knowledge helps to explain the belief, probably in part Socratic (for it fits with his sense of personal dialectic), that consistent *interpretation* of poetry is impossible: for this view see *Prt.* 347c-e, *Ion* again, *Hp. Min.* 365c-d, and the irony regarding Simonides at *Rep.* 1.332b-c"[9].

Plato connects the mimetic form of poetry to the development of human character through habituation in *Republic* Books II and III. As a result, it argues that the future guardians of the city should be exposed only to mimetic poetry that represents virtue. Here, the question posed ultimately leads to an inquiry into the ontology of poetry: why should anyone, in a just society, be exposed to anything other than this kind of ›virtuous‹ poetry? Why is there a need for poetry and art in general, if the main purpose is not ethical formation in all cases? The focus has thus shifted from imitation to character formation, a relation which has to be further examined. This criticism may sound like a radical attack on works of art in general, or a kind of puritanism, in which Plato reclaims the necessity of an ethical impact of poetry. At this point it is appropriate to closer examine the argument Plato expresses in Book X.

One implication of the criticism in this book concerns the need to separate the ethical meaning of the poetic message from its technical quality as *mimesis*. The problematization implied by the aforementioned idea of an ontology of poetry thus dwells on the need to judge poetry according to ethical criteria and on the question of whether *mimesis* itself could be a medium embodying or communicating knowledge.

As we can see in Books II and III, the Socratic critique of poetry has a strong ethical focus. This will remain at the basis of Plato's hostility towards poetry: "If poets purvey ethical falsehoods, not only are they deserving of philosophical rebuttal, but their status as central material in Greek education becomes questionable"[10]. Plato's fear is that the aim of poets is to please the audience, to captivate them with the most shocking or interesting things, and that in pursuing this aim they would always be prepared to sacrifice any ethical standards: "Plato associates the essential pleasure of poetry with the indulgence of our lower emotional nature"[11].

In Books II and III Plato argues that those who are exposed to poetry in direct discourse go through a process of imaginative identification with the moods that poetry conveys, which is detrimental, as it will influence their behavior, whether

[9] Stephen Halliwell, *Plato Republic 10,* United Kingdom: Oxbow Books, 2005, p. 4.
[10] Ibidem.
[11] Ibidem, commentary on the passage 606b, p. 148.

we are talking about the performer, the listener, or the reader. In Book X the attack on *mimesis* is even more radical. It argues that the influence poetry will have is no longer a matter of producing immediate experiences or feelings. It will have a permanent effect on the mind and behavior of those who expose themselves to poetry (606b5-8). This is the main addition brought in Book X, in comparison to books II and III, where the impact of poetry was presented as immediate but short lived.

The arguments presented in Books II and III - such as falsity, immorality, and poetry's powerful psychological impact - are later revisited in Book X, where they serve as the foundation for an even stricter rejection. More emphasis is placed on the concept of *mimesis*, mentioned only peripherally in the previous Books. Book X thus proposes a new analysis of the concept of *mimesis* and the implications that mimetic art can thus have: "Mimesis is now judged to be *inherently* false or fake, rather than simply capable of conveying falsehoods (which was the suggestion in bks.2-3)"[12]

3. Reality and simulacra: *mimesis* as illusion

Socrates insists on bringing forth his arguments against poetry in a direct, provocative, or even annoying way. Halliwell remarks that it might be worth seriously considering why Socrates has this kind of insistent and perhaps slightly exaggerated discourse. One possible function of his style, Halliwell argues, would be to incentivize poetry lovers to think more rigorously about the value they place on poetry. The challenge that Socrates sets forth is all the greater, because at first glance the reasons for which poetry is enjoyed seem all too obvious, and thus masks the underlying philosophical meaning. To this purpose, following Halliwell's line of argument, we will continue the analysis of the concept of *mimesis* by relating art to reality and to the mind. What, then, is the relationship between our experience of art and our other experiences of the world in general? What is the relationship between art and the reality that surrounds us? And most important, how can something which is offered as a simulation justify itself?

The famous comparison with the mirror in passage 596c-e is extremely relevant and also provocative: if art is compared with a mirror, and what the mirror shows is simply an image obstructing access to the thing it represents, then art, functioning in the same way, should bring forth the same impossibility:

[12] Ibidem, p. 5.

> For this same manual artisan is not only able to make all implements but also makes everything that grows naturally from the earth, and he produces all animals - the others and himself too - and, in addition to that, ptoduces earth and heaven and gods adn everything in heaven and everything in Hades under the earth. (...) It's not hard, I said, you could fabricate them quickly in many ways and most quickly, of course, if you are willing to take a mirror and carry it around everywhere;[13]

This allegory reveals the limitation to which any representational artistic process is condemned, art succeeding only in producing a simulacrum of the feelings that the actual object could generate in a real experience. This would mean that poetry has no access to the truth and the unchanging reality which lies beyond the appearances that art delivers: "All this, if accepted, necessarily makes it absurd to attribute deep knowledge of the world to poets or painters, and equally so to claim that their work can have an ethically beneficial effect on us — a claim common in Greek culture as well as in later ages"[14]

If the main purpose of art is that of being a perfectly faithful representation of reality, then, says Halliwell, ›illusionism‹ would be the ultimate fulfillment of artistic intent. But this cannot be taken seriously, as it is incompatible with the critical judgment to which art can be subjected to. It is an oversimplification of a complex matter, which should not be trivialized when talking about Plato and the rich theory that he develops. In any case, what draws our attention at first is the fact that Plato rejects representational art or *mimesis* and refuses to admit that this kind of art has any other purpose than representation itself. Let us take a closer look at the issue. Here is the passage where Plato ironically describes how illusionism would obliterate all consciousness of art:

> But, in any event, I suppose, my friend, that this is what must be understood about all such things: when anyone reports to us about someone, saying that he has encountered a humab being who knows all the crafts and everything else that single men severally know, and there is nothing that he does not know more precisely than anyone else, it would have to be replied to such a one that he is an innocent human being and that, as it seems, he has encountered some wizard and imitator and been deceived. Because he himself is unable to put knowledge and lack of knowledge and imitation to the test, that man seemed all-wise to him.[15]

[13] Plato, *Republic*, 596c-e.
[14] Halliwell, *Plato Republic 10,* p. 7.
[15] Plato, *Republic, 598c-d.*

To escape Plato's criticism of poetry art would have to imply or claim that it is more than a mere imitation of the particulars that it represents. If the perspective on representational art was to start from this premise, that it truly implies more than it seems, then art would not have such a vulnerable status in the face of Platonic arguments.

Creativity or the imagination of the artist could be brought as arguments against a reductionistic perspective on art that can be formulated by the mirror analogy. Such arguments would counterbalance Plato's rejection of poetry from another standpoint, as we saw in our analysis of the Muse. The complexity referred to above stems primarily from comparisons made between different parts of Plato's œvre which does not function as a monolithic entity.

The purpose of the analysis of Book X is to seek a justification of art, a reason why we can explain the existence and necessity of art in the world as an enrichment of the latter. Halliwell's standpoint will be to argue that we cannot simply contradict the mirror analogy just by invoking ›the argument of creativity‹. The purpose of wanting to reject the mirror analogy stems from the fact that it vitiates the meaning that art in general could embody, and creativity is brought up as a faulty way of avoiding this reduction.

How art contributes to enriching the way people understand and experience life and the world with all its experiences is probably due to more than just the artist's creativity. It emerges both from the example of the mirror and from the tripartite scheme (forms-objects-images) that the epistemological perspective plays a much greater role in the present analysis regarding the function of art. As early as passage 602c, we see that the ground is set for criticizing the poets' lack of knowledge, and the problem Plato identifies is that a convincing justification of *mimesis* should appeal to something higher than mere faithful imitation of reality. If the possibility of divine inspiration is not a strong enough argument in favor of art - on the contrary, if it becomes a reason to ridicule the poets' creative process - then the focus shifts to the status of knowledge. How much and what kind of knowledge does an artist possess? Does their art communicate any form of knowledge that is useful, admirable, or virtuous?

As Halliwell will also note, Plato's demand for such a foundation for representational art seems not only unrealistic but also unnecessary, thereby completely missing the role that art can actually play in society: "The principle that anyone with knowledge will put it to practical use, rather than lead a life devoted to representationl art (599a), is arbitrary: why prefer to be a carpenter rather than a painter of, among other things, furniture?"[16] This question naturally leads to

[16] Stephen Halliwell, *The Republic's Two Critiques of Poetry*, p. 254.

another dilemma: whether artistic imitation can serve as a means through which knowledge is contained or communicated by its very imitative nature. At this point, we attempt to determine whether the lack of an epistemological foundation for representational art - arguably its most vulnerable aspect in the face of Plato's critique - is a strong enough argument against poetry's ability to lead to a better understanding of life and the world we live in.

4. Knowledge as a ground for art

Halliwell undertakes a careful analysis of why Plato argues that mimetic art does not need knowledge from those who create it and that this type of art is not even capable to generate knowledge in those who admire it: "But, i suppose, if he were in truth a knower of these things that he also imitates, he would be far more serious about the deeds than the imitations and would try to leave many fair deeds behind as memorials of himself and would be more eager to be the one who is lauded rather than the one who lauds".[17]

In relating to mimetic art in the way that he does, ignoring the intrinsic technicalities of art, Plato questions a widely held view that artists of representational art were also connoisseurs of the experiences and phenomena they represented in their works. Art cannot therefore be justified by the criteria of the technical mastery that artists convey in their works: "But defenders of both painting and poetry might argue against Plato that by offering images of possible human realities to the imagination, these arts nurture the mind in ways which cannot be categorized according to a scheme of technical spheres of knowledge"[18]

Even if there were some arguments about the kind of knowledge that could be attributed to poets, Plato was still not convinced that poets could have a positive ethical influence in society. Halliwell's argument lays out multiple reasons why Plato took this stance. First, poetry falls into the category of mimetic art, and therefore is concerned with the appearance and not the substance of things:

> Tragedy and its leader, Homer, must be considered, since we hear from some that these men know all arts and all human things that have to do with virtue and vice, and the divine things too. For it is necessary that the good poet, if he is going to make fair poems about the things his poetry concerns, be in possession of knowledge when he makes his poems or not be able to make them. Hence, we

[17] Plato, *Republic*, 599b.
[18] Halliwell, *Plato Republic 10,* p. 9.

> must consider whether those who tell us this have encountered these imitators and been deceived; and whether, therefore, seeing their works, they do not recognize that these works are third from what *is* and are easy to make for the man who doesn't know the truth — for such a man makes what look like beings but are not.[19]

Here we can see the danger implied by the greater distance brought forth by art, when it comes to knowledge, creating yet another layer which concleas the true object of knowledge.

A second reason is that *imitators* are inferior to the *makers* and *users* of objects, another type of distance is thus brought to light. For example, if the creator of a flute would be deemed superior because of the flute's dependency on him to be brought into existence, then the player would be second in importance because of his knowledge of how to use it: "Doesn't the man who knows report about good and bad flutes, and won't the other, trusting him, make them? [...] Therefore the maker of the same implement will have right trust concerning its beauty and its badness from being with the man who knows and from being compelled to listen to the man who knows, while the user will have knowledge"[20].

There appears to be a complex relationship between the maker and the user, where both the *capacity* of the maker and the *knowledge* of the player come to the forefront and are essential relationships to the object, in comparison to the artist, who is most distanced from the essence of the flute. Thus, the artist or the one who would simply paint the flute is the most inferior one of the three, since he neither knows how to use the instrument nor how to create it. He can only interpret the way the object *appears* to him."And will the imitator from using the things that he paints have knowledge of whether they are fair and right or not, or right opinion due to the necessity of being with the man who knows and receivinh prescriptions of how he must paint? - Neither. - Therefore, with respect to beauty and badness, the imitator will neither know not opine rightly about what he imitates."[21]

This argument, based on the tripartite scheme of maker, user and imitator, also gives us pause for thought, as there are several situations where this does not apply in a very clear way. Plato speaks of technical categories of knowledge, and this scheme is closely related to these types of knowledge. If a painter can accurately render what a piano looks like, the level of knowledge he has might be lower than the one who can build the piano, and especially lower then the one who

[19] Plato, *Republic,* 598d-599a
[20] Ibidem*,* 601e.
[21] Ibidem, 602a.

uses it, but the painter seems to be the one who can indeed tell whether the piano is well-made or not. We might ever go as far as to say that the builder himself might come to rely on the images that the painter provides.

A third reason would be the lack of followers, or disciples of poets. Here Plato again gives the example of Homer, whose work was enjoyed by so many people, but who, in all his life, was unable to *educate* anyone. This would mean that empirical considerations, if taken into account, show that poets do not change lives in a practical way (599a-601b).

The fact that Homer did not *educate* the people is one reason why poetry would not fulfill the ethical expectations that Plato speaks of. The weakness of the poet lies in the weak relationship between ethical knowledge on the one hand and practical activity and success on the other. However, in this regard, Halliwell proposes that we see here only a rhetorical approach on Plato's part, rather than a philosophical statement, which implies an interesting attitude towards the platonic text, where multiple layers are taken into account. We should not be fooled by the ›letter‹ of the text, when a thinker as profound as Plato is explored.

Plato's argument, if it were simplified, could be resumed as follows: if Homer is ›omniscient‹, wise and loved by everyone, then why doesn't he change the world in a more obvious, tangible way than by writing poems? In other words, why does his action confine itself to written works, and not practical deeds, a theme which is in itself multilayered. A possible retort would be, in the words of Halliwell: "is not the creation of poems which come to dominate the imagination of an entire culture (as Plato's own concern with them testifies) an impressive enough way of changing the world?"[22]

The weakness of this third argument — of Homer neither being able to *educate* nor directly intervening in a *practical* manner in the world — actually lies in the fact that the transitive nature of art, in terms of its impact on man and his way of being and perceiving life, does not depend on a certain type of *knowledge* being delivered to him. The interdependence between knowledge and the impact that it has is thus very problematic. We might say that a vast impact can but does not *require* knowledge. Homer might very well be beloved and have an immense practical influence upon the world, but this does not mean that it is being done in accordance with true knowledge. This would in other words mean a separation between *education* and *influence*. The circle thus closes, as we arrive at precisely the point that Plato is trying to make. Art is clearly not a *specialized* and *true* way of guiding man in life through *knowledge*.Plato's argument advocates — as far as

[22] Halliwell, *Plato Republic 10*, p. 10.

ethics is concerned — that poetry can hardly be considered an instrument or a guide to practical wisdom.

Halliwell argues at first that it can indeed be true that "poets can hardly be taken seriously as guides to the realities of practical choice [...] in that a consistent relation between experience of poetry and moral virtue cannot be unsentimentally maintained".[23] He furthermore says that Plato's concern with appearances and simulacra prevents the artist from obtaining any real hold on truth. At this point it might be necessary to try and find another meaning in what Plato claims in his argument, if we were to try to bring out the positive perspectives he might have on art, if such perspectives truly exist in his text. Such an alternative would presuppose that the relationship between art and reality is not as one-sided as presented until now.

It would therefore be recommended to look at art's relationship to reality from another angle, one in which art does not try to be a substitute for something in the surrounding world, but rather accounts for the very truths that cannot be derived from the objects that make up the world. Such a premise leaves room for interpretation, in that art has more than a parasitic or purely imitative role for reality. If art tries to unsuccessfully imitate reality, if, in other words, art cannot be a substitute for reality, as Plato shows, then *there is no substitute for art either*. This would be in art's favor — and it seems to be what Halliwell is arguing for — but does it actually have room in a close reading of Plato's text? Halliwell seems to be drawing his conclusion not directly from what Platon is saying, but from the places that are left open by a certain reading of the platonic text and the contradictions or shortcomings that he sees in Plato.

That Plato was directed against art might be understandable. If the only thing that we gather from his theory of imitation is the fact that art is this attempt to substitute reality, then it is very easy to see art in a purely negative way. Art would only vitiate our experience of the world. Our challenge however is to see in Plato's arguments not just a struggle against bad art or art in general, which in Plato seem to become synonymous, but to seek out the positive aspects as well, which, as shown, also appear to exist. Halliwell is not unjustified in affirming that: "a vindication of these activities against Plato [which are a parasitic substitute] will always need, therefore, to identify something in the making and experience of art which *cannot be readily found elsewhere in life*, and yet — if aesthetic complacency is to be avoided — something which itself constitutes, or can contribute to, *a good form of life*"[24]

[23] Ibidem.
[24] Ibidem, p. 11.

I tend to be in agreement with the outlines of Halliwell's stance, as there seem to be aspects of art which do not seem to be accounted for by the theory presented in Book X. Plato seems to focus on only one aspect of it, undoubtedly the most important one for him. However, as we see in other passages of his work, there are certain contradictions or views that do not necessarily align with the argument presented in Book X. The whole topic of inspiration, which I left open, and the hypothesis of an art not based on imitation — if we were to simplify what Halliwell seems to be saying — shed light on other aspects of this phenomena.

5. Representation and reality. A second look at the problem of *mimesis*

Given the venturesome character of this thesis, it might be prudent to take a second, closer look at the concept of *mimesis*, in order to be reassured that we are not criticizing an oversimplified interpretation of *mimesis*. In another book, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis. Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (2002), Halliwell undertakes a more detailed analysis of the concept of *mimesis*. Here he also acknowledges that Plato's arguments in the *Republic* and other texts dealing with art and poetry pose fundamental challenges to any thinker who takes a serious interest in aesthetics and art, and many of these challenges remain unresolved today. The importance of this concept demands, as mentioned earlier, a philosophical analysis of the relationship between mind and reality. How are these secondary representations of the mimetic process — poetry, painting, sculpture, etc. — realized within the general framework of Plato's philosophy?

Plato's legacy to history of the concept of *mimesis* suggests the impossibility of reconciling art and philosophy. But leaving this issue aside for the moment — for the reasons that were already made apparent — we will move on to the kind of analysis Halliwell will undertake when talking about the concept of *mimesis*. He draws our attention to the fact that Plato's relation to *mimesis* fluctuates in his texts, so that we cannot speak of a ›doctrine of art‹:

> The study of Plato and mimesis has suffered repeatedly from attempts to bring together into a neat, consistent synthesis the many different Platonic passages and contexts in which mimesis is addressed. Whether Plato had a *doctrine* of anything at all, or at any rate gave direct expression to doctrine in his written works, remains debatable. That he had a doctrine of mimesis in particular is not a conclusion that can be confidently reached on the basis of a full and careful reading of the dialogues.[25]

[25] Steven Halliwell, *The Aesthetic of Mimesis. Ancient Texts and Modern Problems,* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002, p.38.

One only has to look at the argument against art that appears in Book X, the most radical on this issue, bringing to their limits ideas presented in Books II and III, as we previously saw. In passage 607c-8b we can see the provisional nature of the conclusions Socrates had reached by that point in the book. Here he makes it quite clear that there is a possibility that his position might change if he receives plausible contradictory contributions from both poets and lovers of poetry:

> Nevertheless, let it be said that if poetry directed to pleasure and imitation has any argument to give that it ought to be in a city of good laws, we should be glad to receive them back from exile, since we are aware that we ourselves are charmed by them. (...) And, surely, we would also give its protectors, those who are not poets, but lovers of poetry, the opportunity to utter a metreless argument in its favor, showing that it is not only agreeable, but beneficial to regimes and to the lives of men. And we will listen to them with goodwill[26]

Even if we were to ignore this fragment, which clearly states an openness toward the art of the poets, the proof that Plato's approach is not a static one but subject to dynamic analysis lies in the relationship between the two important parts of the *Republic*, where Plato discussed the issue. It can be generally argued that the role of poetry must be decisive in any discussion which seeks to ground an ideal society on moral and ethical principles, as poetry represents — whatever Plato might think of it — one of the most influential and compelling types of discourse in the Greek world.

Passages 394d-394e ask the questions of whether mimetic poets are something desirable in the city and whether future guardians should also be mimetic. Socrates answers in the negative, arguing that if poetry does exist, what it conveys should be nothing but an example of virtue and guidance towards ethical conduct. Otherwise scenes of heroic grief and similar behavior must be censored because it may influence the guardians to imitate what the poets convey: "Now this is exactly what I meant: we must come to an agreement as to whether we'll let the poets make their narratives for us by imitation; or whether they are to imitate some things and not others, and what sort belongs to each group; or whether they are not to imitate at all"[27]A well organized society should not be one in which poets are constantly changing different types of states, ideals and behaviors, due to mimetic manifestations, thus influencing the states of the audience and of the polis. Such poets should certainly be thrown out of the city because the different psychological and emotional valences of their representations can disturb the stability of a just city.

[26] Plato, *Republic,* 607c-8b.
[27] Ibidem, 394d.

In these first passages of the *Republic* where the concept of *mimesis* is mentioned, the explanation of the causes and effects that *mimesis* can have refers both to the poets and the people in the audience. First the explanation refers to the poet himself, who is perceived as an *imaginative stage performer* (393c) and then the focus turns to how poetry is received by the young. The interaction between poet and audience took place in a setting where the poet recited aloud in front of an audience — a practice that closely resembled a dramatic act, facilitating audience empathy: "In experiencing poetry in the dramatic mode, the mind orientates itself to, and positions itself *inside*, the viewpoint of the speaker"[28]. What interests us here is how ideas are projected through art, namely how they are embodied in images of human and divine behavior, and how these images are able to shape the souls and minds of those who are exposed to them. Thus, in Book III the analysis of the concept of *mimesis* results in its restriction to the dramatic mode, while its analysis in Book X extends to representational art involving both poetry and other types of visual art.

It is possible to read Plato's criticism of poetry as a radical attack on the works of imagination itself. This aspect entails the problem that Plato could be accused of aesthetic puritanism (Halliwell, *The Aesthetic of Mimesis. Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, chapter 2). This point was already made clear. Where do we thus find the more positive outlook that we are still searching for?

In *The Republic's Two Critiques of Poetry,* Halliwell stresses that Plato's criticism of poetry does not come from a background of misunderstanding and hostility to poetic work in general, but is grounded precisely in an appreciation and knowledge of poetic purpose and tradition. In Book X Plato's discourse has deep confessional overtones in terms of his respect for poetry[29], as he himself has been a great connoisseur and admirer of Homer since childhood: "This tone, reinforced at a number of later stages in the book, allows the second critique to be read as a philosophical examination of poetry from a position of intimate knowledge rather than detached severity"[30] We thus arrive at the core of the problem from a *systematic* point of view — a point which is however not able to encompass all of the attitudes that Plato evidently has toward poetry, but focuses only on one functional aspect: the concept of *mimesis*. In 595c the concept of *mimesis as a whole* is addressed: "Could you tell me what imitation in general is?"[31] What interests us here, is to underline the lack of systematicity in Plato's approach, thus considering

[28] Halliwell, *The Aesthetic of Mimesis*, p. 52.
[29] Plato, *Republic*, 595b.
[30] Halliwell, *The Republic's two critiques of poetry*, p. 251.
[31] Plato, *Republic,* 595c.

his focus on *mimesis* to be only one aspect of a greater whole. An issue that Halliwell considers important in this context is the question that is frequently raised among interpreters of Plato, namely that which questions the return to the subject of poetry in Book X, even though this subject has already been treated quite insistently in Books II and III. Is this an *inconsistency* in Plato's thinking or is the structure of the book strategic?

Halliwell stance will be to say that there is good reason for Plato to return to poetry in the very last chapter of the book: "the design of the *Republic* is not determinable a priori, so to speak; it follows an exploratory course, blown by the wind of dialectical argument (394d), and turns back on itself at various points (e. g. the start of V). Book X refers several times to earlier passages of the dialogue. Above all, and unlike Books II–III, it presupposes, though problematically, both the form-centered metaphysics of V–VII and the concept of conflict between soul-parts (IV 439c ff.). Its status is best understood as a coda or appendix to the main structure"[32]

Conclusions

Plato choses to return to poetry in a book that would seem to have political aims because he saw poetry as a crucial cultural phenomenon, due to its power of influence, especially on the minds of the young, who represent the future of the city and contribute to its growth. Beside the problem of *mimesis* and beside the referral to inspiration or creativity there is another aspect that Halliwell conjures up, which might finally give a positive answer to our insistent search for something other in Plato's *Republic*, something which Halliwell calls an ›alternative poetry‹:

> But the impact of a challenge to poetry's credentials at this juncture is only fully felt when we subsequently find that the entire *Republic* is concluded by an *alternative ›poetry‹* — the philosophical myth whose own logos (the soul's responsibility for its eternal destiny, 617e) contradicts the tragic pessimism of the poetic myths earlier dissected by Socrates[33].

This being said, we can neither draw the conclusion that Plato, in the end, returns to a more positive view of the poets, since we argued that he clearly does not, nor that he simply dismissed the arts in a complete manner. Given this hypothesis of an alternative poetry, present in the works of Plato himself. Halliwell concludes: "It is telling that Socrates ends the second critique of poetry by speaking in the language

[32] Halliwell, *The Republic's two critiques of poetry*, p. 252.
[33] Ibidem.

of a lover who looks back on a former passion with a wistful sense of lingering attachment, but a quiet determination to free his soul from its domination"[34]. The ambivalence is thus firmly maintained, while allowing Plato to formulate a precise rejection of the arts within his theory of *mimesis*.

The effects of Plato's theory were numerous but also ambiguous. Although there are passages in Books II, III and X of the *Republic* in which Plato condemns poetry and art as explicitly as possible, this does not yield a single conclusion but rather leads to different interpretations or, at the very least, provides a foundation for the development of diverse ideas. It is quite difficult for Plato's arguments to receive a clear and strong reply since his texts condemn art on multiple grounds: moral, epistemological and educational. Halliwell ultimately describes Plato's stance toward art as "romantic puritanism"[35]- Plato acknowledges the deep emotional and psychological power of art, but he fears its effects on the soul. He is drawn to its beauty yet wary of its seductive illusions. We might conclude, in a very simple manner, that Plato's condemnation of poetry and art has stimulated multiple ways of thinking about art and has led to the birth of different stances towards the entanglement of art and philosophy, Plato having, in this case, as in many others, opened up spheres of dialogue which have henceforth guided our thinking about the topic.

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[34] Ibidem, p. 256.

[35] Halliwell, *The Aesthetic of Mimesis,* p. 95.