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PLATO ON THE POLITICAL ROLE OF POETRY. THE EXPULSION OF THE TRADITIONAL POETS AND THE REFORM OF POETRY

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Abstract

Plato offers two criticisms of imitative poetry in the Republic. *In the first one, developed in books II and III, Plato seems to criticize poetry softly, banning only one part of imitative poetry. The second criticism, developed in book X, seems to establish a more drastic critique to imitative poetry that precludes the possibility of any kind of imitative poetry in the polis. Many different interpretations have been proposed in order to account for this apparent clash. I will defend Tate's classical interpretation, according to which no clash exists because Plato distinguishes two kinds of imitations, and he remains consistent in preserving one and banishing the other.*

Keywords: *poetry; imitation; education; virtue; polis.*

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El rol político de la poesía en Platón. La expulsión de los poetas tradicionales y la reforma de la poesía

Resumen

Platón realiza dos críticas a la poesía imitativa en la República. *En la primera, establecida en los libros II y III, Platón parece criticar suavemente la poesía prohibiendo solamente una parte de la poesía imitativa. La segunda crítica, desarrollada en el libro X, parece establecer una crítica más drástica a la poesía imitativa que elimina la posibilidad de cualquier tipo de poesía imitativa en la polis. Se han propuesto muchas interpretaciones diferentes para explicar este aparente conflicto. Defenderé la interpretación clásica de Tate, de acuerdo con la cual no hay un conflicto aquí porque Platón distingue dos tipos de imitación y es siempre consistente preservando una de ellas y desterrando la otra.*

Palabras clave: *poesía; imitación; educación; virtud; polis.*

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Plato's hostile attitude towards classical poetry on the building of his ideal city has been long studied and criticized. It has been said that it seems unbelievable that a consummate literary artist, so familiar to poetry and so fond of it as Plato was could be his enemy[1]. For this reason, some interpreters have been trying to produce an interpretation of the *Republic* that could allow us to defend a little more sympathetic attitude toward poetry. On the course of these interpretations, there has been a central debate, which is the framework of this paper. Plato does two critical approaches to imitative poetry on this dialogue. The first one is developed in the books II and III, where it seems to be that Plato criticizes poetry softly banding only one part of imitative poetry and preserving the poetry that only imitates virtuous actions. The second critical approach is developed on the book X, where it seems that Plato establishes a more drastic critique to imitative poetry that precludes the possibility of any kind of imitative poetry in the city. So there seems to be a clash between these two Platonic approaches to poetry.

There have been many different explanations of this apparent clash and the debate about which of these interpretations is correct is still open nowadays. We can classify these interpretations in two main groups (i) some consider that this clash reveals disunity in Plato's thought on the subject

[1] See Gilbert 1939: 4; Asmis 1992: 338-339; Nussbaum 1995: 183-192 and Puchner 2010: 3-9 (some of them quoted by Castillo 2016: 39).

of imitation[2], (ii) others defend that there is not a real clash between those approaches. The defenders of this second possibility have developed many different strategies to defend the unity of Plato's thought on this subject and, in consequence, have developed different interpretations. I can detect three main readings: (ii.a) Plato preserves all the imitative poetry[3]; (ii.b) Plato bands all the imitative poetry[4]; (ii.c) Plato distinguishes two kinds of imitations, preserves one and banishes the other[5]. In this paper I will defend the last reading (ii.c), trying to bring new arguments both to embrace it and to abandon the other interpretations.

In order to accomplish this goal, this paper will be divided into three parts. In the first one, I will analyze the end of the *polis* and the function of education in order to defend the central role of poetry. The second part will be focused on the critique to imitative poetry developed by Plato on the book X, in order to show that this critique is not directed to qualities inherent to imitative poetry, but instead it is addressed to the classics poets who, based on their ignorance, have created a dangerous kind of poetry. The third part will be focused on the reform of poetry proposed by Plato on the books II and III. I will show there the complete agreement between the two platonic approaches to imitative poetry.

The end of the *polis* and the role of education

According to the platonic division of the goods, there are three kinds of goods that human beings use to pursue: the external goods, the goods of the body and the internal goods of human soul. Contrary to the opinions of his own interlocutors and of course opposed to the beliefs of the majority of our

[2] See Greene 1918: 54; Annas 1981; Nehamas 1982.

[3] Gilbert argues that Plato was not trying to expel the poets from his ideal city, but "he was fighting a mistaken practical view of the nature and function of poetry" (Gilbert 1939: 9). After his analysis he concludes: "it is now possible to believe that he was not attacking his beloved Homer and the rest of the tragic company, but rather rescuing them from the ignorant [...] Plato attempted to banish the bad critics that the poets might appear as they truly were and are, even if only to the fit audience who can discern their nature as artists" (Gilbert 1939: 19).

[4] Ariza argues that Plato did not want to expel the classical imitative poets, but the imitative mode itself (Ariza 2009). Ordónez claims that platonic critique to imitative poetry expels all kind of mimetic poetry, preserving only hymns to the gods and eulogies to good people, which, according to his interpretation, do not include imitation (Ordóñez 2012).

[5] Tate establishes a distinction between good and bad imitation, which is based upon the distinction between two kinds of poets: the ignorant and the enlightened (Tate 1928 and 1931). Asmis considers that Plato allows the poetry that preserves only the imitation of virtuous actions and precludes the "all-imitative poetry" (Asmis 1992). See also Belfiore 1974; Halliwell 2002 and White 1979 (some of them quoted by Castillo 2016: 38).

own interlocutors, Plato argues in his *Republic* that the least important goods are the external ones composed by the multitude of material possessions that people are usually devoted to achieve. In the second place, he locates the goods related to our own body, mainly physical health. And in the place of honor, he locates the goods of the soul, in other words the four cardinal virtues of justice, wisdom, temperance and courage, which together are called the complete virtue and define a healthy human soul (444c-e). It is thanks to the possession of this most important good that a human being can be considered truly happy.

In accordance with this hierarchy, he proposes that the end that must be mainly pursued by individual human beings is their own happiness, the health of their own soul. In the same way, the goal that must be pursued by the statesman is the happiness of the complete city, the virtue of each individual citizen together with the correct functioning of the political organization, in which each citizen performs virtuously his own role (420 b-c). All the legislation must be established with this goal in mind and must be evaluated with reference to its contribution to achieve it.

To understand this better, let me briefly recall the platonic conception of the human soul and human virtue, which he pictured through the image of the Ideal City. This city, he says, is composed by three different kinds of people: the rulers, whose function is to deliberate and determine, based upon the knowledge of what is best for the city, how the entire city should be managed; the guardians or the auxiliary class, whose function is to assist the rulers, so that the law which they have established be followed throughout the city; and the lowest and largest class of the city is that of the farmers and other craftsmen, whose function is the production of the means required to the subsistence in a complete obedience to the law. In this city, Plato sketches the four cardinal virtues: the ruling part embodies the virtue of wisdom; the guardians, that of courage; and the lower class, temperance, which is defined as the obedience to the part that by nature rules on behalf of the part that by nature must be guided. The virtue of justice is understood as the complete harmony of the three classes of the city, where each part fulfills its functions and does not intend to go beyond it. If either part exceeds its functions, justice is destroyed and the city is led to its decline.

According with the proposal that he defends in the fourth book of the *Republic,* the human soul is constituted by three parts equivalent to the three parts of the city: the rational part –which is also called the wisdom-loving part– the competitive part and the appetitive part. Each part of the soul has its corresponding function and its related virtue. The function of reason is to deliberate and determine what is convenient to the entire soul and each of

its parts; the spirited or competitive part must defend in the soul the dictates of reason and the appetitive part must obey the ruling part. The correct functioning of these parts produces wisdom, courage and temperance and the complete harmony of them is identified as justice, the health of the soul. The goal of the legislator is to cultivate these four cardinal virtues both in each individual and in the state.

The main resource that the statesman has to achieve this goal is the education of citizens. Two fields, as was traditionally proposed by the Greek cultures, mainly compose this education: gymnastics, on the one hand, and music and poetry, on the other (376e). The traditional educators understood that the first one was established for the care of the body and the latter for the care of the soul. However, according to the platonic proposal, all of them should be established in his Ideal City for the sake of the soul. On one side, he claims, a lifelong physical training without music and poetry causes the spirited part of the soul to become savage and tough and the wisdom-loving part enfeebled, deaf and blind and becomes a hater of reason and music. On the other side, music and poetry without gymnastics causes the spirited part of the soul to become soft and cowardly. On the contrary, when they are simultaneously cultivated "in order that these might be in harmony with one another, each being stretched and relaxed to the appropriate degree" (411e), one part becomes courageous and the other cultivated. (410c-411d) That is why Plato says:

> And isn't it, as we were saying, a mixture of music and poetry, on the one hand, and gymnastics, on the other, that makes the two parts harmonious, stretching and nurturing the rational part with fine words and learning, relaxing the other part through soothing stories, and making it gentle by means of harmony and rhythm? (441e)[6]

Being such the importance that Plato confers to music and poetry in the conformation of harmonious human souls; we can foresee that his critical approach to traditional poetry should not lead him to preclude a space to these arts on his pedagogical proposal.[7] As Plato says, "it is in music and poetry that our guardians must build their bulwark" (424 c)

[6] All translations come from Cooper's edition. Following Heather Reid suggestion, I prefer to translate γυμναστική by gymnastics than physical training, as Cooper does. The reason, as I have mentioned, is that they are established for the sake of the soul.

[7] In this point, I completely reject the interpretation of Gilbert, who says: "If Plato had planned Greek education he would have cut down the amount of effort spent on the poets; certainly he would have eliminated all that part dependent on its supposed immediate practical value" (Gilbert 1939: 13).

I want to point out another central goal that the statesman should pursue through legislation and education. According to Plato, the most important quality that a citizen must have and that in fact is the quality that allows us to evaluate the quality of the soul of the citizens and determine who is going to be guardian and even ruler is the respect and obedience to the law. The education of children from their early years must be focused on this quality. Plato says that even the children's games must be inspected so we can guarantee that they are law-abiding, for if the games become lawless and the children follow suit, they are not going to grow as law-abiding men. The same is true of poetry. Plato says that if we can absorb lawfulness from poetry, we can correct anything in the city that may have gone wrong before (424). But, on the contrary, when we allow lawlessness in poetry we can face the destruction of the complete city. Plato says:

> "Those in charge must cling to education and see that it isn't corrupted without their noticing it, guarding it against everything. Above all, they must guard as carefully as they can against any innovation in music and poetry or in gymnastics that is counter to the established order. [...] The guardians must beware of changing to a new form of music, since it threatens the wholes system. As Damon says, and I am convinced, the musical modes are never changed without change in the most important of a city's laws. [...] When lawlessness has established itself there [in music and poetry], it flows over little and little into characters and ways of life. Then, greatly increased, it steps out into private contracts, and from private contracts, Socrates, it makes its insolent way into laws and government, until in the end it overthrows everything, public and private" (424 b-d)

So, with music and poetry we have an instrument with two potential contrary results. When these arts are correctly performed, they are essential in the conformation of harmonious virtuous souls, manifested on courageous, cultivated and law-abiding citizens. But when they are wrongly performed, they can cause the corruption of citizen's characters and on the long term the destruction of the state. That is why we can see on the *Republic* simultaneously a hard critique to traditional poetry and a proposal for a poetry reform on the framework of the platonic pedagogical model. We are going to examine those two proposals in the following parts.

The critique to imitative poetry and the expulsion of the traditional Poets

Let us begin with an analysis of the platonic critique to the traditional imitative poetry, developed in the beginning of the book X of the *Republic.*

I want to carefully analyze the three argumentations that Plato builds against the imitative poets in order to show that those critiques are not directed to qualities inherent to imitative poetry, but instead they are addressed to the classics poets themselves who, due to their ignorance, have developed a harmful kind of poetry. In that way, I want to show that what must be expelled from the ideal city is not the poetry itself but the poets and the work of poets that, according to Plato, have been wrongly admired in the Greek Culture[8].

The first argumentation (595a-601a) is based upon the distinction of three degrees of reality. The first and highest degree, as we can foresee, is the one of the intelligible beings, Platonic Ideas or Paradigms. The second degree is the one of the sensible beings, the particular entities that we can perceive in our world. And the third degree is the one where we place the imitations that we make of the sensible things. Plato offers an example to illustrate this difference. In the first degree of reality we can locate *the* bed itself, the paradigm of bed according with which we call bed to all things that resemble this Form. In the second degree, we locate all the particular beds that have been and will be manufactured. And in the third degree, we can place the painting of an artist that tries to imitate the beds he sees in his world. What is important in here is to realize, that the work of the artist, says Plato, is an imitation that he makes without knowing anything about the Paradigm of *the* bed, but he is only trying to imitate the works of craftsmen as they appear to him. So, he is an imitator, not of true but of appearance and what he produces is separated from reality in a third degree.

The same happens with the works of poets, particularly of the tragedian. "He is by nature –Plato says– third from the king and the truth, as are all other imitators"; (597e) but their case is even worse, because those things their works are concerned about are the most important both for the constitution and for the individual beings: they imitate all human affairs concerned with virtue and vice, and all the things related with gods as well (598d).

But let us stop for a while and wonder whether it is bad in itself to produce something in this third degree of reality. If it were the case, Plato should expel from his city not only poetry, but also painting, sculpture and what is worst language itself. In fact, in his *Letter VII* Plato argues that the words that we use to capture the first grade of reality are also separated from it in this third degree. That is why there he says that the knowledge of reality cannot be correctly expressed by words, but unfortunately, our language and our arts are by their very nature located in this third degree of reality (*Epis*. VII 341c-343d). Now, far from expelling completely this

[8] Ariza (2009) defends the opposite thesis: Platonic censorship is not concerned with contents or particular poets, but is directed to the poetical forms themselves.

third grade of reality from the *polis* and to condemn all the citizens to an artless and silent life, we have seen that Plato considers poetry together with music and gymnastics as the tools to educate harmonious virtuous souls.

Well, then, what is exactly the problem of these works of imitation that makes the imitative poetry so condemnable? Plato gave the answer to this question pointing out exactly what is the feature we have to carefully examine if we want to rightly evaluate the works of a poet. With regard to those who say that they have encountered good poets, he says these words:

> Hence, we have to look to see whether those who tell us this have encountered these imitators and have been so deceived by them that they don't realize that their works are the third remove from that which is and are easily produced without knowledge of the truth (since they are only images, not things that are), or whether there is something in what these people say, and good poets really do have knowledge of the things most people think they write so well about. (598e-599a)

So the clue is to determine whether they have produced their works based upon the knowledge of human and divine affairs or out of ignorance, and of course the exam that follows these lines is completely devoted to show that classical poets do not have knowledge of human affairs; they know nothing about human virtue and they do not have any idea about how to organize a city. The most important proof for that is that having this kind of knowledge would have allowed them to be good educators of their fellow citizens improving their ways of life; they would have been able to propose good political legislation as Lycurgus did; their cities could have won a war under their instruction. However, the fact is that none of these things happened (599 c-d). So we can confidently conclude that they really did not write the poetry based upon knowledge of human affairs, but they only imitate appearances. And what is worst those are false appearances that produce wrong ideas of what virtue is really like.

Now, to solve the problems of imitative poetry we could undertake two strategies: we can expel all those poets who produce their works out of ignorance but we can also commend wise people, with real knowledge of human and divine affairs, to write renovated poetry which imitate really virtuous actions and which correctly represents the nature of gods. That is exactly the proposal we find in the *Laws* with the creation of the Elder's chorus (*Leg.* 664c), composed by men between thirty and sixty years who must know three things: the nature of what has been represented, how correctly it has been copied and the moral value of the representation

produced by language, tunes and rhythms (*Leg.* 669a-b)[9]; but that is also what we find in the books II and III of the *Republic*, as we are going to examine in the third part of this paper.

Let us now move to the second argumentation against the classical imitative poetry (601d-602c). This one is based upon the distinction between three kinds of arts: the art that uses an object, the art that produces it and the one that imitates it (601d). The example Plato gave to illustrate this distinction is related with the flute: one is the flautist' art, other the art of the flute-maker, and other the one of a painter who draws a flute. The first is the one who has more experience about the object and is the one who understand the virtue of that thing in as much as the virtue of each manufactured item, each living creature and each action is related to its natural use (601d). On the other hand, the maker does not have knowledge, as the flautist does, but only right opinion about whether something he makes is fine or bad, by receiving instructions from a user who knows (601e); but the painter does not have knowledge nor right opinion about the virtue or vice of the things he is painting (602 a). The same thing happens with the imitative poet. They do not have knowledge of human virtue nor right opinion about how to produce it. "Nonetheless –Plato says–, he'll go on imitating, even though he doesn't know the good or bad qualities of anything [...] but what he'll imitate, it seems, is what appears fine or beautiful to the majority of people who know nothing" (602a-b). That is why classical imitative poets easily deceive the majority of people.

But again, we should notice that this critique is directed towards the poets rather than to the imitative poetry itself. We can imagine without contradiction a painter of a flute who is simultaneously a flautist. In the same way, we can imagine an imitative poet who is simultaneously wise about human virtue.[10] This poet would be able to imitate not the false appearances shared by the majority of people who is wrong about virtue, but to imitate the correct and essential characteristics of a virtuous human being.[11]

[9] See also *Leg.* 829 c-e, and Gilbert's commentary to these lines. He considers Plato's proposal of a Chorus of wise but not very talented elders as an expression of Plato's use of irony (Gilbert 1939: 8). On the contrary, I think that he is very committed with this proposal.

[10] Ordóñez claims: "the creator of images, which is first and foremost imitator (*mimetés*) knows about what appears to him -for access to the truth is banded-, never about what is" (Ordóñez 2012: 144. The translation is mine). I do not agree with this idea, because I do not see any reason to claim that the access to the truth is banded to people who are also able to produce something in the third degree of reality.

[11] Tate's distinction between good and bad imitation is based upon this difference between a poet who knows the essence or the Paradigms of Justice, Beauty, etcetera and is trying to reproduce those forms through his art and a false poet who only follows perceptual

The third argumentation (602c-607a) is concerned with the effect that imitative poetry produces in the human soul. Let us remember that the platonic soul is divided into three parts: the rational, the appetitive and the competitive part, and that Plato says that in a healthy human soul each part must be devoted to accomplish its own function and should not overpass it. In that way, we said, a virtuous human soul is one where reason commands the entire soul and the other parts obeys and defends the instructions of reason. The biggest risk of imitative poetry is that it contributes to break the harmony of the soul, encouraging the lower parts of the soul to disobey the dictates of reason.

To explain this thesis Plato focuses in one typical scene that we can observe in tragic poetry. Frequently we can see the hero, the poetic model of a virtuous man, crying, beating his breast, and loudly lamenting the death of his beloveds. But all of them are actions that we consider in fact contrary to the virtuous person, who must cultivate his endurance, recover quickly from his suffering and be able to master his grief. For this reason Plato says:

appearances (cf. Tate 1932: 162 – 163; see also Bourgault 2012: 67). In this point I follow Tate's interpretation completely. However, he goes on claiming that this artist's poems are only once removed from the ideas and not twice removed (Tate 1932: 165). I am not convinced with this part of his interpretation, because the poems themselves –although they are composed out of knowledge of the Paradigm of Virtue and, in consequence, of the essential characteristics of particular virtuous actions– could not be classified in the second degree of reality where we place sensible beings. Imitations are placed in a different ontological level than sensible beings. Of course, these men could be able to create magnificent virtuous actions, persons or cities in the second level of reality thanks to their knowledge of the Paradigm of Virtue. However, in as much as they create this kind of entities they are no longer poets, but citizens, educators or politicians.

Asmis also reflects about the possibility of a poet who knows the Paradigms. But she says that being able to produce goodness in this world, the poet "would not devote himself to making "semblances" of goodness" (Asmis 1992: 353). He would be a creator of actual goodness in human beings. For this reason she prefers to claim that the poet does not have knowledge of the forms, but only receives correct beliefs from lawgivers in order to create his poems. Now, she says, "having correct beliefs, the poet is raised to the level of a craftsman, like the carpenter, the bridle maker, and all the other nonphilosophical craftsmen in the new city. Like the rest, the poet has the position of serving the lawgiver. Instead of imitating humans as they are or appear to be, he creates images of humans as they should be, by taking directions from the lawgiver, who looks toward the Forms." (Asmis 1992: 358). Again, on the one hand, I think that the mere knowledge or right opinion would not move the *poems* to a different ontological level. But, if the poet decides to create entities in the second level of reality they would do that not *as* poet, but *as* citizen, politician or educator. On the other hand, having the possibility to create entities in both levels of reality, I do not think that a person should refuse to create entities in the third degree of reality, given the pedagogical importance of poetry.

> [...] the part that is forcibly controlled in our private misfortunes [...] is the very part that receives satisfaction and enjoyment from poets, and [...] the part of ourselves that is best by nature, *since it hasn't been adequately educated either by reason or by habit*, relaxes its guard over the lamenting part when it is watching the suffering of somebody else. [...] I suppose that only a few are able to figure it out that enjoyment of other people's sufferings is necessarily transferred to our own and that the pitying part, if it is nourished and strengthened on the sufferings of others, won't be easily held in check when we ourselves suffer. (606 a-b)

Thus, the problem of this relaxation of reason when it contemplates the tragic performance is that it allows the nourishment and strengthening of the lowest parts of the soul. This in turn makes us less able to endure our own sufferings. The same happens with all the other aspects of our life: sex, anger, pleasure, pain are also misrepresented in such a way that the hero is pictured as being mastered by them and not by reason (606d). Thanks to that, tragic poetry causes the contrary effect that education is trying to establish in all those aspects of our life: that reason loses its power in the human soul and becomes the slave of the lower parts.

But again, we can see that Plato's critique is not directed to poetry itself, but to the ignorance of the poets. If we find a wise poet, able to understand the real nature of human virtuous actions, we can commend him to write a renovated poetry with the confidence that he will not picture the hero performing all kinds of shameful actions, but doing exactly those actions that are truly virtuous. Now, Plato envisages this option, but he recognizes that the representation of that kind of moderate virtuous man will not cause the general audience any pleasure. To the entire contrary, they are not going to be able to understand the behavior of this character, they are going to be bored and they are going to consider that the poet is an incompetent one (604e-605a)[12]. However, does it mean that we have to renounce to the idea of

[12] Based upon this commentary, Ariza claims that an imitation should meet some internal requirements in order to be considered a good imitation: the actors should be able to arouse emotions, create suspense, etc. Ariza says that we can perform sober representations of calm men, but they are not going to be good representations. *Mímesis* follows its own aesthetic rules, establishes autonomously, independently of moral and philosophical criteria, what counts as a good or bad imitation. This autonomy, he believes, is the reason why imitation and imitative poetry should be expelled from the ideal city. On the contrary, the purely narrative style does not have its own internal rules to determine what counts as a good narration. Its value can be determined based upon moral standards. That is why narration, he says, could be preserved in a reformatted way in the ideal city. (Ariza 2009: 19) I do not agree with this interpretation. No matter how interesting the idea of the autonomy of the mimetic art could be for a modern reader, it is clear that Plato considers that the aesthetic emotions that comes

a renovated imitative poetry? I think that the platonic answer to this question is negative and the reason for that is that he believes that the fundamental role of education is to teach people from their very childhood to feel pleasure in the right things and pain in the wrong things, to love what should be loved and to hate what should be hated (*Leg.* 653a). In consequence, the fact that the majority of bad educated citizens do not feel pleasure in this kind of virtuous performance does not mean that through education we cannot teach children and future adults to feel pleasure in the imitation of real virtuous actions (*Leg.* 659e).

Now, the imitation of these really virtuous actions could have the contrary effect to that caused by the traditional imitative poetry both in the actors and in the spectators. It could habituate us to see and to perform virtuous actions in such a way that on the long term it could smooth the performing of virtuous actions.

To finish this section, I want to quote an invitation that Plato extends after his devastating critique to classical imitative poetry.

> If the poetry that aims at pleasure and imitation has any argument to bring forward that proves it ought to have a place in a well-governed city, we at least would be glad to admit it, for we are well aware of the charm it exercises. [...] Then we'll allow its defenders, who aren't poet themselves but lovers of poetry, to speak in prose on its behalf and to show that it not only gives pleasure but is beneficial both to constitutions and to human life. (607c-d)

As I have already mentioned, although classical poets could not be defended because their works are written out of ignorance, a renovated imitative and pleasant poetry based upon knowledge of human and divine affairs could be written and could be beneficial for human souls and for the state. In the next section I want to focus on the books II and III (376e-403c) of the *Republic* to show that the reform of poetry that he proposes there matches perfectly well this idea.

with the observation of a performance does not depend only and not even mainly on the internal qualities of this performance, but depend on our character, shaped by the way we were brought up to feel pleasure or pain against the appropriate or the inappropriate things (655c-659e). And of course, this education could be evaluated under moral standards. This idea is emphasized by Plato on the *Laws*, where he says that the real quality of an artistic performance could not be evaluated by the mass of uneducated people, but should be evaluated by the wise man who understand the right moral values and can evaluate whether they have been well or bad represented along the performance. An artist sings and dances well, Plato says, if he sings good songs and dances good dances. Besides, a song and a dance are good when they represent the actions of virtuous people (see *Leg.* 659a-d; *Leg*. 654b and 655b).

The platonic reform of poetry

Plato, who confesses to be a lover of poetry, undertakes the work of explaining in prose how poetry and music could be appropriately used as means to educate the guardians of his ideal city. To do that he distinguishes three aspects that should be analyzed: (i) the content of the stories, *what* must be said; (ii) the style, *how* it must be said, and (iii) what modes and rhythms should accompany the stories. I will focus on the content and the style, for that will allow me to show how his proposal matches perfectly well with his invitation and escapes exactly those critiques he made to the traditional poets.

Let us start with the content of the stories (λόγοι). The first thing to do, he says, is to review the already written stories and then:

> [...] select their stories whenever they are fine or beautiful and reject them when they aren't. And we'll persuade nurses and mothers to tell their children the one that we have selected, since they will shape their children's souls with stories much more than they shape their bodies by handling them. Many of the stories they tell now, however, must be thrown out. (377b-c)

But a second step to undertake, according to Plato, is to "order the poets to compose the opposite kind of poetry and tell the opposite kind of tales" (392 a-b).

When we review the patterns that Plato establish to select and write these stories, we see that what he has in mind is that poetry should be written based upon real knowledge of human and divine affairs, in such a way that it does not give us a false image of how heroes and gods are like. The reason for that, of course, is that only in that way we can promote pious and virtuous behavior in our citizens. I will briefly present a synthesis of these patterns:

- **Laws or Patterns for stories about the gods:** Whether in epic, lyric or tragedy, a god must always be represented as he is: (379a) (i) god is really good and is the cause only of good things, (ii) gods are not sorcerers who change their appearance to deceive us, nor do they mislead us by falsehoods in words or deeds.

  The stories of gods should also be written in order to promote virtue. In that way, to stimulate courage: (iii) they should not represent the life in Hades as something terrifying, since that is neither true nor beneficial for future warriors who must be afraid more of slavery than of death, (387b) and to stimulate

moderation: so that citizens obey the rulers, and govern the pleasures of drink, sex and food (389d), (iv) they should not tell stories of immoderate behavior of gods, for all citizens will be ready to excuse their immoderate behavior pointing out that gods and their close descendants act this way (391e).

- **Laws or Patterns for stories about human beings:** The stories should provide a correct idea about the behavior of a truly virtuous man: So (i) we should delete the lamentations ant pitiful speeches of decent men as Achilles and Priam, leave them to *bad women and cowardly men*, because in that way men are going to be able to give way to lamentations and bear misfortune most quietly when it strike (387e). "But if, one the other hand, there are words or deeds of famous men, who are exhibiting endurance in the face of everything, surely they must be seen or heard" (390c-d). (ii) We should prohibit the representation of unjust people as happy, or of the just people as wretched. (iii) In the same way, we should banish the idea that injustice is profitable if it escapes detection, and that justice is another's good but one's loss.

We can see that all these patterns are focused on the idea of disseminating a *true* conception of gods and virtue that promotes in the citizens a pious and virtuous behavior. I also want to present a possibility that Plato envisages in the *Republic.* Sometimes in our private life it is useful to create false stories to help a friend to avoid acting bad out of ignorance or madness (382 c-d). In the same way, sometimes it would be useful to create false stories or to hide true stories in order to promote good behavior in citizens. The production of this falsehood, says Plato, should only be allowed to the rulers. "But everyone else must keep away from them, because for a private citizen to lie to a ruler is just as bad a mistake as for a sick person or athlete not to tell the truth to his doctor or trainer" (398b-c). The reason why I want to underlie this possibility is that it shows clearly that the main goal of Plato is to embrace virtuous behavior and the truth is only the most expedient mean to it. That implies that when we can reach this goal by other means we can sacrifice the truth. That is a clue to defend that what Plato considers undesirable of classical poetry is not that it is placed in the third grade of reality and truth, but that it promotes vicious behavior.

We have already talked about *what* should be said in poetry; let us move to talk about *how* it should be said, I mean, the style. Plato distinguishes three kinds of style (λέξεις):

- **Narrative alone:** The poet himself is speaking and doesn't attempt to get us to think that the speaker is someone other than himself (e.g. dithyrambs). (393a)
- **Narrative through imitation:** The poet speaks as if he were someone else. "To make oneself like someone else in voice or appearance is to imitate the person one makes oneself like". That is why this is called 'narrative through imitation' (e.g. tragedy and comedy). (393c)
- **Narrative alone plus narrative through imitation**: Combines the two former kinds of narrative (e.g. epic poetry).

Plato wonders whether we are going to allow poets to imitate something or are they not going to be allowed to imitate anything at all? Plato gave two answers to this question. In the first one, he remembered that in his ideal city it is not appropriate for a citizen to play many different roles, but each person should be focused on performing only the specific role that has been assigned to him. The guardian, claims Plato, should be single-minded. For this reason, it would be absurd to imagine him imitating many different kinds of entities, characters and occupations (395b-c). This argument would seem to ban the possibility to perform any kind of imitation. However, as Sergio Ariza rightly points out, this argument only shows that the citizen should not imitate a broad scope of things, but he should focus on imitating the actions of a virtuous man[13], which in the long term is a way of performing his own role on society. [14] In that way, this argument leaves open the possibility to defend an imitative poetry that incorporates the imitation of virtuous agents.

The second answer Plato gave to the question about the kind of λέξεις that should be authorized to poets was that the style of poetry should be a combination of purely narrative and narrative through imitation; and of course, the actions that guardians are allowed to imitate are virtuous actions and the reason is that those imitations are going to contribute to their virtuous moral habituation. He says:

[13] Cf. Ariza 2009: 16; see also Castillo 2016: 48.

[14] Tate says that "the guardians who practice it [the imitation of virtuous men] will be imitating their own ideal character, not characters utterly alien from their own. It involves not the suppression but the development of the personality." (Tate 1928: 17-18) In that way, this poet will not loose the single-mindedness, which must characterize the guardian. But, Tate insists, this only will be true under the following condition: "Not only should the model be, as a rule, good; the important point is that the poet must himself be good, and understand the principles of goodness" (Tate 1928: 18) This is very important for Tate, because he believes that the poetry expelled from the ideal *polis* "is that of the unworthy poet who is always putting on a character alien to his own" (Tate 1928: 19).

> If they [the guardians] do imitate, they must imitate from childhood what is appropriate for them, namely, people who are courageous, self-controlled, pious, and free, and their actions. They mustn't be clever at doing or imitating slavish or shameful actions, lest from enjoying the imitation, they come to enjoy the reality. Or haven't you noticed that imitations practiced from youth become part of nature and settle into habits of gesture, voice, and thought? (395c-d)

This platonic thesis also allows us to reinforce our interpretation of the third platonic critique against the traditional imitative poetry. This art, we can say, does not by itself cause a negative effect in the human soul reinforcing the disobedience of the lower parts to reason. On the contrary, poetry composed out of knowledge of what virtue is, can habituate us from childhood through imitation to act virtuously and on the long term to be virtuous.[15] See also this passage, which allows imitation not only to children, but also to adult persons already virtuous:

> "When a moderate man comes upon the words or actions of a good man in his narrative, he'll be willing to report them as if he were that man himself, and he won't be ashamed of that kind of imitation. He'll imitate this good man most when he's acting in a faultless and intelligent manner, but he'll do so less, and with more reluctance, when the good man is upset in disease, sexual passion, drunkenness, or some other misfortune. When he comes to a character unworthy of himself, however, he'll be unwilling to make himself seriously resemble the inferior character –except perhaps for a brief period in which he's doing something good." (396c-d).

So then, we should wonder why Plato wrote the following strong lines as the conclusion of his critique to imitative poetry in the book X of the *Republic*?

[15] This idea allows me to defend that imitation of virtuous actions should not be allowed only to already virtuous agents but also to children and young people guided by the elder ones who can teach them which are the actions whose imitation could contribute to their moral habituation. This is coherent with the platonic idea of education as an early habituation of children in pleasure and pains through the correct actions, that should be latter harmonized with reason, which recognizes why this behavior is correct. Complete virtue, the goal of education and *polis*, is defined as the concord of reason and emotion (*Leg*. 653b). The poet himself, however, could only be the wise and virtuous elder.

> We didn't admit any that is imitative. Now [...] it is even clearer, I think, that such poetry should be altogether excluded. (595a)[16]

And also:

> You should also know that hymns to the gods and eulogies to good people are the only poetry we can admit into our city. [17] If you admit the pleasure-giving Muse, whether in lyric or Epic poetry, pleasure and pains will be the kings in your city instead of law or the thing that everyone has always believed to be best, namely, reason. (607a)

As I have tried to defend, the critiques of Plato are not directed to the imitative poetry itself, but are focused more in the fact that the current poets are ignorant of what virtue is in the first degree of reality and, thus, their imitations are only copies of false appearances of what seems to be virtuous to the majority of people. In that way, passages like the two formers are only Plato's ways to emphasize that all traditional imitative poetry have committed big mistakes. However, as Tate says, there could be a genuine artist and a true and beautiful poetry. "Such art will be an imitation or expression of the reality of truth and beauty. But it would appear that in Plato's view no extant poetry belonged to this class. The ideal state must in its own interests call a new race of poets into being" (Tate 1928: 22).[18]

[16] These lines have been the turning point between the interpreters of Plato. As I have mentioned on the introduction, some have argued that while books II and III allowed the imitation of the actions of virtuous men, Book X excluded the possibility of all kinds of imitation. Thus, they argue that there is a clash between the theses of these books. Others have argued that there is no conflict between them and have mentioned that in these lines the word "imitative" means "indiscriminately imitative", so that what Plato would have been saying is that he has excluded the poetry that imitates all types of entities and actions, including vicious actions (cf. Belfiore, Ferrari and Menza, quoted by Asmis 1992: 363 n 27).

[17] Ordóñez emphasizes these lines and argues that in the platonic city we are going to expel all kind of imitation and we will preserve only hymns to the gods and eulogies to virtuous people in the context of festivities, games and sacrifices, because all these cultural, sporting and religious events are linked to rituals, and rituals require poetry (cf. Ordóñez 2012: 150). But these rituals are also linked with the *mimetic* performance in the Greek tradition (For a further development of this link see Castillo 2016: 37 n.3). Furthermore, Tate argues that Plato himself regarded hymns to the gods and eulogies of good men as imitative poetry (cf. Tate 1932: 161; see also Asmis 1992: 351). He says "I see no reason why these hymns and eulogies should not contain those forms of dramatic representation which are allowed to the ideal poet in 396. Such a poet may imitate good men like himself (cf. Tate 1932: 167).

[18] Thus it seems rather strange to consider Plato as a conservative philosopher of music and poetry and not as a reformist. Bourgault reports as advocates of this conservative image of Plato to Moutsopoulos, Terry Saunders, R. F. Stalley, James Urmson; and argues against them. (Bourgault 2012: 59-60 and 67-68).

Plato finishes his inquiry of the way poetry will be used to educate the citizens of his ideal city analyzing the modes and rhythms that should accompany the stories. I won't focus on this point, because that will move me away from my argumentation, but I do want to point out that the conclusion of this analysis is that modes and rhythms should *imitate* the courageous and moderate men (400d)[19], and that this is important for Plato because "rhythm and harmony permeate the inner part of the soul more than anything else" (401 d). In this way, those non-cognitive elements of poetry play an important role in molding a harmonious soul, making the lower part of the soul gentle, malleable and more obedient to reason. That is one motive more to preserve a renovated poetry in the ideal city.

I want to finish this paper by pointing out that the political goal of molding virtuous citizens through education moves Plato not only to propose a reform of poetry, but also to come through with a reform of all the arts and crafts. In fact, he says, we should not allow the representation of vicious actions neither in paintings, buildings, sculptures nor even woven in embroideries. If we allow any of these, they are going to slowly corrupt the soul of our citizens but if we pay careful attention to all of them, we can use all these things to achieve the means of the *polis*, namely, the happiness of all citizens[20]. Of course, this well-intentioned proposal leads us to question how are we going to achieve happiness without creating a completely totalitarian regimen. That is a question for a different investigation.

[19] Bourgault emphasizes that rhythm and harmony have this capacity to imitate moral character, and its importance for developing in children "*correct* emotional habits—training them to experience pleasure for the right things, at the right time, in the right amount". And she says "This is worth emphasizing because when we argue about the necessity of music censorship today, we tend to consider only the harm done by offensive language. Rarely do we hear arguments to the effect that certain rhythmic patterns or modes could equally affect the mental health of children (and this might very well be something for us to ponder)" (Bourgault 2012: 62).

[20] For a further development of this idea see Asmis 1992: 349.

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