

Plato, Republic, Bk. X

Many have been dissatisfied with Plato's disparagement of the poets and artists in the early books (II, III) and especially in the conclusion to the *Republic*. However, perhaps if we think of his 'ban' as focusing on the 'imitative' character of human beings, and interpret 'artists or poets' in terms of modern public relations advertising and political propaganda, his worries seem a bit more feasible. Consider Walter Pater's reading (one who is no aesthetic Nazi) of Plato's worries:

- 1) Acts of imitation are irresistible in their influence over human nature; we are extremely susceptible to manipulation (consider the passivity of the mind when confronted with sights, sounds, smells, etc.; recall Plato's Bk. I, II -- lovers of spectacles and sounds).
 - 2) We, the founders of the Republic, have as our purpose the simplification of human nature. We are to act like performers carrying out a sacred liturgy, because we move as one being.
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- 3) Thus, the only kind of music, art, and poetry to be permitted citizens will be of a very austere character.

What, one might object, is the motivation for Plato's rather stern recommendations? First, as premise (1) suggests, we need to recall that the habits and dispositions of our souls or minds are very much the creatures of what we see and hear. Humans are very susceptible to sensible qualities of things and persons, to phenomena or appearances as such. It is not so much the matter of a work of art (colors, shapes, sounds) as the form (simplicity, rhythm, variety, discord) that makes a mark upon us educationally. Such aesthetic qualities transform themselves in the attitude of the perceiver into the moral taste of the subject. Here is a further justification that Pater offers for the austerity of aesthetics:

- 1) We are imitative beings, imitating shapes, sounds, colors we experience. We must beware of becoming servile to that which we imitate.
- 2) We, the founders of the Republic, have a peculiar purpose: we are to find or be put into that natural place for which each of us is fitted. Toward this end, we can suppress the male-female distinction and lose the traditional family in the social aggregate; this is our way of simplifying human nature.

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- 3a) Thus, alterations will be few and far between: no musical innovations, and no imitations by instruments of bestial or mechanical sounds are to be expressed.
 - 3b) Accordingly, the proper art of the Perfect City is the art of discipline.

The following is the central argument of Bk. X :

- 1) For the many particulars of our experience to which we give the same name, there is one Form for that class of particulars.
 - a) So, for the many beds and tables, there are 2 Forms, Bedness and Tableness.
 - b) Then, the makers of beds and tables look to their respective Forms when they make the individual beds & tables.
 - c) But, the Form itself is not the work of any craftsman, but the work of a Mastercraftsman (**dêmiourgos**), who makes not only all the kinds of furniture, but also plants, animals, heavens, and earth.
 - 2) Similarly, the painter is a sort of maker; he makes the appearance of a bed.
 - 3) The carpenter does not make the true bed, but something that is like the bed.
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- 4) So, there exist 3 beds: a god makes the Form of the bed (Bedness); the carpenter imitates the Form in creating the artifact (the wooden bed); and the artist, at yet a 3rd remove, makes the imitation of the artifactual bed (painting of bed).
 - 5) The tragedian is also an imitator at a 3rd remove from reality, who imitates the works of the craftsman rather than what is real in nature.
 - 6) The Many claim that Homer and the poets know about all the crafts, virtue and vice, and the gods; however, what Homer composes are merely images (**eikôn**), not reality.
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- 7) Hence, Homer contributed nothing to human understanding of public affairs (**praxis**) -- governing cities, conducting warfare, giving laws -- nor was he wise in deeds (**erga**) or skillful in inventions in crafts; nor was he a notable leader of a community, as Pythagoras; nor was he prized for his theoretical wisdom (**sophos**), as are the Sophists.
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- 8) Hence, all poetic imitators, beginning with Homer, merely imitate images of virtue and have no contact with the truth.
 - 9) The imitator has neither knowledge (one who uses the artifact has knowledge) nor right opinion (as the maker of the artifact does); he merely imitates what appears beautiful to the ignorant Many.
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- 10) Consequently, imitation in general consorts with that part of the soul that is far from reality and knowledge, the unstable, emotional part of ourselves.

Werner Jaeger points out that the core of Plato's attack on art is his umbrage with the thesis that Homer is the educator of all Greece. Homer was considered to be the encyclopedic teacher who understood all crafts, valorized the virtues, and was prized for his theoretical and practical wisdom. This is the real thrust of Plato's attack:

- i) Imitative poetry is to be banished from the ideal Republic [595a].
 - ii) But, since the Republic perhaps can never be realized [592a-b], this condemnation does not imply absolute banishment.
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- iii) So, poetry injures the intellect of its readers and hearers, if they do not possess knowledge of truth as a remedy [595b].
 - iv) This simply means that poetry may remain as a source of aesthetic pleasure, but it is debarred from being a teacher of humankind.
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- v) This further means that all poets and Sophists since Homer have merely produced copies (**eidôla**) of virtue or moral excellence (**aretê**), without touching the truth; so, they cannot be the true educators of humankind.