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Contents

THE POLITICS OF MIMESIS IN THE PLATONIC DIALOGUES: A COMMENT ON PLATO'S ART THEORY FROM THE VANTAGE POINT OF THE *STATESMAN*

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The question pertaining to the proper way of reading Plato has been forcefully reintroduced in philosophical discussion since Leo Strauss's pioneering analyses of the dramatic form of Platonic dialogues.[1] Strauss proved that the dramatic form of the dialogues was equally meaningful to the ideas articulated in them. This shift of emphasis in the interpretation of Plato's dialogues has of course resulted in novel and highly original rereadings of the greatest Western thinker. However, this relatively recent discovery of novel ways to understand and interpret Plato cannot efface twenty five centuries of Platonism. The vast majority of Plato's epigones understood his work in a uniform and consistent way and, historically speaking, Platonism, particularly in some of its popularized versions, soon came to mean a concrete set of ideas.[2] As much as this counters the way that many of us want to understand Plato today, Platonism has produced facts which need to be taken under serious consideration when studying Plato himself; for, obviously Plato cannot be separated from the historical reception he had. Therefore, the question, what is the proper way of reading Plato, remains. It seems that today's reader ought to maintain a balance between Plato as a thinker with a uniform and consistent set of ideas, and Plato as a dramatic

poet whose philosophical physiognomy is delineated differently in each dialogue.

I shall try to maintain this balance in the present paper which to a large extent deals with these two faces of Platonism, or rather struggles with both. History engages us with both faces of Plato and the decision where to finally place the emphasis is up to Plato's reader. This paper concerns Plato's theory of art which is the perfect example of today's interpretive dilemmas concerning the Greek philosopher. For Plato's art theory is constantly referred to by all philosophy or art history scholars. Nonetheless, there is nothing self evident in this phrase "Plato's art theory" besides being perhaps able to affirm that art, painting, sculpture and the rest of visual arts are imitations. Contrariwise, it is possible to maintain that Plato's famous art theory is hardly a theory at all, outside a certain dialogue, since Plato's views on art and on imitation substantially differ from one dialogue to the other.[3] If, therefore, the formula "Plato's theory of art" is meaningful it is because of Platonism which has always understood Plato's art theory as something uniform and consistent.

The present paper will address the question as to how to combine the Platonist tradition, namely the notion that Plato has a uniform and consistent art theory, with our desire to read diligently and attentively all aspects of Platonic dialogues theoretical and dramatic. I shall focus on the concept of mimesis since this is the key concept in all of Plato's reflections on art and I shall pay my respect to Platonism by admitting that there is indeed a concrete and consistent art theory in Plato. After examining the various uses in which mimesis is put by Plato in several of his dialogues, I wish to interpret its concept in a political manner and reveal the close relationship between art and politics in Plato's thought.

MIMESIS AS THE LAW OF ART

In his classical study with the title *Plato and Art*, Manolis Andronikos acknowledged that, as a matter of fact, Platonic *mimesis* is neither a simple notion nor does it have a precise definition.[4] According to his analysis, there are roughly two main concepts of *mimesis*: a narrow concept approximating imitation and a broad one which, depending on the circumstance, may be given a meaning extending

from symbolism to creation.[5] From Andronikos's reading it becomes obvious that he favors the broad concept of *mimesis* as this offers him the opportunity to relate Plato with modern art and particularly with abstract art.[6] Andronikos's passion for offering legitimacy to modernism by associating it with one of the founding fathers of Western thought is still animating many thinkers who see in Plato a potential advocate of abstract or non-representational modernism.

Taking our lead from Andronikos we may proceed to a first review of the uses of *mimesis* in the different Platonic dialogues and roughly group these uses in two categories. First, those uses of *mimesis* displaying a negative view of it, with which most of us are familiar, and then those less familiar uses implying a positive view of *mimesis*.

Apparently there is no better place to start than the *Republic* Book X comprising the most famous Platonic remarks on art and *mimesis*. There Plato claims that painting is *mimesis* of things as they appear and not as they are (598a)[7] and therefore art is three times removed from truth (597e). *Mimesis* is some sort of game of deception (598b) played by all those who are unable to distinguish between knowledge and ignorance (598c). *Mimesis* as practiced by most artists is therefore condemned as is most of art in which *mimesis* plays the key role. In the Sophist, this negative view of *mimesis* is reinstated in a different way: painting which produces imitations of appearances (234b–c) is made parallel to sophistry which is some sort of "conjectural or apparent knowledge of all things" and by no means does it coincide with truth (233d). Image making or *mimesis* is separated in two kinds, "the art of making likenesses" and "the art of making appearances" (236b–e). The first means creating imitations which look like realities from a certain place and the second means creating imitations which appear to be real, irrespectively of place. Both cases of imitations are false. In Cratylus we encounter the same negative view of *mimesis* again in a different context, that of names. Names and images are imitations of real things. However, we ought not to seek knowledge based on either names or images. We should rather seek knowledge based on the real things themselves (430b). Here *mimesis* is again condemned because it leads astray from truth.

Now, in other dialogues we get totally different indications pointing to a rather favorable and positive account of *mimesis*. In his explanation of who the real philosopher is, in Book VI of the *Republic*,

Plato parallels the philosopher with that painter who has the model of reality before his eyes and by drawing the plan of the ideal state, becomes a law giver (484b–c, 500e). Here it becomes obvious that painting and by extension *mimesis*, refer directly to the noblest and most important things and by no means to mere appearances. In Book V of the *Republic* the reference surfaces again to that painter who adheres, like the philosopher, to real being, irrespectively of its existence or non existence (472d–e, 480a). In the Symposium, Plato maintains a similar view that poetry is the reason why everything is being brought into existence. Thus all work and creation is poetry and all workers and creators should be called poets (205b–c). Again, therefore, he acknowledges a positive and productive role for poets, artists and by extension, for *mimesis*. In sum, these last few and elliptic references I have mentioned, are indications that *mimesis* is at times meant in a positive way and provides direct access to real being. *Mimesis* meant in a positive way is thus an important process of creation which even procures those pure and beautiful shapes and sounds offering an exquisite pleasure and discussed in Philebus (51b–e). In Timaeus this type of positive *mimesis* is again acknowledged and even made dependent upon education and upbringing (19d–e).

Thus, on the one hand, Andronikos is right when he distinguishes two meanings of *mimesis* in the Platonic dialogues, a narrow and a broad. On the other hand, and, in a second reading, it is easy to realize that the broad meaning of *mimesis* is finally all too broad. It would certainly be more accurate to refer to a dissemination of meanings of *mimesis*. For if in this short, elliptical and, to a certain extent, too abstract review of Plato's meanings of *mimesis*, we looked into taking under consideration the different dramatic context in which each meaning is presented and used in each different dialogue, the dissemination of meanings of *mimesis* would be even greater than before.

One thing is sure and can be ascertained in all dialogues: fine arts in Plato are essentially mimetic.[8] Thus art functions, works, realizes itself through *mimesis*. From what has so far been argued it is reasonable to infer that *mimesis* is the law of art. With this last sentence, however, we enter a very specific political context of the last Platonic dialogues and, more precisely, of the *Statesman* where we have a decisive articulation of problems of law. Indeed, *mimesis* is both an unwritten and a written law of art. *Mimesis* is an unwritten law to the

extent that it is a rule of traditional art teaching and theory and has thus been handed down from the previous generations to the following. *Mimesis* is a written law to the extent that art is referred to as *mimesis* not only in Plato's writings but even before him. *Mimesis* is not a law which is voted or introduced with all the standard legal procedures. It is rather a law of the symbolic order, with the meaning that Lacanian psychoanalysis gives to law.

Art exactly like *mimesis* has many kinds and is characterized by an equal conceptual dissemination. In the case of fine arts, however, which aim at pleasure, art is a game, according to Plato's *Statesman* (288 c–d). But art also has a broader sense than that of the game in this specific dialogue: at times it comes close to care, knowledge, knowing how and technique.[9] Stanley Rosen even associates art with wisdom and *φρόνησις, phronesis*, in this dialogue, notably when Plato describes the art which characterizes the *Statesman*.[10]

The connection of art with politics in this specific dialogue, the *Statesman*, which I am herein venturing to establish, is not unprecedented. Sir Ernest Baker, one of the classic Platonic scholars, in his reading of the *Statesman*, concludes that the *Statesman* has that special kind of artistic liberty to do the best for his subjects, according to his knowledge and art.[11] For, Plato, Baker argues, understands politics as an art and the state as the *Statesman's* domain of free artistic creation. If Baker attempts to understand politics as art in the *Statesman*, I am trying to account for the opposite, namely to understand art as politics in Plato.

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN ART AND LAW

From the conclusion that *mimesis* is the law of art we may now proceed and read Plato's art theory from the vantage point of the *Statesman*. I am first going to briefly review Plato's famous reflections on law in this particular dialogue which are extremely pertinent, even nowadays. As it is well known, in this dialogue the stranger and young Socrates engage in conversation in order to seek the best definition for the Statesman. In the middle of the dialogue the stranger asks whether it is right to govern without laws (294b). He responds to his own question by stating that: "There can be no doubt that legislation is in a manner the business of a king, and yet the best thing of all is not that the law should rule, but that a man should rule sup-

posing him to have wisdom and royal power" (294b). The dialogue proceeds with the explanations that the stranger offers for his rather provocative thesis:

> Str. Because the law does not perfectly comprehend what is noblest and most just for all and therefore cannot enforce what is best. The differences of men and actions and the endless irregular movements of human beings, do not admit of any universal and simple rule. And no art whatsoever can lay down a rule which will last for all time.
>
> Y. Soc. Of course not.
>
> Str. But the law is always striving to make one;-like the obstinate and ignorant tyrant, who will not allow anything to be done contrary to his appointment, or any question to be asked-not even in sudden changes of circumstances, when something happens to be better than what he commanded for someone. (294b–c)

The law is therefore not the best rule (294d) since it cannot "provide exactly what is suitable for each particular case" (295a) but lays down "laws in a general form for the majority, roughly meeting the cases of individuals" (295b). The man who governs has the right and sometimes the obligation to break the law when he does the best for the city. He also has the right and obligation to change the laws or replace them with better ones. In any case, he ought to govern with wisdom and art without keeping the laws, as long as he wishes the best for his city and as long as he is ready to grant the perfect justice and education to his subjects (295e, 296b, 296e–297b, 300c–e). Law is thus a necessary evil. Precisely because we do not live in the era of Cronus when everything was perfect according to the myth,[12] but live in times which are not blessed with God's favor (271b–e, 272b–e), the perfect government exists nowhere and this is exactly the reason why laws have been instituted everywhere. Laws constitute the second best form of government, they are imitations of truth and should not be transgressed (297e, 300b–c). The statesman's art consists of the corrective transcendence of law with the ultimate task to grant what is best and just to the city and to the citizens.

Briefly speaking, there is a contrast between art and law which is crucial to the *Statesman* as a dialogue. "The wise and good man governing the affairs of the city" may or may not obey the laws. His art which is a mixture of knowledge, technical capacity, care and

wisdom may at times be assisted by law. However, most often the law becomes a burden and an obstacle to the statesman and part of his art is precisely his capacity to overcome or replace problematic and obsolete laws. Art is ideal and law is real and as much as idealism and realism are contrasting values they ought to be both two sides of the correct government.

Rephrasing the contrast between art and law again in a Platonic way, art is associated with courage and law with temperance. Courage and temperance are the most important virtues for all statesmen despite the fact that they are in contrast (306b–c, 307b–c, 307e, 308b). Courage enables the statesman to break the law for the sake of justice, temperance allows the statesman to prudently obey and safeguard the law, again for the sake of justice (306d–311c). These contrasting values of courage and temperance, of art and law are instilled in the politicians during their upbringing and education, in reality by laws themselves but most crucially by God (310b). For the very existence of contrasting values in one and the same person is a sure sign of God's favor (310b). Consequently, Plato considers the statesman a very gifted person, whose talent and skills are, on the one hand, a result of his education and, on the other, they have divine provenance.

The contrast between law and art is apparent in the dramatic form of the statesman as a dialogue. The debate regarding the dramatic value of the late Platonic dialogues is well known and has not yet been settled. One side in this debate claims that the late Platonic works are less skillful, dramatically speaking, reflecting Plato's great age and lost sparkle and merely constituting a delineation of ideas without any of the earlier dramatic value of his dialogues of youth. Indeed, on the one hand, in the statesman, young Socrates seems to be completely dominated by the cataclysmic presence of the stranger and hardly manages to follow the dialogue, restricting himself to brief questions and answering without objecting to its course which has been totally determined by the stranger. Except for once or twice when he asks for some clarification, young Socrates seems to attend the stranger's monologue and to have a simply decorative and secondary presence, dramatically speaking. On the other hand, however, this very situation might be intended as a dramatic strategy by Plato, serving the very ideas pronounced in the dialogue. Through the stranger's majestic intellectual superiority, Plato manages to dramati-

cally picture the contrast between art and law which pervades the dialogue. The Eleatic stranger, who is in a foreign country with different laws than the ones he is accustomed to, is obviously the one representing art. He is the one who, by virtue of his empowered presence, brings novelty and questions the legitimate order of the city he is visiting, the very city which brought one of its wisest men, Socrates, before the law and condemned him to death.[13] If, as mentioned before, the stranger represents art, young Socrates represents the law with his constant need for clarification, his many questions, his attention, prudence, modesty and sense of justice. The very profile of the two dialogue speakers, the one bold and cataclysmic, the other low key and prudent, sets the appropriate dramatic stage for the contrast between art and law. Thus the dramatic form is not less important, even in this late Platonic dialogue. The contrast between art and law also relates to the often asked question why Plato entrusts his philosophic argument to the stranger rather than to young Socrates.[14] According to my view, the stranger is the one coming from a foreign place and can therefore naturally question the laws and customs of the city he is visiting. This is precisely the reason why Plato entrusts him his philosophical argument and allows him to be the superior speaker. Art has a completely unknown origin and this is the reason why, during its history, it was often attributed to genius or to God's favor or charisma. Exactly like art, the stranger's origin is completely unknown. The law changes when it comes into contact with the completely unknown, with whatever has not been accounted for or does not belong to any of the already familiar categories.

ART AGAINST AND BEYOND *MIMESIS*

We may now begin to see the contrast we delineated earlier between art and law in the Statesman in the context of Plato's art theory. As mentioned before, art means at once knowledge, wisdom, technical capacity, care and poetry with the sense of creation of something which did not exist previously. Art is also a game. Art's law is *mimesis*. Yet, art can never be contained in its law. It is therefore never entirely contained in *mimesis*. In reality, there is always something in art not only beyond *mimesis* but also against *mimesis*. There is something in art which always disturbs, corrects or refurnishes *mimesis*. This may very well be the gift of artistic creation which has

puzzled not only Plato but also Immanuel Kant and many other modern and contemporary philosophers having deemed this gift as mysterious and unknown and having thought of it as a gift from God. Art is beyond *mimesis* even if it depends on it or is defined through it. Plato states this clearly in the *Statesman:*

> Str. If such were the mode of procedure, Socrates, about these sciences and about generalship, and any branch of hunting, or about painting or imitation in general, or carpentry, or any sort of handicraft, or husbandry, or planning, or if we were to see an art of rearing horses, or tending herds, or divination, or any ministerial service, or draught-playing, or any science conversant with number, whether simple or square or cube, or comprising motion—I say, if all these things were done in this way according to written regulations and not according to art, what would be the result?
>
> Y. Soc. All the arts would utterly perish, and could never be recovered, because enquiry would be unlawful. And human life, which is bad enough already, would then become unendurable. (299d–e, 300)

It is apparent from this passage that the kind of art which complies with law, i.e., *mimesis* does not merit its name. It is not art. Art must necessarily question the law in order to merit its name. If *mimesis* is the law of art then art must necessarily question its own law, *mimesis*. Art is therefore beyond and against *mimesis*. From the point of view of art history, art refers to itself alone as it advances in history by abolishing the very law which gave it birth, *mimesis*. The artist is therefore the model statesman in this Platonic sense. His prudence and modesty allow him to learn and study, his courage and boldness lead him to question and reject his teachers and thus regenerate the laws of art. The artist's aim, exactly like the statesman's, is to grant justice there where law has no easy access, in the realm of desire or in the realm of need.

In conclusion, I wish to offer an account for the dissemination of meanings of art and *mimesis* in the Platonic dialogues. Art as well as *mimesis* differ from one dialogue to the other in the same way that each artwork an artist creates is unique and in the same way that each artwork's standards are different. As a great artwork furnishes us with a notion about art in general so the Platonic definitions of art and *mimesis* are a unique result of every different dialogue and are therefore different from one dialogue to the other. The dissemination

of meanings of art and *mimesis* in the Platonic dialogues is necessary and intentional in order to indicate that art and *mimesis* are deeply political concepts, changing, therefore, according to the political ends they are put to serve. Art is therefore the politics of *mimesis*. Plato is the model artist-Statesman when one takes under consideration the poetic and dramatic value of his dialogues. Thus every time Plato writes, he regenerates the law differently in order to serve the aims of his specific writing at that particular circumstance when he is writing. *Mimesis* as the law of art is therefore differently regenerated in every other Platonic dialogue.

At a certain point at the beginning of the dialogue, the stranger advises Socrates not to "be in too great haste to arrive quickly at the political science" (264b). I think that it is very important to think the stranger's advice twice, not to be in too great haste to arrive quickly to politics and thus rediscover politics in unexpected areas or where politics have been forgotten. One such area is art, which, according to Plato, is always deeply political and this is the reason why he takes it so seriously, dedicates to it so many thoughts and is deeply concerned with it when he writes on his ideal city. By proposing art as the politics of *mimesis* I wish to insist, in contrast to many contemporary views that art is nowadays apolitical, that art which merits its name is almost always political since it questions its own law or the laws pervading reality. Along with the discovery of art as the politics of *mimesis*, the Statesman offers a criterion of evaluating political *praxis* which is no other than questioning of law in the name of justice. It is my firm belief that we have to ponder hard on the stranger's advice not to be in too great haste to arrive quickly at politics; what seems to be the furthest access to politics may really be one of the closest, to paraphrase Heidegger. Art which merits its name is definitely one of the closest accesses to politics.

NOTES

1 See Strauss's classic analyses in Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983).

2 In Friedrich Nietzsche's view all of Christianity is characterized as "Platonism for the people" in Martin Heidegger, *Neitzsche*, trans. David Farrell Kress (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1991) vol. 1, p. 159.

3 Θεόπη Παρισάκη, «Ο Πλάτων και η ζωγραφική» *Ελληνική Φιλοσοφία και Καλές Τέχνες* επιμ. Κωνσταντίνος Βουδούρης (Αθήνα: Ιονία, 2000), pp. 227–36.

4 Μανώλης Ανδρόνικος, *Ο Πλάτων και η τέχνη* (Αθήνα: Νεφέλη, 1986), pp. 75, 76. *Mimesis* is roughly translated as imitation.

5 Ibid., pp. 64, 62, 63.

6 Ibid., pp. 264–85.

7 All references to Platonic dialogues are from Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed. *The Dialogues of Plato,* trans. Benjamin Jowett (London: William Benton, *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* 1952).

8 Furthermore, Pierre Maxime Schuhl maintains, the pleasure that fine arts procure is called χάρις and is a result of the discovery of resemblance, "la découverte de la ressemblance" between the art work and a real thing (in whatever sense one gives to reality). See Pierre Maxime Schuhl, *Platon et l'art de son temps* (Paris: PUF, 1952), p. 44.

9 On the importance of knowledge for the definition of the statesman's art, see I. S. Christodoulou's analysis in his introduction to the Statesman (Athens: Zitros Editions, 1998).

10 Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Statesman: The Web of Politics* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 5, 182.

11 Sir Ernest Baker, *Greek Political Thought: Plato and his Predecessors* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1977), p. 321.

12 J. P. Dumont in his essay "Temps Image et Existence chez Platon" argues that the ideal government was in the era of Cronus. See Jean-Paul Dumont, Lucien Bescond, ed. *Politique dans l'antiquité: Images, mythes et fantasmes* (Lille: PUL, Universite de Lille III, 1986), p. 105.

13 See George Klosko's analysis of the Statesman and the dialogue references he traces to Socrate's trial and death in 299b–c. See George Klosko, *The Development of Plato's Political Theory* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 196.

14 This question has been raised by many, including Leo Strauss. Seth Bernardete makes this question his point of departure for his own analysis of the Statesman as a dialogue. See Seth Benardete, *The Being of the Beautiful: Plato's Theatetus, Sophist and Statesman* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), p. xvii.