The Impenetrable Looking Glass: Plato on the Different Possibilities of the Visual and Literary Arts

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"...poetry has a wider range...there are beauties at its command which painting is never able to attain" Lessing, *Laocoon*,[1] chapter 8

Plato did not have to know the likes of Mapplethorpe to see salacious or violent visual images. They abound on classical and archaic artifacts: A panel from the Tomb of the Diver at Paestum depicts two symposiasts gazing at each other with obvious lust. An important kylix by the Amasis painter shows a defecating dog under each handle and on one side of the cup, two prodigiously endowed satyrs pleasuring themselves. The Parthenon Frieze, as Joan Connelly has so masterfully argued,[2] portrays a prelude to a human sacrifice. Yet Plato does not deem the visual artists ethically corrosive as he does the literary. This, even though in his Republic 10, he brings his most damaging charge against the poets by drawing an analogy with the painters in order to show how the poet exploits the fallibility of human judgment. Moreover, in the earlier books, he points to the morally suspect content of the literature of his time. Many scholars thus find his preferential treatment of the painter either baffling or logically inconsistent.[3]

In fact, it is neither. Plato treats the two types of art differently because, as I show in this article, he considers the aesthetic experiences of the two types of art to have different kinds of relation to our cognitive, emotional, and ethical lives. For Plato, as we shall see, irreducible aesthetic pleasure is a constituent of the aesthetic experience of poetry but not of painting.

Many proponents of aesthetic experience distinguish it from other types of interior events and in fact value it for bringing a reprieve from ordinary life. Some reject that separation, while still others reject the very existence of a unique

aesthetic experience, thinking it either a reducible concept or a philosophical fiction. Surprisingly, Plato, despite his reputation as a moralist about art, acknowledges the phenomenon of aesthetic pleasure at least in response to literary artworks and offers an alternative to the separatist model, one which, to my knowledge, has not been recognized as such in his work. His model, as we shall see, depicts aesthetic experience, however rapturous, as leading us to a deeper, more enduring (and, to him, deleterious), emotional involvement with the world. His analysis, though arguably problematic, provokes searching questions. In this article, I shall propose a new slant on Plato's controversial assault on literature show that his arguments provide an insightful, even if flawed, view on the nature of aesthetic experience itself. I also shall address a problem arising within Plato's theory of art—his tolerance for the painters—and I suggest why Plato might , without inconsistency, assume such a counter-intuitive stance.

I. Background

According to some theorists, the concept of an irreducible aesthetic emotion distinct from ordinary life wrongly isolates artistic involvements[4] from our political, emotional, and intellectual lives. This notion of the aesthetic, as they see it, is modernism's inheritance from the Enlightenment, the presuppositions of which they believe we should now abandon. Poststructuralists of various persuasions think that the aesthetic is a cultural construct along with all of our responses to art.

Some more traditional aestheticians find the concept too closely associated with aesthetically-driven theories such as formalism, the now-unfashionable New Criticism, or other cognitive theories of art, views they believe posit too much distance between the human observer and the artwork, or exile artworks to a hermetic realm of their own. Yet other philosophical aestheticians are uncomfortable with what they consider the metaphysical or epistemological implications of the aesthetic: the existence of a special faculty, the reality of aesthetic properties, a deceptive separation between an artwork and the historical moment at which it was created, or a mistaken phenomenological description of aesthetic experience which takes it to include a component irreducible to a set of other human experiences. It is no coincidence that one of the most vehement critics of this notion, George Dickie,[5] is also a prominent architect of the institutional theory of art. This theory construes the .artworld as a politically constructed community, not as a separate or transcendent one

with non-contingent standards of admission. On this view, the criteria for classifying something as an artwork include its political status but not something inherent to the work itself, such as formal properties or expressive content. Accordingly, experience of artworks, on this view, must be primarily cognitive and securely rooted in our social lives.

Such a theory contrasts starkly with views such as formalism and its various descendants, which essentially isolate the aesthetic sphere with its unique experiences and artistic struggles. Clive Bell, in the Preface to his now canonical *Art,* remarks that "Everyone in his heart believes there is a real distinction between works of art and all other objects." Moreover, he, like many others, thinks that aesthetic responses carry one away from quotidian life. The concept of aesthetic emotion, while not essential to, works well with, a theory that locates an artwork in a separate realm. There the objects of attention are the formal properties of an artwork, and the aesthetic or artistic properties that arguably supervene on them (however one analyzes supervenience).

One influential model, then, isolates aesthetic experience. This, according to some, vitiates currently prevalent ethical criticism (in its various versions), because such theories diminish the aesthetic, identifying artworks too closely with their subject matter and linking our appreciation of them with it.

More recently, some aestheticians have synthesized these approaches. While taking seriously the wide spectrum of objections to the idea of an irreducible aesthetic sensation, they also acknowledge the clear distinctiveness of artworks and our engagement with them. Jerrold Levinson offers a noteworthy analysis:

> Pleasure in an artwork is aesthetic when, regardless of which aspects of it are attended to, be they psychological or political or polemical, there is also attention to the *relation* between content and form -between what the work represents or expresses or suggests, and the means it uses to do so.

In order to attend to this relation, obviously we must attend to the relata; so we cannot sever the aesthetic from life—presumably even if the subject matter happens to be something purely artistic, for example the interrelation of colors or applications of paint.

Plato, too, takes the aesthetic experience of an artwork to be distinctive and yet closely related to the world. But, unlike Levinson, Plato, as I shall demonstrate, takes our apprehension of that " relation between content and form—

between what the work...expresses...and the means it uses" to interfere with the aesthetic experience.

The more intense the aesthetic response, for Plato, the dimmer our focus on the formal properties, the less agile our cognitive faculties. For Plato, the aesthetic experience leads us to a profoundly emotional engagement with the moral, psychological, and social world. But once we focus on the formal properties of a work, we cannot discern Levinson's ideal convergence of form and content. It eludes us, because in Plato's philosophical psychology, we cannot be absorbed in the content while attending to the formal properties of a work. This is one source of Plato's animus against the poets: the more keen our awareness of artistic and formal elements, the less we engage with the subject matter of the work; correlatively, the more we are engaged by the subject matter, the more the artistic and formal elements recede from our purview. Levinson's ideal is impossible for Plato.

Poets and Painters

Plato sets forth the painter as the paradigmatic creator of illusions. Yet despite his metaphysical and moral repugnance towards the image, he does not vilify the painter as he does the poet. Scholars find this odd. But they should find it more curious that he likens the two at all, given that he so often contrasts the poet and painter, sometimes invidiously. In the *Gorgias*, for example, Socrates avers that the aim of tragedy is to gratify the audience, to give pleasure. Given Plato's refusal to identify pleasure with excellence, the extent to which a tragedy provides pleasure to the many cannot be a mark of real goodness. What gives poetry the power to elicit pleasure are its formal properties such as "rhythm, meter, and music," for without these, poetry would be just speech" (502c) In the *Republic*, both books 10 and 3, he makes the same point more subtly. In book 3 (393d-394b), he demonstrates this tacitly when Socrates (in classifying narrative technique) describes prosaically the events narrated in a dramatic, emotionally charged passage from Homer. Socrates's recital of it is as compelling as a mere plot summary of *King Lear*: flat, monochromatic, and matter-of-fact. In book 10, he conveys the point differently:

> So great is the natural charm of poetry, for if you strip the works...of their artistic coloring...They are like the faces of those who were young but not beautiful after the bloom of youth has left them. (601b)'

Socrates presupposes a form/content distinction, and he deems the formal

or artistic properties those that evoke pleasure. This pleasure, he argues, is so absorbing that it overtakes judgmental activities, almost as if it takes over and governs the ego. This may be akin to the disinterested condition that some ascribe to aesthetic experience.

The poet does not aspire, according to Plato, to enlighten his audience about the human condition or reality. Nor is the poet concerned with the facts about the poem's subject matter. For reasons that will emerge, Homer, for example, did not need to know much about seafaring or military strategy nor Sophocles about technicalities of survival on a deserted island or the pathology of infantile foot binding. Thus, Socrates argues, most famously in the *Ion*, that the poet, unlike the painter, composes without knowledge or *techne*. Here he presents his fanciful account of poetic inspiration, which is a metaphorical expression of Plato's aestheticism with regard to poetry. Plato in fact realizes that the literary artist has a *techne*, but a different one than many think it to be. This will emerge in our analysis of the *Republic*.

In the *Gorgias*, however, where Plato forcefully underscores the carelessness of the poet, Socrates uses painting as an illustrative example of a *techne*:

> ...all other craftsmen do not each choose and apply materials to their work at random, but with the view that each of their productions should have a certain form. Look, for example...at painters...and all of the other craftsmen...how each one disposes each element he contributes in a fixed order, and compels one to fit and harmonize with the other until he has combined the whole into something well-ordered and regulated. (503d-504b)[8]

A *techne* or art has a clearly defined product or goal and a set of principles, including the structural principles that give the product harmony, order, and excellence. Socrates remarks (504a) that harmony, order, and integration are the marks of excellence in a given thing. This applies not only to artifacts, but to the soul as well (506e), in which, ideally, order arises from the efforts of others (for example, poets and orators) and oneself. Plato never deviates from this standard, though he amplifies it variously.

The painter, then, works methodically with an eye to achieving a specific effect. As Eva Keuls[9] cogently argues, most of the important advances in illusionistic painting predate Plato's creative period and were widely known. They included technical studies such as color theory, perspective, and optical

proportions—techniques involving precision and in which there was continuing study and experimentation.[10] Plato's argument in book 10 suggests that he himself was widely acquainted with them. Clearly, Plato associates painting with calculative skill and rigorous application of principles. He does not, though, speak of it as having the same dangerous charm as poetry.

The creation of poetry, however, is usually a different matter, for Plato. While his remarks on the poet's madness or divine inspiration may be ironic, giving the dig to an idea widely shared by his contemporaries, Plato does seem to think that the poet brings a certain sensibility to his task that the painter cannot. In the *Republic* book10, where he likens the two creators, he implicitly ascribes a sort of *techne* to the poet, but one not as rigorous as that of the painter. Let us turn to that matter now.

The Meaning of the Painter/Poet Analogy

Plato is, of course, well-known for exiling literary artists from the Republic. He does this in part because of the poet's irreverence, but chiefly because of the harm wrought by the experience itself. In book 3, he speaks of the creator's process as dangerous; in book 10 of the spectator's. The two arguments are remarkably similar, in that at the foundation of each is Plato's observation that inhabiting the vantage point of a fictional character is the essence of the poetic imagination, be it the creator's or spectator's. The difference between the one who creates or enacts a character and the one who receives it is that the poet (and in some cases, actor) is the source of the spectator's imaginative experience as well as his own. Moreover, the poet has a command of his formal materials, which he calls into the service of his imagination.

In book 3, he offers a labyrinthine argument (395a-396c) to establish that mimesis or representation of an evil, conflicted, passionate, or otherwise flawed character—in short, any character of dramatic interest—can harm the poet or performer in several ways. One is that he acquires dispositions to behave in ways that the enacted character behaves; but more importantly, the poet or actor must place himself in the private world of the character he represents, which tends to put him in sympathy with that character. Indeed, this is one of the chief functions of the poetic imagination: the poet creates in his imagination a world, or more precisely, a sliver of a world. Thus, in book 3, Socrates prohibits the guardians from imitating various sorts of persons and actions, remarking:

> They must not become accustomed to making themselves like madmen in word or deed. They must have knowledge of men and women who are mad and evil, but none of their actions should be performed or imitated. (396a)

Plato's insight is expressed elegantly by the contemporary American writer Cynthia Ozick:

> Imagination is more than make-believe, more than the power to invent. It is also the power to penetrate evil...to become evil...Whoever writes a story that includes villainy enters into and becomes the villain. Imagination...[is] becoming: the writer can enter the leg of a mosquito, a sex not her own...a mind larger or smaller....the imagination seeks out the unsayable and the undoable, and says and does them....more dangerous: [it] always has the lust...to wear out the rational...[11]

What does this have to do with painting? Let us turn to *Republic* 10 to examine the function of the painter/poet analogy in the structure of his argument. Basically, Plato portrays the painter also as inhabiting an imagined world; but it is not a world of human drama. Rather, the painter depicts the appearances of the visual world, as if, as Plato sees it, holding a mirror to the world or to an imagined visual world; for the painter is interested in the way things appear visually, not emotionally, according to Plato. His well-known and, at first , puzzling remarks about craftsmen in book 10 (597a-d) indicate that he views the painter as a maker, but unlike the craftsman, not of material things, but only of appearances of things from a given perspective under certain physical conditions (e.g., light, time of day, spatial location, season) . The painter creates images of appearances: they are images not of things, but of sense-data that we correlate with surfaces of things. Socrates asks:

> What does the picture relate to? Does it imitate the reality of the model as it is *(hoia estin)* or its appearanceas it ~~appears~~ *(hoia phainetai)*? (*Rep*. 598b)

Naive perception, unaided by experience, Plato points out, distorts the real properties of sensible objects is a bed any different if you look at it from the side or fromany other point? Or is it not different, but [only] appears different? (598a) Similarly, and the same things seem crooked when we see them in water and straight when we see them out of it (602c)

We should note, too, that Plato discusses the painter in the *Sophist* (235d-236c) where he distinguishes two kinds of image-making: (1) the making of images that, if not qualitatively identical to their originals, resemble them closely:

likeness or *eikon*-making (2) the making of images that are not like their models, but appear to be so: semblance or *phantasma*-making. Illusionistic painters and sculptors, he observes, fall under (2), otherwise they would not achieve verisimilitude:

If they were to reproduce the true proportions of a well-made figure...the upper parts would appear too small and the lower too large, because we see one at a distance, the other close at hand. (*Sophist* 236a)[12]

The painter may know nothing about the subject matter except its appearance, as Plato indicates in *Republic* 10. The painter contrasts with the craftsman in this regard. The violin-maker must grasp the principles of violin playing; the painter of a violin need only see the details of its appearance. Plato here anticipates the topos of Magritte's witty painting of a pipe, "Ceci ne pas une pipe."

As noted above, Plato acknowledges that perception endows objects with properties they do not, indeed cannot, possess. This perceptual distortion, he alleges, is the basis for *skiagraphia* (602d). While the exact meaning of this term remains controversial, some important scholars11[3] speculate that it was a technique akin to pointillism or some type of impressionism so that the painted subject did not look real when viewed at close range, but did when viewed from a distance.

Plato implies that reason allows the painter to correct perceptual distortion. Illusionistic painting requires a scrupulous command of the various ways objects appear, a scientific grasp of the way perception distorts in a lawlike fashion.[14] It is not only the philosopher who must undergo arduous training, for the painter must as well if he is to portray accurately actual or hypothetical visual data. In vase painting and wall painting alike, technical experimentation was in the air, and according to Keuls, there seems to have been controversies over such matters as whether form should take precedence over color.[15] Clearly, painters had to possess a scientific sensibility. Ironically, then, the painter has to cultivate the rational, calculative faculty in order to be more sensitive to illusion. Therefore, the painterly imagination requires a kind of intellectual rigor. One can see the Platonic influence in the Renaissance ideal of the artist as scientist-observer, which since the 19th century has been eclipsed by the Romantic ideal of the artist as primarily emotional.

What is the basis of Plato's analogy between the passionate poet and the rational painter? The poet, like the painter, creates images, subjective

perspectival impressions; though these are not visual impressions but emotional, psychological, and moral ones. He is like a painter, first of all, in copying some subjects offensive to Plato (among others). Furthermore, the good poet knows the way the world appears to given types of psyches—people of passion, violence, weakness, and the like—but the poet (lacking Platonic philosophical training) does not understand the truth about moral and psychological reality. Homer can make us feel that the rage of Achilles is justified, without making us question whether in fact it is, so imaginatively absorbed are we in Achilles' sense of indignation. For Plato, then, the poet bears the same relation to the philosopher as the painter does to the craftsman.[16] In the poet's case, however, it is dangerous, whereas in the painter's it is not. Notice, too, that the painter's understanding endows his art with intellectual rigor; Plato is well aware of the craft the poet wields in fashioning his linguistic artifacts and the psychological understanding that an artistically successful poet must possess. But the poet's craft is inferior for two reasons: (l) the human psyche, for Plato, cannot be predicted with the same precision as the appearances of physical objects, and (2) the poet's creation, in moving us aesthetically, blinds us to moral principles, and blurs our sense of boundaries between the actual and the imaginary. Moreover, as we shall see, the painter, regardless of how well he executes his work, cannot transport us from life in the same way as the poet. Let us now consider why Plato embraces an aestheticism with regard to literature, but not to the visual arts. This disparity violates the intuitions of many proponents of aesthetic experience.

Painting and Aesthetic Experience

As noted earlier, a painter, for Plato, works with technical precision. In fact, by attending to formal characteristics achieved by this precision, the viewer enriches his own experience. Though a good visual artist uses imagination in his own creative process, he also sets into motion the spectator's imagination, but differently than a poet.

For Plato, the better the poet, the more deeply immersed we become in a fictional or illusionary world so that we cannot at the same time be both in the world of the poem and notice its formal features—these are different endeavors. Plato overlooks the possibility that we may appreciate a literary work aesthetically, by scrutinizing only its formal and artistic features, while remaining emotionally aloof from its emotive content. The aesthetic excellence of a work—the set of formal poetic features—is falsely seductive. The poet as seducer, ultimately deceives us, making us blind to the most vital ethical truths.

One reason for Plato's disparate assessments of the two kinds of artwork may be simply that he himself was not emotionally moved by pure visual form as he obviously was by the literary (for example, musicality, imagery, structure). In book 5, he speaks disparagingly of the "lovers of sights and sounds". This sort of pleasure, for Plato, undoubtedly would be subsumed under appetite *(epithumia)*—moreover, unnecessary appetite, and possibly lawless, unnecessary appetite.[17]

Another reason for Plato's preference may be his appreciation of the scientific precision necessary to achieve excellence in the visual arts. A poet deals with the chaotic human psyche. Whether human responses can be predicted with the same reliability as visual responses is a serious philosophical question; if they can be, then it would be the Platonic philosopher who would have this science, not the literary artist.

This putative imprecision afflicting literature seems insufficient to account for Plato's venom. Rather, it is his concern that the aesthetic element in poetry unseats our judgment, which he might not think possible for painting because of the difference in degree and in kind of the enjoyment we feel. Even if, therefore, a painter depicts lewd, violent, or perverse subjects, his work cannot undermine our rationality, not at any rate, our power to make rational moral judgments.

Even if it is Plato's own obtuseness towards visual art that leads him to this view, he nonetheless suggests an intriguing analysis of the nature of aesthetic experience of representational artworks. The painter depicts a world; the poet draws us into a world. The painter shows it; the poet makes us experience it. Plato evidently does not believe that we can imaginatively feel the world of the painting and emotionally sympathize with a subject depicted, as we can with a character in a well-wrought literary work. Kendall Walton, as part of his more global aesthetic theory, sees other possibilities in the visual arts. Speaking of Van Gogh's "Sorrow," a lithograph which depicts a seated woman in profile, with a bent head and her arms around her knees, Walton remarks:

I am not sure that I actually imagine being sorrowful myself when I contemplate the picture. I do, however, respond imaginatively to the woman....By imagining feeling as I do towards the woman I imaginatively understand her. And this...gains for me an understanding of what a particular kind of sorrow is like....All this began with the expansion of the picture world into a world of

make-believe big enough to include the perceiver as well as the contents of the picture world. Rather than merely Standing outside the picture and imagining what it depicts, Imagining a sorrowful woman sitting hunched...I imagine myself seeing her and observing her sorrow....[thus] imagining feeling about her and for her, and perhaps with her, in ways that enable me to understand her sorrow.[18]

Plato cannot accept this possibility. The painter, as we have seen, deals with the sensible world—that is his subject-matter. A visual artwork, for Plato, cannot "include the perceiver." Plato may seem to have no justification other than his own prejudices and aesthetic insensitivity. But his view, I think, has some merit. Let us consider why.

The painter cannot make us suspend disbelief or fall into illusion in the way the poet can, because the visual artist's product by nature stands framed by the actual world in a way that the poet's does not. By 'framed,' I do not mean 'within a frame', but rather that the work, be it, sculpted or painted, has finite spatial parameters and therefore is necessarily surrounded by the actual visible world. We are aware of that world even when we contemplate the artwork with rapt attention. Moreover, the observer views it from his own psyche, because we are at the same time subliminally aware of the actual world.

Being tethered, then, to actuality, we appreciate the artist's illusion, but do not become absorbed by it. However, Plato clearly sees the poet as capable of suspending our rational powers; we cannot experience intense aesthetic pleasure, together with the poetic technique and the work's formal characteristics. We cannot, that is, attend to the literary work as a literary work while experiencing the emotions and passions the work evokes. Unfortunately, Plato does not adequately account for how the poet can both craft and imaginatively understand the world he creates.

The viewer of a visual work cannot suspend disbelief in the way he can with a literary narrative. Even with a Dwayne Hanson sculpture or a trompe l'oeil mural, we may be tricked briefly or caught up short; but we may be not drawn into another world—if we were, we would not be struck by the verisimilitude. The effectiveness of such starkly realistic works lies in the cognitive dissonance that occurs once we realize it is a representation. Plato surely saw equally convincing representations, judging from the *Sophist* passage, to name just one. Scholars speculate[19] that realistic techniques were used in domestic wall paintings, and to judge by the vase paintings, some must have been quite piquant.

As I have argued, Plato implies that the two sorts of illusions—visual and literary—have different psychological structures. For Plato, the representational success of a visual work precludes our entering its world as we do that of a literary work; and correlatively, the affective intensity of a literary work precludes our appreciating its aesthetic and formal features. Even if he wrongly seems to think that this arises from the lack of aesthetic pleasure in the visual experience and from the psychological impossibility of simultaneous deep emotional sympathy and aesthetic appreciation in the poetic experience, Plato, with characteristic originality, impels us to reflect on the difference between the visual and the literary arts. The poet can lead us through the looking glass, which remains impenetrable for the painter.

Notes and References

1. Translated by Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).
2. Connelly, "Parthenon and *Parthenoi*: A Mythological Interpretation of the Parthenon Frieze,"*American Journal of Archaeology* 100 (1996): 53-80.
3. Some scholars deny that Plato tolerates the visual arts. But that tolerance will become apparent as we explore his arguments. Also, Eva Keuls, in her *Plato and Greek Painting* (Leiden, 1978) offers cogent arguments for Plato's relative indifference to the painters.
4. There is an ambiguity in the notion of aesthetic experience as to whether it pertains to artworks alone, or whether it also encompasses the experience of nature and beauty. In this essay, I use it in the more restricted sense.
5. Noel Carroll, makes this connection clear in his entry on George Dickie in *A Companion to Aesthetics*. edited by David E. Cooper (Oxford: Basil Blackwell. Ltd. 1992). p.124.
6. Levinson, *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Ithaca and London, 1996), p10.
7. Translations from the *Republic* are by Grube
8. Translated by W.D. Woodhead
9. Keuls, chapter 4, especially p.87.
10. Keuls, chapters 4, 5.
11. "Innovation and Redemption: What Literature Means," in *Art and Ardor: Essays by Cynthia Ozick* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), p.247.
12. Ttranslated by Cornford.
13. Keuls , p.38; Nancy Demand, "Plato and the Painters," *Phoenix* 29 (1977): 5-8.

14. Plato is keenly aware of perceptual distortion. See esp..Protagoras

15. Keuls, p.92

16. for a similar interpretation, see Christopher Janeway, "Plato's Analogy Between Painter and Poet," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 31 (1991): 1-12, especially 5-6; and his more recent *Images of Excellence: Plato's Critique of the Arts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp.134-136.

17. Plato offers his taxonomy of appetites most clearly in his *Republic*, book 9.

18. Walton, "Make-Believe and the Arts," in Susan Feagin and Patrick Maynard (eds) Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp.295-296.

    Sarah Worth has written extensively on the relation between Plato and Kendall Walton. But she has not, as far as I know, approached it in this way or made this point.

19. Demand, 16

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