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15 What Is Imitative Poetry and Why Is It Bad?

Plato's argument against poetry in *Republic* 10 is perplexing. He condemns not *all* poetry, but only "however much of it is imitative [*hosē mimētikē*]" (595a). A metaphysical charge against certain works of poetry – that they are forms of imitation, "at a third remove from the truth" – is thus used to justify an ethical charge: that these works cripple our thought and corrupt our souls. Unfortunately, it is not at all clear how to understand the connection between the two charges. We can see how they are related in a loose way: imitators are concerned with images far removed from the truth about what they represent (596a–598b); many people are too foolish to distinguish imitation from reality and thus accept ignorant imitators as experts and guides (598c–602b); imitation appeals to and thereby strengthens an inferior part of the soul unconcerned with truth (602c ff.); worst of all, the charms of imitation can seduce even those who generally know better (605c–607a). But when we try to make Book 10's argument more precise, trouble ensues. Plato certainly never spells out the connection between the metaphysics of imitation and the charge of ethical harm. Moreover, he seems in the end (603c ff.) to abandon metaphysical considerations and give a straightforward argument against tragedy and the works of Homer based on their content – they represent people behaving immoderately – and psychological effect: as audience we weep and wail and behave as immoderately as the characters, and this undermines the order of our souls. This argument makes no mention of imitation or ignorance or removes from truth; what, then, is the relevance of the metaphysical charge, to which Plato devotes so much discussion?

The worry gains more force when we ask how the metaphysical charge *could* do any work in the argument – when we notice, that is,

how difficult it is to apply Plato's definition of imitation to poetry. Plato illustrates what he means by "imitation" with a discussion of painting: the painter is an imitator because he copies material objects like beds instead of Forms, and copies them not as they are but "as they appear" (598a) – that is, as they *look*. What is the relevant analogy for the poet? What corresponds to the painter's bed? And in what sense can the poet, an artist working in a nonvisual medium, copy things "as they appear"? Plato's answers to these questions are far from clear, and thus it is hard to know what he means by calling poetry imitative.

Furthermore, even if we grant that poetry is somehow analogous to painting and that both are forms of imitation whose products are "at a third remove from the truth" (599d), why should this render poetry ethically harmful? After all, cannot something "third from the truth" be relevantly *similar* to the truth? A photograph of a person resembles the person to a high degree; a photocopy of the photograph resembles the person to a lesser degree. At each stage more detail and precision are lost; nonetheless, it is all a matter of degree – degree of resemblance – and although the photograph is a better likeness than the photocopy, common sense says that the photocopy is still most decidedly a likeness, and will do for many purposes in a fix. If this is right, then imitative poetry should be able to give us something relevantly like the truth about human affairs, and could therefore be a tool of moral education, not its enemy. And while such thoughts may be more natural to us with our modern tools of accurate reproduction than to the Greeks, Socrates himself seems to have suggested just this point in Book 3's discussion of poetry: "By making something false as similar to the truth as we can, don't we make it useful?" (382d).

There is, therefore, a major interpretative difficulty with Book 10: it is not at all clear how the ethical charge that certain works of poetry corrupt the soul depends on the metaphysical charge that these works are imitative.[1] To find a solution, we will have to give

[1] This problem has not been clearly identified as such in the many books and articles about Plato's critique of poetry, although insightful suggestions that might form the basis for a solution to it abound: see, in particular, Nehamas 1982; Ferrari 1989; Janaway 1995; Burnyeat 1999. These writers, however, either leave the connection between metaphysics and ethics at the level of suggestion or give unsatisfactory

a clear account of what Plato means by "imitative." In doing so, we will also be offering a solution to a related difficulty, one much discussed in the enormous body of literature on Book 10: that Plato licenses poetic imitations of one sort – imitations of virtuous people – in Book 3, but then condemns imitative poetry as a whole in Book 10.[2] To avoid contradiction, Plato must be defining "imitative" in Book 10 in a way that excludes faithful imitations of the virtuous. On the account I offer, he is doing precisely that: imitative poetry turns out to refer only to poetry that *misrepresents* human virtue in a dangerous way.

In coming to understand the relation between the metaphysical and ethical charges, then, we will gain a better understanding of the argument of *Republic* 10, and more generally of Plato's reasons for condemning the poetry he condemns. We will also discover an important series of parallels in the distinctions Plato makes between reality and appearances in various fields. These parallels will show Plato's attack on poetry to be intimately connected to his most central ethical and metaphysical views.

1. VISUAL APPEARANCES

Socrates begins Book 10 by congratulating himself on having excluded all imitative poetry from the ideal city, and proposes to explain why such poetry is dangerous by way of a general discussion of imitation (*mimēsis*). A large part of the ensuing discussion is concerned with *visual* phenomena: first mirror-reflections of the sun, plants, animals, and artifacts, then paintings of beds and bridles, then optical illusions. Although Socrates later warns against relying exclusively on the analogy with painting (603b), he clearly intends the discussion of painting and other visual phenomena to provide us with an understanding of imitation, and thereby to help in explaining

accounts of the connection (see section II below). The account that comes closest to doing the work I think needs doing is Belfiore 1983. I note points of comparison between her view and mine below.

[2] Book 3 clearly presents ethically beneficial poetry as engaged in imitation: the "unmixed imitator of the decent person" is admitted into the city (397d), and Plato uses cognates of *mimēsis* to refer to good poetry and art at 398b, 399a, and 401a.

what imitative poetry is and why it is dangerous. Let us consider the discussion with this point in mind.

The analysis of imitation begins with the premise that for each class of material objects there is a single immaterial Form, of which the many material particulars are likenesses;[3] thus a material bed is a likeness of the Form of the bed, which is the *true* bed, the bed that really is.[4] Then Plato considers a painting, a visual imitation, of a particular bed. The painting is a likeness of the material bed, itself a likeness of the *true* bed; therefore the painting is a likeness of a likeness of the original, thrice removed from "the nature" and "the truth" (597e). But it is natural to think, as I argued above, that a likeness of a likeness may still resemble the original; surely a painting of a bed, for example, captures something, although not all, of the nature of beds.

This, however, is decidedly not the way Plato thinks of imitation, and to understand why we must attend to a further ontological distinction that he makes, one far more central to the argument than has generally been noticed. This is the distinction between particular material objects, on the one hand, and their *appearances*, on the other.

The painter copies particular beds, not the Form of the bed. But "does he copy them as they are," Socrates asks, "or as they appear [*hoia estin ē hoia phainetai*]? For you must make this further distinction [*touto gar eti diorison*]" (598a).[5] He explains the distinction as follows: as one moves around a bed, viewing it from different angles, "the bed does not differ at all from itself, but it appears to be different" (598a). I propose that Plato's analysis of imitation makes most sense if we take this passage to distinguish not between two ways of considering one and the same object – as it is versus as it appears from any particular perspective – but rather between two

[3] The material bed is "something which is like [*hoion*]" the Form (597a); Plato suggests that perceptible things are likenesses or images of Forms throughout *Republic* 6–7.

[4] Does Plato really hold that there are Forms of artifacts like beds, or is his discussion here purely heuristic? My own view is that he posits the Form of the bed chiefly for the sake of the analogy with the ethical Forms at issue in poetry. I explain the analogy below.

[5] Translations tend to obscure the force of *touto gar eti diorison*: Grube/Reeve has "You must be clear about that"; Jowett has "You have still to determine this." Bloom translates as I recommend.

distinct objects, the bed itself and the appearance of the bed. The painter copies "not what is, as it is" – here referring not to the Form, but to the material bed, for this is within the scope of the "further distinction"[6] – but rather something different: "what appears [*to phainomenon*], as it appears." His painting is "an imitation of a phantom [*phantasmatos*]" rather than of the truth (598b); he captures "only a small bit [*smikron ti*]" of his subject, "and that a mere image [*eidōlon*]" (598b).[7] In other words, the appearance of a bed – what the painter paints – is nearly as far "removed from truth" as the *painting* of a bed: both are mere images of the particular bed (and therefore copies of copies of the Form). And indeed Book 10 makes no distinction in ontological level at all between appearance and artist's image. Plato refers to the appearances the imitator copies, as well as the images the imitator produces, as mere phantoms – *phainomena*, *phantasmata*, and *eidōla*.[8] (Is Plato here making a point only about what aspect of things the painter paints, or a more general point about what is available for perception? Some take him to be laying the ground for the theory of perception propounded by Russell and others in the last century: we see material objects like beds only indirectly, for between us and them intervenes a layer of sense-data, immaterial entities that are the direct objects of perception.)[9]

Thus far we have seen an argument that the appearance of a bed is ontologically distinct from the particular bed itself, and therefore

[6] Cf. Adam 1963 [1902], vol. 2, p. 394.

[7] Contrast *eidōlon*, which often connotes falsehood, with the more neutral *eikōn*, used to refer to images elsewhere in the *Republic* (e.g., Book 3, 401b ff.). As Halliwell points out, Plato abandons "the standard, non-prejudicial term" *eikōn* in Book 10 (Halliwell 1988, at p. 118).

[8] These words refer to the artist's work at 599a, 599d, 601b, and 605c, and to the thing imitated at 598b and 600e. As Nehamas puts it, this overlap of vocabulary "suggests that he is thinking of the object of imitation and of the product of imitation as being the same object – if not in number, at least in type. It almost seems as if he believes that the painter lifts the surface off the subject and transplants it onto the painting" (Nehamas 1982, p. 263).

[9] Note how close Russell is to *Republic* 10 in giving his case for the existence of sense-data: "Although I believe that the table is 'really' of the same colour all over, the parts that reflect the light look much brighter than the other parts. . . . [I]f I move, . . . the apparent distribution of colours on the table will change . . . [A] given thing looks different in shape from every different point of view"; and, in this connection, "[T]he painter has to . . . learn the habit of seeing things as they appear" (Russell 1912, at pp. 2–3 of the 1959 reprint); cf. *Republic* 598a, quoted above. For a defense of the idea that Plato was a proto-sense-data-theorist, see Paton 1921–22.

that in copying the appearance, the painter fails to copy the bed. But this by no means entails that the painter gets the bed *wrong*. After all, the appearance of a bed certainly looks like a bed, for a bed's "look" is precisely its visible aspect, its appearance. But Plato has shown us that the appearance is not only distinct but also qualitatively different from the bed: when viewed from different angles the bed itself remains the same, while the appearance of it varies (598a). Now compare this way of distinguishing the apparent bed from the material bed with the distinction Plato draws earlier in the *Republic*, and in other dialogues, between the apparent (i.e., perceptible) world as a whole and a reality of a higher grade:

> The beautiful itself . . . remains the same and never in any way tolerates any differing (*alloiōsin*) whatsoever. . . . [but the many beautifuls] never in any way remain the same as themselves or in relation to each other.
>
> (*Phaedo* 78d–e)[10]

The Form of beauty is intelligible but not at all perceptible. The "many beautiful things," on the other hand, are things that we see, things that are apparent. In this case, then, as in the case of the bed, what appears is varied, changing, and contradictory, while the real is stable, uniform, and consistent – the Form absolutely so, and the particular bed relatively to its appearance. (Here we have a concrete application of Plato's claim that the relation of the bottom two sections of Book 6's divided line to the top two is analogous to the relation of the bottom-most to the one above it: "as the opinable is to the knowable [i.e., as the perceptible realm is to the realm of Forms], so the likeness is to the thing that is like" (510a). As the many particular, perceptible beautiful things are to the beautiful itself, so is the shadow or reflection of a bed to the bed. And we have seen that Book

[10] Cf. the *Republic*'s first discussion of Forms, in Book 5: "The Form of Beauty itself . . . always remains the same in all respects [*aei men kata tauta hōsautōs ekhousan*]," but "of all the many beautiful things is there any one that will not appear ugly? Or any one of the just things that will not appear unjust? Or of the pious things that will not appear impious? . . . And the bigs and smalls and lights and heavies, will they be called any more what we say they are than the opposite?" (479a–b). The language is similar at *Symposium* 211a, where Plato offers a fuller explanation of how it is that each beautiful thing (for example) is in some way ugly. It is noteworthy for our purposes that each of these passages, among the most explicit we have in Plato about the difference between Forms and particulars, takes *to kalon* (the beautiful or fine) as its example.

10, by treating the appearances of material objects like images, adds them to the lowest level of the line alongside shadows and reflections.)[11] The distinction between the material bed as it is and as it appears is thus part of a general theory: appearances are qualitatively different from the realities that underlie them, in that appearances are varied and contradictory, while realities are stable and uniform.

What are the consequences of this theory for visual art? Plato tells us that the painter copies the appearance of material objects, not the reality. Why does the painter do so? Because he paints what he sees, what appears. To put it another way, he wants to make his paintings *look like* what they represent, and what looks like a bed is the "look" of the bed, its appearance. But if this is not only distinct from but also qualitatively different from the bed itself, then "realistic" painting, painting that looks like what it represents, must in a deeper sense *misrepresent* its subjects. That is, if a viewer is foolish enough to take the painting to show not merely how a bed looks, but what a bed is really like, the painting will give him false ideas about beds. The point is perhaps clearer in the case of the optical illusions Plato discusses later in Book 10: if two men of the same height stand at different distances from a viewer, the further one appears smaller. He isn't smaller, of course, but that is how he looks from that particular point of view. A realistic painter must portray the men "not as they are but as they appear" (598a), copying not the truth (that they are roughly the same size), but the appearance or *phantasma* that the further one is smaller. If he tries to paint the men as they are and not as they appear, his painting will be "unrealistic": it will not *look like* what it represents.[12]

[11] Cf. Paton 1921–22, p. 85. Note also that appearances are similar to shadows and reflections in being variable: as one walks around a bed, its shadow or reflection changes just as much as its appearance.

[12] The *Republic* thus anticipates the *Sophist's* distinction between "likeness-making" (*eikastikē eidōlopoiikē*) and "phantasm-making" (*phantastikē eidōlopoiikē*). Likeness-makers preserve the proportions and colors of what they represent, but as for those "who sculpt or draw very large works, if they reproduced the true proportions of their beautiful subjects . . . the upper parts would appear smaller than they should, and the lower parts would appear larger, because we see the upper parts from farther away and the lower parts from closer. . . . So don't these craftsmen say goodbye to truth, and produce in their images the proportions that seem to beautiful instead of the real ones?" (*Sophist* 235a–e, trans. Nicholas P. White). Phantasm-making corresponds to what *Republic* 10 calls imitative art; as for likeness-making, *Republic* 10 does not explicitly discuss it, but according to

The discussion of painting, then, has illuminated what Plato means by "imitative" art: art that manages to be compelling and realistic by copying the way things appear, at the cost of misrepresenting the way things are. This charge, and the particular way Plato draws the distinction between realities and appearances – stable and uniform on the one hand, varied and contradictory on the other – will have significant consequences when we turn to the case of poetry and the *ethical* appearances in which it trades. First we must follow the case of painting, to see what power Plato attributes to art that copies appearances and leaves realities aside.

II. DECEPTION

Book 10's paradigm of the imitative artist is a man with a mirror, and we are clearly to understand the painter as one who emulates the mirror-holder, copying things exactly as he sees them – exactly as they appear. Of course Plato writes about realistic painting (and not about abstract, nonrepresentational, cubist, or expressionist art) because this is what he knew.[13] But we miss the point of his discussion of painting if we overlook the more philosophical reason for his interest in realistic painting. Plato wants to make the point that realistic painting has a certain power over us that makes it, on his view, significantly like (although far less dangerous than) poetry: the power to *deceive*.

> [A] painter can paint us a cobbler, a carpenter, or the other craftsmen, even though he knows nothing about these crafts. Nevertheless, if he is a good painter, when he has painted a carpenter and displays his painting from far off, he might deceive children and foolish people by its seeming to be a real carpenter.[14] (598b–c)

the argument I shall offer, the poetry that survives censorship in Books 2 and 3 and the hymns to gods and eulogies of good men that survive in Book 10 would fall under this category.

[13] Greek painters of the time were masters of realism, even of trompe l'oeil: witness the story that birds pecked at Zeuxis' painting of grapes, while Zeuxis tried to lift the painted curtain from Parrhasius' canvas. For a good discussion, see Keuls 1978.

[14] Here I follow the translation of Burnyeat 1999, p. 302. The standard translations have it that the painter deceives the children and fools "into thinking that it is a real carpenter." Both translations are in principle open to either what I will call the implausible reading or the reading that I will suggest, following Burnyeat and also Belfiore 1983; but Burnyeat's translation is overall preferable.

On the surface, Plato is making the implausible claim that people are often tricked into believing that the painter actually creates the three-dimensional objects he merely represents. We need to look beyond this interpretation, however, if we are to find a plausible view, and one that is in any way relevant to poetry. We can take our clue about how to do so from the objects of artistic imitation Plato chooses for his example – craftsmen, knowledgeable experts with the tools of their trades, as opposed to ordinary people or objects – and from the conclusion he draws from the example:

> Whenever someone announces to us that he has met a man who knows all the crafts and everything else that anyone knows, and that there's nothing that he doesn't know more exactly than anyone else, we must suppose that. . . . [the deceived person] is not able to distinguish between knowledge, ignorance and imitation. (598c–d)

The generalization we are to draw from the case of the painted carpenter is not, then, that imitators deceive us into thinking that they create actual people or tools instead of mere images, but rather that they deceive us into thinking them *experts* in all sorts of subjects. But why precisely does being an imitator – where that is defined as one who copies things as they appear instead of as they are – afford one a reputation for near omniscience? To see the connection we must turn to Plato's distinction among users, makers, and imitators (601b ff.).

The passage is a strange one: the relation of its threefold division to the earlier one (among maker of the Form, craftsman, and imitator) is problematic, and it is difficult at first to see how the passage connects to the overall argument. To interpret it aright, we must keep in mind that it forms the link between the discussion of painting and the discussion of poetry. It does so, I shall argue, by applying the appearance/reality distinction to matters of *value*.

For each thing, Plato says, there are three types of craftsmen: the one who uses it, the one who makes it, and the one who imitates it. The user is the true expert, for he alone knows what makes for a *good* thing of that kind: "Are not the excellence [or virtue, *aretē*], the fineness [or beauty, *kallos*], and the correctness of each implement, living creature, and action related to nothing but the use for which

each has been made or begotten?" (601d).[15] The maker, guided by the knowledgeable user, has "right opinion" about whether what he makes is "fine or bad" (601e). The imitator, on the other hand, "will neither know nor have correct belief regarding the fineness or badness of the things he imitates" (602a). Why not? We have learned that the imitator copies the mere appearances of things. If he can do so successfully in total ignorance of the value of his objects, it must be that value does not *appear*.

The function of a carpenter's lathe (what it is for) does not meet the eye, but must be understood. Since value is dependent on function (601d), it is also the case that much of what makes for a genuinely *good* lathe does not meet the eye (certainly not the eye of the layman). But if genuine value is nonapparent, there is something related that does meet the eye: apparent excellence or fineness, the quality of appearing, not being, excellent or fine. And this, it seems, the imitator does know, for

> nevertheless he will imitate, not knowing in what way each thing is bad or good [*ponēron ē khrēston*]. But the sort of things that appear to be fine/beautiful to the ignorant many, this, it seems, he will imitate. (602b)

The true value of a lathe is nonapparent, but a lathe might *look* to be a good one if it is shiny, or big, or has a dramatic shape. The point is more compelling in the case of a complicated machine like a car: one can, with no knowledge of how a car works or what makes for a genuinely good car, know just what would make a car look fast or tough to ignorant children – and can therefore make a picture of what will look to them like an excellent car. (And the children will assume, Plato implies in the passage on the painting of the carpenter, that the person who can make such a picture knows all about cars.)

Thus the user/maker/imitator argument, like the discussion of the painted bed, relies on the distinction between reality and appearances, but with an important difference: there Plato distinguished what is really a bed from the appearance of a bed; here he distinguishes what is really excellent or *kalon* (fine or beautiful) from what appears excellent or *kalon*.[16] In both cases, the imitator copies the

[15] Plato has already argued that excellence is dependent on function at *Republic* 1.352d ff.

[16] Belfiore interprets Plato as distinguishing between a true standard of the *kalon*, function or usefulness, and a false, apparent standard: (aesthetic) pleasure. "The

appearances instead of the reality (the painter paints what appears to be a fine or good lathe, knowing nothing about what sort of lathe *is* fine or good); and in both cases by so doing the imitator makes work that is "realistic" – persuasive, compelling, and even deceptive. A painter who knows the truth about lathes could choose a genuinely good one as the subject of his painting, but if the lathe he portrays lacks the qualities that make lathes appear excellent to the ignorant, his viewers will not recognize it as a good lathe, and therefore will not think him an expert in carpentry. His painting will be unpersuasive, as "unrealistic," although in a different sense, as the painting that ignores perspective and copies the bed as it is instead of as it appears, or makes the further man look as big as the near.

Let us represent the analogy between the bed case and the carpenter case as follows:

Form	2nd remove	3rd remove (a)	3rd remove (b)
Form of bed	Material bed	Appearance of bed	Painting of bed
Form of lathe?[17]	*Kalon* lathe	Apparently *kalon* lathe	Painting of carpenter

With this schema in front of us, we notice one very marked *dis*analogy between the two cases. The appearance of a bed supervenes on and is caused by a particular actual bed; an apparently good

correct standard by which to judge the virtue and beauty of an artefact is that of function. . . . The imitator, however, and the children and fools he deceives, judge beauty by the standard of appearance, believing that those shapes and colors that give pleasure are beautiful. . . . Thus, the pleasingly-shaped hammer made by the imitator will appear to have a beautiful shape to children and fools. But a true craftsman will be able to see that such a shape is really not beautiful, for it would be awkward to handle" (Belfiore 1983, p. 46). I am sympathetic to her conclusions, although the identification of pleasure with the false standard of beauty and goodness needs more argument than she provides.

[17] No Form is mentioned in the user/maker/imitator argument, and while in the discussion of the bed Plato told us that the maker – the carpenter – looks to the Form, this would hardly be compatible with the present claim that the maker has only "correct belief" about what he makes, while it is the user who has knowledge (601e). It may be stretching the analogy further than Plato intended to put any Form here corresponding to the Form of the bed; perhaps, however, the relevant Form is the Form of beauty (the *kalon*) or of excellence. This would take better account of the fact that, as I have emphasized, what is really at stake in this argument is knowledge of *value*; it would also provide more continuity with the analysis of poetry as I understand it.

lathe, however, floats quite free of any genuinely good lathe. Something can appear to be good without actually being good; in fact, Plato implies here as so often, the two qualities rarely coincide.[18] Compare two very different senses of "apparent" in English: "an apparently good lathe" may refer to a good lathe that is manifestly good, or instead to a lathe that appears to be but is not in fact good. In his talk of apparent value, Plato clearly has the latter sense in mind.[19]

This disanalogy notwithstanding, we have very good reasons to take it that Plato does intend to draw an analogy between bed and apparent bed, on one hand, and *kalon* tool, and apparently *kalon* tool on the other. First, given Plato's general disparagement of appearances, the distinction between these two senses of "apparent" is not so sharp for him – the appearance of bed *is not* a bed, any more than a merely apparently good lathe is a good lathe. Second, as I show below, this reading makes the example of the carpenter and the distinction among user, maker, and imitator form a link between the discussion of painting and the discussion of poetry.

Moreover, if we depart from the immediate context and look to Plato's thoughts about the *kalon* more generally, we find a strong and surprising point of analogy between the two sorts of appearance. For look how Plato characterizes the difference between genuine and apparent cases of *kallos* – beauty or fineness – in *Republic* 9:

> [The democratic city] would seem . . . to be the most beautiful [*kallistē*] of the constitutions. Just like a multicolored cloak embroidered [*pepoikilmenon*] with every ornament, so this city, being embroidered with every character, would appear to be most beautiful. And probably many people would judge it most beautiful, just as children and women do when they look at multicolored things [*ta poikila*]. (557c4–9)

The disordered, motley, multicolored democratic city is not beautiful or fine, any more than a cloak of many different colors. But *poikila* – multicolored or variegated – things *appear* beautiful and

[18] Cf., e.g., *Gorgias* 464a on the divergence between the good condition (*euexia*) of a thing and its *seeming* (*dokousa*) good condition.

[19] The Greek language has the resources for clearly marking the distinction between these two senses: *phainesthai* with a participle means is manifestly, while *phainesthai* with an infinitive means merely appears to be. In the relevant passages from *Republic* 10 Plato either uses an infinitive (602b) or uses forms of *phainesthai* on their own, relying on context or contrasts with forms of *einai* ("to be") to show that he intends the latter sense (see, e.g., 596e, 598a–b, and 602d–e).

fine to people as ignorant as women or children. Below we will see that this term *poikilon* has a great deal of ethical significance. If multicolored, variegated things are not truly beautiful, however, what is? Restricting ourselves for now to visual beauty, we find an answer at *Philebus* 51b–c: pure colors and simple shapes.[20] The genuinely beautiful is simple and uniform; the apparently beautiful is varied and contradictory. Thus, apparently *kala* things differ from genuinely *kala* things in just the same way that the appearance of a bed differs from the material bed – and in just the same way that the Form of beauty differs from the many beautifuls. (Here again, however, we must remember that the analogy is only an analogy: while the Form of beauty is absolutely stable and uniform, a genuinely beautiful cloak is only relatively so. Relative to an apparently beautiful cloak it is stable and uniform; relative to the Form of beauty it is varied and full of contradictions.) We can represent the analogy as follows:

Uniform reality	Varied appearance
Form of beauty	Many beautifuls
Material bed	Appearance of bed
Kalon object	Apparently *kalon* object

In the visual realm it is not perhaps plausible that only what is varied, and contradictory will appear *kalon*: it is hard to see why the painted lathe, for example, should fit this description. We will see below, however, that the objects of poetic imitation must be "multicolored," varied, and contradictory, in order to appear *kalon* or otherwise excellent to the audience. Let us turn to poetry now, after taking stock of the conclusions we have drawn from Plato's discussion of painting.

[20] "By the beauty of a shape, I do not mean what the many might presuppose, namely that of a living being or of a picture. What I mean . . . is rather something straight or round and what is constructed out of these with a compass, rule, and square, such as plane figures and solids. Those things I take it are not beautiful in a relative sense as the others are, but are by their very nature forever beautiful by themselves. . . . And colors are beautiful in an analogous way" (*Philebus* 51c–d, trans. D. Frede; the colors in question are described as "pure" at 51b.) Here too Plato distinguishes between what is truly beautiful and what appears beautiful to ordinary people; the latter is something more complex and varied, like a picture or a person.

– Even within the "realm of becoming" appearances are distinct from reality.
– Appearances differ from realities, being varied and contradictory, while realities are stable and uniform.
– Therefore, imitative art – that is, realistic, persuasive art that copies appearances – necessarily *misrepresents* those subjects.
– Therefore, one who lacks the knowledge that imitators copy mere appearances (one who lacks the antidote Plato mentions at 595b) will be deceived, believing both that things truly are as the imitator presents them and that the imitator is an expert about his subjects.

III. ETHICAL IMITATION

Now we must determine how to apply Plato's analysis of imitation to poetry. The painter is an imitator because he copies a material bed, not the Form of the bed, and copies the bed as it appears, not as it is; doing so allows him to deceive foolish people into thinking him an expert. How can we construct an analogy for poetry? Plato defines the object of poetic imitation as follows: "human beings doing actions under compulsion or voluntarily, and believing that as a result of acting they have done well or badly, and in all this either feeling pain or enjoyment" (603c). So as the painter is to the bed, the poet is to human action. But what could it mean to say, as we must to complete the analogy and apply the analysis of imitation, that the poet copies human action as it *appears* and not as it is? And how does this enable him to deceive his audience? Plato gives us no explicit answer to these questions. We need to find an interpretation that not only fits with Plato's characterization of poetry, but also allows us to make sense of the argumentative structure of Book 10. That is, as I stressed in the Introduction, we need an interpretation on which it will come out that poetry corrupts *because* it is a form of imitation, copying appearances instead of reality – an answer that connects the metaphysical charge against poetry to the ethical.

One might think that Plato has in mind the following parallel: just as the painter captures the visible aspect of objects at rest, so the poet captures the visible and audible aspects of humans in motion (humans acting), and thus just as the painter tricks us into thinking

that there is a real carpenter on his canvas, so the poet tricks us into thinking that there is a real king grieving or giving orders on the stage. This, however, is hardly a plausible view about poetry's powers; the Greek audience was savvier than that. More significantly, the interpretation fails to connect the metaphysical charge to the ethical: why should it be corrupting to present the illusion of someone walking around, especially if it is not particularly corrupting to present the illusion of someone standing still, as painters do?[21]

A second interpretation, fairly widespread, holds that the poet captures the appearance and not the reality of human action in that he captures only "the words and actions" of his characters; he "does not express, for he does not understand, the principles which underlie those appearances and which constitute reality," and thus captures "only the external, not the inner meaning" of human action.[22] This interpretation may capture some of Plato's thoughts about poetry, but it cannot explain what he means by calling poetry imitative. First, it is not quite a fair characterization of poetry: tragedians write soliloquies revealing their character's inner thoughts and motivations, and Homer uses narrative to convey the same information. Second, like the first interpretation we considered, this one too fails to connect the metaphysical charge against poetry to the ethical. Poets who can accurately copy the appearance or "feel" of behavior can at least in principle produce convincing copies of *good* behavior, and thereby present good role models for the citizens; why should it matter whether they understand what motivates such behavior? Surely, the passages of Homer that Plato lets stand in Book 3 fall under just this description, and perhaps so too will the hymns to the gods and eulogies of good men that he prescribes in Book 10.

In what follows I offer a very different interpretation of "copying action as it appears," one that is in line with the work of Belfiore and Nehamas. In doing so I answer the questions with which we began in the Introduction: how the analysis of imitation as working at a third remove from the truth, as well as the discussion of painting, prove relevant to the charge that poetry corrupts the soul. The

[21] Book 3 in fact recommends censorship and supervision of all the arts, but it is clear that Plato regards poetry as the most dangerous of all.

[22] Tate 1928, p. 20. Cf. Ferrari: poets "convey the feel of human behaviour, without being possessed of the understanding from which such behaviour would arise in life" (Ferrari 1989, p. 129).

account is this: Just as the painter copies what appears to be, but is not, a bed, the poet copies what appear to be, but are not, instances of human excellence: the appearance of excellence, *apparent* excellence.[23] Furthermore, apparent human excellence is not only distinct from genuine human excellence, but also differs from it in a way that precisely parallels the difference between the apparent bed and the material bed, or between the many beautiful things and the Form of beauty: varied, contradictory characters appear excellent, while true human excellence lies in stability and uniformity of soul. But to be varied and contradictory in character is in reality to be *vicious*. Therefore imitative, "realistic" poetry persuades us to take ignorant poets as experts in human affairs, presents vicious characters as role models, and thereby corrupts our souls.

The first point to make in defending this interpretation is that on Plato's view the chief business of poetry is to present images of human excellence. Just after drawing his conclusions from the carpenter case about imitation's power to deceive, Socrates says,

> After this we must consider both tragedy and its leader, Homer, since we hear from some people that these men know all the crafts, all human things concerned with excellence and vice, and the divine things too. (598d–e)

As we read on, it becomes clear that the second of these areas of alleged expertise, "all human things concerned with excellence and vice," is the main focus of his criticism. Socrates moves to pass over a discussion of the crafts, generalizes his claim against Homer by saying that he is "third from the truth about excellence" (599d), and concludes that imitative poets imitate "images [*eidōla*] of excellence and the other things they make poems about" (600e), the other things now being an afterthought. (Indeed, the other two areas of expertise are closely related to this one: knowledge of crafts is one form of human excellence, and in Book 2 Socrates has described stories about the gods as "stories told with a view to excellence" (378e).) In general, poetry is concerned not merely to represent certain ways of acting, but to represent certain ways of acting as *good* (and others as bad).

[23] I follow both Belfiore and Nehamas in arguing that Plato complains about poetry because it presents characters who are in fact vicious but seem excellent to the ignorant audience; I want to show more clearly than these writers do how this aspect of poetry's *content* (the kind of character it represents) is connected to the fact that such poetry is imitative in form.

This idea underlies the entirety of the *Republic*'s discussion of poetry. The censorship of poetry about gods and heroes, in Books 2 and 3, was premised on the idea that we take poetry's heroes as role models: we admire and strive to emulate them.[24] (This is just as Protagoras describes the effect of poetry in the *Protagoras*: children "learn by heart the poems of good poets, in which there are many . . . praises and encomia of the good men of old, so that the child is eager to imitate them and desires to become like them" (*Prt.* 325e–326a).) Book 10's denigration of poetry is a response to "praisers of Homer who say that this poet educated Greece, and that it is worthwhile to take up his works for study regarding management and educating in human affairs, and to live having *arranged one's whole life* in accordance with this poet" (606e, emphasis added): Socrates compares Homer to the Sophists (600c) because he too is viewed as an expert in human excellence who can teach us how to live.[25]

There is a wealth of evidence outside the *Republic* that Plato's contemporaries thought of poetry in this way as well. Aristotle's *Poetics* gives us an explicit (and uncritical) statement of the view that poetry's characters are examples of human excellence: the characters in Homer and the tragedies are *better* than we are (*Poetics* 2.1488a11, 15.1454b9), and tragedy (in contrast with comedy) represents *kala* actions of *kala* characters (*Poetics* 4.1448b25, cf. 15.1454b9). Aristotle also quotes Sophocles as saying that he depicted people "as they ought to be" (*Poetics* 25.1460b33). Perhaps the most explicit statement of Plato's worry comes from Xenophon, where Niceratus brags,

[24] "Nor is it suitable at all to say that gods war and fight and plot against other gods . . . if indeed those who will guard our city should consider it most shameful to hate one another easily" (378b–c); cf. 391e. Conversely, if a poem presents a character as base, we tend to disdain his behavior: "We would be right to censor the lamentations of renowned men, handing them over to women and not good women either, and to all the bad men, so that those whom we say we are raising to guard the country will be disgusted by acting like those people" (387e–388a). In Books 2 and 3 the claim that we think good, admire, and emulate poetry's heroes is a crucial (although implicit) premise of censorship: the young guardians should not for the most part imitate – play the parts or speak the words of – worthless characters, because by doing so they will come to be like them; if they do ever imitate bad characters they must do so disdainfully and only "in play" (396e).

[25] For relevant passages in other dialogues, see *Charmides* 157e, *Laches* 191b, and *Menexenus* 239b, all cited in Halliwell's commentary on Book 10; Halliwell says that Plato "takes it that one of the oldest and most basic functions of poetry is to bestow praise on figures who are viewed as paragons of humanity in some significant respect" (Halliwell, 1988, pp. 122–23).

"My father, concerned that I should become a good man, forced me to learn all of Homer by heart" (*Symposium* 3.5, cf. 4.6–7).[26]

We can best understand this view of poetry, and Plato's criticism of it, if we read phrases like Aristotle's "better than us" very broadly. Poets sometimes present their characters as paragons of the standard virtues (Odysseus is prudent, Achilles brave, Nestor wise), but Plato is complaining about a more general feature of poetry: that it holds up even its obviously immoral characters as subjects of awe and admiration. Homer and the tragedians present characters we would call "larger than life." We think that in creating them the authors have distilled something of the essence of human nature. And while we may not easily recognize ourselves in Plato's description of poetry's audience,[27] perhaps this way of thinking is not after all so alien to us: we might praise a truly fine work of fiction by saying that it shows us, in some way, who we are. If the poets are thought to be experts in human excellence, it is in part because they seem to be experts more generally in human nature, or human affairs.

The object of poetic imitation, then, is human action, and in particular *excellent* human action. The tragedians and Homer are "imitators of images of excellence and the other things they write about" (600e). The word translated as "image" here is *eidōlon*, *mere* image, the very word that Plato has used earlier in Book 10 to refer to the appearance of the bed in contrast to the bed itself (598b). This should indicate that Plato does not mean to say that poets imitate genuine human excellence as it appears to us or insofar as it is apparent (as Tate would have it). Rather, just as the painter imitates the appearance of the bed and not the bed itself, the poet imitates *eidōla* of excellence instead of genuine excellence. But this is just to say that the poet imitates *apparently* excellent characters and actions – that is, whichever characters and actions appear excellent to the ignorant many.

[26] Burnyeat comments rightly that the comic context should be taken into account here (Burnyeat 1999, p. 306), but the other evidence I cite shows that while Niceratus' claim may be meant as parody, it by no means misses its mark.

[27] The works of Homer and Hesiod and the tragedians were not objects of study for the elite; they were instead popular entertainment, and could plausibly be credited with (or blamed for) influencing and forming popular values and the popular view of human nature. See Murphy 1951; Havelock 1963; Burnyeat 1999; and the comparisons between Plato's attack on poetry and contemporary attitudes toward television in Nehamas 1988.

Now we see in what sense poets imitate the appearance of human action, and we understand the analogy between painting and poetry:

Form	2nd remove	3rd remove (a)	3rd remove (b)
Form of bed	Material bed	Appearance of bed	Painting of bed
Form of lathe?	*Kalon* lathe	Apparently *kalon* lathe	Painting of carpenter
Forms of virtues?	Excellent character	Apparently excellent character	Poem about character

Very few people know the truth about human excellence or virtue, *aretē* – the preceding nine books of the *Republic* have made this point abundantly clear. Book 10 has told us that the excellence of any living thing, like that of any tool, is related to its *function* (compare again *Republic* I, 352d ff.); without knowledge of the function and nature of the soul, no one can know what real excellence is, nor whether a particular person is excellent or not. But humans, like tools, can *appear* excellent or *kalos* without really being so, and what makes for apparent excellence is precisely the province of the imitator. It is the poet more than the painter that Plato has in mind when he says that the imitator "will imitate . . .the sort of things that appear to be fine or beautiful to the ignorant many" (602b, quoted above). The poet does not really know what makes for a skilled doctor, a wise general, a brave soldier, or a just king, but he knows just what sort of behavior will *seem* skilled, wise, brave, and just to popular opinion. This is how a poet such as Homer gains his reputation for knowing "all the crafts and all human things concerned with excellence and vice" (598d–e). Because his portrayal of a doctor healing a patient impresses the ignorant audience as capturing precisely what a good doctor would do, they think that Homer himself knows all about medicine; because he portrays behavior that seems to the audience to exemplify bravery, justice, wisdom, piety, and self-control, they think him an expert in human excellence, a fit teacher to guide them in living their lives.

The poet, then, presents characters and actions that appear *kalon* and excellent to the audience. He does so by imitating the appearance, not the reality, of human excellence. Being faithful to the appearances, his art is imitative in Plato's special sense – "realistic,"

plausible, and persuasive – and therefore he too can deceive his audience. They think him an expert about human excellence because he produces images so like what they take to be the real thing.

None of this, however, is enough to show that poetry is ethically harmful. If the appearance of excellence is relevantly *like* the reality – if Homer's Achilles acts more or less as genuinely brave men would – then imitative poetry may deserve a place in the ideal city, and cannot be accused of corrupting the soul.[28] Is this so? Does poetry present faithful images of excellence? Or is imitative poetry, like painting, "realistic" and persuasive at the cost of misrepresenting the reality?

Long before we get to Book 10 we already know that poetry praises people who are in fact vicious: in Book 2 Adeimantus tells us that poets "account happy and honor vicious [*ponērous*] people who have wealth and other kinds of power" (364a); Book 9 tells us that poets "praise tyranny as godlike" (568b). In the same Book 2 passage Adeimantus accuses poetry of perpetrating the very view about morality that the *Republic* is concerned to disprove: that injustice is more profitable than justice (364a). This is certainly how things *seem* to people, but it is not, Plato argues, how things are.

Now notice how Plato characterizes the difference between genuine human excellence and the traits admired by the many and praised by the poets, apparent excellence. Virtue, as defined in Book 4, is a harmonious ordering of the soul, in which there are no conflicts or tensions. In Book 10 Plato emphasizes that such a state is stable and uniform: the virtuous character is "prudent and peaceful, remaining always nearly the same as itself [*phronimon te kai hēsukhion ēthos, paraplēsion on aei auto hautōi*]" (604e). This should remind us of the description of the material bed, in contrast to its appearance, as "differing in no way from itself" (598a), and the description of the Form of beauty as "remaining always the same in all respects" (479a).[29]

[28] That Plato thinks faithful images of genuinely good characters do deserve *some* place in the ideal city is clear from Books 2 and 3. Such images contribute to moral education; how they do so is an important question, but one that lies outside the scope of this chapter. See Malcolm Schofield's chapter 6 in this volume.

[29] It is important to note that the virtuous character is only *paraplēsion* to itself – nearly the same, very similar – while the unchanging unity of the Form is absolute. As Plato says later in Book 10, our souls are never perfect when embodied (611b ff.). The virtuous soul is as good, as uniform, and as stable as an embodied soul can be, but nonetheless falls far short of the ideal.

Book 10 describes the genuinely virtuous character in this way only to add that it does not lend itself to poetic imitation:

> [T]he wise and peaceful character, remaining always nearly the same as itself, is neither easily imitated nor easy to understand when imitated, especially not by a motley crowd gathered at the theater. For the imitation would be of an experience alien to them [*allotriou . . . pathous*]. (604e)

In what sense is genuine virtue an "alien experience" to most people, and thus not an easy subject of imitation? It cannot be merely that most people have not had the experience of being prudent and peaceful, for neither have they had the experience of being a general or a king or Electra, and it is imitations of these characters that they most enjoy. Rather we should hear "alien" in something closer to the Brechtian sense. A story whose hero is quiet and imperturbable, reacting to fortune's blows not with passion and drama but with calm reasoning and utter self-control, leaves the mass audience as cold as would an abstract painting of a bed. The peaceful character simply does not "look like" a hero – someone "better" than us, *kalos*, larger than life, admirable, exciting, worth watching – any more than a painting that tries to copy the reality of a bed by ignoring perspective and foreshortening will look like a bed. Poetry that copies the reality instead of the appearance of virtue will leave the audience puzzled, distanced, bored, and in no way inclined to think the author an expert in human excellence. The claim that the virtuous character is difficult to imitate, then, must rest on the view that the reality of human excellence is very different from the appearance.

What then, is apparent excellence like – what sort of character appears excellent? It must be the one Plato contrasts to the genuinely virtuous character by describing as *eumimēton*, easily imitated – the kind of character people admire, enjoy watching, and consider a plausible hero. This character Plato characterizes as "irritable and multicolored [*aganaktētikon te kai poikilon*]" (605a5) – stormy, passionate, emotional, full of inner conflict, subject to varied moods and changing desires. Such a character is in fact the very contrary of the virtuous character – it is vicious.[30] But this is precisely the kind of character Homer and the tragedians choose as their heroes: hotheads, lamenters, passionate lovers, wily plotters, wrathful avengers.

[30] The democratic character type, second in vice and misery only to the tyrannical, is called *poikilon* at 561e; the *Laws* refers to vicious characters as "multicolored and base [*ēthē kai poikila kai phaula*]" (*Laws* 704d).

Looking back to the discussion of poetry and music in Books 2 and 3, we find Plato making much the same charge. Genuine excellence is stable and uniform, or as Plato here puts it, "simple" (*haploun*), and art should represent it as such.[31] Popular art, however, tends to represent gods and heroes as changeable, varied, full of contradictions and multicolored variety.[32] Here Plato applies this criticism to the style as well as content of representation: the style of narrative suitable for representing a virtuous person has "little variation," but people much prefer hearing the style that has "motley forms of variation" 397b–c; later he contrasts meters and rhythms appropriate to an "orderly and courageous life" to ones that are multicolored (*poikilous*) and varied (*pantodapas*) (399e–400a). In general, "simplicity [*haplotēs*] in music and poetry" is beneficial (404e), but variety conforms to popular taste.[33]

Genuine excellence and the beneficial art that copies it is "simple" (*haploun*); the character that appears excellent, and thus the art that copies apparent excellence, is "multicolored" (*poikilon*). This latter word echoes throughout the *Republic*: in the passages from Book 3 quoted above, in Book 10 where both the "easily imitated" character and the poet's imitations of him are multicolored (604e, 605a), and in Book 9 where Socrates tells us that women and children foolishly think multicolored things beautiful or fine (557c, quoted above). It is worth noting that poets used this very word to characterize their heroes: Hesiod's Prometheus is *poikilos*, as is Aeschylus'; Euripides uses the same word for his Odysseus, while Homer's Odysseus is *poikilomētēs* – "multicolor-minded."[34] Indeed Homer's Odysseus is a paradigm of a varied and contradictory character presented as hero: he is the man of many wiles and many tricks, *polutropos, polumēkhanos, polumētis*, anything but *haplous*.

[31] The just person is called *haploun* at 361b, a god at 380d; for passages describing good art as *haploun*, see below.

[32] Poetry represents gods as appearing in many shapes, but in reality a god retains one and the same shape, being simple (*haploun*, 380d). Poets represent Achilles (a hero and the son of a goddess) as full of turmoil (391c), but a true god-like hero is stable and calm.

[33] Even "polyharmonic or multistringed instruments" – the flute first among them – are ruled out in favor of simple ones (399c).

[34] Hesiod's *Theogony* 511, Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* 310, Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* 526, Homer's *Iliad* 11.482 and *Odyssey* 3.163.

Plato's criticisms imply, then, that appearances in the realm of human affairs differ from reality in just the same way that we have seen appearances differing from reality throughout. Let us add this to our chart as follows:

Uniform reality	Varied appearance
Form of beauty	Many beautifuls[35]
Material bed	Appearance of bed
Kalon object	Apparently *kalon* object
Excellent character	Apparently excellent character

Now we see the ethical payoff of the discussion of painting, and the relevance of the user/maker/imitator argument. We also have a solution to the problem that has vexed many commentators as to whether Plato contradicts himself by allowing poetry that imitates virtuous characters in Book 3, but condemning all imitative poetry in Book 10. Imitative poetry is "realistic" poetry: it copies things as they appear, not as they are. In particular, it copies virtue as it appears, that is, *apparent* virtue, presenting varied, contradictory, dazzling heroes. Poetry that copies the reality of virtue (i.e., presents images of stable, uniform characters) – like the passages of Homer that survive censorship in Book 3, and the "hymns to gods and eulogies of good men" allowed into the city in Book 10 (607a) – may well include imitations of characters, but it is not "imitative" in the technical sense Book 10 defines: it copies things as they are, not as they appear.[36]

[35] *Timaeus* 50d calls the entire realm of becoming, the perceptible realm, multicolored – *poikilon*.

[36] Contra Adam (see his note on 607a) and the many who agree with him that Plato defines *all* poetry, and indeed all art, as imitative. I thus side with Tate, Ferrari, Janaway, Nehamas, and others who allow Books 3 and 10 to be consistent by arguing for a distinction between imitation, on the one hand, and imitativeness, on the other, and stressing that Plato condemns only *imitativeness*. Each, like me, defines imitativeness in such a way that poets (or actors) who imitate only good characters are not thereby imitative: Ferrari, Janaway, and Nehamas argue that to be imitative is to enjoy imitation for its own sake or to enjoy imitating anything whatsoever, regardless of its worth; Tate argues that to be imitative is to copy what is at a second remove from truth instead of the Forms. I prefer my solution in that it is more closely tied to the metaphysical analysis of imitation and the discussion of painting. My solution does still leave us with an inconsistency: *imitation* is defined

Now we are also, almost, ready to answer the question with which we began: what is the relation between the metaphysical charge that imitative poetry is at a third remove from the truth and the ethical charge that it "puts a bad constitution" in the soul? To complete the answer – and to get a full view of *Republic* 10 – we need to put in place the psychological side of the story.

IV. CORRUPTING THE SOUL

Poetry that encourages us to admire and emulate vicious characters surely does no ethical good. But Plato's accusation is more specific: imitative poetry harms us by "putting a bad constitution" into our souls (605b) – that is, by strengthening an inferior part of the soul and thereby weakening or overthrowing the rule of reason. If this charge is to stand, Plato must show that *just insofar as poetry is imitative*, it targets and gratifies an inferior part of the soul. But here the argument of Book 10 may seem to involve a serious non sequitur.

Socrates asks over what part of the soul imitation exerts its power at 602c; he begins his answer by examining a class of visual appearances that stand out as mere appearances: optical illusions. A person can know how things really are and yet still experience an illusion: a submerged stick looks bent even when one knows it is straight. Plato takes this to show that two distinct parts of the soul are at work in such cases: the rational part, whose beliefs are sensitive to reasoning and calculation, and some other part, unreasoning and base,[37] that believes that things are as they appear.[38] Because painters show things as they appear (the painter paints the submerged stick as bent, and the more distant man as smaller), he concludes that visual

in Book 10 as copying things as they appear, not as they are, but in Books 2 and 3 is indiscriminate between copying appearances and copying realities. This seems to me a blatant, but not very problematic, inconsistency in Plato's text: we can allow that Plato introduces a technical sense of "imitation" in Book 10, while using the term more broadly in the earlier books; after all, the more technical sense relies on metaphysical distinctions not introduced until Books 5–7.

[37] It is one of the base (*phaula*) things in us (603a); it is "far from wisdom" (*phronēsis*, 603a), and it is "thoughtless" (*anoēton*, 605b).

[38] 602c–603b. The conclusion is established by an application of the principle of opposites, the same principle Plato used to establish the division of the soul in Book 4. The argument relies on some questionable presuppositions, in particular that when the stick looks bent, one (in part) *believes* that it is bent.

imitation appeals to this inferior, appearance-receptive part of the soul.

Then he turns to poetry. The discussion makes no overt reference to appearances or illusions of any kind: instead, it describes the kind of characters and situations imitative poetry tends to represent. Socrates even warns his interlocutors not to rely on the analogy with painting in determining what part of the soul poetry affects (603b). He proceeds to describe our responses to poetry as appetitive and emotional, in ways strongly reminiscent of his earlier characterization of the appetitive and spirited parts of the soul.[39] But the conclusion he draws at the end of the discussion is that imitative poetry affects the very part of the soul that is taken in by optical illusions:

> The imitative poet instills a bad constitution in the private soul of each person, gratifying the part of the soul that is thoughtless and doesn't distinguish the bigger from the smaller, but supposes that the same things are at one time large and another time small. (605b–c)[40]

How does Plato reach this conclusion, and what does it mean? How is watching a tragedy or listening to Homer psychologically parallel to experiencing an optical illusion; how, for example, is "hungering for weeping and wailing" parallel to seeing a submerged stick as bent? The connection has seemed to most interpreters obscure or absurd.[41] But the account developed above resolves the mystery: in

[39] Most explicitly: "concerning sexual desires and anger [*thumou*] and all the appetitive desires and pains and pleasures in the soul . . . poetic imitation . . . nurtures these things, watering them although they should wither, and sets them up to rule in us although they should be ruled" (606d). Plato also describes this part of the soul as one that "*hungers* for the satisfaction of weeping and sufficiently lamenting, being by nature such as to have *appetites* for these things [*epithumein*]; this is the part that is satisfied and delighted by the poets" (606a, emphasis added); he describes the type of character naturally akin to poetic imitation as "irritable and multicolored" (605a), where previously he has used such terms to characterize spirit and appetite, respectively. Commentators have wished to resist the conclusion that spirit or appetite is at issue here, because they think it improbable that either of these parts could be involved in optical illusions. The argument I give in what follows should make Plato's strong implication that appetite and spirit are intended far more palatable.

[40] The illusion-believing part of the soul first sees a man close by and believes that he is large, then sees him at a distance and believes that he is small.

[41] Nehamas speaks for many here: "Why should our *desire* tell us that the immersed stick is bent?" (Nehamas 1982, p. 265). He goes on to argue that some hitherto unmentioned subdivision of reason is intended. The basis for this reading (shared

describing the passionate, dazzling, varied, conflicting characters and actions imitative poetry represents, Plato takes himself to be showing that such poetry imitates ethical *appearances*. A straight stick submerged in water appears bent; likewise a multicolored character appears *kalon* and excellent to us, human affairs appear important (604d), and an event such as the death of a son appears obviously bad (603e ff.; Plato calls such events "*seeming* evils" (*dokounta kaka*) at 613a). A passage from the *Phaedo* (69b) is helpful here: what most people think of as virtue (and thus what imitative poetry represents) is in fact only a *skiagraphia* of virtue – a shadow-painting, something akin to trompe l'oeil. Plato classes *skiagraphiai* with optical illusions at *Republic* 602d.[42] Imitative painting trades in visual illusions, imitative poetry in ethical illusions. Thus the passionate emotions provoked by imitative poetry are to be understood as responses to vivid appearances of things as good or bad, wonderful or terrible. Hence Plato's sharp contrast between indulging these emotions, on the one hand, and rational calculation, on the other: weeping and wailing at the death of one's son, like believing that a submerged stick is bent, means assenting to the way things appear instead of using rational calculation to determine how things really are.[43]

by Burnyeat 1999 and others) is a difficult passage at 602e that seems to imply that the stick appears bent to the *rational* part of the soul; there are readings of 602e, however, that avoid this unpalatable conclusion (see, e.g., Adam 1963 [1902], vol. 2, p. 408 and 466–67). For fuller discussion of this passage, *Republic* 10's argument, and the connection between appearances and the nonrational soul, see Moss 2006.

[42] See also *Republic* 586b–c, where Plato describes the impure pleasures of the many as shadow-painted images (*eidōla eskiagraphēmena*) of the true pleasures of the philosopher, and *Laws* 663c where ordinary, corrupt notions of justice and injustice are like shadow paintings viewed from a flawed perspective.

[43] The reason-led person is "measured" in his grief (603e) and holds back from lamentation because he follows "calculation" (604d); note that measurement and calculation are precisely the tools that reason employs in combatting optical illusions (602d–603a). Ethical "calculation" includes the thought that "it is unclear what is good and bad in such things [e.g., the death of one's son]" (604b): although the death of a son certainly *appears* to be bad, just as the stick in water appears to be bent, reason does not simply accept this appearance. The rational man also calculates that "human affairs are not worth great seriousness" (604b–c): here reason puts his or her pains into perspective, just as it corrects for effects of distance in matters of sight. Nussbaum argues that one of Plato's main complaints against tragedy is that it represents good people genuinely suffering from the blows of fortune, while on the Socratic view, a good person cannot be harmed (Nussbaum 1986): we can understand this as the complaint that poetry fails to distinguish what merely *appears* bad (human misfortune) from what is genuinely bad. For good discussion of

Thus realistic, imitative poetry caters to the appearance-responsive, nonrational soul, while poets who present "quiet and moderate" characters, like painters who present true proportions, fail to present things as they appear and thus fail to engage this part of the soul. Now that we have the psychological side of this story in place, we can see why imitative poetry is so worrisome to Plato – that is, why on his account it has such influence and power. First, it is this nonrational part of the soul that tends to dominate in most people. The earlier books of the *Republic* showed us that reason rules the souls only of the few (the virtuous, the philosophic): most people are ruled by appetite or spirit. However precisely Plato intends to identify Book 10's "inferior part of the soul" (603a) with appetite or spirit, here too he holds that most people are ruled not by reason but by the irrational passions, desires, and prejudices that oppose it. Second, this "hungering," "insatiable" part of the soul (604d, 606a) feels intense *pleasure* when gratified. Poetry that caters to its desires for emotional release is thus called "the poetry aiming at pleasure and imitation," where these seem to be equivalent descriptions (607c).[44] The intense pleasure imitative poets provide, along with the persuasive realism that makes them seem to be experts, puts ordinary people fully in their sway. (That emotional responses are so vivid, powerful, and pleasurable should help to explain why imitative poetry is so dangerous, while painting, although it targets the same part of the soul, is less so.)

Most worrisome to Plato – the "greatest charge" against poetry – the pleasures of imitative poetry are so strong that they threaten to upset the order even of a "decent" person's soul (605c). Here it is crucial to recognize that, as we have shown, the pleasures poetry offers us are not the cheap thrills of pulp fiction or "trash." Imitative poetry offers us compelling portraits of human affairs and human excellence – compelling because they are realistic, that is, they capture these things as they appear. In so doing, such poetry gives

the parallels between visual perception and emotional reactions, see White 1979; Belfiore 1983; and Ferrari 1989.

[44] Cf. "If you let in the pleasurable muse in lyric or epic poetry, pleasure and pain will be kings in your city" (607a). The *Gorgias* puts the point very clearly: tragedy is a form of flattery, for it aims "only to gratify the spectators," has no qualms about "saying something pleasant and gratifying to them but corrupting," and refuses to say what is "unpleasant but beneficial" (*Gorgias* 502b).

us the emotional satisfaction of identifying, grieving, and rejoicing with its heroes. When we understand Plato's criticisms we see how closely they apply to the very features that make us value Homer and Sophocles, and Shakespeare and Dostoevsky too. Recall the distinction above between simple (excellent) and multicolored (apparently excellent) characters, and the corresponding distinction between simple (nonimitative) and multicolored (imitative) art. What we call "great literature" is rarely simple: it is complex and varied, rich in detail, in subtlety and even in contradictions. It presents characters who undergo change (think of the charge that a book lacks "character development"), who hold our interest by feeling deep conflict and struggling over what to do, whose human weaknesses allow us to learn from them and whose passions let us sympathize with them. In the visual realm Plato leaves us pure colors and simple shapes (*Philebus* 51b–c, quoted above); in literature, as he makes quite clear in Book 3, he leaves us steady, quiet characters persuading each other with reason, and enduring calmly in the face of trials.[45] Imagine an *Iliad* cast only with Nestors, or a sane, dispassionate Hamlet with no taste for revenge. Or imagine a protagonist who accepts imminent death calmly, and spends his last hours engaged in quiet, rational persuasion. This last makes for excellent Platonic dialogue – but does it give even the most highbrow among us what we want from art?[46]

V. CONCLUSION

Now at last we have our solution to the problem with which we began. How is the metaphysical charge against poetry, that it is a form of imitation and thus at a third remove from the truth, related to the ethical charge, that it corrupts the soul? Imitative art copies

[45] See 389e–390d.

[46] Burnyeat holds out hope that the "hymns to the gods and encomia of good men" allowed into the city at 607a will include "engaging narratives" and "adventure stories" (Burnyeat 1999, p. 278). This may be right, but Plato clearly recognizes that the poetry he countenances lacks the pleasures of the poetry he condemns: "the more poetic and pleasing" poems are, "the less they should be heard" (387b); the multicolored style is most pleasant (397d), but the simple one is more beneficial (398a); the poet who will be admitted to the ideal city is "more austere and less pleasure-giving" than the poets who will be expelled (398a–b). The question of whether Plato means his own dialogues to be poetry of a sort is an important one: see the discussion of "anti-tragic theatre" in Nussbaum 1986.

appearances instead of realities, and therefore is "realistic" – persuasive and compelling, able to deceive the audience into thinking the artist an expert in his subjects. Imitative poetry copies appearances of human affairs, and of human excellence in particular. But these appearances differ drastically from the reality: being varied and contradictory instead of stable and uniform, the apparently excellent character is in fact a model of vice. The audience is deceived by the "realistic" portrayal: they admire and emulate the hero as a paragon of excellence, and take the author to be an expert in human excellence, an expert about how one should live. The spell is all the stronger and more pernicious in that poetry's appearances influence and gratify the nonrational part of the soul, a part that experiences powerful and disruptive pleasure. By gratifying this part of the soul poetry strengthens it; thus the audience's rational thought is crippled, and their souls are harmed.

Last, we have seen that Plato's argument against poetry in *Republic* 10 is far more substantial than it first appears. He is not merely making the complaint that various influential poets happen to write ethically harmful poetry. Rather, he has presented an argument, based on metaphysical and psychological theory, that *only* ethically harmful poetry – poetry that reflects and reinforces the flaws in popular morality – can compel us and move us with its portrayal of human affairs. Persuasive, pleasing, *poikilon* (multicolored) poetry has what beneficial but austere *haploun* (simple) poetry lacks: the power over ordinary people that makes poetry a matter of such concern to Plato in the first place, and the power over even a Plato or a Socrates that make them wish it could be redeemed.[47]

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[47] See the lover's farewell to poetry at 607c–608a, Socrates' avowal of love for Homer at 595b, and Plato's frequent quotation of Homer and other poets throughout the dialogues.

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