Lecture 02

Literature and Mimesis: Plato (I)

Hello and welcome back to another lecture in the series “Introduction to Literary Theory”. In today’s lecture we are going to look back at the legacy of the Greek classical philosophy, and the impact that it has had in the literary theories produced by the subsequent generations. The Greek philosopher with whom we will start this exploration of ancient Greece and its engagement with literature is Plato. The influence of Plato in the European tradition of thoughts and ideas has been so enormous that the twentieth-century intellectual A. N. Whitehead had famously declared that the whole of the European philosophical tradition was little more than footnotes added to the writings of Plato. It is therefore only fitting that we start our discussion of literary theory by harking back to Plato.

But interestingly enough, Plato is usually remembered in the discussions of literary studies for the way in which he famously (or infamously) renounced the poets and exiled them from his conception of an ideal republic. Why is then Plato still important for a discussion of literary studies? Also, why would someone, who is known for his sagacity and wisdom, seek to banish poets from an ideal city? Hasn’t literature been an expression of human culture and civilizational attainment throughout its existence? And hasn’t ancient Greece itself been one of the most brilliant sites of literary production starting from Homer, Hesiod, and Pindar down to Aeschylus, Socrates and Euripides? We will come to these questions soon enough, and we will see what relevance Plato might have on an effort to theorize about literature. But to start with, let us briefly acquaint ourselves with the figure of Plato.

Plato

Plato was born somewhere during the second half of the 5th century BCE. One of the probable years of his birth is 427 BCE but there is no absolute consensus about this date. Today we think of Plato as a Greek philosopher, but back in the 5th century BCE we would not have come across any notion of Greece as a single national cum political entity. Rather, Greece represented a culture-sphere which spread across not only what we identify as modern day Greece but also in southern Italy, some parts of northern Africa, and regions of modern day Turkey. This vast culture-sphere was dotted by independent city states, and it is with reference to these city states that 5th century Greeks primarily defined their identity. The state with which Plato identified himself was Athens, and it was here that he had his training under one of the most remarkable intellectuals of all time: Socrates.

After the execution of Socrates in around 399 BCE, Plato left Athens for southern Italy but later came back to his native city state to set up his famous school "Academy". And it is here, in "Academy", that he trained one of the most notable philosophers of the European tradition, Aristotle.

Plato is said to have died around the middle of the 4th century BCE.

Historical Context

The years through which Plato lived were remarkably eventful. The first thirty years of Plato's life was spent under the shadow of the second Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta, and this war saw a thorough destruction of the Athenian form of government which had sustained its golden era in the 5th century. Plato's career, therefore, in a way, marks the high

point of the achievements of the classical Athenian civilization, but also bears witness to the beginning of the end of that civilization. Ironically enough, some of Plato's own relatives were responsible in siding with the rival power of Sparta and bringing down the earlier form of Athenian government that ultimately led to the downfall of Athenian civilization. But even more important is Plato's direct association with Socrates -- the mercurial figure who was greatly responsible for questioning and undermining some of the very foundational beliefs that held the Athenian way of life together. In fact, Socrates was executed by the Athenian state for not recognizing the god of the city and for corrupting the young men of Athens through his ideas.

Democracy

But what was this old Athenian world order that Plato saw crumbling during his own life time? This world order can perhaps be best explained by a single world: democracy. The Athenian road to democracy began early in the sixth century when a Greek statesman named Solon reformed the existing model of Athenian governance. Under Solon, governmental power, which was previously held by a group of nine Athenians of noble birth, was expanded and a council of 400 citizens was formed to run the city-state.

About a hundred years later, this inclusive expansion of the political structure was furthered even more significantly by a man named Cleisthenes. Cleisthenes was the statesman who finally severed the connection between power and the wealthy nobles. He did this by giving every free male citizen of the Athenian state the power to vote. And it was through this voting process that the government of the city state was elected. Thus, in 507 BCE the democratic form of government was born in Athens. Though most of us are now accustomed to living under democratic regimes all over the world, in 507 BCE democracy was a revolutionary idea where small tradesman, wealthy citizens and aristocrats all became equal partners in the Athenian

government. But we have to remember that this sense of equality and political agency was shared only by the free male citizens, and though this represented a major increase from the days before Solon it was still only about 20 percent of the total people living in Athens. Women, slaves and foreigners were still excluded from the political scene in democratic Athens and did not have a right to vote. And we will see during the course of our lectures how this exclusion of women, slaves and foreigners played an important role in Plato's theorizing about literature in his book *The Republic*.

The Republic

Incidentally, *The Republic* is the book where we find the idea of banishing the poets from the ideal city-state to which I referred to earlier, and it is on this book that we would pivot our discussion on Plato and his theorization of literature during the course of today's lecture. *The Republic* is, however, not primarily a treatise on literature. Rather its main focus is on the idea of governance and the best way to govern a state. As I have already mentioned, the Athenian democracy which had sustained the classical golden age of Athens during the 5^{th} century BCE was already being questioned during Plato's life time not only by external threat posed by such neighboring city states like Sparta but also internally by scholars like Socrates. Situated in the twilight of Athenian democracy, Plato, in his treatise *The Republic*, tries to look into the possible forms of government that might prove best for the running of an ideal city-state. Now the very fact that the topic of literature and the composers of literature are incorporated in *The Republic* shows that literature is conceived as part of a broader socio-political framework and not as an isolated practice. Therefore, we should not be taken aback when we see contemporary theorists trying to read literature by placing it within a broader interdisciplinary context. This is precisely

what has been happening with all theorizations of literature at least since 360 BCE when Plato wrote *The Republic*.

Dialogues

But before we start discussing about Plato's theorization of literature with respect to *The Republic*, let me point out one very important aspect about the writings that have come down to us bearing the name of Plato. They are mostly written in the form of dialogues with perhaps the only major exception being the work titled *Apology*. In these dialogues, we usually see the figure of Socrates occupying the centre stage, and we see various other people engaging in disputation or conversation with the philosopher. It is in this conversational style that Socrates expounds his theories or demolishes received ideas presented by his interlocutors. This means, firstly, that Plato's dialogues themselves reflect the kind of literature for which classical Athens is most famous for – the literary form of drama. Secondly, this means that in Plato's dialogues like *The Republic*, we do not directly hear the voice of Plato himself. What we hear primarily is the voice of Socrates. But this opens up a number of questions. Is Socrates' voice as represented in the dialogues a transparent reflection of what Plato has to say? Or is Socrates' voice a reflection of what the historical Socrates had to say on the matters around which the dialogues are constructed? Or is Socrates like a character in a play whose words, though written by the playwright, does necessarily reflect the playwright's opinions or even the exact sayings of the historical figure on whom the dramatic character might be modeled. As we shall see, these questions have a direct relevance to what *The Republic* has to say about literature. And it is to this text that we now turn.

Mimesis

The main problem that Socrates of *The Republic* appears to have with poetry is its imitative nature. By the way, here I should point out that in this context, poetry stands for the wider field of literature that was known to Plato, and therefore it has a sense that is slightly different from what we understand by poetry today. Anyway, coming back to Socrates, the problem that he identifies at the heart of poetry is its imitative nature, and the Greek word that refers to this imitation is "mimesis".

In Book X of *The Republic*, which is the last chapter of the dialogue, Socrates mentions that the kind of poetry that he thinks should be banned from the ideal city-state is characterized by imitation or mimesis of

> "the actions of men, whether voluntary or involuntary, on which, […], a good or bad result has ensued, and they rejoice or sorrow accordingly".

In other words, Socrates has a problem with poetry that imitates men and their action and shows how these actions produce good or bad results and thus creates joy or sorrow for an individual. In the same chapter, Socrates also states the reason why he has a problem with such kind of imitative poetry. According to Socrates,

> "the imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less, but thinks the same thing at one time great and at another small-he is a manufacturer of images and is very far removed from the truth".

If we break down this statement, we will see that for Socrates, imitative poetry is problematic because of two reasons. Firstly, he argues that imitative poetry has a corrupting effect upon its

audience – it "implants an evil constitution". And secondly Socrates argues that imitative poetry manufactures images that are far removed from the truth. Both of these "problems" that Socrates mentions incorporate some rather complicated reasoning and would need a significant amount of unpacking. So let us start with the first problem – imitative poetry is corrupting and plants an evil constitution among its audience.

Poetry and moral action

In some earlier chapters of *The Republic*, namely Book II and Book III, we find a rather straightforward explanation of this moral objection that Socrates levies against imitative poetry. In these books, Socrates argues that stories told by the poets have as profound an influence on the mind of young children as gymnastic exercises on shaping their bodies. Therefore, given the significant ways in which stories can fashion the impressionable mind of young children, they should not be exposed to certain kinds of imitative poetry. The kind of poetry that Socrates has in mind here is the one which depicts bad characters or morally degenerate actions. Socrates argues that if impressionable young children are exposed to such imitative poetry, the unsavory characters and their actions depicted in them might have a corrupting influence on their minds thereby making them incapable of developing into good citizens of the ideal city-state.

By way of an example, Socrates refers to the story of the Greek god Uranus and his strife with his son Cronus as depicted by the poet Hesiod. According to Socrates, such stories of quarrels between a father and a son, who are also divine figures, set a very bad example to the children who are to become the future guardians of the ideal city state. This is because

> "the young man should not be told that in committing the worst of crimes he is far from doing anything outrageous; and that even if he chastises his father when does wrong, in

whatever manner, he will only be following the example of the first and greatest among the gods".

In the light of this argument, the moral objection that Socrates voices in Book X can be elaborated in a simple manner. Some imitative poetry should be shunned *because* by portraying immoral men and their dubious actions they set bad examples in front of the impressionable children and young men. These are the examples of imitative poetry which corrupts the souls and implants an evil constitution among the audience.

However, this explanation, derived from Books II and III of *The Republic*, cannot be sustained till the end of the dialogue. This is because by the time we reach Book X, we find Socrates condemning imitative poetry in general. So in Book X, he does not make a distinction between imitative poetry representing bad characters and immoral action and imitative poetry representing good characters and their noble actions. In light of this fact, the source of Socrates' objection therefore needs to be located not in the morally good or morally bad content of the poetry. But rather it needs to be located in imitative poetry's essence as a product of mimesis. Socrates seems to think that imitation itself is ethically corrupting irrespective of whether what is being imitation is morally good or bad. But this leads to the question, why is mimesis, including mimesis of good men and noble actions, morally corrupting? It is to this question that we now turn.

Theory of Forms

According to the character of Socrates in Plato's *The Republic*, mimesis is corrupting because of two distinct but interconnected reasons. The first reason has to do with the nature of reality or truth and this is associated with a philosophical theory that is usually referred to as Plato's theory

of forms. To understand this theory of form, let us look at the example of a bed that Plato mentions in Book X of *The Republic.* What do we understand when we try to think of a real bed or a true bed? According to Plato's theory of form, the true and original bed is "one existing in nature; which is made by God". Now this might sound slightly counter-intuitive given the fact that when we think about a bed we usually think of an object that is made by a carpenter. However, according to the theory of forms, what the carpenter makes is in fact a copy of the original form of the bed that already exists in nature. And this original bed is unconnected with specific instances of beds that we might come across in material reality. To understand the logic here, let us assume that by using some high-tech weapon we manage to destroy all the specific instances of beds that exist in material reality. According to the Platonic theory of forms, even then, with all the material beds gone, we will still retain the idea of the bed, because that idea is universal and not dependent on the existence of specific individual beds. So in this theory, the original and true bed is the ideal form that is universal and non-material. The material bed is an imitation of this non-material ideal form.

But what happens in case of mimetic poetry or other forms of mimetic art which imitates from the world of material reality. In those cases, we move even further from the true and original form. Thus, for instance, the painting of a bed is an imitation of a material bed that is manufactured by a carpenter which in itself is an imitation of the original and universal idea of the bed. Socrates in Plato's *The Republic* builds his critique of mimesis in general and mimetic poetry in particular. And according to this Socrates, mimetic art is problematic because the painting of a bed for instance is situated at third remove from the true and original bed. If you look at this slide you will clearly see this three step relationship:

1st state	2nd remove	3rd remove
Ideal form of the bed	Material bed	Painting of bed

Mimesis and Deception

However, there is a problem here. Even if we assume that the process of mimesis, as depicted by the act of painting a bed, is situated at a third remove from the reality of the ideal form, why should it be considered as a deception. Well the argument is that since the material bed is a specific representation of the ideal form it only represents an aspect of the universal—that is to say a very small part of the whole. When the painter in turn imitates the material bed, he imitates not the material bed as it is in reality, but rather as it appears to him. So for instance the painter standing next to a material bed will only paint the bed as it appears to him from that angle. This appearance does not encompass the entire reality of the material bed. This is because as soon as the painter changes his position, a new angle is achieved and a whole new appearance of the bed is revealed to him, and this new appearance is distinct and separate from the earlier appearance. Therefore, a painting of the material bed is again a small part of what the material bed is. So as you can see, with each shift in the chain that takes us from the ideal form to the material expression to the artistic imitation, we move more and more away from the original essence of a thing.

Limitations of Sense Perceptions

This sense of becoming further and further removed from truth as we pass through different levels of mimesis is further augmented if we consider that the faculty of human perception is

notoriously prone to folly. Let us consider an example: two objects of same dimension are situated at a distance from each other. When I look at both of them, the one nearer to me appears to be larger than the one that is further from me. If I try and paint them, I will paint according to this perception and represent one body as small and one body as large. But in reality, their dimensions are the same. So my artistic imitation will be based on faulty appearance, and not on the true reality.

Similarly, if I look at a stick immersed in water, I might paint it as crocked because that is how it appears to me. But in reality, the stick might be straight and might only appear crocked in water because of refraction. Here again, my imitation of the material object would be faulty since it will necessarily be based on appearance rather than on reality. Thus, since mimesis is susceptible to deception since it is based on appearances rather than truth and reality, imitative art is realized to be problematic. But as you have noticed from my discussion so far, I have explained the objection to mimesis only with reference to visual art. So now the question is, how does this connect to the topic of literature and the suggestion of banning the poets from the ideal city-state?

We will address this issue in our next lecture. Goodbye for now.