Lecture 03

Literature and Mimesis: Plato (II)

Hello and welcome back to this lecture series on Introduction to Literary Theory. As you know, we have been discussing Socrates's famous suggestion to ban poets from the ideal state as mentioned in Plato's *The Republic*. In our previous lecture we have established that this objection to poets stem from their association with mimesis or imitation, and we have been trying to understand this objection through the arguments presented by Socrates with reference to imitative painting. In this lecture, we will see how all of this connects to Socrates's criticism of poetry and of poets.

However, before we can get to the discussion, we will have to stay with the discussion on mimesis and the art of painting for a bit longer. As I mentioned in my previous lecture, Socrates in *The Republic* considers mimesis to be corrupting for two distinct but interconnected reasons. The first reason, as I have already explained, is that mimesis deals in appearances rather than in reality and is situated at a third remove from the true form of a thing. The second reason for which Socrates considers mimesis to be corrupting is because it confuses our sense of distinction between knowledge and ignorance. Since this is a somewhat complex argument we will try to unravel it slowly.

To begin with, let us consider these lines that Socrates utters in Book X of *The Republic*:

> A painter will paint a cobbler, carpenter, or any other artist, though he knows nothing of their arts; and, if he is a good artist, he may deceive

> children or simple persons, when he shows them his picture of a carpenter from a distance, and they will fancy that they are looking at a real carpenter.

The wording of this passage is slightly deceptive. Indeed, a cursory reading might suggest that here, Socrates is talking about something that is similar to the kind of experience that we have when we go and watch a 3D movie at a cinema hall. The 3D projection in the movie theatre can fool us or at least "children and simple person" into believing that they are looking at real human beings rather than at simulations or images. Similarly, we might think that what Socrates is saying is that a crafty painter can fool "children and simple persons" into believing that the carpenter on his canvas is a real three-dimensional person rather than a painted image.

However, if we read this passage in the broader context of Book X, we will realize that this is not the kind of deception that Socrates has in mind here. In fact, what Socrates is referring to here is the painter's ability to make us believe that he is so knowledgeable in the art of carpentry that the man he has painted as a carpenter is precisely what an ideal carpenter looks like in real life. Similarly, he can also make us believe that he knows the art of cobbling shoes so well that his portrayal in the canvas is a true representation of how a cobbler looks and behaves in real life. In other words, a painter who represents through his paintings different kinds of men engaged in different kinds of profession might fool people into believing that his portraits are realistic because he personally knows all about these professions and crafts. Therefore, the painter poses to the people as

an all knowing person. But this is problematic and is, in fact, a deception in itself. As Socrates points out:

> […] whenever someone tells us that he has met a person who knows all the crafts as well as the other things that anyone else knows and that his knowledge of any subject is more exact than any of theirs is, we must assume that we're talking to a simple-minded fellow who has apparently encountered some sort of magician or imitator and been deceived into thinking him omniscient and that the reason he has been deceived is that he himself can't distinguish between knowledge, ignorance, and imitation.

Simply put, a painter who is merely an imitator can pass himself off as knowledgeable in various crafts only by confounding and deceiving a person who is himself ignorant.

Let us explore this thesis further with the help of an illustration. Socrates asks: if we are to consider a flute, then who is the most knowledgeable person in that matter? Of course the person who plays flutes because he is the one who has genuine knowledge about whether a flute is good or bad. Similarly, if we take another instrument, a cricket bat for instance, we will agree that the most knowledgeable person about cricket bats is someone like Sachin Tendulkar. So just like a flutist will know best about a flute because he is a master in the craft of using flutes, a cricketer like Sachin Tendulkar will be in the best position to discern whether a cricket bad is good or bad because he is a master in the craft of yielding it.

If we extrapolate from these individual examples, we arrive at the general truth: *the user or practitioner of something is the person who is really knowledgeable about that thing*. In Socrates's words:

> […] the beauty and correctness of each manufactured item, living creature, and action [is] related to nothing but the use for which each is made or naturally adapted"

The person who makes the flute or the cricket bat or any such instrument of craft is therefore not as knowledgeable as the user of that instrument or the practitioner of that craft. Thus, a maker of cricket bats will necessarily be guided by a master cricketer because it is the latter who has true knowledge about what makes a bat good or bad. Or in case of the flute, to use Socrates's words:

> "the flute-player will tell the flute-maker which of his flutes is satisfactory to the performer; he will tell him how he ought to make them, and the other will attend to his instructions"

Therefore, as we pass from the user to the maker we already shift from real knowledge to a lesser form of knowledge. But the maker, be it of flutes or of cricket bats or any other thing, is still aware of the true value of the items that he manufactures because he is guided by the user. However, when we come to a painter who imitates on his canvas the material flute produced by a flute maker, this connection with true knowledge is absolutely lost. Or rather, knowledge about the value of the flute becomes irrelevant. Why is that the case? Well, imagine if you were to paint a flute by copying a material

sample, would you need to be able to play the flute or judge its sound before you start painting? No, because how good the flute sounds and how worthy it is of performance is irrelevant to the process of imitating that flute on the canvas. So in other words, a painted flute might *appear* to be good without *really* being good. Here again we come to the distinction between appearance and reality that we had encountered earlier in our discussion. And we come to the same conclusion that mimesis or imitation is problematic because it deals in appearances and not in reality.

But there is another level of deception going on here. The painter who imitates the flute need not know anything about flute playing to create a realistic image of the flute. However, the very realism of his painting might trick children and simple-minded people to assume that the painter knows all about flutes since their painting is so nice. So the imitator *appears* to be knowledgeable even though *in reality* he may be ignorant.

So from this discussion of mimesis in the context of realistic paintings, we arrive at two main arguments. The first argument is that mimesis deals in appearances that are situated at a third remove from the true reality. The second is that mimetic artists lack true knowledge of the things that they imitate though they might fool one into believing that they are greatly knowledgeable.

Literature and Mimesis

Now let us take these insights on mimesis and see how they apply to the work of the poets who imitate the “actions of men”. As I have already mentioned in my previous lecture, it is very easy to explain the opposition to poets and poetry that imitate morally reprobate characters and their degenerate actions What is difficult to explain is how this opposition might equally apply to poets imitating noble men and virtuous actions. Let us

start here with an example. In Book IV of *The Republic*, Socrates points out that the virtue of justice for instance does not have anything to do with the outward nature of a man but has to do with the harmonious condition of his inner life, "which is the true self and concernment of man". But a poet who wants to represent the virtues of a just man can only imitate the outward appearance of such a man and not his inner self which is the true source of his virtue. Therefore, we are again confronted here with the argument of mimesis being imitation of appearances which are situated at a third remove from reality. This slide would help explain the overlapping arguments here.

1st state	2nd remove	3rd remove
Ideal form of the bed	Material bed	Painting of bed
Inner self	Outward actions	Poetic imitation of outward actions

The relations established in the first row are already familiar to us from our previous lecture. The true reality of a bed is its universal non-material form. The material expression of that form is situated at a second remove from the original. The painting of that material bed is an imitation of an appearance which is situated at a third remove from the reality of the universal form. Following the same logic, we can read the second row thus: The true seat of a virtue like justice is the soul or the inner self of a man. His outwards actions are particular manifestations of that original virtue and are at a second remove from the soul. The poetic mimesis of virtuous men is only an imitation of this outward appearance of virtue and is therefore situated at a third remove from what originally constitutes virtue.

But this, however, does not explain why poetry imitating virtuous men can be morally corrupting. To arrive at an answer to this question let us try and understand how the binary of knowledge and ignorance plays out in mimetic poetry. As already mentioned, a painter, in spite of being ignorant about flute playing or carpentry, can appear to his audience to be knowledgeable in these crafts because his paintings of a flute or a carpenter looks nice and pleasing. Similarly, a poet, like Homer for instance, in spite of being ignorant about virtue can *appear* to know all about it because his poetic representation of virtuous men might be appealing. Now according to this argument, there are two ways in which a poet like Homer deceives and corrupts his audience through poetic representations of virtue. The first way is by portraying things which are not virtuous as expressions of virtues, and the second is of course by pretending to be knowledgeable while really being ignorant.

Let us take the first of the two points. How or why does a poet portray things which are not virtuous as expressions of virtue? As I have mentioned before, virtue according to Socrates of the Platonic dialogue is a matter of the inner self. And one of the key feature of a virtue is a harmoniously organized inner self. The most identifiable sign of a man possessed with a harmonious inner life is his quiet and controlled nature. So in Book X, Socrates says that a virtuous man with a rational and quiet character will always remain pretty much the same under any given circumstances. Indeed, this very calmness and unchangeability of a character under varied circumstances is what marks him as virtuous in Socrates's scheme of things. However, as Socrates also points out in Book X of *The Republic* that such a virtuous character is difficult to portray through imitative poetry. This is because a poet depends on imitating the outward actions and emotional

expressions of a man to portray his character. So they cannot portray a virtuous character if there is no great outward manifestation of that virtuousness.

What the poets end up representing as virtuous characters are therefore characters who act out in an exaggerated manner the nobility of their inner character. Yet according to Socrates's view of the world, this exaggerated outward manifestation of the inner life represents not a virtuous soul but rather its opposite. It represents a soul which has not achieved harmony that is essential for virtue. So all the men of apparently noble characters who are represented through their virtuous actions in poetry, are, according to Socrates, not virtuous men at all. They only *appear* to be virtuous, and, as we already know, appearances are deceptive and removed from reality. So just as a flute which may look good in painting might not be a good flute in reality, a character who appears to be virtuous in poetry might not be virtuous at all. This is one of the ways in which an imitative poet deceives his audience even while apparently portraying virtuous men and their actions.

The second way they deceive and ultimately corrupt their audience is by posing to be knowledgeable about virtues. It was common practice in the Greek world of Plato to make young children read poetry of Homer and Hesiod to learn the nuances of virtue. In today's context this will be something like exposing the children to good movies and good fiction so that they can grow up to become like the virtuous characters portrayed in these movies and fictions. Socrates identifies a problem here. Just because a poet like Homer portrays virtuous characters, we assume that he will know a great deal about how to be virtuous. Yet this might not be the case at all. Following Socrates's argument, we have already established that a painter who imitates a flute on canvas might make the

image of a good flute without knowing anything about flute playing or about the distinction between good and bad flutes. Similarly, Homer might not know anything about how to be virtuous in spite of his ability to portray characters who *appear* to be virtuous. Since we will not go to a painter of flutes to learn the art of flute playing, we should also not go to the poets who represent virtuous characters to learn the art of being virtuous. Yet we often confuse mimetic portrayal of virtue with true knowledge about virtue and therefore we start regarding the poets as our teachers. This confusion, Socrates suggests, can have serious consequences for the impressionable minds of young men. And this is why he wants to ban the poets from his ideal city-state.

Mimesis feeds passions

Apart from these reasons that I have already stated, Socrates in Book X of *The Republic* also raises another objection against mimetic poetry. For Socrates, to develop into a virtuous individual, one should be guided by reason and keep in control that irrational part of one's nature which gets easily excitable under the influence of images and appearances. Thus, according to Socrates, when confronted by calamities, a rational individual would try to keep calm rather than get swayed by it. He would use his reason to keep in check the desire for weeping and wailing and showing exaggerated manifestation of grief. Yet as I have already mentioned, it is precisely this exaggerated outward actions that forms the basis of imitative poetry. So poetry, rather than enhancing the faculty of reason, appeals to the baser, passionate nature of an individual. In the words of Socrates:

> [P]oetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; [poetry] lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue.

Thus, gradually, under the influence of poetry, individuals fail to become or remain upright rational men and turn into baser human beings like children or fools or women who are slaves to their uncontrolled passions. And here I must note that this association between mimesis and women, children and insane people can indeed be very strongly felt throughout *The Republic*. But this bias should not surprise us given the fact that in the Athenian democracy, it was only the free male citizens who were considered to be equals and worthy of voting. Everyone else, including women and children were considered inferior human specimens. Thus, it is not incomprehensible as to why the effects of mimesis would be criticized by associating it with the nature of women, children and individuals with limited intelligence.

At the end of this discussion, I would like to note that even while criticizing mimetic art, Plato's *The Republic* resembles the form of a drama which was the mimetic art per excellence in ancient Athens. Can we therefore critique the content of Plato's *The Republic* by referring to its form? I will leave the question open for you to answer. But I should tell you that a strong criticism of Plato's portrayal of mimesis as evil and corrupting was indeed launched soon after his death, and by none other than his own celebrated disciple, Aristotle. It is to Aristotle's view on mimesis that we will turn in our next lecture. Goodbye.