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That Yelping Bitch: On Poetry In Plato's *Republic*

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POETS AND PHILOSOPHERS, it seems, have never been able to play very nicely together. Sometimes their quarreling sinks to the level of childish name-calling. Our title here comes from perhaps the most famous of those occasions. Towards the end of Plato's *Republic* Socrates takes note of what, by his account, was already at that time a long-standing feud. As he tells it, one of the choicer names poets were calling philosophy was "That yelping bitch, shrieking at her master."¹ But of course the feeling was entirely mutual. It is hard to recall, or even imagine, a more brutal attack upon poetry than Socrates, at that point, was in the midst of delivering on behalf of philosophy.

It is also a most puzzling attack. Unlike any other portion of the *Republic*, this one (book 10, 595a–608b) looks as if it were just tacked onto a work that seems perfectly complete without it. The career of the city built in speech has been traced from its origin in necessity to its demise in tyranny. In the process an understanding of the sense in which justice is human good has been achieved. All that remains to be done in the work is the relating of a myth whose point is apparently to drive home to the reader the bearing of the entire preceding conversation upon his immortal soul. But before doing that, Socrates, for no apparent reason, returns to a theme which had seemed to have been more than fully dealt with much earlier. At least in that context there had been no problem seeing why poetry was being discussed, even if it wasn't always easy to agree with what Socrates was saying about it. Here, though, the topic just seems dragged in by the ears. Why does it

come up again here? And why this topic, in particular, rather than any number of others that we might have preferred to see developed further?

The usual answer pretty much comes down to vindictiveness. Plato, it is said, just had a lot more to say against poetry and he would not let the work end until he had said it.² And there may well *be* more to say about it. But if so, then why didn't the author—notorious for constantly fiddling with his writings—just rework book 3, so that the whole discussion got put where it belongs? Or, if he couldn't do that, then why didn't he write a separate work on the topic?

In any case, this section is taken as the *locus classicus* for the reasons why philosophy cannot have anything to do with poetry. Here, it is said, is where we find out what is wrong with poetry, why we must be very concerned about the effects that it must have on any well-ordered community.

This way of taking this section, it seems to me, is not just mistaken but in fact dangerously mistaken—mistaken in a way that radically distorts the intent of the work as a whole. My aim here is to set forth why this is the case. I shall do so by looking again at the passage, attending particularly to the question of the relation between it and the rest of the work. For until we understand that relation we will not be in a position to grasp clearly the ground of the enmity between poetry and philosophy—will therefore most likely mis-take that ground in profoundly significant ways.

My contention, basically, is this. This second discussion of poetry in the *Republic* is not just tacked on to the rest of the work. It belongs with the rest. As the last substantive discussion in the work it belongs there, indeed, as gathering the entire work together and sending it on its intended way. It adds (and this is essential) nothing new to the “doctrine” of the work.³ Instead it commences the *work (ergon)* of this work. Here begins the work that must be carried on in the soul of the thoughtful reader for whom this work was written, indicating *how this work as a whole is to be read*, who its proper reader must be. In a word, that reader is—poet!

That is my contention. The rest of this essay will be devoted to showing why it is correct.

I. JUSTIFYING THE POET

THERE IS A style of reading—one might call it the “. . . and then . . .” school—that is content merely to note what gets said where, observing only that one topic has been dropped and another taken up. Such a reader, while he may find much that is puzzling in this second discussion of poetry in the *Republic*, will find nothing strange about the occurrence of the discussion itself. Plato wanted to come back to the topic of poetry? Well, that’s his privilege as author.

There is a second way of reading—of reading generally, but especially for reading Plato—that consists of taking Socrates’ account in *Phaedrus* (264c) of what constitutes a good speech as reflecting, in some sense at least, Plato’s own attitude about what his writing should be like. If we conceive of the *Republic* as a living whole, with each part occupying its organically necessary position, then the very occurrence of this passage at this place becomes genuinely puzzling.⁴ Why is it here? Given what led up to it it simply does not seem to belong. Have we perhaps missed something—some deeper current that we can discern if we look closer or think more deeply about the work? It’s as if, while wiping our hands in satisfaction after putting together some fiendishly complicated apparatus (whew!—almost done with the book, and everything seems to be making sense), we suddenly discover some crucial part we had left out, so that we have to take it all apart again. We have to undo, for the moment, whatever understanding we had achieved of the work as a whole. We have to reawaken and keep open, for now, the *question* of what the *Republic* is about.

That is the first effect of giving thought to the occurrence of this passage. It is also, we’re going to find, its last effect. It will turn out that confronting the question of the return of poetry here at the end of the *Republic* requires nothing less

than radically reawakening *the question of the meaning* of this work—reopening that question so profoundly that it can never be closed off again, can never be given a final or complete answer.

In outline the passage goes like this. Socrates opens book 10 by commenting to Glaucon about how right they were earlier in not admitting into the city “any part of poetry that is imitative.”⁵ Glaucon, foolishly asking him what he means by that, opens the way for Socrates to erupt with this furious diatribe. Imitative poetry, says he, like all imitative art, is at the third remove from what *is*; but it fools people into thinking that they are looking at what *is* rather than at an imitation of it. People tend to be convinced by it that the poet knows all about all things human and divine, since they themselves, being ignorant of such matters, don't know any better. The poet—Homer, for instance—actually has so little knowledge about the way things really are that he has never had any reputation for the performance of great or small deeds. Even his own countrymen don't respect him. All that he does is to manufacture imitations: a task which does not even require the kind of knowledge (of how well or badly the thing does its job) that the user of the genuine article would possess. The imitative poet is useless. But he is also dangerous. By his productions he is able to get hold of and play upon the most irrational and uncontrollable of human feelings. Even the most serious, self-controlled man finds it hard not to listen to him, thus unleashing the very things he has worked hardest to bring under control. The proper city can have no use for such a poet. Or—perhaps it may, *if* somehow, despite this devastating attack on his activity, some poet can, in proper meter, present convincing proof for why he should be allowed back into the city. Or even, perhaps, some non-poet can do that job, of justifying the poet, in plain, dull prose (607d).

It will not help for us to plead that our lyres are badly out of tune, our meters unpracticed. For this is where *we* must begin. We, the readers of this passage, have now been set to

our task. We are the ones by whom the work of the imitative poet must be justified. Either that, or—we can no longer, in good conscience, allow ourselves or anyone else to read the *Republic* itself! For if we do not simply make the easy assumption that we already know all about what imitative poetry is, but instead seek an explanation of what Socrates means by it, then we find that *this very work*, in its entirety, is a conspicuously plain example of this very thing. It is an *imitative poem*. To show this we need only to look briefly at some portions of the earlier discussion of poetry in this work.

2. IMITATIVE POETRY

IN BOOKS 2 and 3 Socrates works out with Glaucon and Adeimantus what the education of the Guardians of the city must be like. This is a highly delicate task. It must result in combining within the guardians the seemingly irreconcilable dispositions of gentleness (towards citizens) and ferocity (towards strangers) (375c). A skewed development of either side could be mortally dangerous to the city as a whole. The education that will produce this combination will consist, as does all education, of gymnastics for the body and music for the soul. What Socrates and the others must do here is to determine what sort of music and gymnastics are needed. They begin with music, outlining first the kinds of stories that can be allowed to be told, then how they may be told (the issue of “style”), and finally what rhythms or meters would be most conducive to the guardians’ way of life. This section is not one to be rushed through with the intention of extracting anyone’s “philosophy of education” from it. To describe, even in outline the intense drama—even battle—that is unfolding here would take us too far afield. Instead we need to focus on one portion of this discussion of “music”: that matter of “style.”

Socrates considers with Adeimantus the *way* stories should be told to the young guardians (392c–398c). In general the principle is this. Except where he is portraying decent things,

the story-teller should never speak as if anyone but himself were speaking. In other words, no direct quotes, nothing but the kind of second-hand narration in which it is clearly the story-teller himself that we are hearing at all times rather than the most likely unworthy characters he is telling about. And certainly no imitation of such utterly unguardian-like things as women, sick, mad, in labor; or animals or thunder or earthquakes and on and on. It is especially necessary that the guardians themselves not be encouraged to imitate such things. Instead (the conclusion to this excursus on "style") they may be allowed only the "unmixed imitation of the decent."⁶

In all this cleansing of style, just about all the literary forms that were (and still are) most popular have been thrown out of the city. Nothing like a Homeric poem can be at all appropriate to the guardian's training. Nor, in particular, can any kind of *drama*, which consists of *nothing but* direct imitation of whatever sleazy characters the playwright may choose to bring before us, with no narrative comments to remind us that we are listening only to an imitation. Here is the way a portion of that conversation goes. Socrates speaks first, then Adeimantus.

"Isn't it narrative when he [the story-teller] gives all the speeches and also what comes between the speeches?"

"Of course."

"But, when he gives a speech as though he were someone else, won't we say that he then likens his style as much as possible to that of the man he has announced as the speaker?"

"We'll say that, surely."

"Isn't likening himself to someone else, either in voice or in looks the same as imitating the man he likens himself to?"

"Surely."

"Then, in this case, it seems, he and the other poets use imitation in making their narrative."

"Most certainly."

.

"Now," I said, "understand that the opposite of this [namely the straight, non-imitative narration that is described in the intervening speech] comes to pass when someone takes out the poet's connections between the speeches and leaves the exchanges."

"That I understand, too," he said. "That's the way it is with tragedies."

"Your supposition is most correct," I said. "And now I suppose I can make plain to you what I couldn't before. Of poetry and tale-telling, one kind proceeds wholly by imitation—as you say, tragedy and comedy; . . ." (393b–c, 394b.)

—And so on, down to the conclusion in which only the "unmixed imitation of the decent" is allowed to the guardian—hence little or none of the narrative poetry or drama that Socrates and Adeimantus have been talking about. Drama—tragedy and comedy—is pure *imitative* poetry, the purest. In it the storyteller takes out all the "poet's connections" and leaves only the spoken exchanges between the characters, speaking as if he were each one of them in turn, no matter how much of a sleaze-ball the character may be.

Now if, with this passage (in Bloom's translation) in mind, we go back and look at the very first word of the entire work,⁷ we find something that may be more than a little disconcerting. That word is "*Socrates: . . .*"—a piece of stage-setting (the only one in the work), telling us how this work comes to us. It says that *Socrates is narrating this story* to us, his audience. The whole thing. From beginning to end, the only voice we ever hear directly is that of this tale-spinner Socrates.

What kind of story-teller is he?

Well, we look through this passage for narrative comments. Like great stretches of the dialogue there is no narrative description at all. The speeches are reported directly to us, as if Socrates and Adeimantus were speaking in our presence, before our very eyes or ears. Throughout this work the story-teller Socrates likens his speech to—that is, he *imitates*—all the speakers, so skillfully that we tend to forget that we are listening to a second-hand narration at all.

Because of him we are right there, in the midst of that group, slipping with Cephalus another step towards the grave, snarling and roaring with that wolf Thrasymachus, and so on. Whatever sleazy characters were there, Socrates brings them to life for us, often even (as in much of our quotation) leaving out the bare minimum of narrative detail, the “he said” and the like, that might mark a change of speaker.⁸ By the strictest terms of the definition Socrates has just given us, this entire work, *narrated* to us by a storyteller who does nothing from beginning to end but shamelessly imitate whoever might be speaking at that point, is a seamless example of imitative poetry, wholly imitative. It is *drama*.⁹

We laugh: we’ve just caught Socrates making himself look flagrantly foolish. But there is only so much mileage we can get from that. Sooner or later we’ll need to get down to the serious business at hand, so we may as well do it here. Socrates, after all, is only the spokesman for Plato, who must therefore bear the responsibility for whatever embarrassments Socrates may have been put into here. So let’s stop berating poor Socrates and get on with the task of working out what *Plato* intends to tell us about imitative poetry.

And told us in a work that consists of nothing but an *imitation* of Socrates *imitating* himself and all the other speakers. Imitation compounded! If there is indeed something so dreadfully wrong with imitative poetry, and if Plato thought it so important to warn us about it here, then he certainly chose the strangest possible way to do so. Nowhere in this work, other than the title-page, is there the slightest indication of who the real teller of this story is. Nowhere does he even hint at speaking in his own voice. It is only our translator, not the author himself, who supplies even the microscopic fragment of a “he said” that, by the definition we’ve just heard, would distinguish this entire work from totally pure imitative drama. This work, by its own definition of such things, turns out to be, even more than before, a wholly imitative poem. It is drama.

This work is imitative poetry. Until we can do what Socrates tells us in book 10 that we must do—work out for

ourselves some defense of such poetry (or at least find some way around book 10's denunciation of such stuff)—*this very work* can have no legitimate place in any proper, well-founded city.

Before leaving this section there is one more thing in it that we need to look at.

Between the two sections of what we just quoted there is a longish speech explaining the difference between imitative poetry and the sort of straight narration (*never* found in the *Republic*) that alone would be acceptable in the city.¹⁰ Here is the way Socrates begins that explanation:

If the poet nowhere hid himself, his poetic work and narration would have taken place without imitation.¹¹

We need to pay very close attention to what this statement is saying.

A poet who didn't hide himself wouldn't use imitation.—Which, by transposition, means that to the extent that the poet does imitate he *is* hiding himself. He is not showing himself as, or where, he is. He is running before us into the depths brought into being within his own poem, forcing us, if we want to catch any clear glimpse of him at all, to follow him further and further into that depth. And if his work is wholly imitative, if it consists even of multiple levels of imitation, then that is all we can do to find him out. We can never catch direct sight of him, hear directly what he wanted to say to us. If he had intended to say anything at all directly to us, he would not have given us such a totally imitative poem.

We, as readers of the *Republic*, have allowed ourselves to be caught up, entangled, within the snares of a wholly imitative poem, consisting even of multiple levels of imitation. We can make *no* further sense of "Plato's doctrines," or "what Plato said" at this, that, or any point whatsoever. Our poet is hidden.

And that statement itself, which we have taken at face value? Is it, then, a proper "doctrine"? Well, where do the implicative convolutions come to an end if we say yes? If we say no?¹²

3. THE EVILS OF IMITATIVE POETRY

THE *REPUBLIC* is an imitative poem. What, then, is wrong with such poetry?

We won't deal here in detail with all or any of the charges Socrates levels against it. Instead we'll simply indicate how, in certain respects at least, *this* imitative poem is condemned out of its own text.

Let's take someone, to start with (following Socrates' lead), who is not imitative, say a carpenter making a bed.¹³ What that artist does is to make something that, as we say, is "really there" in front of our eyes. We can look at it from all angles, walk around it, touch it, and (most important) sleep on it. It is fully there, part of our "real world," as a result of this artist's work. Now, when the imitative artist, say a painter,¹⁴ tries to do the same thing—to "make" a bed, or even the carpenter himself—he ends up with something quite different: a flat, one-dimensional thing, presented only from one perspective: a thing only to be looked at, not used. The depth that the real thing has—the other sides of the bed, its utility, all the things the carpenter may say or do—is lost as the artist is forced, by the exigency of what he is doing, to present (actually, *re-present*) his subject from some one perspective, in some one pose. And yet, depending on how skillful he is, he may well end up with something capable of fooling "children and foolish human beings" (598c) into thinking that they are looking at the real thing. Of course that kind of thing is a lot more likely to happen, as Socrates goes on to explain, with things that cannot be represented visually, that can only be presented in the words of the imitative poet. Virtue, vice, things having to do with the gods: these are the sorts of things that can be represented, if at all, only in speech; and if a person has no knowledge of those things themselves he is very likely to think that the poet (Homer, for instance) who speaks well about them is some kind of all-knowing wizard, inscribing in his poem, for all time, what these things are. The problem with such "children and fool-

ish human beings” is that they simply have no grasp of the difference between the poet’s imitations and reality.

We may want to object: this criticism seems to be getting off on the wrong foot. Granted, there are issues that need to be thought about here with respect to *mimesis*, imitation, and what it does to the human soul. But Socrates (or Plato) seems to have the strange notion that the sole intention of the artist, starting with the painter, is *trompe l’oeil*, fooling the viewer into thinking that he is looking at the real thing: a form of art that, while sometimes entertaining, is hardly what one would ever call great art, nor is it really the sole or basic motivation even of the most “photographic” painter. And to suggest that any poet, no matter how “imitative,” intends to do anything even remotely analogous to that with his poetry seems grotesque.

But step back and think for a moment. What would a person be likely to think who might come across a poem of uncommon beauty and persuasiveness—say, a poem that plumbs the depth of the human soul and sets out its structure, its excellences and defects, which portrays the soul as mirrored in the city, and the city in the soul? Would it necessarily occur to him that there is more to the city, the soul, justice, than can possibly appear in this or any poem, and that what he is looking at is merely a flat, one-dimensional representation of these things? Or might he instead be duped by poetry of such consummate artistry that he ends up convinced that this poem portrays the nature of the human soul itself, describes what courage, temperance, wisdom and justice really are, what cities “ideally” should be (or, perhaps worse, what that poet thought the ideal city would look like)? Have not these very things in fact actually *been* said about *this* poem, the *Republic*, by children and foolish human beings, *ad nauseam*?

Perhaps there was no Greek equivalent, that Socrates was aware of, to our proverb about people living in glass houses.

Consider next the poet himself. Says Socrates, if he is so all-knowing then he should have many great deeds to show, along

with a high reputation and honors from his countrymen. And we look at this story-teller, this purely imitative poet, and know very well where this shuffling vagrant, contributing no more to the city than an occasional competent stint in the army, will end up: condemned to death and executed by his countrymen. (At least Homer, whose example Socrates cites here once again, was reputed to have died in peace, even if without honor.) Or, if we would rather, we turn to the actual author of this poem and think of his dead-earnest, quixotic attempt to convert a tyrant to philosophy, with its near-comic, near-fatal result. That took place, though, far from his own city. Never do we hear of him being responsible for any significant political contribution, let alone any great reformation, in Athens itself.¹⁵ We cannot accept any shuffling excuses about the corrupt state of politics at that time. By the criteria laid down in this very work for determining whether an author knows what he is talking about, the poets responsible for this work did *not* know their stuff. And are we really to suppose that the author was oblivious of all this as he wrote—of how foolish his own poem was making him look?

There is no need to go further. All it takes is a nudge in the direction of applying these criticisms of imitative poetry to the *Republic* itself and it becomes effortlessly easy to see how guilty it is of every one of the things Socrates says is wrong with such poetry. This work excites us, plays on our feelings. We expect to learn from it who man is, what the city is, what virtue is. We try to put what we've learned into practice, with baleful results. History is littered with the sorry skeletons of "ideal cities" supposedly modeled after the *Republic*. In every way, the influence that the *Republic* has had bears out precisely what Socrates says is dangerous about imitative poetry.¹⁶ There is far more at issue here than just the battle against Homer that Socrates wages on the surface of the text. If, as is often said, Homer is the teacher of Classical Greece,¹⁷ then Plato has been the teacher of all ages since that time. We still can do nothing but scribble footnotes to Plato.¹⁸ And so if, as Socrates so vehemently argues, Homer

is no teacher at all but rather a lying seducer, then it would seem that we must, on precisely the same grounds, fundamentally reexamine what we have taken from this “teacher” Plato. And moreover, now, as we watch this passage recoiling upon itself and the rest of this work, we find that it is Plato himself who demands that we do so.¹⁹

The crux of the matter is this. The more skilled the imitative poet (and Plato is one of the most skilled of all time), the more dangerous he is. For the most dangerous thing about such poetry (as we should have learned from the way Plato himself taught us to distinguish between the many appearances and one reality²⁰) is how *it takes what cannot be spoken and puts it into words*. The poet fixes our eyes on wisdom from *this* perspective, welds our thinking to this appearance of courage, makes us speak of justice in *this* way, makes us think that *this* is the way cities should be organized.²¹ And so, fascinated by the light he sheds on the topic through the words by which he makes it visible to us, we find it almost impossible to gain any inkling of the unspoken darkness that is its setting. Seduced by the shapes these things are given in his poem, an entire culture forms itself around these “imitations,” never compelled to confront the *question* of what these things are, beyond these shapes.

Homer, the Bible, Plato: the poet shapes our thinking—in a way, creates the very world we live in by teaching us how to speak it. He makes something present to us by bringing it to speech. But in that very process he obscures that thing by the very clarity by which he makes it present to us, hiding from us its dark, unspoken depth.

There is the case against the imitative poet in a nutshell: he imitates in speech what is beyond all speech. The better he does that, the more dangerous he is. And one of the best ever is Plato.

4. DEFENDING IMITATIVE POETRY

NOW IT HAS become clear why, earlier, we said that *we* would have to develop a defense of imitative poetry if we were to

make any further use of this work. It is not (it never was) simply a matter of protecting the poets against Socrates' attacks: they've never seemed all that worried about them. Instead the question has become this: if Socrates (or Plato) really felt that way about such poetry (and I think he did) then why did he present us with *this* magnificent piece of imitative poetry?

To begin to develop an answer, we need to look more closely at one portion of the section we have been considering. Socrates is speaking with Glaucon:

"Do you suppose that if a man were able to make both, the thing to be imitated and the phantom, he would permit himself to be serious about the crafting of phantoms and set this at the head of his own life as the best thing he has?"

"No, I don't."

"But, I suppose, if he were in truth a knower of these things that he also imitates, he would be far more serious about the deeds than the imitations and would try to leave many fair deeds (πολλὰ καὶ καλὰ ἔργα) behind as memorials of himself and would be more eager to be the one who is lauded rather than the one who lauds." (599a–b)

Not phantoms (εἰδωλα) but *deeds* or *works* (ἔργα) are what the one who knows would want to produce. To the extent that his poetic activity (ποίησις) succeeds only in producing phantoms, the poet who *knows* what he's talking about would have to judge his own entire effort a failure. Only if proper *works* result from what he does—works that make present the things themselves that this poet knows, hence works that are *not imitative*—only then can he regard his work as successful, properly worthy of praise. What works, then, would these be?

Let's suppose that this poet knows something about justice and wishes to convey that knowledge in a poem called *The Republic* or *A Theory of Justice* or whatever. He will, of course, describe justice exactly as he beholds it, sees it (θεωρῶ), putting his knowledge into words as precisely as he is able to. He will imitate, as closely as speech allows him to,

the shape (εἶδος) of justice itself. Yet even as he does so, there will be nothing more painfully clear to him than the degree to which any such description, no matter how complex or far-reaching, falls short of accomplishing the task of making justice itself present. Justice itself cannot be spoken. It is beyond all speech. And so, to the extent that it is only the words of this poet that survive him—his descriptions, theories, “doctrines”—he will have succeeded only in bringing phantoms into being, not the “works” for which he had hoped to be praised. (In one’s darkest imaginings one might even envision an entire industry, deflected from the task of considering how a writing might make justice itself present, devoted instead just to determining what this poet’s “doctrines” are!) In this way it becomes essential that this poet, not wanting to produce mere phantoms, *not* put his own insights, his theory, his doctrine, into his poem, but rather *hide* himself, never let himself be seen, all the way through it.

Then perhaps we should look instead for some deed—say, converting a tyrant to philosophy. That way, at least, there might be something to tell us that the poet really did know what he was talking about. Let’s make a wildly improbable (and contrary to fact) assumption: that this poet succeeds and that what ensues under the reign of this “philosopher-king” is the justest regime the world has ever known, with every person in it contributing and receiving his fair share, not meddling in anyone else’s affairs, with neither sorrow nor tears in all that realm. This at least would have the advantage, which mere words can never have, of bringing justice down to earth, right into the middle of things, with all the thickness of lived experience. Yet for all that, this procedure falls even further short of making justice itself present rather than a mere phantom of it. For in the first place mere living is not knowledge. It is unfortunately all too easy to look at such a regime or even live happily in it all our lives and never turn to consider what we are looking at or living in. That “deed” would not necessarily have left us with any greater knowledge of justice itself than we already had—per-

haps none at all. Second and more seriously, *no* such regime or “deed,” no matter how beneficent, can in the slightest degree be identified with justice itself. All it can do is to indicate what justice looks like from the perspective of these actual circumstances or conditions. And it can do that only for someone who already knows what justice is and therefore is able to see that it is justice that is appearing there. To the extent that we confuse this “deed” or regime with the reality of justice itself, we will once again have been duped by a mere phantom, a flat, one-dimensional re-presentation or imitation that has none of the depth of the original. No, once again we have not found, even in this “deed,” the *work* that this poet intends to achieve.

Well—what if this essay were to end right here? I won’t do that: I’ll “finish” it. And yet maybe stopping here might be the “truest” ending it could have, most consistent with what has come to be at issue in it. (In which case, whatever I say from here to the end will, in a way, be false . . .) For think of what the situation has now become. We are trying to discover the “work” that would justify the activity of the imitative poet—if for no other reason than to show why, despite its own arguments, we should continue to allow anyone to read the *Republic*. We have looked at the words and the deeds of this poet and found no defense in them at all. One and all, they are “imitative,” no matter how beautifully spoken or done. They do not serve at all to make justice itself present to us—if anything, more likely just the opposite, deceiving us with phantoms that it is almost impossible for us not to mistake for justice itself. So we are confused, perplexed—perhaps, indeed, annoyed—that a work in philosophy should leave us so adrift, without an anchor, not knowing which way to turn to find what we thought that work wanted to show us. We *wonder*, looking for any clue to what might bring us back to solid ground.

This very state of our soul, our thinking, is none other than the *work* that this poem, to be successful, fulfilling the poet’s intent, must produce. If it does not accomplish *this*

work, then it becomes purely imitative, lyingly seductive, useless and dangerous.

Justice itself, we have said, is a shape (εἶδος) that cannot be contained within the limits of words or deeds. So if words or deeds are the only settings within which a thing can itself be present, then justice itself can never become present, and we are left forever with nothing other than phantoms. In suggesting this, however, we overlook *the locus of presence itself*: the soul. It is only within the soul that justice can be wholly present, itself present, rather than some mere imitation or phantom of it.

Yet for this to happen, the soul itself must be capable of it. Whenever any word or deed is taken as presenting what justice itself is, then it is as if the soul has been tricked, deceived into mistaking a phantom, a shadow, a dream, for the real. Worse, when the poet's production is regarded merely as portraying *his* account of what it is, then the point of that poem—the work that it was intended to achieve—has come to be entirely lost in obscurity, oblivion. But suppose there comes a time when

after long-continued intercourse between teacher[-poet] and pupil[-reader], in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it [e.g., knowledge of justice itself] is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself.²²

When that happens—*if* it happens—then it becomes clear that “this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences.”²³ Only a soul that is as open as justice itself will be capable of having insight into what justice itself is. But this insight must throw the soul into a condition of unending perplexity and frustration, forever torn between the openness of the shape of justice and the inherent inadequacy of every way in which it shows itself. And so as this soul finds itself engaged in a never-ending struggle to display more adequately the inexhaustibility of this form, it can never cease being the cause of things “coming out of not

being into being," (ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἰς τὸ ὄν ἰόντι)—in other words, by Diotima's account of such things in the *Symposium* (205c), a *poet*. But this is none other than another way of saying that it *seeks* endlessly to know what justice is, driven by the desire to behold its inexhaustible emergence. This soul is *philosopher*, "lover of the sight of truth" (*Rep.* 5, 475e): an essentially ignorant being, straining ceaselessly to hold together within himself the infinitely open presence of justice and his own finite apprehension of it.

How, then, does one put into writing the shape of justice? In other words, how can it be possible to bring into being, by means of writing, the kind of soul to whom justice is itself present, and no mere phantom of it?

Well, what is Plato's doctrine in the *Republic*?

There is no such thing.

What, in this work, tells us what justice is?

Nothing.

Does this work have any serious point to it at all? Or is it just "play"?

There is nothing in it to tell us.

So we are thrown onto our own devices. *Does* justice consist of everyone in the city minding their own business? That's what Socrates says it is, at one point (433b). (Plato, of course, says nothing on the matter.) But we cannot take anything said by this imitative poet at face value. Then what is it? And with this we take the first step: the *question* comes to exist in our thinking—the question that comes directly from our not being able just to believe anything this poet says as it stands. Then: what do we learn of justice from an "ideal city" whose first deed is a brazen act of aggression and robbery (373d)? And what are we to think of an account of education—"gymnastics for bodies and music for the soul" (376d)—that *reverses* that order, devoting a very long discussion to music, and finally bringing in "gymnastics for bodies" only as an afterthought? Or an account of "speeches" that begins with "the false" (377a)—stories told to the very young—that ends up prohibiting the telling of lies (of what is false), except by

the rulers, and then only “as a form of remedy” (389b)? A remedy for what illness?²⁴ How are such falsehoods to be brought together with the very first description of justice in the work: *speaking the truth* and giving back what one owes (331d)? Once we get beyond the supine notion that Socrates intends to be giving us or anyone advice about how to construct a city, we find that every detail of the account that he actually does give raises a host of questions for us—questions from which, the more deeply and seriously we pursue them, the more we learn about the city, the soul, justice, philosophy and no end of other things. The only thing standing in the way of such questioning, such learning, is the assumption that we have the answer because Socrates (or Plato) has given it to us. *There are no answers to be found in this work.* Instead this work opens into the limitless field of *questioning* that is the only locus in which justice itself will be found.

This, then, is the work that this poet would alone consider a fitting, praiseworthy memorial. Nowhere does he tell us what justice, or anything else, is. If we take him as doing so, then we destroy his work. Nor does he show us in “deed” what it is. He could not. For his work is one that takes place, if at all, only in *the soul*. Only the soul which is at once both poetic and philosophic is at all capable of apprehending what this poet is about. If his poem has any part in bringing into being that condition within the soul, then his work will have been achieved. If it does not, then it is mere, contemptible imitation.

In the end the critique of imitative poetry in the *Republic* is not a critique of the work of the poet at all. It is, instead, a devastating rebuke directed against the sort of non-poetic, non-philosophic *reading* that allows this poet’s work to remain mere imitation.

NOTES

An earlier version of this essay was presented at Washington and Jefferson College’s Philosophy Club in January, 1980. I am grateful for a

host of criticisms since that time that have helped me sharpen my thinking and presentation—especially those of a demanding anonymous reader who prevented its publication until it was at least somewhat more ready for it.

1. Plato, *Republic* 10, 607b–c. My translation throughout this essay will be that of Allan Bloom (New York 1968).

2. Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford 1981), 101, differs from most commentators only in her willingness to put in words her irritation with the redundancy of this section: “we are driven by the peculiarities of book X to see it as an excrescence. Plato clearly wanted to add extra material on points that he felt had not been adequately or forcefully enough treated;” and so book 10, since it so clearly does not belong with the rest, ends up being “full of oddities,” not up to the literary or philosophical level of the rest of the work. R. L. Nettleship, *Lectures on the Republic of Plato* (London 1937), 340 ff., suggests that Plato was responding here to critical attacks on what he had said earlier about poetry. Even Bloom, in his commentary, while far more perceptive here than most, says essentially the same thing: this discussion is simply Plato's parting shot against Homer. The one commentator that I know of who does not consider this section a mere accessory appendix is Paul Friedländer in some brief but penetrating comments on it: *Plato I: An Introduction*, Hans Meyerhoff, tr. (New York 1958), 118 ff.

3. As we go on we will be finding reason for being profoundly suspicious of talk about “doctrine” at any point in this work.

4. Here, of course, I am revealing some of the personal history behind this essay.

5. It's not the least bit encouraging to find Socrates, here at the very outset of this discussion, significantly misrepresenting that earlier conclusion. As we'll see in a moment not quite all even of imitative poetry had been “not admitted” into the city before.

6. Adeimantus' phrase (397d), though approvingly repeated soon after by Socrates (398b). But remember: Socrates opens his return to the topic of “poetry” in book 10 by “forgetfully” reminding Glaucon that no imitative poetry—even this “decent” sort—was to be allowed in the city. I see no reason to think, as some do, that the topic is different. Socrates certainly shows no sign that he thinks so.

7. Here Bloom does something that to my knowledge he never does again: he adds a word that isn't found in the Greek text—a word that simply makes explicit what sort of narration this is. Without that word, we don't find out who the speaker is until, as part of the opening scene of the narrative, we hear Polemarchus say “Socrates, I guess you two [he and Glaucon] are hurrying to get away to town.”

8. Some translators, not as faithful to the Greek text as Bloom is, take it upon themselves to leave out some of the “he says”—something about “making for smoother reading.” And then often these same translators, having omitted the bare minimum necessary, by this passage, for keeping narration from being totally imitative drama, will turn around and tell us in their notes about “Plato's dislike of imitation”! See, e.g., G. M. A. Grube, tr., *Plato's Republic* (Indianapolis 1974), iv, 55, 63, etc.

9. Whether tragedy or comedy—perhaps even both—we, in this essay, have no way of knowing. But that question, I am convinced, takes us to the very center of the δῶμα—the deed, thing done—of the *Republic* itself.

10. Within that speech Socrates (i.e., this imitation of Socrates imitating what he said the day before) caps off this description of imitative poetry by treating us to an absurdly convoluted imitation—speaking not as himself but rather as if he were Homer—of what a non-imitative Homer would sound like!

11. 393d. It is disconcerting—even disheartening—to find that this statement, which I think is one of the most crucial ones in all of Plato with respect to how all of his works should be read—is one of those which, in deference to the interests of modern readers, Cornford omits from his translation.

12. What that statement is, in fact, is a real-life instance of the Liar Paradox: Socrates (or if you prefer, Plato), the imitative poet, says that . . .

13. Of course even the carpenter “imitates” in a sense, according to Socrates, patterning his product after the εἶδος, the “form” of bed, made by the god. I would be very interested in hearing anyone’s explanation of how this “*eidos*” is supposed to be more “perfect” or “ideal” or in any way more desirable than an actual bed that you can sleep on.

14. Socrates’ example, as he starts to take aim at his real target, imitative poetry.

15. What he did do, of course, was to found a school that subsequently, and for a very long time, became the most influential one in the Greek and Roman world—a school that, for all its veneration of its founder, never seems to have had much effect, or even much interest, in political reformation. In any case, the upshot of our argument thus far is that nothing in this work can be taken at face value as Plato’s thinking about what the city needs. We here do not know what he thought about that. Which is not to say that he was not concerned about that issue. The more deeply one reads in Plato, the more one becomes aware of the depth of his concern with the fate of the city. But as we continue here, it will eventually become necessary to wonder whether there may not be other, perhaps far profounder, ways to confront that issue than by offering recipes for reformation.

16. Perhaps the recent author who comes closest to Socrates’ own attitude towards this work, once we realize its character as imitative poetry, might, ironically, be Karl Popper in his notorious diatribe against Plato in volume 1 of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.

17. Cf. 606e.

18. Cf. A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (1929; Corrected edition: New York 1976), 39.

19. Cf. Friedländer (note 2), 124: “Plato wages his struggle against Homer as the founder of all imitative art, although Plato himself is praised, in the most significant Greek work of aesthetic criticism . . . , as the ‘most Homeric’ of all authors. And this judgment seems justified; for do not the Platonic dialogues contain a stream of . . . ‘Homeric’ elements, far beyond anything created by earlier forms of mimetic art? Thus this struggle with

mimesis is, after all and primarily, also a struggle of Plato with himself, struggle of the philosopher against the poet. . . . Again and again Plato's written work is mimesis; but it struggles against being nothing but mimesis."

20. E. g., *Republic* 5.476a–d.

21. And if the poet's courage "fails" him when it comes to "Good" (cf. 506d), that is of no consequence: there will be no dearth of fearless commentators ready to step in to explain what he must have had in mind there.

22. Plato, Letter VII, 341c, Glenn R. Morrow, tr.; John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis / Cambridge 1997). If, as some now say, this letter was not written by Plato himself, then it was certainly written by someone with a deep understanding of Plato's way of teaching.

23. Loc. cit.

24. A question that becomes hugely more insistent when, later, rulers are forced to use "drugs"—i.e., "a throng of lies and deceptions," (459d) to deal with what earlier (423e) had been described as the "easy" issues of women, children and procreation. Again, for what illness are such lies the remedy? How is that illness related to what may have compelled rulers to lie at 389b?

