

The Role of *Mīmēsis* in Poetic Education as related to Virtue and Vice¹

It seems impossible to account for the edifying powers² of *mīmēsis* in all forms of art, and in drama in particular, after accepting any doctrine which hinges on the division of experience in the objective and the subjective³, but lacking an articulate account of this nurturing and upbringing would be detrimental to, if not destructive of, any attempt to properly understand human life as political; at the same time, denying such a division of experience may be said to imply some kind of knowledge other than that which we can demonstrate, something that by its very nature could be hard to prove successfully, if not unfeasible.

After discussing Aristotle and Plato, one may come to the conclusion that *mīmēsis*, imitation, is an essential aspect of a political existence⁴. Both philosophers point to the importance of an account of emulation and representation, of recognition and habituation of conduct, the sort of which can inform one's character and display one's disposition towards vice or virtue. Such capacity for imitation is deemed possible by the fact that we are able to perceive an action's sense. They both underline the hefty role poetics so understood play in human societies and consequently of its worth for philosophical concern of the human world (whether it be deemed aesthetical, ethical or political philosophy). The idea behind this is that through the experience of pleasure and pain in contemplating a display of actions, the spectator's soul becomes acquainted with vice and virtue in its many facets, his character is formed little by little, and this is obvious by the perceptible impression made upon us by such works of art. *Mīmēsis*, as the source of emulation and representation, and also as the resulting action of such a perception of someone's actions, is the basis for the discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of poetic education, of the relation between truth and fiction, of praise and blame, and of the reach political regimes can or should have upon its citizens' character formation.

This complex relationship between the true, the good and the beautiful has not been overlooked by traditional studies of these classical thinkers⁵. But even though it may well be evident that the classics discussed

¹ „Die Rolle der Mimesis in der poetischen Erziehung in Bezug auf Tugend und Laster“

² See PLATO, *Laws*, 656c, 816d-17d; *Republic*, 363e-364a, 378c-d, and 401c-e; ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1448a; *Rhetoric*, 1411b 21-1413b 2 (book 3, chapter 11); *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1104b 3-1105b 19 (book 2, chapters 3, 4); *Politics*, 1339a 10-1340b 19 (book 8, chapter 5); XENOPHON, *Memorabilia*, book 3, chapter 10.

³ As inferred from Kant's transcendental philosophy. Consider KANT, *Critique of Judgment* (Henceforth referred to as CJ), §17: “To search a principle of taste which specifies the general criterion of the beautiful through **determinate concepts** [bestimmte Begriffe], is a fruitless endeavor, because that sought is impossible and contradictory in itself. [...] It is not as if taste could be acquired by imitating [nachahmen] someone else's; because taste must be an asset one has for himself. [...] An ideal is the presentation of an individual adequate to an idea, and [...] [the ideal of the beautiful] will merely be an ideal of the imagination [Einbildungskraft] precisely because it doesn't rest on concepts but on a presentation [Darstellung]. [...] Man alone, among all objects in the world, is capable of admitting the ideal of beauty, just as the humanity in his person, as intelligence, admits of the ideal of perfection. [...] The ideal [of the beautiful] consists in the expression of the moral. [...] Pure ideas of Reason and a great strength of imagination belong together in someone who wants not only to judge but even to present the moral ideas as visible corporal manifestations.” All translations are mine unless the contrary is explicitly noted.

⁴ For examples: *Republic*, 401b-d (book 3, chapter 12); *Politics*, 1339a - 1340b (book 8, chapter 5). It shouldn't go without recognition that the question of the relation between poetry (predominantly music) and politics has a long tradition that includes Pythagoras, Damon of Oē, Xenophon, Philodemus of Gadara and Aristides Quintilianus among others. See Enrico FUBINI, *History of Music Aesthetics*, Palgrave, 1991, for an example of its historical documentation.

⁵ Some examples are: KRAUT, “Aristotle's Ethics” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, in which he argues that in his *Politics*, Aristotle conceives an educational system for the best possible regime in which the citizens will learn

the relationship between poetics and the political, *why* did they consider it so important, is not at all so evident for us as it seems to have been for them. As a general rule, we require *at least* an explanation for the fact that Plato and Aristotle devoted such serious consideration to music and the arts among their ethical and political reflections⁶. The cause for this skepticism could be the far reaching implications of the bond between truth, good and beauty in action. Such implications can be understood as follows. Virtue is posited as the true excellence of a human being (i. e., its nature come to full fruition), and as having a *visible* appearance (be it obscure or bright) for which every healthy human being can search with attention and care⁷. This appearance is what is called “the beautifully done.” At the same time, virtue is *invisible* insofar as the actor's own representation of his action in context is a necessary condition for him to have chosen it freely, and as such, is unreachable from an outside perspective. Poetics deals with the art of re-presenting that which is already *in front of* us and *in* us, in such a way that it becomes exalted, emphasized, visible. This is achieved through imagination –the representations set forth by poets are images– and can be done in a especially lucid way through drama, be it comedy or tragedy. The habituation of apparently virtuous acts through emulation (and of evading the apparently shameful, vicious acts), i. e., imitating what is better and in so doing, learning as is connatural to human beings, may bring about the character that informs the virtuous person whenever he chooses what to do, not out of habit anymore, but out of his free choice⁸. Only someone wise would be able to make out the form of virtue and recognize the beautifully done in all its particular ways (that the ancient poets had a reputation of being wise is not gratuitous), but even the ignorant (and maybe the wicked) have the inherent tendency to realize whatever is virtuous⁹.

Perception of good is the basis for the possibility of perception of an action's sense, which as such is

from childhood to use well their leisure, and that this system aims to bring about all virtue, and primarily love of wisdom, as a natural sprout from “imaginative literature and performance attended by music”; DEPEW, “Politics, Music and Contemplation in Aristotle's Ideal State” in *A Companion to Aristotle's Politics*, pp. 346-380; WOERTHER, *Music and the Education of the Soul on Plato and Aristotle*, *The Classical Quarterly*, pp. 89-103; and GRISWOLD, “Plato on Rhetoric and Poetry” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, where Griswold contends that Plato lacked the conceptual precision to separate aesthetics from ethics, so that knowledge of beauty and knowledge of truth were the same to him; to such lengths that he worried about us turning to feel pleasure when tragedy stroke us in life, as a result of the transmutation of feelings brought about by the pleasure we take in representations of sorrow through *mimēsis*.

⁶ For one profound reflection on music's power on the human soul, consider “Thoughts about Music” in Josef PIEPER's *Only the Lover Sings*: “We now realize why and to what extent music plays a role in man's formation and perfection –as contribution or hindrance, and both, once again, *beyond* any conscious efforts toward formation, teaching, or education. We also realize here how indispensable it is to reflect on these very direct forces and influences. Plato and Aristotle, for example, engaged in this reflection, while we ourselves find it difficult to understand why these two great Greek thinkers, in their ethical and even *political* writings, have discussed music with such seriousness and detail.” (Translation of Lothar Krauth from the original *Nur der Liebende singt*).

⁷ Consider Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1015a 3; *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1145a 23; *Politics*, 1253a; *Poetics*, 1458a 19; Plato, *Laws* 829a.

⁸ This could lie behind the remark Socrates offers in book 10 of the *Republic* (619c-d), as he tells the myth of Er, in which one of the souls choosing their next life carelessly makes the worst choice of all available: to live the life of a tyrant who among other horrors would end up eating his own children. As a description of this soul, and as such, as some kind of explanation for its hasty and pitiful choice, Socrates doesn't say that it was the soul of a wicked, vicious or deplorable person, but rather that in its previous life it existed within a regime of martial order (τεταγμένη πολιτεία) whence it “partook in virtue only by habit, without philosophy” (ἔθει ἄνευ φιλοσοφίας ἀρετῆς μετεληφότα). Consider also *Laches*, 188d, 193d-e, in which the eponymous general suggests courage to be some sort of music which “resonates” in actions, and the manner in which Socrates goes along with such an image.

⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1113a 29-b 1, 1143b 13-14, 1144a 11-31.

beautiful to imagine. Therefore, it would be false to reduce the goodness of a virtuous deed to the effective result of a useful calculation, to an individual representation of one's feelings or irrational dispositions, to a historically bound legal complex, to an echo of a biological mechanical response to the environment, or to any such construct that would imply that the perception of good is an epiphaenomenon. This is the assumption which weighs so heavily on many thinkers, especially stemming from Modernity: that the idea of the good is connatural to human action which occurs through the continuous concord of desiring and knowing something true, that is, through the active work of a soul which must be akin to the world in which it lives and in which it operates¹⁰.

There is one idea which presents us with a particularly strong opposition to this conception. If what we can know comes exclusively from that which is given to our faculties of perception as *phaenomena* and, as such, this world we live in is altogether apparent insofar as there is no way for us to know anything as it is in itself (as *substance*, or as *noumena*¹¹), then there is no possible way to know the difference between the apparently virtuous action and the truly virtuous one. Virtue must be one of the *phenomena* and therefore, *always* be apparent virtue. At first the distinction can seem nothing more than an erudites' trifle, but its consequences are in fact very important. If perception of the good in action which informs the character does not indicate the possibility of grasping in some way true virtue, against the apparent good, then true virtue can only be apprehended, shown, an enacted stemming from a purely rational conception. Such a virtue is a construct, not found and learned, but built. In this case, it would follow from a rational law in which the particular, *subjective*, is subordinated to the universal, *objective*. This line of reasoning can be deduced from Kant's critical thought¹². According to his transcendental doctrine, all we can know are representations. The practical realm in which virtue ought to be examined is no exception. It should be noted that this particular approach is not the same road Kant traverses to reach this conclusion, for in this exposition of the problem, we have introduced the thought about *mimēsis* from the classics' discussions. However, the *Critique of Judgment* can attest to its pertinence: the distinction of pleasures corresponding to the agreeable, the beautiful and the good¹³, is in consonance with the idea that virtue could not be beautiful *as such*. From this perspective we have no way to account for perception

¹⁰ See Michael DAVIS, "Introduction" in *The Poetry of Philosophy: On Aristotle's Poetics* (from now on only *The Poetry of Philosophy*), p. xvi: "If all human action seems to aim at some good, and if the existence of instrumental goods points toward a good for the sake of which we choose all the others, and if there is a science of this highest good, and if as Aristotle says this is political science, or *politikē* (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a), then one would expect poetry and politics to be closely linked. They are." Also: *Summa Theologica*, Second Part, question 6, eight articles; question 47, article 15. For the three aspects of beauty see First Part, question 39, article 8: "Species or beauty have similitudes with the property of the Son. For beauty includes three conditions: Firstly, integrity or perfection, since that which is impaired is ugly because of that. Also, due proportion or consonance. And lastly, clarity, whence things that have bright colors are called beautiful."

¹¹ For this see the third chapter of Kant's "The Transcendental Doctrine of the Power of Judgment (Analytic Principles): On the Ground of the Distinction of all Objects in general into *Phaenomena* and *Noumena*" in *Critique of Pure Reason*.

¹² We should not be hasty to dismiss this position. Denying the distinction between the visible effect of someone else's action and the personal experience of choosing to do something would be outrageous. Kant believes that despite the fact that these are different ways to experience action, both the witness and the agent of virtue are perceiving nothing more than *phaenomena*, even if the ones pertaining to the agent are more subtle and combined with subjective judgments. Aristotle and Plato admit of self-knowledge of a kind that Kant deems to be simply impossible to achieve.

¹³ CJ, §5.

of the beautifully done because there are no ways for the Understanding to conceive an orderly systematic exposition of the concept of the beautiful, as there are none for doing so about the highest good (complete moral virtue and happiness¹⁴). The beautiful belongs to another area of human experience altogether. It is the prerogative of reflective Judgment, in which the pleasurable free play of our faculties is put forward without concepts. But the good is practical Reason's domain. The moral principle which governs the highest good comes from a supernatural realm beyond all hope of human knowledge, the anchor of which is freedom. We cannot explain it nor demonstrate it, but we surely experience it as it informs our practical world. This estrangement of the good and the beautiful makes this conclusion manifest: for one to take pleasure in the beautiful, Kant contends, their partaking in it must be disinterested; so for something to be experienced as beautiful the spectator must be untouched by a desire for that beautiful thing to exist. This would obviously be impossible in the case of beautiful actions the emulation of which involves *mímēsis* through imagination and the motivation to act accordingly. Since we understand someone virtuous to experience beauty *in action*, he or she, in any case, should want the beautiful deed to exist. How could anyone act beautifully otherwise! It is not something wholly foreign to this notion when Chesterton acutely notes that “Virtue is not the absence of vices or the avoidance of moral dangers; virtue is a vivid and separate thing, like pain or a particular smell. Mercy does not mean not being cruel or sparing people revenge or punishment; it means a plain and positive thing like the sun, which one has either seen or not see.”¹⁵

The matter gets somewhat more complicated. As Kant argues a little later¹⁶, a beautiful image can come to represent for someone a concept which, with the systematic orderliness of Reason, would be justly named an “ideal of beauty”. This ideal is an individual empiric representation consisting in the appearance of some action or actions which anyone can, on his own, deem good. Here beauty and good would seem to be, if not two aspects of some one thing, at least two things closely related. This relationship notwithstanding, Kant's exposition cannot provide the basis for any moral education through the *mímēsis* of virtue on account of its appearance, nor the emulation of the beautifully done. The reason for this is that **the ideal of beauty is universal insofar as we all partake in the capacity to find within us the moral law which binds all aspects of our practical world together, a finding which occurs individually.** These ideals cannot be transferred, as it were, taught or composed into a law of habit –short of enunciating the fundamental law of pure practical Reason: “Act in such a way that the maxim of your will could at any time be valid just as principle of the decree of a universal law.”¹⁷ This is because they appeal only to the subject for which they appear in an empirical given situation and as a presentation of his pleasurable feelings without concept. Hence can one infer that a moral disposition exhibited by someone who judges perceived actions, does not admit of poetic representation, imitation or exemplar emulation through *mímēsis* (even though there is an exemplar of the idea in the subject's mind). It is definitely not to be learned from exhibitions of beautiful compositions of art in any case: “It is not as if taste could be

¹⁴ “Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason” in *Critique of Practical Reason*, Chapters I and II.

¹⁵ G. K. CHESTERTON, “A Piece of Chalk” in *Tremendous Trifles*.

¹⁶ CJ, §17.

¹⁷ *Critique of Practical Reason*, §7.

acquired by imitating someone else's.”¹⁸ It is rather something everyone has to develop on their own, making use of their own imagination and Reason. The singing choruses of tragedies are public displays of character; the listening to the moral law is an individual exercise. As such, there can be no intelligible objective account of the evidence of the political standing of poetics with which the classic thinkers concerned themselves.

As the possibility of knowledge of what something *is* gets discarded, and validity is recognized only of knowledge about what something appears to be and about the conditions for such an appearance, the distinction between two bearings, or representations, becomes cardinal. One is the world we experience, another the principles that do not depend on the empirical. Such is the basis for the distinction of the objective and subjective as Kant understands it. We can attest this division in at least three senses: 1) subjective are the judgments which are concerned with the subject's mind, while objective are those concerned with objects of nature; 2) subjective are the judgments that depend on a subject's unique frame of mind for them to be such as they are, while objective are those which claim a universal and necessary validity on account of them being true for every possible subject (which happens for most *a priori* based judgments); 3) lastly, judgments can be subjective in that even if they come from *a priori* principles, these are undeterminate (as happens with aesthetical judgments), while they are objective if their *a priori* principles are determinate. In all three senses, knowledge is concerned exclusively with the objective. It could not be any other way, as nothing can be learned from the subjective as such, and even the reflection upon it must make use of an objective representation of the subjective as a concept. If this is well said, then the “learning” that accrues the spectator of a poet's *mimēsis* must not be learning at all, as no such process of gaining knowledge could be possible from a subjective judgment. There cannot be any way to yield the appearance of virtue as the beautifully done in any work of art, either¹⁹. This should be explained away as an illusion leaping forth from the force of pleasurable images upon the mind, falsely giving the impression that a human moral character can be influenced by witnessing human action, when actually every time we make a choice, each us is compelled to find not what “The Wise” deem better for us to emulate, but the moral law within ourselves²⁰.

And yet, if *mimēsis* is the main way through which human beings relate to vice and virtue, and as such, it is indispensable for a thorough understanding of our social life, its relegated position in contemporary thought to the width of aesthetics alone is the consequence of wrongly conceiving experience as something more shallow than what it truly is. Shallow, for it demands that it be divided into objective and subjective only, so that it can reflect all that is possibly known, learned and applied for edification through demonstrable, reliable, defined means. Such an understanding of poetic education would leave no trace of the deep purpose to grasp the whole with which philosophy has always concerned itself, no reckoning of the wealth from lessons learned which escape the weave of speech, and no word of that distinctly human, inexhaustible, source of joy and wonder.

¹⁸ CJ, §17.

¹⁹ Consider SCHILLER, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Twenty-sixth Letter, §§ 10, 11.

²⁰ “According to the new political science, [...] to understand a thing means to understand it in terms of its genesis or its conditions and hence, humanly speaking, to understand the higher in terms of the lower. [...] In particular the new political science cannot admit that the common good is something that is.”, Leo Strauss, “An Epilogue” in *Liberalism Ancient & Modern*, Chicago, p. 207.