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Poetic Imitation: The Argument of *Republic* 10

https://doi.org/10.1515/apeiron-2023-0030
Received June 5, 2022; accepted October 21, 2023; published online November 10, 2023

Abstract: The paper offers a new reading of the argument against poetry in *Republic* 10. I argue that Socrates' corruption charges rely on the tripartite theory of the soul, and that metaphysical doctrines play a role only in the first charge, which demonstrates that the poets are not qualified to teach by reducing tragic poetry to mimetic skill. This accusation clears the way for two corruption charges: the strengthening of appetite, and the softening of spirit (i.e., 'the greatest charge'). The former focuses on the dangerous association between the poets and the largest appetitive class in the city (*hoi polloi*), while the latter focuses on the corruption of the educated elite (*hoi epieikeis*).

Keywords: mimesis; *Republic* 10; poetry; Plato's moral psychology

Republic 10 contains a long, scathing critique of poetry (595a–608b).[1] Not all poets are in the line of fire.[2] Indeed, by the end of his critique, Socrates affirms the possibility of ethically good poetry, which praises 'good men' and 'gods', consistent with his earlier admission of certain poets to the well-governed city of Kallipolis (607a; 395c–e, 398a–b).[3] While their upshot is similar, methodologically the two discussions are different. In *Republic* 2–3 Socrates makes frequent use of examples to illustrate poetic 'errors' with respect to content, style, and even features that a modern reader would consider purely aesthetic, such as rhythm and harmony (399e–400e). Plato's final word on poetry, by contrast, is supported by psychological and metaphysical

1 References are to Slings' *Rempublicam* (2003), and Burnet (1900–7). Translations of the *Republic* are reproduced from Bloom (1968), with frequent modifications.

2 *Pace* Nehamas (1982, 47).

3 A central challenge for readers has been to explain how 'poetry insofar as it is imitative' (*autês hosê mimetikê*, 595a5) can be banned, even though Socrates earlier permitted the use of imitation in musical education. One common solution is to identify the mimetic poet with the 'hypermimetic' imitator who imitates 'everything' without discrimination; see: Tate (1928, 18–19); Belfiore (1984, 126–7); Ferrari (1989, 125); Lear (2014, 249, 251). I will argue that mimetic poets are mere imitators, i.e., poets whose imitations do not serve an educational function because they are guided neither by a sincere intention to educate nor by knowledge.

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doctrines that Socrates had expounded earlier in the dialogue, such as the tripartite theory of soul and the theory of Forms (595a–b, 596a).

Unfortunately, it is not clear how and where Socrates puts these theories to work. By some influential accounts, Plato relies heavily on metaphysical doctrines during the entire discussion. Myles Burnyeat, for instance, maintains that 'the arguments about mimesis in book 10 are guided throughout by the Theory of Forms and will only work with a Platonic philosopher.'[4] However, the Forms are explicitly in play only in the first part of the discussion (595c–602); the part of the discussion that is concerned with psychological corruption does not mention them (602c–606d). Some have taken up the challenge of showing that the first charge appeals to Platonic metaphysics in order to explain the moral corruption in the second part, but I will offer a new reading of Socrates' argument on which the corruption charges against the poets rest on the division of the soul and the city into three parts: appetite, reason, and spirit.[5] The theory of Forms helps Socrates to show that the poets are ignorant, but the subsequent corruption charges are independent.

The main thesis of this paper rests on two observations. First, while the appetitive and spirited parts of the soul are not mentioned by name (*to epithumêtikon*, 439e5; *to thumoeides*, 440e2–3), I show that we have good reasons to think that the first corruption charge (602c–605c) is concerned with the corruption of appetite, while the second, 'greatest' charge (605c–606d) blames the poets for ruining spirit. This is novel; while some invoke the tripartite theory to explain Socrates' argument, they do not distinguish the charges relative to the parts of the soul with which they deal; in fact, most scholars hardly distinguish between the two corruption charges, as they assume that 'the greatest charge' reinforces the first by holding that the poets corrupt even the best listeners.[6] Second, relatedly, I hold that each charge focuses on the kinship between a character type and a social class: the many (*hoi polloi*) identify with irritable characters, while the aristocracy (*hoi epieikeis*) identifies with tragic heroes. Ignored by most scholars, these classist undertones should remind us of the analogy between the parts of the soul and the city. These considerations give rise to a new interpretation of Socrates' corruption charges: according to the first, the poets

4 Burnyeat (1999, 294). Cf. Nehamas (1982, 58–9); Ferrari (1989, 124); Janaway (1995, 108–13). As Jessica Moss notes, these authors 'leave the connection between metaphysics and ethics at the level of suggestion or give unsatisfactory accounts of the connection' (2007, 416 n. 1). While Moss undertakes to establish the connection (see §1), I will argue that the corruption charges against poetry are independent (§§2–3).

5 Some have doubted the applicability of book 4's partition (436–41) to book 10, see: Penner (1971, 111–13); Halliwell (1997, 329–30); Belfiore (1983, 53); Janaway (1995, 144). But this view is no longer widely held; for good discussions, see Lorenz (2006, Ch. 5), Moss (2008), and Ganson (2009).

6 See, selectively, Burnyeat (1999, 319–322), Nehamas (1982, 66–69), Janaway (1995, 150–52), Ferrari (1989, 138), Belfiore (1983, 57–60), Moss (2007, 441–42), Lear (2014, 251), and Kamtekar (2017, 187–190).

promote appetitive desires by presenting demotic characters, whose appetites dominate reason, in a favorable light, while the second and 'greatest' corruption charge accuses the poets of softening the spirited element in the individual and in society by making the best listeners pity tragic heroes whose loftier motives and sentiments, emblematic of the elite, are crushed by misfortune.

The plan is this. Section 1 takes issue with a widespread reading of the metaphysical section and offers an alternative. Socrates aims to show that the poets succeed based on their imitative skill without relying on knowledge. It doesn't follow from his argument that virtue cannot be imitated at all or not compellingly, as some have thought, but only that the epistemic authority poets claim for themselves when they profess to teach the Greeks about serious subjects is unwarranted. Even if poets cannot teach important subjects, someone might argue that their work is harmless. The second part of Socrates' accusation proves that it is harmful. It consists in two corruption charges. The first blames the poets for strengthening something inferior in us, and in so doing destroying that which is by nature superior. Section 2 sides with those who think that the inferior part is appetite, but I offer new reasons for thinking so and a novel explanation of how the corruption works; first, I argue that the poets damage people by favoring characters whose reason is subordinate to appetitive interests; this increases the appeal of unlawful appetites for things that shouldn't be pursued. Second, I argue that the first corruption charge is concerned especially with the demotic element in the city: people who understand and sympathize with appetitive characters. Section 3 interprets 'the greatest charge' against poetry as a unique accusation: the softening of the spirited element in the soul and in society. The elite feels pity towards its own representatives on stage: the grieving heroes. Poets know how to bring this identification about by imitating overt features of the aristocracy that are at once familiar and charming to its members. As a result, the spirited element in the individual and in the city becomes less able to fight alongside reason as it ought to according to the tripartite theory.

1 The Ignorance Charge

1.1 Step One: Painting (595c–598d)

The first step of the ignorance charge largely consists in a meditation on the difference between painting and other manual crafts.[7] Eventually, Socrates will cast traditional poetry as a species of imitation, like painting. Our present aim, however, is to understand what painters do when they imitate, and why their work is inferior

7 Human crafts. Plato also introduces a divine maker (597b4–d7).

to that of other craftsmen—carpenters, for example—since poetry will be devalued along similar lines.

Socrates compares painting to holding a mirror.[8] By holding a mirror one person can make 'all implements,' 'everything that grows naturally from the earth' and 'everything in heaven and in the underworld' (596c1–9). His tone is mocking, and yet the idea that painters, like mirrors, can produce everything isn't entirely a joke. In some sense, the painter too makes a bed (*kaitoi tropôi ge tini*, e10). But Glaucon insists that mirror images, and by analogy paintings, 'appear to be but aren't really' (*phainomena ou mentoi onta ge pou tê alêtheiai*, e4). The contrast he introduces will remain at work throughout the first step. But how should we understand it?

On some influential accounts, the contrast is veridical.[9] The two-dimensional image of a bed, it is argued, misrepresents the real dimensions of the original. This reading is attractive because it offers an easy transition from painting to the critique of poetry. If paintings misrepresent the truth and all imitators are like painters, then mimetic poets, too, misrepresent the truth. The emphasis on ethical misrepresentations later in the argument reinforces the impression that the metaphysical section disparages imitators for producing false images.

Most recently, Jessica Moss has argued that 'just as the painter copies what appears to be, but is not, a bed, the poet copies what appear to be, but are not, instances of human excellence: the appearance of excellence, *apparent* excellence.'[10] What makes poetic misrepresentations especially dangerous is that the audience experiences these images of virtue as veridical: 'varied, contradictory characters appear excellent, while true human excellence lies in stability and uniformity of soul. But to be varied and contradictory in character is in reality to be *vicious*.'[11] Moss uses the term 'realistic' to capture this quality of an image's looking 'like what it represents, even though in a deeper sense it misrepresents its subjects.'[12] Listeners are corrupted as they emulate vicious characters, falsely taken as paragons of virtue.[13]

The veridical reading faces a problem. Glaucon seems to think that mirror-images are categorically such as to appear but not really be; that is, the distinction between being and appearing, as he draws it, is unqualified. But mirrors do not

8 Some have argued that the analogy should not be taken at face value (see, e.g., Ferrari 1989, 127). I think that's a mistake. Plato debunks the claim that successful poets are knowledgeable (partly) by comparing them to painters, and he denies that the painters are knowledgeable (partly) by comparing them to mirrors.

9 The name is due to Belfiore (1983, 40). See also: Moss (2007, 421); Ferrari (1989, 129–31).

10 Moss (2007, 430).

11 Moss (2007, 430; cf. 437).

12 Moss (2007, 421).

13 Moss (2007, 442–43); cf. Nehamas (1982, 68–9), Belfiore (1983, 46).

misrepresent every fact. Consider a mirror-image of Glaucon. Some facts about Glaucon are revealed by the mirror: his being pale, for example. Others are distorted: Glaucon appears to have a freckle on his left cheek, when it is in fact on his right. Because mirror-images do not categorically misrepresent what's the case, the veridical reading seems to conflict with the text.[14]

To be fair, proponents of the veridical reading never say that images distort in every respect; their main concern is with ethical misrepresentations. But because they interpret the unreality of images with an eye to poetic corruption, their reading seems forced: Glaucon's objection reads like a spontaneous reaction to the strange proposal that mirrors *really* produce the thing that they reflect. Instead of gleaning the unreality of images from the nature of appearances, we should compare them to real craft products. The carpenter, explains Socrates, produces his bed 'by looking to the Form' (*pros tên idean blepôn*, 596b5). This results in 'something similar to the Form but not it' (*ti toiouton hoion to on, on de ou*, 597a4–5).[15] I suggest that this means that the resulting product has those essential features in virtue of which the implement functions as it should (cf. 601d–e). While the painted bed may share some features with the original, in virtue of which it can represent it, those features do not deliver the function. It is in this respect that imitations are 'thrice removed from the truth' (597e6–8, 599d3–4), after the Form and everything to which it contributes its function-delivering essence, that is, all of its *bona fide* instances.[16] Call this reading *essentialist*, in contrast with the veridical reading: images are 'not really' what they seem to be because they lack those essential features which constitute a genuine instance of the Form.

The essentialist reading will eventually allow us to see that what is at stake in the first charge against the poets is not an inherent distortion of reality by imitative representations, but the danger of confusing imitative skill with knowledge. It is easier, though, to draw the distinction between imitation and knowledge through the

14 Similarly with paintings: a portrait of a bed would inevitably distort some of its structural features, but not necessarily its color, relative position, etc. But the mirror-analogy makes it clearer that the unreality of the image is not veridical.

15 In context, 'the Being' denotes the Form (*to eidos*, a1, *teleôs on*, 597a5–7).

16 The claim that the inferiority of images is due to their ontological status is not new, but other scholars do not explain it like I do. Burnyeat says that the painter's bed is merely apparent (1999, 297–300). But he doesn't give any account of the difference between this and a real bed. Nehamas refers to the actual bed as 'physical' (1982, 55; cf. 62). But the woodenness of the bed (e.g.) doesn't help us see its similarity with the Form. Lear writes that 'a thing's being is stable (deriving as it does from the Forms) but its appearance is liable to change with every shift in perspective' (2014, 250). That is true, but the painter's bed is arguably even more stable than the carpenter's bed, which is worn out over time by use, so this doesn't explain the image's low status as an independent product. On my reading, the essence of the bed is its function-delivering features, ideally encoded in its Form, and wholly absent from the painting.

contrast between the production of implements and paintings of them. The following passage makes this comparison:

> Socrates: Now tell me this about the painter. In your opinion, does he in each case attempt to imitate the thing itself in nature (*en têi phusei*), or the works of the craftsmen?
>
> Glaucon: The works of the craftsmen.
>
> Socrates: Such as they are or such as they appear? (*hoia estin ê hoia phainetai*) For you still have to make this further distinction.
>
> Glaucon: How do you mean?
>
> Socrates: Like this. Does a bed, if you observe it from the side or from the front, or from anywhere else, differ at all from itself? Or does it not differ at all but only appear different (*ê diapherei men ouden, phainetai de alloia*), and similarly with the rest?
>
> Glaucon: The latter is so. It appears different, but is not.
>
> Socrates: Now consider this very point. Toward which is painting directed in each case—toward imitation of the being as it is (*to on hôs echei*) or toward its appearing as it appears (*to phainomenon hôs phainetai*)? Is it imitation of appearance or of truth (*phantasmatos ê alêtheias ousa mimêsis*)?
>
> Glaucon: Of appearance.
>
> Socrates: Therefore imitation is surely far from the truth; and, as it seems, it is due to this that it produces everything—because it seizes a very small part of each thing, and that is an image (*eidôlon*). For example, the painter, we say, will paint for us a shoemaker, a carpenter, and the other craftsmen, although he doesn't understand the arts of any one of them. But, nevertheless, if he is a good painter, by painting a carpenter and displaying him from far off (*porrôthen epideiknus*), he would deceive children and foolish men into thinking that it is truly a carpenter (*hôs alêthôs tektona einai*) (598a1–c4).

The point of the questioning is to identify the aim of painters. What are they trying to imitate? I suggested that imitation should be understood strictly in productive terms. This will change when we get to step two of the ignorance charge. For now, Socrates' first question is not whether painters try to represent the Form or an instance, but which are they trying to replicate: do painters make likenesses of Forms or instances? The former, recall, is the job of real craftsmen. Glaucon responds that painters imitate instances. Similarly, the second question asks whether painters make things that look like instances or that are essentially like them. Socrates' 'further distinction' is needed because in some cases imitation results in something that is essentially similar. Young guardians, for example, are supposed to become essentially like the noble people that they imitate (395c; cf. *Menex* 236e).

Glaucon finds the second question puzzling. The example of the bed helps him see what Socrates means: painters are focused on the way a bed looks from some angle, which they're trying to replicate. Because their job is not to produce a similar functional structure (i.e., an implement) but only a similar appearance, the essence of the bed does not concern them (cf. 601a, *Cra* 423d–424a). Although the text doesn't identify 'the bed as it is' with its functional structure—all we know is that the bed as it is doesn't change with perspective—this reading fits nicely with the overall argument. If so, it is impossible to produce an image of the carpenter's bed *as it is*, for that would not be an image, but another implement. Socrates raises the possibility dialectically, not because it represents an ethical ideal of imitation.[17]

Someone might object that even though the essentialist reading is plausible, the veridical reading is more relevant. But the conclusion that painters seize a very small part of each thing is relevant. The smallness of images isn't physical, of course. Socrates' point is that painters do not need to know much about what they imitate in order to do a good job. What they grasp about the object, and what they subsequently replicate, is not essential to it. That is why they can quickly grasp every object and produce something similar. This is relevant because, if poets are really just imitators, they too can produce everything superficially without relying on any further expertise.

The illusion at the end of the passage fits nicely with the essentialist reading: the painter produces a figure that looks like a carpenter but lacks the relevant essence; by placing it at a distance, he tricks people into thinking that they're watching a real carpenter. Veridical readers worry that the deception, as I describe it, has no analogue in poetry. The audience in a Greek play wasn't so naïve as to believe that a character on stage is really a king, contends Moss.[18] But perhaps poetry involves a similar deception. When Homer delivers a speech 'as if he were himself Chryses … and tries as far as he can to make us feel that not Homer is the speaker, but the priest, an old man' (393a7–b2), it is plausible that some of his listeners believe that they're hearing a historical Chryses, an old priest: first, because Homer sounds like an old priest; second, because he tells readers that the muses who 'know all things' are his sources for the events in Troy;[19] finally, Homer's words can pass as those of an old priest because he is at sufficient historical distance from the events described, just as a painter can pass his painted carpenter as a real one by displaying it from far-off: his listeners, who were not alive, cannot refute him. Sophisticated readers will not make this mistake, but they might think that Homer has the relevant expertise. Step two targets this assumption.

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17 *Pace* Belfiore (1984, 133).

18 Moss (2007, 428–9). Cf. Belfiore (1983, 45), Ferrari (129–31).

19 See e.g., *Il* II 485, and Murray (1981) for discussion.

1.2 Step Two: Homer the Imitator (598d–602b)

Some people think that a 'good poet' must 'have knowledge when he makes his poems, if he is going to make beautiful poems about the thing his poetry concerns'—including 'all the crafts,' everything concerning 'virtue and vice,' and also 'divine things' (598d–e4). Plato doesn't tell us why people think this, but the emphasis on writing fine poems and the topics he lists suggest the following. Poets, so the objection goes, are not concerned with the outward appearance of carpenters and other experts, but imitate their thoughts and actions instead. Arguably, it is not possible to imitate such things well without knowledge. Socrates will show that poets can write beautiful poems, in some sense, without being experts on the topics they write on by proving that Homer, the foremost poet, wasn't knowledgeable.

On the assumption that someone who is able to produce 'both the being and the appearance would be more serious about the being,' Socrates inquires whether Homer has left behind him 'many fair deeds as memorials of himself' (599a7–b8). Focusing on 'the greatest and fairest things of which Homer attempts to speak,' like warfare, government, and education, Socrates performatively asks Homer which cities he has helped (599c6–d6). Glaucon cannot mention any (e5–6). Similarly in warfare, education, and science, Homer did not distinguish himself in his lifetime (600a1–e3). Socrates infers from this that Homer wasn't an expert practitioner, but a mere imitator of these crafts (600e4–601a2).

Nonetheless, Homer has had enormous poetic success. First, most listeners cannot tell whether he says true things or recommends good actions: 'the poet doesn't know, but he imitates in such a way as to seem, to men whose condition is like his own and who observe only speeches, to speak very well' (601a6–7). But Homer's ignorance cannot explain his success. Rather, he excels by aesthetic standards, irrespective of content. Homer knows how to use 'meter, rhythm, and harmony' which are 'by nature, very charming' to lend artificial beauty to things; the problem is that when you strip these poems of their 'musical colors,' they appear like 'the faces of the boys who are youthful but not fair … after the bloom has forsaken them' (601a7–b8; cf. 377b, 382d). The beauty of Homer's poems doesn't emanate from their content, but is due to external factors (cf. *poiein allotrion kallos, Grg* 465b5).

Having distinguished the content of poetry from its aesthetic features, the final part of the ignorance charge sheds light on misrepresentation in art. Socrates revives the model of painter and painted implements: 'a painter,' says Socrates, 'will paint reins and a bit,' 'but a shoemaker and a smith will make them' (601c7–10). He then notes: 'the painter doesn't know how the reins and bit must be' (c11–12). For the first time in the argument Socrates demarcates the scope of the painter's ignorance: he doesn't know how the implement should be. As it turns out, the maker of the

implement doesn't really know this either: 'the smith and the leathercutter,' says Socrates, do not know 'how the reins and bit must be,' but only 'the horseman who uses them' does (c11–13). Producers are epistemically reliant on users in this respect.[20] Socrates illustrates the point with another example:

> Socrates: A flute player surely reports to the flute-maker which one would serve him in playing, and he will prescribe how they must be made, and the other will serve him.
>
> Glaucon: Of course.
>
> Socrates: Doesn't the man who knows report about useful and defective flutes (*peri chrêstôn kai ponêrôn aulôn*), and will not the other, trusting him, make them?
>
> Glaucon: Yes
>
> Socrates: Therefore the maker of the same implement will have correct trust (*pistin orthên*; cf. *doxan orthên*, 602a4) concerning its beauty and its badness from being with the man who knows and from being compelled to listen to the man who knows, while the user will have knowledge (*epistêmên*). (601d10–602a1)

The skilled flutist is the ultimate arbiter of quality of the implement.[21] He knows whether a given flute is good, and the respects in which it can be better or worse. Without information from the flutist, the maker would have no way of knowing whether his flutes are good or how to improve them. By contrast, 'the imitator will neither know nor opine rightly about what he imitates' but 'whatever looks beautiful to the many who don't know anything—that he will imitate' (602a8–b3). On the veridical reading, recall, the very ugliness, or viciousness, of the thing is what ignorant viewers enjoy. But Socrates has just noted the gap between the external beauty of poetry (meter, rhythm, etc.) and the ugliness of its content; the audience arguably finds these aesthetic features pleasing because they are naturally charming; their pleasure isn't countered by dissatisfaction at the level of content, on which they cannot pass judgment. Relatedly, we shouldn't lose sight of the scope of the imitator's ignorance: he doesn't know how things ought to be and whether, and in what respect, they fall short of the standard. These are the things imitators would need to know, or have true belief about, if they were going to instruct people about them. Other facts are available to everyone, including the painter: the general shape of a flute, for example. Anyone can identify a flute by its shape, but few can rank flutes based on their quality and explain why each of them is good or not. Most of the audience share in this ignorance.

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20 Not so with respect to their own proper know-how, which is productive.

21 See Halliwell (1993, 130).

Suppose the painter was also a skilled player; would that make a difference? It would, not because such a person imitates flutes or flutists 'as they are,'—this, recall, is impossible according to the essentialist reading. Rather, an imitator who is also an expert can produce self-consistent images, in accordance with his intention.[22] Suppose he wants to produce the image of a good flutist. He would make sure that the posture, position, and gestures of the musician and the dimensions and proportion of his instrument are all correct, for example. An ignorant painter would not be able to do this except by luck. His flutist would commit mistakes that a real virtuoso would not.

Similarly, a poet who imitates a general, for example, without being himself a general, wouldn't know whether the action he portrays would be effective in real life and why. The poet can imitate military jargon, people, and situations, but he approaches these matters stochastically (cf. *ou gnousa … alla stochasamenê*, *Grg* 464c3–6). Suppose a poet wants to imitate a good general. His fictional general would do or say what seems right to the poet, given the situation. However, since the poet is not himself a general, then unless he consults others, which Socrates denies, he is guessing. In general, he is ill-equipped to produce self-consistent poems, in which good generals are duly praised for their action, bad kings blamed for their misdeeds, and so on. By contrast, in Kallipolis, poets would willingly consult philosopher-rulers to ensure that their imitations are done rightly, just as flute makers consult users (398a–b). Thus morally good poets abide by the standard of truth by submitting their imitations to expert inspection, and this, in turn, means that their work can be used for educational purposes.

Socrates concludes that the poets know nothing 'worth mentioning.' Imitative poetry 'isn't serious, but a kind of play' (602b5–10). The upshot is not, as veridical readers have thought, that poets, insofar as they are imitators, necessarily misrepresent things, but that they are likely to when they write on topics without having the relevant expertise. Adopting the essentialist reading allows us to see the poets' imitative skill as an independent capacity to produce images of things in words without their essential features: an image of a general, for example, as opposed to a real general. This ability is compatible with ignorance or with knowledge of what constitutes a general, about which a real general, i.e., an accomplished commander of armies, knows and is able to teach others. By casting the poets as not 'serious,' Socrates effectively denies that they are qualified to instruct their listeners about important topics, inasmuch as they rely solely on their imitative skill, without being experts or consulting others. From this moment forward, the term 'imitation' carries

22 Books 2–3 feature many poetic inconsistencies, i.e., cases in which the character behaves in a way that doesn't fit the character description (see e.g., 380d–381e, 390d–391c).

the denial of epistemic authority; the poets especially are *mere* imitators, contrary to the conventional wisdom that they are the educators of Greece (606e–607a).[23]

2 First Corruption Charge (602c–605c)

Suppose we've been persuaded that traditional poetry is not real education. Someone could object that, as long as we don't mistake it for real education, it is quite harmless (see *Leg* 667e). Socrates needs to demonstrate that the poets are harmful even if we only listen for pleasure. This is his goal in the second part of the argument. While scholars typically read this phase as one piece, I will show that it consists of two distinct charges, both relying on the tripartite theory, and each targeting a different part of the nonrational soul. It will emerge that this argument does not rely on the theory of Forms, as it would have to if it showed that poetry is harmful because it misrepresents ethical matters. Instead, we will see the ignorance charge become relevant in another way. Poets exploit their imitative skill to reproduce overt behaviors, especially speech, imitating the manners of various characters in the city: the elite, as well as the lower, uneducated classes. This, in turn, attracts different audiences to these characters in ways that are, according to Socrates, harmful to them.

In the remainder of the paper I will attend carefully to the workings of Socrates' two corruption charges against the poets. Although scholars have emphasized that audiences play a role in their own corruption, they do not notice the argument's classist undertones.[24] The two charges focus on audiences from different social classes: *hoi polloi* (605a4) and *hoi epieikeis* (605c6), respectively. Scholars take the two as moral categories; for them, the former group are ethically flawed individuals, while *hoi epieikeis* are decent or reasonable people. But these categories are elitist, denoting two echelons of society: the uneducated many and the ruling class.[25] In this section, I will argue that the first corruption charge accuses the poets of strengthening the appetitive part of the soul and the demotic element in the city. After that, I will turn to the second corruption charge, i.e., 'the greatest accusation,' arguing that poetry weakens spirit in the souls of the educated elite.

23 On Greek poets as educators, see: Jaeger (1965, Ch. 3); Verdenius (1970). This suggests a new way of interpreting the difference between ethical and unethical poetry in Plato's *Republic*: the latter consists in an imitative skill (*mimetikê*) while the former, grounded as it is in knowledge, is also education (*paideia*; *mousikê*, cf. 376e–377a). See fn. 2 for a widespread alternative.

24 See esp. Harte (2010). Cf. Lear (2014, 250–51). Other readers also assume that 'the many' and 'the best' are merely moral categories, rather than ethical as well as political (classist). For selective bibliography, see fn. 6.

25 See Ober (1989, 251–52).

The first corruption charge begins when Socrates asks, 'on what sort of element in the human being does imitation have the power it has?' (602c4–5).[26] To answer this question, he revives once again the analogy between painters and poets, this time with the aim of showing that both associate with an inferior element in us. On some accounts, poets relate to the nonrational part of the soul, appetite alone, or together with spirit, which believes on the basis of appearances.[27] Others have thought that Socrates re-divides the soul along different lines than in book 4, between an uncritical aspect of human reason, and our capacity for reflective judgment.[28] Both camps seek an account of the inferiority of the part to which imitators relate, in poetry as well as painting. By contrast, I suggest that Plato is not interested in theorizing about our nonrational nature. He begins by calling attention to sight's vulnerability to error, and continues to elucidate the vulnerability of appetite by analogy. This paves the way for him to show that poets promote unlawful desires by presenting them in a powerfully alluring light.

Painting has its power relative to sight, which is inferior to reason with respect to its ability to correctly register visible properties: 'The same magnitude surely doesn't look equal to our sight from near and from far' (602c7–8); 'The same things look bent and straight when seen in water and out of it, and also both concave and convex, due to the sight being misled by the colors (*dia tên peri ta chrômata au planên tês opseôs*)' (c10–d1). When this happens, 'measuring, counting, and weighing,' come to our aid, thanks to which 'we are not ruled by a thing's looking bigger or smaller or more or heavier,' but rather 'by that which has calculated, measured, or weighed,' that is, by reason (*to logistikon*, d6–e1; cf. 605b4–5).

Although Socrates does not identify poetry's partner-faculty by name, some scholars have thought that it is appetite.[29] We know from previous discussions that appetite, left to its own devices, has a tendency to proliferate (588c). Here the part with which poets associate is the cause of 'countless factions' (*muriôn toioutôn enantiômatôn*, 603d5–6). Socrates also blames the poets for satisfying this element, which by its very nature craves (*epithumein*) tears, and is hungering (*pepeinêkos*) for a satisfying cry (606a3–7; cf. 605b1–3). If we thought that appetite is concerned only with basic physical needs, then

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26 'πρὸς δὲ δὴ ποῖόν τί ἐστιν τῶν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἔχον τὴν δύναμιν ἣν ἔχει;' Bloom has: '*on which one* of the parts of the human being etc.' Griffith: 'What part of a person etc.' Shorey: 'What element in man etc.' But the question might be qualitative. Cf. 368e–369: 'εἰ οὖν βούλεσθε, πρῶτον ἐν ταῖς πόλεσι ζητήσωμεν ποῖόν τί ἐστιν [i.e., τὸ δίκαιον]' ('if you want, first we'll investigate what justice is like in the cities,' trans. Bloom). This change in emphasis has consequences for our reading because it does not focus our attention on the underlying unity of sight and appetite, but on their inferiority as faculties.

27 Appetite alone, see: Annas (1981, 131); Reeve (1988, 139); Singpurwalla (2011, 293); Burnyeat (1999, 224–25). Or with spirit, see: Lorenz (2006, 70); Moss (2008, 65); Ganson (2009, 190 n. 33).

28 See Murphy (1951, 239–40), Nehamas (1982, 64–66), Burnyeat (1999, 225–227).

29 See fn. 27.

we would be inclined to dismiss this language as metaphorical. However, by the time we read this we've already seen various ways in which appetite expands beyond a narrow concern with nourishment and sex. A notable example is 'profit,' that is, financial gain, which at a certain point appears definitive of appetite (*to philokerdes*, 586d5).[30]

It has been argued that things appear to appetite as good when they are not, just as a stick might appear bent when it is really straight.[31] However, in book 4, Socrates emphasizes that appetite is just for the thing toward which the appetite is directed: e.g., thirst is for a drink, not a good drink (439a1–b1). This suggests that while the objects of appetite are subject to normative evaluation, and by consequence the appetites themselves, the faculty as such is desiderative, rather than cognitive.[32] How are the two cases analogous, then?

The answer depends on the way appetite and sight tend to oppose reason: 'when reason has measured and indicates that some things are bigger or smaller than others, or equal, often contrary appearances are presented at the same time about the same things' (602e4–6).[33] Because we have contrary opinions 'about the same things at the same time,' Socrates attributes these opinions to different parts of us: 'the part which trusts measure and calculation' is the best and 'the part opposed to it is one of the inferior things in us' (602e8–603a7).

Usually, it is thought that the inferior and opposing part is not sight, but a subject that believes sight. However, it is also possible that sight is thought of as both source and subject of affections, just as reason calculates and endorses its own verdicts. Socrates would then be contrasting two cognitive agencies within us, each issuing its own claims independently of the other, sometimes resulting in contrary assertoric content present in the soul.[34] This does not preclude that sight belongs to our

30 Cf. *Timaeus*: 'the appetitive part (*epithumêtikon*) is for food and drink and whatever else this part feels a need for, given the body's nature' (70d7–8).

31 See Moss (2008, 54). See also Singpurwalla (2011, 293), Kamtekar (2017, 188). See Ganson (2009) for critical discussion.

32 Cf. *Timaeus* 77b, where the appetitive element doesn't share in belief and reasoning but only in pleasant and painful sensible affections with desires.

33 Either the person or his reason are subject to contrary impressions. Bloom's translation preserves the ambiguity. Perhaps Plato wasn't bothered by such ambiguities because he implicitly identifies humans with their reason.

34 This means that perceptions have assertoric force, not, as some have argued, that Socrates divides the rational soul into parts (see fn. 28). Ganson (2009) also argues that the perceptions in this section have assertoric force, but he ascribes these beliefs to spirit and appetite as the nonrational elements in the soul (186, 190 n. 33). On his reading, the nonrational soul, appetite with spirit, is '*the source* and subject of sense-perceptions with an assertoric character' (191, my emphasis). Clearly, *sight* is the source of assertoric content (521c–526c. cf. *Ti* 64a–c, 45c–d), so the suggestion is at the very least unclear. By contrast, I suggest that sight is the source and subject of assertoric content insofar as it preserves its own assertions in the soul (i.e., affections with assertoric force).

nonrational nature.[35] But the argument does not require that we make this connection, if Socrates is calling attention to sight's inferiority. On my preferred reading, sight itself stands in opposition to reason as a source and subject of incorrigible erroneous affections.[36]

But how does sight's tendency to deliver erroneous perceptions elucidate appetite's conflict with reason, and how does poetry make matters worse? The poet 'imitates human beings performing forced or voluntary actions, and, as a result of the action, supposing themselves to have done well or badly, and in all of this experiencing pain or enjoyment' (603c5–8). A person is not always 'of one mind' with respect to what they want to do, but rather, 'just as with respect to sight there was faction and he had contrary opinions in himself at the same time about the same things,' so also 'in practical affairs' (*en tais praxesi*), we sometimes want to-φ and also want not-to-φ, and do as reason commands (c11–d3; cf. 'embracing' and 'thrusting away,' 437b1–d5). Socrates illustrates this conflict with the example of the bereaved father. He describes an upright man[37] who has suffered 'a stroke of fortune as the loss of a son or something else which he cares particularly about' (603e4). This man exhibits contrary attitudes to grieving. When others are watching him, he does his best to avoid weeping; however, when he is alone he is inclined to let go (604a1–8). The superior party 'wants to cure and set right what has fallen and is sick' by reasoning (*tôi logismôi*) and deliberation (*bouleuesthai*) (604c5–d5; cf. 439c–d). 'Whereas the part that leads to recollections of the suffering and to complaints and

35 According to the *Timaeus*, appetitive desires and perception are necessary constituents of the mortal soul (42a–d, 69c–d). On that basis, we might speculate that appetite and sight belong to our distinctively mortal nature whose faculties, both cognitive and desiderative, are different from reason and tend to oppose it. Cf. Moss (2008, 47 n. 24). On her reading of 69c–d, the mortal soul is a union of spirt and appetite fused with perception and desire. But the special emphasis on perception (*aisthêsis*) and desire (*erôs*) in this passage, as well as *Ti* 42a–b, could suggest that the nonrational, mortal soul is essentially a desirous perceiver (or a sentient desirer), subject to appetitive and spirited affections. Or Timaeus might be thinking of the mortal soul as a bundle of powers needed to maintain the animal. The text is open to different interpretations.

36 On the incorrigibility of sense-perception, see Gerson (2009, 56). At *Resp* 605 Socrates says that the imitative poet gratifies the part of the soul 'that doesn't distinguish big from little, but believes the same things are at one time big and at another little' (b7–c1). For most readers, this proves that poetry and painting relate to the same, nonrational part. However, a moment earlier it was said that the poets relate to the part which attaches great significance to things which are not really important (see: 604b–3, cf. 605b–c). Arguably, Socrates is sliding into an identity claim for rhetorical effect (cf. Burnyeat 1999, 225). Plato's point, as I read it, is that appetitive pleasures and pain give rise to strong, incorrigible desires to do or have worthless things; badly wanting to do something worthless often gives rise to false opinions, which is perhaps what Socrates is gesturing at, but it doesn't consist in holding a false moral belief (see fn. 42).

37 'Upright' is not a standard translation of *epieikês* ('decent' or 'reasonable' are). I use it in order to bring out the elitist resonances of the term.

can't get enough of them … is irrational, idle, and a friend of cowardice' (604d7–9). On the proposed interpretation, these compliments go to appetite, which is able to cause even a good man to feel torn between two opposing desires.

Notice that the narrative presupposes a high level of cohesion between social norms and reason. This is clear from the pairing of 'reason and the law' (*logos kai nomos*) who speak in one voice, telling our man 'to hold out,' whereas 'the suffering itself (*auto to pathos*) draws him towards grief' (604a9–10). In addition, the person feels ashamed before his friends, which suggests that the agreement between reason and the law isn't merely formal, but is actually enforced by society and internalized psychologically by its members. This harmony shouldn't be taken for granted. As we know from books 8–9, social norms are not always lawful or reasonable (see 563d3–e1). In terms of Plato's psychological apparatus, our man can be described as someone whose spirit properly functions as an 'ally of reason' (*summachon tôi logoi*, 440b3).[38] We should keep this in mind as we approach the greatest charge against poetry: it will turn out that spirit can be co-opted by appetite and that the poets play a pivotal role in bringing about this unnatural alliance.

This is not yet an example of poetic corruption. While the bereaved father anticipates the second corruption charge, both in theme and in audience, in context it illustrates appetite's innate tendency to oppose reason and the law even in good people. We raised a puzzle concerning the analogy between sight and appetite, which we can now solve. Both appetite and sight oppose reason, but in different spheres: appetite leads us astray in practical affairs just as sight tends to confound us about shapes and magnitudes. We get the following analogy: sight opposes measurement (roughly, reason in mathematical deployment) as appetite opposes wise deliberation (roughly, reason in practical deployment). In each case, the opposition to reason is due to the inferior nature of the faculty. Sight often gives rise to erroneous perceptions, and some appetites are for bad things.

Furthermore, both affections are incorrigible: erroneous perceptions remain even after reason overrules them; similarly, some appetites remain even after reason has resolved that they should not be pursued. In *Republic* 9, Socrates introduces the category of unlawful desires, i.e., unnecessary appetites that are contrary to what reason and the law bid us to do.[39] Socrates seriously entertains the possibility that even the best of us experience them, but in smaller number and less intensely (571b). As the example of the bereaved father shows, the desire to dwell on

38 As the Greek suggests, the spirited part of the soul fights alongside reason against the appetitive part of the soul (see: 440a8–d6). Observe, moreover, the spirited voice of reason: 'the finest thing' (*kalliston*) is 'to keep as quiet as possible in misfortunes and not be irritated' (604b7–8).

39 See 571b–c. Socrates continues to describe extreme cases of unlawful desires in his presentation of tyranny, but the category is clearly broader, as is obvious from the fact that even good people might have them.

one's suffering is probably inevitable; even a good man does not relinquish it entirely (603e8–10).[40] At the same time, it should not be indulged. This is like the incorrigibility of sight's deliverances which remain with us even after reason has discredited them: we cannot get rid of erroneous perceptions, but we should ignore them, and let reason guide our thinking on measurable properties.[41] Similarly, whenever unlawful cravings emerge, we shouldn't satisfy them, but follow reason instead.

Finally, we are ready to extend the analogy to illuminate the first corruption charge. After he observes that sight doesn't reliably tell us how things stand, Socrates disparages the use of 'shadow painting and puppeteering and many other tricks of this kind, which fall nothing short of wizardry' (602d2–4). Painters take advantage (*epithemenê*, 602d3) of sight's incorrigible affections (*hemôn tôi pathêmati tês phuseôs*, d2; cf. *dia tên … planên tês opseôs*, c11–d1) by the use of these and similar techniques; thus they produce and hold our attention on misleading perceptions (602d6–9). Socrates will show that poets likewise tend to increase and intensify unlawful appetites that should be minimized and weakened, since reason and the law forbid their satisfaction. They make it more difficult for the audience to deny themselves the pleasures they crave.[42]

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40 Socrates doesn't explain why that is so, but we might draw insight from the creation of mortal beings in the *Timaeus*. Mortal beings are subject to gains and losses due to their bodily nature, because of which the demiurge directs the younger gods to give them perception, desire, pain and pleasure, etc. (42a–d). These items are arguably necessary for a creature who is going to have to recover losses through its own efforts. Ganson offers the following model, based on *Philebus* 35: 'a depletion of the body gives rise to a perception of this unpleasant affection of the body. This perception in turn gives rise to a memory of the opposite affection, the filling that restores the natural condition of the body. The appetite we call thirst [e.g.] is a desire for this pleasant filling' (2009, 189). While this explains what psychical appetites aim at, it leaves mysterious the pleasure of grieving and similar appetitive cravings which restore nothing and are not purely physical. Perhaps the bereaved father substitutes the memory of his son, on which he dwells, for real restoration, which cannot be attained (cf. Freud 1917); but the restoration is inadequate, thus excessive grieving leads to further longing and pain. In these and in other ways humans are likely to develop appetitive cravings for things that are bad for them.

41 As most of us learn to do from a young age, see *Resp* 522c–e.

42 It has been argued that the pleasures of poetry make things seem good when they are in fact bad, and as a result we pursue the wrong objects. See, e.g., Moss (2007 442–43; cf. 2008, 54), Belfiore (1983, 46), Singpurwalla (2011, 293), Kamtekar (2017, 188). By contrast, I propose that the poets increase preexisting desires by presenting their objects in an attractive way, rather than by instilling or reinforcing false moral beliefs. Others have emphasized the non-cognitive aspect of poetic corruption. According to Myles Burnyeat, Socrates fears 'the long-term, unnoticed effect of the pleasure we take in mimesis of actions we would not, and should not, want to do ourselves' (1999, 319). Cf. Lear (2014, 251–52). On this reading, poets corrupt us by inculcating bad habits, which listeners learn to enjoy, similarly to the cognitive reading. I suggest that the damage is even more direct: poets make us want things that are bad for us more strongly than we did before. This is not a matter of developing a new taste for harmful actions or bad behavior more generally.

As imitators of human action, the poets face a moral choice.[43] This aspect of Socrates' critique has received relatively little attention in the literature, which focuses much more on ignorance.[44] But it is important. The poets could, if they wanted to, use their poetic gift to support the rational element.[45] One of Plato's favorite lines exemplifies this: 'Smiting his breast he reproached his heart with word. Endure, heart; you have endured worse before' (390d4–5; *Od* XX. 17–18). Odysseus does not merely behave as he should, but the effective use of poetic techniques also casts reason's struggle for goodness in a beautiful light. In general, beneficial poetry involves not only veridical claims, but presents the good life in an appealing light through poetic skill. Unfortunately, this line is an outlier. By and large, poets use their poetic charms to advance appetitive causes, for the following reason:

> 'The irritable part affords much and varied imitation, while the wise and quiet character (*to de phronimon te kai hesuchion êthos*), which is always nearly equal to itself, is neither easily imitated nor, when imitated, easily understood, especially by a festive assembly where all sorts of human beings are gathered in a theater. For the imitation is of an experience that is surely alien to them (*allotriou pathous*)' (604e1–6).

Corrupt spirit is associated with excessive anger, so some commentators have thought that 'the irritable part' (*to aganaktêtikon*) refers to a 'degenerate variety' of *to thumoeides*, that is spirited emotions.[46] But the irritable disposition in our passage seems different. The verb *aganakteô*, from which Socrates derives the name *to aganaktêtikon*, connotes irritability due to physical discomfort, e.g., being cold. Plato doesn't use it in the discussion of spirited anger (see 411b1–c2). He does, however, deploy it metaphorically to describe states that are associated with appetitive desires, most strikingly in the *Phaedrus,* where it describes the pangs of erotic passion (251c1, c3). Arguably, 'the irritable part' denotes a degenerate variety of appetites. Because 'the irritable part' is contrasted with the disposition (*êthos*) of someone 'wise and quiet,' it is clear that the conversation has shifted from reflection on opposing forces within a single individual, to contrasting ethical dispositions: wise people

43 Cf. Aristotle's distinction between the dialectician and the sophist. What sets them apart is 'not the power (*dunamis*) but the moral purpose (*prohairesis*)' (*Rh* I 1.1355b17–18). Similarly, I suggest, *mousikê* and *mimetikê* differ not only by the truthfulness of their imitations, but also by their moral purpose. Arguably moral intention is even more important than knowledge since poets can be supervised by philosophers (379a1–4, 398a8–b4, 401c3–d2).

44 Janaway distinguishes morally good poets from bad ones based on their ethical orientation, but the point is underdeveloped (1995, 100, 161).

45 Plato characterizes poetic talent as a natural gift in *Resp* 401: 'ζητητέον τοὺς δημιουργοὺς τοὺς εὐφυῶς δυναμένους ἰχνεύειν τὴν τοῦ καλοῦ τε καὶ εὐσχήμονος φύσιν' (c3–6).

46 See: Adam (1902). Cf. Murray (1996, 219–20).

whose reason-opposing, unlawful appetites 'are few and weak' (571b3–c1; cf. 431c5–7) on the one hand, and people whose appetites irritate them, on the other.

Some scholars single out the monotonous character of the good person as the reason to imitate their opposite: the wise person is relatively unaffected by circumstances, which also makes them boring to watch.[47] While attractive, this interpretation doesn't explain the difficulty of imitating wise characters, but only why they are unpopular. The key lies in the claim that the experience (*pathos*) of the wise is alien. Arguably, most poets cannot imitate such people because they do not know what goes on in the life of such a person; accordingly, they cannot anticipate what someone wise would think or feel or say or do in different situations as they would have to if they were going to imitate them well.[48] Notice that the knowledge that is denied here is experiential, not scientific; most people are neither wise nor have lived among wise people and for that reason, arguably, it is difficult for poets to give proper voice to such lives.[49] Most of their listeners, of course, are in the same situation, which means that they wouldn't be able to identify with or perhaps even recognize authentic representations of such people if they were to appear on stage. Thus the unfamiliarity of the life of the wise explains both why it's hard to make such art and why a poet who could, would not be popular. Instead, they portray appetitive characters in a sympathetic light.

It is worth asking what poetry that overcomes this difficulty might look like. Alcibiades' speech in the *Symposium* is perhaps instructive. There, the notorious politician tells us about Socrates' profound quietness and wisdom, as he experienced it first hand, through story and image. Here are the highlights:

> 'I say he is most similar to the Silenus-figures that sit in the statuaries' shops; those, I mean, which our craftsmen make with pipes or flutes in their hands: when their two halves are pulled open, they are found to contain images of gods …' (215a6–b3).

> 'Whether anyone else has caught him in a serious moment and opened him, and seen the images inside, I know not; but I saw them one day, and thought them so divine and golden, so completely beautiful and wondrous, that I simply had to do as Socrates bade me' (216e5–217a2).

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47 See esp. Moss (2007), who compares the stability of virtuous people to the Form of virtue from which they derive their character, and, by contrast, vicious people to the contradictory appearances of seemingly virtuous people (420–430). Cf. Lear (2014, 251).

48 Not because appearances of virtue are necessarily distorted, *contra* Nehamas (1982, 68) and Moss (2007, 441).

49 Ferrari argues that the poets 'convey the feel of human behaviour, without being possessed of the understanding from which such behaviour would arise in life' (1989, 129). But surely poets understand the motives of people like them. It is more accurate to say, as I do, that most poets do not understand the experience of someone wise and good.

> 'I resolved to charge full tilt at the man, and not to throw up the contest once I had entered upon it: I felt I must clear up the situation. Accordingly I invited him to dine with me …' (217c4–7).
>
> 'I got up, and without suffering the man to say a word more I wrapped my own coat about him—it was winter-time; drew myself under his cloak, so; wound my arms about this truly spiritual and miraculous creature; and lay thus all the night long …' (219b4–c2).
>
> 'Imagine what a state of mind I was in, feeling myself affronted, yet marveling at the sobriety and integrity of his nature: for I had lighted on a man such as I never would have dreamt of meeting …' (219d3–6).[50]

A tragic poet would undoubtably cast Socrates in the role of a lover overcome with passion for the handsome youth, but in Plato's version Alcibiades is the frustrated suitor who falls in love with Socrates' indomitable reason. Thus Plato uses Alcibiades' intensely erotic character to cast the life of reason, rather than appetite, in an attractive light.[51]

Other poets harness their talent to promote an appetitive agenda. We've heard in passing of tragedians who 'sing the praises of tyranny' (568b8; cf. 607a3–4). Socrates arguably has specific poets and tyrants in mind.[52] But the deeper issue, as we now understand, is that their work reinforces the tendency of appetite to oppose reason, even to dominate it. This, according to book 9, is tyranny in a psychological sense; the audience becomes more tyrannical themselves, more dominated by their unlawful appetites.[53] The impulse was already there from the outset, otherwise the audience would not understand these characters or care about them. But the poets make their appetitive desires more pressing and their objects powerfully alluring, thereby strengthening the appetitive element in their souls, and in society as a whole (605b).

While Alcibiades represents the rule of appetite in a member of the elite, which according to book six poses unique dangers for its intensity, coupled with political influence (491b–e), Socrates regards this as unnatural—a symptom of a sick culture rather than something that is proper to the ruling class. According to book 4, appetitive inclinations are the hallmark of the largest uneducated political class, which is analogized to the appetitive element in individuals (430c–431d). The appetitive character of this class was already anticipated in book 3's discussion of imitation. And it is in this discussion, I think, that we should look for examples of irritable characters, not in the grieving hero, who doesn't appear until the final ('greatest') charge.

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50 Translated by Lamb (1925) (slightly modified).

51 An upright person would agree to imitate someone bad doing something useful (396d5–6). Alcibiades' speech arguably exemplifies this.

52 At 568b3 he quotes from Euripides' *Trojan Women* and possibly references the latter's relationship with Archelaus (see 568b5–8, and Arruzza 2018, 108).

53 See: 574d1–575a7. This is the standard interpretation of the essence of tyranny according to *Republic* 9. For discussion and literature, see Arruzza (2018, Ch. 4). For an alternative reading, see Johnstone (2015).

Among the characters Socrates mentions in *Republic* 3, we find (1) women in grief, amorous, or even in labor, abusing their husbands, striving with gods or boasting about their alleged happiness (395d5–e2); (2) slaves doing what slaves do (e4); (3) inferior men insulting and making fun of each other with shameful language and 'in other ways sinning against themselves and others in word and deed after the fashion of such men' (395e6–396a2); (4) mad people (a3–4); (5) manual laborers, e.g., smiths, rowers, etc. (a8–b1). In context, these characters are contrasted with guardians who are not permitted to imitate them even in play. The common thing to all of them, which is relevant to us, is that they are not ruled by reason, but rather they act with a view to the appetitive element in them. This doesn't mean necessarily that their appetites are excessive. It could also mean that their rational principle is underdeveloped or lacking, resulting in undignified language and behavior, partly influenced, arguably, by frustrated appetitive desires (590c–d, 395c). This might be the case with the working classes and slaves whose use of reason is largely directed towards meeting their physical needs, on the one hand, and on the other hand, they lack political power and resources to indulge their appetites.

My reading sheds light on the distinctively demotic flavor of the first corruption charge. The imitator of irritable people gratifies *hoi polloi* (605a4), a 'nondescript mob' (*pantodapois anthrôpois*, 604e5; cf. *aganaktêtikon te kai poikilon*, 605a5). In a clear allusion to the city-soul analogy, Socrates compares poets who intensify unlawful desires to people who turn the city over to inferior men (*mochthêrous*, 605b5).

It is tempting to infer from all this that Plato saw all or most poetry as, in the words of R. L. Nettleship, 'indiscriminate catering for common excitement'. However, the main defendants in Socrates' 'trial,' i.e., Homer and the tragedians, speak to and on behalf of the educated elite.[54] Socrates in particular confesses his love of Homer (595b9–c4, 607c8–d2, 607e4–608b2); he would not, if he thought Homer's poems were merely vulgar excitement.

And they're not. Although Homer and the tragedians certainly know how to 'work' a large audience, their main characters and themes are different from those listed. Friedrich Nietzsche put the point nicely when he said that the Greeks, specifically the Athenians, liked to hear people speak well: 'nothing distinguishes them so thoroughly from non-Greeks as does this truly greedy craving. Even of passion on the stage they demanded that it should speak well, and they endured the unnaturalness of dramatic verse with rapture.'[55] As Nietzsche saw it, the lofty style of Greek tragedy sufficiently refutes Aristotle's claim that it serves primarily an emotional purpose. Two things can be true, however. The Athenians may have gone to the theater in order to pity someone who speaks well. In fact, that's just what Socrates says in his final and 'greatest' accusation against poetry.

54 See: Urmson (1982, 132); Nettleship (1901, 353).

55 Nietzsche (1887, II. 80; trans. by Kaufmann).

3 Second Corruption Charge (605c–606d)

The final and 'greatest' (*to megiston*, 605c5) charge against poetry is concerned with the corruption of 'the best listeners' (*hoi beltistoi*, c9; *tous epieikeis*, c6). Socrates develops it by focusing on a typical tragic situation, comprised of a grieving hero and a listener who pities him (605c10–d2, 606b2–3). While readers normally assume the degenerative process is the same as in the previous charge, I will argue that the mechanism of corruption here is tailored to the elite. It involves not only the strengthening of appetite, but also, crucially, a calculated softening of the spirited part of the soul.

We know from the previous discussion that upright men are restrained both by reason and by feelings of shame.[56] The best listeners are upright men, who, 'in their own misfortunes,' forcibly restrain the part that's 'hungry for tears and sufficient lament and satisfaction' (606a3–5). This ability, moreover, is a source of pride (605d7–e1). However, in the theater, this very restraint becomes a weapon that is wielded against them.

The best listeners want to see people like them, or better, who suffer in ways that are sufficiently similar to what they undergo in their own lives.[57] The grieving hero gives them an opportunity to identify with the opposite side of a typical psychic conflict than they normally would: instead of deliberating, they weep.[58] Socrates puts the point concisely. The upright listener, he explains, thinks that 'it is no shame to [reason] to praise and pity another who, claiming to be a good man (*anêr agathos*), abandons himself to excess in his grief, but thinks this pleasure is so much clear gain (*kerdainein*), and would not consent to forfeit it by disdaining the poem altogether' (606b1–5). By 'clear gain' he presumably means that the pleasure carries no consequences: the listener believes he can enjoy the play without shame, and that he is not neglecting to seek a cure by doing so. Because in their view the pleasure is harmless, 'what is by nature best' in them, i.e., reason, 'since it hasn't been adequately educated by discourse and habit (*logôi oude ethei*), relaxes its guard (*aniêsin tên phulakên*) over this mournful part' (606a7–b1).

Socrates disagrees: 'what we enjoy in others'—fictional characters not excluded — 'inevitably reacts upon ourselves' (606b5–7; see 395c7–8). In the case of tragedy,

56 He uses the same term, *epieikês*, to describe the bereaved father and the best listeners. As I said, the description has classist connotations which are obscured by standard translations.

57 Cf. *Poet* 15.1454b9.

58 For epic/tragic heroes as representatives of elite sentiments and values, see Jaeger (1965, Ch. 1). Other scholars read the example of the tragic hero with the first corruption charge as a prime instance of an irritable character; see e.g., Moss (2007, 435), Lear (2014, 251). But I argued that irritable characters are appetitive and demotic. Socrates introduces the hero in the greatest charge because he thinks this tragic type is a bad influence on the aristocracy in particular (see below).

specifically, 'when pity is nourished and strengthened there [in the theater], it is not easy to restrain it in our own sufferings' (606b7–8). Although Socrates doesn't explicitly mention the tripartite theory, he relies on it. 'The best part' was already identified as reason (*to logistikon*, 602e1, cf. 572a1). And reason, as we know from previous discussions, is assisted by spirit (440b3, 440e4–6, 441a2–3). In its function as reason's 'ally,' spirit causes a person to feel shame and other spirited emotions, such as anger, in relation to things of which reason disapproves, and to delight in things which reason considers beautiful and good (439e2–441a3, 441e3–442b3).[59]

In the good case, that is in fact what spirit does. But spirit has its own vulnerabilities. A harsh spirit can raise faction against reason by engaging in excessive anger (441b4–c2). Socrates prescribes a moderate amount of the right type of music to deal with this problem (412a4–7), while warning us not to consume too much music:

> 'When a man abandons himself to charming music (*mousikêi parechêi kataulein*) … whatever spiritedness (*ti thumoeides*) he had, he softened like iron and made useful from having been useless and hard. But when he keeps at it without letting up and charms his spirit (*mê aniêi alla kêlêi*), he, as the next step, already begins to melt and liquify spirit until he dissolves it completely … and makes it a feeble warrior' (411a5–b4).

Poetry damages appropriately spirited people in two ways. On the one hand, good listeners increase their appetite for grieving and other appetitive desires; in this respect they are like everyone else. More critically, however, their spirited element becomes weak.[60] Consider again, our anguished hero. The poet makes the best listeners pity him, and this enables them to finally weep. Plato's point is that this attitude is not going to stay in the theater. As a result, they are more likely to feel pity in their own personal affairs, rather than shame, anger, or disgust, to name a few negative spirited emotions. Similarly in any other psychic conflict, whenever spirit needs to enforce the rule of reason, having been 'liquified' by the poets, the person will display a more lenient attitude toward bad conduct. The winner is of course appetite, which receives permission to weep.

Reason itself, as you recall, 'relaxes' its guard in this context, apparently on the grounds that there's nothing shameful about such behavior; we should rather praise the poet who moves us to tears. The reasoning, however, is faulty; it rests on the illusion that our appetites can be satisfied through others without changing us, which Plato takes to be false. The mistake arguably reflects insufficient education (*hate ouch hikanôs pepaideumenon*, 606a7–8). Others have argued that the listeners' insufficient

59 See: Moss (2005); Lear (2006); Singpurwalla (2013); Wilburn (2021, Ch. 2).

60 Cf. Destrée (2011). Destrée interprets the weakening of spirit as a loss of motivation for 'competitive eagerness for moral goodness' through exposure to 'a tragic worldview' (272). Destrée is pointing in the right direction, but he doesn't explain this result in terms of Plato's psychology.

education explains why they find tragedy appealing because it results, on their interpretation, in faulty moral dispositions.[61] But we saw that even the best might not be able to fully eradicate their unlawful desires. I suggest that the inadequacy in the best listeners' education is philosophical: they are unaware of the long-term consequences of poetry. The present argument is supposed to enlighten them.

Besides faulty thinking, tragedy contains elements that put the spirited element at ease when it should alert reason. I have pointed out earlier that the cast of characters from book 3, abusive women, slaves, inferior men, etc., do not appeal to the best listeners, but only those like them; for this reason, the hero comes to the fore, as a representative of elite sentiments and concerns. Indeed, when the problematic bunch first made their appearance, they were explicitly contrasted with gentlemanly characters, people the guardians were encouraged to imitate, so that they may eventually be like them.

These gentlemen were not only seen as morally and intellectually superior, but they were also differentiated by observable marks. A good poet, says Socrates, will imitate 'the style of the upright man' (*tên tou epieikous lexin*). In context, he doesn't mean solely, or even primarily, the content of his speech; indeed, he distinguishes the style (*lexis*) of the good man from the content (*ta legomena*, 398b2; see: 392c7). Instead, he means an overall fine manner of speaking (*eulogia*); in the good case, this fine discourse projects a genuinely good ethical stance, and is accompanied by 'good temper' (*euarmmostia*), 'gracefulness' (*euschêmosynê*), and 'good rhythm' (*euruthmia*) (400d10).

As overt expressions, these characteristics can be mimicked even by people who do not possess the corresponding character and never will. Thus an individual can pass as high-minded and virtuous by affecting aristocratic manners. Similarly, poets are able to draw characters whose overt features are like those of upstanding citizens, whether or not they think or act accordingly. The tragedians are arguably very good at this. We catch glimpses of this unnatural refinement in the behavior of the hero. Where most people would devolve into an unintelligible outpouring of emotion, our hero delivers a long speech (*makran rêsin*, 605d1). There's little doubt that the speech is delivered in the style of a gentleman, even if its content is quite opposed to truly noble thoughts and sentiments.

Furthermore, the hero is 'singing and beating his breast' (*aidontas te kai koptoumenous*, d3). These are gestures of mourning, on the one hand. But in tragedy they often express guilt.[62] As we know from reading Greek plays, the protagonist typically knows he's in a wretched state or that he's done something terrible, and feels deeply

61 See Belfiore (1983, 57), Ferrari (1989, 138), Janaway (1995, 150–52), and Lear (2014, 251).

62 Or shame. At least since Dodds (1951), the attribution of guilt to the Greeks is a contested matter (see: Cairns 1993, 14–46). In the present context, I mean the painful recognition of personal failure; e.g., Achilles feels guilty or ashamed about the death of Patroclus for which he feels responsible (see: Hobbs 2000, 236–37).

guilty or ashamed about it. Excruciating pain brings Heracles to behave in a way that he condemns as womanly: 'Here I am, sobbing and crying away like a girl. No one could say he ever saw great Heracles weeping before' (*Trachiniae* 1071–1073). And Ajax is tormented by shame for his mad action: 'Here's Ajax the brave, the bold hearted man. Who never blanched in fight against furious foes, and now he flaunts his power on poor harmless beasts! / Oh, how they'll laugh! / How I've been brought to shame!' (*Ajax* 363–367).[63] Contrast this with the woman who abuses her husband, for example; such a character is less likely to beat her chest with remorse.[64]

The tragedians thus infuse their work with a superior ethos. While some of these features are genuinely beautiful, such as the physical comportment, demeanor, and language of the aristocracy, and even though in the good case they authentically spring from a beautiful personality, they can also be used as a decoy.[65] When the best listeners notice them, their spirit 'warms up' to the hero.[66] By the time his inevitable misfortune comes, the best listeners have already singled him out as a man after their own hearts— 'a good man,' as the poet says, even when his words and actions fall short of this title. It doesn't follow that the hero is a model of vice, as some have argued, only that he falls short of the ideal (as he or she is often the first to admit). What is corrupt in this is the invitation to pity the hero, rather than expecting him to overcome his pain. The long-term effect is excessive tolerance, on account of which spirit cannot serve reason as well as it did before the person became engrossed in tragedy.

4 Conclusions

At the very end of his argument, Socrates mentions comedy.[67] But that is clearly not the focus. His aim throughout is to undermine the loftier presumptions of traditional poetry. He starts by dismissing its claim to knowledge (i.e., the ignorance charge).

63 Translations by Raeburn (2008).

64 In such cases, the poet doesn't try to represent virtue but, if anything, its loss, *pace* Nehamas (1982, 68); Moss (2007, 441). And while these scenes clearly involve moral assumptions, including assumptions about the nature of virtue, they hardly lend themselves to dangerous idealization; on the contrary, the heroes are pitiful in their own eyes and others, as Socrates says (606b3, c5).

65 According to book 3, what we say (*ho logos*) and how we say it (*ho tropos tês lexeôs*) depends on the ethical disposition of our souls (*tês psuchês êthei hepetai*, 400d5–6). Accordingly, good speech (*eulogia*) follows from 'a truly good and beautiful disposition of the character (*to êthos*) and the mind (*dianoian*)' (400e2–3). Other ethically significant features follow this manner of speech (see 400d8–e1).

66 On spirit's welcoming attitude toward 'its own,' see 375b9–376c5 and Wilburn (2021, 38–51).

67 See 606c2–9. The person engages in inappropriate laughter just as reason previously allowed him to weep; in both cases, spirit, as it were, goes on holiday.

Some scholars have taken the upshot of this accusation to be stronger than it is; appearances, including of human excellence, are not inherently deceptive, as veridical readers hold. Rather than taking the unreality of images as false representations of things as they appear, in contrast with what they really are, I argued, in step one, that imitations are non-essential cases of F, i.e., things which appear like genuine instances of the Form but lack the essence. As producers of non-essential things, painters do not need to know what constitutes a bed, in order to produce an image of it, and similarly poets do not have to know medicine or any other craft or domain of knowledge in order to write aesthetically appealing poems about it. Just as painters rely on visual features of objects, so too poets depend on overt features of their models, especially on spoken language: what different kinds of people say and how they say it. This doesn't qualify them to instruct by means of their poetic images, because, as I argued in step two of the ignorance charge, they lack epistemic authority over content of their work, whether their imitated experts, for example, act rightly and why. Since they are not able to determine this, their poems should not be used for educational purposes, unless someone else supervises them, contrary to the conventional wisdom that the poets are the educators of Greece.

Far from edifying people, Socrates argues that poets corrupt them. He levels two corruption charges. Neither depends on the theory of Forms, which, on my reading, has fully served its purpose in the first part of the argument. The crucial doctrine in the second part of the discussion is the partition of the soul into three parts: reason, appetite, and spirit. The first corruption charge blames the poets for strengthening appetite. I have defended a novel way of understanding this claim. Poets increase the number and intensity of unlawful appetites, i.e., desires to have or do things that reason does not permit us to have or do. Because the appetitive element of the many is strong, the poets write characters whose life are similarly appetitive; this way, they gain popularity with the many who understand and sympathize with these characters. I suggested that these appetitive, demotic types receive sympathetic treatment: their concerns seem pressing, and the things they want, attractive. Poets use their skill to magnify these appetitive desires instead of helping us to overcome them, as ethical poets would. Thus the poets are criticized not only for their intellectual shortcomings, but also for their immoral intent.

Socrates refers to his final charge as 'the greatest accusation' against poetry. Other scholars do not adequately distinguish this charge from the first corruption charge. However, I contended that they focus on different parts of the soul, as well as different audiences. The poets not only strengthen unlawful, demotic appetites, they also weaken the spirit of the best listeners. This category is usually understood morally, but I argued that it is classist: the best listeners are the educated elite. Poets corrupt them by imitating an aristocratic style of speech and behavior without being faithful enough to the ethical disposition from which these patterns originally

emanated. The best listeners identify with the hero on stage, whose way of life they recognize as their own; but the poets use this identification for harmful emotional effect: the best audience pities the tragic hero, instead of criticizing him. This has the effect of softening spirit, thereby rendering it a bad ally of reason.[68]

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68 Many thanks to Gabriel Richardson Lear and Agnes Callard for commenting on multiple early versions of this paper, and to the participants of the Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy at the University of Chicago where a previous version of this paper was discussed; to Amy Levine for many helpful conversations and assistance in preparing the final version for publication; and to two anonymous referees for their thoughtful comments and suggestions.

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