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TO DESTROY OR TO REFORM? CONTROVERSIES ON PLATO'S ANTITHEATRICAL ATTITUDE

ABSTRACT

In my manuscript I engage Jonas Barish's claim that Plato engenders an anti-theatrical prejudice, arguing that Plato's critique of poets' creation (tragic and comic) is marked by ambivalence. To emphasize the tensions in Plato's dialogues is not only to problematize the negative judgements against tragic and comic creation, but also to perceive Plato's particular use of theatre in its metaphoric dimension to describe, inter alia, the phenomenon of human existence or ideal legislation. My main hypothesis is that to perceive this complexity, we must take into account the literal and metaphoric dimensions of poetry and theatre. Only then can we capture the genuine theatrical potential of Plato's dialogues: not only critical but also reformative. Moreover, new possibilities emerge when we consider Plato as a playwright, and Socrates as his privileged character. In light of this complexity, we can contest Jonas Barish' declaration of Plato as progenitor of the 'antitheatrical prejudice'.

KEYWORDS

Plato, theatre, comedy, tragedy, metaphor, legislation

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This essay approaches Platonic dialogues as a ‘primal scene’ of discursive encounter between philosophy and the theatre. By the theatre I mean not only the literal and metaphorical dimensions of the stage, but also the theatricality and dramaturgy of a conversation. On the literal level, theatre appears in Plato’s dialogues as a poetic creation (tragic and comic) as well as its scenic performance. Plato’s critical attitude in relation to theatre in its literal dimension is exemplified above all by the allegations against the nature of poetic creation. These allegations are frequently accompanied by a negative assessment of the elements which are closely connected with theatrical writing (in a comedy or a tragedy) and with its public presentations. Exclusive concentration on the Platonic critical argumentation against poetical and theatrical creation leads Jonas Barish to regard Plato as the ofather of the ‘antitheatrical prejudice’. According to Barish, “consideration of the antitheatrical prejudice must begin with Plato, who first articulated it, and to whom its later exponents regularly return in support of their proscriptions and prohibitions.”¹ Barish adds that Plato “provides a philosophical framework for debat over all art, and most of the key terms for a controversy that raged for two millennia after his death and still smoulders today.”² In this perspective, Plato’s anti-theatrical argumentation is based on “certain metaphysical and moral principles.”³ Although Barish is aware that in some dialogues Plato’s decree is clearly alleviated, at the same time he has no doubt that unilateral interpretation of Socrates’s arguments against poetry “would probably be less of an error to take the atipoetic theses if the Republic too literally than to write them off as mere turns of an endless dialectical kaleidoscope.”⁴ According to Barish, in Plato’s dialogues “we must conclude that the hostility to art is real, and the rejection of the theater an integral part of utopian vision.”⁵

In this paper I would like to engage Barish’s claim that Plato engenders an antitheatrical prejudice, arguing that Plato’s critique of poets’ creation (tragic and comic) is marked by ambivalence. Although Plato’s critique of theatre as a spectacle is indubitable, his apparently

¹ J. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1981, p. 5.

² Ibidem.

³ Ibidem, p. 38.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 11–12.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 12.

unequivocal decree which banishes poets from the ideal republic is not. Hence, we ought to consider Plato's criteria for how poetic creation may be justified. To emphasize the tensions in Plato's dialogues is not only to problematize the negative judgements against tragic and comic creation, but also to perceive Plato's particular use of theatre in its metaphoric dimension to describe, *inter alia*, the phenomenon of human existence or ideal legislation. We should also underscore the fact that many contemporary scholars perceive Plato's dialogues as dramatic texts, whereas Plato is regularly treated as a radical theatre reformer. Martin Puchner discerns in Platonic writings not a total rejection of theatre, but rather a criticism of certain theatrical properties. In this view, Plato's critical perspective on theatre emerges directly from his desire to change theatre as he intimately knew it. Indeed, Puchner represents Plato as a herald of a new dramatic form which he defines as 'closet drama.'⁶ Having said this, we must note that Plato's criticism of theatrical phenomena is expressed in a work whose theatrical and dramatic qualifications are impeccable. Furthermore, the figures silhouetted in dialogues are regularly treated by many researchers as *dramatis personae*.⁷ Consequently, one can justifiably inquire into the validity of treating Socrates or the Athenian Stranger as a *porte-parole* of Plato himself. An urgent constraint in making an interpretative decision issues from the inevitable uncertainty regarding whose arguments and opinions are presented in dialogues: those of Plato or one of the figures (Socrates, The Athenian Stranger or the Guest from Elea)?

Many Anglo-American researchers have attempted to answer this question, diverging over the alignment of Plato's own standpoint with the opinions expressed by Socrates in particular. Christopher Rowe, affirming the validity of this parallel in *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing*, argues that "Plato stayed a Socratic till the end."⁸ Having no doubt that Socrates should be understood as Plato's *porte-parole*, alter ego, persona and mask, Rowe suggests that "it will then

⁶ See M. Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama*, Baltimore and London 2002, p. 14; idem, *The Drama of Ideas: Platonic Provocation in Theater and Philosophy*, Oxford, New York 2010, p. 5.

⁷ See, *inter alia*, J. A. Arieti, *Interpreting Plato: The Dialogues as Drama*, Maryland 1991, p. ix; M. M. McCabe, *Plato and His Predecessors: The Dramatisation of Reason*, Cambridge 2000, p. 10.

⁸ Ch. Rowe, *Plato and the Art of Philosophical Writing*, Cambridge 2007, p. viii.

only be in a formal sense that Plato is absent.”⁹ Nonetheless, numerous authors maintain a different stance, resisting the identification of Socrates with Plato. Instead, they perceive Socrates in the Platonic dialogues as a fictitious *dramatis personae*, in contrast to the real Socrates, who is a historical character. American scholar Ruby Blondell, in her book *The Play of Character in Plato’s Dialogues*, suggests that “none of the characters’ voices can be identified in any direct sense with that of the author.”¹⁰ In this reading, Plato is perceived as a playwright who “never speaks in his own voice”; moreover, “none of the views expressed by his characters can be attributed to him directly, any more than the views of Hamlet or Polonius are directly attributable to Shakespeare.”¹¹ Blondell thus establishes that Plato’s use of dramatic form is directly connected to his radical deletion of the author’s voice. Moreover, she suspects that “the character of Socrates voices far more of Plato’s own views than the character of Polonius or Hamlet does of Shakespeare’s.”¹² The provocative nature of contemporary formulations should not, however, eclipse the long and rich history of this controversy. We may note, for example, that Diogenes Laertius had already recalled the ancient anecdotes about the public lecture of *Lysis* by Plato himself, during which Socrates allegedly exclaimed, “By Heracles, what a number of lies this young man is telling about me.”¹³ In his commentary, Diogenes Laertius adds, “For he has included in the dialogue much that Socrates never said.”¹⁴ In addition to the ambiguity surrounding the status of the characters in Plato’s dialogues, as well as the question of their historical validity and credibility, another interpretive difficulty presents itself. This difficulty results from Plato’s broad-based use of the same compositional techniques (with a mimetic dialogue) which are severely criticized in his works. This problem is highlighted by, among others, Arne Melberg, who in his book *Theories of Mimesis* observes that

⁹ Ibidem, p. 32–33.

¹⁰ R. Blondell, *The Play of Character in Plato’s Dialogues*, Cambridge 2002, p. 18.

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² Ibidem, p. 19.

¹³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks, Vol. I, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, London, William Heinemann LTD, MCML, p. 309.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p.309.

“Plato allows himself to criticize *mimesis* in mimetic dialogue.”¹⁵ This point will now be considered in more detail.

Let us remember that, according to Socrates, each poetic presentation can take the form of imitation or narrative. In a crucial moment of the *Republic*, Socrates observes that tragedy as well as comedy are produced “entirely by means of imitation.”¹⁶ Other poetical forms include the recital of the poet himself (for example in the dithyramb) or a combination of the two (for example in the composition of epic poetry.)¹⁷ This contradistinction leads Socrates directly to a consideration of which poetical form may be approved. In brief, Socrates asks “whether we are going to let the poets compose their narrative using imitation, or have some works with imitation, others without, and which each shall be. Or again do we not allow imitation at all?”¹⁸ One of his interlocutors – Adeimantus – remarks that when Socrates reflects on licit forms of poetical expression, he is essentially considering “whether we admit tragedy and comedy into our state, or not.”¹⁹ Thus, if imitation is justifiably to be condemned, by necessity tragedy and comedy cannot find grace in the eyes of rulers. At this juncture, let us recall that the background of Socrates’s considerations is the impact of a form of art on a guardian’s life. Only in light of this reference can we understand Socrates’ passage apparently away from artistic creation. Asking “whether our guardians have to be capable of imitation or not,”²⁰ Socrates essentially speculates on which of the two principles should dominate in the ideal city: the principle of expertise or the principle of versatility? Socrates responds partially to this question when he notices that “one individual should practice one pursuit well and not many.”²¹ This observation makes reference to the criticism of imitation since the same man “is unable to imitate many things well as he can one thing.”²² In a crucial moment of his argumentation, Socrates affirms that “the same people cannot simultane-

¹⁵ A. Melberg, *Theories of Mimesis*, Cambridge, 1995, p. 17.

¹⁶ Plato, *Republic*, Books 1–5, edited and translated by Ch. Emlyn-Jones and W. Preddy, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London 2013, p. 255.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 257.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

ously make good imitations of two things that seem close to one another, such as writing comedy and tragedy.”²³ Socrates adds, “you don’t have the same people acting in both comedy and tragedy, yet both these are imitative arts.”²⁴ Having said this, Socrates seems to suggest that tragedy and a comedy, as different types of imitation, require distinct skills.

Nonetheless, the possibility for unambiguous interpretation of this statement becomes compromised upon comparison with a discussion taking place early in the morning, among Socrates, Agathon and Aristophanes at the end of the *Symposium* when “all the company were either sleeping or gone.”²⁵ The fundamental gaps which preclude a satisfying reconstruction of the conversation by Apollodorus are due to the fact that the bystander Aristodemus “had no recollection, for he had missed the beginning and was also rather drowsy.”²⁶ Furthermore, it is precisely during this conversation that the crucial words are pronounced: words which shed light not only on the relation between comedy and tragedy, but also on the principle of specialization proclaimed by Socrates in many other dialogues. It is important to note that, according to the inexact coverage of Aristodemus, Socrates would argue that “the same man could have the knowledge required for writing comedy and tragedy – that the fully skilled tragedian could be a comedian as well.”²⁷ Reflecting on the enigmatic nature of this fragment, the Israeli scholar Freddie Rokem suspects that Plato may deliberately and intentionally have excised observations which could be crucial for understanding the relation between philosophy and theatre. Rokem asks: “what did Socrates say to the two dramatists that they as well as Aristodemus were too tired and/or too drunk to hear?”²⁸ The gaps in Aristodemus’ and Apollodorus’ reports turn out to be pivotal, especially if we agree with Rokem that “the first encounter, among Socrates, Agathon, and Aristophanes, which takes place within the semifictional context of

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Idem, *Symposium*, [in:] *Plato III. Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, London, William Heinemann Ltd, 1975, p. 245.

²⁶ Ibidem.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ F. Rokem, *Philosophers and Thespians: Thinking Performance*, Stanford, California 2010, p. 29.

Plato's *Symposium*, is no doubt the first meeting among representatives of these two disciplines to have been recorded in detail."²⁹ Gaps which obstruct a fuller understanding of Socrates' thought, at the same time, problematize the credibility of a human memory highly sensitive to changes, to mistakes and distortions. In this context, Rokem proposes an analogy between Plato's condemnation of artistic creation as imitation which produces the 'images of images' and the conversations cited off the top of somebody's head. According to Rokem, the troubling of reliability and the plausibility of the conversation were suggested by Plato from the very beginning of the dialogue, in the meticulously depicted opening scene which "explores and examines the genealogy of the report about the banquet" and "serves as warning."³⁰

Let us recall that at the beginning of the dialogue we learn that the conversation taking place during the eponymous banquet will be reproduced by Apollodorus on the grounds of Aristodemus' inexact coverage. Moreover, a famous speech by Socrates is a reproduction of the words delivered by Diotima. Highlighting this double reconstitution, Rokem emphasizes the importance of the coverage's secondary nature in Plato's dialogue. Rokem observes that "Plato, by drawing detailed attention to the technicalities of the transmission of knowledge, radically problematized the ways in which oral reports and oral wisdom serve as a source of knowledge", by demonstrating that these reports are "unreliable approximations."³¹ Gaps in oral knowledge's transmission, as well as its relatively meagre credibility, are directly connected with the inherent limitations of human memory (as a defective repository of knowledge). Thus, in the *Symposium* Plato effectuates a radical critique of mimetic representation by exposing its formal constraints. To perceive these constraints is to recognize that all the interlocutors (including Socrates) are able to put forward only small fragments of the conversations which had actually happened. After all, as noted earlier, human memory preserves an uncertain testimony, not without errors. Thus, a conversation cited off the top of someone's head emerges as a warped image of a conversation which had occurred previously in a specific time and place. On the basis of these considerations, Rokem concludes that such imperfection of narrative

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 6

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 26–27.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 25.

technique reveals that “not only do narratives and dramatic representations fail to fully reveal or represent the truth, but philosophical ideas are subject to such limitations as well.”³²

On the basis of existing analyses, therefore, we can clearly recognize that Plato’s complex attack on mimetic representation and artistic creation is based both on the specific critical arguments formulated by characters in his dialogues and on specific formal solutions. There are two main critical arguments. While the first argument is based on a clearly defined ontological hierarchy, the second relies on specific moral assumptions. Only within this specific ontological and moral perspective may we understand Socrates’ conviction that mimetic creation can wield a negative influence on its listeners and viewers. In the dialogue *Gorgias*, during his exchange of views with Callicles, Socrates inquires into “the purpose that has inspired our stately and wonderful tragic poetry, who [...] has been invented for the sake of pleasure.”³³ It thus emerges that the endeavour and purpose of tragic poetry is the pleasure and the gratification of the spectators, not their moral amelioration. Tragedy, in pleasing the spectator, is judged severely as ‘flattery.’³⁴ Having said this, Socrates notices that “if we strip any kind of poetry of its melody, its rhythm and its metre, we get mere speeches as the residue”³⁵ – the speeches delivered to a great crowd of people. Identifying poetry with a ‘kind of public speaking’, Socrates thereby suggests a particular similitude between poet and rhetorician. In a rhetorical question to Callicles – ‘do you not think that the poets use rhetoric in the theatres?’ – Socrates accentuates a similar aim which drives these two activities.³⁶ The efficacy of rhetoric which targets the public (comprised not only of free men, but also of women, children and slaves) is based on the peculiar capacity of adulation characterised by Socrates as a flattering art.³⁷

It should be noted, however, that these arguments are modified in the Second Book of *Laws*, when the Guest from Athens affirms that “the criterion of music should be pleasure; not, however, the pleasure of any chance person; rather I should regard that music which pleases

³² Ibidem, p. 26.

³³ Plato, *Gorgias*, [in:] *Plato III. Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, op. cit., p. 451.

³⁴ Ibidem.

³⁵ Ibidem.

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 453.

³⁷ Ibidem.

the best man and the highly educated as about the best, and as quite the best if it pleases the one man who excels all others in virtue and education.”³⁸ Here, therefore, it is not the pleasure itself which is criticized, but rather the pleasure experienced by “any chance person”. The main point defended by the Athenian is that “the judges of these matters need virtue for the reason that they need to possess not only wisdom in general, but especially courage. For the true judge should not take his verdicts from the dictation of the audience, nor yield weakly to the uproar of the crowd or his lack of education.”³⁹ Similarly, in the Third Book, the Guest from Athens criticizes the predominant practice of granting the power of judgement to the theatre’s numerous spectators. The Athenian places the blame on poets who “inwittingly bore false witness against music, as a thing without any standard of correctness, of which the best criterion is the pleasure of the auditor, be he a good man or a bad.”⁴⁰ Thus, the Athenian attempts to show that “by compositions of such a character, set to similar words, they bred in the populace a spirit of lawlessness in regard to music, and the effrontery of supposing themselves capable of passing judgement on it. Hence the theatregoers became noisy instead of silent, as though they knew the difference between good and bad music, and in the place of an aristocracy in music there sprang up a kind of theatrocracy.”⁴¹ In short, the Athenian disagrees with those who wish to impute in a theatrical crowd the conviction of the possibility of unpunished violation of ancient rights. Moreover, he cannot accept that the crowd could be in position to judge an artistic creation. In the Athenian’s view, “if in music, and music only, there had arisen a democracy of free men, such a result would not have been so very alarming; but as it was, the universal conceit of universal wisdom and the contempt for law originated in the music, and on the heels of these came liberty.”⁴² This statement brings Athenian to the conviction that “for, thinking themselves knowing, men became fearless; and audacity begat effrontery. For to be fearless of the opinion of a better man, owing to self-con-

³⁸ *Idem*, *The Laws I*, translated by R. G. Bury, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, London, William Heinemann LTD, MCMLXXXIV, 1984, p. 109.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 247.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 248–249.

fidence, is nothing else than base effrontery; and it is brought about by a liberty that is audacious to excess.”⁴³

The perceived connection between poetical activity and degradation of rights and morals leads the Athenian to be convinced of the necessity of artistic censorship. Furthermore, he reflects on the alternative artistic object shaped by different creators. Comparing the projected organization of his society to the ‘truest tragedy’, the Athenian takes away from poets a privilege of exclusivity in the field of verbal artistic creation. In the seventh Book of *Laws* the Athenian deploys poetic and theatrical imagery in a discussion with a tragedian (described as a ‘serious poet’) who asks the city’s legislators about the possibility to ‘pay visit to your city and country, and traffic in poetry.’⁴⁴ We may recall here a response, often commented upon, that the Athenian delivered to the poet, starting with the famous ascertainment that

[...] we ourselves, to the best of our ability, are the authors of a tragedy a tonce superlatively fair and good; at least, all our polity (gr. *politeia*) is framed as a representation (gr. *mimesis*) of the fairest and best life, which is in reality, as we assert, the truest (gr. *alethestaten*) tragedy. Thus we are composers of the same things as yourselves, rivals (gr. *antitechnoi*) of yours as artists and actors of the fairest drama, which, as our hop eis, true law, and it alone, is by nature competent to complete. Do not imagine, then, that we will ever thus lightly allow you to set up your stage beside us in the market-place, and give permission to those imported actors of yours, with their dulcet tones and their voices louder than ours, to harangue women and children and the whole populace, and to say not the same things as we say about the same institutions, but, on the contrary, things that are, for the most part, just the opposite. In truth, both we ourselves and the whole State would be absolutely mad, were it to allow you to do as I have said, before the magistrates had decided whether or not your compositions are deserving of utterance and suited publication. So now, ye children and offspring of Muse mild, do ye first display your chants side by side with ours before the rulers; and if your utterances seem to be the same as ours or better, then we will grant you a chorus, but if not, my friend, we can never do so.⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibidem.

⁴⁴ Idem, *The Laws II*, translated by R. G. Bury, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, London, William Heinemann Ltd, 1984, p. 97.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 99.

Adopting theatrical imagery, the Athenian presents the legislators as the most serious rivals for the tragic poets. Moreover, he draws our attention to the fact that the perfect tragedy can be realized only in the city (and not on the theatre's stage). The city described by the Athenian may be designated the 'truest tragedy' and the 'fairest drama' in light of its institutional realization of the most beautiful and most perfect life.

Building the Athenian's statement on the theatrical imagery, Plato once again emphasizes a tension between the critique of visual thinking repeatedly formulated in numerous dialogues, and the conviction of its irresistible attractiveness. Let us also recall that Socrates, in the sixth book of the *Republic*, while responding to Aidemantus, admits that he "needs an answer in the form of allegory."⁴⁶ Hearing this, Aidemantus seems quite surprised because he did not believe that it was Socrates' practice to employ images. By placing the abstract ideas in literal terms, Plato suggests the impossibility of a total exclusion of images from philosophical discourse, furthermore implying the impossibility of pure dialectics. In view of this, French scholar Michelle le Doeuff evokes the extensive album of Platonic images, or the most original metaphors which are actively involved in the production of sense.⁴⁷ A similar point is registered almost thirty years later by American critic Jill Gordon. In her book *In Plato's Image*, Gordon observes that Plato's dialogues "are not consistent with a view of philosophy as a purely rational enterprise", since they "never fail to appeal to our visual senses, forcing us to see and to create images in our minds."⁴⁸

In this essay I have attempted to highlight the complexity of the theatrical questions in the Plato's work. To perceive this complexity, we must take into account the literal and metaphoric dimensions of poetry and theatre. Only then can we capture the genuine theatrical potential of Plato's dialogues: not only critical but also reformative. Moreover, new possibilities emerge when we consider Plato as a playwright, and Socrates as his privileged character. In light of this complexity, we can contest Jonas Baris' declaration of Plato as progenitor

⁴⁶ Idem, *Republic, Books 6–10*, edited and translated by Ch. Emlyn-Jones and W. Preddy, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London 2013, p. 17.

⁴⁷ M. le Doeuff, *L'imaginaire philosophique. Recherches sur l'imaginaire philosophique*, Paris, 1980, p. 14.

⁴⁸ J. Gordon, *In Plato's Image*, [w:] *Philosophy in Dialogue: Plato's Many Devices*, edited by G. A. Scott, Evanston, Illinois 2007, p. 213.

of the ‘antitheatrical prejudice’. Nonetheless, to contest this view is not to ignore the antitheatrical and anti-poetical argumentation which occurs in Plato’s dialogues. We should recognize rather that the aim of this argumentation is not to destroy the object criticized, but to reform it radically.⁴⁹ For, as Jacques Taminiaux observes, Plato’s protests against the existing tragic scene function “in the name of entirely different theatre, to which only a philosopher has access.”⁵⁰

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⁴⁹ Zob. M. Puchner, *The Drama of Ideas...*, op. cit., p. 5.

⁵⁰ J. Taminiaux, *Le theatre des philosophes: la tragedie, l’etre, l’action*, Grenoble 1995, p. 5.

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