

The relation between truth and tragedy according to plato

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Abstract: Despite the highly privileged status of Truth in the philosophical ideas of Plato, he has not expressed anything about during the Socratic and elderly period of his life. He has started the serious discussions on Truth during his maturity when he claims that Senses deceive, while philosophers seek truth and knowledge: "when does the soul attain to truth? For when it tries to consider anything in company with the body, it is evidently deceived by it." (*Phaedo*, 65). In contrast, Plato as early the Socratic period discusses tragic poetry as a "stately and wonderful" art that is "pleasant and gratifying" for the spectator (*Gorgias*, 502). This temporal distance between the discussions reflects the importance of each idea in different periods of Plato's life. During his Socratic and elderly period, he considers poetry and tragedy writing as a form "divine power" (*Ion*, 533) and "divine madness" (*Phaedrus*, 245), who "with the aid of Graces and Muses, often grasps the truth" (*Laws*, Book 3, 682). The same Plato at the age of maturity, when obsessed with the concept of Truth, claims that the tragedy maker and the poet is three stages away from Truth (*Republic*, Book 10, 597) and "knows nothing of the reality but only the appearance" (*Republic*, Book 10, 601) and consequently, his art has no relation to Truth. Despite Plato's specific objections to tragedy in his later works, a collection of different attitudes toward the relation between tragedy and truth in different periods of his works reveal the fact that it is impossible to find a unified and clear expression of the relation between tragedy and truth in Plato.

Key words: Plato; Truth; Tragedy; Poetry; Mimetic poetry; Mimetic art

1. Introduction

The task of educating the Greek was usually done by the poets. "The Greeks always felt that a poet was in the broadest and deepest sense the educator of his people." The politicians and law makers handed them in this task. Poetry was the language of culture and education, and the emergence of philosophy in the guise of poetry happened because of the mastery of poetry over the mind, reason and feelings of the Greeks. It is against this background that Plato defined poetry and in particular tragic poetry as a rival to philosophy and struggles to determine the nature of education and decide on the relation between tragedy and truth.

A limited number of studies have been done on "the question of tragedy" as well as "the relation between tragedy and Truth" in the works of Plato. Therefore this study aims to investigate the works of Plato to find out a clear answer to the question; it was Plato who recommended such an approach as "to be learned and sought for, not from names but much better through themselves than through names" (*Cratylus*, 439); therefore, the best way to find the relation between tragedy and Truth in in the very dialogues of Plato.

The Relation between Truth and Tragedy in Platonic Dialogues

The works of Plato are usually divided into four periods of "Socratic", "transitional", "maturity" and "old age" (Copleston, 1961, pp. 138 – 140). In the first part, where he is under direct influence of Socrates, covers nothing about Truth. The most important expression of the idea of Truth begins in *Phaedo* where he declares "when does the soul attain to truth? For when it tries to consider anything in company with the body, it is evidently deceived by it" (*Phaedo*, 65). He continues to argue that "I was afraid my soul would be blinded if I looked at things with my eyes and tried to grasp them with any of my senses. So I thought I must have recourse to conceptions and examine in them the truth of realities." (*Phaedo*, 99). Therefore, the senses cannot provide Truth. The only method to find the truth is dialectics: "if I could, I would show you, no longer an image and symbol of my meaning, but the very truth, as it appears to me... nothing less than the power of dialectics could reveal this" (*Republic*, Book 7, 533).

Plato sets "set dialectics above all other studies to be as it were the coping-stone—and that no other higher kind of study could rightly be placed above it" (*Republic*, Book 7, 534). Dialectics can be comprehended in two meanings, first as an spiritual journey in the form of an internal dialogue with the soul, through which the person passes the sensory world of appearances and attains a higher world of true, eternal and immortal reality; and, second as a method in discussion and argumentation where the

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person who has passed the spiritual journey engages with others and reveals the inaccuracies, contradictions, fallacies and contradictions around them. According to Plato, there are four introductory sciences for dialectics: mathematics, (*Republic*, Book 7, 525-526); geometry (*Republic*, Book 7, 527); surface geometry (*Republic*, Book 7, 527) and astronomy (*Republic*, Book 7, 528); however, being “experts in these matters” does not necessarily mean a person to be a dialectician (*Republic*, Book 7, 531d-e). In order to show who is after Truth and dialectics, Plato distinguishes between three types of persons: “the philosopher or lover of wisdom, the lover of victory and the lover of gain”, each one recommending his way of life (*Republic*, Book 9, 581c), the lover of gain is after money and the lover of victory is after his ambitions and it is only the lover of wisdom who is after Truth and understanding. These three personalities disagree over the meaning of pleasure and quality of life (*Republic*, Book 9, 581c). “Corresponding to the three types in the city, the soul also is tripartite... The three parts have also, it appears to me, three kinds of pleasure, one peculiar to each, and similarly three appetites and controls.” (*Republic*, Book 9, 580d).

Thus, Plato places three forms of pleasure against three parts of the soul. Pleasure of wisdom is placed beside the highest part of the soul, the head; the pleasure of victory and control is equal to the middle part, the heart and pleasure of profit corresponds to the lowest part of the soul, the abdomen. The highest form of pleasure is the pure and true form of pleasure and other forms of pleasure are phantom of pleasure. Plato extends this definition of pleasure to the city and society and finds a close relation between the high pleasures of philosophers and moderate people with law and order and a certain proximity with true pleasure. On the other hand, he finds “that which is furthest removed from philosophy and reason... [is] furthest removed from reason... [and] is furthest from law and order”. (*Republic*, Book 9, 587). This is the way Plato argues how “three times three, then, by numerical measure is the interval that separates the tyrant from true pleasure” and how the inferior part of the soul is three stages away from truth.

Finding corresponding relations between three parts of the soul and the city makes it possible for Plato to extend the analogy to every sphere including literature and art, and particularly investigate on mimetic art of tragedy as an important component in education of Greek citizens. According to Plato there are two forms of mimetic art: one form is used for making of tools and accessories such as painting and the other form is used for creating a mimetic image by employing the body as an instrument “When anyone, by employing his own person as his instrument, makes his own figure or voice seem similar to yours, that kind of fantastic art is called mimetic” (*Sophist*, 267). Mimetic poets, including tragedy writers cannot distinguish good things from the bad (*Laws*, 801); tragedy writers use an obscure language (*Republic*, Book 3, 413); they are imitators

(*Republic*, Book 10, 597) and they are creators of “the phantom, the imitator, [who] knows nothing of the reality but only the appearance.” (*Republic*, Book 10, 601). Therefore, “that the imitator knows nothing worth mentioning of the things he imitates, but that imitation is a form of play, not to be taken seriously, and that those who attempt tragic poetry, whether in iambs or heroic verse, are all altogether imitators.” (*Republic*, Book 10, 602). For Plato, mimetic and tragic poetry “seems to be a corruption of the mind of all listeners who do not possess, as an antidote, knowledge of its real nature.” (*Republic*, Book 10, 595).

Such a stance makes Plato to sacrifice his respect toward Homer against his love of Truth and through arguing that the coach in poetry is three stages away from reality (*Republic*, Book 10, 597) he declares that “the producer of the product three removes from nature you call the imitator.... This, then, will apply to the maker of tragedies also, if he is an imitator and is in his nature three removes from the king and the truth, as are all other imitators” (*Republic*, Book 10, 597).

For Plato poetry has real effects on the youth and guardians of the city and considers it as a challenge to true education of the people, as mimetic the poet cultivates the low desires and “and by strengthening it tends to destroy the rational part, just as when in a state one puts bad men in power and turns the city over to them and ruins the better sort” (*Republic*, Book 10, 605). Such a poet “sets up in each individual soul a vicious constitution by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality, and by currying favor with the senseless element” Despite this, Plato admits that the mimetic art of poetry (both in tragedy and comedy) has considerably strong effect on the audience, and since this it has a magical power, it may harm the noble people who love law and order and only a few are not affected by this (*Republic*, Book 10, 605).

It is clear that the first arguments of Plato on the relation between tragedy and truth are formed around the distance between sensory perception and reality. He attempts to clarify how man can attain truth and how is he distracted and mislead. The starting point of this discussion is in *Republics* where the role of poetry and narration in education are introduced: historic and fictional narration is the instruments of education of human soul; albeit “tales are of two species, the one true and the other false” (*Republic*, Book 2, 376). This is the very point where relation between truth and poetry and narration and ultimately between truth and tragic poetry is defined. Plato declares that tales are telling lies and they may contain some germs of truth. Therefore, he considers the expressions of Homer, Aeschylus and other poets about deceitful gods as a lie and “when anyone says that sort of thing about the gods, we shall be wroth with him, we will refuse him a chorus, neither will we allow teachers to use him for the education of the young” (*Republic*, Book 2, 383).

Beside poetry and tragedy, such topics as art, building, technology and beauty are introduced in

the works of Plato; all of which have direct and precise associations with the concept of truth. His definition of art is such that in a sense, every human being can make everything like an artist. The simplest way of doing this is "if you should choose to take a mirror and carry it about everywhere. You will speedily produce the sun and all the things in the sky, and speedily the earth and yourself and the other animals and implements and plants and all the objects... the appearance of them, but not the reality and the truth.... the painter too belongs to this class of producers" (*Republic*, Book 10, 596). If it is true that the painter creates another coach, but "his creations are not real and true". Therefore, there a difference between making a real coach and an appearing one. Real making requires an idea and a model but painting is not based on true knowledge and wisdom. It is like holding a mirror against all manifestations of nature and even man. "The painter too belongs to this class of producers...[but] his creations are not real and true" (*Republic*, Book 10, 596). Making something is different with painting it and require true knowledge. Painting does not require knowledge is like a holding a mirror against all manifestations of nature and man. The craftsman who makes this and that specific coach, does not create the truth of coach (or idea of coach) but a coach that resembles the true coach. Therefore the product of carpenter or any other craftsman is not equal to truth (*Republic*, Book 10, 597). That is why imitators can create anything very much like those who take a mirror, and those how are away from true knowledge, when they see such imitations and the imitators, they are easily deceived and think they are confronted with masters of knowledge and wisdom who know all the mysteries of universe.

Thus Plato criticizes the poetic basis of education and with the guide of Socrates leaves tragic poetry and instead turns to philosophical education: "when he was about to compete for the prize with a tragedy, he listened to Socrates in front of the theatre of Dionysus, and then consigned his poems to the flames" (Diogenes Laërtius, Book 3, Chapter 1), hoping the people or at least the youth to turn from tragedy and start their quest for the truth. However, he openly talks about the painstaking task of achieving a dialectical knowledge. He has seen only a few mathematicians who could practice dialectics, including Theatetus who after long periods of mathematical practices and experiences in explored dialectical contradictions and was attracted to philosophical knowledge (*Theatetus*, 186). But practice and experience does not lead a person to become a poet or tragedy writer and "that what they composed they composed not by wisdom, but by nature" (*Apology*, 22). "Being divinely inspired in its chanting, the poetic tribe, with the aid of Graces and Muses, often grasps the truth of history" (*Laws*, Book 3, 682).

When introducing the ranking of the souls who can see the truth, Plato places "a poet or some other imitative artist" in the sixth level (*Phaedrus* 248). The tragedy writers are ranked in the same stage as

the poets, because they are both imitators as well as divine frenzies. When talking about the properties of being a divine frenzy, Plato distinguishes between two forms of frenzy: "one arising from human diseases, and the other from a divine release from the customary habits" (*Phaedrus* 265). Gods are favoring their true followers which are manifested as madness. "We made four divisions of the divine madness, ascribing them to four gods, saying that prophecy was inspired by Apollo, the mystic madness by Dionysus, the poetic by the Muses, and the madness of love, inspired by Aphrodite and Eros" (*Phaedrus* 265). Therefore, despite the harsh attack on poetry in book 10 of *Republic*, there are clear instances when Plato seriously considers a divine aspect for the poets and tragedy writers.

While Plato was silent about truth in his Socratic period, still he had many expressions about poetry and tragedy like: "soothsayers and prophets and all of the poetic turn; and especially we can say of the statesmen that they are divine and enraptured" (*Meno*, 99); and continues this by stating that "being inspired and possessed of God when they succeed in speaking many great things, while knowing nought of what they say" (*Meno*, 99). "It is God himself who speaks and addresses us through them" (*Ion*, 534). He explores in poetry and the genres used in Homeric and rhapsodic poetry, talks about "divine dispensation" and "divine influence". This madness first happens in the poet, then in the narrator and finally reaches to the audience (*Ion*, 533-4; *Phaedrus*, 245).

According to Pappas, "Plato says nothing about divine madness in the *Republic*, probably because it threatens to elevate poetry to a more exalted level than the *Republic's* ungenerous criticism will permit. But without some such explanation of their charm, the danger inherent in works of art must also go unexplained." He continues, "given their epistemic worthlessness, they can seduce their audience only by virtue of their charm. Either Plato must explain the bewitchment of art in terms that do not praise it, or he must concede that such error-riddled productions could never corrupt the soul." (Pappas, 2003, 135) Therefore, in both transitional and maturity periods of his works, Plato harshly attacks poets and poetry, even criticizes Homer. It is true that Homer "appears to have been the first teacher and beginner of all these beauties of tragedy" but "we must not honor a man above truth" (*Republic*, Book 10, 595). Finding the best education in philosophy, Plato attempts to confront poetry and tragedy, and when thousands of people asked for consideration of epic, lyric, tragic and comic works of the poets as educational materials for the youth, who should read and memorize these works, Plato raises objections and calls the wide range of exposure of children to poetry as "dangerous" (*Laws*, Book 7, 810 – 811). According to Plato, tragedy "bent rather upon pleasure and the gratification of the spectators" it can be considered as "is a kind of public speaking" (*Gorgias*, 502). Since both poetry and tragedy impress the people through the senses, Plato fiercely

challenges them in different occasions throughout his works.

Plato refers to Pan, the Greek deity and the son of Hermes; Pan means all and "You know that speech makes all things ($\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu$) known and always makes them circulate and move about, and is twofold, true and false... the true part is smooth and divine and dwells aloft among the gods, but falsehood dwells below among common men, is rough and like the tragic goat; for tales and falsehoods are most at home there, in the tragic life" (*Cratylus*, 408). Here Plato attempts to define tragedy as proponent of falsehood, very much like his earlier attempt to define oratory as deceptive. He refers to changing and moving nature of both oratorical speech and tragic poetry to show them as capricious and impulsive. If in oratorical speeches the changes happen only in words, in tragedy the changes are visual and perceptual. Both changes in words and in bodies are for affecting the senses of the audience. Therefore, Plato rejects both oratorical speech and tragic poetry as they misleads men from truth; the true value of a speech both in the information it gives us and in the education it provides, resides in its adherence to truth.

On the other hand, Plato defines poetry and tragedy as a product of divine madness and frenzy. As a religious philosopher he tries to show the defects of poetry and tragedy, and at the same time wonders if poetry is a divine art. It seems that the religious Plato is in a deep conflict with Plato the philosopher. He wonders how to deal with poetry. If he defines poetry as totally false and untrue, what should he do with existing definitions that call poetry as a form of divine inspiration; if he defines poetry and tragedy the a divine endowment, how should he deal with poems and tragedies he sees as harming the people's souls and how should he define their relation to truth.

As Greek epic poetry is based on exaggerated lies and as tragedy brings the same images on the stage, Plato bans the inhabitants and citizens of his ideal city from tragedy; tragedy writers, very much like painters and sculptors are three stages away from reality.

True philosophers follow truth, while tragedies on Dionysus festivals depict only lies or speeches far from reality. Therefore there are true philosophers and false philosophers. The first group only attempt to know the truth behind appearances while the false philosophers of the second group are cast away from truth and would like to follow the chorus group in tragedy (*Republic*, Book 3, 413) and their lower part of the soul is certainly affected by this.

Although the mimetic and tragic poetry as the manifestation of divine madness is harshly attacked in *Republic* and some other works but in *Laws* which is the last dialogue, the concept of truth is strictly avoided and poetry is dealt with respect: "For being divinely inspired in its chanting, the poetic tribe, with the aid of Graces and Muses, often grasps the truth of history." (*Laws*, Book 3, 682). Even Homer is called a divinely inspired poet again.

Clearly there are differences in Plato's definition of poetry and tragedy in his four periods of work. In maturity treatises, specifically in *Republic*, changes his position when considering the value of poetry according to its impact on action or its effect on knowledge. In Book 2 of *Republic*, he has a softer tone toward poetry and does not deny its total value but calls for a change in some elements in poetry that are not compatible with his philosophical stance. But his second judgment appear in Book 10 of *Republic* where he calls tragedy and poetry as an image of an image and thus three stages removed from reality. However, Plato believes that if poetry could defend itself on a rational basis and if the followers of poetic vision could defend poetry in simple prose, and show it as useful to society, it is possible for poetry to return from exile for the benefit of the society (*Republic*, Book 10, 607-8). This clearly manifests his attempt to bridge tragedy and truth through finding a middle way for using the potentials of both.

2. Conclusion

As the above review of the works of Plato shows, when he wants to discuss the relation between tragedy and truth, he starts by justifying his opposition to poetry. Despite his belief about the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy, he praises the attractive and effective elements that are lied in poetry; yet he strongly warns against sacrificing the truth obtained through dialectical philosophy against simple poetry (*Republic*, Book 10, 607). Despite this, both in his Socratic and maturity periods, especially in *Laws*, he avoid to talk about truth and refers to poets and tragedy writers are those who are under the influence of gods and divine madness (*Laws*, Book 3, 682) whose poetic or tragic works are the result of this influence.

The overall review of Plato's treatises indicate his different attempts to define the relation between tragedy and truth in favor of the latter, but it is not possible to find a single idea about this relation and generalize it as his point of view.

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