

# “Wizardry” and Wisdom: Imitation in Book 10 of the *Republic*

ESTHER MOON

“ ‘Plainly you mean things that appear from far off,’ he said, ‘and shadow paintings.’  
‘You have hardly got my meaning,’ I said.”<sup>1</sup>

To begin the *Republic*’s final book, Socrates makes a surprising return to the subject of poetry, remarking that he is particularly glad they outlawed imitative poetry from the City in Speech. His timing is suspicious: after all, the dialogue just climaxed when Socrates related the City in Speech to the soul and pointed Glaucon to the “pattern [of a city] laid up” in heaven—a soaring finish. When we descend to earth again in book 10, we might notice that the content of Socrates’ new argument is also suspicious: previously he had only outlawed the kinds of imitative poetry that presented a bad example for the guardians, and suddenly he is congratulating himself for “not admitting at all any part of [poetry] that is imitative” (10.595a). This subject seems to be more interesting to Socrates than it is to Glaucon, who says, “What about it?” (10.595a). Allan Bloom is also surprised at the turn in conversation, and says it is

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, 7.523b.

“difficult to see why we should return to this topic,” since, as he argues, Socrates’ end goal regarding poetry is to establish its subordination to philosophy and to propose its reform, not banishment.<sup>2</sup> But here at the start of book 10, Socrates says that “all” the works of “the tragic poets and all the other imitators . . . seem to maim the thought of those who hear them” (10.595b). His reason?—imitation is far from the truth. I argue that Socrates does not mean what he says, that all imitation cripples its audience because it is far from the truth. Under his rhetoric, aimed at impressing on Glaucon the real dangers of imitative art, Socrates’ logical argument is that imitation still can powerfully assist the soul by elucidating the true, beautiful, and good and by drawing the soul’s love toward what it illuminates. A close reading of this argument shows that Socrates purposefully creates a false dichotomy between appearance and truth, which allows him unfairly to dismiss imitation from participating in truth-telling; he does this in order to define by negation a positive role for imitation: telling the truth in a way that illuminates what cannot be grasped by reason alone.

Remember, the first argument against imitation in book 3 concluded that only imitations of a good disposition should be allowed in the City in Speech, because art insinuates itself into the soul and people become what they hear or see. In book 10, Socrates argues that imitation is twice removed from the truth: forms or ideas are true; things made according to a form are one remove from the truth; and imitations of things are removed again from the truth. He is able to establish this hierarchy by linking truth to use, or function: a created thing is truer the better it fulfills the purpose for which it was made—the form’s purpose. Because an imitation of a thing does not function as the thing, it does not participate in its truth. Since images are so far from the truth, he argues, they can be neither virtuous, beautiful, nor right. Therefore, we should reject the charm of imitation, whether in painting or poetry, as deceptive. But I argue that by defining an imitation as a “phantom” of a thing or an action, Socrates relegates images to having no other use than that of the object or action they imitate, and of course they cannot be used as the objects they imitate. In other words, an image of a couch is a failed couch. First, I will look more closely at how Socrates sets up this hierarchy of removes from the truth; then, consider what conclusions his

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<sup>2</sup> Allan Bloom, “Interpretive Essay,” *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, 426–7, 434.

reasoning points to; and finally, define the positive role for imitation that Socrates leaves open.

### HOW IMITATION IS REMOVED FROM TRUTH

Socrates first divorces images from truth by arguing that an image is not really a thing at all. His first question of book 10—what is imitation?—comes with the strange caveat, “I myself scarcely comprehend what it wants to be” (10.595c). He says that images maim thought and “do not as a remedy have the knowledge of how they really are,” the knowledge of reality or truth (10.595b). It seems silly to accuse images of not possessing accurate knowledge, since images cannot know; either he means the image-makers do not have knowledge of reality, or the images do not present an accurate picture of reality. This is strange, because he first characterizes image-making as reflecting things in a mirror: how much more accurate can an image get? A reflection must be accurate, as long as the reflecting surface is not distorted, because it can only show what exists outside the mirror; there is no role for the artist. It is also strange, then, that Socrates describes the reflection-maker as a “manual artisan” and a “craftsman” who “fabricates” things—all terms that highlight physical action and tactile creation (10.596c, d). This first definition of imitation does not involve doing anything at all except holding up the mirror, and the image disappears once the mirror is lowered. Glaucon, of course, responds to Socrates’ assertion that a man with a mirror “makes” things by objecting, “they look like they *are*; however, they surely *are* not in truth” (10.596e). The man holding a mirror does not actually make the things that he reflects in the mirror. Socrates is pleased by this response, and conflating painting with mirror-holding, quickly adds painters to this group of craftsmen who make what look like things but aren’t in fact anything (10.596e). The agency of images to know what *is* and of their artists to create what *is* is awkwardly assumed and then taken away in Socrates’ initial question and example. Too obviously done to be accidental, this move reveals the direction Socrates is taking his imitation argument: he wants to lull us into thinking that images are nothing more than a reflection of the looks of things, lacking truth or even access to truth.

The reason Socrates defines painters as imitators of the looks of objects becomes clear in the next step of his argument, where he establishes a hierarchy of different kinds of creation ranked by their

closeness to the *idea*, or truth, created by a god. Now he can relegate painters, as imitators of the appearance of objects, to the bottom of the hierarchy because their imitations are furthest removed from the truth. However, Socrates makes an important slip: he artificially limits the argument with a leading question. He asserts that painters are not makers of the objects they imitate, but then instead of asking, “of what then are they makers?” he asks, “But what *of a couch* will you say he is?” (10.597d; italics added). Instead of asking what painters do, he asks what they have to do with couches—thereby limiting the argument to that which pertains to couches. Based on this rhetorical maneuver he will get the answer he is pushing for (couches and painters are rather loosely connected), but his question precludes other, fuller answers.

By grounding his argument in a particular thing (a couch), and by defining the purpose of imitation relative to particular things, Socrates allows imitation no direct access to the truth. Imitation rather is at the far end of a regression from truth. One might assert that Socrates’ argument is still valid if he has already proven this foundation, his hierarchy of regressive imitation, in arguing for his theory of forms. Forms or *ideas* are by definition unmakeable (by humans), and certainly cannot be fabricated from anything sensible. Therefore, an image, being material, cannot participate in the being of the *ideas* of the material objects it represents, any more than the objects are *ideas*. And, Socrates concludes, if the craftsman “doesn’t make what *is*, he wouldn’t make the being but something that is like the being, but is not being” (10.597a). Here Plato implies that being, or closeness to an *idea* which has being, is the goal of all makings. This makes more sense relative to a couch (although Plato’s assertion that there is only *one* form of couch means it must be a pretty generic one, not fully comprehending an artistic craftsman’s goal in creating any particular couch) (10.597c). But is art’s goal to resemble an *idea* already formed by a god? If the goal of art is to express or reflect truth, and truth is the same as being, then it would seem so. Here Socrates assumes the answer to what art is for, which should make us suspicious because this is a very important question, and it never gets its own argument.

And assuming that imitation merely creates a version of a being without the being results in a rather ridiculous definition of objects: the only thing that comes from the form of “couch” is the infinite regression

of non-couch (including couches themselves, which are merely imitations and therefore “something that is like the being, but is not being” [10.597a]); therefore images of a couch are only ever “non-couches” — they have no positive identity, and no identity at all apart from “couch.” The problem is, this argument assumes a specific starting point: as Socrates reminds Glaucon, in their dialogue they are “accustomed to set down some one particular form for each of the particular ‘manys’ to which [they] apply the same name” (10.596a). Socrates chooses a particular form, the *idea* of a common thing, and then establishes both that all its incarnations in the sensible world are made with reference to this form only and that they are not the form, leaving no positive identity for imitations, which cannot even function as that which they imitate.

Is Socrates right that objects are only negations of their *ideas*? Does truth only exist as a receding echo, farther away with each successive act of making? For Socrates, it seems so: that the only road leading from the forms is the downward road from being to non-being. But wait—as Aristotle would interject at this point, roads go both ways: from the origin and to the origin. Socrates sets up an argument that only goes one way: first there are forms, then bodies and actions, the former of which he calls “being” and the latter “becoming,” but the “becoming” never becomes anything with being, since it can never be a form (7.525b). An image is only defined and valued as it approximates the being of the form it imitates—a descending path from form to thing, an argument from origins. For Socrates the forms are all fixed points, theoretical versions of specific sensible things. However, viewing the forms as mere generators and yardsticks of material things is a bit materialistic: there is no suggestion in this discussion that forms are interconnected any more than discrete material objects are connected, or that they fulfill another function than inspiring, for instance, couches and chairs (unless the form of the couch exists for the form of the couch-potato). A form is a preternatural paradigm from which its physical manifestations depend. But this is not consistent with the way Socrates reasons, by his own admission: he begins by abstracting a form from the “manys,” categorizing all couches as having the same function and then positing a form based on his own induction. If truth works deductively, traveling down in diminishing amounts from the forms, how is it that he posits

this truth through inductive logic? It seems that Socrates knows that the road goes two ways, that one can arrive at truth from studying particulars as well as principles; but he still argues with Glaucon as if images are irrevocably removed from being.

Socrates has already identified forms, or *ideas*, with truth and being, and therefore images can be neither truth nor being; however, he takes his argument one step further in order to conclude that imitations do not even attempt to imitate truth. A painting does not imitate a couch's "truth," but its looks (10.598b). This argument assumes that forms are defined by utility: the *idea* of "couch" is a specific kind of furniture to lie on; a painting of a couch does not even try to be useful in that way; therefore paintings of couches are useless. This seems to reveal, Arthur Danto says, a decided preference for craftsmanship over fine art which leads him to rail against Plato's "very vengeful and punitive picture—a philosophical disenfranchisement of art," a not uncommon opinion regarding Plato's views on art, especially among artists.<sup>3</sup> Socrates does list three different arts—using, making, and imitating—and says that "the virtue, beauty, and rightness" of each thing is "related to nothing but the use for which each thing was made," meaning that an imitation of a couch cannot be virtuous, beautiful, or right because it does not participate in a couch's use (10.601d). But a painting of a couch is not made to be used as a couch. Rather, an image is its own thing; categorizing it as not-the-thing-it-imitates is incredibly crude. While this distinction was useful for judging the difference between a mirror's reflection and what it reflects, a painting is actually a thing, a thing that is made. Therefore, images that are made supersede Socrates' distinction between making and imitating, and they must be defined positively as well as negatively. If only Glaucon had asked Socrates, "what is the form of a painting?"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur Danto, *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations*, 298–9.

<sup>4</sup> It may be that Socrates genuinely is mystified as to the purpose of art: remember his first question, "I myself scarcely comprehend what [imitation] wants to be" (10.595c). It is not so easy to define art according to its use or function, like furniture: perhaps Socrates (or Plato) objects to art's non-materialism, its propensity to jack all trades and produce nary a practical result (as W. H. Auden says, "poetry makes nothing happen" ["In Memory"]). Or perhaps the problem is that art's workings defy the rational ordering of the soul that Socrates glorifies: art can affect the soul despite reason. For example, see how in the *Divine Comedy* Dante explores the soul's response to Romance and love poetry, and then the soul-shaping

### THE UNFAIR DISMISSAL OF IMAGES FROM TRUTH-TELLING

Socrates must be aware of how rough his definition of images is, because he pushes it to the border of ridiculousness—perhaps in an attempt to rouse Glaucon to opposition. He states that a painter who paints craftsmen “doesn’t understand the arts of any one of them” and therefore merely deceives, but he forgets to mention that the painter does know one art: the art of painting (10.598c). Also, in rendering craftsmen, the painter is now no longer imitating the works of craftsmen, as he asserted earlier, but the men themselves—a product of nature, not art—again bringing images one remove closer to the truth (10.598a).

However, Socrates pretends still to be talking about couches, which are useful and accommodating objects, and we can let him rest comfortably here a while longer until he finishes deriding the uselessness of paintings. He goes on to argue that only the user of a thing really knows its good and bad points, its “virtue, beauty, and rightness” (10.601e, d). The maker trusts the user to share this knowledge so that he can make the thing correctly, but the imitator does not receive the user’s “prescriptions of how he must paint;” therefore he “will neither know nor opine rightly about what he imitates” (10.601e, 602a). First, Socrates is conflating arts again: use of an object does not comprehend knowledge of its making or imitation, nor vice versa. A couch-user, from the cozy depths of his seat, can no more tell a painter how to paint than he can tell a couch-maker how to use a circular saw or sew upholstery. Second, Socrates assumes that the image of a couch is directed toward the same use as a couch, such that the couch-user’s suggestions, “make it more comfy,” “make it stain-resistant,” would actually have some bearing on the artist’s project. It seems that Socrates has answered his own initial question about what imitation wants to be: it wants to be what it imitates (10.595c). A painting of a couch wants to be a couch. He concludes that, “with respect to beauty and badness,” image-makers cannot know anything about the objects they imitate, nor can they even chance on the right opinion—and so they lack wisdom about what they make (10.602a). Glaucon swallows it all, even the glaring assertion that artists know nothing about beauty.

Socrates forces Glaucon to distinguish looks from truth without

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art of Purgatory. If someone as intelligent as Dante has trouble with the unruly power of art, what will become of Glaucon?

proving that they have to be different. Having established that the works of craftsmen are not “the thing itself” (the form) and that artists imitate not “the thing itself” but only the works of craftsmen, Socrates pushes for a further distinction: do artists imitate these works “[s]uch as they are or such as they look?” (10.597e, 598a). When Glaucon is, understandably, confused, Socrates reminds him that the same couch looks different from different angles and then asks again: “Toward which is painting directed in each case—toward the imitation of the being as it is or toward its looking as it looks? Is it imitation of looks or of truth?” immediately assuming a binary relationship between the two and reinforcing it with repetition (10.598b). Forced to pick one, Glaucon responds as we knew he would, by accepting Socrates’ premise and saying that painting imitates looks, not truth (Ibid.). But Socrates has not proven that this is a question of either-or, not both-and. He simply replies, “Therefore, imitation is surely far from the truth: and, as it seems, it is due to this that it produces everything—because it lays hold of a certain small part of each thing, and that part is itself only a phantom” (Ibid.). In other words, looks are only a small part of a thing, and not even a real part. Socrates says the only way that art can imitate everything is because what it imitates is so shallow and inessential as to be nonexistent, or fantastical—in effect eliminating the possibility that the senses can perceive truth.

Not only is imitation of looks opposed to imitation of truth, but Socrates argues in a last bold claim that it is actually deception. If a man meets an imitator who is able to represent all kinds of subjects equally well and seems generally knowledgeable, “it would have to be replied to [the man] that he is an innocent human being and that, as it seems, he has encountered some wizard or imitator and been deceived. Because he himself is unable to put knowledge and lack of knowledge and imitation to the test, that man seemed all-wise to him” (10.598c, d). Imitators prey on innocent people by making them believe that a painting is not two-dimensional? What would be the danger of that?—that someone might sit on a canvas because it looks like a couch? The danger, Socrates says, is that images have a charm that has nothing to do with the truth: for when the charm of artistry, the rhythm of the music or the colors of the paint, is stripped away from the “things of the poets” (or painters) and they are “said alone, by themselves,” they look different (10.601b). (Here he’s



talking about the bad things poets do, especially tragedy, which I do not have time to discuss, but it is clear that Socrates has pernicious imitation in mind.) “I suppose you know how they look. For you, surely, have seen,” Socrates tells Glaucon, who has no idea what he is talking about; “I have indeed,” he responds, like the courtiers commenting on the Emperor’s new clothes (10.601b). “Don’t they,” Socrates continues, “resemble the faces of the boys who are youthful but not fair in what happens to their looks when the bloom has forsaken them?” — “Exactly,” Glaucon responds (Ibid.). In other words, lies told beautifully, with music or colors, are attractive, whereas lies told simply are ugly. Art without truth is like a boy without beauty: no good. This is an ironic example to use, because Socrates presents an image of natural ugliness — a boy without beauty — in an attempt to teach Glaucon to revile beautiful art, associating dishonestly beautiful human efforts with the unequivocal honesty of an ugly face. The true face of art, he argues, the charming things of the poets and painters, is ugly because it is not useful like the things it represents, and this is why we should resist its attraction. Socrates goes on to say that we must not rely on sight, because things can look distorted — bent when they are straight, small when they are big — and we rely on measuring, counting, and weighing, the calculating part of the soul, to rectify the impressions of sight, and therefore to tell us what is truly beautiful (10.602d, e). The system of loving what is beautiful and hating what is ugly is still intact; Socrates has just changed the defining terms. What looks beautiful is not truly beautiful, and we already know that our eyes cannot be trusted because things look different from different angles. Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting, but the man who calculates is to be praised. This is how Socrates proves from painting that images cannot tell the truth; his definition of imitation is not merely rough, but also limited and misdirected through such obvious rhetorical twists and logical slips that he must be aware of them.

### A POSITIVE ROLE FOR IMITATION

One reason that Socrates sets up this faulty definition of imitation is in order to describe the problems inherent in grasping what imitation really is. Art is especially difficult to pin down because it encompasses all objects and subjects, anything that can be painted or sung, and yet it is not any of the things it represents. What, then, is it good for? In the end,

Socrates' argument is not with imitation itself, but with its purpose. If an image is directed toward its proper use, it meets the standard Socrates sets up for products of craftsmen and nature: that they perform well the use for which they were made or brought into being (10.601d). As the dialogue nears its end, Socrates revives the "old quarrel between philosophy and poetry" but finishes with an invitation: "If poetry directed to pleasure and imitation have any argument to give showing that they should be in a city with good laws, we should be delighted to receive them back from exile, since we are aware that we ourselves are charmed by them" (10.607b, c). He acknowledges beauty's power to draw the soul's love, in agreement with the *Phaedrus*' definition of beauty, but he is wary of the uses to which it can be put, arguing that he will only allow poetry into the city—perhaps into his soul—when lovers of poetry can show "that it's not only pleasant but also beneficial to regimes and human life" (10.607c). Imitation that draws the soul toward what is good once again escapes Socrates' indictment.

Socrates' concern with the purposes of imitation is why he ties off his argument with a series of knotty contradictions, revealing that although he does not trust Glaucon to judge imitation, he is willing to use it on Glaucon. Though imitation might turn out to be "best and truest," until this is proven one must pair it with a "countercharm," chanting Socrates' argument against imitation, "taking care against falling back into this love, which is childish and belongs to the many" (10.608a). Although Socrates himself has just admitted to loving poetry and feeling its charm, now he derides the love beautiful art inspires as common and childish, implying that Glaucon should be above it. He manages to say that imitative poetry is both trivial and a formidable enemy of the soul: it "mustn't be taken seriously as a serious thing laying hold of the truth, but . . . the man who hears it must be careful, fearing for the regime in himself" (Ibid.). If I were Glaucon, I would be confused, but at least Socrates has probably achieved a wariness in Glaucon that he did not formerly possess—perhaps even confusion about how exactly imitation should be understood will make him more careful. Maybe Plato means to alert the reader to the complexity of grasping the truth by any art. However, after all this, Socrates ends with a story, the myth of Er—an artful piece of poetry intended to inspire in Glaucon a love of justice and prudence by relating what Er saw in the afterlife, which

Socrates pointedly calls a “story,” not a factual account (10.621c). In the end, then, Socrates trusts that art is capable of telling the truth and inspiring its audience to respond in the real world, with the actions of which he is so fond. He even says that Er’s tale “could save [them], if [they] were persuaded by it” not to defile their souls: if they use it well, they “*shall* make a good crossing of the river of Lethe” (Ibid.; italics added). Art, according to Socrates, has the ultimate power to save souls.

Just as art can save souls, Socrates implies that souls can save art—from uselessness and from his own argument banishing it from well-ordered cities and souls. When Er returns from the afterworld to tell his tale, Plato ends his own tale, the *Republic*, with a final speech from Socrates beginning: “And thus, Glaucon, a tale was saved and not lost” (10.621b), implying, as Bloom says, that the tale of Er “has been given meaning.”<sup>5</sup> Not until a work of art works on a human being—according to Socrates’ valuation, by enabling him to see and choose “between the worse and the better life” (10.618d, e)—is it saved from the outer darkness of uselessness and non-being to which he condemns imitative art at the beginning of book 10.<sup>6</sup> As Er returns from the dead and tells what he saw, thus saving the tale from languishing unheard in the afterlife, an attentive audience resurrects art from the ghost-world, from merely “lay[ing] hold of . . . a phantom” (10.598b), by considering the work of art seriously and allowing that may have laid hold of something real. Socrates already hinted at this approach to art when he said that the man taken in by the imitative artist “is an innocent human being and . . . as it seems, he has encountered some wizard . . . and been deceived. *Because he himself is unable to put knowledge and lack of knowledge and imitation to the test, that man seemed all-wise to him*” (10.598c, d; italics added). Rather than dismissing art as deceptive wizardsry or conversely exalting the artist as all-wise, the “innocent” should learn to put imitation to the test, by which his own lack of knowledge may be revealed and his knowledge increased.

By linking art’s looks and its truth, by engaging with art as something more than a surface illusion, the audience can feel out its

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<sup>5</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, 472.

<sup>6</sup> For a different but not contradictory valuation of what makes art worthwhile, see book 7, where Socrates distinguishes between objects of sensation that “summon the intellect” and those that do not (7.523).

dimensionality, the reality behind the illusion.<sup>7</sup> Bloom adds that “saved” here also means, “[the tale] has been supported in a deeper sense that gives the surface plausibility”<sup>8</sup>—it is not just an imitation of “looks,” as Socrates accuses art of being, but a surface beneath which lies substance, what *is*. Art journeys to shadowy places, illuminates even things that cannot be seen, such as “gods and everything in heaven and everything in Hades under the earth” (Plato, 10.596c), and brings them into the realm of human perception to be sounded and responded to.

The human mind, as Richard Wilbur so aptly tells us (in a poem!), is like a bat: it “beats about in caverns all alone, / Contriving by a kind of senseless wit / Not to conclude against a wall of stone.”<sup>9</sup> Because it knows “darkly” what obstacles are in the cave, “[i]t has no need to falter or explore,” but instead makes “perfect courses through the blackest air.”<sup>10</sup> By itself, the intellect may make perfect patterns of rational thought but still remain in the cave. The solution, Wilbur suggests, is not courses of thought that are more perfect. Similarly, though Plato’s cave is not quite so dark, he acknowledges that what the mind knows darkly may in fact be a mere shadow of the truth. Plato’s initial solution was to flee the shadows—but here at the end of the *Republic* he offers an additional suggestion: pay attention to the shadows art illuminates. Be guided by art’s ability to see into the shadows if you want to fare well, “both here and when we reap the rewards” (10.621c-d). Wilbur’s poem concludes, “The mind is like a bat. Precisely. Save / That in the very happiest intellection / A graceful error may correct the cave.”<sup>11</sup> Art, for Plato, is this happy intellection. It is the grace beyond perfect logic, the human act of exploring the shadows, of risking getting it wrong in order to get it right. You might crash into a wall, but you might also expand the cave. Both intersecting a wall and finding open space where there was none before invite us to pay attention to the surface of things to teach us about what *is*, to use our senses to increase our knowledge—and this is what art does. Art has the power to maim, as

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<sup>7</sup> Picasso famously said, “We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand.” Plato’s point here seems similar. (see Pablo Picasso, “Statement, 1923” in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschel Chipp, 264).

<sup>8</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, 472.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Wilbur, “Mind,” 314.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Wilbur, “Mind,” 314.

Socrates asserts, but it has also the power to correct: it may be wizardry, but there is wisdom to it.

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