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Words of Desire: Poetry and Non-Rational Motivation in Plato's *Republic*

Olof Pettersson

Abstract

Although it is often acknowledged that poetry can only influence the non-rational part of the soul, this is rarely thought to be decisive for Plato's argument. Poetry, instead, is taken to be psychologically corrupting because it is third removed from reality. By a closer look at Plato's account of the address of poetry in the *Republic*, this paper argues that Plato takes poetry to be morally corrupting, not because of bad imitation, but because it represents and strengthens the illusory sentiments of an already corrupted character condition. Looking at the dialogue from this point of view can both help to clarify how the illusions of poetry are morally dangerous, and not just metaphysically wrong, and why Plato puts so much effort into explaining them.

Introduction

Plato's account of poetry in book ten of the *Republic* is most often understood in terms of how the illusions of poetry influence and degenerate the soul. Poetry, it is argued, is efficient because its subjects lack the ability to evaluate the deceptive imagery it presents and this imagery is taken to be corrupting because it is "at a third remove from the truth" (599d).¹

However, in the light of Plato's discussion of how the illusions of poetry are adapted to its addressees, there are reasons to question this view. As this paper sets out to argue, the poets cannot construct false images and impose them on their subjects at all – because the illusions of the poets are merely reproductions of the conceited sentiments and convictions of already corrupted souls. As we shall see, the nature and efficiency of poetry is better understood as a part of the mechanisms of appetite formation and in terms of what Plato calls *Diomedean necessity*.

¹ So, e.g., Lorenz (2006), Moss (2008, 35), Ferrari (1989), Nehamas (1982), Belfiore (1983) or Burnyeat (1999). For discussion, esp. of Moss (2008) and Lorenz (2006), see below.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section argues that all souls prone to be affected by poetry have what Plato calls “a multiform character”. Against the background of the psychology of book four and nine of the *Republic*, the second section suggests that this type of character is best described in terms of a soul condition governed by its non-rational and appetitive part. The third section argues that the mechanisms of poetical illusion should therefore be understood in terms of what Plato describes as a circle of imitative reproduction called *Diomedean necessity*. The paper concludes by arguing that poetry, for Plato, is morally corrupting, not because it is a false echo of ultimate reality, as is often taken to be the case, but because it mirrors and strengthens an already corrupted illusion.

1. The Addressee of Poetry

Although Plato’s account of the addressee of poetry is most explicit in book ten, the basic idea is prepared already in book three. Poetry is used for educational purposes in childhood, because children cannot properly distinguish its underlying meaning. Children are not able to understand reason (λόγος, 402a2) and they are influenced by poetry because they lack rational judgement. “For the young”, Socrates explains, “are not able to judge (κρίνειν) what is, and what is not, the underlying meaning (ὑπόνοια)” (378d6-e1).²

In book ten the same idea is spelled out in less forbearing terms. Those souls that are affected by the illusions of poetry are not able to listen to reason.³ Instead they will think that what they see is what they get and their actions will be unmediated and direct. Poetry – just like scene-painting and witchcraft – will exploit this weakness (cf. 602c10-d4). It will address the non-rational part of the soul and it will try to influence it directly. It is as such, Socrates explains, that poetry affects children and other senseless people (598c2). Without the ability to count and measure and weigh, they do not have the ability to dismantle the illusions of the poets (cf. 603c-d). These operations are exclusive to the rational or calculative (λογιστικός) abilities of

² The proper tool to judge (κρίνειν) is reason (λόγος) and only a philosopher has the proper tool (cf. 582d). All translations, if not otherwise stated, are based on Grube and Reeve, in Cooper (1997). The Greek is Burnet’s (1903).

³ On the apparent contradiction between the account of poetry in books two and three and the account offered in book ten, see Moss (2007, 417).

their souls (602d-e), and for this reason, Socrates concludes, poetry should not be able to affect those with a properly working rational soul.⁴

Clearly, then, an imitative poet isn't by nature related to the part of the soul that rules in such a character, and if he's to attain a good reputation with the majority of people, his cleverness isn't directed to pleasing it. Instead, he's related to the excitable and multiform character (ποικίλον ἦθος) [...]⁵ (605a1-6).

In contrast to a character who can be distinguished by means of the active ability to expose the veils of the illusionists, the primary addressee of poetry is an excitable (ἀγανακτικτός) and multiform (ποικίλος) type of character (ἦθος). This is a person who is not disposed to listen to reason. And in this person there is also a conflict. Reason tells him one thing, and another part something else. He is "at war with himself", we learn; and holds "opposite beliefs about the same thing at the same time" (603d1-3).⁶ Socrates explains what he means in terms of optical illusions.

[T]he same things appear bent and straight to those who view them in water and out, or concave and convex, owing to similar errors of vision about colours, and there is obviously every confusion of this sort in our souls. And so scene-painting in its exploitation of this weakness of our nature falls nothing short of witchcraft, and so do jugglery and many other such contrivances (602c10-d4).

In the case of the multiform and excitable character there is a conflict.⁷ And poetry, just like scene-painting, takes advantage of this conflict. Pertaining to the poetical art of imitating human action in grief or joy (cf. 603c), poetry speaks to our doubts and inner conflicts. Is it not the same, Socrates asks, with poetry as with scene-painting? Does it not try to take advantage of persons with self-conflicting points of views?

⁴ I write *should be* because it is clear that even those with rational abilities can sometimes be affected, cf. 605c and 606a. For discussion, see Lorenz (2006, 64).

⁵ "because it is easy to imitate", Socrates adds. I shall return to this qualification below.

⁶ For this use of belief (δόξα), see Lorenz (2006, 61 & 67f).

⁷ Judging from what we can learn about psychic civil war from book four (443c-444c), this is a person who is not properly unified, because that part of him that is prompt to believe the illusion disturbs the unified order that would establish itself, reason ruling.

Is a man, then, in all this of one mind (ὁμονητικῶς [...] δικάεται) with himself, or just as in the domain of sight [i.e. the optical illusions] there was faction and strife and he held within himself contrary opinions at the same time about the same things, so also in our actions there is division and strife of the man with himself? But I recall that there is no need now of our seeking agreement on this point, for in our former discussion we were sufficiently agreed that our soul at any one moment teems with countless such self-contradictions (603c10-d7).

As is fairly common knowledge, and as the last quotes reveal, Plato's account of the character-type affected by poetry is framed in an argument for a division of the soul. As Jessica Moss has pointed out, the example of the optical illusion, as it is construed to also be explanatory for poetry, is designed to show that there are two soul parts in play.

In Book 10 [...] Socrates [...] argues for a divide between the rational part and some other part of the soul [...] At 602c-603a he gives an argument based on the cognitive dissonance that sometimes occurs when we experience optical illusion: the rational part calculates the truth and believes in accordance with its calculations, while an inferior part believes that things are as they appear (Moss 2008, 35).

Faced with an optical illusion, a conflict appears. On the one hand, one sees the painted wall as concave or convex, and on the other, rational calculation operating, one realizes that it is really flat. This gives rise to a conflict in how one perceives reality. And since the main task of the rational or calculative part of the soul is to do the evaluation, it cannot be this part of the soul that accepts the appearance of the illusion.

[That] which puts its trust in measurement (μέτρον) and calculation (λογισμός) must be the best part of the soul [and thus] that which opposes it must belong to what is the inferior part in us (τῶν φαύλων ἂν τι εἴη ἐν ἡμῖν) (603a4-7).

Parallel to the argument from optical illusion, there is also another argument that makes the same point. When someone experiences a great misfortune, Socrates argues, he is often faced with two opposing motivational forces. On

the one hand he feels that he wants to express his sadness and do many things in private that he would be ashamed to do in public (604a). Yet, there is also something in him that tells him to do the opposite, on the other. Reason and norm (“λόγος καὶ νόμος”), Socrates explains, will offer resistance. Reminding us of the *principle of opposites* articulated in book four (436b-c), Socrates concludes that “where there are two opposite impulses (ἀγωγή) in a man at the same time about the same thing we say that there must needs be two things in him” (604b3-4). First, then, there is one part of this man's soul that will obey reason and norm and try to keep calm. Second, there is another part of his soul that will make him behave like a wailing child (παῖς, 604c). The first part, in its wish to heal the pain, is ready to listen to rational argument or calculation (λογισμός, 604d5), while the second part, driving us back to the pain, is irrational (ἀλόγιστος), passive (ἀργός) and a friend of cowardice (“δειλίας φίλον”, 604d10).

The relevant example of poetry in this case, I believe, is when one is or is not similarly affected by the misfortune expressed in tragedy. Socrates spells it out a few lines down.

I think you know that the very best of us, when we hear Homer or some other of the makers of tragedy imitating one of the heroes who is in grief, and is delivering a long tirade in his lamentations or chanting and beating his breast, feel pleasure, and abandon ourselves and accompany the representation with sympathy and eagerness, and we praise as an excellent poet the one who most strongly affects us in this way (605c10-d5).

There is one part of this man's soul that will listen to reason and try to keep calm, and there is another part that will make him loose himself, and join in the grief or pleasure of the hero.

In arguing against the claim that the argument from optical illusion cannot be said to pertain to the same soul parts as the argument from emotion, Moss points our attention to 605b-c, which she translates as follows.

[T]he imitative poet... , by making images (εἶδωλα) far removed from the truth, gratifies that part of the soul that is thoughtless and doesn't distinguish greater things from lesser, but thinks that the same things are at the one time large and another small.⁸

⁸ Moss' translation (2008, 45).

Here, Moss argues, Socrates makes it clear that the two arguments for the division of the soul are designed to make the same point. “The imitative poet”, she writes, “appeals to the part of the soul that believes that a person standing at a distance is smaller than he was when standing closer – that is, to the part of the soul that perceives and believes optical illusions” (Moss 2008, 45).

Hendrik Lorenz has argued in similar terms. “In fact”, Lorenz writes, “he [Socrates] goes out of his way to make it clear that he takes imitative poetry to appeal to the same part that painting [i.e. optical illusion] appeals to” (Lorenz 2006, 63). Lorenz also reminds his readers that Socrates at 605c (in describing that part of the soul which is easily excited to grief and pleasure) most probably is referring back to 602c-603b (where the optical illusions of the scene-painters are described).

Granted that Moss and Lorenz are right, we also have reason to ask how this distinction squares with the psychology made earlier. At this point in the dialogue, Socrates’ general psychological framework has already been spelled out. Initiated in book four and supplemented in book nine, Socrates has already shown that the soul can be analysed in three parts, that these three parts can be distinguished in terms of their objects of desire (ἐπιθυμία), in terms of their specific pleasure (ἡδονή), and that we accordingly also can distinguish three types of soul conditions depending on what soul-part is the ruling principle (ἀρχή), i.e. the condition of the philosopher, the condition of the victory-lover and the condition of the soul ruled by its appetitive part. Socrates cannot of course have forgotten this when he here, in book ten, comes to argue about poetry. And it seems fairly safe to claim that we have reasons to understand the twofold distinction made in book ten against the background of the threefold made earlier.

Judging from how Socrates articulates the matter, it is also clear that the illusion-believing part of book ten “is or includes appetite and spirit”, as Moss formulates the matter (2008, 42). Let us look at the passages that seem to make this plausible:

Clearly, then, an imitative poet isn’t by nature related to the part of the soul that rules in such a character [i.e. a rational and calm character], and if he’s to attain a good reputation with the majority of people, his cleverness isn’t directed to pleasing it. Instead, he’s related to the excitable and *multiform character* (ποικίλον ἦθος) [...] Like a painter, he produces work that is inferior with respect to truth and that appeals

to a part of the soul that is similarly inferior rather than to the best part. [H]e arouses, nourishes, and strengthen this part of the soul and so destroys the rational one (τὸ λογιστικόν) [...] Similarly we say that an imitative poet puts a bad constitution in the soul of each individual by making images that are far removed from the truth and by gratifying the irrational (ἀνόητος) part (605a2-c2, my italics).

And later down the line:

And so in regard to the emotions of sex (ἀφροδισίων) and anger (θυμοῦ), and all the appetites (πάντων τῶν ἐπιθυμητικῶν) and pains and pleasures of the soul which we say accompany all our actions, the effect of poetic imitation is the same. For it waters and fosters these feelings when what we ought to do is to dry them up, and it establishes them as our rulers when they ought to be ruled (606d1-5).

Both Moss and Lorenz interpret these passages to mean that the illusion-believing part is or includes the appetitive part *and* the spirited part (Moss 2008, 45 & Lorenz 2006, 65). Firstly, it is clear that it cannot be the rational part (τὸ λογιστικόν), since poetry is not supposed to water but destroy this part. Secondly, it is reasonable to believe that poetry appeals to the appetitive part, because poetry is supposed to water all appetites (“πάντων τῶν ἐπιθυμητικῶν”). Thirdly, we have reason to think that poetry occasionally also speaks to the spirited part, because poetry may also water spirit or anger (θυμός).

In addition to this way of trying to square the threefold division of the soul in book nine (and in book four), with the twofold division of book ten, so as to further understand to whom poetry is primarily addressed, we also have reasons to read these passages in terms of the *character-type* to which poetry speaks.

In accordance with what we have seen so far, it is thus possible to distinguish four interconnected criteria that must be satisfied by the character-type who is supposed to be liable to be affected by poetry. (1) There must be a possibility for conflict in his soul. He must be liable to have one part of his soul tell him one thing (i.e. the rational or calculative part) and another part something else (i.e. the illusion-believing part). (2) In view of this conflict, he must also be disposed to often side with the illusion-believing part. He must be easily excitable (ἀγανακτητικός) and he must be heavily

influenced by what his illusion-believing part tells him. (3) In effect, he cannot be ruled by reason, because reason, by means of calculation and reasoning, would make him immune to the poetical illusions. And (4) he must also be possible to describe in terms of being multiform (*ποικίλος*). Accordingly, it is also possible to imagine three scenarios by means of which we can test which character-type will do.

In the first we have a philosopher (*φιλόσοφος*). As book nine reads, a philosopher desires truth and knowledge, takes pleasure in such and is ruled by his rational and calculative part (581b-e). Since the philosopher will only believe what the rational part says, the philosopher will see through the poetical illusion and will not be affected. In accordance with the four criteria described above the philosopher can be excluded: (1) There are no conflicts in the philosophers' soul (cf. 444b). (2) The philosopher does not listen to the illusion-believing part. (3) The philosopher is ruled by reason and (4) is never described to be multiform.

In the second scenario we have a lover of honour and victory (*φιλόνομος*) listening to the poem. The victory-lover has a desire for power, victory, honour and a good reputation (581a-c). He takes pleasure in such things and is ruled by the spirited part of his soul (439e and 581a-b).⁹ Not being ruled by his rational part, he will not be immune to the poetical illusion. The lover of victory and honour may occasionally also be affected by the poem, it seems, *but* mainly insofar as it corresponds to his particular desire. We can imagine him listening to a poem articulated in the vein of the Leontius example (cf. 439e). Let us say that the poem describes the tragic separation of a child and her mother transformed into the guises of a fawn and a white-tailed deer. All the children around the victory-lover start to weep. Eventually the poem also starts to get to him. He feels how his eyes start to water and how his nose starts to tickle. In this situation we can imagine his spirit to kick in. He will not allow himself to be embarrassed in this way. What if somebody would see him? If he starts to weep like a child (cf. 604c), he will become a laughingstock. He becomes angry with himself and the spirited part of his soul will accordingly resist the message of the poem. Yet, he will not get angry because the poem excites spirit or anger, but rather because he realizes that he cannot allow the poem to affect him, that is, if he is to keep behaving in an honourable way. In contrast to the case of the philosopher, it will not be his rational part that makes him resist the message of the poem. Instead it will be his pride and his desire not to become embarrassed. So,

⁹ Cf. Cooper (1985).

although we can imagine poems of honour and glory, which he most likely will devour with great pride, there are also reasons to think that he will not accept everything he hears. In referring to Socrates' argument from emotion (603e-604e), Lorenz makes a similar point:

From spirit's point of view [ruling in the victory-lover], it is a disgrace for a man to behave that way (cf. 605 E 4) [being affected by the grief or pleasure of the poem's hero]. Any enjoyment we may get out of *such* imitation therefore must belong to a part of us below reason and spirit (Lorenz 2006, 63).

In accordance with the four criteria described, we can also test if the victory-lover fits the picture. (1) Since he is not ruled by reason, there might certainly be a conflict in his soul. (2) But it is not as clear that he always, or even often, sides with the illusion-believing part, at least not insofar as this part of his soul is also to extend beyond the desire for honour and victory. (3) He is not ruled by reason, yet (4) he is never described to be multiform. He does not seem to be a perfect match.

In the third scenario we have that character-type called a lover of profit (φιλοκερδής) listening to the poem (581e). As we soon shall see in more detail, this character-type desires a multitude of things, he takes pleasure in them all, and his motivations do primarily spring from that part of him from which his multiform (ποικίλος) desires also spring. Indeed, one of those personality types described in book eight and nine as being dominated by this multiform part of the soul is also called multiform. Moss (2008, 43) articulates the relevance of this last point perceptibly:

'Multicolored' [or *multiform*, as I translate ποικίλος] has earlier been used to describe the democratic character, who is ruled by his appetites (561e; cf. 557c, 588c, 559d), and to describe the appetites themselves (588c; see also 404e).¹⁰

¹⁰ In the *Republic*, there are three character-types or soul conditions that are described to be primarily ruled by the appetitive or multiform part of their souls: the oligarch, the democrat and the tyrant. Two of these characters types also seem to fit the profile of the one liable to be affected by poetry in book ten: the democrat and the tyrant; the democrat because he is explicitly said to be multiform (ποικίλος, 561e, cf. also 557c and 559d) and the tyrant because he is the primary example of a character who is totally ruled by the multiform (ποικίλος) part of his soul. The oligarch does not seem to fit the profile because he is someone that forbids anything that is not instrumental for making a profit. He will censure anything that has to do with unnecessary

Not listening to his rational or calculative part, the character-type ruled by his multiform (ποικίλος) soul-part will certainly be liable to believe the poetical illusion. Poetry will speak to the part of his soul that motivates him. It will water it, make it stronger (605b and 606d), and the multiform character will have no reasons to resist. In accordance with the four criteria described above, we can also test if this character fits the picture. (1) Since he is not ruled by reason, there might certainly be a conflict in his soul. (2) Being primarily influenced by the appetitive part of the soul, he will mainly, if not always, side with his illusion-believing part. (3) He is not ruled by reason, and (4) he can certainly be described in terms of being multiform (ποικίλος).

Accordingly it seems reasonable to draw two general conclusions with regard to the addressee of poetry. It is (a) justified to think that the illusion-believing part of the soul in book ten corresponds to the appetitive and spirited parts of book nine (and four). And (b) as I, with Lorenz, want to qualify the matter, we also have reasons to think that although both spirited and multiform character-types may be affected by poetry, the primary addressee of poetry is the multiform type. But what, then, is the soul condition of this character-type like?

2. The Multiform Soul

Drawing on book four's account of the tripartite soul, the details of psychological multiform is spelled out in book nine. As is well known, the human soul is here imagined as if it would be like some ancient creature. It is somewhat like the Chimaera, the Scylla or the Cerberus. Encapsulated in the shape of a human it consists of three parts. The smallest part is supposed to look like a human and the second smallest part like a lion. The third part, i.e. that part which is the ruling principle (ἀρχή, 580d) in the soul condition we are dealing with now, is described in the following way.

Mould, then, a single shape of a multiform (ποικίλος) and many-headed (πολυκέφαλος) beast that has a ring of heads of tame and wild beasts and can change them and cause to spring forth from itself all such growths (588c7-10).

This part of the soul is the biggest. It is irrational (ἄλογος, 591c6). And it is understood in terms of being like a multiform and multi-headed beast

desire and pleasure. For discussion, see Annas (1981, 134 & 142), Brown (2012) and Moss (2008, 43).

(θηρίον). The heads of the beast sit in a ring and consist of a mixture of wild (ἄγριος) and tame (ἥμερος) ones. The forms of these heads can change and be transformed by the monster itself (“ἐξ αὐτοῦ”, 588c9).¹¹ In the case of the character-type Socrates describes to be ruled by appetite, it is also this multi-form and multi-headed beast that calls the shots (581b-c).

In view of its lack of reason and its multi-form nature, Socrates has a few Stephanus pages earlier also offered an explanation of how this beast-like part of the soul might manifest itself. At the beginning of book nine, Socrates explains what happens at night. When we sleep, the reasonable (λογιστικός, 571c4, cf. 439d) and tame (ἥμερος) part of the soul falls asleep and the wild (ἄγριος) and beast-like (θηριώδης) awakens (571c). Filled with food and wine, Socrates goes on, the beast-like part of the soul shakes the sleep away and skips out trying to live up to its peculiar character (ἦθος, 571c). As such, it is also totally out of bound, Socrates explains. It allows itself to do anything.

It does not shrink from attempting to lie with a mother in fancy or with anyone else, man, god or animal. It is ready for any foul deed of blood; it abstains from no food, and, in a word, falls short of no extreme of folly and shamelessness (571c9-d4).

However unappealing the ways of this part of the soul are described to be, there is, as Socrates goes on to explain, no escape. It is there in each and every one of us. The evidence is obvious, Socrates argues, and at night, in the visions of our dreams, it makes itself manifest. It persists, he explains, even in the most moderate of souls (572a-b). Even if we may want it to resist it and although we may perhaps be able to control it (589a-b), neither reason nor argument can make it go away.

Given the evidence from our dreams, the wild and tame heads of the multi-headed beast are also given a further explanation. A few lines above, in the description of what happen at night, Socrates introduces something he calls unlawful (παράνομος) appetites (ἐπιθυμῖαι). The unlawful appetites, he explains, are also unnecessary (μὴ ἀνάγκη), and they are present in us all, though they are more or less tamed in different persons (571b). It is also under these headings that the appetites he has just described falls.

¹¹ For a discussion of what these different parts of the monster, and its different heads, represent, see Perry (2007, 408ff). See also below.

Besides being an articulation of the difference between *lawful* and *lawless* appetites, this is most likely a reference to 558d, where Socrates makes a more elaborate distinction between *necessary* and *unnecessary* types of appetites. Here Socrates explains that unnecessary appetites are always abundant, but as such also redundant (559c). While necessary appetites are exemplified by bread and relishes, insofar as they aid the wellness of the body, unnecessary appetites are given a somewhat more evasive description. They are characterized in terms of honey (μέλι, 559d), and the image we get has to do with the many possible and impossible types of honeys that we may imagine if we would spend a day or two in the wildness of bestial pleasure (559d).

Accordingly, it is also possible to spell out the taxonomy that Socrates has in mind. Appetite can be either necessary or unnecessary. Necessary appetites can be understood in terms of food and drink. Unnecessary appetites can either be in accordance with law or they can be lawless. Lawless appetites can be exemplified by incest or bestiality, while unnecessary yet law abiding appetites can be exemplified by, say, prostitution or other kinds of (what in Plato's time was) legal sexual-overindulgence (cf. 559c and 571c-d).

In trying to reconcile this taxonomy with the image of the multi-headed beast offered at 588c, Richard Perry has argued that even though it might seem natural to identify the wild heads of the many-headed beast with the unnecessary appetites, and the tame heads with the necessary, such an explanation may cause more problems than it solves (Perry 2007, 409). Indeed, if we are to juxtapose the passage on the multi-headed beast with the passage on dreams, all of the heads are really unnecessary and unlawful (571b). At night, while our tame part is still asleep, the beast-like part of our soul awakens, and the whole of this beast-like part of the soul is described to be wild (ἄγριος, 571c5). So, even though this part of the soul is supposed to have both wild and tame heads, the part itself is described to be wild.

Regarding this problem, and the general problem of how to capture and determine this part of the soul, it might be helpful to make a methodological point. For although the distinction between the necessary and the unnecessary appetites (lawful and lawless) fills a function in determining the moral value and taxonomical scope of the appetite in question, this distinction does not help us to determine the nature of what we are trying to understand. The many heads of the multi-headed beast may be wild and tame. There is certainly a difference in the way they are supposed to be regarded. Likening the heads of the beast to a farmer's field, Socrates also points out that we

should grow the tame ones and get rid of the wild (589b). But this does not really explain what these heads are or what they may change into (cf. 588c). Indeed, Socrates' account of their shared and more fundamental nature is also spelled out in a different set of terms.

Regarding the first and second parts of the soul, i.e. the human and the lion, there seems to be no greater problems in determining their natures. This is done, simply, by looking at their objects. The human part desires knowledge and truth (581b) and the lion part desires victory and honour (581a). Their distinctiveness as different soul parts and as different sources of motivation seems to lie in the different natures of their objects. As it comes to the third part, however, Socrates is much more cautious, and his description of this part as the appetitive part is carefully qualified.

One part, we say, is that with which a man learns, one is that with which he feels anger. But the third part, owing to its manifold forms (διὰ πολυειδίαν), we had no one peculiar name to give to it (ἐνὶ οὐκ ἔσχομεν ὀνόματι προσεῖπεῖν ἰδίῳ αὐτοῦ), but gave it the name of its biggest and strongest element; for we called it the appetitive (ἐπιθυμητικόν) part because of the intensity of its appetites concerned with food and drink and love and their accompaniments (περὶ τὴν ἐδωδὴν ἐπιθυμιῶν καὶ πόσιν καὶ ἀφροδίσια καὶ ὅσα ἄλλα τούτοις ἀκόλουθα) (580d10-e4).

Because of its multiform-ness (“διὰ πολυειδίαν”), Socrates explains, the multi-headed part of the soul cannot be given any one, single and peculiar (ἰδία, 580e1) name. Calling it *appetitive* (“ἐπιθυμητικόν”), in the sense of being oriented towards such things as food, drink and sex, may give us a hint of the objects it *may* pertain to, but this name does not as such determine or exhaust it (cf. 580e). Many other names are presumably possible (Annas 1981, 129). Socrates does, for example, remind us not to forget that this part's desire for food, wine and sex is equally strong as its desire for money. And therefore, Socrates explains, it must also be called the money-loving (φιλοχρήματος) part (580e).

[W]e called it the appetitive (ἐπιθυμητικόν) part because of the intensity of its appetites (ἐπιθυμιῶν) concerned with food and drink and sex and their accompaniments, and likewise the money-loving

(φιλοχρήματον) part, because money (χρῆμα) is the chief instrument for the gratification (ἀποτελοῦνται) of such desires (580e2-581a5).

Although it might be argued that there are reasons to think that Socrates calls this part of the soul money-loving because it is supposed to have just as many objects of desire as money can buy, Socrates' primary reason for calling it money-loving is because of the instrumental value of money. A money-lover is not someone that loves money because he likes the way it feels in his hand. He loves money because they can help him to gratify (ἀποτελέω, 581a5) his appetites. The soul part Socrates here describes in terms of being money-loving is most likely also called this in virtue of the multiform (ποικίλος) nature of its objects of desire (588c).

But all of this may seem to be insufficient. Since the two other parts of the soul can be determined and defined, it would also seem possible to determine and define the multi-headed part. Just as in the case of the other parts of the soul, one may be inclined to think that there should be a way of identifying it by means of specifying what kind of objects are particular to this type of desire as opposed to the other. Yet, as it seems, in this case such a type of identification causes problems. As it comes to appetite and to the character-type ruled by appetite, the possible objects of desire are described to be so diverse that they cannot be properly exhausted. But how, then, are we do understand this?

Socrates account of poetry offers an important clue. And although it does not precisely specify the particular type of object pertaining to appetite, it does tell us something important about the process of how its objects are set and about the scope of what may be involved. Let us take a closer look at this.

3. Diomedean Necessity

As we have seen, poetry is primarily addressed to a character-type that Socrates describes in terms of being multiform (605a). This type of character is not disposed to listen to reason; and not listening to reason, it will not be able to properly evaluate a poetical illusion when faced with one. Of this the poet will try to take advantage. Accordingly, the poet will not address or relate to someone that will not be affected, but “[i]nstead, he’s related to the excitable and multiform character (ποικίλον ἦθος)” (605a5). Poetry speaks to that part of this character’s soul that is the ruling principle (ἀρχή). And, as we have seen, this is the appetitive part. Poetry waters and strengthens it (cf.

605b and 606d). In fact, when the multiform character listens to poetry he will also be deeply moved. He will give in (*ἐνδίδωμι*), Socrates explains (605c-d). He will share the grief and pleasure expressed by the poem, and when influenced in this way, his disposition will also be deeply affected (cf. 605c-606d). Socrates explains how this works in terms of tragic poetry and its staging.

If you reflect, first, that the part of the soul that is forcibly controlled in our private misfortunes and that hungers for the satisfaction of weeping and wailing, because it desires (*ἐπιθυμεῖν*) these things by nature, is the very part that receives satisfaction and enjoyment from poets, and second, that the part of ourselves that is best by nature, relaxes its guard over the lamenting part when it is watching the sufferings of somebody else. [...] I suppose that only a few are able to figure out that enjoyments of other people's sufferings is necessary transferred to our own and that the pitying part, if it is nourished and strengthened on the suffering of others, won't be easily held in check when we ourselves suffers (606a3-b8).

Relaxing our rational guard only for a few moments, the poem will nourish and strengthen that part of our souls that has an appetite for weeping and wailing. And the disposition thus established will also be transferred into our private lives. Faced with sorrow or joy in private, Socrates says, we will start to behave like we behaved when we were enjoying the poem. It does not seem to matter if it is tragic, comic or erotic (cf. 606c-d). Poetry will establish the desire awakened so that we will feel in private what we feel at the theatre. The objects pertaining to the appetites of the poem's hero will thus also establish themselves in the poems' addressee. He will start to desire what the hero desires and he will start to feel like him.

Not everybody, however, needs to be affected in this way. Keeping the rational part of our souls awake and at its guard, the influence of poetry should be possible to avoid. Instead of listening to that part of our souls that is affected by the poetical illusions, we may listen to reason, look at the poem for what it really is, measure and weigh it, calculate and reason about it, and thus realize that the behaviour staged by the poem is merely a game, as Socrates says (602b).

For the multiform and easily excitable character, however, this is not an alternative. Not listening to reason and being primarily dominated by the

appetites and sentiments of his illusion-believing part, he will be deeply affected by what he hears and sees. The disposition thus awakened in the theatre will be transferred to his character. Just as the wailing hero on the stage, he will weep and cry when he suffers misfortune, and just like the hero in the comedy, he will become a comedian (κωμωδοποιός) in private (“ἐν τοῖς οἰκείοις”, 606c8). Poetry will deeply influence his soul and it will determine the way he acts and reacts. It will establish his objects of desire. As it seems reasonable to believe, it will determine how his motivations are disposed.

One crucial question in this context does of course concern the scope of what poetry may thus establish. Given the general definition of poetry spelled out at 603c, Socrates does also offer an answer. Poetry is a matter of representation. Poetry “represents (μιμῆται) human action, forced or voluntarily and as a result of their actions supposing themselves to have fared well or ill and in all this feeling either grief or joy” (603c4-7). As Socrates also goes on to explain, the scope of poetical influence is however limited. Since poetry can only represent, it is limited by the already prevalent desires and motivations of the general public.

The argument for this is spelled out in terms of how poetry in general is nothing but illusion and simulacrum (φάντασμα, 599a2, cf. 598a-599c). The argument is familiar and we may find it, in a variety of forms, throughout Plato’s works.¹² Poets (just like painters, sophist and other charlatans) lay claim to be all-knowing (πάνσοφος, 598d3-4), because they represent and portray everything with their art (598d, cf. 397a). A poet, Socrates says, must know all skills and all professions; if the poet is to be able to portray all kinds of persons, in all kinds of situations, he must know what he is going to portray. He must know all aspects of human life: warfare, generalship, city government, education, all crafts and arts, medicine and everything that has to do with human dignity and baseness (598c-599d). If a good poet, Socrates explains, is to make fine poetry about those subject matters he considers, he must also know what he is going to talk about (598e). But no one can know everything. And therefore the poets and their works must be shadows and illusions.

But for all that, my friend, this, I take it, is what we ought to bear in mind in all such cases: When anyone reports to us of someone, that he

¹² E.g. *Apol.*, 22c or 22d, *Gorg.*, 464c and 501a-b, *Soph.*, 231b-c or 233c-d, *Phdr.*, 275a-b or *Laws*, 811b or 819a.

has met a man who knows all the crafts and everything else that men know, and that there is nothing that he does not know more exactly than anybody else, our tacit rejoinder must be that he is a simple fellow, who apparently has met some magician or sleight-of-hand man and imitator and has been deceived by him into the belief that he is all-wise, because of his own inability to put to the proof and distinguish knowledge, ignorance and imitation (598c6-d5).

Only someone without the proper ability to evaluate the knowledge of the poet will believe his illusions. In exemplifying this with painting, Socrates explains, children and senseless people will believe (598c2). They will believe that what they see is the real thing, and they will appreciate the images of the poets as if they were reality. But, of course, they are not. As Socrates insists, the images that the poets make have little with reality to do. Poetry only imitates what most people think is the case. The poetical art is only a kind of flattery. And, in fact, Socrates says, the poets neither know what they are representing nor do they have a correct opinion about this (602a8).

The argument for this is spelled out in terms of a flute. Suppose that the poet is to make a poem about a flute. There are three kinds of arts: (a) the art that uses the flute, pertaining to the musician, (b) the art that makes the flute, pertaining to the flute-maker, and (c) the art that represents the flute, pertaining to the poet. The musician knows how the instrument works and he knows whether or not a flute is good or bad. This he reports to the flute-maker. And accordingly the flute-maker gets a correct opinion (601d-e). The poet, however, gets nothing. He can neither play the flute nor does he listen to the flute-player when he is making his images. His art is neither based on knowledge nor on correct opinion. And instead of listening to those that know, the poet listens to the general public. He listens to the multitude.

Yet still he [the poet] will none the less imitate, though in every case he does not know in what way the thing is bad or good. But, as it seems, the thing he will imitate will be the thing that appears beautiful to the ignorant multitude (602b1-4).

Instead of trying to get to know the real nature of the flute, by means of listening to someone that knows this, or at least to someone that has a correct opinion about this, the poet will be satisfied if he manages to make

representation that the general public will approve and find beautiful. And since they, in general, know nothing about flutes either, it is all a matter of unfounded convictions (cf. 602b).

One reason Socrates offers in order to explain how this can be true is spelled out in terms of effort. Knowledge and correct opinion are hard things to represent. And since the poet really only is trying to influence the ignorant multitude, he has no motivations to get to know the reality of things.

And does not the fretful part of us present many and varied occasions for imitation, while the intelligent and temperate disposition, always remaining approximately the same, is neither easy to imitate nor to be understood when imitated, especially by a nondescript mob assembled in the theatre? (604e1-5)

As we have seen, it is also for this reason that poetry is more akin to the multiform character than to the simple and unified one.

Clearly, then, an imitative poet isn't by nature related to the part of the soul that rules in such a character, and if he's to attain a good reputation with the multitude (τοῖς πολλοῖς), his cleverness isn't directed to pleasing it [the simple and unified soul]. Instead, he's related to the excitable and multiform character (ποικίλον ἦθος) since it is easy to imitate (605a1-6).

The multiform character-type is just like the multitude. Not only is he just as easy to imitate, but he also shares the convictions of the many. When the poet is supposed to make his images, it is this he must take into consideration. Instead of trying to get to know the reality of things, the poet must learn what the ignorant multitude thinks is the case. And just as in the case of the flute, he must learn to represent this, that is, he must learn to represent not the way things really are (the real flute) but the way things appear to be for the general public (what the multitude thinks a flute is). Instead of representing how an intelligent person, with knowledge of the flute, would use and treat the flute, the poet will make an image of what the "nondescript mob" thinks is the case.

Back in book six, this line of thought is also eloquently captured. If one is to please the multitude, one must learn its moods and appetites.

It is as if a man were acquiring the knowledge of the moods and appetites (τὰς ὀργὰς [...] καὶ ἐπιθυμίας) of a great strong beast which he had in his keeping, how it is to be approached and touched, and when and by what things it is made most savage or gentle, yes, and the several sounds it is wont to utter on the occasion of each, and again what sounds uttered by another make it tame or fierce, and after mastering this knowledge by living and spending time with the creature, and should construct thereof a system and art and turn to the teaching of it, knowing nothing in reality about which of these opinions and desires is honourable or base, good or evil, just or unjust, but should apply all these terms to the judgements of the great beast, calling the things that pleased it good, and the things that vexed it bad, having no other account to render of them, but should call what is necessary just and honourable, never having observed how great is the real difference between the necessary and the good, and being incapable of explaining it to another (493a9-c6).

In order to please the multitude one must study its moods and appetites. One must learn to understand what it likes and dislikes. And to get to know this, one must live and interact with it. One must observe the behaviour of the beast and spend time with it.¹³ Only thus may one learn how to please it.

If we take a closer look at the description of what is going on here, one thing that presumably is supposed to strike the reader as absurd is the fact that the knowledge in play is totally void of moral concerns. According to Socrates' description, what we are dealing with is a situation where moral notions, like good and evil, are simply used as names of what the beast likes and dislikes. The knowledge that the beast-keeper has is knowledge of what the beast desires and enjoys. The beast-keeper is no inventor, but rather a flatterer and a parrot. He listens to the beast, learns what it likes and uses this so as to make it happy. Calling the object of its cravings good and honourable, it is a matter of pleasing the multitude by means of representing its moods and appetites. Socrates describes the situation in this way.

If anyone approached the multitude (τοὺς πολλούς) to exhibit his poetry or some other piece of craftsmanship or his service to the city and gives them mastery over him to any degree beyond what is

¹³ In the quote above, Socrates is describing the art of a sophist, but, as he goes on to explain, the situation is the same for the poet (493d).

unavoidable, he'll be under Diomedean necessity, as it is called (ἡ Διομηδεΐα λεγομένη ἀνάγκη), to do the sort of thing of which they approve (493d3-7).

The Diomedean type of necessity (“ἡ Διομηδεΐα [...] ἀνάγκη”) Socrates here refers to is, in this context, a matter of being at the mercy of the multitude. The poet is driven forth by the many.¹⁴ The poet and his products become subject to the approval of the mass. Instead of trying to influence them by means of telling them what truly is right and good, the poet uses words like *right* and *good* as names of what pleases and satisfies the moods and appetites of the many.

However we are to understand the details of this, the basic point is clear. Insofar as the poet makes his poetry to please the multitude, he is speaking to them in virtue of being subjects to their appetites. Yet, since the appetites of the multitude thus determine the scope and contents of his poems, the objects of appetite that his poems establish are objects that the multitude already has an appetite for. How these objects became desirable in the first place we learn very little about, although it is quite clear that they do not spring from rational considerations.

Judging from the examples we are offered, the mechanisms of the Diomedean necessity are apparently also something quite common. Supposedly, they are in play every day – in courtrooms, at the theatre, on the battle field and at most meetings of the community (492c-d). Here, we learn, the multitude is at its best. With loud voices and shouts of blame and praise, it strengthens its own convictions and appetites. And by means of some designated poet (cf. 493d), the multitude gratifies itself by making the poet praise what it has an appetite for, calling this good, and blame what it dislikes, calling this bad. As Socrates also makes perfectly clear, the situation is not *status quo*. Something happens. And as they sit there in the theatre the words of the poet bounces from the walls around. Just like the applause affirming him, his words are doubled like echoes. Gathering up to a great flood of resonant sound and noise (492b-c), Socrates says, the voice of the poet reflects and enhances the sentiments of the many (493d). The poet establishes and re-establishes their already unfounded convictions and appetites. It is a Diomedean circle.

¹⁴ The expression *Diomedean necessity* might come from a story about Odysseus and Diomedes in which Diomedes drives Odysseus in front of him by means of striking him on the back with the flat of his sword. See Trzaskoma (2004, 87).

Summary and Conclusion

Poetry speaks to the weakness of our souls. It speaks to us when the voice of reason is silent. As such, the persuasive force of poetry is also most efficient as it comes to souls that are *multiform* (ποικίλος), that is, to souls whose motivations principally originate in that part of them that is likened to a multiform and multi-headed beast. The convictions and sentiments of such souls do not have their source in reason. Their motivations are not formed on the basis of rational calculation. Instead they are at the mercy of whatever appears to be the case. When Plato explains how the illusory imagery of poetry is internalized in the souls of its addressees, he is also quite clear in pointing out how poetry is corrupting. In contrast to how this is often understood, poetry is not corrupting because it merely misrepresents reality. Poetry is corrupting because it represents and re-establishes the appetitive sentiments of the general public. This is what Plato calls *Diomedean necessity*. By means of representing what the multitude already finds familiar, poetry deepens and re-establishes their already conceited convictions. And although it is clear that Plato thinks that these mechanisms can be exploited for educational purposes, he dismisses poetry because its echoes nourish the irrational cravings of our souls.

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