

FACT AND FICTION: THE SLIPPERINESS OF "TRUTH"  
IN RENAISSANCE LITERATURE

INSTRUCTOR: Dr. Vasiliki Markidou

Plato

Plato argued that there are two contrary forms of representation: one of which is valid for the realm of being and the other for the realm of becoming. Knowledge is only possible of the always-being, which is unchangeable. That which is becoming, that which is temporarily conditioned and changeable from moment to moment, can only be described, if at all, in the language of myth.

According to Plato, the Soul belongs to both the realm of being and the realm of becoming, and to neither. It is an in-between, a hybrid nature, incapable of renouncing either the pure being of the idea or the world of appearances and of becoming. Plato believed that the Soul is a non-material entity, that it is immortal, that it exists before the individual human body to which it is attached comes into being, and that it continues to exist following the death of the body.

Plato drew an antithesis between Idea and Matter and argued that God -the ultimate Idea- is not part of the universe but remains outside it. The finite material cannot be part of the infinite eternal reality. The finite world can be understood by the human being for it is made of the same material so the human being can experience and investigate it. The human being can also penetrate eternal truth in an indirect way. Because the finite and infinite are separate, the human being can deduce the infinite from its reverse manifestation in the finite.

Platonism held that behind the phenomenal world is a world of spiritual and intellectual entities, an invisible world that is real and that nourishes our life in the visible world. This habit of thought, this attitude that accepted the reality as well as primacy of the supersensory world, persisted until it began to be eroded by the philosophies of Bacon and Hobbes.

The forms are patterns or ideas of things. Yet, they exist independent of things and they are both prior and antecedent to the things that bear their names. Forms are absolute, external and immutable, whereas things are subject to alteration and decay. Forms are the eternal and unchanging paradigms of which sensible things are imperfect images. Plato defines knowledge as the apprehension of the knowledge of forms; what we discover through our senses he calls mere opinion. The devaluation of sense-experience and the corresponding exaltation of forms are an aspect of the dualism that colors Plato's thought. Some of these dualisms are:

- Soul & Body
- Knowledge & opinion
- Reality & appearance

- The Intelligible & the Visible
- The Rational & the Sensible

In each of these pairs, the first member is superior to the second, and in respect to the division between the forms and their appearances in the world of things, the first is also anterior to the second, having an independent existence outside time and space and being permanent, not transient.

Plato developed his Theory by means of dialectical arguments and he also expressed it through parable and myth. Characteristic of the early Platonic dialogues is Socrates' disarming claim of ignorance and a formal technique of cross-examination called elenchus, a method of questioning designed to lead a learner through stages or reasoning and to expose the contradictions in an opponent's original statement. This method is especially evident in his discussion of poetry with Ion, a rhapsode (a professional reciter of epic poetry). The middle period includes the Symposium, Cratylus and Republic, all began after the founding of the Academy (an institution devoted to research and instruction in philosophy and the Sciences). Plato envisioned the Academy as a school for statesmen where he could train a new kind of philosopher. These works develop the theory of Forms or Ideas anticipated in the early dialogues. The Forms constitute a realm of unchanging being to which the world of individual mutable objects is subordinate. Because the Forms are immutable, they are more real -and more true- than the changing material world.

In Ion, Plato's Socrates engages Ion in a debate about the nature of the rhapsode's knowledge of poetry, about the nature of poetry, and about the status of knowledge itself. He maintains that poetry is not an art; it is a form of divine madness: "the poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he gets inspired and goes out of his mind." Thus, Plato initiates the following debate which has had a long history in European literary criticism: Is poetry primarily a craft with a set of rules that can be taught and learned, or is it mainly the result of inspiration or genius? Plato's Socrates goes a step further. Not only is poetry a form of divinely inspired madness, but so is criticism. Socrates uses the image of a magnet as a metaphor for divine inspiration: as a magnet attracts iron and passes that attraction along, so the gods inspire the artist, who inspires the interpreter, who, in turn, inspires the audience. For Plato's Socrates, the work of a poet and a critic is not divided between inspirational and rational analysis, as it is for most modern critics; rather, it lies in a continuum, and the work of the critic is no more rational than that of a poet, the critics knowledge no more truthful.

In Republic, Plato's Socrates argues that far from being divinely inspired, poets lie and ought to be banished from the ideal republic or, at the very least, heavily censored and kept in check. The Republic is a book concerned with the ideal education of the guardians and the citizens. Socrates divides schooling into physical training of the body and music & poetry for the soul. Plato's criticism of poetry and its representations appears to be directed against a culture that believed "that poets know all crafts, all human affairs." According to Plato's Socrates, the world we perceive through our senses is illusory and deceptive. It depends on a prior realm of separately existing Forms, organized beneath the Form of Good. The realm of Forms is accessible not through the senses, as is the world of appearances, but only through rigorous philosophic discussion and thought, based on mathematical reasoning. For Plato's Socrates, measuring, counting and weighing, all bring us closer to the realm of Forms than do poetry's pale representations of nature. And all art and poetry, because they represent what is already an inferior representation of the true original (Forms), can only lead further away from truth, and further into a world of illusion and deception. To Plato, Art is a dangerous mis-representation of reality.

## Plotinus

Plotinus was the third century founder and greatest philosopher of Neoplatonism, that is, a philosophical system that locates reality in a transcendental spiritual realm that gives meaning to the visible world.

Plotinus revised Plato. Unlike the latter, he described an intellectual ascent from the corporeal world to the intelligible world of Forms. Plotinus denied that art is merely the pale imitation of a more perfect nature and argued instead that the artists struggle to invest an inchoate matter with form and beauty, thus enabling both viewers and artists to transcend the sensible world and discover the more "real" intelligible world of Forms, with the ultimate goal of unification with the One (i.e. the transcendent source of all Being). This idea influenced heavily the Christian Neoplatonism of the Middle Ages.

Plotinus was a strict dualist. He argued for a split between the intelligible world -that is, the world of ideas and Ideal Forms- and the sensible world of matter. For Plotinus, the intelligible world is unchanging and non-spatial; for this reason it is more real than the sensible world of matter. The sensible world is the changing image of the intelligible world, its extension in time and space.

In "On the Intellectual Beauty", Plotinus challenges Plato's controversial view of art as an imitation twice removed from the real (the intelligible), and therefore a copy of a copy. Nature, Plotinus argues, is an emanation and not a copy, of a higher reality, an ideal reality the artist may apprehend because the arts "run back up to the forming principles from which nature derives." "The forming principles from which nature derives" -i.e. the intelligible world- can be mapped through a hierarchy of three principal causes, or archai: Agency is transmitted from: 1) the Absolute Being, called the One or the Good 2) from which proceeds the Nous or Intellect, from which emanates 3) the Soul of the world, that is, the Soul of individual humans, animals and finally matter. The One transcends essence and existence; it has neither number nor name. It is the source of everything and the goal toward which everything strives (in latter Christian Neoplatonism the One is God). Intellect (the Nous) proceeds from the One; it is knowledge and wisdom. The Intellect's thoughts are the Platonic Forms, the eternal and unchanging paradigms of which sensible things are imperfect images. These Forms, for Plotinus, are substances and are more real than the sensible things through which we come to understand them. Finally, the Soul of Psyche proceeds from the Intellect and mediates between the intelligible and the sensible world. Soul is the lowest intelligible cause; it forms and orders the sensible world. Humans stand midway between the two worlds; the body belongs to the sensible world, while the soul has its roots in the intelligible world.

The goal of philosophy for Plotinus is the soul's transcendence of the sensible, its ascent toward an intuition of the Intellect, and ultimately a complete and ecstatic union with the One. Since the more beautiful a thing is the closer it is to the One, art's beauty can provide a privileged glimpse of the One, but not as an exact copy of it. The ascent from the beauty of the corporeal world to the beautiful itself is expressed in terms of Plotinus's doctrine of intellectual ascent. The beauty of the work of art resides not in its materiality, or anything of the sensible world, but in the form art imparts to the work. This visible form is itself merely a pale reflection of the beauty that resides in art itself, "which is greater and more beautiful than anything in the external object." Far from being a dangerous misrepresentation of reality, as Plato states in the Republic, art -the contemplation of the beautiful and ultimately of beauty itself- can be the means by which individuals ascend toward ecstatic unification with the One.

Plotinus's Neoplatonism locates reality in a transcendent world of spirit rather than in an imperfect material world. For this reason, his work appealed to the leaders of an emergent Christianity.

## Machiavelli

During the Renaissance, and in contrast to the Middle Ages, there is an indeterminacy of a stable ethical code, which breeds, paradoxically, a new kind of morality, attaching itself neither "positive" nor "negative" values. Thus, the transition from the medieval times to the early Renaissance marks a transition from the notion of virtue as intimately connected with religious institutional morality, to the notion of virtue first as individual integrity and will, and later, and more radically, as the ability of deviousness and insidiousness. Indeed, Renaissance humanists and courtiers self-consciously employed prudence as a very loose and ambivalent concept. Machiavelli's idea of the dissociation of prudence from the traditional view of ethics gave rise to a new ethics of adapting itself, by every means, to circumstance in order to survive and prosper, often at somebody else's expense. Such a version of prudence is artificial in that it is located outside the individual, regardless of her/his inherent beliefs and moral principles. The dissemination of Machiavellian thought led, at the outset of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, to the separation of ethics from politics. Acting deviously and according to circumstances emerges as an artificial -in the sense of "insincere"- behavior as it distinguishes between external practice and inner belief.

In The Prince (1513), Machiavelli presents man entangled in power politics without undergoing any internal metamorphosis. The issue is not transforming one's nature -which seems impossible- but working one's way toward success by means of various tactics and ever-changing procedures. He thus proposes the emergence of an artificial being with no real essence, which exists only through interaction with people, that is, in public. The "real" self is simulated, fashioned in retrospect, depending on the circumstances. In Machiavelli, we can understand why a king or anyone with power may want to theatricalize himself/herself -insecurity, fear, ambition, greed.

The Renaissance self is thus perceived as the public, artificial (literally as artifice, symbolically as courtly) image of the individual, as what it shows rather than what it really is.

## Castiglione

Castiglione, with The Book of the Courtier (1561), made an epoch by inaugurating a new aristocracy, seeking, through courtship, the political and financial favor of the monarch. He points to the power that the courtier draws from being seen fighting. Indeed, we may argue that a courtier-soldier in combat assumes his status by being made into a spectacle, as something worth seeing and admiring. Otherwise, he simply does not exist. We thus can talk about the substitution of courtly artifice for realistic circumstances, a substitution effected by means of imposing eye-sight (spectatorship) onto sheer acts of nobility (courtship as spectacle).

The modern critic Stephen Orgel claims that a Renaissance portrait is not so much about the face as it is about the surrounding ornamentation which discloses the public identity or profession of a person (eg. the portraits of Elizabeth I). Artifice emerges as a main theme in (pictorial or not) Renaissance representation; a representation that is no longer constituted by the subject/face but by the (ornamental) objects coming to the fore.