

Beauty between Essence and Appearance in Plato's. Essay on Art as a Discourse of Truth

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ABSTRACT: The problem addressed by this article is that of knowing whether beauty in general and art in particular can say, express and represent the truth. Plato's thought, the inaugural gesture of philosophical aesthetics, is the framework from which we question this possibility or not for aesthetics to be epistemological, even science. The article shows that if beauty as an idea has an undeniable link with truth, and if art is itself a form of expression of truth, they are only an incomplete, apparent form. Only philosophy, the art of criticism, dialectics and essences, can tell the beauty and truth of things.

Keywords: - Appearance; art; beauty; essence; truth

I. INTRODUCTION

Beauty is one of the fundamental categories of aesthetics. It is with Plato that there is the concern to question beauty. This is to question its foundations and its nature that appeared for the first time in philosophy. Plato wants to know what is beautiful in itself, what is beautiful of necessity, what makes beautiful things beautiful at all times and in all places. He seeks the principle according to which beautiful things are beautiful and ugly things are ugly. His concern is to understand the concept of the beauty as such. Now, the determination of the essence of beauty opens up the requirement to pose it as an object of knowledge and of rational discourse. The basic question is then the value of such knowledge. Indeed, if Plato considers that the beautiful can be defined and known, of what type or kind is this knowledge? If Plato concedes to skill the claim to express beauty and truth, what place does he assign to it in the domain of essences? Is Plato's condemnation of artistic representation definite, or does the philosopher nevertheless concede it a role in the process of forming thought to the truth of ideas?

II. THE YOUNG PLATO AND THE DIFFICULTIES OF A PHILOSOPHICAL SCIENCE OF BEAUTY

It is in *Hyppias Major* that the young Plato opens the debate on the principle of beauty. The discussion revolves around a question put by Socrates to Hyppias: "How do you know which things are beautiful and which are ugly? [...] Can you tell me what is beautiful? ». (Plato, [1967: 286a-286e]). This question is accompanied by a warning: "Be careful, my good friend: [I] do not ask you which thing is beautiful, but what the beautiful is" (Plato, [1967: 287 c-288 b]).

2.1. Essays on the definition of beauty

Hyppias puts forward eight proposals about beauty, all of which are refuted by Socrates. According to the sophist, the beautiful is in turn:

- *A beautiful girl.* True in appearance, this answer is false in reality, for if 'there is something that gives beauty to beautiful things' (Plato, [1967: 287 c-288 b]), it is a matter of observing that 'the most beautiful girl is ugly, compared to the race of gods' (Plato, [1967: 288 e-289 c]). The maiden is thus sometimes beautiful and sometimes ugly; she is not absolutely beautiful and therefore cannot be the beautiful in itself, that 'beautiful in itself which adorns all other things and makes them appear beautiful, when this form has been added to them' (Plato, [1967: 289 c-290 b]).
- *Gold.* It is, according to Hyppias, the only thing that, when applied to other things, makes them appear beautiful. But, Socrates objects, ivory is also beautiful. So gold alone does not exhaust the quality called beauty (Plato, [1967: 290 b-290 e]).

- *Wealth, health, honours, long life and a magnificent funeral for oneself and one's ancestors.* The main drawback of this proposal is that it excludes heroes such as Achilles and Heracles, as well as the gods, from beauty. Now, Socrates asks, what could it mean for a god, i.e. an immortal, to be buried? (Plato, [1967: 291 c-292 a]). The same could be said for wealth, health, long life, all of which have no absolute value.
- *Propriety.* Pressed by Socrates, Hippias agrees to a definition that would make propriety the beautiful. But, Socrates objects, propriety has more to do with appearance than with reality. If a ridiculous man puts on clothes that fit him well, he will not be said to be handsome, he will only appear so. Socrates summarizes: 'Propriety has appeared to us as different from beauty' (Plato, [1967: 294 d-295 a]).
- *The useful.* Could this be the true definition of beauty? Socrates doubts it. Socrates observes that there is a link between usefulness, power and goodness: a thing is made useful, and therefore beautiful, when one has the ability, the power to do it by directing it in the direction of good. However, Socrates notes, this is not the case with most men, who often act badly. It may therefore happen that utility and power are perfectly ugly things (Plato, [1967: 296 d-297 a]).
- *The advantageous.* Would the beautiful then be the advantageous, if the latter is born precisely when the action is applied to a good end and produces what is called the good? To admit that the advantageous produces the good is to say that it is the cause of it. Now, if the advantageous is the beautiful, this means that the beautiful is the cause of the good, which is then only the effect. But what we also know is that the effect is by nature different from the cause that produces it: "'The cause is not the effect, nor the effect the cause' (Plato, [1967: 297 d-297 c]). The good is therefore different from the beautiful, it is not the beautiful.
- *The pleasure of hearing and seeing:* This alternative definition of beauty is protested by Socrates. For example, we find that beautiful occupations and laws are beautiful without the pleasure they give us coming from sight or hearing (Plato, [1967: 297 e-298 c]).
- *The advantageous pleasure.* The choice of sight and hearing can be seen as justified by the fact that the pleasures provided by these senses are considered to be 'the most innocent and best of all, whether taken together or individually' (Plato, [1967: 303 c-303 e]). This amounts to considering that beauty is advantageous pleasure. Now, it is known that the advantageous is what produces the good as its cause. The cause being different from the effect, we cannot conclude that the advantageous, here the beautiful, is the same thing as the good.

As we can see, the discussion between Socrates and Hippias does not lead to any satisfactory conclusion. For the young Plato, there is still a philosophical science of beauty to be founded. This begins when the mind decides to go beyond common discourses and approaches determined by appearance and verisimilitude to question beauty at the level of its foundation, its essence. For Plato, beauty is an essence in itself.

2.2. Beauty is an essence in itself

For Plato, to say that beauty is an essence in itself is to assert that it is not a particular quality, but a general determination. At the stage of the *Hippias Major*, Plato already knows that to say what beauty is, is to say what beauty is in general, i.e. beauty not as it may appear to us individually, but as it is in itself. For the young Plato, the beautiful is already 'the beautiful in itself [which] adorns all other things and makes them appear beautiful when this form is added to them' (Plato, [1967: 289 c-290 b]).

Let us recall that form exists here as that which serves as a framework, a foundation, a base, a determination; it is a container whose vocation is to receive a content, exactly in the sense that the category subsumes the object. It therefore has the characteristics not only of universality, since it can be applied to anything, but also of permanence, eternity and immutability. The form does not change, it remains, imposing itself in the same way and everywhere as being identical to itself. In this case, beauty already appears to the first Plato as a general form, a reality in itself which exists independently of its sensible applications observed here or there, in this object or that object. Of course, Plato does not yet speak explicitly of the Ideas, which are the eternal essences that underlie sensible reality and are its model; he has certainly not yet formulated the metaphysical doctrine of forms, but he is already on the way to it. Beauty already appears to him as "something that will not appear ugly at any time, in any place, to any man" (Plato, [1967: 291 c-292 a]). But if beauty is an essence in itself, what does this essence correspond to, how does this essence differ from other essences, how is it recognized and how does the mind access it?

III. METAPHYSICS OF BEAUTY AND DOCTRINE OF IDEAS

By approaching beauty from its essence, the Idea, Plato looks at aesthetics as metaphysics. Beauty is part of the discussions on the cause of beings and their final end.

3.1. Love as a desire for the beautiful

It is in the *Phaedrus* that Plato really develops his metaphysical conception of beauty. He starts with ethical considerations about love and concludes that love is nothing more than the desire for beauty. In other

words, the beautiful is the foundation of love, it is what drives us to desire and love things. While Phaedrus advises to build pragmatic sentimental relationships based on 'the solid advantage of enjoyment' (Plato, [1964: 231 b-232 b]), Socrates considers the idea that 'the one who loves has a sicker mind than the one who does not love' (Plato, [1964: 235 e-236d]) to be false. According to Socrates, Phaedrus spoke about love without having defined it first. He spoke about something he did not know, he spoke for nothing.

But what is love? Socrates answers: "Love is a desire". More precisely, love is "the desire for the beautiful" (Plato, [1964: 237a-238a]). Socrates explains that two principles govern human life: the innate desire for pleasure on the one hand, and the acquired desire for good on the other. These two principles are sometimes at war and sometimes at peace. When it is the "rational taste for good" that dominates, we speak of temperance. When, on the other hand, it is "unreasonable desire that leads us to pleasure and rules in us," we speak of intemperance. The latter appears under several faces or "species;" gluttony when it is the tyrannical desire for good food, drunkenness when it is the tyrannical desire for wine, etc. As for love, according to Socrates, it is the tyrannical desire for the pleasure of the physical beauty. The sight of a beautiful appearance, of a beautiful body, triggers a desire in the soul to which is attached a pleasure that overrides all others: this is love as the fundamental desire for beauty, the universal and irresistible attraction for what is beautiful. Beauty is therefore what, in us, arouses and creates love:

When the blind desire, overpowering the feeling that impels us towards the good, is directed towards the pleasure that beauty gives, and, strongly reinforced by the desires of the same family that are directed towards physical beauty, it becomes an irresistible inclination, I will say that this desire takes its name from this very force and is called love. (Plato, [1964: 238 a-238 e])¹

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato's philosophical system is already firmly established². The discussion on beauty is rooted in a set of very abstract considerations on the nature of the soul and the principles that govern it.

3.2. Determining the nature of the soul: between desire for pleasure and desire for good

According to Plato, the soul is agitated by passion, the "delirium" that the vision of a beautiful object gives it, and which is called love. The soul is that which is immortal in us. An active principle, because it is in motion, the soul is the source of other beings which derive their existence from it. Being that moves from itself, draws its being from itself and is its own cause, the soul has neither beginning nor end, it can neither begin nor end: its essence is immortality³. The immortal soul resembles a force composed of a winged carriage and a winged coachman. The coachman governs the carriage, one of whose horses is docile, because it is of a good breed, and the other is restive and rebellious, because it is of a bad breed. Governing such a team is therefore no easy task (Plato, [1964: 246 a-246 e]). The soul is a mixture of reason and unreason. It is agitated by opposite and contrary tendencies that are very difficult to hold together.

When the soul is perfect, it has wings, that is, power and governance over everything; when it is imperfect, it has lost its wings, wanders in the air and falls into a body which it will animate. The perfect winged soul belongs to the gods, while the imperfect wingless soul belongs to humans. Wings are the most divine things in that they have 'the power to lift what is heavy to the heights where the race of gods dwells' (Plato, [1964: 246a-246e]). They guide the soul towards what is beautiful, wise and good, while turning it away from what is ugly, false and wicked.

The gods drive their carriage with balance and ease. Men find it more difficult to follow the gods because of the vicious horse that prevents them from turning their souls towards the elevated contemplation of essences (Plato, [1964: 247 a-247 e]). The souls of the gods enjoy the vision of being in itself. They see "the essence, truly existent, which is colourless, formless, shadowy, only perceptible to the guide [which is] the soul, the intelligence, and which is the object of true science..." ([*Ibid*]). Not science in motion, "but science that has absolute Being as its object" ([*Ibid*]), in other words the Idea. The souls of men, on the other hand, torn between

¹ The question of beauty appears in Plato in a theoretical context marked by a discussion on love. The fact that the *Phaedrus* comes after the *Banquet* ([2016]), of which it is an extension, shows the conceptual continuity that Plato establishes between aesthetics and ethics: the former is inseparable from the latter and the questions that the two raise appear to be inextricably linked. Let us note that this theoretical neighborhood between beauty and morality will become a central theme of post-Platonic aesthetics in Aristotle ([1990]): art purifies the soul; Kant ([1985]): beauty is a sign of morality; Hegel ([1964]): art belongs to the ethical world of the absolute spirit; Marx ([1996]): aesthetic contemplation is a sign of the moral elevation of the worker and the liberation of man's senses in their totality; Adorno ([1989]): art can embody a utopia and lead a project of revolutionary transformation of society.

² If in the *Banquet* ([2016]) Plato celebrates love as the most beautiful of things as a virtue, the most beautiful of virtues, in the *Phaedrus* he sets out to define what means by beauty. From then on, the *Phaedrus* (1964) appears as the doctrinal answer to one of the very first Platonic dialogue: *Hyppias Major* (1967)

³ Plato is here in line with the tradition of philosophical idealism inaugurated by Parmenides.

pleasure and goodness, madness and reason, “troubled by their horses, [have] difficulty in contemplating the essences” (Plato, [1964: 247 e-248 e]). Unable to see the absolute, they are sometimes left with “no other food than opinion” ([*Ibid*]). Yet, as Plato points out, “the soul that has seen the most truths will produce a man who will be passionate about wisdom, beauty, the muses, love” ([*Ibid*]). This man, as we shall see later, the only one whose soul is winged, is the philosopher⁴.

However, behind the questioning of beauty, its nature and its laws, there is a general reflection on the nature of truth. Seeking the beautiful is at the same time probing the being, what is, as much as seeking what is true. Admiring the beautiful is, in a way, seeing and knowing the true. Plato places beauty in the domain of the Absolute, of Truth⁵. The question is therefore how the soul reaches this absolute essence, how representations of beautiful things are formed in our minds.

3.3. Theory of beauty and doctrine of reminiscence

Reminiscence refers to the recollection by means of which man, turning his back on the changing and shifting sensibility, goes back to the (re)discovery of essences, to the (re)knowledge of general ideas once seen and contemplated in the sky of ideas:

To be a man, Plato asserts, we must understand what is called the general, which, starting from the multiplicity of sensations, brings them back to unity by reasoning. Now this faculty is a reminiscence of the things which our soul saw when it was on its way with the divine soul and, disdaining what we take here below to be beings, it straightened up to contemplate the true being. (Plato, [1964: 248 e-249 d])

For Plato, to know is to remember. Remembrance concerns the essence, it is that of the Idea, whose (re)possession opens the soul of man to divinity, just as it makes the philosopher a divine being. The real work of education, the real enterprise of knowledge, of learning, is this activity of remembering essences, of recalling or recollecting Ideas: “The man who knows how to make use of these reminiscences, initiated unceasingly into the mysteries of absolute perfection, becomes truly perfect” ([*Ibid*]). Now, what Plato shows is that it is precisely through recollection that man's soul gains access to beauty in its very being. Faced with the earthly beauty offered by the organ of sight, the soul of man remembers the model of beauty once seen in the celestial world as it enjoyed the company of the gods. The desire above all to rise again to this perfect beauty provokes a desire, an enthusiasm which others take for madness, but which is, for the one possessed of it as for the one to whom it is addressed, and the passion of love for beautiful people (Plato, [1964: 249 d-250 c]).

For Plato, “every human soul has naturally contemplated the essences” ([*Ibid*]). But, he immediately acknowledges, “it is not easy for all souls to remember the things of heaven when they see those of earth” ([*Ibid*]). Why such vagueness? Plato explains:

It is that as far as justice, temperance and the other goods of the soul are concerned, their images of this world do not shine through; because of the weakness of our organs, it is hardly possible for some people, on encountering images of these virtues, to recognise the kind of model they represent. ([*Ibid*])

However, things are different with regard to beauty. While other essences are difficult to perceive, Plato notes that “beauty, on the contrary, was easy to see because of its brilliance” ([*Ibid*]). Of all the essences, it was the one that shone most brilliantly and attracted the soul's eye most easily. In the world of Ideas, no essence is indeed comparable to beauty in terms of power of luminosity, charm, visibility and splendour. It is therefore the essence of beauty that the soul has seen first and most readily. But when true beauty has been incorporated into a person or applied to an individual, it means sight has noticed this beautiful appearance and has been moved by it. Man is then attracted to the beautiful appearance and has at first a primary reaction of immediate satisfaction towards it (Plato, [1964: 250 d-251 c]). But the man in question here is the one with an insufficiently cultivated mind, who fails to ascend “to absolute beauty, when he contemplates on earth an image that bears its name” ([*Ibid*]). For the initiated man, the man of reason, things are clear: earthly beauty reminds him of heavenly beauty. Shivering, heat, fever, frenzy, desire, love can be explained in this way: man remembers the

⁴ On this question of the relationship between aesthetics and metaphysics, it would be interesting to see the approach taken by philosophers such as Kant ([1985]) and Hegel ([1964]). It is well known that, despite all the prejudices he expressed about a metaphysics that he judged inferior to science in the field of truth, Kant could not help thinking of the question of the judgment of taste and the sublime as linked to that a finality of nature – a metaphysical question among all others – that the human mind tries to translate by means, not of concepts, but of the imagination and the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. As far as Hegel is concerned, the challenge is to think of art in the moment of absolute spirit as its final phase: philosophy provides its speculative foundation for aesthetics and the same time intervenes as its necessary completion in the great synthesis of absolute Knowledge.

⁵ The idea is that there can be no philosophy without aesthetics and epistemology.

ideal of beauty that he has seen in the world of essences. It is this perfect beauty that he pursues and wants to find in his love of the beautiful body.

The man whose soul has not (sufficiently) contemplated celestial beauty feels pleasure at the sight of a beautiful object; the wise man, who has well contemplated the essence in itself of the beautiful and remembers it, feels love: "At the sight of it [the man]'s memory returns to the essence of beauty, and he sees it again standing with temperance on a sacred pedestal. Before this vision, seized with awe and respect, he falls backwards..." (Plato, [1964: 253 c-254 c]). Plato adds:

But he who has been recently initiated, who has seen much in heaven, sees in a face a happy imitation of divine beauty or in a body some features of ideal beauty, immediately he shudders and feels something of his former emotions stirring within him... (Plato, [1964: 250 d-251c]).

The stirring of our former emotions (the Ideas), their return to the surface of consciousness, is what earthly beauty opens up to us⁶.

3.4. The Body's beauty as an image of ideal beauty

The function of memory is to produce images of things in the mind or memory. In the case of beauty, Plato distinguishes between earthly, bodily, physical beauty and ideal, perfect, absolute beauty, to which only philosophical thought opens. It is clear that Plato reproduces in the field of aesthetic reflection the metaphysical dualism of matter and spirit, of the sensible world and the intelligible world - this dualism which had led him to postulate the superiority of the Idea over reality, one being the model, the essence, the being, while the other is only an appearance, a pale and degraded copy, an incomplete and finite manifestation. Therefore, earthly beauty is an image of absolute beauty, it is only the more or less perfect reproduction of the model, which is an Idea. About what he calls 'absolute beauty', Plato says that it is found in 'the other world', whereas sensible beauty occurs at the moment when the soul 'contemplates on earth an image which [...] bears the name' of absolute beauty (Plato, [1964: 250 d-251c]).

According to Plato, then, the Idea of the beautiful is a "rapturous contemplation" (Plato, [1964: 249 d-250 c]), of which the particular beauties are only weak phenomenal replicas, loose memories, distant material references. According to Plato himself, the beautiful as such is "to be contemplated in a pure light of perfect, simple, unchanging, blissful appearances, pure ourselves and free from the stigma of that burden which we carry with us and which we call the body, and in which we are imprisoned like the oyster in its shell" ([*Ibid*]). Stable, immutable, identical, eternal, it is the work of reason and intelligence. As for phenomenal beauty, it is that which we see in bodies, in persons, in particular individuals; this physical, natural beauty comes into play when we see "in a face a happy imitation of divine beauty or in a body some features of ideal beauty" (Plato, [1964: 250 d-251 c]). It is the memory, let us remember, that connects or bridges the gap between heavenly and earthly beauty. Unstable, moving, changing, multiple, heterogeneous, transitory, ephemeral, earthly beauty is the work of sensitive perception, since it passes through the eyes, that "natural path of the soul", according to Plato. In fact, Plato establishes a link between beauty and thought that we must now examine.

3.5. Beauty and philosophical wisdom

If beauty is an Idea, it is something spiritual that can only be known spiritually, in other words through thought, dialectics, philosophy. The man in love is the one who feels attraction for a beautiful object, insofar as it reminds him of the splendour of the ideal beauty once contemplated in the sky of essences. But Plato differentiates between two types of loves: one with pleasure, carnal, the less noble, which presupposes the satiation of desires and the outpouring of passion; and the other without pleasure, the greater, which is regulated by philosophy and the knowledge of essences (Plato, [1964: 255 d-256 c]). Now, to say the nature, the essence, the truth, consist fundamentally, as Socrates suggests against Lysias, in establishing distinctions between things on the one hand, and in operating by progressive synthesis on the other. The real art is therefore that of divisions and syntheses. This art is a science: dialectics. Its procedure, according to Plato, "is first to embrace in a single view and to bring together in a single idea the notions scattered on either side, in order to clarify by definition the subject we wish to treat" (Plato, [1964: 265 c-266 a]). Dialectics is first and foremost in the art of definitions, its scope is universal, its aim is general, its goal is the idea. But it does not stop at this synthetic aspect alone, it also separates, introduces differences: "(It) consists in dividing the idea again into its elements according to its natural articulations, trying not to truncate anything..." ([*Ibid*]).

By proceeding through the method of analysis and synthesis, philosophical dialectics allows the soul to unravel the threads of reality and, going beyond appearances, to go back to the essences and the absolute being.

⁶ Hegel, an important thinker on art, writes about the importance for art of the past and its recall in representation: "Poets, painters, sculptors, musicians, almost always borrow their subjects from past eras, whose culture, customs, constitution, and worship differ from the culture of their own time. This retreat into the past has the great advantage[...] that the release from the immediate and the present by recollection produces that character of generality which art needs" (Hegel, [1997: 354]).

It is this attraction to the absolute that Plato calls true love. And if the soul is attracted to the absolute to the point of being enamored of it, is it not because the absolute is beautiful? Because essences are beautiful? Because truth is the most beautiful thing? Socrates states:

This, Phaedrus, is what I am in love with: it is divisions and syntheses; I see in them the means of learning to speak and to think. And if I find someone else capable of seeing things in their unity and multiplicity that *is the man I follow, like a god*. Those who are able to do this, God knows whether I am wrong or right to apply this name to them, but so far I call them dialecticians" (Plato, [1964: 266 a-266 d]).

Plato's aesthetics should therefore be given a more general scope by opening it up to logic. For Plato, true beauty consists in the soul seeing the truth. Beautiful is not the beautiful body, but the beautiful soul; not the ignorance of a mind locked in the darkness of opinion and error, of sensible illusions and appearances, but the reflected knowledge of a knowing conscience made free by the power of thought and the construction of science. Ugly is the inability to reason, to produce ideas, in short the hostility towards all spiritual activity in general, towards what Plato holds to be "the higher elements of the soul" (Plato, [1964: 255 d-256 c]): superstitions, beliefs, religions, demonologies, witchcraft, myths... Ugly is the attachment to the sensible, to matter, to passions, to pleasures, to a life governed by chrematistics. Deceit, lies, falsehood, verisimilitude, wickedness, evil, vice, injustice, fear, etc. are ugly. For Plato, beauty is the activity of reason itself, which penetrates reality and accesses the mysteries of the world by means of concept and theory. It is reason itself that is beautiful in its ability to produce, through reflection, abstract propositions about the nature of things and their sensible appearances.

What is beautiful is to question, to question, to criticize, to examine, to analyze, to reason, to argue, to explain, to understand. Beauty is truth, aesthetics is science. The beautiful is an essence; now, the essence is the factual; therefore, the beautiful is the truth. For Plato, beauty participates in truth, it is one of its modalities. Beauty is philosophical wisdom itself, and only philosophy has the vocation to express and represent beauty. This is where the Platonic disqualification of art in a world of aesthetics whose direction has been entrusted to philosophy opens.

IV. BEAUTY AS ESSENCE AND ART AS APPEARANCE

As the production of the beautiful through human creative activity, art is judged rather negatively by Plato. Its aesthetic potential and truth content, compared to philosophy, are almost nil in Plato's opinion. For him, art is an expression that lies even below the world of appearances, which places it very far from the truth and beauty of the Ideas.

4.1. Rhetoric as the art of appearance: a critique of writing

The Platonic critique of art is inseparable from its critique of rhetoric. Sophistry is a universal science that prides itself on proving things and their opposite. A formidable pragmatism, sophistry posits that the goal of all discussion is victory. To achieve this, language is an essential tool. For sophists, the most important thing is to speak well, to write well and to compose beautiful speeches in order to persuade through stylistic effects and to draw the maximum possible benefits from the crowd. Sophists are therefore comparable to artists. It is in this capacity that they receive Plato's wrath.

In the second part of the *Phaedrus*, Plato initiates a discussion on writing. Agreeing with Phaedrus that it is a shame "not to speak and write properly" (Plato, [1964: 258 d-259 b]). Socrates asks: "What is good or bad writing?" (Ibid). To speak, according to Plato, is to say something, more precisely, to say something true. Beautiful speech is speech with a logical and epistemological claim. Plato is formal: 'There is no true art of speech, apart from truth [...] and there never will be' (Plato, [1964: 260 c-261 a]).

But what does rhetoric do? It speaks without concern for truth. It dissociates speech as formal expression on the one hand, from knowledge as inner content on the other. Rhetoric is therefore, for Plato, mere chatter, empty of meaning. To speak is first to establish distinctions, to define the nature and essence of each thing. Only philosophy does this, only it is allowed to speak: "Come, noble creatures, and persuade Phaedrus, [...] that, unless he has studied philosophy sufficiently, he will never be able to speak about anything" (Ibid). It is a warning to Socrates. As for rhetoric, not establishing essences and favouring verisimilitude, deception and gain, its discourse remains at the level of "mere routine" (Ibid). For Plato, rhetoric does not even speak⁷. And when it does speak, it is only wandering and vagrancy.

⁷ It is worth recalling that Plato's diatribe against rhetoric was necessary for philosophy to free the Greek mind from the world of mythology and poetry. For sophists, poets and artists met in their common desire for the fantastic, the marvelous, the legendary, the fable and the extraordinary, thus giving a representation that was only slightly more elaborate and suitable for the opinions, common beliefs and popular superstitions of their time. It should be also be pointed out that Plato's vigorous charge was the preparatory stage for Aristotle's

An unusual and universal mixture of things of different natures, an amalgam of propositions going in all directions, without method, rhetoric produces only the appearance of beauty. It is the appearance of beauty, its unfortunate imitation. It is characterized by vagueness and confusion: it is only the art of appearance⁸. In the same way, rhetoric produces only the appearance of truth. And this is precisely why it is ugly. Rhetoric is ugly because it does not know. And what applies to rhetoric applies to art in general: art does not speak, it says nothing, it is mute, because what it says is false.

Starting from rhetoric, Plato intends to show that art does not convey any truth. One of the indications of this artistic muteness - seen as logical muteness - is undoubtedly to be found in the parallel drawn by Plato between writing and painting. If writing is rejected by Plato, it is mainly because written discourse, in addition to considerably weakening memory and dispensing with personal thought, is conspicuous for its ineptitude for discussion, debate and dialectic. Plato perfectly illustrates this muteness of writing, which he compares to the muteness of pictorial art: "Writing has a serious drawback, just like painting. The products of painting are as if they were alive; but ask them a question and they remain gravely silent. The same is true of written speeches" (Plato, [1964: 275 c-276 a])⁹. Rhetoric, like art in general, is therefore the world of dreams. For Plato, philosophy is beautiful because its discourse has an object (essence), a method (analytical division and synthesis) and an aim (the Good). It is far above the mere production of appearances that the art of rhetoric attests. Plato speaks of art as the image of the image, a third degree of knowledge removed from ideal reality.

4.2. The Platonic Condemnation of Art: Homer Driven from the City

It is in the *Republic*, published in all likelihood before the *Phaedrus*, that Plato develops his criticism of art most forcefully. Particularly vigorous in Books II, III and X, this criticism revolves around the epistemological weakness of art and its inability, by its very nature, to be a discourse of truth. Plato directs his charge in two different directions: the first is based on the idea that art is a lie with disastrous social consequences, and the second is based on the fact that art is a third-rate imitation of the Idea.

In Book II of the *Republic*, a discussion continues on the nature of justice. Socrates confronts Glauconus and Adimantius, formidable opponents who convey Thrasymachus' view that injustice is preferable to justice because it is more profitable and advantageous (Plato, [1966: Book II, 360 b-361 c]). A monument to cynicism and moral pragmatism, Glaucon - and those who follow him - rely on the comparative advantages of injustice and deduce its superiority over justice: not wanting to be just, but to appear to be; not wanting to appear unjust, but to be unjust; not wanting justice for its own sake, but for the reputation and fame it brings. It is precisely such immoralism that Plato detects in the poetic creations of Homer and Hesiod. For rather than presenting justice per se and celebrating it for what it is, these artists simply make it a secondary determination, a pragmatic stance, an opportunistic attitude tied to a fabricated mythological universe of gods, demons, titans, etc. For Plato, such a teaching cannot serve as a serious moral basis for the constitution of an ideal city (Plato, [1966: 369 b-370 b])¹⁰.

One particular class attracts Plato's attention, that of the guardians of the city, the soldiers. Their education requires the exercise of music and gymnastics. Let us recall that the term "music" has in Plato the

undertaking, which, by founding logic later on, was intended to establish once and for all the rules of correct reasoning and to define the laws of right and rational thought. The aim was clear: to get away from sophistical rambling and rhetoric extravagance.

⁸ It is symptomatic to observe that at a time when postmodernism proclaims the magnificent advent of a new humanity whose characters would be the simulacrum, the image, the superficiality and the surface, the distant reference of such an idea is precisely in sophistry and rhetoric. Doesn't Foucault ([1966], [1969]) announce the era of "pure language" as series of statements without truth, without history and anthropological anchorage? Doesn't Derrida ([1967]) assert that the time of "pure writing" has come, "writing for nothing"? Doesn't Lyotard ([1979]) celebrate the "language games" in his pragmatics of "coups" as a denunciation of consensus? And what about Deleuze's ([1980]) praise of "surfaces", "mirror effects", and "skin", understood as everything that is not interiority, content, spirituality and depth? And yet, we must see that in the hollow of all this gigantic movement of destruction of reason, these neo-Nietzscheans, like the sophists of the ancient era, negotiate a set of theoretical and practical devices affirming domination, the right of force, the natural inequality of men, the order of instincts, barbarism and savagery to the detriment of civilization, nature in place of culture.

⁹ Plato is said to have disagreed with Hegel about the eloquence of works of art: "However harmonious and well circumscribed in itself the world fashioned by the work of art may be, it does not exist, as a real and singularized object, *for its own sake*, but *for us*, for the sake of an audience that contemplates and enjoys it. Thus actors do not only speak to each other during the performance of a drama, but also to the audience, and must make themselves understood by both sides. Not every work of art is a kind of dialogue with whoever is in front of it" (Hegel, 1997: 354).

¹⁰ It is the city that is self-sufficient in terms of its material needs (food, housing, clothing), and also the one that is based on a strict division of labor, whereby each performs his or her task, fulfils his or her function.

very general meaning of the art of the Muses. It refers to music itself, but also includes comedy, painting, tragedy, dance, lyric poetry, eloquence, etc. The teaching of this art of the Muses is therefore fundamental to Plato, who advises young people to sing fables from their earliest childhood (Plato, [1966: 376 c-377 b]).

But Plato immediately warns against bad poets, especially the greatest ones, Homer and Hesiod, who are accused of lying: "These," Plato laments, "have composed lying fables which have been told and are still being told to men" (Plato, [1966: 377 b-378 b]). The main reason for this lie is that these poets misrepresent the gods, sometimes as cruel and vengeful warriors, sometimes as vicious, hateful, jealous, corrupt and evil-loving characters. These stories are not only false, they are also devoid of morality. Plato's condemnation of the poets can be explained on this basis: enchanters, fabulists, illusionists, allegorists and magicians, they are liars. Creators of imaginary worlds where the deities have more vices than virtues, more baseness than greatness, artists must be severely controlled, if not outright pushed out of the limits of the City.

Plato does not dispute the legitimacy of poets creating fictions and legends. But that they should glorify crime and praise injustice through fictions and legends, Plato finds intolerable. Mythic discourse and the posture of mythology in general are not a construct of reason. On a practical level, they have the value of ratifying force and domination. The lie is linked to poetry, through and through. The poets say that the deities are evil and attribute to them the existence of evil; they claim that they change their forms all the time; that they love sex, food, wine, riches, honours; that they mourn, laugh, get angry, etc.¹¹ For Plato, on the contrary, God is perfect and can only be the cause of good. Plato therefore warns parents against the dangers of poetic irrationalism: "Let not mothers, persuaded by the poets, frighten their children by telling them ill-timed tales of certain gods wandering about at night in the guise of strangers of all sorts, so as to avoid both blaspheming the gods and making children more fearful" (Plato, [1966: 381 b-382 a]).

But if poetry remains a legendary and mystifying discourse, if it lies so brazenly that Plato compares the poet to the sophist, it is precisely because poetry has a very weak relationship with the world of Ideas from which it is at least three degrees removed.

4.3. Art: imitation of imitation

It is in Book X of the *Republic* that Plato provides the argument of the imitation of the imitation. Plato is convinced that the imitator, i.e. the artist, is a sophist: a supposedly universal scientist capable of representing everything, but basically an illusionist and a maker of appearances. As a brilliant imitator, what the artist imitates is already the imitation of reality. Plato distinguishes between three orders of reality: the Form, its making and its imitation. The first is reality in itself, the second is a manifestation of this reality in particular objects, the third is a representation of the particular object which itself already substantially reflects the model. To these orders of reality correspond types of activities and professions: the creator, master of the Form; the craftsman or worker, master of the object he makes; and the artist, master of the imitation of the object made. In other words: God, the carpenter and the painter.

Again, Plato explains, the idea of the bed, for example. It is of divine origin, the carpenter realizes it concretely in a particular bed, and the painter produces an imitative representation of that particular bed. While Plato acknowledges that "in a certain way, the painter also makes a bed" ([Ibid]), he nevertheless adds a restriction: "What he makes has no reality," in the absolute sense of the term. Neither the carpenter nor the painter makes the real object. So, Plato points out, their "work [is] something obscure, compared to the truth" ([Ibid]). But if the carpenter only produces a likeness of the real object, the painter only produces the likeness of the likeness of reality. Thus, not only from a metaphysical point of view, but also from a logical and epistemological one, the painter is at a threefold distance from the truth. The Platonic critique of art is epistemological and concerns the relationship of art to truth. According to Plato, what art produces is not the truth, not even its imitation. Art produces the replication of the imitation of the truth found in the sensible world: art is the copy of the copy.

It should be remembered that Platonic dualism has thus far allowed us to see the theoretical scheme of an objective intelligible world on the one hand, and a subjective sensible world, a degraded copy of the former, on the other. With art, it seems that we have entered an additional dimension of reality. This third dimension is neither that of intelligibility nor that of sensibility. Art is inferior to both, it is below both. If one were to consider that true discourse is that which deals with essences, it is obvious that the discourse of art is not truth, nor even the appearance of truth, but the appearance of the appearance of truth. To Glaucon in Book X of the *Republic*, Socrates says: "You call the author of a production three degrees removed from nature an imitator" (Plato, [1966: 597 d-598 c]). For Plato, art is three steps removed from the place where truth is found. And as he vehemently attacks tragedy, Plato states, "[...] The maker of tragedies, if he is an imitator, will by nature be three steps away from the king and the truth" ([Ibid]). The products of art are but shadows. In other words, art's claim

¹¹ Plato would therefore have found Hegel's comments on the calm, mastery, nobility, serenity and bliss of the Greek gods, especially those depicted by Homer, quite strange (Hegel, [1997 : 306-307]).

to truth is futile, its enterprise is rather one of ignorance. The artist's perfection is the perfection of illusion, his science is the illusion of science. Art is the science of illusion.

According to Plato, beauty is essence and art is appearance. One, the place of knowledge, is the privilege of the philosopher, while the other, the terrain of opinion, is the proper space of the poet, the painter, the sculptor and the sophist. Of course, beauty does not express knowledge in its totality and in its absolute logical purity; it is nevertheless a close manifestation of it. Beauty signals the truth that the philosopher and reason enunciate. Of all the essences, beauty is the one that shines brightest. Art, on the other hand, is an activity good for the uneducated crowd and immature childhood. The artist, the maker of illusions, is a charlatan. This is because he can represent everything, the artist believes he knows everything. In fact, Plato reveals, the artist is a 'worker of the image' (*Ibid*, 599 c- 600 c). For him, "poets create phantoms, not realities" (Plato, [1966: 598 c- 599 c]). Plato does not recognize in them, including the greatest of all, Homer, any law, any invention, any science, and any disciple. For Plato, "the creator of images, the imitator [...] hears nothing of reality, he knows only appearance" (*Ibid*). According to Plato, 'the imitator has therefore neither science nor right opinion' (Plato, [1966: 601 c-602 b]). Art leads us away from the path of truth and settles us in magic. A ridiculous, light-hearted and unserious activity, art is denounced by Plato as fundamentally irrational. Having nothing to do with reason, but everything to do with unreason, it is a "mediocre thing coupled with a mediocre element" (Plato, [1966: 603 a-603 e]).

4.4. Art as a preparation for science: education and music

Is the Platonic condemnation of art definitive? Although Plato attacks poetry on both the practical and theoretical levels, he nonetheless recognizes the importance of art in educating the conscience to the truth. What Plato criticizes is poetry that has been left to its own devices and has become immoral. Against it, he recommends a strict control of artistic production in both form and content: poetry must be made for the moral and spiritual elevation of children, to whom poets must provide images of virtue, justice, goodness and truth. Plato specifically denounces bad poets (Plato, [1966: 377 b-378 b]). It should be noted that not all the arts suffer the same condemnation from Plato. Tragedy and comedy are rejected because they evoke vile and ignoble feelings that weaken the spirit: lamentations, fears, complaints, passions, laughter, etc. In contrast, music, in the form of melody, is valued because its words, rhythm and harmony forge a beautiful soul (Plato, [1966: 398 b- 399 a]). Plato also shows a certain preference for simple narration, which is more realistic and rational for his taste (Plato, [1966: 396 b-397 b]).

Plato recognizes a certain role for art in education that leads the soul to the knowledge of the essences of truth and goodness. It is not easy for children's souls to immediately reach the Ideas. Access to truth, to the general and the universal, is a painful exercise. Therefore, instead of the truth itself, children should first be presented with the appearance of truth in order to train their souls to recognize it. For Plato, art serves to initiate the souls of young children 'to love beautiful reason and to agree with it' (Plato, [1966: 400 e-402]). Although not the truth itself, art can nevertheless lead us to it, for it opens its path and indicates its way. For Plato, art serves as a preparation for truth, acting as a propaedeutic to science.

V. CONCLUSION

Faced with the relativism and skepticism of the sophists, Plato decided to find a universal and rational basis for beauty. He found this foundation in the Idea, because, according to him, beauty is an essence in the same way as the good, the reliable and the truthful. The study of beauty is therefore a matter of metaphysics, i.e. the discourse on being and the absolute. If sensible beauties exist, they are only as distant images that remind man's mind of the ideal beauty once contemplated in the world of essences. It is therefore as Idea, essence, that beauty participates in truth. It is a dimension of truth that has the particularity, because of its brilliance and brightness, of having first attracted man's gaze. It is also as a spiritual thing that beauty can only be grasped spiritually, in other words rationally. Ultimately, what is beautiful, according to Plato, is not so much the things themselves as the ability of the mind to grasp them through thought. Beauty is the reason that doubts, criticizes, analyses, clarifies, synthesizes, in short, pushes back the boundaries of ignorance. Beauty is the knowing mind, philosophical wisdom. If art is disqualified by Plato, it is because it is rooted in materiality, which confers a weak epistemological and metaphysical value on its objects. And yet, Plato recognizes the mind in its ascending process towards the absolute that needs the images of art as a preparation for the view of being. Such, then, is the Platonic idealism of beauty. Nevertheless, one can question its value and its authenticity in the "postmodern" era of post-art¹².

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