

The realm of mimesis in Plato: orality, writing, and the ontology of the image

Mariangela Esposito, *The realm of mimesis in Plato: orality, writing, and the ontology of the image*. Brill's Plato studies series, 13. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2022. Pp. xiv, 173. ISBN 9789004533110.

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Preview

The preoccupation with *mimesis* is central to Plato's works. Mariangela Esposito situates the Platonic corpus in the age of an "anthropological paradigm shift" from a culture of orality to a culture of writing (pp. ix, 51, 59, 65) and proposes a "contemporary philosophical inquiry" (p. ix) into Plato's criticisms of both cultures. The author later explains that in fact "there is no shift from orality to writing, but *through* orality *to* writing, in which Plato may be considered the main representative, given that the transition gained both awareness and intentionality under his cultural project", a movement similar to the "shift *through myth to philosophy*" that resulted from the employment of myths with a critical intent, no longer focused on concreteness but at the service of philosophical abstraction, "when philosophy became more conceptual and abstract under Plato" (p. 69, all italics in the original). Within this context, Esposito discusses the realm of *mimesis* in Plato as a "mechanism" (p. xiii) that reveals

the constant relationships of opposition, continuity, and co-dependency in the critiques of writing and orality, as well as a crucial problem in the ontology of the image, devoting a separate chapter of the monograph to each one of these three axes (writing, orality, and image).

Throughout the book, one can count over fifty occurrences of the word “contemporary”, an adjective that seems to be employed by the author with two different intents. In one sense, “contemporary” refers to the topicality of some problems and their relevance to the present. In the very first lines of the Abstract, the above-mentioned paradigm shift that had happened in Plato’s time is declared to be “... very similar to the one we have been experiencing for a few decades. As we experience the progressive erosion of literacy in favour of digitalisation ...” (p. ix), an assertion that is not resumed anywhere else in the book. The most direct bridge with current events only resurfaces in the short Afterword (“On the Contemporary Relatability of This Study”, pp. 143-147), where the author recalls some key-concepts of the study (*eidola*, *logoi*) and appears to apply them to “contemporary phenomena” such as “fake news” (including anti-vaccine narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic) and the first image of a black hole to be captured.^[1] The adjective “contemporary” is also employed in a second way, often in conjunction with words such as “scholars”, “authors”, or “interpreters”, qualifying readings of Plato undertaken mainly during the 20th century, which are extensively followed by the author and are pivotal in the first two chapters.

Chapter 1 of the book deals with the critique of writing in the *Phaedrus* and in the *Seventh Letter* of Plato, relying heavily on the “deconstructive reading” that Derrida made of the *Phaedrus* and the “epistemological reading” of the *Seventh Letter* proposed by Gadamer (p. 5). Following the famous essay “Plato’s Pharmacy” (later incorporated into Derrida’s *Dissemination*), quoted in French in the body of text and then in English in a footnote (p. 7, n. 4), Esposito endorses Derrida’s reading in finding two charges against writing: that is, firstly, an imitation of the original and, secondly, an attempt to substitute the original, which makes clear

the “... genuine connection between arts and writing in Plato’s work. This connection is the mimetic mechanism” (p. 17). The myth of Thamus and Theuth plays an important role in this reading of the challenges of writing, showing how “a technique is never innocent in itself” (p. 12), since the concept of *pharmakon* involves the opposite senses of poison and cure.^[2] Gadamer’s interpretation of the *Seventh Letter* concurs with the critique of the weakness of the *logoi*, noting the importance of a dialectic of the image or copy in both works. Then, two lengthy sections offer a descriptive account of the history and development of an influential esoteric interpretation of Plato (pp. 31-47), usually known as the school of Tübingen (and Milan) and named after the testimony of Arist. *Phys.* 209b15, a thesis that argued for the existence of unwritten doctrines that are not explicitly mentioned in the dialogues but contained in other attestations. The author rejects this reading (“which this work does not consider sustainable”, p. 47) because it clashes with the description of a tension between writing and orality in Plato in which the project of the book is grounded, without making clear why the possibility of the *Ungeschriebene Lehre* is mentioned and then dismissed without a thorough analysis of textual sources.

The critique of orality in the *Ion* and the *Republic* is discussed in chapter 2. Havelock and the Harvard School are “the main theoretical model referred to in this chapter” (p. 52), which advances a reading of the oral origins of Ancient Greek poetry and the Homeric Question through the lenses of structural linguistics and anthropology. Denying the rationality of an alleged art of the rhapsody, Socrates denounces the *mania* of Ion, whose performances were made in a state of near trance “in which self-identity would be better identified with the personal voice rather than with self-consciousness” (p. 64). Esposito rightly frames this criticism within the set of problems that pose a threat to the structure of the *psyche*. The discussion of the arts in the *Republic* is articulated with “a discourse on the soul” (p. 71); at the same time the epistemological perils of *mimesis* and the mimetic mechanism in books 2, 3, and 10 are brought together with the

distinctions between reality and appearances—and therefore between likeness-making and appearance-making—made in the *Sophist*.

Chapter 3 highlights the significance of the ontology of image in Plato's account of *mimesis*. The author accounts for the decisive role of the conceptual couple *eidos* and *eidolon* for her argument, drawing on a truncated quote of the already extremely difficult *Soph.* 240a-c (in translation), where “Theaetetus insists on similarity (*eoikos*), resemblance (*eoikos*), likeness (*eikon*)” (p. 99). The ontology of falsehood is also investigated with recourse to the *Sophist*, *Theaetetus*, *Symposium*, and Sextus Empiricus. The last sections of the book and its concluding pages emphasize the role of beauty in the transcendence of the dialectic of the “double” (p. 136).

While discussing the role of *mimesis* in education, the author recognises “a substantial homogeneity in Plato's works” (p. 113), a valid stance that is further elaborated in a footnote where the authenticity of the *Epinomis* is questioned, which is a completely legitimate issue. Esposito claims, however, that “According to Diogenes Laertius (*Vitae philosophorum*, III, 37) the *Epinomis* was added by Plato's student, Philip of Opus, as a last book to conclude the *Laws*.” (p. 113, n. 47). Diogenes Laertius, though, writes in that passage that “some people say (ἐνιοί τέ φασιν)” that Philip of Opus transcribed the *Laws* from wax tables and that those people say that the *Epinomis* is also his (τούτου δὲ καὶ τὴν Ἐπινομίδα φασιν εἶναι; Diog. Laert. 3.37, p. 263, 416-418 Dorandi).^[3] After this, the author quotes a passage where there is a reference to “... skills that employ words, all the arts of the Muses, and the genres of visual representation” (τά τε κατὰ λόγους καὶ μοῦσαν πᾶσαν, καὶ ὅσων γραφικὴ μήτηρ; *Epin.* 975d5-6 Novotný = Tarán = Tulli), in a loose translation by McKirahan that follows the text established by Tarán, the author of a reference work on the *Epinomis*, a reference to which could have strengthened the claim of spuriousness.^[4] A more serious mishap occurs when quoting the three criteria to judge *eikona* in *Leg.* 669a-b. The translation of Saunders follows the tradition of the so-called “moral interpretation” and reads the third criterion as “... and then, third,

the *moral value* of this or that representation produced by language, tunes and rhythms” (p. 115; italics in the monograph), while the Greek reads τὸ τρίτον, εἵργασται τῶν εἰκόνων ἡτισοῦν ῥήμασί τε καὶ μέλεσι καὶ τοῖς ῥυθμοῖς; (*Lg.* 669b1-3 Burnet = des Places). This suggests that the original text was not checked, other translations were not consulted (in English: Jowett, Bury, Pangle, Meyer, or Griffith, for instance), and neither were the critical tradition and commentaries on this passage. Saunders’ reading is legitimate but, as it is not literal, it should be explained and defended.

This review cannot be concluded without mentioning two sentences in the Premises of the book whose implications are critical both for the methodology followed in this work and for its bibliography: “A purely philological approach has not been considered due to a lack of advanced expertise in this specific field, and the possibility of its limiting the original aim of the research. Nevertheless, a personal reading of the original Greek text takes priority over any contemporary philosophical interpretation.” (p. xiii) However, it is not clear what is meant here by a “personal” reading of the original text. With regard to Plato, all quotes are taken from the Hackett complete edition (ed. Cooper), and the author does not make a single change or correction to these translations. As for the Greek text, “[t]he relevant Platonic texts are quoted from the Oxford versions edited by John Burnet” (p. xiv), but no philological reason or other justifications are provided for this choice; since Burnet’s edition, the first volume and the *Resp.* have had new editions in the OCT series, and other dialogues now have alternative reference editions, some of them already followed by the Hackett translation that Esposito quotes. As for Aristotle, the entries in the bibliography are the revised Oxford translation (ed. Barnes) and an Italian translation of the *Po.* The methodology followed in this book is thus not the same as the one stated in the Premises. Apart from these problems, there are inaccuracies in some works in the bibliography (e.g. Lopes & Cornelli, Murray); the English translations of ancient authors are listed without the names of translators (Aristoxenus, Sextus Empiricus, Simplicius); finally,

references to modern works that are translations are not identified as such (one can even find separate entries for the same book by Szlezák in both German and Italian).

This book makes a contribution to the topic, with some remarkable scholarly insights, and it may be useful for an introductory reading (in translation) of some key texts in the Platonic corpus, especially for those who are interested in the reception of the problem of *mimesis* in authors of the philosophical production of the 20th century. In view of the critique above, however, some caution should be exercised if one aims to make closer readings of the textual sources for the argument, since the general claims that underlie the readings of these sources are not defended as thoroughly as they ought to be.

Notes

[1] Four and a half pages that do “not intend to be a purely autoreferential academic exercise” (p. 143).

[2] “The Greek word *pharmakon*, which is a *vox media* [sic] (meaning at the same time medicine and poison), recurs often in the dialogue ...” (p. 11, n. 15, italics in the original).

[3] Quoting from the same edition that is listed in the bibliography: Diogenes Laertius. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Edited with introduction by Tiziano Dorandi. Cambridge Classical Texts and Commentaries, 50. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

[4] Leonardo Tarán. *Academia: Plato, Philip of Opus, and the Pseudo-Platonic Epinomis*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1975.