

A PHILOSOPHY OF ART IN PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*: AN ANALYSIS OF COLLINGWOOD'S PROPOSAL.

I.

The status of art in Plato's philosophy has always been a difficult problem. As a matter of fact, he even threw the poets out from his ideal state¹, a passage that has led many interpreters to assess that Plato did not develop a proper philosophy of art. Nevertheless, R. G. Collingwood, wrote an article titled "Plato's Philosophy of Art"². How can it be? What could lead one of the most important aesthetic scholars of the first half of the twentieth century to make this thesis about Plato? To understand Collingwood's position, I propose to review it in a new light: his own philosophy of art at that moment as it was propounded in *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art*³, a work he published that same year.

II.

Collingwood's position on Plato's philosophy of art arises from the analysis he makes of Book X of the *Republic*, especially its beginning⁴, although he later completes his reading with some other passages of Plato's works. According to Collingwood, the cited passage can be summarized in three main points:

- 1.- The doctrine of the Three Degrees of Reality.
- 2.- The doctrine of the Three Degrees of Knowledge
- 3.- The doctrine of the Emotionality of Art.⁵

Next, Collingwood passes to analyze the concept of imitation or copying (*μίμησις*), which is the key for the right interpretation of the passage. Thus, for Plato, a copy is not a replica, is not an object of the same order as the object copied, but "*an object of a wholly different order, having the characteristics proper to that order, and having in that resemblance the ground of its peculiar value*"⁶. Therefore, for Plato, as Collingwood shows, when a carpenter produces a bed, he is not producing an idea nor an intelligible object, but a percept, whose value lies in its relation with the first order object (the idea) being copied. But, there is a radical imperfection in the produced sensible object by which it cannot even be considered as an instance of the idea copied, since the perceptible is tainted with unreality and unintelligibility. As

1 *Republic*, 595a

2 Collingwood published his "Plato's Philosophy of Art" in *Mind: A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy* in 1925, XXXIV, pages 154-172. I will use Donogan's edition of the text in Donogan (1966), 155-183.

3 Collingwood published *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* in 1925, (London: Oxford University Press). As before, I will be using Donogan's edition of the text in Donogan (1966), 43-154.

4 *Republic*, 595a-608

5 Cf. 158-160.

6 Donogan (1966), 161.

Collingwood states it: “*hence the attempt to embody the perfection of the concept in perceptible shape is a selfcontradictory attempt, and foredoomed to failure*”⁷. This last statement clarifies, for Collingwood, what Plato meant by *mimesis*: “*To copy is to construct in a given material an object resembling one which is not made in that material; and the material itself imposes an impassible restriction on the fidelity of the resemblance*”⁸.

But if the concept of imitation is central to the understanding of the kind of relationship between the conceptual world and the perceptible objects, it is also the key to the right interpretation of the relation between the perceptible world and art. According to Collingwood, Plato's definition of art in the *Republic* is “*that in art this same process is repeated at a further stage. As the percept copies the concept, so the work of art copies the percept*”⁹. Collingwood understands that the same clarifications done before for the relation between the concept and the percept are now of application to the relation between percepts and works of art: each object is in a different metaphysical plane, and therefore the work of art possesses only those attributes peculiar to its own order of reality, and its value depends on its relation to the world of percepts¹⁰. Therefore, just as the value of the perceptible bed is judged by its relation to the ideal bed, so the picture of a bed must be judged by its relation to the perceptible bed.

The importance of this last conclusion is quite evident. Collingwood is stating that, for Plato, the artist in his activity cannot use the idea as the model he copies: “*the concept, the ideal which the craftsman would realize if he could, is a thing of which the artist knows nothing*”¹¹. The artist does not produce a bed nor a hero, but an object *sui generis*, which must be judged by a standard peculiar to itself and not by the standard of the ideal. This is just the negative side of Plato's conception of art as double imitation – an imitation of the imitation of the concept. But it is also, Collingwood says, the founding-stone of all sound aesthetic theory: “*To distinguish art from science and morality and handicraft and to assert that it has a sphere of its own; to distinguish the value of its works from scientific truth and from practical utility, and to place them in a distinct metaphysical category; this is the first step towards a real philosophy of art*”¹².

So, after all, from Collingwood's perspective, Plato is actually setting the foundations of a sound theory of art. But, at the same time, we can get an overview of Collingwood's own conception about the foundations of any sound aesthetic theory, which he himself had tried to accomplish in the *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art*,

7 Donogan (1966), 162.

8 Donogan (1966), 162.

9 Donogan (1966), 163.

10 Cf. Donogan (1966), 163.

11 Donogan (1966), 164.

12 Donogan (1966), 164.

where we can find two complete sections (§§ 26-27)¹³ devoted to the distinction between art, religion, science, history and philosophy. It is therefore Collingwood's own view about what a sound aesthetic theory should be that unveils the possibility of a theory of art in Plato, something not always discovered by other of his interpreters.

But Plato, for Collingwood, goes even further: he does not only develop a negative theory of art – what art is not -, but also proposes a positive view of what art is. Collingwood understands that this is, in fact, one of the positive consequences of the Doctrine of the Three Degrees of Reality. The negative side of the concept of *mimesis* in Plato is the affirmation of the impossibility of the copy to reproduce the model in an adequate form; its positive side is that it is, at least, a copy, an imitation. This way, a work of art, although an object of a different degree of reality from the percept, nevertheless copies that perceptual world, maintaining a positive relation with it. For the clarification of the meaning of *mimesis*, from its positive side, Collingwood will review Books VI and VII of Plato's *Republic*, arriving at the following conclusions:

1. From the ontological point of view, “*only the highest grade is absolutely real, and ultimately therefore the other grades do not exist at all, they are appearance, not reality...*”¹⁴.
2. But, appearances must also have some sort of ontological status. According to Collingwood, for Plato the percepts or appearances, so far as they are anything, are confused or perverted versions of the highest grade of reality, our right understanding of them being dependent of our understanding of their correct ontological status. Percepts are then the confused version of reality¹⁵.
3. This last thesis applies also to the description of the relationship between the third level of reality and percepts. A work of art is then “*a confused version of this confusion*”¹⁶, and its intelligibility comes from considering it from its proper ontological status.

For Collingwood these are the key concepts for the right understanding of Plato's concept of *mimesis*. Each of the last two levels of Reality “*tries to be what the one above it is*”¹⁷. Even more, translating all this from the terminology of the object into that of the subject, we find that “*there are as many forms or grades of experience as there are grades of objects*”¹⁸, so that each of the lower levels of experience are defined from the error of believing that they deal with the grade of reality immediately superior. But then *mimesis* “*expresses not the resemblance between two real things, nor even the relation between a less real thing and a more real thing; it*

13 Donogan (1966), 137-144.

14 Donogan (1966), 165.

15 Cf. Donogan (1966), 166.

16 Donogan (1966), 166.

17 Donogan (1966), 166.

18 Donogan (1966), 166.

*expresses the relation between an appearance and the reality which it appears to be*¹⁹.

This means, for Collingwood, that Plato conceives the work of art as “*an appearance of an appearance*”²⁰. But it means also that just as the proper experience of the concepts must be called knowledge – the apprehension of necessary truth -, and the proper experience of the percepts must be called opinion, there must also be a proper experience of the objects of the lowest level of reality. Collingwood states: “*its own right name is imagination and that of its objects is phantasms or images*”²¹. Therefore, according to Collingwood, imagination is the essence of the aesthetic experience in Plato, is the kind of experience that happens properly in art. Even more, just as the quality of knowledge is truth, and that of opinion is utility, works of art “*contain no truths, nor even assertions which by some chance might be true, but only a glamour which when stripped off leaves nothing behind (601). This glamour is what we call beauty*”²².

For someone familiar with Plato's passages cited by Collingwood, these last statements may sound, at least, strange. Plato does not use in them the word *imagination* to refer to this kind of experience; instead, he speaks of *imitation, poetry or painting*. I think, in fact, that we must look into Collingwood's own *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* to understand his interpretation of Plato. The third Section of Chapter 1 is titled “*§ 3. Art in its specific Nature: Theoretically, as Imagination*”²³. This must not necessarily mean that Collingwood is forcing the text. It is true that Collingwood is bringing into play his own preconception of what art is when reading the text, but it is also true that the text also offers itself for the playing.

The explanation is different for Collingwood's assertion that beauty is, for Plato, the proper quality of works of art. In this case, Collingwood is going to reason his proposal from an etymological point of view. He admits that Plato, in 601 does not use what has become the Greek equivalent for beauty (*kallós*) but rather talks of the glamour, fascination or spell (*kélesis*) that surrounds a work of art. But, according to Collingwood, Plato does not use *kallos* because for him that word “*does not mean beauty. It means goodness or rightness or utility*”²⁴. So just as the Greeks did not have a word for art, in the modern sense, they did not have a word for beauty, and when Plato wants to talk about art's beauty, he uses words like *hedoné, keleísthai*, or *eros*, words that possess a more than evident sensual connotation coherent with the degree of reality and experience proper to the works of art.

19 Donogan (1966), 167.

20 Donogan (1966), 167.

21 Donogan (1966), 168.

22 Donogan (1966), 168.

23 Donogan (1966), 52.

24 Donogan (1966), 168.

All the above implies, for Collingwood, that Plato is separating art from reason and placing it in emotion²⁵. Although, Plato himself makes explicitly this separation²⁶, the important point to note about this is that Collingwood is going to deduce art emotional character from its imaginative nature: “*The emotionality of art, as Socrates conceives it, is a deduction from its imaginative nature. If each grade of objects is what it is by trying to embody an ideal drawn from the next higher grade, if each is a μίμησις of the next above, imagination is what it is by being a μίμησις, at two removes of truth*”²⁷. This means the substitution of truth by certitude in the case of perception, and of certitude by glamour or emotional character in the case of art. Collingwood goes even ahead of Plato's text when he explains the glamour that clings to the work of art by the fact that it indirectly symbolizes truth, so that, according to Collingwood, Plato is actually conceiving the work of art as a symbol of truth, being precisely this the reason of Plato's expulsion of the artists from his Ideal State: “*If the emotionality of art were a merely sensuous reaction, the struggle against it, the old quarrel between poetry and philosophy, would be merely another case of the irksome but not heartrending warfare which all must wage against animal lust. The struggle against art is the struggle to resist the emotional appeal of a symbol in order to penetrate to that which it symbolises*”²⁸.

I suppose that in this point the reader is, again, perplexed. Some pages before²⁹, Collingwood had stated that for Plato a work of art did not contain any truth, and I am now showing that according to him, for Plato, a work of art is a symbol of truth. I hope to undo, or at least clarify, this seeming contradiction. To do it I want the reader to take into account Collingwood own thesis about art as a symbolic form that expresses the meaning of life, developed in *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art*: “*What the artist sees as an absolutely unique creation, the historian sees as another attempt added to the long list of previous attempts to express the meaning of life in a symbolic form. Both the artist and the historian regard the work of art as expressive: but whereas the artist regards it as expressive simply of itself, the historian regards it as expressive of the experiences, now forgotten, which have paved the way for its creation*”³⁰.

The text shows us many thinks about Collingwood's reading of Plato. In the first place, that Collingwood is making the two, apparently contradicting, statements about Plato's conception of the work of art because for him there is not contradiction at all. The first one defines art from the artist's own point of view, while the second is the result of examining art from the philosopher's point of view (being philosophy the only place where a theory of reality can be propounded). But, secondly, that for

25 Cf. Donogan (1966), 168.

26 Cf. *Republic*, 603b

27 Donogan (1966), 169.

28 Donogan (1966), 170.

29 Cf. Donogan (1966), 168.

30 Donogan (1966), 68.

Collingwood art is also conceived as a symbol, but only from the historical point of view. The question is now whether or not is possible to draw these distinctions in Plato's text.

The answer to this last problem is found in the following passage: “*Why, between ourselves – for you will not betray me to the tragic poets and all other imitators – that kind of art seems to be a corruption of the mind of all listeners who do not possess, as an antidote a knowledge of its real nature*”³¹. In it, Socrates is talking about the problem that works of art mean to those who do not know their true nature, their spellbinding and glamorous nature. These are both the artists and spectators who do not know Truth, while the philosopher who has climbed to the world of Ideas, who is aware of art's real nature, is also aware that its spellbinding nature and glamour comes from its being a symbol of truth, that talks openly to feelings but is quiet for reason.

Collingwood gives one more step in his interpretation of Plato's *Republic* when he tries to explain the reason for art's symbolic character: “*the view stated by Socrates, at any rate, is that mind is such a unity and that its various grades of experience are linked together by a progressive dialectic*”³². Only from a conception that considers mind as an essential unity is possible to hold that art is a symbol of truth. Moreover, for Collingwood this is the only possible explanation for Plato's two-sided position about the status of art and artists in his ideal state. From one point of view, if aesthetic activity is a symbol or *μίμησις* of activities of a higher level, it can be consider as a preparation for them; so that it could be admitted in the education of a class of citizens of the ideal Republic, as Plato does in 392d-396. But, from the other point of view, art is not truth; it is only its symbolic representation or *μίμησις*, so that it must be prohibited to those who are to be in contact with it, the future philosophers, being this Plato's position about art in Book X³³.

Once again, Collingwood's position about mind or spirit clarifies his reading of the text. In this sense, it is significant that Section twenty-eighth in Chapter 6 of *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* is titled: “*The unity of spiritual life*”. In it, Collingwood tries to describe the interrelation between the five phases of the life of the spirit he has just discussed before: art, religion, science, history and philosophy. For him, they are not species of a common genus, but activities interconnected in a double way: each one presupposes and includes the previous one in the scale of spiritual life (philosophy presupposes history; history, science; and so on), and each is in a sense all the others that follow that same scale (art is, in a sense, religion; religion, science; and so on)³⁴. Therefore also for Collingwood mind is a unity in which the different kinds of experience are linked together dialectically.

31 *Republic*, 595b

32 Donogan (1966), 170.

33 Cf. Donogan (1966), 170-171.

34 Cf. Donogan (1996), 144.

I think Plato's text justifies this interpretation. In order to see it, I propose the reader to take a close look at the well known Myth of the Carvern³⁵, in conjunction with the Analogy of the Line³⁶. In them, he describes the path the ignorant must walk to discover truth. This travel is, essentially, a process of self-discovery³⁷ by which the soul gets to know the world of Ideas, in such a way that in order to get such knowledge, a soul must go through all the different grades until he reaches reason (conjecture, belief, understanding and reason). So, after all, as Collingwood had stated, there are elements in Plato's *Republic* that enabled him to assert that mind is a unity whose different types or grades of experience are linked together in a progressive dialectic, describe in the Myth as the climbing of the prisoner out of the cave, and his final contemplation of the sun.

III.

I have offered the main keys of Collingwood's proposal of a philosophy of art in Plato. It could be summarized in the following points.

1. Plato sets the basis for a sound theory of art distinguishing art from other types of experience. The central concept in this distinction is *μίμησις*. A work of art is neither a percept nor an Idea, but an imitation of the percept, and therefore an imitation of the imitation of the idea, a second order copy of true reality.
2. Plato also develops a positive theory of art by defining a proper experience for the work of art. This experience is imagination and its proper quality is beauty conceived as the emotional dimension of the work of art.
3. The emotional character of the work of art, its glamour, can only be explained defining art as an indirect symbol of truth. This explains Plato bipolar position about the arts in the description of the ideal state.

This is the core of Collingwood's interpretation of Plato's position about art. But, as I have shown, and at least for the second and third points stated above, Collingwood is only able to propound it because he is bringing into play important elements of his own philosophy of art. In this regard, there is a question that could be interesting to consider: Is Collingwood forcing Plato's text? As I have tried to show in the article, I believe that, at least in its main points, he is not doing so, but rather his own theory of art as developed in *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* is bringing into light some virtualities of the text that were overseen by other interpreters.

35 Cf. *Republic*, 514a-518b.

36 Cf. *Republic*, 509d-511e.

37 Cf. *Republic*, 518c.

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