

François Renaud

7 The Voice of Homer and That of His Characters: The Criticism of μίμησις (*Resp.* 393d – 394e) and Its Varied Reception

1 Context and Problematic

The crucial issue for Socrates in the criticism of poetry in Books 2 and 3 of *Republic* is the education of the guardians. Socrates first examines the content of reformed poetry, that is, what ought to be said (ὅ [...] λεκτέον). He criticises the immorality of the gods and heroes as portrayed primarily by Homer. He then deals with the form it ought to take (ὡς λεκτέον), and formulates a theory of poetic discourses in three types: simple narration (ἀπλῇ διήγησις), narration by means of imitation (μίμησις) and the combination of the two (δι’ ἀμφοτέρων, 3.392d – 394d). All are in fact narrative modes, narration being conducted either without imitation (ἄνευ μιμήσεως), or by means of it (διὰ μιμήσεως). Simple narration is associated with dithyramb, imitation with tragedy and comedy, and the combination of both with epic. As in the case of content, the key issue with the classification of mode of discourse is moral or psychological rather than aesthetic.

To illustrate his theory, Socrates refers to the beginning of the *Iliad*, where Apollo’s priest Chryses begs Agamemnon to give him back his daughter. This Homeric episode begins with simple narration and then turns to imitative mode. In the case of narrative mode, of which he cites two verses (*Il.* 1.15 – 16), Socrates claims “the poet himself is speaking” (λέγει τε αὐτὸς ὁ ποιητής, 393a6). In the imitative mode, the poet “speaks as if he were Chryses and tries as far as possible to make us think that the speaker isn’t Homer but the priest himself” (πειρᾶται ἡμᾶς ὅτι μάλιστα ποιῆσαι μὴ Ὅμηρον δοκεῖν εἶναι τὸν λέγοντα, 393a8 – b2). In this mode, the poet “hides himself” (ἐαυτὸν ἀποκρύπτειτο) behind his characters (393c11). Imitating means “to make oneself like someone else in voice or appearance” (τό γε ὁμοιοῦν ἐαυτὸν ἄλλῳ ἢ κατὰ φωνὴν ἢ κατὰ σχῆμα, 393c5 – 6; trans. Grube, rev. Reeve).

Socrates apparently intends this classification to serve as a general theory of poetic or literary discourse. This theory is, moreover, normative: simple narration

Note: All quotations from the Greek Platonic text are from Burnet’s edition. Translations when not indicated are my own.

is considered superior to mimetic style. Emotional and cognitive impersonation in and by the mimetic poet applies each time to different objects, which brings about a multiplication of psychological dispositions in the public. Here lies the problem: the education of the guardians aims, on the contrary, at the mastery of passions and the strict unity of the soul.¹

On the whole, Socrates does not seem to make the distinction between the poet and the narrator nor between the poet and his characters. The apparent absence of distinction between the voice of the poet and that of the imitated character means that the poet takes on mimetically all the psychological traits and opinions of his or her character. This would mean, moreover, that if the characters express contradictory views from one another, the voice of the poet will itself be considered as contradictory.² In other words, mimetic poetry favours multiplicity and inconsistency instead of unity and harmony as it ought to.

The question then arises: does Socrates, and Plato, defend the absence of distinction between the voice of the poet and that of the characters, and if so, would it not in part compromise Plato's criticism of Homer? Or rather does Plato make the distinction between poet and characters, despite what Socrates seems to be saying, and if so, in what sense and to which extent? Most commentators today regard the meaning of the poetic theory as clear on this: these distinctions are simply absent. This non-distinction, however, hardly seems acceptable to us Moderns, especially as it denies the difference between the author and his or her characters and thus excludes the notion of literary persona.³ This odd conception, if this is indeed an accurate reflection of Plato's thought, could perhaps be explained by the primacy of oral culture. In Plato's time, 'literature' was still read aloud in a dramatic fashion;⁴ poetic activity is centred on performance (or the act of reciting or reading aloud), which would inevitably imply continuity between the poet and his or her creation, between the poet and the rhapsode-actor, and between the poet and his or her public (cf. *Ion* 535c5–e6).⁵ If indeed such is the case, is this poetic theory

1 Let us recall the three different meanings, increasingly larger, the term μίμησις takes on in the *Republic*: (i) the formal or poetic meaning, that is, the imitative (or dramatic) mode by comparison to simple narrative (3.392d–394d); (ii) the moral or psychological meaning: the mode expressing the psychological imitation or identification exerting an influence on character or behaviour (3.394e, 395c; cf. 401b–404c); (iii) the metaphysical or ontological meaning (10.595c).

2 This would seem to explain the criticism of poets in the *Laws* (719c5–d1), where the Athenian Stranger reproaches them to be self-contradictory when their characters contradict one another.

3 Cf. Clay (1998) 27.

4 In Aristotle's view (*Rh.* 3.1403b23–24) "at first the poets themselves acted their tragedies" (ὅτε κρίνοντο γὰρ αὐτοὶ τὰς τραγωδίας οἱ ποιηταὶ τὸ πρῶτον; Ross; trans. Reeve).

5 Cf. Pl. *Ion* 535c5–e6 about the emotional chain that unites poet (and first the Muse), rhapsode-actor and public.

compatible with Platonic writing? I will return to these questions in the third and fourth sections of this paper.

Views on the meaning and value of this pioneer classification in Antiquity are varied and strongly divided. It has exerted an enormous influence on ancient literary theories. The influence of this theory, associated with the forceful criticism of Homer, led to attempts to harmonize Homer and Plato. The adversaries of Homer tend to follow Plato in criticizing the poet's immorality or inconsistencies, while most of his defenders, Platonists and non-Platonists alike, seek to overcome these difficulties by means of various interpretative strategies.

In the second section, I examine the three principal ancient views and their subdivisions on the relation between the poet and his characters: (i) the defence of the non-distinction between poet and character on the part of a scholiast, who refers to Plato favourably by underlying the primacy of the poet; (ii) the defence of the distinction by two Platonists (Porphyry, Plutarch), a distinction conceived implicitly as a confirmation of or a complement to what is taken to be Plato's view; (iii) the defence of the distinction on the part of two grammarians (Aristarchus, Athenaeus): the first, in implicit, the second in explicit opposition to Plato. The first two views (i and ii) might go back to Aristotle, who will also be discussed below. In the third and last section, I discuss the question of whether the classification propounded by Socrates can be regarded as a complete theory applicable to the Platonic dialogues themselves.

2 Three Diverging Views

2.1 The Poet-Character: Reclaiming and Defending Plato?

The first of the three views I will present follows Plato (or Socrates) by refusing to distinguish Homer from his characters. A Homeric scholium gives a brief but clear example of this. Let us first recall that in the immense corpus of Homeric scholia no unified literary theory can be found, but rather fragments expressing a great number of dispersed theories, formulated in the form of *ad hoc* commentaries on single verses, and that the source of these scholia is often difficult or impossible to determine with any certainty⁶.

⁶ For a general survey on the Homeric scholia, as well as a more detailed account on their value with regard to both Homer and Plato, see George Gazis' paper in this volume.

Our scholium, placed at the beginning of the Catalogue of Ships (*Il.* 2.494–877), refers explicitly to Plato and reclaims the tripartite division of *Republic* Book 3, echoing the view that Homer’s characters are but mouthpieces of the poet.

τρεῖς δέ φησιν ὁ Πλάτων λόγων ιδέας, δραματικὴν, ἔνθα ὁ ποιητὴς συνεχῶς εὐδοκιμεῖ τοῖς ἡθεσι τῶν ὑποκειμένων προσώπων, ἀμίμητον, ὡς τὴν Φωκυλίδου, μικτὴν⁷ ὡς τὴν Ἡσιόδου.

Plato says that there are three forms of literary art, the dramatic, where the poet constantly distinguishes himself by means of the characters represented, the amimetic, such as Phocylides’, the mixed, such as Hesiod’s. (*schol.* B *Il.* 2.494–877 Erbse; trans. Nünlist 2009, 95)

The scholiast begins his comment with the following praise: “the poet is admirable” (θαυμάσιος ὁ ποιητής).⁸ Homer is thought to be admirable because of his ability to use his characters as a showcase for his own talents. The commentator thus agrees with what is taken to be Plato’s view about the fundamentally monophonic character of Homeric poetry, while underscoring Homer’s talents in exhibiting his powers of expression through his characters. The terminological differences between the scholiast and Plato do not affect the meaning: ἀμίμητος is employed instead of διηγηματικός, and δραματικός instead of μιμητικός.⁹ The term δραματικός possibly goes back to Aristotle’s definition of drama (*Poet.* 1448a28–29),¹⁰ which follows his characterization of the main forms of poetic discourse (1448a19–24), to be discussed below.

2.2 The Poet and His Characters (i): Confirming or Completing Plato Without Naming Him

The second view consists in refusing the non-distinction, that is, in separating the poet from his characters, without naming Plato. Two Platonists, Porphyry and Plutarch, defend different versions of this exegetical position.

⁷ μικτήν is a conjecture by Erbse, based on Eustathius (263, 9 = 1400, 19), accepted by van der Valk as well as Nünlist (2009, 94).

⁸ θαυμάσιος ὁ ποιητής μὴδ’ ὅτι οὐκ παραλείπων τῆς ὑποθέσεως, πάντα δ’ ἐξ ἀναστροφῆς κατὰ τὸν ἐπιβάλλοντα καιρὸν διηγούμενος, τὴν τῶν θεῶν ἔριν, τὴν τῆς Ἑλένης ἄρπαγην, τὸν Ἀχιλλέως θάνατον (“The poet is admirable, he does not omit any parts of the story, but relates all events in the revised order: the dispute between the goddesses [sc. Hera, Athena and Aphrodite], the rape of Helen, the death of Achilles,” trans. my own).

⁹ See especially Diog. Laert. 3.50.

¹⁰ *Poet.* 1448a28–29: ὅθεν καὶ δράματα καλεῖσθαι τινες αὐτὰ φασιν, ὅτι μιμοῦνται δρῶντας (“Hence the assertion some people make, that dramas are so called because they represent people in action,” Kassel, trans. Halliwell 1995).

In Porphyry's *Homeric Questions* we find a commentary of *Iliad* 6.265, with regard to verse 261. It is about the opposed remarks of Hecuba and Hector concerning the strengthening or debilitating effects of wine. Porphyry adopts the solution consisting in taking into account the character's viewpoint, or what the exegetical tradition calls, since Aristarch apparently, the λύσις ἐκ τοῦ προσώπου ("solution from the character"):¹¹

οὐδὲν δὲ θαυμαστὸν εἰ παρὰ τῷ ποιητῇ ἐναντία λέγεται ὑπὸ διαφόρων φωνῶν. ὅσα μὲν γὰρ ἔφη αὐτὸς ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ ἐξ ἰδίου προσώπου, ταῦτα δεῖ ἀκόλουθα εἶναι καὶ μὴ ἐναντία ἀλλήλοις· ὅσα δὲ προσώποις περιτίθῃσιν, οὐκ αὐτοῦ εἰσιν ἀλλὰ τῶν λεγόντων νοεῖται, ὅθεν καὶ ἐπιδέχεται πολλάκις διαφωνίαν.

it is no wonder if in the poet contrary things are said by different voices. For all that he said himself from his own persona, this must be consistent and not mutually contradictory; but all that he assigns to characters is not perceived to be his but of those who are speaking it, from which he admits inconsistency frequently, just as in this. (Porph. *Homeric Questions on the Iliad* 6.265, I 100.4–9 Schrader = 116 MacPhail; trans. MacPhail).

The hermeneutical strategy employed here resides in explaining an apparent contradiction by contextualisation, namely through the character who speaks. It recognizes the narrator's (or author's) mastery over his narration, what he himself says, out of his own persona (αὐτὸς ἀφ' ἑαυτοῦ, ἐξ ἰδίου προσώπου), in making his character speak in a specific way. While this distinction is not always observed by ancient readers, resorting to the λύσις ἐκ τοῦ προσώπου indicates that "the more careful critics at least differentiated between the voice of the poet and that of his characters," as René Nünlist notes.¹²

This exegetical method might go back to Aristotle.¹³ Elsewhere in the *Homeric Questions* Porphyry himself cites the solution given by Aristotle with regard to two contradictory statements concerning simple empirical data: while Homer in the Catalogue of the Ships claims that Crete has a hundred cities (ἐκατόμπολις), Odysseus, in a fictive story told to Penelope (*Od.* 19.173), says it comprises ninety (ἐννήκοντα πόλεις):

¹¹ In addition to the criterion of character (ἐκ τοῦ προσώπου), Porphyry also seeks to solve the difficulties in relation to style (ἐκ τῆς λέξεως), custom (ἐκ τοῦ ἔθνους), and time (ἐκ τοῦ καιροῦ). See MacPhail (2011) 7.

¹² Nünlist (2009) 132–3.

¹³ See Bouchard (2016) for a detailed study arguing for the influence of Aristotle, and more generally of the peripatetic school, in literary matters on the school of Alexandria, especially on Aristarch.

Ἀριστοτέλης δὲ οὐκ ἄτοπόν φησιν, εἰ μὴ πάντες τὰ αὐτὰ λέγοντες πεποίηνται αὐτῶ· οὕτως γὰρ καὶ ἀλλήλοις τὰ αὐτὰ παντελῶς λέγειν ὤφειλον.

Aristotle says it is not odd unless he depicts them all saying the same things. For in this way they ought to have said the same things as one another altogether. (Aristotle, frag. 146 Rose³ = Porph. *Homeric Questions on the Iliad* 2.649, I 48–9, I 48–9 Schrader = 68 MacPhail; trans. MacPhail).¹⁴

The modern reader might not even try to find a solution to this type of inconsistency and would “explain” it for instance by means of the hypothesis according to which the two epics are from different authors. Ancient readers, however, presuppose common authorship and strict literary unity, a unity to be discovered behind apparent and even minor anomalies, whereby the distinction between the poet and its characters constitutes a key exegetical tool.¹⁵ This method rests on the more general methodological principle that one must explain Homer by himself (Ὅμηρον ἐξ Ὁμήρου σαφηνίζειν), another principle commonly attributed to Aristarch. A similar distinction can be found in Dio Chrysostom, which he claims to borrow from Antisthenes.¹⁶

Plutarch also resorts to the distinction between the poet and his characters. He even claims that the poet, notably Homer, judges the words and the behaviour of his characters, correcting (ἐπανόρθωσις) them. Plutarch thus attributes didactic and moral intention to Homer. In his treatise *How to Study Poetry*, after quoting some ten Homeric passages, he makes at 19a–c the following remarks concerning the initial episode of the *Iliad* discussed and reformulated in prose by Socrates in *Republic* Book 3 referred to at the beginning of this paper:

Ἐν δὲ τούτοις εὖ μάλα προσεκτέον εἰ τινὰς ὁ ποιητὴς αὐτὸς ἐμφάσεις δίδωσι κατὰ τῶν λεγομένων ὡς δυσχεραينوμένων ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ. [...] ἄριστα δ’ Ὅμηρος τῷ γένει τούτῳ κέχρηται· καὶ γὰρ προδιαβάλλει τὰ φαῦλα καὶ προσυνίστησι τὰ χρηστὰ τῶν λεγομένων [...] οἷον τὸν τ’ Ἀγαμέμνονα μέλλων διηγέσθαι τῷ ἱερεῖ χρώμενον ἀπηνῶς προείρηκεν ἀλλ’ οὐκ Ἀτρεΐδῃ Ἀγα-

14 See also *Poet.* 1461b15–18: τὰ δ’ ὑπεναντίως εἰρημένα οὕτω σκοπεῖν ὥσπερ οἱ ἐν τοῖς λόγοις ἔλεγχοι εἰ τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ πρὸς τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ ὡσαύτως, ὥστε καὶ αὐτὸν ἢ πρὸς ἃ αὐτὸς λέγει ἢ ὃ ἂν φρόνιμος ὑποθῇται (“Contradictions should be scrutinized as with refutations in argument, to see whether the same is meant, in the same relation, and in the same respect, so that the poet himself contradicts either his own words or what an intelligent person would assume;” Kassel; trans. Halliwell 1995).

15 Nünlist (2009) 117, n. 7: “The advantage of this principle cannot be overestimated, because it is often neglected.”

16 Dio. Chrys., *On Homer* (orat. LIII) 4–5 = Antisthenes V A 194 = v. Arnim 58 DC fr. 274 SVF. For an analysis of the debate surrounding this passage, see Renaud (2022a), in which it is argued that the exegesis of Antisthenes includes the principle that it is possible to overcome an apparent contradiction by distinguishing the voice of Homer from that of his characters.

μέμνονι ἦνδανε θυμῷ / ἀλλὰ κακῶς ἀφίει. Τοντέστιν ἀγρίως καὶ αὐθάδως καὶ παρὰ τὸ προσῆκον.

In these passages, close attention must be given to see whether the poet himself gives any hints against the sentiments expressed to indicate that they are distasteful to himself; [...] But Homer has best employed this method; for he in advance discredits the mean and calls our attention to the good in what is said. [...] For example, when he is on the point of narrating Agamemnon's harsh treatment of the priest, he says in advance, *Yet Agamemnon, Atreus' son, at heart did not like it / Harshly he sent him away* [Il. 1.378–79] that is to say, savagely and wilfully and contrary to what he should have done. (Plut. *How to Study Poetry* 19a–c; Wytttenbach; trans. Babbitt).¹⁷

Plutarch here clearly distinguishes between Homer and his characters and makes the poet into the moral judge of his own characters. He does not name Plato, but he no doubt has in mind his famous criticism of poetry. Plutarch does not criticize him even indirectly, for he thinks Plato has appreciated the dangers of literature for the youth better than anyone. While Plato in the *Republic* wrote as a legislator of an ideal city, Plutarch sought to respond to the needs of the youth of his own time.¹⁸ In sum, according to Plutarch, Homer blames or praises by means of indications (ἐμφάσεις), that is, by clear evaluative terms or phrases that invite the careful reader to reflect on the behaviour to be avoided or adopted.¹⁹

2.3 The Poet and His Characters (ii): Polemicizing against Plato, Openly or Not

As noted earlier, the principle that one ought to understand a statement in connection with the person making it, may go back to Aristarch. Like Plutarch after him, Aristarch gives primacy to the author-narrator's discourse over that of the characters. For example, according to Aristarch, Menelaus should not be considered a

17 See earlier in the text (17b–d): οὐθ' Ὅμηρος οὔτε Πίνδαρος οὔτε Σοφοκλῆς πεπεισμένοι ταῦτ' ἔχειν οὕτως ἔγραψαν [...] αὐται πεπονθότων εἰσὶ καὶ προεαλωκότων ὑπὸ δόξης καὶ ἀπάτης ("And not Homer nor Pindar nor Sophocles really believed that these things are so when they wrote [...]). These are the voices of persons affected by emotion and prepossessed by opinions and delusion," Wytttenbach; trans. Babbitt).

18 According to Plutarch (15a) "it is neither possible, perhaps, nor profitable to debar from poetry a boy" (οὐτ' ἴσως δυνατόν ἐστιν οὐτ' ὠφέλιμον ποιημάτων ἀπείργειν, Wytttenbach; trans. Babbitt). Cf. Hunter (2009) 176–7.

19 For a detailed analysis of the notion of correction (ἐπανόρθωσις) in Plutarch, see the chapter of Dino De Sanctis in this volume.

coward, as described in *Il.* 17.588, since this judgment is that of an adversary eager to slander him:

μαλθακὸς αἰχμητής· τὸ σημεῖον, ὅτι οὐχ ὡς τῷ ὄντι μαλθακοῦ αἰχμητοῦ ὄντος τοῦ Μενελάου ληπτέον, ἀλλὰ τὸ πρόσωπον πολέμιον ὃν εἰς διαβολὴν λέγει· “ἀρηΐφιλον” γὰρ ὁ ποιητὴς αὐτὸν καλεῖ

‘weakling warrior’: the sign, because one ought not understand these words as if Menelaus really was a weakling warrior, but because the character is an enemy he says that in order to slander him, for the poet calls him ‘dear to Ares.’ (*schol.* A, *Il.* 17.588a Ariston; Erbse; trans. my own)

Aristarch claims, moreover, that the speaker, the god Apollo, expresses the view of a defender of the Trojan camp and that the poet narrator *explains* that Apollo seeks to encourage Hector to fight against Menelaus, who has killed one of his friends (583–585). As most modern commentators, including Hartmut Erbse, argue, Aristarch is no doubt thinking here of Plato and polemicizes against him without naming him. Indeed, in *Symp.* 174c1, Socrates cites this verse as a remark disapproving of Menelaus on the part of Homer. Besides, Athenaeus has possibly borrowed his criticism of Plato from Aristarch. Athenaeus, however, names and criticizes Plato openly. He explicitly refers to the *Symposium* passage and concludes as follows:

οὐ γὰρ εἴ τι λέγεται παρ’ Ὀμήρῳ, τοῦθ’ Ὀμηρος λέγει.

For when something is said in Homer, this is not necessarily said by Homer. (*Deipnosophistae* 5.178d; Gulick; trans. my own).

We thus seem to be dealing with two ways of polemicizing against a certain understanding of Plato’s criticism of Homer. What is aimed at and rejected here, however, is not the poetic theory formulated by Socrates, but rather the interpretative *practice*, conceivably based on that theory.

2.4 Aristotle, Possible Source or Intermediary

The principle that one ought to distinguish the poet from his characters, already defended explicitly by Aristarch, would seem to go back at least to Aristotle. Let us cite the most relevant passages, taken from the *Poetics*. First:

περὶ δὲ τοῦ καλῶς ἢ μὴ καλῶς εἰ εἴρηται τι ἢ πέπρακται, οὐ μόνον σκεπτέον εἰς αὐτὸ τὸ πεπραγμένον ἢ εἰρημένον βλέποντα εἰ σπουδαῖον ἢ φαῦλον, ἀλλὰ καὶ εἰς τὸν πράττοντα ἢ λέ-

γοντα πρὸς ὃν ἢ ὅτε ἢ ὅτω ἢ οὐ ἔνεκεν, οἷον εἰ μείζονος ἀγαθοῦ, ἵνα γένηται, ἢ μείζονος κακοῦ, ἵνα ἀπογένηται.

When the question is whether or not someone has spoken or acted well, one should examine not only whether the actual deed or utterance is good or bad, but also the identity of the agent or speaker, to whom he acted or spoke, when, with what means, and for what end (*Poet.* 1461a4–9; Kassel; trans. Halliwell).

More generally, Aristotle reclaims the Socratic distinction between narrative and mimetic modes, which represent according to him the two principal modes of imitation, the tripartite classification thus becoming bipartite. Aristotle understands μίμησις as representation rather than impersonation (or identification), and as the specific characteristic of all poetic arts. In the two following passages from the *Poetics* Aristotle expresses important disagreements with Plato without naming him:

Ἔτι δὲ τούτων τρίτη διαφορὰ τὸ ὡς ἕκαστα τούτων μιμήσαιο ἂν τις. Καὶ γὰρ ἐν τοῖς αὐτοῖς καὶ τὰ αὐτὰ μιμεῖσθαι ἔστιν ὅτε μὲν ἀπαγγέλλοντα, ἢ ἑτερόν τι γινόμενον ὥσπερ Ὅμηρος ποιεῖ ἢ ὡς τὸν αὐτὸν καὶ μὴ μεταβάλλοντα, ἢ πάντας ὡς πράττοντας καὶ ἐνεργοῦντας ἰτούς μιμουμένους†.

There is, beside these, a third distinction in the mode of mimesis for these various objects. For in the same media one can represent the same objects by combining narrative with direct personation, as Homer does; or in an invariable narrative voice; or by direct enactment of all roles (*Poet.* 1448a19–24 Kassel; trans. Halliwell).

While Socrates speaks of the poet's concealment (*Resp.* 393c11; see above), Aristotle's language is that of self-effacement or absence. Homer would allow his characters free range of expression, intervening seldom in his own work:

Ὅμηρος δὲ ἄλλα τε πολλὰ ἄξιος ἐπαινεῖσθαι καὶ δὴ καὶ ὅτι μόνος τῶν ποιητῶν οὐκ ἀγνοεῖ ὃ δεῖ ποιεῖν αὐτόν. Αὐτὸν γὰρ δεῖ τὸν ποιητὴν ἐλάχιστα λέγειν· οὐ γὰρ ἔστι κατὰ ταῦτα μιμητής. Οἱ μὲν οὖν ἄλλοι αὐτοὶ μὲν δι' ὅλου ἀγωνίζονται, μιμοῦνται δὲ ὀλίγα καὶ ὀλιγάκις· ὁ δὲ ὀλίγα φροιμασάμενος εὐθὺς εἰσάγει ἄνδρα ἢ γυναῖκα ἢ ἄλλο τι ἥθος, καὶ οὐδέν' ἀήθη ἀλλ' ἔχοντα ἥθος.

Homer deserves praise for many other qualities, but especially for realising, alone among epic poets, the place of the poet's own voice. For *the poet should say as little as possible in his own voice*, as it is not this that makes him a mimetic artist. The others participate in their own voice throughout, and engage in mimesis only briefly and occasionally, whereas Homer, after a brief introduction, at once 'brings onto stage' a man, woman, or other figure (all of them rich in character). (*Poet.* 1460a5–11 Kassel; trans. Halliwell; emphasis mine)

According to most modern commentators, in this passage Aristotle is alluding to the primacy of direct discourse in the Homeric poems, by comparison to the other Greek epic poems, which give much larger room to narrative mode. According to Irene de

Jong, however, this interpretation is not without difficulties, one of which would be attributing a non-Aristotelian meaning to the term *μίμησις* as synonym with direct mode.²⁰ The meaning of the above passage would rather be that Homer remains objective, avoiding a personal or subjective point of view.²¹ In short, according to Aristotle, Homer knows the art of remaining silent, while letting his character speak, in which would reside his great merit. In Plato's view, on the contrary – at least following the common reading – Homer always speaks in his own name, mixing indirect and direct discourse, while he should only use indirect discourse, instead of concealing himself and creating illusion. It is true, as de Jong points out,²² that Plato does not consider simple narration (*ἀπλὴ δῆγησις*) to imply a form of mediation, since this type of narration allows the poet to speak in his own name. The indirect style has, however, the function of dispelling the illusion and thus of creating distance with respect to what is being represented.²³

The interpretation of Socrates' theory in *Republic* Book 3 as meaning the refusal (or failure) of distinguishing the author, notably Homer, from his characters does not, however, seem to correspond to the usual *practice* of Homeric citation in the dialogues. J. J. Mulhern's study on the uses of the verb *ποιεῖν* by Socrates when citing Homer, both with and without the verbs for saying or thinking, shows that Socrates typically assumes, on the contrary, the distinction between Homer and his characters. Socrates generally employs the verb *ποιεῖν* to indicate how Homer makes (or "has made": *πεποίηκεν*) his protagonists say such and such. In the *Pheado* (94c9–d5), for instance Socrates illustrates his thesis by means of two Homeric verses (*Od.* 20.17–18) by introducing them as follows: "Homer has made in the *Odyssey*, where he tells of the [protagonist] Odysseus [...]" (*Ὀμηρος ἐν Ὀδυσσεΐᾳ πεποίηκεν, οὗ λέγει τὸν Ὀδυσσεΐα;* trans. Grube). Socrates here again makes it clear that Odysseus is the speaker.²⁴ The exact same use of *ποιεῖν* occurs for instance in the *Hippias Minor* (365c2), where Hippias refers to the way in which Homer has made (*πεποίηκεν*) Odysseus into a *πολύτροπος*. As for our passage in *Republic* Book 3 concerning the Chryses episode, Socrates presents Homer when

20 Michele Corradi in this volume defends the common interpretation according to which Aristotle uses here the term *μίμησις* in the technical sense Plato contributes to it in *Resp.* 393a–394a, while he is ultimately opposed to Plato in considering *μίμησις*, and not *δῆγησις*, as poetry's excellence.

21 Dupont Roc-Lallot (1980) 380 formulates this reading as follows: "*l'excellence d'Homère se marque ici par son aptitude, unique, à s'effacer derrière des personnages de fiction suffisamment consistants pour occuper eux-mêmes la scène épique et éclipser le poète qui les a créés.*"

22 de Jong (2004) 4.

23 This anti-illusionistic poetics, or narratology of distance between the work of art and reality, interestingly exhibits similarities with Berthold Brecht's dramatic theory.

24 For the context of this passage and the kind of citation involved, see Renaud (2021) 93–6.

employing the direct (or mimetic) mode as speaking in his own name, but in the manner of his character. In sum, Socrates would merely claim that Homer is not a protagonist in his epic, but rather simply its narrator. In other words, Socrates would not be implying that Homer expresses his personal opinions through his characters, or that these are his spokesmen.²⁵

3 Socrates' Tripartite Classification and Plato's Dialogues

Overall, the theory of types of poetic discourses proposed by Socrates in *Republic* Book 3 has had a very varied reception in Antiquity, plausibly through Aristotle's mediation. This theory has been received, unchanged or modified (that is, completed or criticized) especially for the presumed failure to distinguish between the poet and his characters. The poet-character distinction appears necessary and fundamental to us today. Let us then return to the question raised at the beginning: can the classification of poetic discourses in *Republic* Book 3 be considered as general and so complete, not only by Socrates but also Plato?²⁶ Let us formulate the question the other way: can this theory be applied to the classification of the Platonic dialogues themselves and, if so, can the latter escape Socrates' criticism?

Some ancient readers applied this threefold classification to the Platonic corpus, as Diogenes Laertius demonstrates.²⁷ Plutarch divides the dialogues into two categories, those that are narrated (διηγηματικοί) and those that are dramatic (δραματικοί) in a way that suggests the practice was common at his time.²⁸ Proclus explicitly refers to the tripartite classification in the *Republic* and considers this

25 Mulhern (2015) 265–6.

26 *Resp.* 392d2–3: ἄρ' οὐ πάντα ὅσα ὑπὸ μυθολόγων ἢ ποιητῶν λέγεται διήγησις οὔσα τυγχάνει ἢ γεγονότων ἢ ὄντων ἢ μελλόντων; ("Isn't everything said by poets and storytellers a narrative about past, present, or future events?" trans. Grube, rev. Reeve).

27 *Diog. Laert.* 3.49–50: οὐ λανθάνει δ' ἡμᾶς ὅτι τινὲς ἄλλως διαφέρειν τοὺς διαλόγους φασί (λέγουσι γὰρ αὐτῶν τοὺς μὲν δραματικούς, τοὺς δὲ διηγηματικούς, τοὺς δὲ μικτούς), ἀλλ' ἐκεῖνοι μὲν πραγματικῶς μᾶλλον ἢ φιλοσόφως τὴν διαφορὰν τῶν διαλόγων προσωνόμασαν ("I am not unaware that there are other ways in which certain writers classify the dialogues. For some dialogues they call dramatic, others narrative, and others again a mixture of the two. But the terms they employ in their classification of the dialogues are better suited to the stage than to philosophy," Dorandi; trans. Hicks). See Tarrant (1993) 104–5.

28 *Plut. Quaest. conv.* 7.711b–c: ὅστε γάρ' εἶπεν ὅτι τῶν Πλάτωνος διαλόγων διηγηματικοί τινὲς εἰσιν οἱ δὲ δραματικοί ("You know," he said, "that some of Plato's dialogues are narrative and other dramatic," trans. Boys-Stones).

dialogue to belong to the mixed genre.²⁹ In modern Platonic studies the importance of this theory of poetic discourses lies, according to some, in constituting a key to the way in which we should read the dialogues.

Regarding the arguments in favour of applying this theory to the Platonic corpus, the following preliminary considerations deserve mention. First, Aristotle considers the ‘Socratic dialogue’ to be a poetic genre (*Poet.* 1447b9–11).³⁰ Some ancient readers claim, moreover, that the dialogues would be examples of good μίμησις. Good μίμησις is discussed in *Republic* Book 3: “But, for our own good, we ourselves should employ a more austere and less pleasure-giving poet and storyteller, one who would imitate the speech of a decent person” (τὴν τοῦ ἐπεικοῦς λέξιν μιμοῖτο; cf. 396c5–d3; trans. Grube, rev. Reeve).³¹ Indeed, good μίμησις constitutes the second criterion of classification proposed by Socrates: in addition to the tripartite division in dramatic, narrative, and mixed genres, there is that according to characters, namely, who imitates or who is imitated. The virtuous or measured man who imitates will make moderate use of imitation and of simple narration, and will only imitate virtuous characters, worthy objects of imitation for the future

²⁹ Procl. *In R.* 1.14–16: Δεύτερον δὲ ἦν ἐπὶ τούτῳ κεφάλαιον, ὁποῖόν ἐστιν τῶν λόγων τὸ εἶδος, καθ’ ὃ διέθηκεν τὴν πραγματείαν ταύτην ὁ συγγραφεὺς. τοῦτο δὲ οὐ πολλῶν οἶμαι δεήσεσθαι μοι λόγων, ἀλλ’ ἀναμνήσαι χρήναι μόνον ὅτι καὶ αὐτὸς ἐν τῷδε τῷ συγγράμματι [392d–394d] τρία φησὶν εἶδη λέξεως ὑπάρχειν [...] δεῖ δὴπου τὴν προκειμένην πραγματείαν εἰς τὸ μικτὸν εἶδος τῶν λόγων ἀναπέμπειν (“The second major topic following this previous one was the literary genre (*eidos*) of the dialogues, in terms of which the author arranged this work. And I think that this does not require a long discussion from me, but it is necessary merely to remind you that Plato himself says in this text (392d–394d) that there exist three genres of discourse (*lexis*). [...] Of these three genres that are distinguished in Plato, it is clearly necessary to ascribe the work before us to the mixed genre of discourse” Kroll; trans. Baltzly, Finamore, Miles). Proclus refers to Platonists who employ the other classification of the dialogues in Antiquity, which overlaps with the literary division, namely that between the expository (ὕφηγητικός), the investigative (ζητητικός) and the mixed genres. Cf. Diog. Laert. 3.48–50; Nüsser (1991) 238–43; Tarrant (1993) 104.

³⁰ See also *Rh.* 3.16.1417a16–21, where the notion of ἦθος is presented as an essential component of the Socratic dialogue, which makes it akin to the Homeric epic, which is full of acting human beings, etc.: ἠθικὴν δὲ χρὴ τὴν διήγησιν εἶναι· ἔσται δὲ τοῦτο, ἂν εἰδῶμεν τί ἦθος ποιεῖ. ἐν μὲν δὴ τὸ προαίρεσιν δηλοῦν, ποῖον δὲ τὸ ἦθος τῷ ποῖαν ταύτην, ἢ δὲ προαίρεσις ποῖα τῷ τέλει· διὰ τοῦτο <δ> οὐκ ἔχουσιν οἱ μαθηματικοὶ λόγοι ἦθος, ὅτι οὐδὲ προαίρεσιν (τὸ γὰρ οὐ ἔνεκα οὐκ ἔχουσιν), ἀλλ’ οἱ Σωκρατικοί (“The narration should be expressive of character. And it will be so if we know what makes the character. One thing that certainly does so is making the deliberate choice clear, and it is by the quality of this that the character is of a certain quality, and it is by its end that the deliberate choice is of a certain quality. This is why mathematical arguments (*logos*) do not involve character, namely, because they do not involve deliberate choice (for they do not involve the for-the-sake-of-which), but the Socratic arguments do (for they speak of things of this sort).”; Ross; trans. Reeve). See also *Ath.* 15.505.

³¹ See Hölsle (2012) 166 and above all Capuccino (2014) 25–54.

guardians. In other words, he will proceed in the opposite manner from the mediocre imitator who imitates anything without restraints (397a–b). In Book 5 (471c3–473b3) Socrates approves again of μίμησις, this time not from a moral, but rather an epistemological viewpoint, namely when the representation of a model (παράδειγμα) is based on knowledge. The very foundation of the ideal city in speech is compared by Socrates to the making of myths (ὥσπερ ἐν μύθῳ μυθολογοῦντές, 376d9), an activity that ranks μίμησις in the category of “mythology” in prose (392d2).³² Finally, in the *Laws* (7.817a–d), the Athenian considers himself and his two interlocutors to be authors of tragedy (ἡμεῖς ἐσμὲν τραγωδίας αὐτοὶ ποιηταί, b2) and their laws to be “the finest and best” tragedy (καλλίστης ἅμα καὶ ἀρίστης, b3).

This interpretation applying Socrates’ classification to Plato’s dialogues is, however, subject to many objections. Generally, the narrative nature of the Platonic dialogues is so complex that it seems impossible to make it fit within the tripartite classification of *Republic* Book 3. The structural complexity, in addition to polyphony, gave rise in Antiquity to many debates about Plato’s spokesperson(s).³³ We are here dealing with a crucial feature of Platonic writing, namely what is commonly called its anonymity. Plato never appears in his dialogues, either as narrator or as a character.³⁴ In this he differs from Xenophon and Aristotle (in his lost dialogues). I return to this question below. The complexity of Platonic writing is such that his texts include various narrative modes that are not accounted for in the tripartite division. The main Platonic narrator is Socrates, such as is the case in the *Republic*. This dialogue includes, however, the story of Gyges reported by Glaucon (2.359c–360b). Moreover, the narrative dialogues include a mixed subcategory that is difficult to schematize, especially for those that are dramatic at the start, and later become narrative. The extreme formal complexity of the *Parmenides* and of the *Symposium* can be opposed to the monologue, in direct style, of the *Apology of Socrates*, where Socrates speaks alone, with the exception of his exchange with Meletus. The narrative architecture of the *Parmenides* is composed of three narrative frames (Pythodorus-Antiphon-Cephalus).³⁵ The same is true of the *Symposium* if one includes the Diotima speech as allegedly reported by Socrates

³² Halliwell (2009) 36.

³³ On this question see the collection of essays edited by Press (2000).

³⁴ Cf. e.g. Morgan (2004) 359. There are only three mentions of his name in the corpus: *Ap.* 34a1, 38b6 and *Phd.* 59b10, the later expressing Plato’s ironic distance in a terse manner: Πλάτων δὲ οἶμαι ἡσθένει (“Plato, I believe, was ill”).

³⁵ On the philosophical importance of the *Parmenides*’ prologue, see Renaud (2022b). See also the collection of essays edited by Kaklamanou *et al.* (2020), especially the contribution by Capuccino (2020).

(Aristodemus-Apollodorus-Socrates).³⁶ In short, the narrative *theory* of Socrates in *Republic* Book 3 does not appear capacious or subtle enough to account for the *practice* of Platonic writing, starting with the dialogue in which this theory is expounded.³⁷

There is more; the dialogues are not always examples of good μίμησις to the extent to which some present morally dubious characters, such as Thrasymachus in the *Republic* or Callicles in the *Gorgias*. Did Plato remedy the imitation of bad models, which Socrates condemns in the *Republic*? According to Andrea Capra,³⁸ the use of simple narration is an antidote to the dangers associated with the representation of morally inferior character, since it constitutes a filter between the character and the recipient, in such a way that the later does not identify with this kind of person. This might indeed be true of narrated dialogues, but would not be applicable to the dramatic dialogues, such as the *Gorgias*. Harold Tarrant underscores how the narrative voice of Socrates as intermediary would discourage even more the identification to bad models.³⁹ One single narrative voice, moreover, would allow for unified content, rhythm, and harmony, as opposed to the multiplicity of polyphony (cf. 397b–e).⁴⁰ As for Plato's mimetic (or dramatic) dialogues, which are opposed to the primacy principle of simple narration, Tarrant argues the (reconstituted) chronology of the dialogues would suggest that Plato decided, from the *Republic* on, to reduce his dependence on imitation of real life, and on characters of an inferior quality, which would be true of *Republic* Books 2–9, by contrast with Book 1.⁴¹ This solution, however, depends on the acceptance of two interrelated hypotheses: that of the development of Plato's thought, and that according to which the mimetic dialogues belong above all of the early period. This would mean, at any rate, that the theory of literary genres could only apply to the dialogues posterior to the *Republic*, dialogues in which inferior characters are not to be found, or any rate not as protagonist or chief interlocutor.⁴²

36 I owe this observation to Francesca Pentassuglio. According to the definition of the Platonic dialogue given by Diogenes Laertius (3.48), it includes the portrayal of characters with their specificity, and therewith, so it seems, the distinction between Plato and his characters: "A dialogue is a discourse consisting of question and answer on some philosophical or political subject, with due regard to the characters of the persons introduced (μετὰ τῆς πρεπούσης ἡθοιοῦίας τῶν παραλαμβανομένων προσώπων) and the choice of diction" (Dorandi; trans. Hicks).

37 This insufficiency would be true for Homer's poetry too; for example, the two levels of narration by Odysseus in Books 9 to 12 of the *Odyssey*. Cf. Halliwell (2014) 25.

38 Capra (2003) 24–5. See also Capuccino (2020) 41.

39 Tarrant (1999) 183.

40 Tarrant (2013) 310.

41 Tarrant (1999) 183. Cf. more recently Capuccino (2020) 56.

42 I owe this last observation to Harold Tarrant.

4 Final Considerations

One may wonder, however, whether all the dialogues are not in reality mimetic, insofar as the narrative frame is integrated into a dialogical frame. As already remarked by Rudolf Hirzel at the end of the 19th century, the decisive element would lie in the fact that it is not Plato who narrates, but Socrates or some other character who speaks to one or many listeners with whom he first held a conversation. The truly fundamental distinction thus would not be that of separating dramatic and narrative dialogues, but between simple dialogues and dialogues occurring within another dialogue.⁴³ This brings us back to the ‘anonymity’ of Platonic writing, whereby Plato disappears, conceals himself behind his characters. Let us recall Socrates’ observation in *Republic* Book 3 about the imitative mode in which the poet, Homer in this case, conceals himself (ἐαυτὸν ἀποκρύπτειτο, 393c11) behind his characters. Some modern commentators see in this remark an indirect reference to Plato himself and therefore a hermeneutical key to reading the dialogues.⁴⁴ Inversely, this interpretation of *Resp.* 393c implies that Plato would not in reality deny Homer the distinction between himself and his characters, but would on the contrary grant it to him, in the manner of his own anonymity as author. Would this view imply that we have to suppose Plato considers himself to be a poet?⁴⁵ Not necessarily since Socrates indicates that his theory is not limited to poets, as it applies to “all poets and speakers” (πάντες οἱ ποιηταὶ καὶ οἱ τι λέγοντες, 397c8; trans. Grube, rev. Reeve)⁴⁶. This self-effacement on the part of Plato would even be a key component of the philosophical dialogue as genre. Philosophy cannot be learned like other forms of knowledge, nor acquired vicariously, but only practiced, indeed lived, in the first-person singular, and so anonymity of the philosophic author would allow the reader to think and speak in his or her own voice. The Platonic dialogue would thus imitate the immediacy of authentic, oral dialogue, while reminding the reader of the distance separating orality and written accounts.⁴⁷ The Platonic dialogue by its variety of narrative modes and its paradoxical reference to both orality and writing, might thus be aiming at making the

⁴³ Hirzel (1895) 212.

⁴⁴ Cf. e.g. Clay (1998) 24; Hölsle (2012) 165.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Leg.* 7.817a–d referred to above; Aristotle, *Poet.* 1447b9–11.

⁴⁶ Cf. Capuccino (2020) 45.

⁴⁷ According to Capuccino (2020) 50, 56, the *Theaetetus* would be an exemplary case in taking up the original form, without however the illusions of proximity, through the setting in its prologue, which presents the oral speech of Socrates in the form of a written transcription.

reader reflect on this very mode of communication and its intrinsic link to the philosophical search.⁴⁸

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⁴⁸ Cf. Capuccino (2020) 57–8 as well as Jouët-Pastré (2018) 179. Cf. *Letter VII* (341c5–6): "There is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be one. For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences" (ῥητὸν γὰρ οὐδαμῶς ἐστὶν ὡς ἄλλα μαθήματα; trans. Morrow). Just as dialectic is conceived as the true rhetoric (*Gorgias*, *Phaedrus*), likewise the Platonic dialogue would be conceived as the true poetry. For dialectic as true rhetoric in the *Gorgias*, see Renaud (2023).

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