

# The Genealogy of Aesthetics

---

Eckbert Faas



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Ekbert Faas, 2002

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without  
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*Typeface* Plantin 10/12 pt.    *System* L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X 2<sub>ε</sub> [TB]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Faas, Ekbert, 1938–  
The genealogy of aesthetics / by Ekbert Faas.  
p.      cm.  
Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 0 521 81182 1  
1. Aesthetics – History. I. Title.  
BH81 .F33 2002  
111'.85 – dc21 2001043619

ISBN 0 521 81182 1 hardback

# Contents

---

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xii
Introduction	1
1 Plato's transvaluation of aesthetic values	15
2 Proto-Nietzschean opponents to Plato	28
3 Late antiquity, Plotinus, and Augustine	40
4 Augustine's Platonopolis	52
5 The Middle Ages	64
6 The Renaissance	75
7 The Renaissance Academy, Ficino, Montaigne, and Shakespeare	93
8 Hobbes and Shaftesbury	110
9 Mandeville, Burke, Hume, and Erasmus Darwin	121
10 Kant's ethicoteleological aesthetics	138
11 Kant's midlife conversion	155
12 Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx	169
13 Marx's Nietzschean moment	182
14 Heidegger's "destruction" of traditional aesthetics	199
15 Heidegger contra Nietzsche	214
16 Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Derrida	229
17 <i>Différance</i> , Freud, Nietzsche, and Artaud	241
18 Derrida's megatranscendentalist <i>mimēsis</i>	257

viii Contents

19	Postmodern or pre-Nietzschean? Derrida, Lyotard, and de Man	272
20	The postmodern revival of the aesthetic ideal	286
	Afterword	298
	<i>Notes</i>	318
	<i>References</i>	388
	<i>Index</i>	413

## Illustrations

---

1. Giotto, *The Last Judgment*. Arena Chapel frescoes in Padua. Giuseppe Basile, *Giotto. The Arena Chapel Frescoes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993 [1992]), following 287. 77
2. Giotto, *The Last Judgment*. Arena Chapel frescoes in Padua. Giuseppe Basile, *Giotto. The Arena Chapel Frescoes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993 [1992]), following 287. 78
3. *Standing Rotting Pair*. Panel made in Germany, ca. 1470. Musée de l'Oeuvre Notre-Dame de Strasbourg. Michael Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love. Objects and Subjects of Desire* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), 161, illustration 147. 79
4. Sebastiano del Piombo, *The Martyrdom of Saint Agatha*. Palazzo Pitti, Florence. Michael Hirst, *Sebastiano del Piombo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), illustration 106. 80
5. Albrecht Dürer, *Perspectivist Sketching a Lady*. Albrecht Dürer, *The Painter's Manual* (1525). Translated and with a Commentary by Walter L. Strauss (New York: Abaris Books, 1977), 434. 82
6. Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait, Nude*, 1503/18. Weimar, Schlossmuseum, from the Grünling Collection. Walter L. Strauss, *The Complete Drawings of Albrecht Dürer*, vol. II, 1500–1509, 688–89 (New York: Abaris Books, 1974). 83
7. Titian, *Venus with an Organist*, ca. 1550. Madrid, Museo del Prado. Erwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian: Mostly Iconographic* (London: Phaidon Press, 1969), illustration 137. 84
8. Giorgione, *The Sleeping Venus*. Dresden, Gemäldegalerie. Paolo Lecaldano (ed), *The Complete Paintings of Giorgione*. Introduction by Cecil Gould, notes and catalogue by Pietro Zampetti (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970 [1968]), plates LII–LIII. 86
9. Albrecht Altdorfer, *Lot and his Daughter*, 1537. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Christopher S. Wood, *Albrecht*

- Aldorfer and the Origins of Landscape* (London: Reaktion Books, 1993), 268, illustration 193. 88
10. Pietro Aretino, *Sonetti lussoriosi (i Modi) e dubbi amorosi*. Nuova edizione integrale a cura di Riccardo Reim (Rome: Tascabili Economici Newton, 1993 [1974]), 36–37. 89
11. “The Artistic Idea. Allegory.” Engraving by S. Thomassin after Errard, in Fréart de Chambray, *Parallèle de l’architecture antique et moderne*, 1702. Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics* (3 vols.), ed. J. Harrell, C. Barrett, and D. Petsch, trans. Adam and Ann Czerniawski, R. M. Montgomery, C. A. Kisiel, and J. F. Besemeres (Warsaw: PWN – Polish Scientific Publishers; The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1970–74), III, following 220, illustration XXXV. 91
12. Gravettian female ivory figurines from Avdeevo, Russia, ca. 21,000–19,000 BC. Denis Vialou, *Prehistoric Art and Civilization* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998 [1996]), 74: “A perforation made at ankle level enabled them to be hung head downward around the neck of the wearer. Only the wearers could see them the right way up, on their chests. Several of these naked female statuettes, as usual dating from the Palaeolithic period, were themselves adorned with bracelets, belts and necklaces engraved on their skin. The female body, idealized for the first time by three-dimensional sculpture in ivory or stone, was glorified a second time by being adorned as if it were, once again, an authentic living being. Finally, this symbolic expression centred on the body was enriched a third time through the use of the carved and adorned body as living jewellery on real human beings.” 101
13. Love-making. Case mirror from Corinth, ca. 320–300 BC. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Andrew Stewart, *Art, Desire, and the Body in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 178, illustration 114. Cf. *ibid.*, 177: “What makes [this scene] interesting is not merely [its] explicit eroticism, but the fact that the woman is represented as an equal partner to the man, even as taking the initiative . . . she turns frontally to the viewer, prominently displaying her breasts, belly, and labia; largely eclipsing her lover, she pulls his head forward to kiss him as he enters her, looking straight into his eyes.” 102
14. Temple frieze at Khajuraho, west of Allahabad in northern India, tenth century CE. Photograph by Ekbert Faas. Cf. Hugo Munsterberg, *The Art of India and Southeast Asia*

(New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1970), 98: “Many of the scenes portrayed in the sculptures at Khajuraho are frankly erotic, showing lovers performing the sex act in various positions, many of which are described in the famous Hindu manual of love, the Kama Sutra. To the Westerner, imbued with the puritan ethics of the Christian tradition, such subjects seem highly unsuitable for a sanctuary designed for religious worship, but to the Hindu no such objections exist, since every aspect of life is looked upon as a revelation of the god who may often manifest himself as a lingam and is frequently thought of as being accompanied by his female counterpart, or shakti.”

# 1 Plato's transvaluation of aesthetic values

---

[Platonism] reversed the concept "reality" and said: "What you take to be real is an error, and the closer we come to the "idea," the closer to "the truth." – Is that understood? This *was the greatest rechristening*: and since it was adopted by Christianity, this astounding fact passes unnoticed by us.

XII, 253 / *The Will to Power*, 572

Though we know little about pre-Platonic aesthetics, there is evidence to suggest that Plato accomplished a major reorientation in the area. Where, before him, had artistic imitation been denounced as essentially a misrepresentation of reality? Where the embodiment of its subject matter in diverse concrete media been decried as "shadowy simulacra" or "toys with little real substance?"<sup>1</sup> Where its pleasurable appeal to the senses been either condemned out of hand or surrounded by grave suspicions? To be sure, Plato's strictures are mostly leveled at the imitative arts. But, in a sense, which art is not mimetic? Even music, as Plato keeps reminding us, can be so, to some extent.

As one would expect, Plato's pronouncements on this least imitative and most mathematical of the arts owe most to previous theoreticians. According to the Pythagoreans, music, like the "austere, classical"<sup>2</sup> type favored by Plato, is "modelled after numbers,"<sup>3</sup> achieves a "harmonization of opposites,"<sup>4</sup> has powers to "purge"<sup>5</sup> and is able to sooth the passions.<sup>6</sup> But even regarding music, Plato's pronouncements take on a specific edge. Music can induce sobriety.<sup>7</sup> It is indispensable in the education of the young.<sup>8</sup> It can help indoctrinate people by its soothing spell.<sup>9</sup> Also, there is much to be shunned, such as the merely "lascivious pleasing of the flute"<sup>10</sup> or a playing, "not by measurement but by the lucky shots of a practiced finger."<sup>11</sup> After the fall of Athens in 404 BC there had been a reaction against the "austere, classical" type of music that Plato favored. Accordingly, classical music, in his view, suffered a "universal confusion of forms,"<sup>12</sup> degenerating into melodies, rhythms, free forms and "unmusical license."<sup>13</sup> "Possessed by a frantic and unhallowed lust for pleasure," newfangled, upstart musicians in their ignorance "of what



is right and legitimate in the realm of the Muses . . . contaminated laments with hymns and paeans with dithyrambs.”<sup>14</sup> To prevent such confusion, a specially appointed “director of music”<sup>15</sup> ought to “distinguish a good musical imitation of a soul under the stress of its emotions” from a bad one.<sup>16</sup> He should separate what is merely appealing to men’s senses from what is imbued with serious purpose<sup>17</sup> and safeguard “public standards of song.”<sup>18</sup> Optimal to Plato was a kind of music that eliminates melody and rhythm as potentially passion-arousing elements to the point of producing “a single series of pure notes” with “smooth and clear” sounds.<sup>19</sup>

Plato’s transvaluation of aesthetic theorizing becomes more pronounced in his comments on the fine arts. A sculptor like Polyclitus may stress that such works should be modeled on golden means, symmetries, and proportions<sup>20</sup> thus prefiguring Plato in stressing elements of measuring and numbering as underlying the arts in general.<sup>21</sup> But here the main precedents end. Polyclitus, in observing numerical ratios, did not attempt to diminish, let alone transcend or obliterate, the sensuousness of his medium or subject matter. On the contrary, whatever airy, mathematical nothings there were, had to be given a local habitation, mostly in the form of naked human bodies, displaying, except for the obvious differences, all the sensuous appeal of live ones. It was by a paradoxical inversion of the same premises that Plato wanted painters to use ratios as a means of transcending art’s concrete sensuousness to the point where their pictures would become abstract configurations foreshadowing twentieth-century minimalists like Piet Mondrian – “something straight, or round, and the surfaces and solids which a lathe, or a carpenter’s rule and square, produces from the straight and the round.”<sup>22</sup> His own age’s plastic and pictorial arts struck him as correspondingly inferior. There was too much in them of a striving for illusionist effects and too little of a truthful mirroring of reality, too much “appearance imitating mimesis based on opinion” instead of a “scientific mimesis based on knowledge.”<sup>23</sup> In creating large-size paintings and sculptures, for instance, artists falsified the proportions of the human body so as to offset the optical shrinkage of those of its parts seen from a distance. “So artists, leaving the truth to take care of itself, do in fact put into the images they make, not the real proportions, but those that will appear beautiful.”<sup>24</sup> Plato also disapproved of *skiagraphia*, which availed itself of effects analogous to the way in which straight or convex objects are made to look bent or concave by being immersed in water. “And so scene painting in its exploitation of this weakness of our nature falls nothing short of witchcraft,”<sup>25</sup> he warns.

The dangers such degenerate forms of music, sculpture, and painting present to his citizens, however, are minimal when compared with those

caused by poetry and other forms of writing. To begin with, literature shares its sister arts' corruptive potential for inciting the passions, for misrepresenting reality, and for catering to the mob's greed for pleasure instead of appealing to the regulated taste of the judicious few. What is more, it poses a threat to philosophy by using the same, verbal medium. There was no question in Plato's mind as to who must have the upper hand in this "old quarrel between philosophy and poetry."<sup>26</sup>

Who among Plato's predecessors voiced similar misgivings? Granted, poets like Pindar and Hesiod admitted that their "fables [were] embellished with colourful fictions" and went against or "beyond the truth" in trying to make "the unbelievable thing to be believed."<sup>27</sup> But even Solon's complaint that "minstrels tell many falsehoods"<sup>28</sup> by no means amounted to a wholesale condemnation of mimetic art for telling lies in principle. For the most part, the poet's lies were seen as pardonable necessities, or even as praiseworthy ones, depending on his skills in manipulating the listeners' willing suspension of disbelief. "Tragedy, by means of legends and emotions," the Sophist Gorgias claimed, "creates a deception in which the deceiver is more honest than the non-deceiver, and the deceived is wiser than the non-deceived."<sup>29</sup>

Apart from Aristophanes, who made a few tongue-in-cheek comments to the effect that poets ought to teach,<sup>30</sup> nobody wanted to press the arts into educational schemes or to condemn them for gratuitously appealing to people's appetite for pleasure as did Plato. Even the defensiveness of certain Sophists, who explained that "poets write their works not for the sake of truth but in order to give pleasure to men,"<sup>31</sup> or that statues "are imitations of real bodies . . . [giving] joy to the beholder, but [serving] no useful purpose,"<sup>32</sup> would have struck most pre-Platonic artists as quite uncalled for. That art was meant to please, delight, or distract humans from their worries, in other words, was simply taken for granted.<sup>33</sup> Even the restriction that such pleasurable appeals should be directed primarily to eyes and ears,<sup>34</sup> rather than addressed to all of a person's emotional and instinctual sensibilities, seems to be a later addition to such theorizing. Homer clearly meant his listeners to enjoy his poetry in much the same way in which they relished their banquets, "the dance, and changes of raiment and the warm bath, and love and sleep."<sup>35</sup> The association of poetry with meat and drink – when people sit "at the feast in the halls and listen to the singer"<sup>35</sup> eating and carousing – or even with sex, was commonplace enough to become an oral formulaic cliché: "What art is this, what charm against the threat of cares? What a path of song: For verily here is choice of all three things, joy, love and sweet sleep."<sup>36</sup>

Plato's reformulation of such aesthetic concepts, as we know, involved a complete, albeit utopian, recasting of society and its laws. Thus a "universal art" of statesmanship should hold sway over all the others,<sup>37</sup> a supremacy Plato defined in ever more stringent forms as he grew older. "Society's law book," he writes, "should, in right and reason, prove, when we open it, by far the best and finest work of its whole literature; other men's compositions should either conform to it, or, if they strike a different note, excite our contempt."<sup>38</sup> By virtue of knowing more than all the poets together,<sup>39</sup> the legislator should protect us from being "gulled by the fictions" of men like Homer who try to make us believe, for instance, that the Olympians are thieves and liars. Altogether, poesy with its eulogies, satires, and other forms of discourse, is deemed to be full of contentious disagreements and unmeaning admissions. "The one certain touchstone of all is the text of the legislator. The good judge will possess the text within his own breast as an antidote against other discourse."<sup>40</sup>

When tested by the touchstone of the lawbook, there are few poets Plato does not find wanting. Hesiod, Homer, Musaeus, Orpheus, Pindar, Simonides<sup>41</sup> – to Plato, their reputation as wise and knowledgeable educators of mankind is a dangerous and demonstrable lie. This is particularly true of Hesiod and Homer, the two fountainheads of Greek state religion. Had not Socrates, his great teacher, been sentenced for allegedly criticizing that religion? To Plato, the charges should have been reversed: Homer and Hesiod should have been accused of giving false accounts of the gods as well as of corrupting the young.<sup>42</sup> Had they not spread stories of recurrent parricide in their genealogy of the gods?<sup>43</sup> Or how about "Theseus, the son of Poseidon, and Pirithous, the son of Zeus, attempt[ing] such dreadful rapes"?<sup>44</sup> Or Zeus himself being overcome by sexual desire for Hera, or worse, by an even "fiercer desire than when they first consorted with one another, 'deceiving their dear parents'?"<sup>45</sup> Even if true, these and other false stories about the gods told by Hesiod and Homer ought not to be passed on to "thoughtless young persons."<sup>46</sup> Plato may allow for the telling of bowdlerized myths for the purpose of shaping the souls of the young,<sup>47</sup> or for the reciting of "hymns to the gods and the praises of good men"<sup>48</sup> to the rest of the citizens. But whatever else of poetry or the sister arts is permitted to play a role in the educational schemes of the state, is hedged in by such grudging reservations or condemnations as to make their general banishment from Plato's utopia appear well-nigh total.

In sum, poets like Hesiod and Homer, far from being educators of mankind, misrepresent facts, heroes, and the gods.<sup>49</sup> More often than not, they corrupt their listeners' minds,<sup>50</sup> frequently by inciting the wrong emotions.<sup>51</sup> Hence poetry's bewitching "magic" is to be deeply

distrusted.<sup>52</sup> Unless one holds “a countercharm to [this] spell,”<sup>53</sup> such magic is not to be admitted. In other words, classical literature had to be either expurgated, rewritten, or done away with entirely. Plato's early instances of what ought to be bowdlerized in this fashion concern multiple forms of divine or heroic misdemeanor as well as diverse points of religious doctrine. The gods neither plot nor war against each other;<sup>54</sup> they are not to be thought of as bursting with laughter;<sup>55</sup> Zeus himself, who is “altogether simple and true in deed and word,” is not to be seen as changing identity or deceiving others;<sup>56</sup> to portray him as the “dispenser alike of good and of evil to mortals”<sup>57</sup> is a sign of egregious folly. For how could this “most excellent and just among the gods”<sup>58</sup> be blamed for the evils of this world? We must look for their cause “in other things and not in God.”<sup>59</sup>

Plato's negative attitude toward literature is most pronounced in the *Republic*. “Poetry, and in general the mimetic art,” as he states there, “produces a product that is far removed from the truth . . . and associates with the part in us that is remote from intelligence.”<sup>60</sup> Enough has been written about his reasons for saying so to allow us to sum up matters briefly here: about his defining imitation as a mirroring of reality at a double remove from the truth<sup>61</sup> by presenting “appearance as it appears”<sup>62</sup> or about his refusal to admit any poetry except “hymns to the gods and the praises of good men” to his republic: for if you grant admission to the lyric or epic, “pleasure and pain will be lords of your city instead of law.”<sup>63</sup> Plato's comments on poetry and the arts sound an even more negative note in book X than in the earlier ones. It is here, at the end of the *Republic* that Plato, perhaps in response to discussions about what he had said earlier, decided to measure the mimetic potential of the arts against the transcendent world of ideas. The arts, he concluded, are incapable of representing these ultimate realities, and, worse, pose a dangerous obstacle in their pursuit.<sup>64</sup>

The argument that artistic imitation operates at a double remove from the truth vanished from Plato's philosophical concerns as quickly as it arose. There is no further mention of it (let alone of his instance of the couch in relation to God, the cabinet maker, and the painter), in any of his later works. In the *Sophist*, he instead ponders the difference between “the making of likenesses” and “the making of semblances”;<sup>65</sup> or he tries out a quadruple subdivision instead of the triple one in the *Republic*: art is either divine or human, the “products of divine workmanship” being either “the original” or “the image,” those of human art either manufactured objects or their mimetic mirrorings: “Must we not say that in building it produces an actual house, and in painting a house of a different sort, as it were a man-made dream for waking eyes?”<sup>66</sup> From here until the

*Laws*, discussions of artistic imitation are conspicuous primarily for their absence.

When they are resumed, Plato's main attention is devoted to determining how artistic imitation can be used most efficiently in trying to put a charm on youthful minds so as to make them pursue "virtue by means of these same imitations."<sup>67</sup> One way is to make sure that the artist chooses the right subject matters; a second, to ensure that these will be truthfully rendered along the lines of a scientific mimesis as previously worked out in the *Sophist*;<sup>68</sup> a third, to enforce the proper use of the devices that engender the arts' concomitant charm or pleasure – with the proviso that such pleasure be morally harmless and not become the standard whereby to judge the artist's performance.<sup>69</sup> Even when Plato for a fleeting moment resumes his previous critique of artistic imitation as producing "shadowy simulacra," he is mainly concerned with the arts' ever-present potential of promoting "epidemics of youthful irreligion."<sup>70</sup>

Obviously, Plato has become preoccupied with, if not obsessed by, other problems. E. R. Dodds calls it his "underlying despair"<sup>71</sup> subsequent to the collapse of his hopes of founding a republic ruled by "an élite of purified men."<sup>72</sup> Plato himself speaks of a "malady of doubt" against which his spokesman prescribes a quick "prophylactic."<sup>73</sup> One wonders how far this remedy managed to silence that omnipresent, ventriloquist voice of contradiction<sup>74</sup> that plagued Plato during this period. Granted there is "a form of rightness or of beauty or of goodness."<sup>75</sup> But is there one of "hair or mud or dirt" as well?<sup>76</sup> His first answering in the negative, but then questioning this denial is anything but reassuring: "I have sometimes been troubled by a doubt whether what is true in one case may not be true in all. Then, when I have reached that point, I am driven to retreat, for fear of tumbling into a bottomless pit of nonsense."<sup>77</sup> To have Plato articulate such powerful arguments against himself is one of the hallmarks of his greatness; and probably there is no more impressive instance of this magnanimity than Parmenides' *tour de force* disquisition on the "one [that] is both all things and nothing whatsoever"<sup>78</sup> immediately following his debate with Socrates.

But from about the *Sophist* onward, Plato's tone turns somber and defensive. A large part of that dialogue is taken up with trying to "hunt down"<sup>79</sup> those "sham philosophers,"<sup>80</sup> "Hydra-headed Sophist[s],"<sup>81</sup> and "creators of error"<sup>82</sup> who reduce every argument to "a tug of war"<sup>83</sup> in order to "to rob us of discourse" and hence "philosophy."<sup>84</sup> Simultaneously, Plato fights yet another rhetorical battle with a tribe of philosophers to whom "whatever they cannot squeeze between their hands is just nothing at all."<sup>85</sup> It takes the form of a Hesiod-like war in heaven between the Olympian "friends of forms"<sup>86</sup> or idealists, and the "earthborn

giants about reality"<sup>87</sup> or materialists. Even the "reverend and awful" Parmenides,<sup>88</sup> to whom Plato feels indebted like a son, is not to be spared in such internecine warfare. Plato resolves his anxieties of influence toward "father Parmenides" in maneuvers of "self-defense" just stopping short of Oedipal "parricide."<sup>89</sup> Letting "no scruple hinder" him from laying "unfilial hands" on Parmenides' pronouncements,<sup>90</sup> he uses a "mild degree of torture"<sup>91</sup> in cross-examining them.

The Socratic irony still evident in these polemics evaporates in the *Statesman* wherever Plato resumes pondering his future utopia. Abandoning the idea of a republic run by saintly guardians, he now opts for a second best "science of shepherding mankind."<sup>92</sup> Legal measures toward that end would include mass deportation and/or extermination. Thus an entire city may have to be purged "for its better health by putting some of the citizens to death or banishing others."<sup>93</sup> All this, we are told, is to be done on the basis of "a reasoned scientific principle following essential justice."<sup>94</sup> Other "arts of herd tending"<sup>95</sup> include racial breeding through arranged marriages<sup>96</sup> as well as a universal censorship code controlling such individual arts as rhetoric and public speaking.<sup>97</sup>

No aspect of the citizens' spiritual lives are left unmonitored. The ancient myths are to be dismissed "without more ado" since they offer nothing but "primitive stories."<sup>98</sup> Severer measures are to be taken against "the theories of our modern men of enlightenment,"<sup>99</sup> prose writers and poets alike, who are spreading "epidemics of youthful irreligion."<sup>100</sup> Plato's vehemence in refuting these "awful creed[s],"<sup>101</sup> which have caused a "general corruption of the young people of whole cities and private households,"<sup>102</sup> speaks for itself. One such creed, he tells us, teaches "the non-existence of gods"; a second that, even if the gods do exist, "they are indifferent to human conduct"; a third that, "though not indifferent, they are lightly placated by sacrifice and prayers."<sup>103</sup> More generally speaking, these theories, which have been broadcast "throughout all mankind,"<sup>104</sup> claim that matter is prior to mind, thus reducing the divine cosmos to a conglomerate of "earth and stones"<sup>105</sup> in permanent flux.<sup>106</sup> Looming behind them, then, is the full range of pre-Socratic philosophy including Heraclitus, Empedocles, Democritus, Anaxagoras, Anaximander, and Archelaus, as well as those Sophists who proclaim man to be the measure of all things, declare the gods to "have no real and natural, but only an artificial being, in virtue of legal conventions,"<sup>107</sup> and propagate what they call "the 'really and naturally right life,' that is, the life of real domination over others, not of conventional service to them."<sup>108</sup> In Plato's view, most of the respective philosophers err in declaring the soul to be secondary to the body, an error which "wrecked the whole scheme, or, to speak more accurately, wrecked themselves." It also involved them

in “many charges of infidelity” and, as Plato adds – probably thinking of Socrates’ followers including himself – “inspired poets to denounce students of philosophy by comparing them with dogs baying the moon.”<sup>109</sup>

Several of Plato’s arguments against these “irreligious doctrines”<sup>110</sup> assume the form of admonitions to an imaginary young person corrupted by them.<sup>111</sup> But Plato does not let things rest here. There ought to be “laws against impiety”<sup>112</sup> governed by a threefold catechism: (a) that the gods exist, (b) that they are concerned for mankind, and (c) that they cannot be bribed. These are to be enforced with the utmost severity, especially when compared with what Plato’s penal code provided for “regular” crimes like murder and theft. Offenders, by either speech or act, against the three tenets are to be reported to the authorities, and, if convicted, to be sentenced to no less than five years solitary confinement in a house of correction where they are to benefit from the religious propaganda administered by the Nocturnal Council. If they do not benefit, they are to be executed.<sup>113</sup>

With this system hypothetically put in place, Plato can allow himself somewhat more tolerance toward poets and artists – that is as long as they abide by the rules of their heresy-proof community, and work within the educational schemes of the state. Only thus will the “man of poetic gifts” be allowed “to compose as he ought.”<sup>114</sup> What is more, older poetry, even if of the oral kind, is to be sifted and, if “pronounced satisfactory, [to] be accepted, while any that are judged to be defective . . . shall . . . be revised and corrected.”<sup>115</sup> Though the legislators have the final word in this process, they will take “advice from experts in poetry and music.”<sup>116</sup> Hence, there will be separate censorship boards for every kind of art and poetry, be it panegyric,<sup>117</sup> lyrical,<sup>118</sup> comical, or satirical.<sup>119</sup>

Even the utterances of the inspired poet, in spite of their often contradictory nature,<sup>120</sup> are to be handled in the same dictatorially benevolent way. Never mind if the words uttered after the poet’s “judgment [has taken] leave of him”<sup>121</sup> should sound irrational. The censors will separate the wheat from the chaff. For it is not the poet’s task to determine “whether his representation is a good one or not.”<sup>122</sup> His responsibility is toward his medium, not the content. It is only concerning matters such as “scale and rhythm” that his judgment “cannot be dispensed with.”<sup>123</sup> As for subject matter, the poet ought to rely on the legislators who might tell him how to compose prayers to the gods<sup>124</sup> or how to explain the spirit of his laws. To give an instance, a legislator might tell his poet that it is virtually impossible for “wicked men [to] have a pleasant life,” or that those asserting the opposite ought to suffer a “penalty little short of the capital.”<sup>125</sup>

The main task of the poet as defined in the *Laws*, then, is “to employ his noble and fine-filed phrases to represent by their rhythms the bearing,

and by their melodies the strains, of men who are pure, valiant, and, in a word, good."<sup>126</sup> Hence, even the bewitching charm of the poet's medium, so dangerous if left unrestrained, is harnessed to the worthy purpose of constraining his perhaps less good, pure, and valiant listeners or readers into virtue.<sup>127</sup>

Plato's recasting of the age's art theories within the framework of his utopian republic goes hand in hand with a radical transvaluation of earlier senses of the true, the good, and the beautiful. Of these, the beautiful naturally is most closely related to the arts even though Plato rarely speaks of it in this context. The proverbial exception is his complaint about the "lovers of sounds and sights . . . [who] delight in beautiful tones and colors and shapes and in everything that art fashions out of these," but are "incapable of apprehending and taking delight in the nature of the beautiful in itself."<sup>128</sup> This comment is characteristic of Plato's general deprecation of art, but untypical of his normally more abstract use of the concept.

The beautiful, to him, is either an eternal form in the transcendent realm of ideas or an attribute of persons or objects that are beautiful insofar as they partake of "absolute beauty."<sup>129</sup> Needless to say, only the initiated are able to appreciate this ultimately "unknowable" beauty.<sup>130</sup> For it can neither be seen with our eyes nor apprehended "with any other bodily sense."<sup>131</sup> Socrates' answer to the question as to whether or not "the multitude [can] possibly tolerate or believe in the reality of the beautiful in itself as opposed to the multiplicity of beautiful things"<sup>132</sup> is decidedly negative. Meanwhile, Plato had reason to complain that there were many "who view many beautiful things but do not see the beautiful itself." Worse, there were those who were "unable to follow another's guidance to it,"<sup>133</sup> or even refused to do so.

To the more enlightened, there were at least two ways of entering that realm full of "visions of a beauty beyond words."<sup>134</sup> In both, the questor takes his initial impulse from the contemplation of "the beauty of one individual body."<sup>135</sup> Diotima in the *Symposium* has a reverential appreciation of this potentially sexual impulse or "breeding instinct" quite unlike Plato himself. There is "a divinity in human propagation," she explains, "an immortal something in the midst of man's mortality" presided over by Beauty, "the goddess of both fate and travail."<sup>136</sup> Like Schopenhauer's Will or August Weismann's germ plasm, this "longing for propagation," to her, "is the one deathless and eternal element in our mortality."<sup>137</sup> Through this procreative instinct alone the body "and all else that is temporal partakes of the eternal."<sup>138</sup> Plato's spokesman Socrates, while acknowledging Diotima's "most impressive argument," wonders if she is right, ironically commenting on her "air of authority that was almost



professorial.”<sup>139</sup> There is more than that to call her praise of sexuality in question. Thus she is made to expound another more strictly Platonic mode of procreating offspring of a spiritual rather than fleshly kind.<sup>140</sup> This, of course, is the celebrated account of how the questor, via a “heavenly ladder,”<sup>141</sup> makes his gradual ascent from the contemplation of “the beauty of one individual body”<sup>142</sup> toward a “vision of the very soul of beauty.”<sup>143</sup>

As we know, this “wondrous vision”<sup>144</sup> involves a knowledge of something ultimately unattainable by the senses. For the beautiful itself does not take the form of any face, body, or object to be seen, heard, felt, or measured. “It will be neither words, nor knowledge, nor a something that exists in something else, such as a living creature, or the earth, or the heavens, or anything that is.”<sup>145</sup> Hence, the beautiful, to use the more philosophically penetrating arguments about being in *Parmenides*, is not just “unknowable to us.”<sup>146</sup> In an ultimate sense, it is a nothingness. For as something which, in Diotima’s words, subsists “of itself and by itself in an eternal oneness,”<sup>147</sup> the beautiful is subject to the *reductio ad absurdum* to which the “reverend and awful”<sup>148</sup> *Parmenides* reduces the one.<sup>149</sup>

No wonder if the votary lost in the contemplation of this nothingness of “beauty’s very self”<sup>150</sup> should be viewed as “demented.”<sup>151</sup> Inversely, he looks down on all the sexually or otherwise beautiful things that “used to take [his] breath away”<sup>152</sup> with mere indifference. This is as far as Diotima is made to go. Apart from calling the beautiful “unsullied, unalloyed, and freed from the mortal taint that haunts the frailer loveliness of flesh and blood,”<sup>153</sup> she nowhere voices the contempt for earthly beauty manifest elsewhere in Plato’s dialogues, or the disgust with the “disgraceful and repulsive sight” of people involved in “sexual intercourse.”<sup>154</sup>

Even the beauty lovers in *Phaedrus* who consummate their love in a sexual union thereby achieving that full desire which the ignorant “multitude account blissful,”<sup>155</sup> are still treated with relative tolerance. Since they took “the first steps on the celestial highway [they] shall no more return to the dark pathways beneath the earth, but shall walk together in a life of shining bliss.”<sup>156</sup> But otherwise, this second major account of the soul’s ascent toward pure beauty as conveyed via the image of the soul as “a team of winged steeds and their winged charioteer,”<sup>157</sup> is marked by Plato’s distaste for sexuality throughout. The questor who fails to appreciate “beauty’s self yonder” and hence has eyes only for “that which is called beautiful here,” is equated with a “four-footed beast” which, in begetting offspring of the flesh, consorts with wantonness and “has no fear nor shame in running after unnatural pleasure.”<sup>158</sup>

The main reason for this protopuritanical attitude seems to be psychological. For the soul, in *Phaedrus*, is split into two mutually antagonistic

principles represented by the two steeds: one good, noble, reverend, heedful, and temperate; the other evil, wicked, unruly, hot-blooded, and eager for the “delights of love’s commerce” as well as for “monstrous and forbidden act[s].”<sup>159</sup> The strife between the two, which repeatedly thwarts, confounds, even threatens to derail the charioteer’s pursuit of “true beauty,”<sup>160</sup> results from the fact that the soul is chained down in the “prison house” of the body,<sup>161</sup> a concept already dwelt upon in the earlier *Phaedo*.<sup>162</sup> New is the violence with which the charioteer enforces his ultimately triumphant rule of “self-mastery” on the “wanton horse.”<sup>163</sup> Being sidetracked one more time in the direction of “the delights of love’s commerce,” the driver suddenly remembers true beauty “enthroned by the side of temperance,” and hence coerces the evil horse into groveling submission: “with resentment even stronger than before . . . [he] jerks back the bit in the mouth of the wanton horse with an even stronger pull, bespatters his railing tongue and his jaws with blood, and forcing him down on legs and haunches delivers him over to anguish.”<sup>164</sup>

At the same time one can see how the essential nothingness of universal beauty dazzling the beholder with its untainted invisibility is filling up with concrete, theological notions. These accrue around how the pursuit of beauty is progressively turning into a battle between good and evil for the conquest of the soul. Intruding upon the rarified realms of “true being . . . without color or shape,”<sup>165</sup> there is the punitive eschatology, newly locked into distinct notions of time and eternity, of the various kinds of “chastisement beneath the earth” or rewards to be enjoyed in “a certain region of the heavens.”<sup>166</sup> Punishments and/or rewards are to be meted out to those who either fail or succeed in their quest for universal beauty existing outside time.

Simultaneously, Plato continues to expatiate upon the beauty of ultimate nothingness in ever more glowing terms. His account in the *Republic* rightly makes Socrates’ listeners protest that “hyperbole can no further go” in trying to captivate that ultimately “inconceivable beauty.”<sup>167</sup> Socrates compares the good or the beautiful with the sun; he expounds on how the questor makes his ascent via “geometry and the kindred arts” as well as the “power of dialectic”;<sup>168</sup> he links his previous analogy of the sun with the good to the notion of the soul’s imprisonment in the body<sup>169</sup> in his allegory of the cave; he also explains how the cave dwellers, who so far have only seen shadowy projections of true reality, are blinded by the sun of universal beauty as they turn around and gradually make their way up the long, sloping cave into plain daylight.

None of these accounts of “the soul’s ascension to the intelligible region”<sup>170</sup> returns to the inner struggle, familiar from *Phaedrus*, between the forces of good and those of evil, with irrational and carnal ones pulling

the questor back from trying “to scale that ascent.”<sup>171</sup> Yet it is in the *Republic* where Plato, more frequently than ever before, returns to the discussion of the “double man”<sup>172</sup> ruled by “opposite impulses”;<sup>173</sup> and where he develops an almost Everyman-like allegorical account of how these forces fight it out in and around the “citadel of the young man’s soul.”<sup>174</sup>

After the *Republic*, Plato’s spokesmen rarely, if ever, gaze, “so to say, direct at the sun”<sup>175</sup> of universal beauty. Instead, they scan things close to the ground. They anxiously watch people succumb to the “dangerous seductive blandishments”<sup>176</sup> of pleasure, that “greatest incitement to evil,”<sup>177</sup> or they note with particular revulsion how human beings, driven by “the mad frenzy of sex,”<sup>178</sup> behave worse than animals. The breeding instinct which, to Diotima, represented the one “deathless and eternal element in our mortality,”<sup>179</sup> has become the “lust of procreation with its blaze of wanton appetite.”<sup>180</sup> What the vulgar call “this ‘heaven of bliss’”<sup>181</sup> has become a very hell. In *Phaedrus*, questors for the beautiful who consummate their love in sex will still be allowed to “walk together in a life of shining bliss”<sup>182</sup> one day. But by the time of *Philebus*, the beautiful is talked about in direct opposition to such vulgar sensual pleasure: “when we see someone, no matter whom, experiencing pleasures – and I think this is true especially of the greatest pleasures – we detect in them an element either of the ridiculous or of extreme ugliness, so that we ourselves feel ashamed, and do our best to cover it up and hide it away.”<sup>183</sup>

In the *Laws*, we finally find Plato casting about for what will arouse the “universal dread” by which “the minds of all will be subjugated” into abstaining from homosexuality, lesbianism, and all sexual activities except procreative intercourse.<sup>184</sup> Other measures toward enforcing sexual abstinence involve, first, the kind of hard work capable of “checking the development of the full violence of these lusts” by way of redirecting their “rising current into some other physical channel”; second, the instilling of “a sense of shame” to attend “sexual indulgence[s]”; and third, the establishment of a code of honor whereby sexual overindulgers would be noted as “slaves to their vices.”<sup>185</sup> In addition to all these means of trying to suppress “the mad frenzy of sex,”<sup>186</sup> he recommends “the development of the passion for a beauty which is spiritual, not physical.”<sup>187</sup>

Meanwhile, Plato had long declared the ascent to “inconceivable beauty” to be *eo ipso* unattainable to the ignorant mob. The latter simply cannot appreciate “the reality of the beautiful in itself as opposed to the multiplicity of beautiful things.”<sup>188</sup> Appreciation of “the beautiful in itself” has become the prerogative of an élite of initiates who, unlike their lesser brethren wallowing pig-like in “the mud of ignorance,”<sup>189</sup> will scale heights whence “the petty miseries of men”<sup>190</sup> appear as matters of

supreme indifference. What allows these “lover[s] of wisdom” to associate with the “divine order”<sup>191</sup> is a “conversion of the soul,”<sup>192</sup> a complete turning inside out of themselves, resulting in an inversion of all traditionally held beliefs – light becoming darkness, the real unreal, the good bad, and the beautiful ugly. Plato convinced himself over the years that such a conversion cannot be taught. At best, an education may prod the initiate to the point where it happens spontaneously – “suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark,” until the mind “is flooded with light.”<sup>193</sup>

The wheel has come full circle. Everything once called beautiful for causing natural pleasure has been debunked as a misrepresentation of reality, denounced as an inducement to evil, or reviled as plain ugly or shameful; what is called beautiful is a nothingness beyond reality. Meanwhile, this ultimately nihilistic conception of beauty has become part of a manipulative theology designed to brainwash the common man into accepting Plato's new doctrines. “Men's beliefs about gods have changed, and so the law must be changed too,”<sup>194</sup> Plato remarks categorically. “The youthful mind,” he stands convinced, “will be persuaded of anything, if one will take the trouble to persuade it.”<sup>195</sup> And should his doctrines be false, they would still amount to the most “useful fiction” ever told.<sup>196</sup>