



WILEY

Plato on True and False Poetry

Author(s): M. Pabst Battin

Source: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Winter, 1977), pp. 163-174

Published by: Wiley on behalf of The American Society for Aesthetics

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/429756>

Accessed: 27-06-2016 08:23 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

http://www.jstor.org/stable/429756?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The American Society for Aesthetics, Wiley are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*

M. PABST BATTIN

Plato on True and False Poetry

IN BOOK X of the *Republic*, Plato argues that poetry – he has in mind particularly the poetry of Homer – must be excluded from the ideal state on two grounds: it inflames the passions, and it isn't true. Either characteristic is sufficient to disrupt the order of the just soul: poetry which inflames the passions strengthens τὸ θυμοειδῆς, the spirited part of the soul, so that it may gain control of the rational part; poetry which is untrue weakens τὸ λογιστικόν, the rational part, so that it becomes unable to maintain control over the troublesome spirited and appetitive parts. Should the rational part lose control for either reason, the irrational parts gain it, and the individual becomes unjust. But a state peopled by unjust individuals cannot itself be just: thus, if in the *Republic* we are to envision the ideal, truly just state, we must banish whatever produces injustice in individuals. Poetry, Plato holds, is untrue and inflammatory, and so produces injustice in individuals; it therefore cannot be admitted, whatever its beauties, to the ideal state.

That, in very simple terms, is the argument against poetry advanced in the *Republic*. But notice that it rests on two central assumptions about the nature of poetry: that it is untrue, and that it inflames the emotions. While the second of these is perhaps primarily of psychological interest, it is the first assumption that is philosophically provocative, and which we shall examine here: the claim that poetry is not true.

M. PABST BATTIN is assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Utah.

One might, perhaps, suggest that all Plato has in mind in claiming that poetry is not true is the trivial fact that poetry, insofar as it is *fiction*, describing mythical or legendary persons and events that did not happen, is not true in the way that a report or description of actual persons or events is. But this cannot be an adequate account, since the poetry with which Plato is most concerned, that of Hesiod and Homer, was thought, at least by most of Plato's contemporaries, to describe actual beings. The gods and heroes of Homeric and Hesiodic poetry were believed to exist, or have existed, not in some legendary or mythical other world, but in this one; thus Plato would be quite unable to rest his case on the claim that poetry is not true because it describes merely fictitious people and places. Besides, I think he has something much more interesting in mind.

A symptom of the fact that Plato's point is not trivial occurs in some rather jarring notes in the case against poetry. Plato says that he prizes nothing above the truth, and yet when designing the ideal state elects to admit some poetry which is not true, and to exclude some poetry which is. But if it is truth – and truth alone – which strengthens the rational part of the soul, and hence favors the development of justice in the individual and, consequently, the state, it seems quite astonishing that he should make such choices.

Let us consider a couple of curious passages. In Book II, when Socrates and his companions are discussing the educational regimen appropriate to the young guardians,

Socrates first claims that the stories Homer and Hesiod tell about the gods are false, and then remarks (translation Shorey, italics mine):

Even if they were true I should not think that they ought to be thus lightly told to thoughtless young persons. But the best way would be to bury them in silence, and if there were some necessity for relating them, that only a very small audience should be admitted under pledge of secrecy and after sacrificing, not a pig, but some huge and unprocurable victim, to the end that as few as possible should have heard these tales. (378A)

Here the claim, albeit a hypothetical one, is that some true stories ought not to be told. Conversely, Socrates claims in several places that some stories which are not true *should* be told. Not only is a child's first education to be in fables, which are, "as a whole, false," though they do contain some truth (377A), but as adults the inhabitants of the city are to be told "opportune falsehoods" whenever the guardians deem it socially useful to do so (389B). These so-called noble lies (among them such tales as the myth of the metals) are to be devised by hireling poets under the strictest scrutiny and censorship of the guardians, and in the *Laws* form a major part of the literary diet of the state (*Laws* 663D–664A).

Such claims hardly seem those made by a man who rejects poetry on the grounds that it does not "lay hold on truth" (600E). If truth were actually Plato's only criterion for the admission of poetry, and if truthfulness in poetry were as crucial to the justness of the soul as he says it is, then we might expect that *all* false poetry — including children's fables and the noble lies — would be excluded, and that *all* true poetry — including any of the tales of Hesiod and Homer that might be true — would be retained. But this is not the case. It seems, then, that Plato's exclusion policy suffers from some sort of pervasive conceptual confusion about the nature or importance of truth.

With perhaps one exception, however, Plato does not apply the terms "true" or "false" directly to poetry;¹ what he does say, repeatedly, is that poetry is "far from the truth" (597E, 598B, 602C), that it does not

"imitate the truth" (598B), that it is "produced without knowledge of the truth" (599A), and that it does not "lay hold on truth" (600E). We know, of course, that for Plato it is the Forms which are true, and thus that poetry which is "far from the truth" is poetry which is far from the Forms. But this is not very informative. If we are to understand what he means in claiming that poetry fails to reach truth, and in particular if we are to comprehend why he admits some sorts of tales and excludes others in the name of truth, we must find some way of speaking with our own vocabulary of "true" and "false" which will make intelligible to us what it is for poetry to be "far from" the Forms, and what it is to fail to "lay hold of truth."

Perhaps we will be aided in this project by taking notice of a distinction in our own language: we make use of at least two distinct senses of "true." While we generally assume that "true" denotes a property of statements, and that a statement which has this property is one which "corresponds to" or correctly describes some object or state of affairs in the world, we also recognize that this is not the only way in which we use the term. Consider the following two statements:

- (a) That today is Wednesday is true.
- (b) Jack's a true radical.

We tend to assume that the first of these, in which the predicate "true" is applied to a statement, is the central or principal sense of the word "true"; "true" as it is used in the second context, however, is an equally familiar phenomenon in our language. In this usage, it does not modify a statement; it denotes a property of *objects*, in this case, radicals. In fact, it can apply to many sorts of entities: we speak of true remorse, true courage, and true love; we speak of true leaders and true cowards; we speak of true granite, true red, and true hydrophobia. What we mean in these contexts is that the object, or state of affairs, of which "true" is predicated is a paradigm or reliable example of the kind of thing it is; it is not in any way fake, artificial, or imperfect. A true red is a paradigm red, one which is genuinely, fully, and completely red, and is not adulter-

ated with any other hues. True concern is that which is not colored by any ulterior motives; it is an example of the kind of thing concern ought to be. In at least some cases involving human beings, this use of "true" not only has this paradigmatic, normative sense, but seems also to suggest that the individual of whom the predication is made has the property in question *by nature*, and could not be otherwise. "Jack's a true radical" and "Jane's a true pianist" suggest that these individuals are what they are by nature, and given adequate opportunity for development at all, could not have been otherwise.

We see, then, that in English we can discern two distinct senses of "true."² The first of these uses, in which "true" is a predicate of statements and means that the statement correctly describes the world, or is conformable to fact, I shall call henceforth the descriptive or *factual* sense of "true"; the second, equally familiar at least in everyday English discourse, I shall call the paradigmatic or *normative* sense of "true," to suggest that it is said of an entity which functions as a paradigm. In this latter sense "true" means something like "genuine," "essential," "perfect," "ideal," and so forth.

Greek also uses ἀληθής, usually translated "true," both as a predicate of statements and as an adjective modifying nouns. This, of course, is not sufficient evidence that the Greek word is bivocal, or that it has just those senses, either for Greek-users in general or for Plato in particular, that the English term does; it is evidence only that the term can be used in two distinct grammatical ways. Plato does use the term in both grammatical ways; both usages, in fact, are to be found within Book X.³ While this does not guarantee that the senses he assigns ἀληθής are equivalent to the English senses of "true," however, in the absence of any explicit discussion of the meaning(s) of this term we must rely, if we are to understand Plato's case at all, on our English-language intuitions, at least to avoid the more common interpretive errors. English-language intuitions alone, of course, will not tell us what it means to be "far from the truth." But by keeping the factual and normative

senses of "true" straight, we may be able to see how Plato has been misinterpreted, what he has in mind, and come to understand his seemingly curious position on true and false poetry.

I suspect that what gives rise to the jarring notes we detect in Plato's argument that poetry is not true is that while we see that both senses of "true" can be used of the content of poetry, Plato means that poetry is not true in a way connected with one of these senses, and we tend to understand it in the other. Plato may be denying that the statements of which poetry consists are true, that is, that they correctly describe objects or states-of-affairs in the world. Or he may be denying that poetry portrays true x's, that is, objects which are paradigms or trustworthy exemplars of their kinds, and which are not in any way fake, artificial, or imperfect. If we take him to deny that poetry consists primarily of factually correct statements, we will take him to be telling us that poetry fails to tell us what is the case; if we understand him to deny that poetry describes paradigmatic entities, we shall take him to be saying that poetry fails to show us what is best, or tell us what ought to be the case.

The modern reader may object that poetry is not primarily a set of statements, but a collection of non-assertorial speech acts. But it is clear that Plato thought of poetry as a set of statements, each of which has a truth value. However, these statements are presented in elaborately descriptive, metaphorical, and/or pleasingly rhymed and metrical language; it is this feature which tends to obscure their truth or falsity. For instance, he says in Book X that those who are ignorant of a craft — cobbling or generalship, for instance — will be impressed by poetic accounts of these crafts given in rhythm, meter, and harmony, "so mighty is the spell that these adornments naturally exercise," but he adds that when these statements are "stripped bare of their musical coloring and taken by themselves, I think you know what sort of a showing these sayings of the poets make" (601B; cf. *Gorgias* 502B). I take this to mean that a statement which, when pre-

sented in highly poetic language, may strike the hearer as true and significant, may turn out, when made straightforwardly and without ornament, to be false or uninteresting.

It is the statements or groups of statements of which poetry consists, then, that may be true or false. Of course, any given statement has both factual and normative truth values; if it is a statement, it either does or it doesn't correctly describe some state-of-affairs, and it either does or it doesn't have to do with a paradigm object. From the truth values of the component statements we can determine the truth value either of any particular tale within that poetry, or of a given work of poetry as a whole: we can speak of "factually true poetry" as poetry in which the crucial factual statements are true, and "normatively true poetry" as that in which most or all of the important normative statements are true. (One might also apply the normative sense of "true" directly to poetry itself, not to its constituent statements, in order to speak of "true poetry" as opposed to fake, flawed or artificial poetry, as for instance in greeting card verses, but this usage, while quite legitimate, is nowhere relevant to the discussions in the *Republic*.)

If we are to respond to the jarring notes in the case against poetry, then, and ask what Plato means by calling poetry "far from the truth," we shall be asking whether he has in mind poetry in which the crucial factual statements are false, or poetry in which the important normative statements are not true. As I've suggested, this is to ask whether Plato's complaint is that poetry does not tell us what is the case, or that poetry fails to tell us what ought to be the case.

But now while we understand how a factually false statement fails to tell us what is the case, it is not so clear how a normatively true statement — that is, a statement about a true *x* — might tell us what ought to be the case. I have claimed that the normative sense of "true" is that which is displayed in locutions like "Jack's a true radical"; but this is not a claim that "Jack's a true radical" is itself a normative statement. It is not: normative statements are "ought" statements, and there is no "ought"

or any equivalent in this one. Rather, it is a statement of fact which asserts that some entity (Jack) is a paradigm of its kind (radicals), and it is false if Jack is not a paradigm radical, or if there is no entity Jack. Further assertions about this paradigm entity (e.g. "Jack detests bureaucracy") may also be factually true or false, depending on whether there is a Jack at all and whether, if he exists, he has the property of detesting bureaucracy.

We must notice, however, that factual falsity does not entail normative falsity as well. Whether or not the assertion about Jack correctly describes an actually existing individual, it may nevertheless present a genuine paradigm. If it does, it gives rise to a normative claim. The assumption at work here, of course, is the central Platonic one that whatever properties are possessed by a paradigm entity are to be possessed, though perhaps in lesser degree, by all entities of that kind: the paradigm is the norm or standard for what that kind of thing ought to be.⁴ It may strike us as peculiar to hold that "normative" claims may hold of objects incapable of volition: it seems odd to say that because the paradigm stone is hard, a particular stone "ought" to be hard also, if it is to be correctly called a stone. But it does not strike us as odd to claim that because the paradigm citizen is just, a particular citizen ought also to be just, if he is to be correctly called a citizen. Plato, however, makes no distinction between the ways in which entities capable and incapable of volition participate in the Forms.

Of course, the paradigm need not be actually existing, at least not in this world; for Plato the true paradigms, the Forms, do not exist in the actual world at all. Furthermore, descriptions of the paradigms are at best approximations, and not wholly satisfactory substitutes for a full vision of the paradigms themselves. Nevertheless, descriptions of these paradigms do give rise to normative claims. That is why Socrates seeks to define true justice, true piety, true courage, and so forth; he is convinced that if he succeeds in doing so, we will know how to live.

A normative claim can be engendered,

then, by a paradigmatic entity which does not exist in the actual world. The Forms do not exist in the actual world, but they do give rise to normative claims. But would fictional figures or tales, myths, or stories of imaginary beings do the same? Surely not, unless – and this is the crucial condition – unless these fictional or imaginary figures have properties very much like those of the real, i.e., Formal, paradigms. We know, for instance, that there is a paradigm general: there is a Form General. But suppose we hear a tale, albeit fictional, about a general who is uncommonly brave, perspicacious, and skilled in deploying his forces: the sort of man we'd call a "true general." He is not *the* true general, of course; there is only one such, and that is the Form itself. If he were an actual man, we would say that he participates very closely in the Form General, much more closely than other generals. But he is not. Nevertheless, the description of this figure, although there is in fact no such figure, is a very close approximation to any description we might give to the Form, and this fact too can give rise to normative claims. Since, as inhabitants of the Republic, we hope to accustom ourselves to living in accordance with descriptions of the Forms (for these, or laws based on them, are what philosophers who are returning to the cave will bring to us) it would seem plausible that we should also be willing to guide our lives by any very close approximation to such descriptions. If a fictional tale describes a particular human action in such a way that it coincides very closely with the philosophers' description of, say, the Form Justice, that is an action we should emulate in our own lives.

Actually, this sort of case is spurious for a consideration of Plato, inasmuch as the figures populating the myths of Homer and Hesiod, the gods and heroes, were not thought to be fictional, but to live or have lived in the actual world. Plato never claims that the gods and heroes Homer describes do not exist; he argues only that they cannot have the characteristics Homer ascribes to them, or that they are not divine (§91C–D). Whether the poetry Plato is concerned with is fictional or not, then, is irrelevant to the case Plato makes against

it: both fictional and nonfictional tales can exert normative claims.

I think we now have the skeleton for an intelligible account of Plato's notions about poetry. For Plato, statements about paradigmatic entities, viz. the Forms, serve as bases for normative claims about entities of that kind. Particular individuals, inhabiting the real or fictional worlds, cannot be full paradigms, in that they cannot be Forms; but they can be more or less closely participatory in the Forms. Those individuals of whom we'd say, in ordinary talk, that they are true x's, are those who participate most closely in the Forms. Because of this we are willing to say that they are paradigmatic, and do serve as models of how other individuals of that sort ought to be. A heroic figure from poetry, then, if he participates very closely in, say, the Form Courage, can and does serve as a model of what a courageous man ought to be: the courageous man ought to be like the heroic figure. Whatever the essential properties of the paradigm, those are the properties any aspirant to x-hood ought to have. If Euthyphro were truly pious, as he believes, then anyone aspiring to piety ought to have those properties Euthyphro displays: among others, the property of accusing one's father. Since, for Plato, we ought all to aspire to piety, the normative import of Euthyphro's tale – if he were truly pious – would be this: we ought all, in similar circumstances, accuse our fathers.

This account shows why for Plato we talk of normatively *true* statements, instead simply of normative statements. While such talk may seem odd to modern ears, this is because Plato's ontology includes something ours (for the most part) does not: a genuine objective paradigm for every kind of thing there is: namely, its Form.⁵ This fact of Plato's metaphysics makes it possible to determine the truth value of whatever directives or normative statements may be explicit in or engendered by poetry: all one need do is compare the object or individual on which they are based to the true paradigm, that is, the Form. If they correspond, at least with respect to the proper attributes of the Form, then the normative statement arising from a description of the compared

object can be said to be *normatively true*.

It is statements about model individuals and things, then — true generals, truly pious men, even true chairs — which make demands on those who read about them. A given poetic statement, of course, may also be factually true or false, but as such it has no normative force.

Let's see how this account might work for a given sample of poetry. Let us consider a tale of the kind Plato describes as a "noble lie": the familiar "parable of the metals."

While all of you in the city are brothers . . . yet God in fashioning those of you who are fitted to hold rule mingled gold in their generation, for which reasons they are the most precious—but in the helpers silver, and iron and brass in the farmers and other craftsmen. And as you are all akin, though for the most part you will breed after your kinds, it may sometimes happen that a golden father would beget a silver son and that a golden offspring would come from a silver sire and that the rest would in like manner be born of one another. So that the first and chief injunction that the god lays upon the rulers is that of nothing else are they to be such careful guardians and so intently observant as of the intermixture of these metals in the souls of their offspring, and if sons are born to them with an infusion of brass or iron they shall by no means give way to pity in their treatment of them, but shall assign to each the status due to his nature and thrust them out among the artisans or the farmers. And again, if from these there is born a son with unexpected gold or silver in his composition they shall honour such and bid them go up higher, some to the office of guardian, some to the assistanceship, alleging that there is an oracle that the state shall then be overthrown when the man of iron or brass is its guardian. (415A–C)

We must be careful to note, of course, that the parable is not stated in the *Republic* in the form in which it would be told to the populace of the ideal state. As a poetic work designed for the consumption of the populace, it might perhaps take the form of a tale of two persons — one, the "iron" or lesser father of a "golden" or superior son, the other the "golden" father, himself a guardian, of a much inferior son of iron. These might be purely fictional characters, or, more probably, they might be allegedly actual gods or heroes, some of whose other characteristics or deeds might be selected from the cultural stock as suitable for incorporation in this tale. In any case, the

parable itself would involve the noble actions of the two fathers: it would describe the iron father as admirable in encouraging or even commanding his golden son to aspire highly and to undergo the rigorous training required for the office of guardian; the golden father, on the other hand, would be described as equally admirable in resolutely casting out his iron son, to be reared among the artisans or farmers. The tale might be told with great elaborateness and embellishment, as long as the behaviors of the characters involved are in accordance with the social principle to be embodied in the tale.

Plato says of the description of the tale he provides — and he would no doubt also say it of our embellished, poetic version — that it is false. Not only does he call it a falsehood (*τὸ ψεῦδος*), but he says that it "has not happened and perhaps would not be likely to happen in our day," and that it would require "no little persuasion" to make it believable (414C).

This is not merely a function of the fact that the tale is told in somewhat metaphorical terms, and makes reference to "golden" and "iron" natures; we could strip it of its metaphorical character, as well as its poetic ornament, and it would still be false, at least insofar as it makes a factual assertion about states of affairs in the world: that men are socially divided into classes irrespective of parentage, and that the two central characters have behaved as described.

However, even though the parable is admittedly factually false, it does describe the way (Plato thinks) the world ought to be: it describes a world in which the social classes are scrupulously separated and in which one's abilities, not one's genealogy, determine one's class. The parable presents a paradigm of social organization; if there is a Form of Society as a whole, the view of society given in this parable will correspond very closely to it. The tale's two heroes, the iron and the golden fathers, are both "true citizens" or perhaps "truly just members" of that society; they too will participate very closely in the Forms of their kinds. Whatever characteristics they have, then, will serve as bases for normative claims binding on all other members of the state.

Plato himself sees that the parable has normative import: he says that it serves to enjoin or command (*παραγγέλει* 415B) the rulers to act in certain ways. They are to take extreme care of interbreeding in their society; they are to be pitiless in seeing that their offspring are brought up not necessarily among themselves, but within the class to which they are suited (415B–C). It is obvious, then, that Plato recognizes that a mythical description of a non-actual society and of literary characters can – even when admittedly false – function in a normative way. Because the myth describes the paradigm social organization (“the true society,” as it were), and provides directives for achieving it, it places an obligation upon the hearers of that tale: they are to act in such a way as to bring about the paradigmatic state-of-affairs described. The parable presents an ideal fiction; the job of the hearers is to make it real. It may not be the case that all normatively true tales actually provide explicit directives, but all of them serve to display an optimum state-of-affairs – that is, they describe what ought to be the case, and so they all impose obligations upon the hearers.

By composing tales in this way, Plato holds (both in the *Republic* and in the *Laws*), hired poets could devise what would properly be called “noble lies” to exhibit paradigm behavior, or the behavior of paradigm figures, and hence supply the populace with a set of directives or instructions for living their lives. It is this feature, that the noble lie displays an optimum state-of-affairs and may furthermore yield directives for obtaining it, that is, directives for good or socially beneficial action, that makes the noble lie noble, and distinguishes it from common lies and ordinary falsehoods. A common lie is factually false and normatively false or neutral; a noble lie is also factually false, but is normatively *true*.

The account I have given points out, as we’ve seen, that the normative statements to which poetic tales give rise have truth values, which are to be determined by comparing the persons, actions, objects, or whatever is portrayed in the tale to the Forms of their kinds. If we are tempted to conclude

from Homer’s description of the three-legged stool on which the disguised Odysseus sits that “a stool ought to have three legs,” we need only compare the description with the Form Stool: if the Form also has three legs, then the poetic description is normatively true; otherwise it is not. But while the problem may seem silly when stated for material objects (though we must remember that Homeric poetry was touted as a repository of technical and practical information about vehicles, weapons, and other material objects, as well as an authority on moral questions), it becomes more obvious and more acute when stated for the moral virtues: courage, temperance, piety and so forth. We know whether Homer is accurately describing an act of true filial piety on the part of Telemachus by comparing it with our view of the proper attributes of Filial Piety itself (indeed, this is how we tell whether Telemachus is a “true son”), and we know whether Odysseus is truly courageous (even though he feigned madness to avoid the Trojan campaign) by determining whether the description Homer offers of his behavior would also correctly describe the Form Courage.

But while the solution seems easy, the assessment is not, and that is because it is not easy to attain a view of the Forms. Only the philosopher, and then only after long and rigorous practice of dialectic, can hope for such a view; the common man, chained in the cave, is virtually ignorant of the Forms, and has no way of seeing them. The common man can, at least in principle, determine whether any statement of poetry is *factually* true – he can look about in his world quite well and discover whether the poetry in question accurately describes anything he sees there,⁶ but he has no way of looking about in the world of Forms. Consequently, he has in principle as well as in practice no way of knowing whether the poetry he is exposed to is normatively true.

Of course, in the *Republic* there will be individuals, not confined to the cave, who are capable of assessing the normative truth value of a given work of poetry, and then labelling that work as true or untrue for the consumption of those common folk who

cannot make this determination themselves. Those individuals are, as we might expect, the philosophers; this is why philosopher-guardians are to control poetic output in the just state. They will perform just the kind of activity we see Socrates himself performing in Books II–III. Since Socrates, as a philosopher, has privileged acquaintance with the Forms, he knows what true justice is, and so knows that the accounts Homer and Hesiod give of justice are grossly inaccurate. The lengthy analysis of the content of the Homeric and Hesiodic tales, beginning in Book II at 362D and extending throughout a large part of Book III, constitutes Socrates' evidence for the claim that these poets do not know what true justice is; he is showing that their accounts do not match his vision of the Forms. While the philosopher-guardians will be able to exclude such poetry from the state altogether, Socrates does the next best thing: he attempts to warn those who cannot see this fact themselves that Homer's poetry is not true.

There is another reason for which one might think poetry would serve as an unreliable model. Objects and figures who are portrayed in poetry as paradigms of their kinds (a true warrior, like Achilles; a true son, like Telemachus) have not only paradigmatic but non-paradigmatic properties as well. Someone attempting to emulate, say, Achilles' true courage in the battle for Troy might copy those parts of the poetic description which show him flying into an uncontrollable rage, or dragging the body of Hector behind his chariot, and not those parts which show him engaging in battle with reasoned fearlessness and daring. This risk, greatest when we are confronted with only a single instance or two of a certain kind of thing, is inherent in taking any poetic description as normative: unless we already know the Form of the object or action described (in which case we will hardly need to use poetry as an authoritative guide), we may always mistake non-paradigmatic features for the paradigmatic ones.

It is apparent, however, that the poetic or fictional figure or object stands a better chance of serving as a genuine paradigm

than any real-world individual. This is because the poet may give only a partial or incomplete characterization of a fictional figure, while a real-world figure always has fully determinate characteristics. The real Socrates either had a wife named Xantippe, or a wife named something else, or no wife at all; but he must have had one of these features. But the poet, in describing a true philosopher, can simply omit all reference to his marital status – as well as any other non-essential characteristics – and describe only those features which are paradigmatic. Such poetry, one might even claim, would not be imitative of *particular* objects or individuals after all, and so would not be thrice-removed from the Forms. Of course, poetry which is purely paradigmatic will be dull and colorless poetry indeed, but that is not Plato's concern: he is concerned only that poetry not teach incorrect behavioral lessons.

Poetry, then, at least in principle, might succeed in depicting figures and objects which do participate closely in the Forms, so closely that their descriptions may match those of the Forms. This I take to be the core of the poets' claim to truth: that they are in some way able to depict the "essence" of some object or human action. Whether they actually do so or not is a matter for the philosopher to determine.

But what about poetry which does not describe true *x*'s; would we want to say that it is normatively false? I do not think so. Earlier, I called common lies "normatively neutral" to emphasize an essential difference between factual and normative truth-values. Although we say that a statement which is not factually true is factually false, we do not say that a description of something which is not a true *x* is therefore a description of a false *x*. If Jane is not a true pianist, that does not mean she's a false pianist, or not a pianist at all; she's a pianist, alright, just not a very highly skilled one. Descriptions of objects or properties which are not paradigms are not therefore descriptions of "anti-paradigms," if we can imagine an object with properties just the opposite of those the paradigm would have; they are simply not paradigms at all.

Nevertheless, there are cases in which we

seem to want to say that a poetic description is normatively *false*, not merely *neutral*. When Socrates says that the trouble he finds with Hesiod and Homer is the fault of telling lies, especially lies that are not good (377D), he means that what is so reprehensible about Hesiod and Homer is that their tales give rise to directives actually encouraging ignoble behavior. They set bad behavioral examples, and are bad guides for living one's life. The story about Uranus and Cronos (377E), for instance, is not only factually false, in that no such series of events (according to Plato) ever did take place, but it sets for us an example of just that kind of behavior which we should *not* perform: it is what he calls the "utmost wrong" (*ἀδικῶν τὰ ἔσχατα* 378B2). What makes these stories so pernicious is just that they are examples — they are intended by the author (or at least by his adherents) and understood by the audience as models or guides for action, and neither author nor audience sees that they are guides to the wrong kind of action. Indeed, Euthyphro tries to justify the fact that he is prosecuting his father for murder by arguing that Zeus had put his own father in bonds (*Euthyphro* 5E–6C); he actually refers to the (Homeric) tales of Zeus as a "sure proof" (*τεκμήριον*) that he is doing the right thing. Socrates takes Homer's complacent portrayal of Autolycus as a similar model of bad behavior, and says that Polemarchus probably got his erroneous notion that justice is a kind of theft from this source (*Rep.* 334B).

We cannot overemphasize the fact that poetry, in Plato's time, was firmly considered a proper source of behavioral models and ethical norms: Homer was said to be the "educator of all Greece" in moral as well as technical matters. In fact, Plato says, the supporters of Homer claim that "we should order our entire lives by the guidance of this poet" (606E). Of course, if Homer's poetry, whether or not intended as moral guidance, were not understood as such (as we ourselves do not understand Homer), little harm would be done, and all that might occur when the audience listens to Homer would be a bit of innocent recreation. But this is not what happens: rather, the audience is encouraged by Homer's sup-

porters, and by the culture in general, to treat his poetry as exemplary, and is thus led, like Euthyphro, to behave in the unseemly ways of Homer's heroes and gods.

It cannot, Socrates believes, be true that Zeus accused his father. But if it were, as he makes quite clear in the canons of theology formulated at the end of Book II, it could not be the case that Zeus was acting as a true god, since a true god cannot cause evil, and to accuse one's father is to cause evil. Nor is it true, as Homer claims, that Zeus sent a misleading dream to Agamemnon, or that Apollo, singing at Thetis' wedding, foretold happy fortunes for her progeny, when he knew he himself would be the slayer of her son Achilles (383B). If it were, Zeus and Apollo would not be acting as true gods do, for "the gods do not mislead us by falsehoods in words or deed" (383A). In short, the gods Homer describes are not paradigms. Consequently, the normative claims which one might derive from such tales, as Euthyphro derives "I ought to accuse my father" from the tale of Zeus, are false. They are derived from unreliable, nongenuine, spurious paradigms, the misleading portraits of gods who are not true gods at all.

There is a bit of irony in this. The audience's understanding of Homer's poetry about the gods and heroes as paradigmatic is not misguided: gods and heroes are, as it were, by definition paradigmatic. Hence it would seem quite proper that the audience take Homer's tales of the gods' behavior as models for its own; it would seem odd to chastise Euthyphro for following Zeus, foremost among them. But what Euthyphro, or the listener who regards Homer not as a teller of tales but as a source of behavioral models, does not realize is that Homer's accounts of the gods are *wrong*: Homer is not describing true gods, but only what he erroneously imagines them to be.

But the listener has no way of knowing this. Homer is the average listener's primary source of information about the gods, and since, Socrates assumes, the average listener, unlike himself, has no conception of what divinity properly is, it never occurs to the listener that Homer may be wrong. Socrates and his companions can perform a bit of

penetrating conceptual analysis, and conclude that to claim that God causes evil is neither holy, nor profitable, nor even consistent (see, for instance, the conclusions they reach at the end of Book II, at 380C), but the common man cannot do this: all that he knows is that he owes reverence to the gods. If the gods are such as Homer describes them, then that is what he is to revere. The way in which the common man understands Homer is entirely appropriate to Homer's subject matter, but he is unwittingly duped by a misleading presentation of that subject matter.

One might suggest that by careful warning or antidote the audience could be dissuaded from taking Homer's tales as paradigms, or encouraged to question the accuracy of the accounts of the gods; indeed, there is some suggestion of antidotes at the end of Book X (608A). But such an attitude towards Homer and his subject matter would be considered entirely inappropriate by the common man: one does not question the source and standard for the central truths of one's culture, and one does not regard a god or a hero as anything but a paradigm. If one does, then one is not regarding them as gods or heroes. The listener is caught in an uncomfortable dilemma: if he takes Homer's tales as exemplary, he is duped; and if he does not regard them as exemplary, he is irreverent, and guilty of utmost impiety. Seeing this, Socrates draws the only conclusion he can: since there is no satisfactory attitude the listener can adopt towards Homer's poetry, the only reasonable thing to do is to exclude it from the state altogether.

This is a more important point for Plato's theory that it might seem, and one which finally allows us to see that this theory is not entirely irrational or bad-tempered, as so many critics have suggested. What the audience does is to take texts which are not normatively true, since they do not describe genuine paradigms, as giving rise to reliable normative claims. They thus become not innocuous stories or mere recreations, but dangers: they are misleading, deceptive, and untrustworthy.

Now, I think, we are in a position to re-

consider the jarring notes in Plato's case against poetry, and discover that they do not betray conceptual confusion after all. We had looked at a couple of curious passages: one in which Socrates says that the stories Hesiod and Homer tell about the gods, *even if true*, ought not to be told, and one in which Socrates says that falsehoods, such as the myth of the metals, should — for the good of the state — be told. Socrates thinks that even if the stories Hesiod and Homer tell might conceivably be factually true — that is, correctly describe the actual behavior of the figures they describe — they are not and cannot be normatively true: they do not disclose what a genuine god is, and they do not show the way a god, or someone who emulates a god, is supposed to be. Conversely, even though the "noble lies" which the guardians may find it serviceable to use in the interests of the state are literally false, they are nevertheless normatively true. They describe what ought to be the case in the world, and are known to do so by those philosophers who can compare them with the Forms.

From these examples we can clearly see what priorities Plato gives to the various kinds of truth, and describe what we might call the "rule of inclusion" for poetry. We find six cases: those in which the particular piece or type of poetry is

- (1) both normatively and factually true
- (2) normatively true and factually false
- (3) normatively neutral and factually true
- (4) normatively neutral and factually false
- (5) normatively false and factually true
- (6) both normatively and factually false

Cases of type (1), which are true in every way, are to be included; these would include those hymns to the gods which do not show them behaving in reprehensible ways⁷ and the praises of good men mentioned at 607A. Those of type (6), true in no way, are excluded; Nettleship suggests that a "myth which represented God as doing evil" would be false in both senses.⁸ As the two examples of the myth of the metals and the Homeric and Hesiodic tales show, in cases (2) and (5) normative truth takes priority over factual truth: (2) is to be included but not (5).

The two remaining cases might seem to present a problem. In these cases, where no normative claim is either being advanced by the author or understood by the audience (cases of "innocent recreations," we would/could call them), we might suspect that Plato would use factual truth as a criterion of admittance: he might admit (3) but not (4). But I can think of no instances in the text of the *Republic* to support such a speculation, nor any to defeat it. But, I think, there is a reason for this: given the role of poetry in Greek society, the cases in which poetry is not only intended as normatively neutral, but is so understood by the audience, are few or nil. Poetry—at least Homer's poetry—is *always* understood by the audience, if not by the poets as well, as exemplary. Certainly no tale of the gods or heroes can be normatively neutral—as we saw, the only pious attitude one can adopt towards the gods and heroes is to treat them as behavioral models—and this covers virtually all of Homer and the other major poets as well. (3) and (4), then, are spurious cases, cases which do not arise in the average listener's actual commerce with poetry.

Given the four cases in which it is clear what is to be admitted or excluded from the state, we can digest them into a single more efficient rule, one which we might term the general "rule of inclusion" for poetry:

Admit to the state all and only poetry which is normatively true, regardless of whether it is factually true or false.

This, then, is the substance of Plato's "attack on poetry" in the *Republic*: to argue that poetry which is false—*normatively* false—sense must be excluded from the state. Because the audience mistakenly assumes that poetry—especially Homer's—is normatively true, it presents a genuine danger to the state. The audience is led to believe that Homer describes true cobblers, true justice, and true gods, when in fact he does not.

As Grote points out, Plato, following out the train of thought begun in the *Republic* to its inevitable conclusion, proposes in the *Laws* to admit to the state as its complete cultural diet a body of "noble lies" like the myth of the metals, which are to be com-

posed by poets under the most strict censorship. Plato almost seems to be no longer interested in truth as we usually understand it at all—in any pretense to factual or historical truth—but only in truth of the normative sort. Grote writes:

That which he proposes for his commonwealth is . . . a body of premeditated fictitious stories, prepared by poets under his inspection and control. He does not set up any pretence of historical truth for these stories, when first promulgated: he claims no traditional evidence, no divine inspiration, such as were associated more or less with the received legends, in the minds both of those who recited and of those who heard them.¹

They are "pious frauds," Grote says, "constructed for an orthodox purpose,"¹⁰ and I hope to have dispelled any wonderment about how they can be suitable fare for those who "prize truth above all else." They are, for Plato, true, true in the most important sense, and true in just the way that Homer is not.

¹ At the very end of the discussion of poetry in Book X, at 608A, Socrates says he will be glad if the case can be made out that poetry is most noble and most true (*βελτίστην και ἀληθεστάτην*); he clearly implies that poetry is ignoble and false. In general, however, he does not apply the terms "true" and "false" to poetry as a whole, though he does describe particular tales within poetry as true or false.

² This distinction is suggested by Gregory Vlastos' remarks on the term "real." In his paper "Degrees on Reality in Plato" (in *Platonic Studies*, Princeton University Press, 1973, pp. 58–75), Vlastos points out that the metaphysical puzzles engendered by the Theory of Forms (for instance, how can an immaterial, nontemporal, invisible entity like the Form Table be more *real* than an actual table, which you can kick?) dissolve if we abandon the assumption that "real" means "existent," and do not insist that Plato's claim that the Form Chair is more real than a particular chair means that it "exists" more than that chair. It does not. But it is more genuine, and more trustworthy as an object of knowledge. In Vlastos' terminology, the Form Chair is more "cognitively reliable," as well as more "reliably valuable," than any particular chair, although it does not in the ordinary sense exist, or "exist more" than any kickable chair. This is what Plato means in saying that the Forms are "real": he means that they are genuine and trustworthy objects of knowledge.

While the second sense of "true" we distinguished here, that in which the predicate serves to indicate

that its object is a paradigm or reliable example of the kind of thing it is, may seem to be nearly synonymous with the second sense of "real" described by Vlastos, I do not think it is entirely synonymous; at least in English, we can detect differences in the meanings of:

- (a) He's a true radical.
- (b) He's a real radical.
- (a) That's a true red.
- (b) That's a real red.
- (a) She showed real concern.
- (b) She showed true concern.

In saying that someone is a real radical, you are pointing out that he is not an imposter or a federal agent in disguise; he actually is a radical. But in saying that he is a true radical, you are suggesting that he is not simply an ordinary radical; he is a model or paradigmatic or perfect radical. Someone who shows real concern is someone who is not faking; but someone who shows true concern is not merely showing concern, but showing the kind of concern which is unusually or admirably pure, genuine, etc. Consequently, I think Vlastos is wrong in claiming that in such cases, "real" can be substituted for "true" with little change of sense (see p. 59). A real radical and a true radical are both radicals, not imposters or mere enthusiasts; but a true radical is paradigmatic in a way that that real radical need not be.

This argument, however, has been conducted in English. It may well be the case that in Greek, at least in Plato's Greek, these second senses of "true" and "real" are more nearly synonymous. After all, Plato does use the terms "real" and "true" interchangeably in some contexts; consider his use of forms of *ἀλήθεια* and *τὸ ὄν* at the beginning of Book X. At 596E9 he says that the painter's creations are not *ἀληθῆ*; seven lines later he says that what the carpenter makes is not that which really is (*τὸ ὄν*); and only six lines beyond that he summarizes the argument by saying that the work of the carpenter or any other craftsman is only a dim adumbration *πρὸς ἀλήθειαν* "of truth." We see suggestions of a similar interchanging of the terms "true" and "real" in the Divided Line passage at the end of Book VI. Vlastos also points out that at *Republic* 389C the expressions *τὰ ὄντα λέγειν, τ' ἀληθῆ λέγειν*, are used synonymously, and further cites *Theaetetus* 179C and 199A. Consequently, although these second senses of "true" and "real" are not synonymous in English, it may well be the case that in Greek—at least Greek as Plato uses it—they are. In both cases, the sense connoted is that of genuineness, reliability, perfectness, trustworthiness as a model.

³ Several examples of the factual sense of "true," in which "true" is said of statements, are available in Book X. In *εἰ τὰ λεγόμενα περὶ Ὀμήρου ἀληθῆ* (600B8-9), *ἀληθῆ* is actually an adjective modifying *λεγόμενα*, but the import is clear: the statements made about Homer may be true or false. "True" is

also frequently used as a reply to questions, for instance at 602D: a full statement of the assertion being admitted by Glaucon would be "'that scene-painting . . . falls nothing short of witchcraft' is true." As an example of the normative use of "true," consider *τὴν ἀληθῆ φύσιν* (612A3-4); Socrates is speaking of the soul's "true nature," that is, its genuine, essential nature.

⁴ See David Key's paper "The Mad Craftsman of the *Timaeus*" (*Phil. Review* LXXX (1971), 230-234) for a discussion of the distinction between the purely formal properties common to all Forms, such as eternalness and immateriality, and the proper attributes of a given Form, those properties which make it the Form of the kind of thing it is. A particular participating in a Form partakes of that Form's proper attributes only, not its formal ones.

⁵ We shall ignore here Plato's difficulties over mud, hair, dirt, and other degrading objects. It is tempting to claim that adequate grounds for excluding poetry which deals with degrading things—and this would include ignoble behavior on the part of the gods, instances of lying, rape, theft, "women wrangling with their husbands, women who are sick, in love, or in labor, slaves doing slaves' work, cowards, drunkards, neighing horses, lowing bulls, the noise of rivers, the roar of the sea, and thunder" (395D-396B)—in short, the whole catalogue of horrors listed in Books II and III—rests on the fact that such poetry does not imitate the Forms—and *cannot*, since there are no Forms of such things to imitate in the first place. But such a claim would require some resolution on Plato's part of the issue of whether there are Forms of things which cannot be said to be good, beautiful, or true.

⁶ Determining the factual correctness of Homeric or Hesiodic poetry might in practice prove difficult, since the gods and heroes described, while believed to inhabit the actual world, are either elusive, invisible, or dead. Nevertheless, one might in principle describe ways of establishing factual claims about them; these ways would resemble ordinary historical method.

⁷ I.e., those tales of the gods which meet the criterion developed at the end of Book II, and do not show (1) that the gods cause evil, or (2) that the gods change, alter, or mislead by falsehoods (382C-383C).

⁸ R. L. Nettleship, *Lectures on Plato's Republic*. New York, 1968, pp. 84-85. We would consider any fabricated story about wicked deeds to be false in both senses.

⁹ George Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates* (New York, 1973; reprint of the 1888 edition), Vol. IV, p. 156. The passage he has in mind, I presume, is *Laus* 663D-664A.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

I wish to thank Gerasimos Santas, Charles Young, Guy Siricello, and Nelson Pike for their attention to this paper. I have also profited from comments by James Lescher, Mary Sirridge, and George Gale.