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Plato Reflected in Tennyson's Mirror

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She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
To look down to Camelot.
She knows not what the curse may be,
And so she weaveth steadily,
And little other care hath she,
The Lady of Shalott.

— Alfred, Lord Tennyson,

“The Lady of Shalott”

Tennyson's Lady of Shalott looks at the towered city of Camelot through a mirror hanged on the wall of her chamber. She has been cursed not to look at Camelot, but she has not been told what the curse may be. She remains engrossed in her embroidery works throughout the day. It is only the dawn of love in her for the handsome Lord Lancelot that made her curious of the forbidden city. During her final journey to know the hitherto unknown Camelot the Lady embraces her death. Is Death the ultimate curse that is destined to befall on the Lady of Shalott should she dare to acquire Knowledge? Is not the Lady of Shalott's condition like Plato's painter who is excluded from the realm of *epistēmē*, and has access of only superfluous appearances of the earthly particulars? Does not she also resemble the ignorant cave-dweller in the *Republic*, Book VI, who, released from the cave comes to know the reality? A Platonic reading of Tennyson's “The Lady of Shalott” might

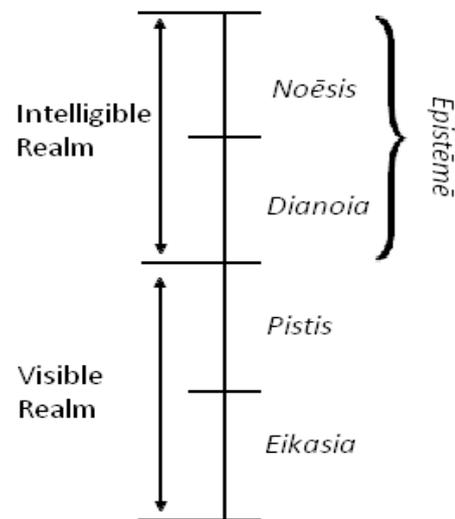
provide answers to these questions which are remarkably co-related to the Greek philosopher's problematic reaction to poetry.

Within the ambit of philosophy the presence of poetry and Art in general often result in uneasy tussles that open up instances of dissent. The relation between poetry and philosophy does not always manifest harmonious coexistence but antithetical perspectives too. Any recuperative attempt at the famous Platonic anathema to poetry must address the context that fashioned his arguments. Plato condemns poetry in his *Republic* and wishes to banish poets from his ideal republic for a number of reasons. The rhetorically enriched "dialogues" of Plato do not give us the scope to visualize a well-organized philosophical system, but gives his ideas in fragments. *Republic* Books II, III and X, and *Ion* are the vestibules of Plato's theory of poetry though his ideas do not remain consistent throughout the dialogues. Plato concept of poetry is invariably associated with his concept of *mimêsis* which is most often translated as "imitation" or "representation." But the Greek word *mimêsis* "can refer either to process or to that process's outcome," that is, a poet "engage[s] on the act of imitation in order to produce an imitation" ("Plato's Aesthetics"). Then, there are differences between the concept of *mimêsis* in Book III and that in Book X of the *Republic*. While Book III treats imitation as a "formal concept", Book X "revises the formal aspects of *mimêsis* with a picturing or portrayal that involves more than direct quotation" (ibid).

Before embarking on a discussion on what constitutes Plato's hostility to poetry, it would be profitable to have a look at the backdrop against which Plato wrote his *Republic* in order to figure out his concerns. The defeat of Athens, which was the axis of Greek culture and Arts, by Sparta in the long Peloponnesian War (c. 432-404 BC) was a catastrophic and unanticipated incident for devout Athenians like Plato. The anarchy in the socio-political sphere that followed bred dissatisfaction in Plato, and he attempted to formulate his concept of an ideal republic to be properly ruled by well-trained philosopher kings and queens. While enumerating the prerequisites of education of the young minds Plato decreed his infamous banishment of the poets from his ideal republic. The Greeks had no "Bible" and they were supposed to draw their moral education from poetry and drama. Hence, "if Plato seems very preoccupied with the moral and theological aspect of the poets it is because it was from them that the ordinary Greek was expected to acquire his moral and theological notions" (Lee 67).

One of Plato's major objections that the poets of his period indulge in impersonation or misrepresentation of Gods and human beings in their poetry needs

corrective measures because Gods are the epitome of goodness and justice, and no evil can ever spring from Them. The poets “must not try to persuade our young men that the gods are the source of evil, and the heroes are no better than ordinary mortals; that [...] is a wicked lie, for we have proved that no evil can originate with the gods” (Republic 84). The Guardians of the state should respect God and imbibe in themselves the benevolent qualities of God. And “we should be quite right to cut out from our poetry lamentations by famous men. We can give them to the less reputable women characters or to the bad men, so that those whom we say are bringing up as Guardians of our state will be ashamed to imitate them” (79). In Book X of the *Republic*, where Plato develops his theory of *mimêsis* it is strongly argued that the poets, like the painters, are but ignorant “copy-makers” and that they have no concept of the Form. What the poets imitate is not the Form (which alone is absolute, universal, eternal and constant), but insubstantial, inconstant appearances of the earthly or “real” things. Since these things too are mere replicas of the heavenly Form, according to Plato, poetry stands at third remove from reality. Plato insinuates that the poets are in a vague, image-bound, illusory state he calls *eikasia* (illusion), the lowest division in the hierarchy of knowledge with *pistis* (belief), *dianoia* (mathematical reasoning), and *noēsis* (intelligence or dialect) placed in an ascending order (*Republic* 237-40).



Plato's Divided Line of Knowledge

The epistemic impediments that stand on the way of the poet exemplify Plato's idea of knowledge which he develops in *Theaetetus*. There Plato rejects the empiricist claim, especially that by Protagoras, that perception is the source of knowledge. To Plato, perception of a thing is not constant but varies with the shift of percipients. Again, he echoes the Heraclitean notion that earthly things as well as men are not constant but in flux and in continuous process of *becoming*, when he argues that things in perception continuously go on changing or “becoming for someone, or of something, or towards something.” The only constant things, according to Plato, are the God-made Forms which exist in heaven. The philosopher has the potential to contemplate on the Forms and obtain a comprehensive idea of the Form while the craftsman can produce a copy of the Form although he does not have exact knowledge of the Form, and his copy inheres only a few aspects of the

Form. A painter, according to Plato, is someone who holds a mirror up to nature and produces insubstantial images of the earthly things (*Republic* 337). Poet's work is similar to that of a painter. Poets don't have any idea of the Form, even they can't manufacture any "real thing" but can only produce an imitation of it, which means his art is twice removed from reality. Plato further says that even when a poet imitates an object made by a craftsman he does not imitate it as it *is* but as it *appears*:

'If you look at a bed, or anything else, sideways or endways or from some other angle, does it make any difference to the bed? Isn't it merely like it *looks* different, without *being* different? And similarly with other things.'

'Yes, it's the same bed, but it looks different.'

'Then consider—when the painter makes his representation, does he do so by reference to the object as it actually is or to its superficial appearance? In his representation or of the truth?'

'Of an apparition.'

'The art of representation is therefore a long way removed from truth, and it is able to reproduce everything because it has little grasp of anything, and that little is of a mere phenomenal appearance. For example, a painter can paint a portrait of a shoemaker or a carpenter or any other craftsman without understanding any of their crafts; yet, if he is skilful enough, his portrait of a carpenter may, at any distance, deceive children or simple people into thinking it is real carpenter' (*Republic* 339-340).

That the poet is excluded from the realm of knowledge is again depicted in *Ion*, where the poet is said to be an "inspired" person whose persona the God works through. In the words of Stecker:

Poets do not make poems by possessing a certain kind of knowledge, that is, a skill or an art in the Greek sense. [...] In saying the poet is not practicing an art, Socrates is claiming that the poet is not using certain knowledge in applying means to achieve a foreseen end. Rather, they are inspired, that is, possessed by a muse or god. It is not the human poet [...] but a god or muse that is ultimately the expressor. (48)

In *Republic*, Plato divides imitation into two categories — i. versatile imitation (*mimêtike*), and ii. imitation with knowledge. A poet is a versatile imitation in the sense he does not have any comprehensive idea of the Form, he merely imitates the *appearance* of earthly objects. The aim of such imitation is to impart pleasure among

people. On the other hand, imitation with knowledge is imitation of an object as it *is*—something the poets are incapable of accomplishing.

Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott* resembles the Platonic concept of a poet as both are eliminated from the realm of knowledge. What the Lady sees are mirror-images without any precise idea of the city of Camelot and its people. The poem "*Lady of Shalott*" which is inspired by the stories associated with the Arthurian legends—so popular in Medieval literatures in England—is part of the continuum of the poet's Arthurian cycle poems which include, for example, *Morte D'Arthur*, "*Sir Galahad*" and "*Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*". The Arthurian Legends never exhausted writers from drawing inspiration from its various themes and characters. The shift of focus from the central figure Arthur to his knights and women associated with them, notes Putter and Archibald, is one of the main reasons of the legends' success through generations (2). Tennyson's reframing of the *Lady of Shalott*, the unrequited beloved of the knight Sir Lancelot, is an important Victorian addition to the tradition. The poet's immediate source of "*The Lady of Shalott*," according to Gossedge and Knight, is an anonymous Italian romance edited by Giulia Ferraro and published in the year 1804 in Milan as a novelette entitled *Qui conta come la Damigella di Scalot mori per amore di Lancialotto de Lac*, which provided "much of the exotic and passionate element in the poem" (112-13). The poem which has been interpreted in a number of ways carry unmistakably the moral undertone, an obvious signifier of—to use the clichéd term once again—"Victorian morality." Apart from the artistic poise of the usual Tennyson, the love depicted here has remarkable serenity, even at the inviting face of curiosity. By portraying the *Lady of Shalott* as a solitary embroiderer separated from the buzz and bustles of outside world, Tennyson construes the concept of an artist who maintains a certain "aesthetic distance" from the populace. But the character of the Lady, as represented by Tennyson, has more serious nuances of philosophical meaning.

The aristocratic Lady who dwells in *Shalott* (an isle below the Arthurian city of Camelot) is somewhat cursed—she was ordained not to look at Camelot. She keeps herself confined within the walls of her bower. Separated from outside contact the Lady looks at Camelot reflected in the mirror which is hanged in her room in proper angle to capture the panorama of Camelot:

And moving thro' a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.

There she sees the highway near
 Winding down to Camelot:
 There the river eddy whirls,
 And there the surly village-churls,
 And the red cloaks of market girls,
 Pass onward from Shalott.

The mirror of the Lady gives only a partial and incomplete view of the distant city. She is like the painter of Plato who does not have any concept of the Form or the objects in Camelot. She possesses only a second-hand experience of the things from their reflections in the mirror. Camelot here is the heaven, the abode of the Platonic "Form" which the lady is unable to comprehend. Her cognitive indifference, however, is not unsettled before her love dawns for Sir Lancelot. Prior to her seeing the image of the handsome Knight she remained quite satisfied with the image-bound edifices of the city, and never dared to know the truth. The curse that is bestowed on the Lady is the curse of *non-knowledge* devised by her profound ignorance of the curse itself. This inability of the Lady to conceptualize her curse is evocative of the ignorance of Plato's painter who is devoid of the realm of the true knowledge or *epistēmē*, and cannot discern what his art lacks.



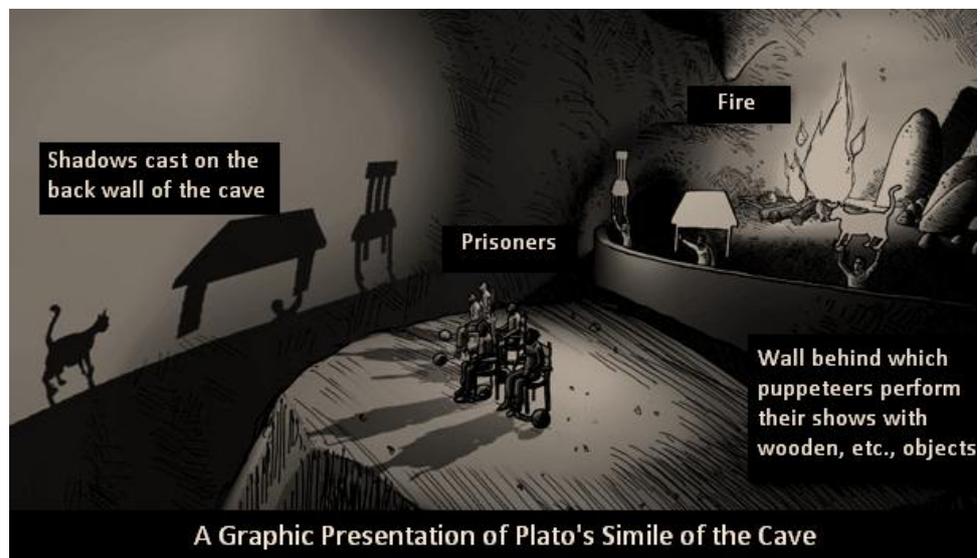
William Hallman Hunt's Painting of the Lady of Shalott : While doing embroidery works the Lady sees Sir Lancelot reflected in the mirror. Courtesy: The Victorian Web

Tennyson, a classicist by temperament, does not challenge the Platonic idea of a painter as ignorant fool. Rather, he reincarnates the Platonic conception of painter

in his *Lady of Shalott* who is an artist of embroidery works. His personifying the Lady as an embroiderer serves the dual purpose—first, the Lady is labeled as an artist or imitator to whom the Form is unknown, and secondly, he conforms his loyalty to the Victorian notion of womanhood, as he wrote in *The Princess*: “Man for the sword and for the needle she.” However, the first characteristic of the Lady is our prime concern here. Tennyson confines the Lady of Shalott in her bower who is abstained from any connection with the outer world. The reflection of Camelot in the mirror is her only source of imperfect knowledge.

The condition of the Lady of Shalott is here analogous to the cave prisoners of Plato’s simile in Book VI in *Republic*. In that simile the Greek master provides a picturesque view of the ascent of the mind from illusion to intelligent and the pain associated with the process. Tennyson’s *Lady of Shalott* is like the prisoner who is never allowed

to see light and real objects, but only shadows cast on the back wall of the cave. Naturally, the prisoner considers the images to be real things.



But once he is released from his captive imprisonment he looks at the fire which has been the cause of shadows, but finds it painful to tolerate direct light. He finds it more difficult to look at sunrays because he is not familiar with such glaring light. When his eyes get accustomed to sunrays he looks at the real things and realizes the nature of particular things as well as their poor shadows. Thus true intelligence comes to the ignorant cave-prisoner: “you won’t go wrong if you connect the ascent into the upper world and the sight of the objects there with the upward progress of the mind into the intelligible region” (*Republic* 244). The final thing, according to Plato, which should be perceived by him is the Form of good.

The Lady of Shalott is in an ignorant state but she is not absolutely unable to recognize her captivity. The unknown curse has intrigued her estrangement from the

world outside and she is condemned to live in solitary seclusion. Although she often sees common people and knights descending from Camelot in her mirror, and grieves that “She hath no loyal knight and true.” Her unsatisfied sexual passion torments her when she sees a young couple, newlywed; she sighs: “I am half sick of shadows.” She feels exhausted with the improper knowledge that the mirror-images provide her. The Lady, on seeing the image of the good Sir Lancelot who was moving nearby her palace, feels attracted to his image. Forgetting all her curse, she directly looks at the knight and “The mirror crack’d from side to side.” After the Knight returns to Camelot, the Lady rows a boat towards Camelot to which she is not supposed to pay a visit. She is motivated by her budding love for Sir Lancelot to defy the curse.

The concept of love that Plato develops in the *Symposium* passes from various stages with typical Platonic question-answers and eventually arrives at the love of wisdom which is held to be the “true” love, the ultimate purpose of the Philosopher. The Lady of Shalott’s journey bears the testimony of her transformed love from lust and infatuation to heightened passion for wisdom. Throughout her life she has glanced the events of Camelot through the mirror. But now she becomes defiant of the curse of ignorance and rows towards the “Form” or Camelot humming a song. It is not easy for her to look at the towered city without difficulties because, long held in the stupefying darkness of her palace, she feels the glare of wisdom too bright to tolerate. She could gaze at Camelot only at the cost of her life. Her condition substantiates Plato’s Simile of Cave—she resembles the fortunate prisoner who comes in contact of reality after he is released from his bondage in the dark cave. Again, her condition is like that of Plato’s ignorant painter who is awakened to knowledge only after death when he reaches heaven. The merciful God blesses him with the perception of the Form as he enters into the realm of *epistēmē*.

As Tennyson’s Lady enters into Camelot :

Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, “She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her grace,
The Lady of Shalott”.

The “grace” Sir Lancelot talks about is the grace of knowledge which was unattained by the Lady during her lifetime. She does no longer need the mirror to look at the heavenly city which is amply suggested by the cracking of her mirror. As the cursed

Lady enters rowing into Camelot to witness in the marvellous panorama, the sight blinds her:

They heard her singing her last song

[...]

Till her blood was frozen slowly,

And her eyes were darken'd wholly,

The Lady of Shalott dies but her curse of ignorance is dispelled. As now her knowledge is complete she must wing to the heaven. The fascinating city of Camelot surrenders to her in its reality, and the reality is too good to stand; so the lady must die because she has nothing more to know. Her knowledge is complete and so is her mundane life.

NOTE: The author has provided page numbers of the quoted lines from the Penguin Classics edition of *The Republic* in parenthetical citations, and not the section numbers which are usually used.

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