

Reading Platonic and Neoplatonic Notions of Mimesis with and against Martin Heidegger

Constantinos V. Proimos

In recent decades we have often heard the complaint that the innumerable aesthetic considerations of and investigations into art and the beautiful have achieved nothing, that they have not helped anyone to gain access to art, that they have contributed virtually nothing to artistic creativity and to a sound appreciation of art. That is certainly true, especially with regard to the kind of thing bandied about today under the name 'aesthetics'.¹

These provocative words by Martin Heidegger were pronounced between the years 1936-1940 during his university lectures on Nietzsche. Even today, more than fifty years later, they remind many of us of similar experiences of complaints against aesthetics, particularly on the part of artists.

The aim of this paper is to propose and analyze some of the reasons why Heidegger was prompted to such a fierce condemnation of aesthetics. Through his detailed, long and critical account of Nietzsche and under the shadows of Hegel and Kant, Heidegger attempts in his university lectures a definite settling of accounts with Plato and Platonism. This is certainly no small task, for he clearly sees Platonic philosophy as well as Platonism as endemic to the entire history of Western philosophy. Even if one disagrees with Heidegger's rejection of aesthetics, there can hardly be any disagreement with the fact that Plato by his thought and via his many successors set the standards for all discussion of art.

However, Heidegger's problem with aesthetics is not merely restricted to the fact that he wants to propose a different understanding of art, beyond those already offered over the whole history of aesthetics. Heidegger's problem is greater than this: it concerns Plato's basic assumptions about thinking and in particular about truth and its production. Therefore Heidegger's condemnation of aesthetics goes hand in hand with his criticism of truth as representation, whether this is understood as correspondence, ὁμοίωσις, imitation, μίμησις, or as adequation, *adaequatio*.² Understanding his problem with aesthetics provides the best access to one of the most fundamental tenets of Heidegger's thinking, namely his notion of truth.

According to Heidegger, truth is neither a representation of something that exists outside thinking, nor a correspondence between the concept and reality. Likewise, truth cannot be measured through adequation or ὁμοίωσις between the concept and the real. According to my interpretation of Heidegger, all these traditional models of truth, which he rejected and found not only incorrect but also gravely misleading and ill-fated, depend on μίμησις. Μίμησις, that major Platonic notion which we may translate as

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. I, transl. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco 1979), 79.

² Ibid. 149, and see also M. Heidegger 'On the Essence of Truth' trans. John Sallis, in William McNeill (ed.), *Pathmarks* (Cambridge 1998), 137-40.

imitation or representation, plays a key role in the Platonic theory of ideal forms. Schematically speaking, and according to most of the traditional interpretations of Platonism, all reality (in Plato and in Neoplatonism) strives to imitate or represent the reality of the ideal forms, always unsuccessfully and yet always necessarily. Schematically speaking again, according to Platonism, only the reality of the ideal forms is genuinely true, good and beautiful. Now, translated into our modern concepts this means that through logic, ethics and aesthetics, humans strive to reach this reality and to imitate it in the best way they can. Humans set the rules for this imitation via logic, ethics and aesthetics. According to Heidegger's interpretation of the history of metaphysics, logic is 'knowledge of *logos*, that is the doctrine of assertion or judgement as the basic form of thought. Logic is knowledge of thinking, of the forms and rules of thought'.³ Ethics is 'knowledge of *ethos*, of the inner character of man and of the way it determines his behavior'.⁴ Aesthetics is *episteme aisthetike*, 'knowledge of human behavior with regard to sense, sensation, and feeling, and knowledge of how these are determined'.⁵ Now one can better understand what metaphysicians mean when they teach us that humans strive to imitate the true, good and beautiful reality of ideal forms through logic, ethics and aesthetics. The knowledge which these domains of thinking produce, via their rules and standards, orients the action and behavior of humankind. According to Platonism however, this knowledge is ultimately and permanently determined by the ideal forms, and this has of course numerous consequences for thinking and philosophy, which Heidegger attempts to analyze and criticize.

It is easy to infer from our presentation so far that Heidegger's problem with aesthetics hides in fact a problem with Platonism in general. For Platonism tends to acknowledge the ultimate reality of the ideal forms as the one and only valid or legitimate order. Consequently most Platonists despise beings for what they are 'on the basis of what (they) should or ought to be'.⁶ For if truth, goodness and beauty are ultimately placed in the supersensuous realm, all that is grounded in the sensuous is, in the final analysis, opposed or excluded. If art is affirmation of the sensuous⁷ then it can be understood why art has traditionally been interpreted to play an inferior role in Plato's *Republic*, in his ideal state. It is also easy to understand why, according to Heidegger, Nietzsche became Plato's most notorious and fierce opponent. As he famously put it himself, Nietzsche struggled to overturn Platonism by maintaining in his *Will to Power* that art which espouses the sensuous is worth more than truth which espouses the supersensuous. Nevertheless, overturning the tyranny of Platonism is not as easy as it may appear. For by espousing the sensuous and declaring the reality in which we live to be the only possible one, by celebrating the senses and art, we may easily end up in positivism, something of which Nietzsche also was aware. Positivism, according to Heidegger, accepts as the only standard 'what lies before us from the outset, what is constantly placed before us, the *positum*. The latter is what is given in

³ Ibid. 77.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. 78.

⁶ Ibid. 160.

⁷ Ibid. 163.

sensation, the sensuous'.⁸ However, it would be at best naïve to limit the scope of reality to what is given to sensation, to what is constantly placed before us. For in such a case, Heidegger argues, we develop a dangerous blindness to all that is beyond sensation, therefore to all tradition, culture and history, whose courses Platonism has contributed so much to shaping.

Thus truth, according to Heidegger, is neither in Platonism, nor in positivism, at least in these crude versions of them so far presented.

What is needed is neither abolition of the sensuous nor abolition of the nonsensuous. On the contrary, what must be cast aside is the misinterpretation, the deprecation, of the sensuous, as well as the extravagant elevation of the supersensuous. A path must be cleared for a new interpretation of the sensuous on the basis of a new hierarchy of the sensuous and nonsensuous. The new hierarchy does not simply wish to reverse matters within the old structural order, now reverencing the sensuous and scorning the nonsensuous. It does not wish to put what was at the very bottom on the very top. A new hierarchy and new valuation mean that the ordering *structure* must be changed. To that extent, overturning Platonism must become a twisting free of it.⁹

Ironically, the path that Heidegger himself chooses in order to twist free of Platonism is a reinterpretation of μίμησις on the basis of Plato's book X of the *Republic*, but also with reference to *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. For to twist free of Platonism does not at all mean the impossible and ill-fated wish to dispense with Platonist thinking, writing or heritage. Quite the contrary; according to Heidegger, twisting free of Platonism means a strong reinterpretation of Platonism. The itinerary of Heidegger's journey to this reinterpretation is too long and detailed to be properly presented here. However, I shall attempt to sketch the main idea and present its results in the best way possible. Interpreting the Greek-Platonic concept of μίμησις, Heidegger argues thus:

What is decisive for the Greek-Platonic concept of *mimesis* or imitation is not reproduction or portraiture, not the fact that the painter provides us with the same thing once again; what is decisive is that this is precisely what he cannot do, that he is even less capable than the craftsman of duplicating the same thing. It is therefore wrongheaded to apply to *mimesis* notions of 'naturalistic' or 'primitivistic' copying and reproducing. Imitation is subordinate production.¹⁰

Heidegger's words do give some interesting indications for a critical reappraisal of Platonic μίμησις which are however only dealt with in passing. Yet the significance and full import of his words may be better understood in the context of the famous Platonic example of the bed. As is well known from Plato's *Republic*, the craftsman of a bed creates it with a view to the ideal form of the bed as well as with due consideration of the bed's use.¹¹ However, ultimately, the ideal form of bed remains unknown to him, and this is the reason why we have many different constructions of beds, feather beds, water beds, etc. Likewise, the painter who paints a bed and the poet who describes one base themselves on crafted beds. The form of the ideal bed is far from them. And we,

⁸ Ibid. 152.

⁹ Ibid. 209-10.

¹⁰ Ibid. 185.

¹¹ Plato, *The Republic*, transl. Desmond Lee, second ed. rev. (London 1987), 361.

users of beds, acquire our criteria of judgement when it comes to beds from craftsmen and artists. If we are well informed and carry out research we can imagine the form of the ideal bed. However, all through our lives we may keep trying and discovering beds that are far superior to anything we have previously tried or known. Thus for us too, the ideal form of bed is ultimately unknown, for no matter how much we go out of our usual way to purchase the most ideal bed, it is sure that there is always going to be a better one.

The point here is that whatever access we have to the ideal form of things, this access is necessarily mediated by craftsmen as well as by artists, by their subordinate and yet necessary production of things. And if we come across the most ideal form of bed we have ever imagined or tried, then we can infer that all previous beds have been inferior to it and that this bed is indeed close to what the ideal bed must be. Then, the fact that we often proclaim 'This is a real bed!', 'This is truly a bed!', 'This is a true bed!' means, first, that there is truth assigned to the thing, second, that truth pertains to actual things, in general, and third, that some actual things, even of the same kind, can be truer than others. When we come across a good bed, at least a better one than the one we already have, then something of the ideal form of bed is revealed to us. The better bed is revealed as closer to the ideal bed, and yet prudence and modesty about our possessions, and perhaps a little bit of consumerist addiction, dictate that there must always be a better bed, closer to the ideal.

Thus when Heidegger claims that truth, whether in part or in totality, belongs to things themselves, he is interpreting Plato. For some things, even of the same kind, are truer than others, exactly like beds, some of which are truer than others. Heidegger defines his notion of truth in an essay earlier than the Nietzsche lectures, with the title 'Plato's Doctrine of Truth', 1931/1932. There, Heidegger reads Plato's fable of the cave and on the basis of this defines truth as unhiddenness. 'As unhiddenness truth is a fundamental trait of beings themselves'.¹² To the extent that all beings show themselves to us, they emerge from hiddenness, and to this extent such beings are true.

In Greek, unhiddenness is called ἀλήθεια, a word that we translate as 'truth...'. Originally for the Greeks hiddenness, as an act of self-hiding, permeated the essence of being and thus also determined beings in their presentness and accessibility ('truth'); and that is why the Greek word for what the Romans call '*veritas*' and for what we call 'truth' was distinguished by the alpha-privative (ἀ-λήθεια). Truth originally means what has been wrested from hiddenness. Truth is thus a wresting away in each case, in the form of revealing. The hiddenness can be of various kinds: closing off, hiding away, disguising, covering over, masking, dissembling.¹³

To be sure, according to Heidegger, truth does not only belong to things themselves. At the same time that Heidegger discovers truth as ἀλήθεια, he also acknowledges truth as ὀρθότης, the correctness of the gaze, which is equally developed on the basis of his reading of the Platonic fable of the cave.

Already within the cave, when those who have been liberated turn away from the shadows and turn toward the things, they direct their gaze to that which, in comparison with the

¹² M. Heidegger, 'Plato's Doctrine of Truth', trans. Thomas Sheehan, op. cit. (n. 2), 177.

¹³ Ibid. 168, 171.

mere shadows, 'is more in being': πρὸς μᾶλλον ὄντα τετραμμένος ὀρθότερον βλέπει (515d3/4), 'and thus turned to what is more in being, they should certainly see more correctly'.¹⁴

Truth as ὀρθότης, is 'the correctness in apprehending and asserting'.¹⁵ Truth as correctness of the gaze 'becomes a characteristic of human comportment toward beings',¹⁶ rather than a characteristic of beings themselves. Finally, truth as correctness of the gaze is the representational form of truth, as it concerns the correctness of representation and assertion. This truth which concerns human intellect finally prevails in the history of metaphysics. Truth as correctness of representation recurs periodically as *adaequatio* in medieval Scholasticism, notably in the work of Thomas Aquinas, as *veritas* in Descartes' rules, as 'the necessary error' in Nietzsche's *Will to Power*. Concomitantly, the essential ambiguity in the works of both Plato and Aristotle between

¹⁴ Ibid. 176-7. The Platonic text in which Heidegger reads Plato's notion of truth as oscillating between ἀλήθεια and ὀρθότης and which he cites in Greek and translates is the famous Platonic fable of the cave. I cite here the most important passage for Heidegger:

σκόπει δὴ, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, αὐτῶν λύσιν τε καὶ ἴσιν τῶν τε δεσμῶν καὶ τῆς ἀφροσύνης, οἷα τις ἂν εἶη φύσει, εἰ τοιάδε συμβαίνοι αὐτοῖς. Ὅποτε τις λυθείη καὶ ἀναγκάζοιτο ἐξαίφνης ἀνίστασθαι τε καὶ περιάγειν τὸν αὐχένα καὶ βαδίζειν καὶ πρὸς τὸ φῶς ἀναβλέπειν, πάντα δὲ ταῦτα ποιῶν ἀλογοῖ τε καὶ διὰ τὰς μαρμαρυγὰς ἀδυνατοῖ καθορᾶν ἐκεῖνα ὧν τότε τὰς σκιὰς ἑώρα, τί ἂν οἶει αὐτὸν εἶπεῖν, εἴ τις αὐτῷ λέγοι ὅτι τότε μὲν ἑώρα φλυαρίας, νῦν δὲ μᾶλλον τι ἐγγυτέρω τοῦ ὄντος καὶ πρὸς μᾶλλον ὄντα τετραμμένος ὀρθότερον βλέπει, καὶ δὴ καὶ ἕκαστον τῶν παριόντων διεκνύς αὐτῷ ἀναγκάζοι ἐρωτῶν ἀποκρίνεσθαι ὅτι ἔστιν; Οὐχ οἶει αὐτὸν ἀπορεῖν τε ἂν καὶ ἡγεῖσθαι τὰ τότε ὀρώμενα ἀληθέστερα ἢ νῦν δεικνύμενα; — πολὺ γ', ἔφη.

Οὐκοῦν κἄν εἰ πρὸς αὐτὸ τὸ φῶς ἀναγκάζοι αὐτὸν βλέπειν, ἀλογεῖν τε ἂν τὰ ὄμματα καὶ φεύγειν ἀποστρεφόμενον πρὸς ἐκεῖνα ἃ δύναται καθορᾶν, καὶ νομίζειν ταῦτα τῷ ὄντι σαφέστερα τῶν δεικνυμένων; — οὕτως, ἔφη.

Thomas Sheehan's English translation is (ibid. 158-9):

'So now', I replied, 'watch the process whereby the prisoners are set free from their chains and, along with that, cured of their lack of insight, and likewise consider what kind of lack of insight this must be if the following were to happen to those who are chained. Whenever any of them was unchained and was forced to stand up suddenly, to turn around, to walk, and to look up toward the light, in each case the person would be able to do this only with pain, and because of the flickering brightness he would be unable to look at those things whose shadows he saw before. (If all this were to happen to the prisoner), what do you think he would say if someone were to inform him that what he saw before were (mere) trifles but that now he is much nearer to beings; and that, as a consequence of now being turned toward what is more in being, he also sees more correctly? And if someone were (then) to show him any of the things that are passing by and were to force him to answer the question about what it is, do you not think that he would be at wits' end and also would consider that what he saw before (with his own eyes) is more unhidden than what is now being shown (to him by someone else)?' 'Yes, absolutely', he said. 'And if someone even forced him to look into the glare of the fire, would his eyes not hurt him, and would he not then turn away and flee (back) to that which he is capable of looking at? And would he not decide that (what he could see before without any help) is in fact clearer than what is now being shown to him?' 'Precisely', he said.

¹⁵ Ibid. 177.

¹⁶ Ibid.

truth as ἀλήθεια and as ὀρθότης is, subsequently to their works, lost.¹⁷ Heidegger is apparently interested in contradicting truth as ὀρθότης, as correctness of representation, but more importantly wishes to provide an interpretation of its prominence in the history of metaphysics.

Heidegger thus aims to retrieve and use this Platonic ambiguity in the determination of the essence of truth in order to criticize and limit the scope of the mimetic model of truth, truth as correctness of representation. The main notion of truth through which he operates is that of ἀλήθεια, that truth which as unhiddenness pertains to things themselves and which is non-representational. To the extent that unhiddenness becomes an operating principle of his thinking, Heidegger arrives at some peculiar sort of earth-bound Platonism which is, however, stripped of the constitutional and traditional roles ascribed to μίμησις and to the supersensuous realm. Truth as unhiddenness has its opposite in hiddenness. Of course, Heidegger claims, things do not err. They only conceal themselves. Erring in this case belongs to the very constitution of humans and consists of humans turning away from the mystery of things 'toward what is readily available, onward from one current thing to the next, passing the mystery by...'.¹⁸ Erring is therefore to accept things as they are, hidden, passing by their mystery, never questioning them and therefore never exposing oneself to their unhiddenness. The essence of truth according to Heidegger is freedom and freedom is letting things be (*Gelassenheit*). However, for Heidegger letting things be also means engaging with things and caring for them (*Entschlossenheit*).¹⁹ To what extent this is some sort of Platonism, or is a definitive twisting free of Platonism, remains an open question. It is most probably both, in my opinion, and this is an essential aspect of classical scholarship, to determine the extent and the way in which we are still bound to the classical tradition.

In any case, in Plato himself Heidegger finds the seeds of twisting free of Platonism. Twisting free of Platonism for him means to abandon the all-dominant mimetic notion of truth, truth as correctness of representation and assertion, in favor of truth as ἀλήθεια, unhiddenness. Furthermore, what this means is that Heidegger does not limit the scope of truth to matters which have to do with intellect and representation. Truth is not pertinent solely to logic but also applies to the individual, social or historical comportment of humans and, finally, equally concerns their productive activities, the manner in which they create or fabricate things.

Heidegger's notion of truth in which logic is related to history resonates in his Hegelianism. For the neat traditional separation of metaphysics into logic, ethics and aesthetics holds neither in Hegel's nor in Heidegger's views. Rather, the latter's notion of truth as unhiddenness allows him to consider in an all-encompassing manner all the activities of humankind which were hitherto separated and distinguished. This is certainly reminiscent of Hegel's project in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and justifies all those who claim that Heidegger maintained an ambivalent relationship to Hegel in both his early and his late writings.

¹⁷ Ibid. 178-9.

¹⁸ Heidegger, 'On the Essence of Truth', op. cit. (n. 2), 150.

¹⁹ Ibid. 147, 144.

Heidegger's non-mimetic notion of truth has, however, a particular significance for all reflection on art nowadays, for the mimetic notion of truth which has been predominant in aesthetics blinds us to essential aspects of the significance of many artworks and artifacts, old and new. The temple of classical Greek antiquity, an example that Heidegger employs in 'The Origin of the Work of Art', stands there without being a copy of anything. The historical, political and religious ideas and views it exemplifies do not have a direct formal resemblance to its forms and contours. Certainly the forms and contours of the temple have a historical, political and religious significance. These forms clearly crystallize the views and the values of classical Greek antiquity. In fact, the construction of the temple is associated in our memory with everything that the ancient world of classical antiquity is for us today. It points paradigmatically to this world and to the rest of the remnants of it that we possess. The temple's truth is one of our few remaining ways of access to this world. But its truth also and more importantly depends on how, in each historical era, this same temple emerges from hiddenness, how it is discovered and rediscovered and what special significance each historical people attaches to this discovery. The fact that the temple's truth survives time and is in fact recreated in each historical era according to the ideals that each historical people read in it, points precisely to the mimetic independence it has from the ancient world of which it was a vital part. Thus is it also with all artworks which from this same point of view are all originals, not copies of real things. All artworks are therefore resistant to changing historical times precisely because they are the models for history and not copies of it.

A crafted thing like a bed has a significance for us today which depends on the rich variety of beds which exist and are available in the market. However, contrary to Plato's assumption, a bed's significance and value are not inferred solely from the rich variety of actual beds. For example, a non-existent bed, the bed described by Homer during Ulysses' meeting with Penelope and the event of his recognition by her, directly or indirectly influences the way we see all beds and the special significance we attach to them as symbols of marital love and faith. Even as a subordinate literary production, according to the Platonic doctrine, this bed leaves an ineffable mark on our memory and may indeed, more than any water or feather bed, stand in our imagination as that bed which is closest to the ideal. Homer's bed is then the ideal form of bed and the model for all subsequent beds to the extent that their construction is determined by promoting marital love and faith. Therefore and from this point of view only literature or art in general provides access to the ideal forms. For God never speaks to us directly but only via his messengers, writers, poets, artists. Plato was certainly one of these messengers, otherwise we would not have been able to know anything about the ideal bed or about any ideal forms whatsoever.

Furthermore, if we ever hope to get a clue about modern and contemporary art of the 19th and 20th centuries, it is imperative to extend our notion of truth beyond *μίμησις* to more productive notions of truth, like the literary truth exemplified in Homer's ideal bed. For, as is well known, a great deal of modern and contemporary art signifies without representing anything real. Modern and contemporary artworks are rather examples of things in the Heideggerian sense of the term: they have their own truth which partly relates to aspects of the world in which we live and they reveal this truth and emerge from hiddenness once we let ourselves be exposed to these aspects, once we

question their mystery and engage with them. Therefore, it is narrow-minded to restrict artworks to the domains of representation, aesthetics, feeling. Often their significance in terms of these domains is secondary if not non-existent. Hence Heidegger's condemnation of aesthetics aims to direct our attention to an alternative non-representational, non-aesthetic and more self-productive understanding of art which of course stems from his alternative understanding of truth and of how it pertains to all things.

Heidegger's non-mimetic notion of truth is therefore of great value for arriving at an insight into various historical developments in the different arts. Moreover, the insights that Heidegger's notion of truth provides into the state of the arts are theoretical and political too, exactly like Plato's inquiry into art in the *Republic*. This is why Heidegger, like the Greeks, locates art between τέχνη and ποίησις. On the one hand, art as τέχνη signifies 'an ability in the sense of being well versed in something, of a thoroughgoing and therefore masterful *know-how*'.²⁰ On the other hand, art as ποίησις means '*what is brought forward in a process of bringing-forth*, what is produced in production, and the producing itself'.²¹ Finally art is not irrelevant, according to Heidegger, to the Greek μελέτη and ἐπιμέλεια, carefulness of concern.²² In all cases, art for Heidegger is by no means restricted to μίμησις but is well beyond and above it.

Of course, if we consider the fact that Heidegger developed his thinking on art, truth, and politics in the thirties, that is during his Nazi period, this can be quite troublesome for anyone engaging with his understanding of art. This troublesome consideration of dates is what prompts Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, one of the most important contemporary critics of Heidegger, to assert that despite Heidegger's rejection of aesthetics and criticism of μίμησις, he in fact falls prey to both of them. First, he falls prey to aesthetics to the extent that he equates art with thought and politics under the rubric of τέχνη, and thus, consciously or unconsciously, participates in the general reactionary tendency of the thirties towards the aesthetization of politics. Second, Heidegger falls prey to μίμησις to the extent that his thought offers no resistance to the German obsession during the thirties with restoring in Germany the glory of ancient Greece.²³ Whether one agrees or disagrees with Lacoue-Labarthe, his criticism must indeed be taken seriously, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine it in further detail. It is true that a certain degree of caution should always be applied towards the Heideggerian texts of the period which connect art, truth and politics so closely. However, it is also true that the Heideggerian notion of truth provides an important platform, on the basis of which we can think constructively and pertinently about art, its ontological status and its theoretical and political significance. As with all great and controversial philosophers, one is free to employ this platform at one's own risk.

Now when it comes to Plato's epigones, Platonists and Neoplatonists, Heidegger seems to believe that Platonists after Plato lack the literary complexity, subtlety and

²⁰ Heidegger, op. cit. (n. 1), 164.

²¹ Ibid. 165.

²² Ibid. 164.

²³ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L'imitation des modernes. Typographies II* (Paris 1986), 190-4. See also the English translation of some of the essays of this volume, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, transl. Christopher Fynsk (Stanford 1998), 297, 299, 300.

ambivalence of the master. Pressing to the extreme such systematic aspects of Platonic thought as the distinction between sensuous and supersensuous, Heidegger's verdict against Platonism is that it often rendered Platonic philosophy rigid and repressive, much to the cost of its essential ambivalence. Heidegger seems to embrace Nietzsche's views on the matter, according to which the whole of Christianity is characterized as 'Platonism for the people'.²⁴

This demeaning belief about Platonism and Neoplatonism should, however, in each case be carefully scrutinized. For Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism and perhaps the most celebrated Neoplatonist, it is certainly not the case. On the contrary, the reader of Plotinus' views on beauty discovers aspects which resolve many of the Platonic difficulties in the account of the arts. Plotinus, for example, extends the scope of beauty in the very same way that Heidegger extends the scope of art. For, as is well known, beauty, according to Plotinus, need not be restricted to the physical world but equally concerns matters of conduct and intellect.²⁵ Furthermore, beauty is neither exclusively founded upon the senses, nor does it uniquely depend on symmetry and proportion.²⁶ Again like Heidegger, Plotinus closely relates beauty and truth. For Plotinus claims that: 'We ourselves possess beauty when we are true to our own being; our ugliness is in going over to another order; our self-knowledge, that is to say, is our beauty; in self-ignorance we are ugly'.²⁷ Even Heidegger's criticism of μίμησις is first articulated in Plotinus' work:

Still the arts are not to be slighted on the ground that they create by imitation of natural objects; for to begin with, these natural objects are themselves imitations; then, we must recognize that they give no bare reproduction of the thing seen but go back to the Reason-Principles from which Nature itself derives, and, furthermore, that much of their work is all their own; they are holders of beauty and add where nature is lacking. Thus Pheidias wrought the Zeus with no model among things of sense but by apprehending what form Zeus must take if he chose to become manifest to sight.²⁸

Art therefore, according to Plotinus, is also appraised as a theoretical and political activity of a historical character and is endowed with bringing forth truth in the form of Reason-Principles. It is praised and esteemed more than nature, for, through art, the

²⁴ Heidegger, op. cit. (n. 1), 159. See also Heidegger's discussion of Nietzsche's overturning of Platonism, 200-10.

²⁵ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London, 1991), 1.6, 45, 54.

²⁶ Ibid. 49, 46, 47.

²⁷ Ibid. 424; Plot. *Enn.* V 8.13. 19-23:

'Ἐπεὶ καί, ὅταν καὶ αὐτοὶ καλοὶ, τῷ αὐτῶν εἶναι, αἰσχροὶ δὲ ἐπ' ἄλλην μεταβαίνοντες φύσιν· καὶ γινώσκοντες μὲν ἑαυτοὺς καλοὶ, αἰσχροὶ δὲ ἀγνοοῦντες.

²⁸ Ibid. 411; Plot. *Enn.* V 8.1. 32-40:

Εἰ δέ τις τὰς τέχνας ἀτιμάζει, ὅτι μιμούμεναι τὴν φύσιν ποιοῦσι, πρῶτον μὲν φατέον καὶ τὰς φύσεις μιμεῖσθαι ἄλλα. Ἐπειτα δεῖ εἰδέναι, ὡς οὐχ ἀπλῶς τὸ ὀρώμενον μιμοῦνται, ἀλλ' ἀνατρέχουσιν ἐπὶ τοὺς λόγους, ἐξ ὧν ἡ φύσις. Εἶτα καὶ ὅτι πολλὰ παρ' αὐτῶν ποιοῦσι καὶ προστιθέασι δέ, ὅψω τι ἐλλείπει, ὡς ἔχουσαι τὸ κάλλος· ἐπεὶ καὶ ὁ Φειδίας τὸν Δία πρὸς οὐδὲν αἰσθητὸν ποιήσας, ἀλλὰ λαβὼν ὅσος ἂν γένοιτο, εἰ ἡμῖν ὁ Ζεὺς δι' ὀμμάτων ἐθέλοι φανῆναι.

opportunity is given to behold and admire the idea, infer the intellectual principle from what is less to it and love and desire Being.²⁹ Contrary to Plato, art, according to Plotinus, is esteemed more than mere craftsmanship. But in this act of irreverence towards his master, Plotinus is in the good company of Heidegger. The latter indicates his disagreement with Plato through an anecdote:

A statement by Erasmus which has been handed down to us is supposed to characterize the art of the painter Albrecht Dürer. The statement expresses a thought that obviously grew out of a personal conversation which that learned man had with the artist. The statement runs: *ex situ rei unius, non unam speciem sese oculis offerentem exprimit*: by showing a particular thing from any given angle, he, Dürer the painter, brings to the fore not only the single isolated view which offers itself to the eye. Rather — we may complete the thought in the following way — by showing any given individual thing as this particular thing, in its singularity, he makes Being itself visible: in a particular hare, the Being of the hare; in a particular animal, the animality. It is clear that Erasmus here is speaking against Plato.³⁰

So is Heidegger of course. Therefore both Plotinus and Heidegger conceive of art in a broad, productive manner for they both regard it as the vehicle of truth or the vessel of whatever is highly esteemed in their thinking. Both Plotinus and Heidegger criticize μίμησις and thus limit its scope. Finally, without straightforwardly rejecting μίμησις, both Plotinus and Heidegger repeat Plato's essential ambivalence on it. Therefore Heidegger was wrong to apply the demeaning charge of being too simplistic to Neoplatonism. Through Plotinus' example, Neoplatonism is shown to be far more complex than Heidegger had assumed.

The connections among Heidegger, Plato and Plotinus that I have attempted to establish, a little quickly and schematically, in relation to the great chronological distance separating the three thinkers, testify to the fact that Platonism has travelled a long way and will certainly continue to do so in years to come. However, Platonism's itinerary is extremely liable to change and in modern times has become less and less dependent on μίμησις. Hence the startling differences of approach and interpretation among historians of philosophy when dealing with one and the same body of texts, those of Plato and his successors. One differing in itself, as Lacoue-Labarthe puts it in Heraclitean terms,³¹ perhaps offers the best description of Platonism. This Heraclitean description also indicates something else, perhaps more important for the present paper: that in the times in which we live, passionate for the right to difference, pluralism and a better world,

²⁹ Ibid. 412, 413, 419, 420.

³⁰ Heidegger, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 186-7.

³¹ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *L'imitation des modernes. Typographies II*, 194. Lacoue-Labarthe's reference is to Heracl. fr. 51 Diels-Kranz⁶ (1951):

οὐ ξυνιᾶσιν ὅκως διαφερόμενον ἑωυτῷ ὁμολογέει· παλίντροπος ἀρμονίη ὅκωσπερ τόξου καὶ λύρης.

Its translation is:

They do not understand how, while differing from (or: being at variance), [it] is in agreement with itself. [There is] a back turning connection, like [that] of a bow or lyre.

Heraclitus, *Fragments*, trans. T.M. Robinson (Toronto 1987), 36.

Platonic μίμησις has often been the target of our rage because it so often gives rise to the politically conservative, metaphysical impetus to submit everything to one and the same model. I hope to have indicated a way in which a productive model of Platonic μίμησις which fosters difference and pluralism may again turn Platonism into an ally of our passion.

University of Crete