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The Architecture of Mimesis in Plato and in the Quran

Platon ve Kur'an'da Mimesisin Mimarisi

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Abstract

The way we understand mimesis is fundamental to epistemology, physics, and representation in political life as well as in the arts. Can truth/reality be copied? The most enduring understanding of what truth and reality are has come to us from Plato, who launched an attack on poetry as false representation of the divine. Although a rarely defined Neoplatonism is routinely attributed to the ninth and tenth-century philosophers who wrote in Arabic, I and others have overlooked how much of Plato there is in the whole of Islamicate literature and culture, beginning with the linguistic environment of the Quran. But it is well known that Plato was revered in historical Islamicate societies; Ibn Sina (Avicenna, d. 1037) and many others referred to him as "the divine Plato," and considered him a prophet in the monotheistic tradition. There is now a small body of work on mimesis and Islam, but here I will look specifically at Platonic topics found in the Quran with regard to mimesis and poetry, and the kind of methodology needed to appreciate them.

Keywords

Plato,
Quran,
mimesis,
Late Antique,
poetry,
post-truth

Öz

Mimesisi anlama biçimimiz, epistemoloji, fizik ve siyasi yaşamda olduğu kadar sanatta da temsil için temel öneme sahiptir. Hakikat/gerçek kopyalanabilir mi? Hakikatin ve gerçekliğin ne olduğu konusundaki en etkili anlayış, ilahi olanın yanlış temsili olarak şiiri eleştiren Platon'dan gelmiştir. Nadiren tanımlanan Yeni Platonculuk, Arapça yazan dokuz ve onuncu yüzyıl filozoflarına rutin olarak atfedilse de ben ve diğerleri, Kur'an-ı Kerim'in dilsel ortamından başlayarak, İslam edebiyatı ve kültürünün tamamında Platon'un ne kadar çok yer aldığını gözden kaçırmışızdır. Ancak Platon'un tarihî İslam toplumlarında saygı gördüğü iyi bilinmektedir. İbn Sina (ö. 1037) ve diğerleri onu "ilahi Platon" olarak adlandırmış ve tek tanrılı gelenekte bir peygamber olarak görmüşlerdir. Mimesis ve İslam üzerine şu anda az sayıda çalışma bulunmaktadır ve ben bu çalışmada özellikle Kur'an-ı Kerim'de mimesis ve şiirle ilgili Platonik konulara ve bunları anlamak için gerekli olan yönteme odaklanacağım.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Platon,
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Introduction

The way we understand mimesis is fundamental for epistemology, physics, and representation in political life as well as in the arts. Here I will examine Platonic topics found in the Quran with regard to mimesis and poetry. This effort began as a talk in the "Mekân" (Space) lecture series at Istanbul Bilgi University's Faculty of Architecture in early 2020, just before the pandemic spread. There is now a small body of work on mimesis and Islam,[1] but I will look specifically at material shared by Plato and the Quran and the kind of methodology needed to appreciate it.

For some time before the pandemic began in 2020, we were being told that we were living in a post-truth era. Conspiracy theories continued to abound, but post-truth chatter died down during the pandemic, perhaps because corpses are visible. If truth is the opposite of falsehood, how can one go beyond it? Eventually it becomes clear. A building stands because its measurements are in accord with geometry; if an engineer falsifies a building's geometry, the building falls. But truth is more than the opposite of falsehood. Truth and reality overlap, yet the opposite of reality is illusion, not falsehood. Much has rightly been made of Plato's respect for geometry, but he is perhaps better known for his attack on poetry as mimesis. The Greek word *poeisis* means "making," and *mimesis* means making an imitation of something. Can truth/reality be copied? It seems easy with digital technology, and of course with the term "post-truth," people were trying to get at an emerging political reality.

Islamic(ate)[2] Plato

The most enduring understanding of what truth and reality are has come to us from Plato through the great monotheisms. I and others have overlooked how much of Plato there is in the whole of Islamicate literature, although a rarely defined Neoplatonism is routinely attributed to the ninth

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1 For example, Michael Kirwan and Ahmed Achtar, eds., *Mimetic Theory and Islam: "The Wound Where Light Enters"* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 3-27; Youshaa Patel, *The Muslim Difference: Defining the Line Between Believers from Early Islam to the Present* (Yale University Press, 2022); Nazım Taşan, "Klasik Şiirin Kaynağı: Mimesis Karşısında İlhamın İmkânı," *Pamukkale Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 10, no. 2 (2023): 551-568; William Sherman, "Finding the Quran in Imitation, Critical Mimesis from Musaylima to Finnegan's Wake," *Reorient* 9, no. 1 (2024): 50-69.

2 "Islamicate" is a term coined by Marshall G.S. Hodgson on the model of "Italianate" to refer to the broad range of activities and artefacts in the poly-ethnic, poly-lingual, poly-confessional Muslim-majority polities that flourished subsequent to the early community of Arabia. It can seem thick-headed to refer to all such artefacts as "Islamic." If pornography is written in Arabic, are we to call it Islamic? Why use a religious adjective? The major contributions of Jewish and Christian philosophers are obscured. The term "Arabic" in "Arabic philosophy," is also confusing. The newly literate Arabic of the 800s was forged with the flood of words and concepts quickly absorbed from Persian, Turkish, Syriac, Armenian, Sanskrit, Greek and other languages in massive conquests of territory. Many who wrote in Arabic did not think of themselves as Arabs, just as many today whose first language is Arabic do not. The tie between language and national identity is modern.

and tenth-century philosophers usually called Peripatetics, i.e. Aristotelians. But it is well known that Plato and his teacher Socrates were revered in the historical Islamicate societies, though perhaps not in their modern heir states; Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and many others referred to "the divine Plato," and considered him a prophet in the monotheistic tradition. Stories in which he defeats Aristotle, in Nizami Ganjavi's (d. 1209) *Iskandarnameh* for example, made Plato a trope for wisdom beyond "mere" reason up until the twentieth century. His ubiquitous presence in Islamicate literature in general is less often noticed, and Wendy Meral Kural Shaw reminds us that he had many afterlives in visual art as well.[3]

The Islamicate reception of Plato is assumed to date from the translation activity of the eighth and ninth-centuries, when almost all Greek books available in Byzantium and the Near East were translated into Arabic[4]—although no complete Arabic translation of a dialogue by Plato is extant. [5] To say that Platonica—topics, themes, idioms, tropes, images from Plato's works—appeared in Arabic much earlier, two centuries earlier, in the Quran revealed to God's messenger Muhammed from 610 to 632, is a proposal new to scholarship.

Let me be clear: I am not saying the Quran was "influenced" by Plato. It is more like a filial relationship in the nature of branches on a family tree whose roots grow across culture and whose boughs bear legacies of translation. I do not seek to reduce any book or society to "sources," but rather to view the continuity of ideas over time and place. What I do say is that ancient Platonic themes, topics and idioms, along with their images and tropes, must have been absorbed into Arabic before the revelation of the Quran[6] because the Arabic of the Quran includes them. We can

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3 Wendy Meral Kural Shaw, *What is Islamic Art?: Between Religion and Perception* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

4 Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbasid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th centuries)* (Routledge, 1998).

5 "None of Plato's works has been preserved in a complete Arabic translation, and it is a matter of doubt whether there were ever such translations." Rudiger Arnzen, "Plato, Arabic," in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund (Springer, 2020), 1520. Commentary and summary, rather than translation, were the norm for philosophical writing in Late Antiquity, and have been the norm for much of its history, but the transmission of Plato to Arabic was particularly sporadic, likely due in large part to the centuries of emphasis on reconciling Aristotle with Plato. Moseley 2017 collects almost all extant passages from Plato in Arabic, and provides a comprehensive review of scholarship in the field, postulating that "(a) late antique Christian antipathy to Plato, (b) an Alexandrian conception of the history of philosophy," and "(c) a related reinterpretation of the agreement or compatibility (συμφωνία) between Plato and Aristotle, jointly account for the sparse transmission of authentic *Platonica* in Arabic" (1). While all of this is no doubt true, Plato's signature themes came to be ubiquitous in Islamicate thought and arts nonetheless.

6 George Tamer has investigated Greek concepts in pre-Islamic Arabic as well as in the Quran. For his study of the relationship between Greek *aion* and Arabic *dahr* and *zamān*, see Georges Tamer, "Hellenistic Ideas of Time in the Koran, " in *Judaism, Christianity and Islam in the Course of History: Exchange and Conflicts*, eds., Lothar Gall and Dietmar Willoweit (Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2011), a brief summary of Georges Tamer, *Zeit und Gott. Hellenistische Zeitvorstellungen in der*

see this by looking at the texts and making use of literary-critical methodologies to trace these elements. There is a millennium and half a dozen languages between Plato's dialogues and the Quran. It is not possible for one scholar to cover all aspects involved, but I hope to convince you that this inquiry is worth pursuing.

All else aside, the Prophet Muhammed could not have read Plato's works. Pre-Islamic Arabic literary culture was oral; the Quran is the first Arabic book.[7] The Prophet was famously "illiterate," beyond what was necessary for his business as caravan leader. In his time, no works by Plato had ever been translated into any language except Latin.[8] Latin translation was exceedingly rare and almost certainly inaccessible in his Arabia. How and to what extent some Platonica—topics, themes, idioms, images, figures of speech—reached speakers of Arabic prior to the Quran has not been investigated. This is likely not a trail that can be traced by philological means to produce philological fact. But reading a book is not the only way to absorb its contents. We do know that there were oral Arabic legends about Socrates of undatable antiquity,[9] and that sixth-century Syriac literature contained paraphrase of Middle Platonic interpreters and Plato himself[10] (based on earlier paraphrase rather than Plato's texts).

One can argue for spontaneous reinvention; similar things "arise" in disparate locales.[11] As a believer in cause and effect, I am not convinced. The immediate conduit may well in some cases

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altarabischen Dichtung und im Koran (Studien Zur Geschichteund Kültür des islamischen Orients N.F. 20) (De Gruyter, 2008). Tamer pointed out in his review of scholarship that Peter Brown considered Late Antiquity to include the first two centuries of Islam; that Glen Bowerstock went on to assume that at least some of the roots of Islam were embedded in the local Hellenism of Arabia; and that Barbara Finster and Garth Fowden concurred in viewing Islam as rooted in and even consummating antiquity; among Islamic Studies scholars, Tamer mentioned Aziz al-Azmeh in particular for his confirmation of Carl Heinrich Becker's famous statement, "Without Alexander the Great, no Islamic civilization," locating the link in a Hellenistic and Late Antique dynamic (Tamer 2011: 21-23). Aziz al-Azmeh took his own work further with Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allah and his People* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

7 The few earliest, scarce, written documents in Arabic, save for inscriptions, date from the 500s CE. See Muhammed al-Sharkawi, *History and Development of the Arabic Language* (Routledge, 2016), xiii.

8 Syriac became an intermediary language for Greek-to-Arabic transmission, and translation of Greek to Syriac to Arabic was a familiar pattern in the 800s. But "no literary or non-literary data permit the assumption that full translations of the genuine works of Plato ever existed in Syriac. [...] The 'Christianization' of Plato in the first centuries of Church history created a new image of the philosopher that did not necessarily presuppose any acquaintance with his works. [...] Passages introduced by the gnomic formula 'Plato said...' do not necessarily pre-suppose any direct knowledge of the philosopher's texts." Yuri Arzhanov, "Plato in Syriac Literature," *Le Muséon* 132, no. 1–2 (2019): 6.

9 Ilai Alon, *Socrates in Mediaeval Arabic Literature* (E. J. Brill, The Magnes Press, 1991).

10 Arzhanov, "Plato in Syriac Literature."

11 Massih Zekavat, "A Comparative Study of the Poetics of Plato and *Qur'an*," *Primerjalna književnost* 38, no. 3 (2015).

have been through notions of the Neoplatonists, Plotinus and those who came after him, and there is the possibility of sources more ancient that Plato shared in common. But when material in the Quran bears characteristically Platonic phrasing not found in Neoplatonists, the possibility that the trail is from Plato through usages of language—Plato's ways of saying things in Greek that were orally translated into Arabic or a bridge language and became part of everyday Arabic speech—is the stronger likelihood. The East Mediterranean/Near East was and is multilingual; people often spoke more than one language, translating between them.

Truth, Reality, Goodness, and Beauty

Plato betrayed no doubt that there is such a thing as truth, and no doubt that it can be known. Challenges to that way of thinking have always been legion, but perhaps those most decisive for the world we live in today came two millennia later during the European Enlightenment. Emphasis on empirical observation and doubt that things can be known "in themselves," as they really are, spread through educational and other institutions of the Enlightenment's twin, European colonialism, setting in motion global forces pushing rapid social change.

For Plato, truth and reality are closely related to goodness and beauty. All four are closely related, and in some of Plato's dialogues, seem to be identical. This may sound odd to the uninitiated. In ancient thought, generally speaking, life, existence, was the ultimate good. It is better to exist than not to, and beauty is very like goodness. The question then becomes what kinds of existence are better, more beautiful, truer, realer.

In his dialogues, Plato had Socrates use multivalent terms for the ultimate reality. In *Republic*, it is the most often the form of the good (*agathon*):

> In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it (517c).[12]

The word "form" here, often called a "Platonic form" (*eidos*, elsewhere *paradigma*) is the intelligible entity that makes a thing what it is. There are many kinds of chairs, but the intelligible form of chair is what makes them all chairs; it is from that form that all chair-ness ultimately derives. In this sense, the form of chair is what a chair really is. And so on with everything, cats, ships, human beings. I am 170 cm tall, and I was once very small, yet despite all the many ways I have changed, my "form" remains the same and it is what I am.

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[12] All translations of Plato's dialogues herein are from John Madison Cooper and Douglas S. Hutchinson, eds. *Plato: Complete Works* (Hackett, 1997).

The Quranic term for both truth and reality is *ḥaqq*.[13] *Ḥaqq* is "a noun and an adjective that means truth and true, reality and real, propriety and proper, rightness and right […] everything has a *ḥaqq* pertaining to it, which is to say that everything has a proper situation, a correct mode of being."[14] Interpreters of the Quran have had it that God refers to himself in the Quran by ninety-nine "most beautiful" divine names and attributes, and *al-ḥaqq* has a special status as *the* reality, *the* truth, of which "Allah" is the name.[15] These names and attributes perform in the way that Platonic forms do; as all goodness in the things of the world derives from Plato's form of the good, and so on with the other forms, so do the qualities of all the things in the world derive from God's names and attributes.

In the famous "Staircase of Love" passage in Plato's *Symposium*, the ultimate reality is the form of beauty. Plato has Socrates relate the teaching of the priestess Diotima that all good (*agathon*) things are beautiful (201c et fol.), and that virtue is propagated in[16] the form of beauty (*to kalon*). By "image" below, Plato means a copy of something, whether a reflection or an imitation, rather than the thing itself:

> This is what it is to go aright, or be led by another, into the mystery of Love: one goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to learning beautiful things […] so that in the end […] he looks at Beauty in the only way that Beauty can be seen—only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue (because he's in touch with no images), but to true virtue (because he is in touch with the true Beauty). The love of the gods belongs to anyone who has given birth to true virtue and nourished it (211c-212b).

In fact *kalon* (beauty) corresponds almost exactly to Arabic *ḥuṣn*, (and Persian *nīkū'ī*, and Turkish *güzel*). Almost all Arabic words have triliteral roots, which are thought of as "producing" verbal and nominal forms of the meaning inherent in the root. Murata and Chittick, while discussing *iḥsān*, "doing what is beautiful," a Quranic concept also derived from the Arabic root *ḥ-ṣ-n*, defined *ḥuṣn* in the Quran as "a good that is inseparable from beauty and attractiveness," while its dictionary meanings include all positive qualities in general—goodness, goodliness, beauty, comeliness, pleasingness, harmony, symmetry, desirability.[17] Harmony, symmetry, desirability, as well as the meanings of *ḥaqq* as "propriety and proper, rightness and right..." recall Greek *symmetria*, which translators of Plato have rendered variously as "harmony," "proportion," and "commensurability." In different dialogues, Plato shifted emphasis from one to another of our

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13 The term *ḥaqīqa* does not occur in the Quran.

14 William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabi's Cosmology* (State University of New York Press, 1998), xxiv.

15 "The name Allah often has a specific technical significance […] In other cases it is merely the vaguest and most general name that can be applied to the ultimate Reality, synonymous with *al-ḥaqq*, 'the Real.'" William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (State University of New York Press, 1989), 49.

16 Meaning perhaps "in the presence of." Interpretations differ.

17 Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (Paragon House, 1994), 268.

four terms, truth, reality, goodness, and beauty. In *Philebus*, when Socrates seeks the proper mixture of knowledge and pleasure to constitute the good, he says:

> If we cannot capture the good [*agathon*] in *one* form, we will have to take hold of it in a conjunction of three: beauty [*kalon*], proportion [*symmetria*], and truth [*aletheia*]. Let us affirm that these three should by right be treated as a unity (65a).[18]

In short, truth, reality, goodness, and beauty are closely aligned in the usages of both Plato and the Quran.

Poetry and Verse

The Quran says little directly about poetry, and much indirectly. Poetry is what the Quran is not. That the Quran is not poetry is what distinguishes it as revelation—this is the well-known doctrine of *i'jāz*, miracle "*that leaves one in awe*," which is traditionally asserted as proof of the divine origin of the Quran.

It is important to realize that neither in Muhammed's time nor Plato's did people have the notions about poetry that we have. Poetry was not an autonomous art created by an individual working in free verse in a room of her own to produce something original for which she will not be paid. For most of world history, the milieu of poetry was communal; poetry was performed, and it was full of stock phrases and tropes; poets were well compensated, and poetry was verse: metered language, often rhymed.

We do well to make a distinction between poetry and verse. Prior to the nineteenth-century, the signal feature of poetry was that it was composed in verse, and many things we today do not think possible for poetry were written in verse—medical treatises, dictionaries, chronicles, etc. Everywhere, until modern times, prose was the exception and verse was the norm. For Arabic-speakers of Muhammed's time, *verse was the sole form of composition*. It was recited from memory and performed, rather than read from written texts, and was the much-revered background against which the Quran was revealed. It may seem unlikely today, but what most distinguished the Quran may be that unlike the poetry of its time, which is to say all the literature of its time, the Quran did not use established verse forms. That is what made it so stunningly different; prose was so unheard-of that the Quran's use of it made its claim to be divine convincing.

But like poetry, the Quran was speech rather than writing; it is an oral "recital" (*qurʿān*). The importance of preserving it played a large role in the transition of Arabic language from orality to literacy—which is not to say that orality did not continue to be the norm for the majority. The same has been said of Plato's works. They played a key role in the transition of Greek from orality to

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[18] According to Rachael Barney, this is Plato's "last word on the subject." She concludes that in Plato's works, the beautiful "is to be found *wherever* goodness, that is, appropriate order and function, are—no matter how lowly the locale." Rachael Barney, "Notes on Plato on the *Kalon* and the Good," *Classical Philology* 105, no. 4 (2010): 363–65.

literacy, while oral culture continued.[19] Everywhere, throughout history, literacy has been limited to around 10% of a population. The dream of universal literacy is modern, a nineteenth-century European hope for educated voters in democracy, and it is disappearing before our eyes. In Late Antiquity, writing in Arabic developed as a result of solidarities and needs related to the military conquests that followed upon revelation of the Quran; at the most basic level, the need to keep administrative records.

For Plato also, verse was the ubiquitous, much-revered oral literature that served as the background to the new account of truth he proposed. Verse was among other things the vehicle of religion; Greeks learned about their religion from Homer. Although we are accustomed to read Hesiod, Homer, Sappho, and the Greek dramatists in prose translations, their works were composed in verse, and most often heard recited or performed rather than read in books. Homer's verse portrayal of Greek religion has rascally gods raping and exploiting human beings. Plato's profound concern was for good government, and he argued that religion offered models of perfection. In this regard his argument against poetry is about false representation—false mimesis. There is much here similar to the situation in which the Quran was revealed. The God of the Quran is far from the vested interests of polytheistic gods worshiped in Arabia at the time; God was misrepresented.

The encyclopedia-level story of ancient Greece is that its philosophers founded Western civilization by inventing science and rigorous logical argument. But the pre-Socratics were religious men, and we do not know that Socrates and Plato were not. We do know that Plato's Socrates made liberal use of myth and allegory. In the oft-repeated line near the end of *Republic*, Plato has Socrates say: "...let's also tell poetry that there is an ancient quarrel between it and philosophy..." (607b-c). But despite Socrates's insistent assault on poetry in many of Plato's dialogues, if we consider how new philosophy was then, and how ancient and successful poetry was, we might wonder if with this phrase, Plato announced a new polemic, imbuing with a legitimating aura of antiquity.[20]

Plato's position has another kind of complexity comparable with that of the Quran that I will not deal with here. He has Socrates argue against writing, privileging the spoken word, while he himself writes down dramatizations of Socrates's teachings. The Quran, as mentioned before, is an aural "recitation," not, say, a written tablet, but was written down.[21]

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19 Twyla Gibson, "Epilogue to Plato: The Bias of Literacy," *Proceedings of the Media Ecology Association* 6, (2005): 47-67.

20 Glenn W. Most, "What Ancient Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry?" In *Plato and the Poets*, eds. Pierre Destrée and Fritz-Gregor Herrmann (Brill, 2011). Reviews the scholarly arguments.

21 See Shaw 2019, chapter 2 and passim.

How are Attitudes about Poetry in Plato's Works and in the Quran Comparable?

Plato is known for his dialogue form, and the Quran, like much Antique literature, is largely dialogical.[22] Although it also contains narratives in the third person, it is primarily God's address to Muhammed and others, inviting the interlocutor into an often argumentative dialogue. God refutes accusations that the Quran is Muhammed's invention, that he is merely a poet and the Quran is merely poetry he has composed. In these accusations, poets and poetry are associated with madness and confusion, and likened to oracle and dreams. God repeats the accusations in order to defend Muhammed against them:

1. "They say it is confused dreams; no, he has invented it; no, he is a poet" (21:5).
2. "We have not taught him poetry, nor is it suitable for him. It is but a reminder and a recital [*qurān*] that makes things clear" (36:69).
3. "They say, 'Are we to abandon our gods for a madman poet?'" (37:36).
4. "So, remind [them]; you are not, by the grace of your Lord, an oracle (*kāhin*), nor are you a madman. Or they say, 'He is a poet—let us wait for the misfortune of time to overtake him.'" (52:29-30).
5. "I swear by what you see and what you do not see, it [the Quran] is truly the speech (*qawl*) of a noble messenger and not the speech of a poet. Small it is what you believe. And it is not the speech of an oracle. Small it is what you heed. It is a revelation from the Lord of the worlds." (69:38-43).[23]

In the Quran there is also the chapter of "The Poets" (al-Shuʿarāʾ, 26), which mentions poets only once, at the end of a long account relating how God's messengers have struggled to bring revelation to humankind. Pharaoh called Moses a madman; Abraham tried to reason with his idol-worshipping people; Noah had to escape in the ark; and Hud, Salih (who was called bewitched), Lot, and Shuayb all struggled unsuccessfully to convince their people that they had brought a revelation from God.

The condemnation of poets is severe. They are mentioned at the end of a long list of people who have led humankind astray. The Quran refers to notions, common at the time, that poets are supernaturally inspired, that invisible, immortal creatures, such as devils and jinn, "come down" from a higher world to whisper things to human beings. The Quran is "brought down" by the angel Gabriel; devils could not bring down such a revelation. Devils come down to sinful liars, "and poets, followed by those who go wrong, wander from valley to valley and say what they do not do" (26:226). Poets are accused of sophistry; the renowned Quran commentator Razi noted that poets are known for saying one thing one day and saying the opposite the next, to please a different

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22 Abdessamad Belhaj, "The Dialectics of the Quran Through 2:258," *Islamic Studies* 51, no. 3 (2012): 263-273.

23 The word "poetry" (*shiʿr*) occurs only once in the Quran, and the word "poet" (*shāʿir*) four times.

audience.[24] They are certainly accused of false representation as well as sophistry, in the sense that they are skilled in the art of successfully arguing a proposition regardless of whether it is true or not.

These criticisms echo a great many voiced in Plato's dialogues. In *Ion*, poets, like worshippers of Bacchus, are out of their right minds, supernaturally possessed (534b3–6). Poets do not really know the things of which they speak; they are merely transmitters of a "divine spark" ("divine" meaning immortal)—which the Quran would deem brought down by devils and jinn. In *Gorgias* (502c), Socrates characterizes poetry as a kind of rhetoric, which he associates with sophistry, arguing that poets are mere rhetoricians. By Plato's lights, rhetoricians, sophists, and poets rely upon the assumption that truth is irrelevant.[25]

So far we have strong continuities between the treatment of poetry by Plato and in the Quran; both associate poetry with madness, the supernatural, sophistry, and false representation.

Mimesis

Plato's use of the term "mimesis" is customarily translated in English as "imitation," although in practice, he is often referring to what we would call copies. While there are passages related to this subject in several of Plato's dialogues, the ones referenced most often are the explicit uses of the term in *Republic*, books II-III and X.

Socrates gradually builds arguments for what may be needed in the best kind of city. The context of his first treatment of mimesis in books II and III is education for the guardians who would administer the city. Socrates condemns images in poetry as untrue examples set for the young (377e-393c), both by the poet who composes poetry and the performer who recites it. He introduces the analogy of painting. "When a storyteller gives us the wrong impression of the nature of the gods and heroes, it's like an artist producing pictures which don't look like the things he was trying to draw." Poet-performers mimic the characters in stories they tell, acting them out, and attribute their own mimetic role-play to those characters, thus falsely representing them. Mimesis is categorized as false representation, not suitable for the guardians' education, and Socrates declares that poetry of the mimesis type will not be allowed into the city.[26] His argument is more complex than this, and many scholars have found inconsistences in it,[27] but here I leave the

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24 Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1210) wrote a highly influential 32-volume commentary on the Quran, *Tafsīr al-Kabīr*. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard, Mohammed Rustom eds. *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (Harper One, 2015), 925.

25 Charles L. Griswold, "Plato on Rhetoric and Poetry," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2024).

26 Nickolas Pappas, "Plato's Aesthetics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2025).

27 Griswold 2024 and Pappas 1999 provide summaries.

enormous subject of rational argument for another time in order to focus on the structure—"architecture"—of mimesis.

For the Quran, mimesis is an issue crucial to its legitimacy, as I mentioned before: the proof of the Quran's divine origin is that it cannot be imitated. Five passages in the Quran challenge doubters to compose something like it or instruct Muhammed to do so:

1. "If you are in doubt about what We have revealed to Our servant, produce a *sūra* [chapter of the Quran] like (*mithl*) it" (2:23)
2. "This Quran is not a thing that could be produced by someone other than God […] "They say he has fabricated it. Say: 'Bring a *sūra* like (*mithl*) it'" (10:37-38).
3. "They say he has fabricated it. Say: 'Bring ten *sūra* like (*mithl*) it'" (11.13).
4. "Say: 'If humankind and jinn gathered together to bring the like (*mithl*) of this Quran, they could not bring the like of it'" (17:88).
5. "They say he has made it up. No, they do not believe. Then let them bring accounts [*ḥadīth*] like (*mithl*) it" (52:34).

The root of the word *mithl*, "like" and "likeness," is *m-th-l*. This root is the one most often used in the Quran in relation to likeness in all its implications, including imitations. But likeness is also a broader, major Quranic theme. The root *m-th-l* occurs in the Quran 169 times in nine verb forms in a range of meanings, including "like," "likeness," "analogy," and "example," [28] all closely related in meaning. None of these terms exactly corresponds to imitation; two things may be alike without there being any intent to imitate involved, but a likeness is very close in meaning to an imitation. These matters are at the heart of figurative language, logic, and what I am calling "the architecture of mimesis." Both Plato and the Quran assume that the things of the world derive from

[28] The transitive verb form V *tamaththala* occurs once; the masculine elative noun '*amthal* once, and its feminine form, *muthlā*, once; the quasi-active participle *mithl* occurs 73 times; the dual *mithlayn*, twice; the noun *mathal*, 69 times; *amthāl*, plural of *mithl* , *mathal*, and *mithāl*, 19 times; the plural noun *mathulāt* once, and *tamāthil*, plural of the noun *timthāl*, twice. Badawi & Haleem 2008, 867-869. Several of these words are used in Turkish today: *mithl* (Tr. *misil*), *mathal* (*masal*, *mesel*), *amthāl* (*emsal*), *timthāl* (timsal). Badawi & Haleem give the following range of root meanings for Quranic usage: "similarity, to resemble, to imitate, to liken, statue, to stand for, to emulate, to appear, to materialize, to submit, proof; amount; example, a saying, parable; measure; to recover, to become good, the best; to mutilate, to maim, punishment, retribution." Wehr 1994 gives: "to resemble (s.o.), be or look like s.o., bear a likeness (to); to imitate, copy (s.o.); to compare, liken (s.o. to); to represent, mean, signify (s.th.), stand for; to stand erect (before s.o. in audience), appear before s.o.; to present o.s. to s.o.; to present itself to the eye, be on view; to plant, stand; to step forth, come forward, enter, appear, make one's appearance (esp. of an actor, on the stage)..." (1046). If we look to later Arabic usage, the terms used for "mimesis" in translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, *muḥākāt, ḥikāya* and *tashbīh*, do not occur in the Quran. Glossarium Greceo-Arabicum, accessed July 29, 2025, https://glossga.bbaw.de/results.php?gr_lexeme=μίμησις&ar_lexeme=&ar_root_1=&ar_root_2=&ar_root_3=&ar_root_4=&ar_root_5=&submit-button=

ontologically prior, invisible origins, and both attack representations that, by failing to observe that derivation, falsify *the true order of things*.

We can get a better understanding of the Quranic view of mimesis, and prepare ourselves for Socrates's other arguments, if we look at how the verb *tamaththala* in the Quran describes the Annunciation by Gabriel to Mary, telling her that she will have a child although she has been with no man (17:19). *Tamaththala* is the action which Gabriel, a non-corporeal angel, also called a spirit (Rūḥ al-Quddus), performed in order that Mary might see him. The verse is usually translated as "he appeared before her as a normal man" (*fa-tamaththala lahā basharan sawiyan*). But if we consult Lane for the verb, we find: "He affected to be like, or imitated such a thing."[29] *Tamaththala* is the reflexive causative, difficult to say in English, but easy in Turkish: Gabriel caused himself to be the likeness of a man; he "likened" himself to a man (*kendini adama benzetti*).

Ontological Architecture

But what does that mean? Does "to liken oneself to a man" mean "to imitate a man"? Is this mimesis? As the Quran declares often, God is "Lord of the worlds" (for example, 69:43 above), and interpreters mapped out a structure of these worlds on the basis of the Quranic terms *ghaib*, *malakūt*, and *mulk*.[30] *Al-ghaib* is the invisible world, often translated as the Unseen. *Al-mulk*, the Kingship, is the world of corporeality. *Al-malakūt*, the Sovereignty, is a realm in between the two, interrelating them. In this way "the worlds" were thought to have a three-tiered structure, in which the most true/real is the invisible world, while the realm of corporeality is least real.

Understanding of these worlds came to be refined as the "Degrees of Being" schema (Ar. *marātib al-wujūd*, Tr. *varlık dereceleri*), perhaps most widely in Ottoman thought. The worlds were subdivided into four, five, and more, while the original three were called by other names: the Unseen became *'alam-i lāhūt*, the Realm of Divinity; the Kingship became *'alam-i nāsūt*, the Realm of Humanity; and *al-malakūt* was called both *'alam-i khayāl*—the Imaginal Realm—and *'alam-i mithāl*—the Realm of Likeness.[31]

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29 Edward William Lane made extraordinarily extensive use of Quranic commentaries for his *An Arabic-English Lexicon* in 8 volumes. He gave the following meanings on page 3017 for other forms of the root that appear in the Quran: "*mithl*: "A like; a similar person or thing; match; fellow; an analogue. ___ A likeness, resemblance, or semblance. ___ An equivalent; a requital; *mathal*: a description by way of comparison." Badawi and Haleem included "to materialize" among the range of meanings for *m-th-l*, but this strikes me as a modernization of the ancient notion.

30 *Ghaib* occurs forty-nine times; *malakūt* four times, in 6:75, 7:185, 23:88, 36:83, and *mulk* forty-eight times.

31 The precise history of these usages remains to be traced. See Victoria Rowe Holbrook, "Divided Line and Degrees of Being," in *Long Platonism. The Routes of Plato's Reception to the Italian Renaissance*, edited by Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides and Georgios Steiris. Forthcoming. For Ibn Arabi's usages, see Chittick 1989, passim.

The Realm of Likeness/Imaginal Realm was understood to be populated by images: non-corporeal, *imaginal* forms, like the images we see in dreams, visible, somehow existing, but without physical body. The three realms possess an order of ontological priority; all things originate in the Unseen, then acquire imaginal form, and then acquire corporeal form; but they also continue to subsist simultaneously in the other two realms, to which we return after death. Another name for the Realm of Likeness is "the Grave." While human beings are in their bodies "down here," their imaginal forms subsist in the Realm of Likeness, and their spirits subsist in the Unseen. Many narratives of spiritual journeys recount meetings with imaginal men and women.

In this light, Murata and Chittick's translation of the Annunciation verse is best: Gabriel "imaginalized himself" to Mary.[32] Gabriel, an immaterial being, showed himself to Mary in his imaginal form. This mimesis has ontological depth. Likeness and representation are spatial; they have an ontological architecture, both temporal and unbounded by time.

The related terms *mithl*, *mathal*, *amthāl*, and *tamthīl* can all have this sense of crossing a boundary to represent one category of thing in terms of another, different, but analogous category of thing, as metaphor does— Greek *metaphor*, from the Greek verb "to carry across." In metaphor, one thing represents another thing, which it resembles. The Quran itself is a likeness; God's speech is likened/represented as human speech; its verses are called "signs" (*ā*ya), they point to the Unseen. Gabriel "comes down" and "brings down" the Quran from an ontologically prior, while yet simultaneous, state in which the Quran abides. The Quran criticizes poets for ignoring ontological architecture ("Small it is what you believe. […] Small it is what you heed," quoted above).

These terms can also be used in mundane senses, as Plato uses the term mimesis to mean false representation; but imitation always brings a thrill of the uncanny. Nickolas Pappas reminds us that Aristophanes, in his comedy *Women Celebrating the Thesmophoria*, has mimesis called "a disruption of life and opposed to nature."[33] False representation disrupts the order of things, matching the wrong outward form to an interior reality.

In book X of *Republic*, Plato uses mimesis in ways that make clear he has an ontological architecture in mind. Socrates defends his banishment of mimetic poetry with reference to arguments developed after book III: the crucial discussions of the tripartite soul (IV, 435b-441c), which provides for conflict within the psyche; the analogy of the sun (VI 507b-509c), which bestows light by which the eye can see, as the Form of the Good illumines the intelligible with truth; the "Divided Line" (VI, 509d-511), which sketches out the architecture of mimesis; and the Allegory of the Cave (VII, 514a-520a), a parable of this architecture. In a four-tiered hierarchy, from lowest to highest, Plato's Divided Line has (1) shadows and reflections at the bottom, then (2) corporeal objects ("what the first section is an image of"), then (3) abstract principles (*dianoia*,

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32 Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, 101. They also refined the translation of *basharan sawiyan*: "He imaginalized himself to her as *a mortal without fault*."

33 Pappas 2025 and 1999.

a thought process used when "doing things like geometry and arithmetic"), which are imitations of (4) the forms, in the top section of the Divided Line.

This seems an ancestor of the Quranic hierarchy of worlds, except that in the Quranic version, Plato's bottom section of shadows and reflections is discarded, and dianoia is elaborately developed as the imaginal realm of likeness. The status of the corporeal, too, is liminal. Bodies are imaginal forms that have acquired corporeality; they change over time, die, and become again imaginal. In many usages—in Ibn Arabi's work, and Mevlana Rumi's, the entire created realm is imaginal, and a human being may encompass all the "worlds."

To return to book X of *Republic* and conclude, we find Socrates using a series of analogies (596-602c). In the analogy of the couch (596b-598b), he distinguishes between 1. the form of couch, what a couch truly is; 2. the couch as a thing made by a carpenter; and 3. the painting of a couch. This schema seems three-tiered, although the carpenter has a kind of couch in mind, an image of the couch he will make, which he imitates when he makes it, and which may be inserted between the couch made by craft and the true form of couch. So, the form of couch is located in the top section of the Divided Line; the couch in mind is located in the dianoia section; the couch made by craft is a corporeal object; and Plato has likened a painting of the couch to a reflection of it, in the bottom section.

In the course of this exposition, Socrates says, ironically, that the quickest way to be a creator of all things would be to carry around a mirror wherever one goes (596e), likening mimesis, and creation, to reflection, to making a copy. He repeats his earlier analogy between painting and poetry; mimesis in poetry is, like painting, the imitation of an appearance (601). He also distinguishes between the user of a thing (flute or bridle), the crafter of that thing, and someone who paints it. The user knows the thing, and the crafter has a correct opinion about it (the couch in mind), but the painter merely imitates without knowledge (601c-602a). Socrates finishes by explaining how the painter's kind of mimesis harms the soul (602c-608b). Because it is concerned exclusively with appearance, ignorant of the truth of appearances, it upsets the balance between the parts of the soul and corrupts it.

In the Allegory of the Cave, Socrates likened the condition of uneducated humankind to that of people held captive in a cave since birth. All the captives have ever seen are the shadows thrown upon the cave wall of objects held up by others in the light of a fire behind them, higher up toward the cave's opening. Socrates interprets this allegory, saying that the cave is the region revealed to us by sight, and the light of the fire is the power of the sun. The path out of the cave and the view of things outside is the ascent of the soul to the intelligible realm. As I mentioned before, he says that the form of the good is the thing viewed last in that realm, and is the cause of all that is right and good. "In the realm of sight it gives birth to light and light's sovereign, the sun, while in the realm of thought it is itself sovereign, producing truth and reason unassisted" (517b-c).

The architecture of the likeness Socrates strikes here is faithful to the ontology he has set out gradually in *Republic* and other dialogues as well. He assigns negative meaning to the term mimesis, while providing examples of the correct use of mimesis himself, without saying so. It is

the congruity between his architecture of mimesis and the architecture of his ontology that makes his mimesis different from that of the poetry he rejects. This congruity is what is understood as likeness in Quranic usage, and constitutes the underlying family resemblance between Plato's treatment of poetry and the Quran's. Both set a new image of the divine against the background of a poetry based in ignorance, and insisted upon a kind of likeness structured in accord with their vision of truth.

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