

Title: Platonic images as shaped by the translations of the Republic

Category: shorter

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Abstract: “Disciplines invent the teachers. And, as it turned out, the Neoplatonists—more orthodox even than the direct successors installed in the Academy—invented Platonism,” Régis Debray claims in a study of the material and deliberative acts of transmitting culture. Inspired by his ‘mediological’ style of inquiry as well as other authors who subordinate the origin or the object that is transmitted in history to the process of transmission, my research focusses on the history of Platonic interpretation as presented through the translations of Plato’s *Politeia* in various epochs.

In this paper I examine the concepts that express visuality and seeing, trying to show how the different strategies adopted by the translations of Plato have reflected the interpretive ideals of the period as well as shaped the reception of his philosophy, which in some cases have been called even paradigm shifts in the Platonic scholarship. I will bring examples from the texts of the 15th-century Italy and 19th-century Germany, and read the translations with an eye on the duality between the ‘mystical’ and the ‘intellectual’ Plato. How have translators acted in situations that have been left ‘undecidable’ (to use a Derridean concept): what strategies have been used to make out the mystical statements or when Plato has substituted a conceptual discourse for an imagistic one?

The first modern translations of Platonic dialogues by Leonardo Bruni and Marsilio Ficino practiced a doctrinal reading of Plato that bears resemblance to the strategies used in the interpretation of religious texts. Despite their sincere affection towards the work of Plato, the humanist translators did not hesitate to correct the text or reinterpret it in order to keep its coherent meaning and ‘truth’.

Friedrich Schleiermacher, whose translations of Plato have had an unprecedented reputation and resulted in translations of a translation, treated Platonic texts with more respect than his hermeneutic theory generally would have required. Although he believed that by grasping the unconscious, the interpreter could understand an author better than the author himself, this was not the case with Plato because of his allusive style and lack of system. Instead of reconstructing the doctrinal system, Schleiermacher put the emphasis on the artistic form of Plato’s text and saw its’ intention in the way it captivates the reader into the dialogue.

I will claim that Plato proceeds by images. These images may obstruct the reality, they may seduce us to forget about the desire for truth and acquiesce to a convenient illusion, but they may also work as short-cuts to the real. I believe that it does not lie in the image, but in the way of looking at the image. The possibility offered by Plato to the reader to actively participate is perhaps the reason why the Platonic tradition has generated such a number of diverse interpretations. It remains the responsibility of each translator and each reader to

make their decisions. Just when (the interpretation of) Platonism as a metaphysics is overcome, Plato is back as a non-metaphysical thinker.

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