

Some remarks on Plato's poetics

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The ill-famed Plato's expulsion of poets from the ideal *polis*, the exclusion of great Homer and some adored writers of tragedies, founded by the argument that they are just "imitators of images" who "do not lay hold on truth" (*Republic* X, 600e), has of course an important role in *Politeia* and it cannot be overlooked also in the whole Plato's opus, so this thought of the founder of philosophical idealism, rather weird from the present-day point of view, actually has to be critically considered and, most probably, dismissed – however, it would be a very wrong consequence, destructive for the relations between philosophy and poetry, if the overall rejection of Plato's philosophical idealism were inferred from the legitimate dismissal of his "poetics". The condemnation of poetry in spite of its gravity does not concern the very essence of Platonism – namely, the essence of Platonism is, most briefly said, the overcoming of transitoriness, longing for eternity, which is common to both, poets and philosophers.

It has to be remarked that Plato himself felt some uneasiness in his critique of poetry, "since we ourselves are very conscious of her spell" (*ibid.* 607c), and that's why he tried somehow to apologize:

"Let us, then, conclude our return to the topic of poetry and our apology, and affirm that we really had good grounds then for dismissing her from our city, since such was her character. For reason constrained us. And let us further say to her, lest she condemn us for harshness and rusticity, that there is from of old a quarrel between philosophy and poetry." (607b).

Concerning this "quarrel" (*diaphora*, also: difference, distinctness), Hans Georg Gadamer in his essay *Plato and Poets* puts the question:

"Is the fact that the philosopher Plato cannot be fair to poets and their art ... the consequence of the ancient quarrel between philosophers and poets?"

The answer is ambiguous: on the one hand, the "diaphora" between philosophy and poetry indeed goes back to Pre-Socratic sages (Heraclitus, Xenophanes *et al.*), who rejected Homer's "fairy tales" about quarrelsome and debauchery gods, about the gloomy Hades etc. (because they understood them "too seriously", very differently from ourselves), and Plato just carries on this "rational" critique of mythical and poetical thought, especially in books II and III of *Republic*, considering that such fantasies deprive guardians of their courage and "spoil their souls" – while on the other hand, Plato in book X introduces his own specific critique of poetry, based on the supposition that it "imitates" empirical things and events, which are on their turn also "imitations" or "images" (*eidola*) of the eternal and most real Forms (Ideas), so that a poet is farer from the supreme Reality than a carpenter, who, while making a table, directly "imitates" its ideal Form, as "seen" in his mind. From Plato's point of view the principal poet's mistake is his remoteness from the real Truth, from the transcendent "World of Forms". Here is the "ill-famed" sequence from *Politeia*:

"This consideration, then, makes it right for us to proceed to lay hold of him [the poet] and set him down as a counterpart of a painter, for he resembles him in that his creations are inferior in respect of reality, and the fact that his appeal is to the inferior part of the soul and not to the best part is another point of

resemblance. And so we may at last say that we should be justified in not admitting him into a well-ordered state, because he stimulates and fosters this element in the soul, and by strengthening it tends to destroy the rational part, just as when in a state one puts bad men in power and turns the city over to them and ruins the better sort. Precisely in the same manner we shall say that the mimetic poet sets up in each individual soul a vicious constitution by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality ..." (695a–c).

Plato's rejection of poetry is argued *per analogiam* with more obviously "mimetic" art of painting: painted images are supposed to be like some "shadows" of empirical reality, and they do not represent things "as they are", but only "as they seem to us".

I agree with Gadamer, when he says that "it would be wrong, if we tried somehow to diminish the provocative paradoxical character of this [Plato's] critique" (*ibid.*), and I endorse also his judgement that this is an obvious case of "blindness" of Platonic *paideia*, a dangerous illusion that spiritual education may have an "unlimited creative power" (*ibid.*). I also agree with Gadamer's diagnosis of this "blindness", namely with his statement that here it is simply a case of a wrong supposition: that the essence of poetry and art in general is the imitation of the world of senses. However, I have to add that this Plato's mistake has been discovered and corrected already in the late Greek and Roman Neo-Platonism. Let us see one of the famous passages from *Enneads*, where Plotinus clearly corrects his master's lapse:

"But if anyone despises the arts because they produce their works by imitating nature, we must tell him, first, that natural things are imitations too. Then he must know that the arts do not simply imitate what they see, but they run back up to the forming principles [*logoi*, 'seeds'] from which nature derives; then also that they do a great deal by themselves, and, since they possess beauty, they make up what is defective in things. For Pheidias too did not make his Zeus from any model perceived by the senses, but understood what Zeus would look like if he wanted to make himself visible." (*Enn.* V. 8. 1)

Such a new, explicitly positive Plotinus' attitude towards art as *creating* sensual beauty which "imitates", i. e. re-presents, the transcendental, divine beauty, is quite a "different story", compared with the old Plato's critique of poetry – however, it is still perfectly Platonic! Art, as well as literature, is for Plotinus on the same quest as philosophy: when it tries to in-form the upper world of gods, when it re-presents the upper world *as it would look like* if it were visible for us, it follows the way of transcending transitoriness, temporal change of all phenomena, in order to reach something timeless and eternal. This understanding of art in (Neo)Platonism was essential also for its revival in the Renaissance period, when many masterpieces of art were directly influenced by Platonic ideas, so the latter were obviously not directed against art and poetry. However, later developments of Platonism cannot erase the severe attitude towards poetry of Plato himself.

Our "postmodern" philosophies and literatures have been very much (too much!) determined with several de(con)structions of metaphysics, spanning from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Derrida and Lacan, so that our cultural climate is, generally speaking, quite unfavorable to every revival of Platonism, and consequently also of philosophical-literary essays of Platonic type. Among other reasons for this prejudice is also the frequent misunderstanding of the meaning and role of Plato's literary passages ("myths", metaphors, analogies etc.) within his philosophical discourse, as well as ignoring the essential stylistic importance of dialogues. Even Gadamer, who is otherwise a positive exception in understanding the importance of Platonic dialogue – since his own hermeneutics is also dialogic – states in his already quoted essay *Plato*

and Poets (which is of course only one of many Gadamer's different and seminal works on Plato's philosophy) that "Platonic 'myths' are neither myths nor poetry" (*op. cit.*), since the philosopher refers in them and through them "back to *logos*", i. e., that they are some kind of rationally directed allegories after all. I do not agree with this statement since the point of Platonic mythos is not referring back to *logos*, on the contrary: mythos is introduced into the Platonic dialogical discourse on the point(s) where the latter fails, because it is unable to "show" (in Wittgenstein's sense) the transcendental truth which is *beyond* any discursive expression. So, for example, the famous Allegory of the cave is not just an illustration of some underlying theoretical concepts, philosophical "ideas" in the modern sense, but is itself, as *mythos*, essentially *constitutive* for the Platonic wisdom, since its metaphysical transcendent truth is based on the synthesis of *logos* and *mythos*. And Platonic dialogues – as Gadamer himself has well pointed out – have a similar, very decisive role: Socratic "love of wisdom" is written down for us in the dramatic form, because dialogues formally enable "polyphony" of truth, as well as some subtle "distance" of the author towards thoughts and opinions, held by his *dramatis personae* (this feature of Platonic discourse has been extensively presented also by Gorazd Kocijančič in the introductory notes to his Slovenian translation of Plato's collected works).

In the end, I would like to mention my personal experience in writing philosophical-literary discourses. My still growing comprehensive tetralogy *Four Seasons* (two of them, *Spring* and *Summer*, have appeared already, in Slovenian) is from the formal and conceptual points of view much inspired by the Classical and the Renaissance Platonism. I believe in the further development of a "hybrid" which may be called "literary philosophy", and I am sure that such a twofold (or manifold) discourse can without much trouble avoid lapsing into some "ideological" fiction. For the literary philosophy, which has a rich tradition (from Pre-Socratics and Plato over the Renaissance to several modern *belles-lettres* within philosophy), it is essential that *logos*, in close connection with *mythos* and expressed as *dialogos* or in some other "literary" style, develops itself as "polyphonic", "fluent" and *dialectical* discourse (in the pristine sense of the word), i. e., that it never forgets to be opened to the transcendental truth "beyond". And that's why philosophy should be, for its own sake, as far as possible open-minded towards poetry, literature and all other arts.

References

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