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INTRODUCTION TO POETRY IN PLATO'S REPUBLIC

(INTRODUÇÃO À POESIA NA REPÚBLICA DE PLATÃO )

(EINFÜHRUNG IN DIE POESIE IN PLATONS REPUBLIK)

SUMMARY

There surely does not appear to be any need for extended summation. The gist of the article is implied in its title; I've merely worked carefully through the *Republic*, noting specifically how poets and poetry were treated.

I at rare times veered just a bit from the *Republic* to other dialogues for the sake of pertinent citation or substantiation. The central concept is that neither poet nor poetry - given certain restrictions - was banned in Plato's forthcoming utopia. This, the writing maintains, is not too commonly understood or believed - indeed, it is quite the opposite: The casual reader (or non-reader) has heard or been led somehow to believe that the great Greek was antagonistic to the offerings of the poet.

Doubtless a much more synoptic coverage is surely possible; this, as stated, is merely introductory material. §§

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## RESUMO

De certa forma não parece haver necessidade de um resumo detalhado. O ponto essencial do artigo está explícito no seu título; apenas examinei com cuidado a *República*, registrando especificamente como os poetas e a poesia foram considerados.

Desviei-me, em alguns casos, da *República* para outros Diálogos em benefício de uma citação, ou documentação mais apropriada. A idéia central é de que, nem o poeta, nem a poesia – consideradas certas restrições – foi abandonada na utopia sonhada de Platão. Esse fato, o artigo defende, não é facilmente compreendido ou aceito – na verdade o que acontece é justamente o contrário: o leitor negligente (ou o não-leitor) ouviu, ou foi levado a crer que o grande autor grego era hostil às oferendas do poeta.

Sem dúvida, uma abordagem mais resumida seria possível ; esta, como já foi dito, é apenas matéria introdutória. §§

If the mere idea of so renowned a philosopher tends to dismay slightly, it is an unwarranted response. So far as this very limited inquiry goes, Plato is readily understandable. These pages normally ought to touch on virtually every Dialogue since to varying degree and extent comments pertaining to poetry crop up often. But that itself would lead into a whole book, a veritable tome. Thus, I've chosen to restrict this inquiry (acknowledging an occasional divergence) to our philosopher's single lengthiest composition, itself consisting of ten "Books," each of some fifteen/twenty pages.

Most of us remember the *Republic's* central concern: The nature of justice and its triumph over injustice, and consequently in the main the happiness of its citizens. So far as I'm able to infer, the present-day attitude (where it is even evinced) holds that Plato was antagonistic towards poets and their endeavors. Not so. Not true. In the *Protagoras* (to diverge a moment) we learn that skill in poetry is the chief component of education. But it surely is true that certain declamations, actions, or innuendos – and of course outrageous falsehoods – were prohibited. Nowhere, however, throughout Plato's entire canon is poetry (accepting these limitations) prohibited or the poet wholly silenced.

Our concern bypasses Book I as largely irrelevant; we thus encounter our muse trotting forth merrily in Book II and III and also in Book X, where in the latter we are again told that the poet is a manufacturer of images, a stranger therefore to truth. Anybody curious to delve the very fine points inhering in our philosopher's notions on poetry could not do better than commence with the *Ion*. It is incidentally pleasant to notice

throughout the Dialogues – with one exception – how the conversation is characterized by an absence of bravura, or the captious, and proceeds with abundant courtesy and patience, illustrating the nature of those who sought the fons et origo of being, including poetry.

It is time now to discuss exactly what "poetry" was intended to suggest, in the 8th, 7th, 6th, 5th, and 4th centuries of Plato's domain and environs.

Poetry as most of us recall was what we generally think of as the epic, intricately significant dramatic offerings unfolded in narrative form, the playwright never failing to tend to the mythological possibilities, despite an intermittent veil of irony. In the main, as everyone knows, tragedies dominated but this does not imply an absence of the aculeated comedy. Further, in no sense were there any brief six-line compositions, or such as we in general see today under the heading of "poetry," nor any intrinsic silliness to evoke empty laughter. The poet was earnest and wise so far as the limitations of his circumstances allowed.

Of the comedies, two men are outstanding. Aristophanes of course and the less-known Prince of Comedy (so-called by Socrates), Epicharmus. Clearly the greatest figures in all of early Greek writing remain Homer and Hesiod, assuming the former to have been an individual. From the writings of these two arose the dazzling pantheon of the Greeks and igniting most of the contemporary literary efforts. Both Homer and Hesiod are abundantly cited throughout most of Plato's dialogues, thus including the *Republic*. Held forth to the aspiring poet as worthy of imitation, Homer and Hesiod nonetheless at times are gently rebuked: *Republic*,

Book II, p. 322 and Book III, p. 325-7-8.

We turn now towards the distasteful: censorship.

Here is a fact from which our good Greek still incurs negative criticism. But while censorship indeed is obvious in the *Republic*, it's a modified form. Given the intent behind the to-be-State, the societal realities and the nature of the hour, a certain censorship seemed inevitable and probably essential. After all, Plato had lived through the Peloponnesian War; reasonably he was motivated to conceive of an ideal State, hence war-less, and whatever appeared to undermine this utopia was ipso facto unacceptable – which explains, I think, the censorship so erroneously infamous. Asked what constitutes the most serious crime against the State, Socrates says, "*Whenever an erroneous representation is made of the nature of gods and heroes...*"<sup>1</sup> And here we detect the point. Not merely gods and heroes, per se, but their nature. Which implies that gods and heroes (or at least gods) partake of a divine radiance inaccessible to you and to me. Thus, the imputation of that which is not praiseworthy constitutes blasphemy. Poets are to tread with care lest they fail admittance to the *Republic*. We have not forgotten that Socrates was put to death for being a poet, a weaver of tales calculated to corrupt.

Mention of divine radiance moves us close to Plato's most pervasive concept, though rather tenuously related to poetry. This allusion, first, is to his intriguing IDEA (or Form) – the first here preferred.

Certainly nebulous, this immense concept is itself subsumed under its greater reality: The ONE, a vision all-embracing, all-inclusive, wholly over-riding all possibilities beyond which or surrounding which lies absolutely nothing.

Nonetheless, whereas The ONE lies beyond this essay, we can comprehend and perhaps approach a definition – at least intimated – of the IDEA. In terms, then, of rough parallelism Plato's IDEA corresponds to what we think of today as an archetype, what most Christians call – after duly investing the IDEA with certain benign qualities – God, what Einstein referred to as the Central Intelligence, what most Hindus think of as Brahma, what Aristotle intends by the Unmoved Mover, what Schopenhauer implied by his great Will, and what the American Transcendentalists spoke of as the Oversoul. It might be objected: But these are in the main quasi-religious feelings. True, but do remember this was introduced as a rough parallelism. To probe further is to move entirely away from our subject, poetry in the *Republic*.

The IDEA, then, is the wellspring of all things of which we might or can be aware, whether tangible or otherwise, even as it itself depends on The ONE. We find, but not in the *Republic*, Socrates wondering whether even a stone has its unique original somewhere Up There amidst Plato's IDEA. Since all terrestrial objects are ipso facto unreal, which implies sheer imitation, it follows all poetry is imitation, mere reflection. Poetry, accordingly, can never contain pure truth; the best the best can do is the close approach. Clearly, censorship is required lest this fragile art, spreading excessive untruth, woefully influence an audience. The *Republic* must rest on rock, not rot.

The *Republic* pays no attention to nugatory objects, not because they have no place but because they are not apt to rise before an audience to uphold misrepresentation. The *Republic* has no fear of cobblers or chariot-drivers. Only the insidious

writer bears careful watching. He and that other suspicious fellow, the rhapsodist.

We read in Book II of certain mendicants calling themselves prophets, knocking on the doors of the rich, seeking recognition of themselves as those with powers not all possess, including vicarious atonement (for a slight fee. We realize this quaint tendency is scarcely extinct). The speaker in the dialogue says, "... *poets are the authorities to whom they (mendicants) appeal, smoothing the path to vice with the words of Hesiod...*" And a bit along: "*Homer is cited as a witness that the gods may be influenced by men...*"<sup>2</sup>

Much attention is devoted to the caution that must attend the poet and it is spelled out in Book III, p. 331-98. "*For we mean to employ for our soul's health the rougher and severer poet or story-teller, who will imitate the style of the virtuous only...*"<sup>3</sup> And we read again on page 323 this attention to censorship: "*Neither must we have mothers under the influence of the poets scaring their children with a bad version of these myths...*"<sup>4</sup>

Can we pinpoint the causative agent, so to speak, which in truth incites Plato's sustained concern with censorship? Briefly, we recall how the Greeks above all sought wisdom, variously defined by the various writers. But wisdom's high wide cry can be circumscribed, for it had as its soaring potential the awareness of the nature and comprehension of the soul with all the unutterable consolation inhering in the revelation. The poet who fell short of inculcating this concept, this desideratum, fell short of acceptance, within the *Republic*.

"*Did you never observe,*" Socrates asks in Book II, "*how*

imitations... grow into habits and become a second nature, affecting body, voice, and mind?"<sup>5</sup> By voice doubtless is meant the poet or rhapsodist. And in no manner may imitation carry us soulward. Once again, in Book III, we learn that, according to Socrates, "... everything that deceives may be said to enchant."<sup>6</sup> If we now move ahead to the 19th c. we find Bulwer-Lytton imperishably reminding us that the pen is mightier than the sword, a truth Plato realized rather some time ago. And some 250 years anterior to Bulwer-Lytton, *A midsummer night's dream* reminds us that the poet has tricks, he deceives, calls up things unknown, that it is easy to mistake a bush for a bear (Wallace Stevens centuries later tells us there are no bears among the roses). Misrepresentation is ubiquitous! The poet is a creature of sliding attributes.

At about this point someone calls out to say what about Homer – the great Homer? Didn't he write falsehoods, myth, nonsense? Yes, he surely did – depending upon one's interpretation of "nonsense." But chiefly this dyadic influence – Homer and Hesiod – was sustained because both men bore the marvelous insignia of antiquity, and as earlier mentioned, gave to the Greeks of whom I'm speaking their glorious community of gods and goddesses. How could so illustrious a pair be tossed out? Nevertheless, it is a fact that scattered throughout the dialogues one finds gentle disagreement with certain portions of the writings of these two great ones (See Book III, sec. 387-91-3).

As a minimal introduction to Plato's concepts bearing on poetry in the *Republic*, perhaps this suffices. Despite a few well-known eschatological inconsistencies (pointed out, among others, by Aristotle) in several Dialogues, the inarguable



idealism of men who prided themselves on being uncompromising realists is both consistent and astonishing.

What document surpasses in sheer idealism Plato's major work? Or, indeed, where is the writing to quite match the idealism (even, if we dare, the romanticism) of Aristotle's *Politics*?

Nonetheless – platitudinous as of course it is – all of us remain gloriously indebted to these men especially, perhaps, the man from Athens. His crime after all was the search for The Good Life ("Seek ye first the Kingdom of Heaven") which, were it attained meant the good life for the inhabitants of the *Republic*. The Good Life seems still a bit elusive, society unequally divided as to its definition – if there is one. The realists – mostly businessmen – are concerned still with power, status, ornamentation, and the synthetic, i.e., the imitative. And to be sure, gadgetry.

The minority remains still largely attentive to the immanent transcendence – to ideals – the shrill cries in meadows – rhythm – colors – nuances of all sorts – and so much of actual truth as lends itself to captivity: briefly, the artistic substance.

Grossly outnumbered (reminiscent – to be a bit hyperbolic – of Thermopylae: 300 Greeks against the Persian army), the poet's lantern is nonetheless inextinguishable, still casting its fragile incandescence. Are we too far amiss to see the modern writer as the offspring of a remote few born to listen to the silence and to decipher so far as mortals can its tenuous harmonics? §§

*Notes*

All citations unless otherwise noted from the Dialogues of Plato, trans. by Jowett, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., Chicago, 1952.

<sup>1</sup> p. 321.

<sup>2</sup> p. 314.

<sup>3</sup> p. 331.

<sup>4</sup> p. 323.

<sup>5</sup> p. 330.

<sup>6</sup> p. 339.