The quarrel between poetry and philosophy: Plato - a sceptical view on ‘poetry’

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Abstract

Aristotle’s Poetics is widely considered the starting point for the literary theory of the Western culture. Nevertheless, Aristotle’s work is preceded by a vast array of literary practices and a range of theoretical views on poetry that show the manner in which the Western culture had outlined the idea of literature. Admittedly, one of the most important moments in the historical evolution of the critical reflection on literature is Plato’s philosophy. This study analyzes Plato’s critical and theoretical views on poetry (as presented in Apology of Socrates, Ion and Republic) in connection with an analysis of the cultural role played by poetry at that time. The paper argues that Plato’s critical view on poetry denies tradition and its role, while tradition only stores ‘folk wisdom.’ In fact, Plato’s clear distinction between poetry (doxa) and philosophy (truth) represents the birth of an analytical perspective on poetry, seen as a particular cultural phenomenon.

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1. The Quarrel between Poetry and Philosophy

Admittedly, any analysis of the beginnings of the theoretical perspective on literature (poetry) in the Western Culture acknowledges Aristotle’s foundational role. True, Aristotle is highly regarded as the founder of an explicitly analytical-oriented view on literature/poetry (see for example Doležel [1]). By writing Poetics (c. 335 BCE), the Greek philosopher initiated, indeed, a didactic and systematic theoretical approach to what is now known as literature, an approach which has its undeniable merits for the present understanding of literature. Nevertheless, if one considers Aristotle as the founding father of the vast history of the idea of literature, one should also consider a whole tradition of systematic reflection on poetry and its cultural significance, to which

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Aristotle is much indebted. The birth of the analytical view on poetry is a long demythologizing process that occurred in the age of classical philosophy, but Plato’s sceptical view on poetry represents the very moment of the birth of a true analytical view on literature that started to question the literary phenomenon per se and its links to the entire ancient Greek tradition.

1.1. Myth, poetry, and culture

The poetical practices prior to Aristotle, as they appeared in their early forms, have been seldom presented by critics as a long process that originated in ancient histories and in their mythical formulae, repeated in rituals, and that put forth several formal categories with a double role: aesthetic and socio-cultural. For instance, Gregory Nagy [2], in his attempt to culturally frame the poetical ideas as presented in the few passages in which the early poets of ancient Greece speak of themselves and of their poetry, starts his analysis from an anthropological definition of the myth, in which he combines its ontological features – the statement of an essential reality, of origins and fundaments – with the cultural identifier features (the statement is made by a social group), and with the aesthetic features (the particular and particularizing form accommodating all these features in the discourse). The focus on the inner ritual quality of the myth results in the sheer opposition between ordinary speech and the song that will be later reflected in the treatment of the rhythm, melody, and isosyllabism, or other types of formal stylized parallelisms. Hence, the formal categories of the early poetry of ancient Greece: dactylic hexameter (Homer’s epic and hymns, Hesiod’s Theogony), the elegiac couplets (Archilochus, Callinus, etc), or iambic trimeter (Archilochus again, but also the tragedy and the comedy of the Attic of the 5th century) [2].

Myth – ritual repetition – formal marking – rhythmic formula (euphony) – formal parallelism (verse) – song – poetry: these are the diachronic connections that led to the first outline of poetry in the early antiquity; nevertheless, almost all literary ages have preserved parts of these connections for defining the semantics of poetry/literature. If the poetical form can be stressed by euphonic particularities, the ‘content’ itself still maintains a clear connection with the mythical formula: “[...] song, like poetry, can call itself kleos” [2]. Kleos means fame and glory, but especially that glory conferred through writing poetry or, in general, through creation [2]. Therefore, poetry functions as a medium that stores the essential memory of a culture, its founding acts, its heroes, and its mobilizing symbols or its action models. The role of poetry would be the one of using proteanly the active models of tradition, i.e. the role of voicing the essential landmarks of a shifting identity and of a present that organically mirrors into the past.

This fact becomes even more increasingly apparent if we look at the third dimension of early ancient poetry – the relation with the audience. It is a fact that early Greek literary works were specifically intended to be performed in public (the song, the public spectacle, and the poetry performance). A poetry as performance was supposed to be an oral presentation of poetry, either recited or sung by rhapsodes (aoidoi, later rhapsodoi), so it may be said that poetry mainly originated in active public performances of cultural interactions that were inherited from the inner ritual quality of the myth. Before their actual transcription, the great founding literary works of ancient Greece (the 7th century BCE, Homer’s essential epics) had circulated in an oral form and had adapted to diverse local traditions. In the epoch of flourishing cultural achievements in Athens, the imperative need to transcribe the wide variations of Homer’s epics, but also the different mythological remarks, was the clear result of an increased awareness of a unitary Greek tradition. This phenomenon, mainly known as pan-Hellenism, has been one of the most important challenges for the development of the critical culture that separated the poetical forms from the myth (or from the local activation of a mythical tradition) and gave poetry an authentic universal dimension (a pan-Hellenist ‘universality’). At the same time, starting with Hesiod’s Theogony, one can notice a real desire to go beyond the rich local traditions [2] that had destabilized, by means of their relativizing formulae, the truth-holding quality of the myth. It is clear that from the phenomenon of pan-Hellenism emerged the critical attitude that was concerned with the truth value (aletheia) of the myths themselves, an attitude that will be later supported by the critical thinking of the philosophy of the pre-Socratic
epoch [3] (the 6th century BC). The truth will become a much debated critical topic in philosophy and poetry [4], especially apparent in Plato’s critical views on poetry (Ion, Republic).

Not surprisingly, the established pan-Hellenistic dimension will greatly influence the basis of the textual cannon of the oral ancient Greek tradition of poetry, as it definitely strengthened the idea of written literature. Even if this quality of literature was not very popular in Classical Greece because of the manifest attraction for the stylized ritual of the “Athenian drama” [2] that reused the performance of original pan-Hellenist mythology, the written dimension will be necessary for the preservation of the cultural memory whose origins cannot be exactly tracked back in time, as well as for further considering it as one of foundational bases of the future European culture:

“The very evolution of what we know as the Classics - both a concept and a reality - was but an extension of the organic pan-Hellenisation of oral traditions. In other words, the evolution of ancient Greek canons in both song and poetry need not be attributed primarily to the factor of writing. Granted, writing would have been essential for the ultimate preservation of these canons once the traditions of performance were becoming obsolete. Still, it is important to recall the observation, made earlier, that the key to the actual evolution of canons must be sought in the social context of performance itself. It can be argued that the performance-traditions of the Classics, as an extension of the pan-Hellenisation of oral traditions in poetry and song, were preserved in the social context of what the Greeks called paideia, ‘education’ [2].

One of the most significant results of the cultural canonization of the archaic tradition of Greek poetry is that the poetry will be integrated into an educational corpus that is both public – due to its original performance acts – and private – due to its written quality. It is this educational dimension that activates all the formative characteristics of poetry (embellished speech, formal creativity, mytho-religious truth, essential traditional models). Due to its educational purpose, ‘poetry’ will be the central ‘reality’ sitting at the heart of ancient culture, claiming respect and asking for recognition, by making appeal to traditional essential images and acts. In the flourishing philosophical epoch, when poetry receives the first systematic theoretical lines and definitions through the works of Plato and Aristotle, poets are still the leading, or rather, the authoritarian voice of tradition.

1.2. Plato on poetry

Any attempt to structure historically the definitions of ‘poetry’/literature are bound to start with Plato - regarded as the leading founder of the ‘theoretical’ reflection on ‘poetry,’ especially if one takes into account the fact that many of his theoretical statements are included in the systematic treaty on poetry written by his disciple, Aristotle.

Plato’s dialogues contain significant commentaries on poetry, which has much to say regarding the Greek philosopher’s intense preoccupations that are intrinsically related to the highly significant role played by the poetical practices of the time. Indeed, this theoretical preoccupation can be seen in Plato’s discourse in which he makes definite critical claims concerning the life and the future of poetry. Therefore, we should notice that Plato’s writings on poetry, more specifically those that have Socrates as the main ‘hero,’ can be seen as examples of authentic critical views on literature and on its cultural role, while all his entire critical enterprise is carried out with the keen skeptical eye of a loyal servant of philosophy.

More specifically, three works of Plato contain explicit critical language used with the clear purpose of questioning the nature and the true relevance of poetry writing. For instance, in the Apology of Socrates he questions directly, by the voice of Socrates, the poets’ claim asking for the recognition of their intellectual capacities, while Plato states that poetry is not the fruit of the intellect searching for the absolute truth but the actual result of poetic inspiration:

“So I learnt that not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration; they are like diviners or soothsayers who also say many fine things, but do not understand the meaning of them” (Apology, 22b-c) [5].
Likewise, in Ion, one of Plato’s early works, as it is the Apology of Socrates, the dialogue between Socrates and the rhapsode Ion from Chios gives voice to the same definition of poetry: “for the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and reason is no longer in him” (Ion, 534 b) [5]. Such a definition of poetry, placed at the heart of this short dialogue, envisages poetry empowered by a ‘magnetic’ force, and thus advancing a theory based on this critical conception (533 d-e) [5]: the muse fills the poets with ‘inspiration,’ who become the recipients of the ‘divine gift’ and who will share it with others, first with the rhapsodes and eventually with the audience. ‘The creator’/the poet, the rhapsode and the spectator are all linked together in a long ‘chain’ that demystifies the ‘divine’ message, now governed by the arbitrary whims of the interpreters who reevaluate the message and present it in different forms and modes. At this point, one should notice the start of a new philosophical debate – the new values and understandings of truth – and consequently, the clear separation of philosophy (centered on truth and reason) and poetry (separated from truth, centered on ‘madness’). This fact can be seen in Socrates’ explicitly ironic attitude or in his sharp tones used to create an almost caricatured figure of the rhapsode in the entire course of the dialogue, and also in the antithetic language he attributes to Socrates:

“Soc. [...] would you like me to explain my meaning, Ion?

Ion. Yes, indeed, Socrates; I very much wish that you would: for I love to hear you wise men talk.

Soc. O, that we were wise, Ion, and that you could truly call us so; but you rhapsodes and actors, and the poets whose verses you sing, or wise; whereas I am a common man, who only speaks the truth” (Ion, 532 d-e) [5].

The few examples of antithetic language that can be found in the two dialogues analyzed in the previous paragraphs and also their sarcastic tones will be used by Plato in the Republic to orchestrate a successful campaign against poetry; in this dialogue the real issue of ‘poetry’ is highly exploited and obsessively dealt with.

In this way, the Republic is rather a project with clear pedagogical and political aims; its main themes are centered on ‘the ideal city’ and, according to C. Noica [6], the ideal man: “the man of moral and intellectual supremacy.” Clearly, the ideal city and the ideal man cannot be imagined without an ideal aim that, to Plato, perfectly coincides with the discovery of truth. To exemplify, we can look at the vast array of examples in the Republic in which Plato separates ‘poetry’ from ‘truth’ (or philosophical thinking, as acknowledged today) and presents them in clear opposition. Then, we can further examine Plato’s ironic tone when he mentions the names of the ‘poets’ and also when he looks into the supposedly true value of ‘poetry’ so as to finally question poetry and cast more doubt on it.

The analysis of the ideal city, started in Book II (368 d), and continued until the end of Book III, mainly treats the problem of the education of the ‘guardians’ in the ideal city and, for that purpose, it contains many references to ‘poetry’ and quotes many of the classical poets, especially Homer. Here in Book III one can find the first implicit attempts at defining ‘poetry.’ Contrary to the common misconception regarding Plato’s attitude to poets, poets are given well-established places in the city, although their role there is not a crucial one:

“No will the city have to fill and swell with a multitude of callings which are not required by any natural want; such as the tribe of hunters, and again imitators, of whom one large class have to do with forms and colours; another will be votaries of music – poets and their attendant train of rhapsodists, players, dancers, contractors; also makes of divers kinds of articles, including those which serve for the adornment of women” (Republic, 373 b) [5].

In the first part of the Republic, Plato seems to hesitate when he has to give a clear definition to poetry. Arts are therefore secondary handcrafts that have to be adapted to a given purpose. In Socrates’ speech, arts are explicitly subject to certain limitations that will transform them into useful educational forms within the ‘city,’ especially useful for the education of the ‘guardians.’ In this sense, the guardian needs to “unite in himself philosophy and spirit” (376 c), and this can be modeled by the help of the ‘art of the muses’ (mousiké, 376 e),
and also by ‘the tales and stories,’ more exactly by ‘the myth,’ present in every man’s life since early childhood (376 e - 377a) [5]. However, in Plato’s view, the myth is a combination of truth and lies: “we begin by telling children stories which, though not wholly destitute of truth, are in the main fictitious” (377 a) [5].

Once the formal framework is established for the poetic arts, their message remains to be clarified. To exemplify, Homer’s and Hesiod’s founding works of the Greek culture clearly show the fact that much of the classical Greek poetry can be held accountable for the disregard for the gods, disregard that can be equated with ‘falsehood’ (381 d) [5] and caused by the anthropomorphic manner depicting the nature and the behavior of the gods; in the end, this way of seeing gods cannot be justified, not even allegorically:

“But the narrative of Hephaestus binding Here his mother, or how on another occasion his father sent him flying for taking her part when she was being beaten, and all the battles of the gods in Homer - these tales must not be admitted into our State, whether they are supposed to have an allegorical meaning or not” (Republic, 378 d) [5].

Thus, due to its far reaching tradition, poetry becomes a ‘negative’ model for those who value the truth:

“And further they are likely to have a bad effect on those who hear them: for everybody will begin to excuse his own vices when he is convinced that similar wickedness are always perpetrated by – ‘The blood of deities yet flowing in their veins’” (from the Niobe of Aeschylus) (Republic, 391 e) [5].

It is in Book III of the Republic where Plato gives a comprehensive view on poetry and also where he makes definite claims about the nature of poetry; here Plato goes from an analysis of the logos (poetry’s content) to the analysis of the lexis (poetry’s expressive form), and gives a working definition to poetry, which is, by and large, an essentially representationist or ‘mimetic’ one: “all mythology and poetry is a narration of events, either past, present, or to come” (392 d) [5]. Still here the philosopher classifies poetry in generic categories that will later become, in Aristotle’s Poetics, the model for a theory of the genres:

“And narration may be either simple narration, or imitation, or a union of the two” (392 d) [5].

“[…]some poetry and mythology are wholly imitative (and, as you say, I mean tragedy and comedy); there is likewise the opposite style, in which the poet is the only speaker – of this the dithyramb affords the best example; and the combination of both is found in epic, and in several others styles of poetry” (Republic, 394 b-c) [5].

This ‘generic’ separation operating on poetry lies at the basis of a later statement about the problematic nature of poetry in its relation to truth, and also it anticipates the pronunciation of the well-known sentence that banishes poetry from the ideal city, a sentence that will be further detailed in Book X:

“And therefore when any one of these pantomimic gentlemen, who are so clever that they can imitate anything, comes to us and makes a proposal to exhibit himself and his poetry, we will fall down and worship him as a sacred, marvellous and delightful being; but we must also inform him that in our State such as he are not permitted to exist; the law will not allow them. And so when we have anointed him with myrrh, and set a garland of wool upon his head, we shall send him to another city” (Republic, 398 a) [5].

Thus, imitators have to be banished from the city. The ironical tone is evident: in Plato’s entire dialogue, the representationist aspect of ‘mimesis’ is slowly replaced by a ‘mechanicist’ one, in the sense that the representation, rendering truth to various degrees, is replaced by formal ‘imitation,’ with its myriads of modes, and its illusionist nature, and that cannot be accepted by seekers of truth. The newer mechanicist nature of mimesis will be part of the gnosiological sentences given by the dialogue, based on a set of arguments using rather transparent allegorical images.

Plato’s indictment on poetry – specifically on poetry as imitation – can be clarified by several excerpts from the Republic which develop a theory of knowledge; for instance, ‘the allegory of the Cave’ in Book VII (514 a – 521 c) [5] illustrating a group of prisoners who have lived chained to the walls of the cave, and to whom reality
and ‘truth’ are nothing but mere shadows projected on the wall. In essence, the allegory of the cave is used to show the gnosiological limitations of the man who has been misled by his own senses, and that can be read as the want to overcome such limitations so as to perceive the true form of reality and the most fundamental form of the good:

“[...] in the world of knowledge the idea of good appears last of all, and is seen only with an effort; although when seen, it is inferred to be the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in the visible world, and the immediate and supreme source of reason and truth in the intellectual; and that is the power upon which he who act rationally either in public or private life must have his eyes fixed” (Republic, 517 b-c) [5].

At the end of the dialogue, in Book X, Plato reiterates his thesis making definite claims about the nature of poetry, especially about imitative poetry (595 a) [5]: “it [the imitative poetry] certainly ought not be received.” The artist as imitator (the tragedy poet, more exactly) is seen as a performer that uses the illusion given by imitation to produce false images and ‘appearances’ (596 e) [5]. In the context, Plato further defines his thesis (true, in negative terms) through the metaphor of the mirror, one of his fundamental metaphors used to define literature and which has been recorded in history since then:

“An easy way enough; or rather, there are many ways in which the feat might be quickly and easily accomplished, none quicker than that of turning a mirror round and round – you would soon enough make the sun and the heavens, and the earth and yourself, and other animals and plants, and all the other things of which we were just now speaking, in the mirror.

Yes, he said; but they would be appearances only.

Very good, I said, you are coming to the point now. And the painter too is, as I conceive, just such another – a creator of appearances, is he not?” (Republic, 596 d-e) [5].

As with painting, poetry – a playful form of appearances – is freed from the constraints of truth or of ‘the nature of things,’ and eventually is viewed as a poor imitation of truth aroused by the contemplation of ideas. Therefore, when Plato reflects on the nature of things, through the voice of Socrates, he claims that tragic poets, as well as Homer – the founder of poetry – cannot discover the true nature of things, so their claims to have entered the realm of truth should be treated with absolute disregard:

“[..] we have to consider tragedy and its leader, Homer; for we hear some persons saying that these poets know all the arts; and all things human; where virtue and vice are concerned, and indeed all divine things too” (Republic, 598 d-e) [5].

At this point, we should notice Plato’s ambiguous claims made either about tragic poets or about poets or poetry in general. True, Plato’s diatribes aim explicitly at imitative poetry, in the first place at tragedy, but this ambiguity shows the fact that the Greek philosopher looks at the entire artistic phenomenon with a critical eye. The very end of the dialogue has the role of a sentence whose appeal is denied – poetry must be banished from the city; reason alone will rule the city (607 b) [5].

2. Conclusions: Plato’s philosophy as a reaction against the cultural an educational monopoly of the poetry

On the long run, Plato’s negative view on poetry is justified, in fact, by his philosophy, the source for the definition of the phenomenon and also for his practical approach to poetry. On the whole, Plato’s critical statements lead to a hermeneutical approach to the poetical forms, tended with the tools of the philosophical discourse.

It is apparent that the central part of the philosopher’s view on poetry is the definition of art as imitation/mimesis. This term, originating in the archaic Greek culture since the 5th century BC, had been rarely used before Plato and it originates from the root mimos that used to illustrate a person imitator and also a sort of
spectacular performance based on imitation [7]. Also, the term has multiple meanings: it may designate various similarities or correspondences between different phenomena, it may refer to the imitation of behaviour or moral models, or it may show the metaphysical correspondence between the real world and its ideal representations [8].

As shown above, Plato associates the term with the idea of representation, while the different variations of the term are due to the particular forms and means of representation. However, Plato’s critical view on mimesis, as presented in the Republic, can be attributed to an early modern theory of the image, which will have unquestionable consequences for the further definitions of poetry and literature as a representationist form of art, as noticed by Jean-Pierre Vernant [19]. Eventually, Plato’s consistent search for truth can justify his objections to poetry as ‘imitation,’ as well as his moral requirements applicable to poetry that will finally lead to the banishment of poetry from the ideal city. To Plato, truth can only be discovered if you are led by reason through the labyrinth of deceiving images feeding and watering “the passions instead of drying them up” (Republic, 606d) [5], images released by the poetry. These images are the more deceiving, the higher their prestige or their authority. Then, we can notice an absolute monopole of poetry in the culture of the times, as also remarked by the majority of the critics in the age of Plato [10,11]. This fact can be easily explained if we remember that before the 5th century BC the memory of Greek culture identifies with poetry itself, especially Homer’s epics that store history, myths and cultural models, but also a wide pool of folk wisdom that had been activated by each particular performance. By repeatedly denying the poets’ claims for the authority and wisdom, Plato is aware of the fact that the haunting quest for the ultimate truth happens beyond the common beliefs (doxa) held by the deceiving images (or the ‘shadows’) of poetry. Socrates, the hero of Plato’s philosophical dialogues, by means of subtle irony, casts doubts on doxa, and on its mechanisms helping it to proliferate. Such a mechanism would be poetry itself, specifically in its public and spectacular forms. Plato’s disregard for poetry as imitation, i.e. the tragedy, is mainly motivated by the heavily theatrical or public nature of the ‘literature’ at that time [12], and also by its capacity to arouse emotions and passions that can hinder rational thought from discovering the truth beyond appearances:

“[...] the imitative poet implants en evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less, but thinks the same thing at one time great and at another small – he is an imitator of images and is very far removed from the truth” (Republic, 605 b-c, p. 425) [5].

In his analysis of the influence of Homer’s epics on the classical Greek literature, Robert Flacelière notices that the epics were massively used in the field of classical education [11]. True, pupils at school learned how to write and read, improved their memory and discovered their identity by reading Homer. It is then apparent why “most ancient writers have quoted Homer as ‘the leading authority,’ in the same way the Holy Bible used to be cited in the Christian ages; therefore, Homer’s writings were supposed to contain the whole truth, the whole wisdom, and the whole knowledge” [11]. E. A. Havelock speaks of a true cultural monopole led by Homer, and starting with him, a monopole of poetry, which seems to be a comprehensive encyclopaedia marking the epoch [10], and becoming largely popular as it addresses a large audience, due to its spectacular nature. As a true philosopher, Plato fights this cultural monopole, in his attempt to challenge reason and philosophical thinking to enter a more mature age. It is a fact that Plato’s consistently negative critical tone to poetry illustrates the actual transformation of Greek philosophy to a more mature age, now seeking new confirmations at a time when tradition is often regarded in light of new analytical reconsiderations. Even if “the Greeks remained loyal to Homer” [11], and Plato’s sceptical view on poetry will be softened by his followers, the newly-born analytical mindframe and critical spirit will always be acknowledged as priceless cultural assets.

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