

1 · Plato (427–347 B.C.)

THE GREEKS were great talkers and they must, among other things, have talked about poetry. Yet their words were carried away by the winds of the Mediterranean. Before Plato, except for a line or two in the poets and a few fragments from philosophical treatises, there was no real literary criticism in the sense of a theory of literature. Even the brilliant literary evaluations that Aristophanes makes in his comedies are practical rather than theoretical. So if we want to begin with general ideas on literature, we must begin with Plato. One could wish to begin elsewhere, for Plato, the most poetic of philosophers, was an enemy of poetry. This is a fact so shocking that many have refused to believe it. Like too naïve lovers they have refused the evidence of their own eyes. Honey-mouthed Plato could not be unfaithful.

Yet the case is clear. As Tolstoy is going to find later, Plato found that he had to betray his own art because he had discovered something he believed to be greater. Saint Augustine will read him and use him to strengthen the antagonism of the early Christian Church to literature. The political totalitarians of the twentieth century, both communist and fascist, are going to borrow his approach. Everyone who believes he has found the TRUTH will fall into Plato's position toward art. If one's sole concern is building the Platonic Republic, the Soviet State, or the City of God, literature must be done away with or put in chains. What is a poem compared with man's immortal soul or the classless society?

From every point of view he took, pedagogical, metaphysical,

ethical, or political, Plato arrived at the same sobering conclusion—poetry is dangerous. The puritan streak in him even, we suspect, found melancholy satisfaction in giving up what he loved. For Plato loved poetry, or he would not have feared it so. Thomas Mann's short stories and novels, where art is presented time and time again as the seducer, the disintegrator of our middle-class morality, are, among other things, deep-seeing commentaries on Plato and the poets.

Heavy with civilization as we are, we picture Plato as living in the fresh dawn of our culture. To him, of course, it seemed like the sunset. The great things had already been done. Athens was rushing to destruction. A Mediterranean people, art-loving and soft, were being led like sheep by unscrupulous demagogues. For religion they had the gods and goddesses as represented in Homer: fornicators, liars, and quarrelers. What the Athenian needed desperately was the discipline and reason that could be supplied by philosophers like Plato.

The poets, living and dead, were Plato's enemies. Everyone accepted the fact that they were teachers. The poets, as all agreed, were inspired. This, Plato felt, was enough to damn them, for is not truth arrived at by reason? In the *Ion* he gave the popular theory 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 then the mind is no longer in him: when he has not attained to this state, he is powerless and is unable to utter his oracles. Many are the noble words in which poets speak of actions like your own words about Homer; but they do not speak of them by any rules of art: only when they make that to which the Muse impels them are their inventions inspired; and then one of them will make dithyrambs, another hymns of praise, another choral strains, another epic or iambic verses—and he who is good at one is not good at any other kind of verse; for not by art does the poet sing, but by power divine.

This apparently noble conception of poetry he then turned against the poets. The charioteer knows more about chariot-racing than Homer. Every artisan knows more about his own craft than the poet who speaks of his craft. Thus, as a teacher the poet is inferior to the artisan. Since, then, the poet speaks, not from knowledge but from inspiration (or madness—for

Plato it is much the same thing), he cannot be trusted as a teacher.

The poet fared no better when examined in the light of Plato's metaphysics. According to Plato, reality existed in the world of Ideas, not in the world of material things. There was, for instance, the Idea of the bed, the real and unchanging bed. The individual bed that the cabinetmaker constructed was an imitation, by definition imperfect, of the ideal bed. When the poet described a bed he was imitating an imitation and was thus two degrees removed from truth or reality. The poet's art was "an inferior who marries an inferior and has inferior offspring."

For morality and ethics, the citizen had better go almost anywhere rather than to the poets. In Homer, God is represented as doing things which are morally wrong. Zeus arbitrarily assigns happiness to some, unhappiness to others. Athene and Zeus are represented as the violators of oaths and treaties, other gods as the causers of evil and strife among men. Since God is good, evil must have another cause. Thus, not only does Homer lie about the gods, but his poetry can lead the citizen into the paths of wickedness. The poet should be prevented by law from saying that God causes evil.

And if a poet writes of the sufferings of Niobe—the subject of the tragedy in which these iambic verses occur—or of the house of Pelops, or of the Trojan war or any similar theme, either we must not permit him to say that these are the works of God, or if they are of God, he must devise some explanation of them such as we are seeking; he must say that God did what was just and right, and they were the better for being punished; but that those who are punished are miserable, and that God is the author of their misery—the poet is not to be permitted to say; though he may say that the wicked are miserable because they require to be punished, and are benefitted by receiving punishment from God; but that God being good is the author of evil to any one is to be strenuously denied, and not to be said or sung or heard in verse or prose by any one whether old or young in any well-ordered commonwealth. Such a fiction is suicidal, ruinous, impious. (*Republic*)

Ethics and politics cannot, for Plato, be disentangled. In attempting to set up an education for the future rulers or guardians of his ideal Republic, he finds that the poets do not teach

good citizenship. Not only do they lie about the gods, but they represent men as doing unworthy things. They show heroes sulking in their tents, magistrates taking bribes, and many other things which soldiers and rulers should not consider even possible. Particularly evil is their representation of Hades as a shadowy, unpleasant place. Young men should be taught to die bravely for their country, with the promise of reward in the after-life. The Hades of the poets is a deterrent to heroism and makes young men cowards, desirous of life, and fearful of death. Members of the ruling class, the guardians, should dedicate themselves wholly to the maintenance of freedom in the state and should not imitate anything vile.

Yet, what examples would the poets give them? Women, bad men, even low characters such as "smiths or other artificers or oarsmen, or boat-swains, or the like." Indeed, all things that seem pleasant to the ignorant multitude. Nor must we forget that poetry feeds and waters the passions that ought to be dried up. "She lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue."

When the poet who can imitate anything comes to the city, "we will fall down and worship him as a sweet and holy and wonderful 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 away to another city."

Thus the poet is exiled from Plato's Republic.

Is there then to be no song, no poetry? Some, but only that written under the control of the rulers. Music which makes for good military discipline; hymns to the gods and praises for good men. But even this official poetry cannot be written by anyone. Only the politically reliable, to use a modern term, may write. And even they will be limited to "official" poetry. So the victors in the games that strengthen the state may be praised, but not by every poet.

And let poets celebrate the victors,—not however every poet, but only one who in the first place is not less than fifty years of age; nor should he be one who, although he may have musical and poetical gifts, has never in his life done any noble or illustrious action; but

those who are themselves good and also honourable in the state, creators of noble actions—let their poems be sung, even though they be not very musical. And let the judgment of them rest with the instructor of youth (i.e., the director of education) and the other guardians of the laws, who shall give them this privilege, and they alone shall be free to sing; but the rest of the world shall not have this liberty. Nor shall any one dare to sing a song which has not been approved by the judgment of the guardians of the laws, not even if his strain be sweeter than the songs of Thamyras and Orpheus; but only such poems as have been judged sacred and dedicated to the gods, and such as are the works of good men, in which praise or blame has been awarded and which have been deemed to fulfill their design fairly. (*Laws*)

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