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PLATO'S CRITIQUE OF THE FINE ARTS [1]

In a paper which I wrote many years ago, entitled *Plato's teaching on fine art*[2], I dealt with Plato's general aesthetics. Here I shall present his critique of specific fine arts of Greece : architecture, sculpture, painting, the dance, music, and literature. The amount of space I shall devote to each of these arts will be proportionate to the amount of discussion there is to be found about them in Plato's dialogues. Thus, I shall say little about architecture and sculpture, because there are few references to these arts in his writings ; but I shall say a good deal about literature, because Plato discusses at length various forms of it, including rhetoric; stories, comedy, tragedy, and epic poetry.

Before proceeding with the presentation of Plato's critique of the fine arts, I shall repeat what I said at the beginning and end of my earlier paper, because it will serve as helpful background for understanding the discussion that will follow. Here is what I said :

Plato has traditionally been interpreted as condemning the fine arts. The following reasons have been given as the grounds for this supposed condemnation : fine art is (a) imitative, (b) concerned with particulars, (c) immoral. I submit that a careful study of Plato's works, particularly of the Greek texts, will show that Plato distinguishes between true art and pseudo art and condemns only the latter ; that he does n o t condemn pseudo art because it is imitative — true art for him also is imitative — but because it is imitative of improper objects ; that he d o e s condemn pseudo art because it is concerned with particulars, but that he recognizes an art that is concerned, instead, with universals ; that he d o e s condemn pseudo art because it is immoral, but that he does so v a l i d l y, since for him the moral is a species of the aesthetic, i.e. since goodness is conceived by him in terms of beauty...

If then we grasp clearly Plato's distinction between true art and pseudo art — which his interpreters have failed to see — it becomes evident that Plato does not condemn true art but only pseudo art ; that for him true art has as its immediate aim the imitation or expression not of the world of phenomena but of the world of

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1. Lecture delivered on May 15, 1969, at Colgate University, Hamilton, N.Y., under the sponsorship of the Department of Classics and the Delta Zeta Chapter of Eta Sigma Phi.

2. «Philosophy and Phenomenological Research» 13 (1953) 487-498.

true being, of eternal ideas, of suprasensible beauty ; and that true art, far from being for him immoral, is in the highest degree moral.

1. Architecture.

After these introductory remarks, let us turn to the first of the fine arts that I have mentioned : architecture. Plato's references to architecture show that he had very high esteem for it, because he found in it great accuracy and real theoretical knowledge. Thus, in the *Philebus* (56 b) he says : *The art of building (τεκτονική) employs the greatest number of measures and instruments which give it great accurancy and make it more scientific than most arts.* In the *Statesman* (260 a) he similarly remarks that the architect (ἀρχιτέκτων) *may justly be said to participate in intellectual science*[3], inasmuch as while workmen supply manual labor he supplies knowledge (259 e). Plato here evidently views architecture as an excellent instance of an art that is based on knowledge (ἐπιστήμη, γνῶσις). In the *Republic* (4, 438 c), too, architecture is cited as *a kind of knowledge*[4]. It is also mentioned together with sculpture and poetry as an art which may express either beauty, harmony and rhythm, or the opposites of these (3, 401)[5]. But he brings forward no instances of bad architecture.

In the light of the preceeding, we are justified in assuming that he thought highly of the architectual achievements of his age, such as the Parthenon and the Erechtheum on the Acropolis of Athens.

2. Sculpture.

Plato's attitude towards Greek sculpture (ἀνδριαντοποιία), as towards Greek architecture, is not at all depreciatory, but appreciative. Thus, he speaks of Daedalus' statues as *really beautiful works of art*, (*Meno* 97 d) and those of Pheidias as works of resplendent beauty (91 d). And significantly, he compares young Charmides, who is very handsome, to a statue, and likens the ideal philosopher as depicted by Socrates to the creations of a sculptor, being godlike[6]. Also significant is the fact that he attributes wisdom to Daedalus[7], and superior character to Pheidias[8] and Polycleitus[9].

So far as the expression of physical beauty is concerned, Plato could

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3. Cf. 251 c, 259 e, *Gorg.* 455 b.
4. Cf. *Charm.* 165 d.
5. Cf. *Crat.* 429 a.
6. *Charm.* 154 c-d, Rep. 7, 540 c.
7. *Euthyphro* 11 e.
8. *Meno* 91 d.
9. *Prot.* 328 c.

have had no complaint against such sculptors, inasmuch as they depicted ideally formed bodies : well-proportioned, graceful, healthy and strong. And apparently he was satisfied that the statues of these and other well-known sculptors expressed inner beauty, too, which was of far greater concern to him than outer beauty.

3. Painting.

Much more is said in Plato's dialogues about painting (γραφική) than about either architecture or sculpture. Most of his discussion on painting consists of general criticism of contemporary Greek works and their unnamed creators. He rejects these works because he finds them 1. to convey no insight into the true nature of the objects depicted, 2. to be mere semblances of physical things, made to astonish the spectator by their striking resemblance to such things, or 3. to portray individuals whose souls are full of ignorance and disharmony.

In order to clarify these points, Plato employs his theory of reality, particularly in book 10 of the *Republic*. According to this, there is a higher realm of being which includes eternal, unchanging, perfect «archetypes», «forms», or «ideas», as well as God and the rational part of the soul, and a lower realm of appearances, of changing things, which includes the two-dimensional and three-dimensional objects of the physical world and the irrational part of the soul. The forms of things in the realm of appearences or phenomena are more or less imperfect copies of the perfect archetypes in the higher realm, the realm of true being. Now the creator of naturalistic or realistic paintings lacks knowledge of the higher, ideal realm, and hence takes as his models entities of the lower, imperfect realm. Plato considers naturalistic painting as a kind of jugglery, having no serious relevance to human life. And when it expresses ugliness through the human figure, especially inner ugliness – i.e. ignorance, intemperance, and the like – it is for him a major evil. If one is exposed frequently to paintings and other works of art that express inner deformity, the soul will be infected by it. For we become like that which we habitually contemplate. Hence he advises that youth be not allowed *to grow up amid images of moral deformity, . . . and thus gradually and unawares accumulate a huge mass of evil in their own souls* (*Rep.* 3, 401 b-c).

In order to acquire inner grace and harmony – beauty of soul – youth must live in surroundings that suggest such positive qualities. The architecture, the statues and the paintings which they contemplate, as well as

the tunes and words which they hear, should suggest to them excellence of the body and even more of the spirit.

That painting can and ought to express the ideal is a thought that recurs in the *Republic* and appears also in the *Laws*. In the *Republic* Plato envisions a painter who contemplates divine archetypes and seeks to express through the human figures he paints the ideals of wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. Such an artist looks at the archetypes of these virtues and tries to express them as far as this is possible in line and color, erasing one touch or stroke and painting another, until he succeeds in representing *a type of human character that is pleasing and dear to God* (6, 500 e-501 c). In the *Laws* the Athenian philosopher praises Egyptian painting because it abides strictly by the principle, which he advocates, that the youth should habituate themselves to postures and gestures that are beautiful (2, 656 d-e).

This rejection of naturalism in painting and demand for idealism constitute not only a vindication of Egyptian art, but also a remarkable anticipation of some of the basic principles underlying Byzantine iconography. The Byzantines realized more effectively than any others the spiritual type of painting which Plato vaguely envisioned[10].

Besides naturalism, Plato criticizes imaginative painting, particularly that depicting the gods. In the *Euthyphro* he expresses disapproval of the representations of the gods as involved in bitter hatreds and battles among themselves. Paintings with such representations were to be seen in the Athenian temples and on the robe that was carried up to the Acropolis at the great Panathenaic festival (6 b)[11]. Although his spokesman, Socrates, professes that he knows nothing about the truth of the stories on which these paintings are based, it is evident from the context that he regards such stories as positively false, springing from an erroneous conception of deity.

It is to be noted that while Plato condemned the attribution of human vices to the popular Greek gods, he did not question the existence of these deities and hence never rejected the depiction of them as such. His theological thought did not advance so far as to lead him to reject these deities as mere fictions. Like his master Socrates, whom he regarded as *the best and wisest man*, he did not break completely with Greek polytheism.

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10. See my book *Byzantine Thought and Art*, Belmont, Mass.,Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 1968, ch. 5.

11. Cf. *Rep.* 2, 378 c.

It is significant that at the opening of the *Republic* Plato tells us that Socrates had gone to Piraeus to pray to a popular goddess; and that in the *Phaedo* he reports that Socrates' last thoughts were directed to the god Aesculapius : *Crito*, he said, *we owe a cock to Aesculapius. Pay it and do not neglect* (118 a). It remained for Christian thinkers, such as Clement of Alexandria in the East and Augustine in the West, to criticize ruthlessly Greek polytheism and its expression in sculpture, painting and literature as idolatry.

4. The Dance.

Except in his last work, the *Laws*, Plato seldom refers to the dance (ὄρχησις) and then only casually. It is only in the second and seventh books of the *Laws* that he seriously turns his attention to it, discussing its nature, kinds, and place in education and life. He attributes real importance to the dance, asserting that *the well educated man will be able to dance well* (2, 654 b) and that *both girls and boys must learn dancing* (7, 813 b). The dance is for him a part of the branch of education which he calls «gymnastic». The direct aim of true gymnastic is the improvement of the body, making it healthy, strong, hardy, agile, graceful, harmoniously developed[12]. But as the body is only an instrument of the soul, gymnastic is ultimately designed for the sake of the soul.

There are two kinds of dance : the noble and the ignoble. In the noble dance there is a representation of the solemn movement of beautiful bodies, while in the ignoble dance there is a representation of the ignoble movement of ugly bodies. Both of these kinds are subdivided into two branches. The noble dance is divided into the dance of war, termed «Pyrrhic», and the dance of peace, called «Emmeleia». The dances of war imitate the postures of those engaged in war and vehement action, whereas the dances of peace exhibit a temperate soul in the enjoyment of prosperity and modest pleasures (7, 814 c). Plato approves of both types of the noble dance, regarding them as suitable for the citizens of a well-regulated State. Of the ignoble dances, which are identified with the «Bacchic», one class imitate drunken men, and are named after Nymphs, Pans, Sileni, and Satyrs, while the other class are used for certain supposed purifications and mystic rites. Plato rejects both kinds of ignoble dance as having no real meaning whatever and unfit for the citizens of a good State (7, 815). In rejecting the second

12. Cf. *Laws* 7, 795 e.

class of ignoble dances, he is not condemning sacred dances as such, but only the actual religious dances of the Greeks, who in the name of religion practiced various unseemly dances. That he allows for other, «noble», types of sacred dances is evident from a passage in the *Laws* where he expresses the belief that the rulers who follow the regulations which he has prescribed for a well-governed State will receive supernatural guidance as regards the question of the dances to be performed in honor of the gods (7,804 a).

Plato was by no means as hostile to existing Greek dances as he was to Greek paintings. This is obvious from his acceptance of the Greek dances called Pyrrhic and Emmeleia as «noble», and from the following statement which he makes in the *Laws* : (7, 802 a) : *There are many dances which are excellent, and from these the newly founded city-state may freely select what is proper and suitable.*

5. Music.

Music (μουσικὴ) is more important for Plato than any of the arts we have discussed. Hence he devotes much more space to it. He is profoundly convinced that music exercises a most powerful influence on the soul, sinking deeply into it and greatly contributing to the formation of one or another type of character (ἦθος). Accordingly he stresses the need of listening to the r i g h t kind of music, that which is conducive to inner harmony and inner strength, and avoiding those kinds which have the opposite effects.

The music he envisages is always vocal, with or without the accompaniment of musical instruments. It consists of three elements : 1. words, 2. rhythm, and 3. melody in some one of various modes or scales. The question of the words in music is of great importance for Plato, and he says very much about it in his discussions of literature. I shall deal with it later, in discussing poetry, the words of music being those of poetry, either epic, lyric, or dramatic, and also in speaking of stories, inasmuch as these may be in verse. Here I shall speak of the other two elements of music : rhythm and melody.

Just as in his teaching on the dance he admits only two kinds of dances : dances that are expressive of courage and dances that are expressive of temperance, so in his treatment of music he approves of only two kinds of rhythm and two kinds of melody, those which are appropriate to a life of courage and those which are appropriate to a life of self-control. He rejects all rhythms that are expressive of *meanness, insolence, frenzy and other such evils* (*Rep.* 3, 400 b). Simplicity should be a guiding principle in this

selection. Just as simplicity in diet is conducive to health of the body and complexity to disease, so simplicity in music leads to health of the soul, while complexity leads to disease of the soul — to inner discord.

In his treatment of melody, Plato brings in various Greek «modes» (ἁρμονίαι) or types of arrangement of the tones of the octave. He mentions six different modes in the *Republic*: the Dorian, the Lydian, the Mixolydian, the Hypolydian, the Ionian, and the Phrygian. Of these, he regards only the Dorian and the Phrygian as suitable for the citizens of the ideal State. The Dorian is expressive of courage; the Phrygian, of temperance. The Dorian mode *fittingly imitates the utterances and the accents of a brave man who is engaged in warfare or in any other hard and dangerous task, and who acts with firm step and a determination to endure,* while the Phrygian expresses *peaceful action under no stress of hard necessity, as when a man is using persuasion or entreaty, praying to the gods, or instructing and admonishing his neighbor, ... exhibiting wise restraint and contentment* (3, 399 a-c). The Mixolydian and the Hypolydian modes are to be excluded because they are sorrowful. Plato rejects dirges and laments as weakening the moral fiber, as opposed to the development of courage and temperance or self-mastery. For the same reason he rejects the Ionian and the Lydian modes. These, he says, are «slack», and hence tend to instil softness, weakness.

As a result of this elimination and the emphasis on simplicity, few musical instruments, of small compass, will be needed in the ideal State. *Our songs and melodies*, remarks the Platonic Socrates, *will not need instruments of many strings or capable of modulation into all the modes* (3, 399 c-d). Only the lyre and the cithara are to be retained.

This is Plato's position in the *Republic*. In the *Laws*, where again he speaks at some length about music, his views are substantially the same. Thus, he says that there is good music and bad music; that good music imitates good character, while bad music imitates evil character; that music which expresses good character is universally good, while that which expresses bad character is exactly the reverse; that we should accept music which imitates or expresses goodness (or beauty) and reject that which imitates badness (or ugliness); that by listening to the former we follow and attain excellence or virtue, whereas by listening to the latter we follow and develop vice, inner deformity.

To this teaching, two new ideas are added in the *Laws*. One of them pertains to the c r i t e r i o n of the goodness of music; the other, to the c o m p l e x i t y of music. With regard to the criterion by which the goodness

of music should be judged, Plato concedes to the majority that the pleasure evoked by music may be taken as proof that it is good ; but he adds the proviso that this pleasure should not be that of any chance person, but should be that of the man who excels all others in virtue and education[13]. Pleasure as such, he notes, apart from the character and education of the person who experiences it, cannot be taken as a standard of correctness, because a l l music evokes pleasure in s o m e class of persons. As regards complexity, Plato mentions and rejects a specific form of it not discussed in the *Republic* : counterpoint or part music. He is against it because it hinders musical education. He says (*Laws* 7, 812 d-e)[14] :

Complexity and variation of notes, when the strings give one tune and the poet or composer of the melody gives another — also when they make concords and harmonies, in which lesser and greater intervals, slow and quick, or high and low notes, are combined — all that sort of thing is not suited to those who have to acquire a speedy and useful knowledge of music in three years.

For Plato this pedagogical consideration is sufficient ground for rejecting part music. In the *Republic*, as we have noted, he had ethico-aesthetic grounds for disapproving of complexity in music. These broader considerations reappear in a later work, the *Timaeus*. Here (47 d-e), Plato remarks :

Music is granted to us for the sake of harmony ; and harmony, which has motions akin to those of our souls, is not regarded by the intelligent votary of the Muses as given by them with a view to irrational pleasure, which is deemed to be the purpose of it in our day, but as meant to correct any discord which may have arisen in the courses of the soul, and to be our ally in bringing her into harmony and agreement with herself ; and rhythm, too, was given by them for the same reason, on account of the irregular and graceless ways which prevail among mankind generally and to help us against them.

6. L i t e r a t u r e.

Let us turn now to those arts which are designated by the term literature. Plato gave a great deal of thought to the subject of literature, to the forms of it that were very popular in his time : rhetoric, stories, comedy, tragedy, epic and lyric poetry. I shall discuss each of these separately.

a. R h e t o r i c.

The term rhetoric (ῥητορικὴ) is used by Plato to denote both literature as a whole and also a part of it, oratory. Taken in the broader sense, it is

13. *Laws* 7, 802.

14. Cf. *Rep.* 3, 397.

the art of discourse, oral as well as written, prose as well as verse. Taken in the narrower sense, it is the art of persuasion — judicial, deliberative, and epideictic.

In his discussion of it, particularly in the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*, where he speaks of rhetoric at length, he distinguishes between true or «noble» rhetoric and pseudo or «ignoble» rhetoric. True rhetoric is based on real knowledge of the subject which it treats, and also of the soul, to which it addresses itself. Pseudo rhetoric, on the other hand, lacks knowledge of both, and bases itself on mere opinion. Plato stresses the importance of knowledge of the soul for the speaker and writer, because he considers the improvement of the soul to be the ultimate aim of true rhetoric. True rhetoric communicates truth, produces conviction based on insight, and promotes the development of virtue, of excellence. Pseudo rhetoric, on the other hand, is based on a semblance of knowledge, on mere opinion or conjecture, and is not concerned with the improvement of the soul, but seeks only to evoke pleasure : it is mere flattery. Thus, in the *Gorgias* (503 a) Socrates says :

I am contented with the admission that rhetoric is of two sorts : one, which is mere flattery and disgraceful declamation ; the other, which is noble and aims at the training and improvement of the souls of citizens, and strives to say what is best, whether welcome or unwelcome to the audience.

Plato was very critical of the oratory of the Sophists, such as Gorgias and Protagoras, who in their speeches made the worse argument appear the better, and flattered their listeners in order thus to acquire wealth and fame. But he has good things to say about the oratory of Pericles and Isocrates, regards both as distinctly superior to the Sophists. Pericles, he remarks, *was the most accomplished of rhetoricians ;* and this because in addition to being gifted, he was imbued, through his association with Anaxagoras, *with the higher philosophy, and attained the knowledge of mind and the negative of mind* (*Phaedr.* 270 a). Plato also lauds Isocrates, placing him much higher than Lysias. He says that Isocrates was a very gifted man, possessing superior character and having *an element of philosophy in his nature* (279 b). But though he rates Pericles and Isocrates higher than the other orators, still he does not speak of them as masters of the art of t r u e rhetoric.

Did Plato recognize any Greek as a real master of this art ? Yes. Socrates, whom he presents in his dialogues as a great exemplar of moral excellence and of authentic philosophy, is also for him a master of true rhetoric. More than all others, Socrates stresses the importance of seeking the

truth, of knowing the truth, and of courageously speaking the truth, *whether welcome or unwelcome to the audience*; and he endeavors to improve his listeners. In his great speech before the Athenians, recorded in substance in the *Apology*, Socrates states that it is speaking the truth that makes a good orator (18 a). And he repeatedly asserts that he is telling the truth, and remarks that having neglected his own private affairs, he goes about and tries to persuade every one of them whom he meets to concern himself above all about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul (29 d-31 c). Numerous similar statements are to be found in other Platonic writings where Socrates is the central figure.

b. Stories.

Stories (λόγοι, μῦθοι) are considered by Plato an important part of early education. They are of two kinds : the true and the fictitious. Both must be included in education. Such stories may be either in prose or in verse. Not all are suitable, especially in the earliest years, when the mind is very impressionable and the ideas received are likely to become indelibly fixed. Stories which contain false and detrimental ideas should be excluded[15].

Plato believed that most of the stories then in use were of the unsuitable type. Among those that definitely had his approval were the fables of Aesop ; for he tells us in the *Phaedo* (61 b) that his master Socrates spent his last days, while in prison, composing a hymn to Apollo and turning into verse some of Aesop's fables.

What are the criteria by which a story is to be judged whether or not it is suitable ? Plato does not deal with this question exhaustively. He mentions only three criteria, which he evidently regards as the most important. A story must represent correctly 1. the nature of the gods, 2. the character of the heroes, 3. the state of the departed souls. If it misrepresents either the gods, or the heroes, or the hereafter it should be rejected. He discusses each of these points and gives illustrations of bad stories taken from Greek poetry, especially Homer.

With regard to the representation of deity, Plato says that its nature ought always to be represented as good and the cause only of good, never of evil. Stories in which the gods are depicted as having the faults or vices of men, or as causing evil, must be rejected. Whether in prose or in verse, such stories are unsuitable for both the youth and adults. This rules out

15. *Rep.* 2, 376 e ff.

many stories contained in the works of Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, and other famous Greek writers.

Plato's grounds for insisting that deity must be depicted as good and the cause only of good, never of evil, are ethico-aesthetic and metaphysical. The ethico-aesthetic ground is that the descriptions of the gods as imperfect – as lying, hating, quarreling, murdering, and so on – are conducive to the formation of bad, ugly character. We become like that which we habitually contemplate ; and if people from youth on are impressed by descriptions of gods who have all the defects of men, they will themselves grew up with the corresponding defects of character. Plato is also aware of what psychologists today call «rationalization», the attempt to excuse one's own faults by noting that similar faults are to be found in others. Not only in connection with the gods, but in general falsehood has bad effects on the soul. Thus, in the *Phaedo* (115 e) Socrates says : *False speech is not only evil in it self but it infects the soul with evil*[16]

The metaphysical or ontological ground upon which the ethico-aesthetic one is based is that the representation of the gods as having vices and causing evil is not in accord with the true nature of the gods. The false representation of deity is for Plato the most serious type of lie ; and *no one, if he could help it, would tolerate the presence of untruth in the most vital part of his nature concerning the most vital matters* (*Rep.* 2, 382 a). It is extremely important, therefore, that deity be represented truthfully, as perfectly good and the cause only of good (379 b).

Another principle which should be observed by poets and other writers in depicting the gods is that they do not change, that every god remains absolutely and for ever in his own form. Being perfect, change for them would be change for the worse ; and it is absurd to suppose that a god would desire to make himself worse. Accounts, such as those which one finds in Homer's epics, that the gods assume all sorts of forms must be rejected, as they degrade the gods to deceivers, liars. A god must be represented as he truly is : unchanging, true both in word and in deed.

In connection with Plato's theology, it should be added that although he believes in the existence of many gods, his polytheism constitutes a great advance over popular Greek polytheism as found in the writings of the poets, not only in setting forth a purified concept of deity, but also in affirming the existence of a Supreme God, maker (δημιουργὸς) of the universe and of the subordinate gods, all-wise, all-good, providential.

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16. Cf. *Charm.* 156 e-157 a, *Prot.* 313 a-314 c.

With regard to the way the h e r o e s are to be depicted, Plato holds that they should be depicted as truthful, brave, and self-controlled. They should not be described as wailing and lamenting, but as bearing with the greatest equanimity any misfortune, such as the loss of a son or brother. Only the baser sort of men should be depicted as wailing, and women who are not good for anything. Also, heroes should not be represented as overcome by laughter, for violent laughter is unbecoming and provokes a violent reaction[17]. In short, heroes should be represented as being always masters of themselves, acting in a seemly manner. On the basis of this principle, Plato criticizes a number of passages in the *Iliad*.

As far as the description of the h e r e a f t e r is concerned, Plato expresses a strong disapproval of passages in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* which depict the realm of the departed souls as shadowy and gloomy. Such descriptions must be avoided, both because they are untrue, and also because they tend to make warriors afraid of death[18].

How he would have the hereafter depicted we see amply in the closing pages of the *Republic*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Gorgias*. The life of the soul after death is here described as a very real one, in which it retains its power of thinking, feeling, and remembering. But it is pointed out that the souls do not all share the same state. There are three different conditions. According to their character and life on earth, some souls live in the other world in everlasting bliss, others in everlasting suffering, and the rest – the great majority – in a mixed state, which is followed after a long period of time by a return to the earth, where they reinvest themselves with new bodies.

c. C o m e d y.

Plato distinguishes three types of poetry : 1. dramatic, 2. narrative, and 3. that which is a combination of these two. He divides dramatic poetry into comedy and tragedy, and cites the dithyramb as the best example of narrative or lyric poetry, and the epic as the best example of the third type. He discusses all these forms mainly in the *Republic*, books 2 and 10, and in the *Laws*, books 2 and 7.

In the *Republic*, where he is speaking of the best possible State, Plato condemns all poetry, except that part of the narrative kind which consists of hymns to the gods and praises of good men. In the *Laws*, where he is discussing the best practicable State, he allows, for some forms of

17. *Rep.* 3, 388 e ; cf. *Laws* 5, 732 b-c. 18. *Rep.* 3, 386 a-387 c.

comedy, tragedy and epic poetry. I shall present in turn his views on each of these kinds of poetry. Most of what he says about poetry pertains to comedy and tragedy ; hence the rest of this paper will be concerned chiefly with them.

I shall speak first of comedy. But before doing this, I must say a few words about the various charges which Plato brings against Greek poetry in general. One of them is that this poetry, from Homer on, is not based on real knowledge of its subject-matter or even on right belief : it knows nothing of true reality, but only the appearance ; and as a consequence it does not communicate knowledge of reality : it merely reproduces what wins the approval of the ignorant multitude. What is especially significant in this connection is that this poetry does not express the insights of the few wise and virtuous as to what is good and evil, just and unjust, beautiful and ugly, but rather notions of the mass of mankind, who are in the dark as regards the true nature of these things.

Another objection to Greek poetry which Plato advances is that it addresses itself not to the higher, rational part of the soul, but to the lower, irrational part, nourishing and strengthening it, while starving and undermining reason.

With regard to comedy (κωμῳδία), he holds in the *Republic* that it cultivates in men the impulse to play the clown, the buffoon. This is a bad impulse ; it should be allowed to wither away instead of being stimulated and strengthened. He says (10, 606 c) :

> *There are jests which you would be ashamed to make yourself, and yet are greatly amused by them, and are not at all disgusted at their baseness ; there is an element in human nature which is disposed to raise a laugh, and this which you once restrained by reason, because you were afraid of being thought a buffoon, is now let out again ; and having stimulated that element at the theatre, you are betrayed unconsciously to yourself into playing the comic poet at home.*

Evidently Plato is here criticizing vulgar forms of comedy.

In the *Laws* (11, 935 e) he does not revise his view on such types of comedy ; but he conceives of other types, which can be of positive value. The general tone of his thought leaves no doubt that he is against all comedies that employ base jokes. Further, he lays down the principle for the good State that no writer of comedies shall be allowed to ridicule any of the citizens, either by word or by mimicry, whether with or without passion. Thus he implicitly rules out such plays as Aristophanes' *Clouds,* in which this playwright ridicules his fellow Athenian Socrates. But he holds that other forms of comedy have an educational value for the citizens, provided

certain conditions are observed. They are the following : 1. The actors must in no case be freemen, but always slaves or foreign hirelings. 2. No free man or free woman must learn such mimicry. 3. The performances must always present some novel feature, i.e. must teach something new (*Laws* 7, 816 d-e).

Plato sees significant educational value in comedy because he is convinced that *it is impossible to learn the serious (σπουδαῖα) without the comic (γελοῖα), or any of a pair of contraries without the other* (816 d). By seeing the comic we come to know and appreciate better the serious. Thus he remarks : *It is specisely for this reason that we should learn the comic : in order to avoid ever doing or saying anything ludicrous, through ignorance, when we ought not* (816 e).

This point about the value of comedy in man's ethico-aesthetic training has been adopted and amplified by Henri Bergson, within the framework of his own metaphysics, in his book *Laughter. The art of the comic poet,* says Bergson, *is to acquaint us intimately with vice that is comic*[19]. The writer of comedies does consciously, deliberately, and more effectively what ordinary people do in everyday life. People laugh at eccentricities, at rigidity of body, character and mind, at mechanicalness, that take the form of awkwardness, absent-mindedness, automatism. Laughter is a kind of gesture on the part of society. By the fear which it inspires, it represses eccentricities, softens the rigidity of the mind and even of the body. Laughter pursues unconsciously a useful end, that of perfecting human nature[20]. Bergson identifies the comic with mechanicalness in man ; Plato, with incongruity. A person is comic, according to Plato, when there is a striking incongruity between what he imagines himself to be and what he really is. Thus, one is comic or ridiculous if he is homely and imagines that he is handsome ; ignorant, and imagines himself to be wise ; and so on[21]. Socrates is famous for his masterly use of irony to bring out the latter kind of incongruity. And the Socratic dialogues, in which this irony is extensively used, are instances of the type of comedy Plato approves of. From these, it is worth noting, Kierkegaard learned the masterly use or irony, seen in his «aesthetic» works.

d. Tragedy.

Plato rejects Greek tragedy (τραγῳδία), because it tends to strengthen

19. *Le Rire*, Paris 1947, 12.
20. Ibid. 15-16.
21. *Phil.* 48 c-50 a.

lower elements in man and to suppress the higher, being irrational in its basis and appealing to the irrational part of the soul (*Rep.* 10, 595 b). The writer of tragedies looks not at ideals, but at appearances, at imperfect historical reality. He proceeds not on the basis of knowledge, but of opinion, conjecture, hearsay ; and his works excite in people irrational fear, pity and sorrow. Tragedy causes these negative emotions to wax strong, to cloud and suppress the rational faculty. It effects this by representing its heroes as overcome by sorrow, beating themselves hopelessly and wailing (605 e).

Tragedians depict such characters because they do not have knowledge and understanding of the best. Moreover, they are not interested in learning about the higher type of character, because it is difficult to represent a man who is wise, gentle, and serene, and difficult for people to appreciate him when represented, inasmuch as they are strangers to wisdom and higher emotions ; whereas it is comparatively easy to depict the customary, agitated type of hero, and easy to find audiences that can understand and admire him.

The view of tragedy thus far stated is to be found in the *Republic*, especially in the tenth book. In the *Laws* Plato does not reject this view, but suggests here more definitely than in the *Republic* a higher type of tragedy, which would be acceptable in the good State. Thus, he says that *the representation of the most beautiful and best life is the most beautiful and best tragedy* (*Laws* 7, 817 a-d). Implicit here is the view that the life of the individual who is dedicated to the ideals of intellectual and moral excellence is tragic, and that it is such an individual and his life that should be the object of tragic poetry.

From this standpoint, several of Plato's own works must be considered as tragedies, tragedies of the truest kind, notably the *Apology*, the *Crito* the *Phaedo*, and the *Republic*. The tragic hero in the first three is Socrates. He is a true hero : wise, so far as human beings go, gentle, serene, courageous, temperate, just. He is a perfect master of his feelings, free from irrational forms of fear, pity and sorrow. Thus, in the *Phaedo* (60 a), where Socrates is about to die, his wife, Xanthippe, cries and beats herself. Socrates, on the other hand, remains serene and simply says to his friend Crito : *Crito, let some one take her home.* Later, when Socrates drinks the poison, even those who were able thus far to control themselves burst out into tears. Only Socrates retains his calm ; and he remarks (117 d) :

What is this strange outcry ? I sent away the women mainly in order that they

might not misbehave in this way, for I have been told that a man should die in peace. Be quiet, then, and have patience.

It should be remarked that from Plato's portrayal of the tragic hero and his description of the contrast presented by those about the hero, we learn not only that Plato would have the hero free of irrational fear and pity, and uncontrolled sorrow, which the tragedians he criticizes attribute to their heroes, but also that he is not at all opposed to the attribution of these feelings to characters other than the hero himself, when this is done for the sake of stressing his freedom from such feelings.

e. Lyric poetry.

Of all the poets, the lyric are the least criticized. Plato mentions without condemning the poetry of Anacreon, Pindar, Simonides, and Sappho. He calls Anacreon and Simonides wise[22], and Pindar most wise[23]. He refers most often to Pindar, in nearly all instances approvingly.

Nevertheless, the works of these poets are not the kind that Plato recommends for his ideal republic. He conceives of a higher kind of lyric poetry (μέλη), of which he gives no actual, historical instances. This poetry is to consist of *hymns to the gods and praises of good men*[24].

As in his theory of painting, so here Plato anticipated an art that blossomed in Byzantium. For in Byzantium lyric poetry assumed the form of sacred hymnography – of hymns to God and to holy men, saints[25].

f. Epic poetry.

In the *Republic*, epic poetry (ἔπη) is said to be a combination of narration and drama, particularly of tragedy. Hence in substance I have covered it in discussing these forms of literature. One major point alone should be added, that in the *Laws*, considering existing poetry in general, not only in Greece but *anywhere in any State in the world (Laws* 2, 658 e), Plato ranks epic as *by far the best.*

We do not know what non-Greek epics he had in mind when he said this : but so far as Greek epic poetry is concerned, we know that he regarded that of Homer as the best[26].

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22. *Phaedr.* 235 c, *Rep.* 1, 335 e.
23. *Laws* 3, 690 b.
24. *Rep.* 10, 607 a.
25. See C. Cavarnos, *Byzantine Thought and Art*, ch. 10.
26. *Ion* 530 b, *Laws* 6, 777 a, etc.

This evaluation of epic poetry, particularly Homer, does not constitute a contradiction to Plato's strictures on Homer and tragedy which we noted earlier. Firstly, his judgment here is relative, not absolute: he is c o m p a r-i n g the different existing forms of poetry with one another with respect to merit, placing epics above other works of poetry. He is not asserting that the existing epics have his complete approval. Secondly, Plato's own practice in his dialogues, of choosing some verses for censure and others for approval and illustration of his own doctrines, shows that he stood for a careful, critical, selective use of Greek poetry in education and in life. This standpoint was later adopted and justified by great Christian writers of the Hellenic East, such as Clement of Alexandria and Basil the Great[27].

7. C o n c l u s i o n.

Now to conclude. It is obvious from what I have said that Plato does not condemn the fine arts as such. What he does condemn is forms of art which he considers as wrong. Further, it is evident that he assigns important value to the fine arts when they are in their true, pure form, based on wisdom and directed to the higher elements in man. For then they introduce the soul to truth, lift her to the realm of ideals and transform her into a superior, harmonious existent.

As far as the arts of the Greeks are concerned, he finds no fault with architecture and sculpture, although he notes that these arts like all the rest can assume wrong forms, becoming bad instead of good influences.

Plato is very critical of the works of Greek painters, because they merely copy nature or have their source in phantasy instead of rational insight.

He is moderately critical of Greek dances and music, approving of some kinds and disapproving of others. Specifically, he approves of the «noble» dances but disapproves of the «ignoble»; and he accepts those forms of music which are simple and expressive of courage and temperance, but rejects those which are unduly complex and expressive of the opposite states of character.

In the case of literature, he distinguishes in each type the better and the worse expressions. He apparently regards the stories of Aesop as excellent, but conceives of forms of rhetoric, comedy, tragedy and other kinds of poetry of a distinctively higher level than those familiar to the Greeks. In particular, he implicitly offers his own dialogues as examples of true rhetoric, comedy and tragedy, being based on insight into truth and not

27. See my book *Byzantine Thought and Art* 22-24.

on mere opinion, and addressing themselves to the higher element in man, the rational faculty, seeking to strengthen this and enable it to transform man's inner and outer discord into harmony, beauty.

The question may be raised about the relevance of the principles underlying Plato's critique of the fine arts of Greece. In my discussion, I have already indicated briefly their relevance to an understanding and appreciation of Egyptian and Byzantine painting, of Byzantine poetry, and of Bergson's theory of comedy. Here I may add that the Byzantines were very close to Plato, not only in their theory and practice of sacred painting or iconography and of poetry, which chiefly took the form of hymns to God and to saints, but also in their theory and practice of church music, which excluded polyphony or part music and, going further in the direction recommended by Plato, excluded a l l musical instruments. I may also add, coming to more recent times, that the relevance of Plato's principles is seen conspicuously in the works of sixteenth and seventeenth century English poets, such as Edmund Spenser, William Drummond, and Milton[28], and also in those of Shelley[29]. These poets accepted Plato's doctrine of a suprasensible beauty as contrasted with a sensible beauty, and his view that poetry should seek to express the former rather than the latter and should exclude the ugly, except insofar as its portrayal is helpful for augmenting the expression of the higher beauty as seen in wisdom and moral excellence. Numerous other examples could be cited.

Plato's principles of artistic creation and art criticism are evidently of perennial interest and value. Every reflecting person who grasps these principles will be better able to understand the true nature of the various arts, the important role they can play in enriching and improving the lives of men, and also the various deviations from this true nature and their undesirable effects on humanity.

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28. See J. S. Harrison, *Platonism in English Poetry*, New York, Columbia University Press 1903.

29. See J. A. Notopoulos, *The Platonism of Shelley*, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1949, and J. E. Baker, *Shelley's Platonic Answer to a Platonic Attack on Poetry*, Iowa City, University of Iowa Press 1965.

Η ΠΛΑΤΩΝΙΚΗ ΚΡΙΤΙΚΗ ΘΕΩΡΗΣΙΣ ΤΩΝ ΚΑΛΩΝ ΤΕΧΝΩΝ

Περίληψις.

Εἰς τὴν μελέτην αὐτὴν παρουσιάζεται συστηματικῶς ἡ Πλατωνικὴ κριτικὴ θεώρησις τῶν καλῶν τεχνῶν – συγκεκριμένως, τῆς ἀρχιτεκτονικῆς, τῆς γλυπτικῆς, τῆς ζωγραφικῆς, τῆς ὀρχήσεως, τῆς μουσικῆς, τῆς ρητορικῆς, τοῦ διηγήματος, τῆς κωμωδίας, τῆς τραγωδίας, τῆς λυρικῆς ποιήσεως καὶ τοῦ ἔπους. Ἀποδεικνύεται ὅτι ὁ Πλάτων δὲν καταδικάζει τὰς καλὰς τέχνας αὐτὰς καθ' αὑτάς, ὅπως ἔχουν ἰσχυρισθῇ πολλοί, ἀλλὰ μόνον τὰς μορφὰς τῆς τέχνης, αἱ ὁποῖαι ὑποβιβάζουν τὸν ἄνθρωπον πνευματικῶς ἀντὶ νὰ τὸν ἀναγάγουν εἰς τὴν περιοχὴν τῶν ἰδεωδῶν, τοῦ πνευματικοῦ κάλλους.

Διὰ τὴν ἀρχιτεκτονικὴν καὶ γλυπτικὴν ὁ Πλάτων ἐκφράζει ἱκανοποίησιν καὶ θαυμασμόν. Ἐλέγχει ὅμως αὐστηρῶς τὰ ἔργα τῶν ζωγράφων, διότι ἁπλῶς μιμοῦνται τὴν φύσιν ἢ ἐκπηγάζουν ἀπὸ τὴν φαντασίαν. Ἡ κριτικὴ τῆς ὀρχήσεως καὶ τῆς μουσικῆς εἶναι μετριοπαθής : ὁ Πλάτων ἐπιδοκιμάζει ὡρισμένας μορφὰς καὶ ἀπορρίπτει ἄλλας. Ἐπιδοκιμάζει τοὺς σεμνοὺς χορούς, ἀλλ' ἀποδοκιμάζει τοὺς ἀσέμνους· δέχεται τὰς μορφὰς τῆς μουσικῆς, αἱ ὁποῖαι εἶναι ἁπλαῖ καὶ ἐκφραστικαὶ τῆς ἀνδρείας καὶ τῆς σωφροσύνης, ἀλλὰ καταδικάζει τὰ εἴδη, τὰ ὁποῖα εἶναι περίπλοκα καὶ ἐκφραστικὰ τῶν ἀντιθέτων ἕξεων καὶ διαθέσεων. Εἰς τὴν λογοτεχνίαν κάμνει διάκρισιν εἰς κάθε εἶδος μεταξὺ τῶν ἀνωτέρων καὶ τῶν κατωτέρων ἐκφάνσεων. Προφανῶς ἀναγνωρίζει τοὺς μύθους τοῦ Αἰσώπου ὡς ἄριστα παραδείγματα διηγήματος, ἀλλὰ διανοεῖται μορφὰς ρητορικῆς, κωμωδίας, τραγωδίας καὶ τῶν ἄλλων εἰδῶν τῆς ποιήσεως μᾶλλον ἀνωτέρου ἐπιπέδου ἀπὸ τὰ κοινῶς γνωστά. Προσφέρει δὲ τοὺς διαλόγους του ὡς δείγματα τῆς ἀνωτέρας, ἀληθοῦς ρητορικῆς, κωμωδίας καὶ τραγωδίας, βασιζόμενα ἐπὶ τῆς συλλήψεως τῶν ἰδεωδῶν ὑπὸ τοῦ νοὸς – καὶ ὄχι ἐπὶ τῶν αἰσθήσεων, τῆς ἀλόγου φαντασίας, τῆς πλάνης – καὶ ἀποτεινόμενα εἰς τὸ εὐγενέστερον μέρος τῆς ψυχῆς.

Τέλος, ὑπογραμμίζεται ἡ διηνεκὴς μεγάλη ἀξία τῶν αἰσθητικῶν ἀρχῶν τοῦ Πλάτωνος διὰ τὴν ἐκτίμησιν τῆς τέχνης ἄλλων πολιτισμῶν, ὅλως ἰδιαιτέρως δὲ τοῦ Βυζαντινοῦ, καὶ γενικῶς διὰ τὴν κατανόησιν τῆς φύσεως καὶ τῶν σκοπῶν τῶν καλῶν τεχνῶν.

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