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PLATO ON POETRY¹

By NORMAN GULLEY

The 'poetry' of my title has at least the virtue of brevity as a description of the sort of literature Plato discusses in Books 2, 3, and 10 of the *Republic*. But in its Platonic sense 'poetry' is too narrow a description. Two characteristics recognized by Plato as invariably belonging to poetry (*poiēsis*) are (i) that what it composes are fictional stories (*muthoi*) (*Phd.* 61 b), and (ii) that it composes them in verse (*Grg.* 502 c; *Smp.* 205 c; *R.* 393 d, 601 d, 607 d; *Phdr.* 258 d). And the sort of literature discussed in the *Republic*, while it invariably has characteristic (i), does not invariably have (ii).

Admittedly the discussion concentrates on verse literature, naturally enough in view of its predominance in Greek imaginative literature. Yet it embraces prose as well as verse literature. When Plato talks of fabricated or fictional stories (*muthoi plasthentes*: *R.* 377 b; all further unspecified references are to the *Republic*) and discusses whether there is any room for them in the education of the middle and top classes of his ideal state, he means to include stories in prose as well as in verse. This is made quite clear (380 c, 390 a, 392 a–b). So that if 'poetry' is to designate accurately the range of literature Plato is dealing with we need to take it, as Aristotle takes *poiēsis* in the *Poetics*, in a sense broad enough to include imaginative prose literature. I shall use it in this broad sense in examining Plato's views in the *Republic* of its aim and value. Webster's dictionary definition of it as 'inventive or imaginative writing', in distinction from history and philosophy, gets the sense well enough.

Plato's assessment of poetry has two readily distinguishable parts. First, in Book 10, there is an analysis of its aims; this provides both a positive theory of its aims and a rebuttal of the high claims often made in respect of the didacticism of its aims and the moral authority of the literary artist. Second, in Books 2 and 3, there is an evaluation of its educational uses; this assumes as its basis the truth of the positive theory in Book 10. I will start with Book 10, the fundamental part of the assessment.

Here is Plato's own statement of the claims made on behalf of Homer and the tragedians (598 d–e). Some people, he says, tell

¹ Substantially a paper read at the A.G.M. of the Classical Association at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth in April 1976.

us that these poets know all the arts and all things human pertaining to virtue and vice and all things divine. They also tell us, he says, that this knowledge is the essential basis of poetic ability, of being a good poet. This second claim is treated as tantamount to the claim that the essential mark of a poetic work is its ability to convey to others the author's insight into the truth of things; the poet is the expert educator. Plato deals first with the claim that poets actually *possess* this wide-ranging knowledge. We may forget the part of it which claims for the poet expert technical knowledge and finds in his work a guide to housekeeping, military strategy, and so on. This sort of thing is no essential part of the poet's subject-matter. Plato describes the poet's subject-matter, as Aristotle does, as human behaviour in its moral aspects (603 c). And he treats as the crucial part of the *cognitive* claim made on behalf of the poets the claim that they know what moral excellence is (599 d, 600 e, 603 b). This is the main target of his criticism.

His first and most important criticism is specially important for the notion of artistic *imitation* which it contains. In outlining it I will leave out of account the part which Forms or Ideas play in it. When I refer to what is 'real' or 'the real thing' I refer to the things of this world, not the Forms. Poets, Plato argues, are like painters (597 e–598 d). 'Ut pictura, poesis.' And painters portray only phantoms of what is real. If a painter portrays a bed he portrays a mere phantom bed, the appearance of a bed from a particular perspective. His painted bed is not real at all. You cannot sleep in it. Nor can you make inferences from your perception of any number of phantom beds to a real bed, the kind made by a carpenter. For the painter's beds are wholly delusive as metaphysical pointers.

Now poets, Plato goes on, are in the same metaphysical boat (598 e ff.). All they portray or 'imitate' are phantoms or appearances of the real thing. Instead of phantom beds and tables they portray a sort of phantom moral behaviour, just as radically cut off as the painter's portraits from the real world, from what good behaviour is in real life. And you can no more infer what moral excellence is from listening to a recital of the *Iliad* or watching the *Agamemnon* than you can make inferences to a real table from looking at paintings of a table. Notice how Plato fills out his analogy (599 b–600 e). To the carpenter's beds and tables correspond good deeds in real life. To the painter's phantom bed or table corresponds the *Iliad* or the *Agamemnon*, phantoms of real-life good behaviour. And to carpenters correspond philosophers. The metaphysical downgrading of the *Iliad* and the *Agamemnon* carries with it a *cognitive* downgrading of the poet's vision. The

poet cannot possibly know what moral excellence is. If he did, he would not waste his time and prostitute his knowledge by producing phantoms. He would set a real-life example to others by his good deeds and help them to see the light for themselves. He would be a philosopher, not a poet.

The main interest of this argument lies in its notion of artistic imitation. It is as *imitators* that Plato condemns painters and poets. He does not say simply that they are restricted in their *vision* to appearances or phantoms. He also says, explicitly, that all they are doing in producing their paintings or poems is *imitating* appearances or phantoms (598 b, 600 e). It is not the case that they are imitating the real thing, making a hash of it, and producing as a result a deceptive appearance of the real thing. They are directly imitating or portraying mere appearances. 'Imitation' is restricted in sense to 'direct portrayal of appearances'.

It could well be argued that the painting or the poem is a mere phantom of the real thing in either case, i.e. whether it is an appearance or the real thing that the poet or painter is imitating. So why all the fuss about Plato's notion of imitation? Does it matter whether we say that the painter aims to *represent* a real bed or to *present* a phantom one? It does. The fuss is about aims, in particular about Plato's notion of the aims of the literary artist. He is deliberately ruling out any idea that the literary artist is aiming, however unsuccessful he might be in the result, to imitate something *beyond* appearance by *means* of an appearance or phantom-show, to *represent* something beyond what he directly portrays. So that Plato is not just ruling out the idea that the artist can *botch* his portrait. He is also ruling out the idea that he can *upgrade* it by making it more than a mere copy of a phantom. It follows that a poetic work has no referential value, and so no cognitive value, beyond the images it imitates or portrays. In the story which the poet presents to us there is no pointer to any truth behind the scenes. To use Proclus' phrase in his commentary on the *Republic* (*in Remp.* ed. Kroll. i. 74.19–20), there are no 'concealed thoughts' behind the veil of fictions. The painted veil is all there is. And there is no truth in it.

Let me illustrate in simple, concrete terms the level of significance to which Plato is restricting the poet's portraits and the levels of significance he is ruling out. Some of us immediately react to Plato's argument by saying something like this: 'Surely one of the great things about Homer's work or Shakespeare's work is the truth about human nature and human behaviour we find in them.' It is misguided, we say, to rule out even the possibility that literary

works can *represent* such truth. More specifically, we would argue against Plato that implicit in a literary artist's work—whether an *Iliad* or an *Oliver Twist*—is some general conception of human excellence or some general truth about human fortunes. This can be inferred from the story and reflects the artist's moral insights. You pick up the clues from the way the story is made to evolve, from the author's apparent sympathy or lack of sympathy with particular characters, from moral predicates applied to particular actions and apparently reflecting the author's convictions, and so on. You note that what Achilles does to Hector after killing him is described as outrageous, that his killing of the Trojan captives for Patroclus' funeral pyre is described as wicked. You sympathize with Oliver and Nancy but not with Fagin and Bill Sikes. And when Dickens says in the preface to his story that the conduct and character of Nancy are *true*, he is not saying that it is true that there was a Nancy who actually behaved as Nancy is portrayed as behaving, that it is true, e.g., that this Nancy went to meet someone named Brownlow at the side of the Thames. He is saying that his portrayal of Nancy *represents* certain general truths about moral behaviour which his readers, by inference from his story, can recognize and which he wants them to accept, e.g., that sincerity of affection, devotion to the best moral interests of the object of one's affection, indeed moral goodness generally, are not children of particular material circumstances or of a particular social class. To quote what Dickens himself liked to quote:

True hearts are more than coronets
And simple faith than Norman blood.

So what the literary artist is doing, on this view, is embodying his moral and psychological insights in his story, not by *stating* any *general* truths but by making his story a *particular* imaginative illustration or instance of them; he *represents* them. And it is this which, on Plato's analysis, the literary artist is incapable of doing. He does not have the insights. And the level of significance of the phantoms he produces is the level belonging to what he directly portrays. There is no truth to be *inferred* from this level. And no truth *belongs* to this level. The literary artist has *made up* what he portrays.

But Plato does not merely argue, as he has done so far, that in fact the literary artist lacks insight into moral truth and produces what are only phantoms of reality. He goes on to argue that the proper aim of the literary artist has no concern with truth or reality. It is not his job to try to be an expert moral educator. So what

precisely is his job? To answer this Plato puts forward what we should nowadays call an emotionalist thesis about the literary artist's aims. What is it in us, he asks, that the poet aims to gratify? (603 b–c). Not reason, he says, but feeling (*pathos*) (604 a–b). When we praise someone as an excellent poet we are not assuming, as some misguided people do, that knowledge of virtue and vice is the basis of his excellence. We are praising him, Plato says, as the one whose stories have the greatest emotional effect on us (605 d). Aristotle follows Plato here in recognizing that the important question to ask in evaluating a poet's work is the question: what is its actual or potential effect on those who read it or listen to it? He also follows Plato in recognizing that it is the *emotional* effect we have to consider. Plato emphasizes especially the insidious nature of these effects in moulding our emotional dispositions (605 c–607 a). The audience is carried along emotionally with the characters and events portrayed. It weeps with Priam as he moans and rolls in the dung at the sight of Hector being dragged behind Achilles' chariot. It rejoices with Electra and the Chorus at the reunion with Orestes. The audience abandons itself, as Plato puts it, in following the portrayal (605 d). And what is insidious about this, he goes on, is that we do not realize what effect this sort of thing has on our emotional attitudes. We do not reflect that entering into the feeling of others inevitably reacts on the tenor of our own feelings and hence on our moral attitudes (606 b–c). For it is our approvals and disapprovals, our sympathies and antipathies, which are evoked by what the poet portrays. And they are not evoked according to any *consistent* pattern, let alone a pattern which would result in the *right* moral attitudes. Why should the literary artist be concerned with that? He is an entertainer, not an expert moral teacher.

This is an acute analysis of the literary artist as entertainer, giving his audience or reader what he thinks will be maximum emotional satisfaction. And note that, in keeping with the *metaphysical* grading of his portraits, the literary artist's aim is presented as one which relies for its effects on what is *directly* portrayed or imitated. What I mean, and what I think Plato means, is this. The poet's tale is a tale of *particular* events which in itself, in the manner of an adventure story, is calculated to engage the audience's feelings. A condition is that the audience must 'believe in it', as we say. But not in the sense that the poet must prompt his audience to recognize and accept any general truths suggested by his tale. The aim is to get the audience to accept as 'real', as actually happening, something which is unreal, which is not happening, which is made up. The rhapsode and the actors are the poet's allies in this. In Plato's

Ion the rhapsode confesses that when he sings of Odysseus leaping on to the threshold and revealing himself to the wooers, or of Achilles rushing on Hector, or of some pitiful incident about Andromache or Hecuba or Priam, he is beside himself. He feels himself present in the action he describes—in Ithaca or Troy or wherever (535 b–c). This is how he gets the most telling effect on his audience (535 b, e)—presenting what is *directly portrayed* as the real thing, as if what he portrays really happened, as if his fictions are true. Moreover it is made clear (535 e–536 b) that in doing this he is carrying out the aims of the literary artist. He is the link-man between poet and audience.

This, then, is Plato's conception of the literary artist, as imitator and entertainer. And these two aspects of the literary artist and his work are complementary. The phantoms the literary artist portrays as imitator are used by him as *direct emotional* stimuli. Proclus, in his commentary on the *Republic*, is extremely unhappy about this assessment. He is still partially under the spell of the idea of the literary artist as the man of wisdom. What he finds specially difficult to accept is that Plato is serious in arguing that the work of Homer, of all people, is completely lacking in truth and aims only to give emotional kicks. Proclus cannot very well sweep Plato's arguments under the carpet. What he does is to argue that they do not *apply* to Homer (Kroll. i. 196.18 ff.). He grants that they apply to tragedians and comedians, that tragedians and comedians are imitators with an emotionalist aim (i. 197.30–198.11; 199.12–14). But Homer, he argues, is not an imitator (198.11 ff.). And since Plato is condemning only imitators, Homer is exempt, and intended by Plato to be exempt, from condemnation. But the plain fact is that in the last book of the *Republic* Plato, having introduced at the start a new general definition of imitation (595 c–597 e), condemns *all* poets as imitators, Homer included (599 b–c; 600 c, e; 601 a; 603 b; 606 e–607 a). Proclus' argument will not fit Plato's text. Yet his distinction between the imitative and the non-imitative poet is important. It shows that he is well aware of the narrowness of Plato's concept of poetic imitation.

Proclus' distinction is essentially a distinction between, on the one hand, what I shall call direct-level portrayal, what Plato calls 'imitation', and, on the other, allegorical representation. In his fictional tales, Proclus says, the imitative literary artist gives a direct-level portrayal of particular events in the life of particular people. Imitative literature is a kind of picture-painting, as Plato's analogy between painter and poet tried to bring out. It does not try to pack any recondite significance into its tales. It does not

pretend to have *cognitive* value. It presents a fiction (*plasma*) for our delight. Proclus recognizes all this. But Homer, he argues, is not an imitator. As Proclus puts it, he uses the veil or curtain of his fictional tales symbolically, as an *allegory* of the truth of things. Behind the veil of appearances, he says, behind the veil of phantoms, lie unseen or hidden thoughts which contain the essence (*ousia*) of things. So do not look for truth, he argues, in the make-believe of imitative poets. Look for it in a poet like Homer, who is not an imitator (Kroll. i.74.10 ff.; 86.15–23; 198.13–199. 14).

This is a brave attempt to save Homer. Proclus' difficulty is that he wants to defend Homer and Plato at the same time, not just to leave Homer unimpaired by Plato's literary theory but to leave room in Plato's theory for recognition of the greatness of Homer's work as a key to the mystery of things. And it cannot be done. Plato is classing all poetry, all imaginative literature, as imitative. It follows, as we have seen, that any truth-claims made for imaginative literature, Homer's work included, can be dismissed. The literary artist's statements, at the *only* level of significance they possess, are simply untrue. It is not the case that Odysseus clung to a fig-tree above Charybdis, or that Oedipus knocked his father out of the carriage with his stick, or that Louisa fell off the Cob at Lyme Regis.

Let me briefly sum up Plato's argument so far. The truth-claims made on behalf of imaginative literature can be reduced virtually to absurdity. Not only does it not *represent* any truth. What it directly *presents* is obviously untrue. Truth in fact is not its concern. Its proper concern is to entertain by playing on the emotions. Now, with this theory already firmly fixed in his mind, Plato asks the important question: has imaginative literature any part to play in education? Obviously it can be ruled out of higher education. It has nothing to offer to grown-ups. It is intellectually void. But what about children and adolescents? Plato's educational aim here is to ensure that the moral dispositions required in the citizens are firmly established by the age of seventeen or so. And he does not see this stage of education as a matter of *intellectual* training; it is a matter of fostering the right *emotional* dispositions (522 a). Can literature help here? After all, the literary artist aims at emotional effect. But he is morally irresponsible. His aim does *not* include a regard for any consistent morality in the emotional tendencies he feeds. There is only one possible way that Plato can see of taking this irresponsibility out of literature and making literature serve his educational aim. It is by putting the control of literature into

the hands of the state. Plato explores the possible value of this in Books 2 and 3 of the *Republic*.

What the state can do, Plato imagines, is to make literature morally responsible. This has become the standard justification for literary censorship. Plato claims for the state the right to lay down general guide-lines which all fictional stories must follow. He himself suggests certain moral and religious principles to serve as guide-lines. And he stamps them with his own seal of truth. We shall see presently how he envisages their operation in sorting out good fictions from bad. We naturally assume that stories exemplifying the principles will be approved, those incompatible with the principles disapproved. But there is one assumption which Plato has to make. It is that stories approved in this way will have the required emotional effects on those who read them or listen to them. The stories must *consistently* foster the right emotional attitudes. For this is the real aim of the exercise. Conformably again with his literary theory, Plato sees that it is what is *directly portrayed* that counts in getting these effects. No hidden meanings, no allegorical nonsense, he says in effect in Book 2 (378 d). He grants that general principles and guide-lines are needed to help the censor to sort out good fiction from bad. But the job of the stories themselves is to promote by direct influence on young people the right emotional dispositions. What Plato is trying to do in fact, in Books 2 and 3 of the *Republic*, is to harness his literary theory to his educational schemes.

Now to some of the detail. Plato makes clear at the start that he is dealing with *imaginative* stories, with tales (*muthoi*) which he ranks as fictional and false (377 a–b; cf. 382 d). He deals especially with what Homer, Hesiod, and the tragedians say about the behaviour of gods and heroes. He does not deal in detail with what these poets tell of *human* behaviour and *human* fortunes. But he puts this part of their subject-matter as well into the category of *muthologia*, the telling of stories which are false (392 b). All these stories are examples of what the theory of Book 10 grades metaphysically as phantoms. The censor's task is to try to ensure that stories of this kind have the right emotional effects.

And there is one thing in Plato's approach to the vetting of these stories which immediately strikes us as odd. It is not that his main concern is with the effect on audience or reader of what is directly portrayed, of what I shall call the direct-level statements of the stories. Knowing Plato's literary theory, we expect that. The striking thing is his concern with the truth-value of these direct-level statements: e.g., he emphasizes that Zeus did not in fact throw Hephaestus

out of heaven when he was trying to save his mother from a beating, that Hector's body was not in fact trailed round the grave of Patroclus, that Theseus did not in fact rape Helen, and so on (378 b–d; 391 b–e). Indeed, he seeks to *demonstrate* that this or that statement in a particular tale is false (380 b–c, 381 b–e, 391 e). It is as if a critic of *Oliver Twist*, while accepting that the tale is fictional and the statements made by Dickens in the course of it false, yet proceeds to *demonstrate* that Oliver did not in fact ask for more. We do not expect this. What is the point of it? The stories are admittedly fictional. So the particular statements which make them up are all on exactly the same footing as far as truth-value is concerned. They are all equally false. So their truth-value is not a possible basis for sorting out the sheep from the goats: e.g., if Plato was deciding between, say, *Middlemarch* and *Women in Love*, we would think it pointless for him to bother with the question whether in fact Dorothea married Will or whether in fact Birkin wept over Gerald's frozen body. How could that possibly help him to answer the question: which of these two stories is more likely to foster desirable emotional attitudes?

A possible explanation of this concern with the truth-value of particular fictional statements is that Plato wanted to disabuse those who believed that the stories *were* or *might be* true. Certainly the Greek's distinction between imaginative and non-imaginative literature was, in Plato's time, much less clear-cut than our own. The Greek's attitude to the raping of Helen by Theseus would not be at all the same in this respect as the Victorian Englishman's attitude to Dorothea marrying Will. Indeed, some Greeks accepted as literally true the stories about gods and heroes which Plato takes to be fictional. Euthyphro, e.g., in Plato's dialogue, says that he believes that the gods actually did what the poets say they did (*Euthyph.* 6 b–c). It is impossible to estimate how many Euthyphros there were in Athens. But it seems safe to say—and Plato certainly assumes it—that the gods and heroes of the poets were *popularly* taken to be real gods and heroes, and the stories told about them to be stories of what they did in an unrecorded past.

If so, we can readily see a significant difference between the statement that Theseus raped Helen and the statement that Dorothea married Will. For the Greek the first statement applies to somebody. It *might* be true. For the Victorian Englishman the second statement applies to nobody. It cannot possibly be true. Theseus and Will are in different metaphysical leagues. Nowadays, of course, we readily enough place the ancient Greek gods and heroes, considered as individual persons, in a common imaginative

realm with Don Quixote and Sarah Gamp. If it is stated, e.g., that the Olympian gods have very naughty propensities we readily treat this as a statement in the same fictional league as the statement that Dorothea married Will. But Plato could not afford to treat it like that. Certainly, from his own viewpoint, the statements *are* in the same fictional league. These gods, immortal creatures with earthy bodies, cannot, he says in the *Phaedrus*, be conceived on any rational grounds as existing (246 c–d). We *imagine* (*plattomen*) gods of that kind. They are part and parcel of *muthoi plasthentes*, creatures of fiction, of fancy. So there is no question of any statements about them being true. Yet, from what Plato apparently takes to be a common Greek viewpoint, some of the poets' statements about them might well be true. So there would be some point in knocking that idea on the head, not merely by emphasizing that *all* the poets' stories about them are fictional and false but by providing a demonstration of the falsity of *some* of their statements. And this would, possibly, explain why Plato pays so much attention to the truth-value of direct-level statements in the poets.

But it is by no means a sufficient explanation. It is, I think, an essential part of the background of Plato's argument. And it is the explanation which we would like to be sufficient. It assumes a genuine concern for the truth on Plato's part. But the argument in Book 2 soon makes it apparent that it is not Plato's *serious* views about this imaginative world of the behaviour of gods and heroes, and indeed of human behaviour, which is the basis of his concern with the truth-value of the poets' statements. Plato does not want to pit his own view that *all* these statements are fictional and equally false against the view that *some* of them are or might be true. Certainly he wants *some* fictional statements to be rejected as false. But at the same time he wants *some* to be accepted as literally true. He proposes to sanction as true those statements which he thinks will have good emotional effects, to condemn as false those which he thinks will have bad effects (377 c, 381 d–382 d, 389 b, 391 b–392 a). True fictions are good fictions. False ones are bad. If imaginative literature is to have any educational use, then a necessary condition, in Plato's view, is that its stories are accepted as literally true.

It is this view which lies behind Plato's prescription of principles to be used by the state as *true* principles in its control of literature. He is attempting to justify his curious distinction between true and false fictions. His procedure is this. He proclaims the truth of certain general principles which are to serve as the state's guide-lines

for literature (379 a ff.). Literary statements exemplifying the principles are approved and may justifiably be propagated as literally true; literary statements incompatible with the principles are condemned as false and disallowed (379 c ff.). So that we have, on the one hand, reprehensibly false literary statements (e.g. 381 e, 386 c, 391 d) and, on the other, what Plato describes as approximately true ones (382 d). This is analogous in its logic to the commandment about the equality of animals in *Animal Farm*. It assumes that, while all fictional statements are false, some are more false than others. Plato's further step is to assume that, if a statement approximates to the truth, then it qualifies to be propagated as literally true and will thereby be sure to have the right emotional effect on those who listen to it or read it. So we now have at least part of the explanation we were seeking of Plato's curious preoccupation with the question of the truth-value of direct-level literary statements. He thinks that only statements which are taken to be true are 'good-effect' statements; statements which can be shown to be false are 'bad-effect' statements.

Here is an illustration of how the distinction works, taken from Book 2 (381 b–d). There are certain true principles about the nature of gods and heroes. Thus gods are perfectly good and changeless, incapable of deceit or injustice or evil of any kind. So that if Homer or Hesiod or whoever describes a god doing something incompatible with those attributes, then he is stating what is false. Such an action, Plato says, is impossible. Hence it did not occur. So Proteus did not in fact change, as Homer says he did, into a lion and a snake and a tall, flowering tree when Menelaus and his friends came rushing at him. Changeless beings cannot do such things. Similarly it is demonstrably false that Hector's body was trailed round the grave of Patroclus, that Theseus raped Helen, and so on. This is the way in which Plato criticizes admittedly fictional stories for the literal falsity of the statements they contain. In the same way one could argue that the March Hare did not in fact ask Alice if she would like some wine. Hares cannot do such things. Or a critic of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* could apply to it Plato's main guide-line for the portrayal of human fortunes, the principle of moral justice (392 b). The critic could argue that Tess, as 'a pure woman', does not deserve to suffer misfortune and that, since God is a guarantor of moral justice, it is impossible that she did suffer misfortune; so she was not in fact executed, and Mr. Hardy's statement that she was executed is false.

Plato decrees that all such statements, which he illustrates abundantly and which he condemns as at once false and harmful, are

to be struck out of imaginative literature. Homer is the principal target of his criticisms. And Proclus is, understandably enough, again unhappy. For he had contrived to pull Homer out of the firing line of Plato's literary theory, to take him out of the class of imitators. Yet Homer is now under severe attack for the falsity and harmfulness of what he directly portrays, as if what he directly portrays in his fictions is what really matters, i.e. as if he is an imitator. In meeting this difficulty Proclus' ingenuity is remarkable. He says that Plato has no alternative but to treat Homer *as if* he is an imitator and to concentrate his criticism on Homer's direct-level statements (Kroll. i.76.24–81.27; cf. 44.14–17; 74.16–30). The explanation is, he says, that it is only children and adolescents with whom Plato is concerned here and the effect of imaginative literature on *them*. And the only effect relevant in such cases is the direct effect of what is directly portrayed. Children and adolescents, Proclus says, are incapable of perceiving the truth which lies behind the fictions (*plasmata*) presented to them. They do not look beyond the veil. That is why it is important to censor very severely what poets like Homer directly portray when considering their tales as educational material for youngsters.

Proclus emphasizes, however, that this does not entail in any way that Homer's real purpose is to entertain youngsters in this direct way with his fictions. In fact, Proclus argues, Plato talks about poets elsewhere in the dialogues in a way which implicitly ascribes to Homer a far loftier purpose than this (Kroll. i.180.4–196.13). In elaborate and vastly entertaining detail he illustrates the high allegorical significance of the direct-level statements in Homer which Plato condemns. This part of Proclus' commentary is one of the most entertaining things in Greek literature. My favourite example is his interpretation of a passage of the *Iliad* (14.292–351) severely censured by Plato (390 b–c). It is the passage describing the impetuosity of Zeus in making love to Hera on Mount Ida. Homer describes the passion of Zeus as too great to allow him to take Hera to the decent privacy of the bedroom. Proclus (Kroll. i.132.14 ff.) explains their union in terms of the first principles of Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy. He associates Mount Ida, as the place of the union, with Plato's realm of Forms (*Idē* with *idea*). A wonderful and utterly absurd interpretation. There is one important question which Proclus fails to ask. If imaginative literature of the calibre of the *Iliad* is of such high significance, if it can really initiate grown-ups into the truth of things, and if, further, Plato is implicitly assuming that it can, why does Plato exclude it completely from higher education?

So much for direct-level statements incompatible with the rules, statements which occupy virtually all Plato's attention in his discussion of the proper content of literature. This still seems to leave plenty of room for *approved* fictions. And in fact Plato says (383 a) that there are many of Homer's statements which are all right. But he gives precious few examples. One of the only two or three examples he gives (389 e) is the statement in the *Iliad* (4.412) that Diomedes told his friend to sit down and keep quiet and listen to what he is told. Obviously a statement worthy to be propagated to young lads as literally true. An excellent example to set to them. Later in the *Republic* there is what Plato considers a really grand example of a fictional tale (*muthos*) which qualifies to be propagated as literally true. It is the tale about the earth-born men of different metals (414 b–415 d). Admittedly it is a tale to be put out as literally true by the founders of the state, not a tale made up by a literary artist under the state's guidance. But Plato ranks it under the same general head of 'justifiable lies' as the ones the literary artist might be permitted to make up. So it will serve as an illustration.

In this manipulation of fictions it is difficult to find any genuine concern for the truth. Admittedly Plato declares that the general principles to be used as guide-lines by the state are true principles. And we have seen that it is conformity or lack of conformity with these principles which he himself uses as a criterion of the truth or falsity of particular fictions in his criticism of the tales of the poets. Is this not evidence of genuine concern for the truth? Obviously it would be if Plato allowed this criterion to stand on its own feet. But he does not. The overriding criterion is the moral effect of particular fictions on audience or reader. It is clear throughout the discussion that considerations of moral benefit or harm finally determine whether particular fictions are to be propagated as true or suppressed as false. Plato admits this (378 a, 383 d, 389 b; similarly *Laws* 660 d–e, 661 c, 663 d–664 a). And he admits it with full awareness of the fictional status of *all* the tales he is dealing with. He is aware that the statement that Zeus decided to send a baneful dream to Agamemnon is on the same truth-value footing as the statement that Mr. Winkle took the dreadful resolve to accept the challenge of Dr. Slammer of the 97th.

Plato's final justification, then, for his proposal to propagate approved fictional statements as literally true is that the moral end justifies these means. As we saw in explaining his preoccupation with the truth-value of particular literary statements, he thinks that approved fictions are likely to foster the right moral dispositions only if they are accepted as literally true. But why does he think so?

Why does he not simply assume that tales exemplifying his guidelines will have the right emotional effect? There is a pointer to the answer in his literary theory. In that theory one aspect of the artist as imitator of phantoms is his role of illusionist (598 b–599 a, 601 a–b). The painter can make people imagine that they are looking at a real bed. The poet can make people imagine that what he portrays is real, that his fictions are true. This, as Socrates suggests to the rhapsode Ion, is how you achieve the greatest emotional effect on your audience. The reason for this is that conviction of the literal truth of tales told of gods and men carries its own emotional charge. In the *Laws* (679 c, e) Plato recognizes the important *moral* influence of these tales if they carry the conviction that they are true. With this conviction, he says, they can engender a simple sort of faith which he counts as one of the foundations of the moral goodness of men of an earlier age. If this is so, then fictional tales acquire importance as instruments of moral education. And if the state is to control that education and gain the moral effects it thinks desirable, it must control the content of the fictions. Moreover, it must propagate approved fictions as literally true.

I can now sum up very briefly my explanation of Plato's procedures in trying to determine the place of imaginative literature in education. He has a very definite view of the proper aim of such literature. He has a very definite view of the proper aim of the education of young people. The question he asks is whether it is possible to accommodate the first aim to the second. And his procedure in answering it is to work out the necessary conditions for that accommodation. What is surprising is that, for all the importance he appears to attach to the use of imaginative literature in early education and for all the attention he gives to distinguishing 'true' fictions from 'false', he finally decides that there is no place for such literature in his ideal state. Limited censorship cannot guarantee the moral benefit of the fictions it thinks permissible. As becomes clear in Book 10 Plato's inherent mistrust of this sort of literature—for the unpredictability of its moral effects and for its essentially emotional appeal—leads him to rule it out. It is too dangerous. There is to be no course at all in Greek literature in the educational curriculum. All that Plato finally allows the poet to try his hand at, subject always to censorship, are hymns to the gods and praises of good men, preferably dead ones (607 a; cf. *Laws* 801 e–802 a). Which means, in effect, that there is to be *no* imaginative literature in Plato's ideal state. Humdrum hymns and humdrum eulogies hardly count.

I have discussed at some length Plato's attempt in the early books of the *Republic* to determine the educational value of imaginative literature. My main reason for doing this is that I consider these books important for an appreciation of the literary theory of Book 10. In their curious but emphatic way they underline several important features of the theory, in respect of both what the literary artist portrays and what he aims to achieve. Moreover, a clear understanding of the relation between the theory and its application to educational issues is an antidote to much misunderstanding of the theory itself. The point is that in the *Republic* the theory is applied in a context which almost inevitably works against an unbiased assessment of its merits. Indeed, an important reason for the theory's generally bad press has always been its association with the special political and educational issues of the *Republic*. In the *Republic* Plato was seriously determined to settle what he calls the quarrel between poetry and philosophy (607 b). He settles it in favour of the philosopher and turns the tables on the poet. Imaginative literature, considered as a means of nurturing moral excellence, gets a very low value-rating from him; philosophy gets a very high rating. It is this low value-rating for literature which has prompted many to frown upon the literary theory.

So, in defence of the theory, I will conclude my discussion with a few remarks on this important question of value-rating. I will take for granted that most people disagree with Plato's abysmally low value-rating of Greek imaginative literature. But it is important to recognize that our most intense disagreement on this score can go happily hand in hand with complete acceptance of Plato's literary theory. For the theory does not itself *entail* any particular value-rating, high or low, for imaginative literature. So we must not let our disagreement about Plato's value-rating of it automatically spill over on to his theory about its aims. We must look at the theory in its own right, apart from the special idealisms of the *Republic*. I happen to think that it is original and important as a theory about the distinctive aim of the work of the literary artist, the man who entertains us with his imaginative fictions as opposed to the man with the didactic writer's job of giving us factual information or an explanatory theory. The literary artist's work gets its low value-rating from Plato only in relation to Plato's scheme of moral and political values. And we may well reject that scheme. We may disagree with Plato's intellectualistic conception of moral excellence. We may be out of sympathy with his puritanical attitude to the emotional excitements afforded by the works of the

literary artist, especially of the dramatist. If we look at Plato's literary theory through our own evaluative spectacles we may well give imaginative literature a high value-rating.

So let us not be distracted by value-ratings in assessing Plato's contribution to literary theory. Keep our eyes fixed on the theory itself. It is obviously wrong to throw out the baby with the bath water before we have given the baby a careful examination.

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