

# ON THE MEANING OF LITERARY DISCOURSE IN PHILOSOPHY: SOME REMARKS ON PLATO'S POETICS (abridged version)

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*The article argues against some contemporary attempts of de(con)struction of Platonism, especially in the field of literary theory. The author's main point is that Plato's dialogues and "myths" are constitutive in the philosophical sense, because the synthesis of logos and mythos is essential for the transcendental truth of Platonism.*

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Plato's ill-famed expulsion of poets from the ideal *polis* – the exclusion of the great Homer and some adored writers of tragedies, founded on the argument that they are simply "imitators of images" that "do not lay hold on truth" (*The Republic X*, 600e) – naturally plays an important role in *The Republic* and cannot be overlooked in Plato's opus as a whole. This thought by the founder of philosophical idealism, which seems rather odd from the present-day point of view, must be critically considered and, most probably, dismissed. Nonetheless, it would be a mistaken consequence, destructive to the relations between philosophy and poetry, if an overall rejection of Plato's philosophical idealism were inferred from the legitimate dismissal of his "poetics." Despite its gravity, the condemnation of poetry does not concern the very essence of Platonism – this essence of Platonism being, most concisely, the overcoming of transitoriness and longing for eternity that is common to both poets and philosophers.

It must be noted that Plato himself felt some uneasiness in his critique of poetry, "because we ourselves are very conscious of her spell" (*The Republic X*, 607c), and this is why he somehow tried to apologize:

Let us, then, conclude our return to the topic of poetry and our apology, and affirm that we really had good grounds then for dismissing her from our city,

since such was her character. For reason constrained us. And let us further say to her, lest she condemn us for harshness and rusticity, that there is from of old a quarrel between philosophy and poetry. (607b)

Concerning this “quarrel” (*diaphora*, also: ‘difference, distinctness’), in his early essay *Plato and Poets* (*Plato und die Dichter*, 1934) Hans Georg Gadamer poses the question: “Is the fact that the philosopher Plato cannot be fair to poets and their art ... the consequence of the ancient quarrel between philosophers and poets?” (Gadamer 192).<sup>1</sup>

The answer is ambiguous: on the one hand, the *diaphora* between philosophy and poetry indeed goes back to pre-Socratic sages (Heraclitus, Xenophanes, etc.), who rejected Homer’s “fairytales” about the quarrelsome and debauched gods, about gloomy Hades, and so on (because they understood them “too seriously,” very differently from us), and Plato simply extends this “rational” critique of mythical and poetical thought, especially in Books II and III of *The Republic*, considering that such fantasies deprive the guardians of their courage and “spoil their souls” – whereas, on the other hand, in Book X Plato introduces his own specific critique of poetry, based on the supposition that it “imitates” empirical things and events, which are in turn also “imitations” or “images” (*eidola*) of the eternal and most real Forms (Ideas), so that a poet is farther from the supreme Reality than a carpenter, who, while making a table, directly “imitates” its ideal Form, as “seen” in his mind. From Plato’s point of view, the poet’s principal mistake is his remoteness from the real Truth, from the transcendent “World of Forms.” Here is the “ill-famed” sequence from *The Republic*:

This consideration, then, makes it right for us to proceed to lay hold of him [the poet] and set him down as a counterpart of a painter, for he resembles him in that his creations are inferior in respect of reality, and the fact that his appeal is to the inferior part of the soul and not to the best part is another point of resemblance. And so we may at last say that we should be justified in not admitting him into a well-ordered state, because he stimulates and fosters this element in the soul, and by strengthening it tends to destroy the rational part, just as when in a state one puts bad men in power and turns the city over to them and ruins the better sort. Precisely in the same manner we shall say that the mimetic poet sets up in each individual soul a vicious constitution by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality ... (695a–c)

Plato’s rejection of poetry is argued *per analogiam* with the more obviously “mimetic” art of painting: painted images are supposed to resemble “shadows” of empirical reality, and they do not represent things “as they are,” but only “as they seem to us.”

I agree with Gadamer when he says that “it would be wrong if we tried somehow to diminish the provocative paradoxical character of this critique [by Plato]” (Gadamer 192),<sup>2</sup> and I also endorse his judgment that this is an obvious case of “blindness” of Platonic *paideia*, a dangerous illusion that spiritual education may have an “unlimited creative power” (Gadamer 197).<sup>3</sup> I also agree with Gadamer’s diagnosis of this “blindness” – namely, with his statement that here it is simply a case of wrong supposition:

that the essence of poetry and art in general is the imitation of the world of senses. However, I have to add that this mistake by Plato had already been discovered and corrected in late Greek and Roman Neo-Platonism. Consider one of the famous passages from *Enneads*, where Plotinus clearly corrects his master's lapse:

But if anyone despises the arts because they produce their works by imitating nature, we must tell him, first, that natural things are imitations too. Then he must know that the arts do not simply imitate what they see, but they run back up to the forming principles [*logoi* 'seeds'] from which nature derives; then also that they do a great deal by themselves, and, since they possess beauty, they make up what is defective in things. For Pheidias too did not make his Zeus from any model perceived by the senses, but understood what Zeus would look like if he wanted to make himself visible. (*Enneads* V. 8. 1)

Plotinus' new, explicitly positive attitude towards art as *creating* sensual beauty that "imitates" (i.e., re-presents) transcendental, divine beauty, is quite a "different story," compared with Plato's old critique of poetry – however, it is still perfectly Platonic! For Plotinus art, as well as literature, is on the same quest as philosophy: when it tries to in-form the upper world of gods, when it re-presents the upper world *as it would look* if it were visible to us, it follows the path of transcending transitoriness, the temporal change of all phenomena, in order to reach something timeless and eternal. This understanding of art in (Neo)Platonism was essential for its revival in the Renaissance period, when many masterpieces of art were directly influenced by Platonic ideas, so the latter were obviously not directed against art and poetry. However, the later developments of Platonism cannot erase the severe attitude towards poetry of Plato himself.

Our "postmodern" philosophies and literatures have been very much (overly much!) determined by various de(con)structions of metaphysics, ranging from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Derrida and Lacan, so that our cultural climate is, generally speaking, quite unfavorable to every revival of Platonism, and consequently also to philosophical-literary essays of the Platonic type. Among other reasons for this prejudice is the frequent misunderstanding of the meaning and role of Plato's literary passages ("myths," metaphors, analogies, etc.) within his philosophical discourse, as well as ignoring the essential stylistic importance of the dialogues. Even Gadamer, who is otherwise a positive exception in understanding the importance of Platonic dialogue – because his own hermeneutics is also dialogic – states in his essay *Plato and Poets* (already cited; this is of course only one of Gadamer's many seminal works on Plato's philosophy) that "Platonic myths are neither myth nor poetry" (Gadamer 208),<sup>4</sup> because the philosopher refers in them and through them "back to *logos*" – that is, that they are some kind of rationally directed allegories after all. I do not agree with this statement because the point of Platonic mythos is not referring back to *logos*, but rather: mythos is introduced into the Platonic dialogical discourse at the point(s) where the latter fails, because it is unable to "show" (in Wittgenstein's sense) the transcendental truth that is *beyond* any discursive expression. So, for example, the famous Allegory of the Cave is not

just an illustration of some underlying theoretical concepts, philosophical “ideas” in the modern sense, but is itself, as *mythos*, essentially *constitutive* for Platonic wisdom, because its metaphysical transcendent truth is based on the synthesis of *logos* and *mythos*. Furthermore, Platonic dialogues – as Gadamer himself has well pointed out – have a similar, very decisive role: Socratic “love of wisdom” is written down for us in the dramatic form, because dialogues formally enable “polyphony” of truth, as well as a certain subtle “distance” of the author towards the thoughts and opinions of his *dramatis personae* (this feature of Platonic discourse has also been extensively presented by Gorazd Kocijančič in the introductory notes to his Slovenian translation of Plato’s collected works).

To conclude, I would like to mention my personal experience in writing philosophical-literary discourses. My comprehensive tetralogy *Four Seasons* (still growing; two works, *Spring* and *Summer*, have already appeared in Slovenian) is, from the formal and conceptual points of view, much inspired by Classical and Renaissance Platonism. I believe in the further development of a “hybrid” that may be called “literary philosophy,” and I am sure that such a twofold (or manifold) discourse can avoid lapsing into some “ideological” fiction without much trouble. As for literary philosophy, which has a rich tradition (from the Pre-Socratics and Plato through the Renaissance to several modern *belles-lettres* within philosophy), it is essential that *logos*, in close connection with *mythos* and expressed as *dialogos* or in some other “literary” style, develop itself as “polyphonic,” “fluent,” and *dialectical* discourse (in the pure sense of the word) – that is, that it never forget to be open to the transcendent truth “beyond.” This is why philosophy should be – for its own sake, and to the greatest extent possible – open-minded towards poetry, literature, and all other arts.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This and the following quotations from Gadamer are translated from German by the author; the original of this passage reads: »Ist es dennoch ... der Ausdruck uralten Zwistes zwischen Dichtern und Philosophen, dass der Philosoph Plato den Dichtern und der Dichtkunst nicht gerecht zu werden vermag?« (Gadamer 192).

<sup>2</sup> »Es ist verfehlt, die herausfordernde Paradoxie dieser Kritik auf irgendeine Weise abschwächen zu wollen« (Gadamer 192).

<sup>3</sup> »... die unbergrenzte Schöpfermacht« (Gadamer 197).

<sup>4</sup> »So sind die platonischen Mythen nicht Mythos und nicht Dichtung ...« (Gadamer 208).

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