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The Critique of Philip Sidney and Percy Bysshe Shelley on Plato's Views about Poetry

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Abstract: In the platonic dialogue *Ion*, Socrates clarifies that poetic creation is a result of inspiration but not of knowledge. As a gift from the Muses, poetry cannot even have a didactic role; since it is not rational and does not constitute a product of right reason, it cannot satisfy the needs of the person who aspires to the acquisition of wisdom. This insistence of Plato on the potential moral deficiency of poetry proves that only epistemological criteria can assist the political balances that are required in his ideal Polis. Since poetry is mimesis and a subcategory of rhetoric, it is deduced that it stands far from the truth. For Philip Sidney, however, in his critique of Plato's views, the poet is directly connected with "poiein", the act of creating. As a creator, he is close to the truth, and he is an owner of the Idea, to which he urges other human beings. As such, the poet is a stronger intellectual figure than the philosopher, due to the fact that he does not abstractly think of moral values but helps to proliferate them. The poet never lies, despite what Plato claims, because the poet never confirms the knowledge of anything, quite unlike the philosopher. Shelley, on the other hand, places great emphasis on the role of imagination within the context of poetic work. He declares that poetic imagination exceeds the borders of reason, thus being rendered the only human faculty that can not only see the ideal forms that Plato is enthusiastic about but also is capable of competently expressing the "eternal truth of life". The two English poets are in accord about poetry signifying unity and harmony, not only with the abstract truth of the world but with virtue and law as well, providing the human being with the right ontological orientation.

Keywords: *Plato, Sidney, Shelley, Poetry, Philosophy.*

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In the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, poetry has always been a means of conveying moral messages but also the main means by which important concepts were disseminated (Havelock, 1963, pp. 36-60). In Plato's dialogue *Ion*, Socrates distinguishes "truth", which may be expressed even by a simple person, from "wisdom", which is held by bards, actors and poets (Plato, *Ion*, 532 d–e, cit. in Murray, 1996). In the *Apology* he admits that he himself once turned to the poets in order to be taught: *For after the public men I went to the poets, those of tragedies, and those of dithyrambs, and the rest, thinking that there I should prove by actual test that I was less learned than they* (Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 22 a-b, cit. in Jowett, 1953). In Plato's *Protagoras*, it is assumed that poetry can have an educational role because it contains many admonitions to young people (Plato, *Protagoras*, 325e-326b, cit. in Jowett, 1953), while in the *Laws* what is stressed is the moral content of poetry, which aims to render young men virtuous and wise citizens (Plato, *Laws*, 810e-811a, cit. in Jowett, 1953).

According to the dominant idea of the time, the poet is regarded as a creator, a craftsman who bases his production on specific knowledge (Plato, *Ion*, 542 a–b, cit. in Murray, 1996). Socrates, in response to Ion who espouses this view, ascribes poetic creation to divine inspiration in the poet's soul: *these fine poems are not human or the work of men, but divine and the work of gods* (Plato, *Ion*, 534e, cit. in Murray, 1996), who in turn transmits this inspiration to the performer, the person who recites the rhapsody. The final stage of the process is the transmission of inspiration from the rhapsodist to the public: *the Muse inspires men herself, and then by means of these inspired persons the inspiration spreads to others, and holds them in a connected chain* (Plato, *Ion*, 533e, cit. in Murray, 1996). Socrates insists that poetic talent is God-given, a gift from the Muse, which leads the poet not to some kind of conscious creation, but to a production achieved when he is made (i.e. detached from himself), when he becomes an instrument of what the possessing divine inspiration dictates. In *Ion* this reasoning is fully substantiated as follows: *For a poet is a light and winged and sacred thing, and is unable ever to indite until he has been inspired and put out of his senses, and his mind is no longer in him* (Plato, *Ion*, 534b, cit. in Murray, 1996). Therefore, it is concluded that not only does the poet not belong to any group of specialists, but he may not be able to have a didactic role either.

Plato's narrative depicts the apparent contrast between philosophy and poetry (Murray, 1996, pp. 14-18). This incompatibility is explicitly affirmed in the *Laws*, when the Athenian Stranger appears to be having an imaginary dialogue with the poets, stating that the two sides are rivals, with opposing arts, *we are composers of the same things as yourselves, rivals of yours as artists and actors of the fairest drama* (Plato, *Laws*, 817b7, cit. in Jowett, 1953).

The rivalry between the two is related to political knowledge as shown in the *Republic*. In this dialogue, Plato makes two references to argue that poetry and, more broadly, art should be exiled from the ideal state. Although one reference pertains to morality and the other to epistemology, they are inextricably linked. The philosopher concludes that the citizens of his ideal state should not have the freedom to claim poetry and art as the source of their value and moral system, or even to claim them as influences in their lives, as was the case, for instance, with the citizens of the Athenian state (Marrou, 1964, pp. 63-75). The reason is that his ideal state, the Republic, has set the ultimate moral norm and value to be people's pledge of full allegiance to reason; their wishes and feelings, as well as their volition, are entirely dominated by rational thought.

Plato banishes poets from his law-abiding ideal state, in order to render education scientific rather than poetic or artistic (Marrou, 1964, p. 109). He does not consider poetry an appropriate educational tool for the worthy citizen who worships the gods and seeks the truth in the world of Ideas. Indeed, in Book II of the *Republic* he stresses the importance of the gods and posits that poets represent them with flaws and defects, misleading people and shaking their faith, especially in the youngest (Plato, *Republic,* II 379a-382e, cit. in Murray, 1996). One main problem of poetry indicated is the absence of any epistemological criteria (Havelock, 1963, p. 14), its inability to prepare the true philosopher on account of depriving him of the acquisition of truth (Marrou, 1964, pp. 113, 116-118). Thus, art is underestimated while, at the same time, the superiority of philosophy as a rational science is displayed. Intrinsically linked with this appreciation of reason, with this underestimation of art, and with the reason-art rivalry, is the depreciation of desires, sensations and emotion (Cook, 1996).

In Book III of the *Republic*, poetry is presented as a sub-category of rhetoric. Moreover, Socrates warns that the guardians should not be exercised in mimetic types of speech because they become addicted to histrionics and self-indulgence (Plato, *Republic*, III 394e-396b, cit. in Murray, 1996). In an attempt to connect the functionality and utility of poetic texts with the ideal state directly, Socrates distinguishes between bad and good poetry. He notes that the first is dangerous, unlike the second which is welcome (Plato, *Republic*, II 390 a-b, cit. in Murray, 1996) as it contains acts of remarkable people and laudatory narratives to the gods. Here he acknowledges the immense power of poetry and notes that it could offer aid in the establishment of his ideal society. In Book X of the *Republic* poets are also recognized as holders of the capacity to fascinate (Plato, *Republic*, X 598 b-e, cit. in Murray, 1996). However, since truth is identified with the world

of Ideas and since the craftsmen (e.g. carpenters) are the ones who build the models of these ideas (e.g. tables) creating the observable universe that surrounds us, what is deduced is that the poets, who come third in this sequence and who represent the observable universe through words (e.g. the word "table"), remain three steps away from the truth (Plato, *Republic*, X 598 e, cit. in Murray, 1996). Overall, Plato is fighting poets, whom he does not consider experts, but public figures that mislead, lie and, sometimes, do not respect the gods. That is why he affirms that, in accordance with the law, their texts must not be used as educational material for the young and especially for the philosophers-guardians. This is because they either distort reality or praise fury and encourage the formation of dangerous habits.

(Sir) Philip Sidney, begins his literary criticism in *The Defence of Poesy* (1595), from the etymological examination of the word "poet". He notes that in the Greek language a poet is one who creates and therefore does so ex novo, while in Latin the word "vates", the prophet, which was used by the Romans, illuminates the paramount value attributed to the poet from their perspective. Indeed, he stresses that the poet either makes things better than nature or creates forms that did not exist in nature before. This simultaneously implies that the poet is not bound by the existent in nature, but moves according to his own creative spirit. Sidney maintains that the poet, due to his ingenuity, yields things of greater beauty than nature itself.

It is the poet, according to the English thinker, who holds the Idea, rendering the depicted beings with mastery equivalent to his imagination. At this point, the concept of imitation, on which Plato builds his criticism against poets, needs to be clarified. According to Sidney, there are three kinds of mimetic poets: 1) those who attribute the excellence of divine existence, such as David in the Psalms, Solomon in the Song of Songs, and earlier ones such as Orpheus and Amphion, 2) those dealing with philosophical issues, including ethical (Tyrtaeus and Cato), natural (Lucretius), astronomical (Manilius and Pontanos) or historical (Lucian) ones and 3) those who teach and entertain simultaneously. The superiority of the poet over the philosopher, according to Sidney, lies in the fact that while the philosopher teaches virtue through abstract terms and deductions in "the harmless Academy of Plato", the poet incites readers to imitate the behavior of the men of times gone by (Sidney, 1986, p. 511). He refers to many specific examples in order to draw the conclusion that the poet brings knowledge but, more importantly, practical guidance in order to lead the reader towards goodness, as he has the power to motivate. If the purpose of teaching is the orientation toward goodness and virtue, what is more valuable: poetry or philosophy? For who would actually manage to

learn if he lacked the desire to learn? Thus, poetry surpasses philosophy in terms of its admonitory effect, and as it successfully urges people to lead a virtuous life.

In addition, the poet excels in another area, which renders him the "monarch" of sciences. This is because poetry is not limited to vague definitions or interpretations, but rather it presents words which are both meaningful and harmonious, and which announce its purpose with certain musicality (Sidney, 1986, p. 513). As for the accusations of Plato, that the poet also represents the obscene and not just the good, Sidney replies that just as the geometer recognizes both the oblique and the straight, just as the mathematician distinguishes between odd and even numbers so does the poet reveal what is shameful or evil in society to highlight the beauty of goodness. The proper use of poetry, therefore, does not detract from virtue, but rather highlights harmony through representations of evil.

Sidney further resists the accusations against poets; the first being that there are more fruitful and useful ways to acquire knowledge than by reading poetry, the second claiming that poetry is the "mother of falsehood". In answer to the first accusation, he makes reference to his previous claim that since poetry teaches us about the desirability of being good, it is the best possible form of knowledge, and reading poetry is the most beneficial way of spending our time. As for the second accusation, Sidney cautiously replies that the scientist will often mislead and yet will still insist that his findings are correct, until they are disproved by more thorough recent research. The poet, on the other hand, never confirms anything, never cites sources to support his claims, so it is impossible for him to lie because he does not assert anything based on findings. As a consequence, any accusations about potential lying in the poetic art are totally ungrounded. All a poet does is to invoke the Muses for inspiration. In this way, he attempts to create what "should be", not to confirm or deny what "already is".

Percy Bysshe Shelley, in *A Defense of Poetry*, written in 1821, upholds that reason forces us to engage in critical and analytical thought processes in order to understand the phenomena and break them down into meaningful components. In contrast, Imagination, the dominant characteristic of the poet is the *mind acting on our thoughts which can then be painted in our own light to create other, new thoughts* (Shelley, 1986, p. 779). This means that the poet is able to distinguish the essential harmonies of the world that are hidden behind the discordant images that make up everyday lives. In this way, imagination differs from analysis and deals with the composition, or the conceptual unity of phenomena where reason only distinguishes differences.

Thus, imagination is superior to reason[1] because it is not only based on it but it manages to surpass it. According to Shelley, *Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance* (Shelley, 1986, p. 779). Responding specifically to Plato and attempting to rescue the art of poetry in an ideal society, the English poet argues for its beneficial moral influence on society (Shelley, 1986, pp. 781-782). The state of mind accessed through poetry is able to counter any vulgar desires (Shelley, 1986, p. 782). Instead, virtue is directly linked to feelings that this form of art gives rise to. He clarifies, in addition, that the pleasure derived from poetry is superior because it is governed by eternal and universal truths, defining that *pleasure is that which the consciousness of a sensitive and intelligent being seeks* (Shelley, 1986, p. 784). This is its real purpose: to act at a divine level, above and beyond our actual consciousness and awaken the mind to make it more receptive to infinite forms of reflection. Thus, poetry manages to *lift the veil from the hidden beauty of the world and make familiar objects be as if they were not familiar*; accordingly, the poet emerges as a communicant spirit, an exponent of *indestructible order* (Shelley, 1986, pp. 781; 785) and *the eternal truths of life,* due to the fact that a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth (Shelley, 1986, p. 783; cf. Clarke, 1971).

For Plato poetry is imitation but for Sidney and Shelley (as it is for some representatives of Romantic and Victorian poetry)[2], it is recognized as an expression of reality, of the creation, on the part of the artist-creator, of something which previously did not exist. This is what Plato's criticism is based on, while in the *Ion* poets are considered quite positively. In the *Phaedrus*, which classifies four kinds of mania, the philosopher makes particular reference to poetic mania, claiming that through it we see parts of ourselves that only the gods can discern and that only pure science can attribute to us. Mania must dominate man in order for him to mean and make sense of meanings which are inaccessible to ordinary human perception, since mania reveals the demonic element of our souls (Theodorakopoulos, 2003, p. 163). Art which fails to reveal eternal elements is not proper art. Plato, however, insists that the imitator possesses neither knowledge nor a sound opinion and that imitation is removed from that part

[1] According to the platonic teaching, imagination (*phantasia*) is a creative ability of the soul, which creates *phantasmata*, representations based on elements taken from reality (cf. Plato, *Philebus*, 39 b). Aristotle, on the other hand, makes a distinction between imagination, sensation and intellect, claiming that without imagination there is no apprehension (Aristotle, *On the Soul*, III 427b, cit. in Barnes, 1984).

[2] John Keats in his *Letters* and Matthew Arnold (*The Study of Poetry*), makes similar reports with Shelley.

of the soul that contains wisdom and truth. It should, however, be noted that if the poet does not depict reality as to seem true, but actually creates ex nihilo (according to Sidney, 1986), the criticism of Plato may not be valid. Therefore, it could be further argued that the criticism ultimately focuses on poetry as a form of conjecture rather than observation.

The fact remains that Plato views poetry from a utilitarian aspect while he attempts quite a profound analysis of poetic art (concentrating exclusively on its moral role within the *Republic*), and it is to this point exactly, the concept of utility, that Sidney reacts. But Sidney fails to respond in depth about the desires and irrationalism that are evident in poetry. By comparing reason and poetry, Shelley responds to this and to the accusation that poetry is immoral. He claims that such an aphorism constitutes a misunderstanding, since poetry acts on a level beyond our conscience and, therefore, does not cause suffering or human imperfections as they do not belong in any coherent poetic doctrine (Shelley, 1986, p. 791). For him, the great secret of morality is love, which is defined as the distance between our own nature and the identification of Beauty, as it is perceived in the Other [action, cognition or person] (Shelley, 1986, pp. 785; 789). This ultimately affirms imagination as *the most important instrument for moral Goodness* (Shelley, 1986, p. 785).

In conclusion, in Plato's philosophy poetry is divided into good and bad, depending on whether it describes good or bad per se. Sidney, on the other hand, affirms the unity of poetry and takes the view that evil, as opposed to good, serves to highlight and "illuminate" the properties of the latter. Of special interest is the way in which Shelley overcomes the force of the law against poetry in Plato's *Republic*. The answer of the romantic thinker is that he is aware of the poet as a legislator, in the sense that he uses elements of reflection, which have historically taken priority to enable new possibilities of the ideal. Moreover, Shelley points out that poetry does not constitute an accumulation of events or a means of calculation. Its goodness and inherent harmony enables us to lead a truly human existence, a life in which one can rise above common culture and assimilate knowledge in the realm of one's own individuality. While the Athenian philosopher ascertains that the weakness of poetry lies in the fact that it is not based on reason and will, the English poet considers this an advantage: because the non-volitional element of poetry, one that does not allow even the best poet to announce that now, at this time, he will compose a poem, is the element that brings man into contact with the divine, with virtue, love, friendship, and with what is considered by most philosophers as a divine "agathon" (good). Thus, poetry can never be connected with vice or malice. *Poets,* concludes Shelley, *are the hierophants of*

incredible inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows cast over the present by the future… the unacknowledged legislators of the world (Shelley, 1986, p. 792).

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