Toronto School of Communication

by Twyla Gibson, Ph.D.

Senior McLuhan Fellow

Plato's Banishment of the Poets

Next, we will consider passages in Plato that have weighed heavily in our reconstruction of Greek culture and education during the transition from oral poetry to written philosophy. In the dialogues, Socrates leads a sustained and merciless attack against the poets with Homer and Simonides (Rep. 331d-335e; Prt. 316d, 339a-347a; Hppr. 228c; Ltr. II. 311a) the targets most frequently mentioned by name. For instance, in Books II and III of the Republic, Socrates considers the subject of diction and points out that Homer and "all the other poets effect their narration through imitation" (Rep. 393c). The poets are criticized for producing deceptive images and for not telling their tales in the prescribed patterns (379a; 398b). In the middle of the dialogue, images are relegated to the lowest level of the diagram of the divided line. In Book X, the poets are said to be imitators who produce without knowledge of the truth (598a). Deceived by their own images, they are unable to perceive them as "three removes from reality" (598b), "for it is phantoms, not realities, that they produce" (599a). Their imitations, Socrates says, cast a spell (601b) over the audience that charms and entertains them while offering no educational benefit (608). Near the end of the dialogue, he looks back on the argument and decides to banish the poets from the ideal republic. They will not be allowed to return from exile, he proclaims, until a defence is offered in prose, showing that poetry is not just delightful but beneficial to the order of the state (607d).[1]

Through the occurrences of words we would translate as art (τέχνη), imitation (μίμησις), images (είδωλα; εἰκόνες), imagination (εἰκασία), and phantasy (φαντ σία), these statements in the Republic have been linked in the history of interpretation to passages in other dialogues, particularly the Sophist (235e; 265-268d), the Philebus (38a-48d), the Timaeus (22a-37d) and the Theaetetus (152c-160c and 164d-165b)[2].

These terms recur again in the Laws (811-818), where the entire preceding discourse is said to be the "kind of poem" that is the most suitable for teaching the young. In fact, in determining what should be taught, the dialogues themselves, we are told, are the standard against which all other compositions - whether poetry, prose or even unwritten discourses - are to be measured. This passage emphasizes that

the Platonic writings should serve as the model for the kinds of compositions that will be committed to writing (811d). Therefore, when the tragic poets stand before the judge and the Minister of Education and ask if they can be readmitted and their poetry with them (817a-d), they are invited to present their compositions for comparison with the dialogues, and they are told that they will be allowed to return only if their works are the same, or better.[3]

Read On: Eric Havelock: Plato and the Transition From Orality to Literacy

Read Back: Milman Parry: The Oral-Formulaic Style of the Homeric Tradition

[1] Deanne Bogdan, "Instruction and Delight: Northrop Frye and the Educational Value of Literature" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1980); "Censorship of Literature Texts and Plato's Banishment of the Poets," Interchange: On Education, 14, No. 3: 1-16, 1983; Re-Educating the Imagination: Toward a Poetics, Politics, and Pedagogy of Literary Engagement (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton-Cook/Heinemann Inc., 1992); John Bussanich, "Review of Julias A. Elias's Plato's Defense of Poetry," Ancient Philosophy, Vol. 6 (1986): 211-215; Julias Elias, Plato's Defense of Poetry (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1984); A.S. Ferguson, "Plato and the Poet's Eidola," Philosophical Essays Presented to John Watson (Kingston: Queens University Press, 1922); William Chase Greene, "Plato's View of Poetry," Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, edited by a committee of the classical instructors of Harvard University (London: Cambridge University Press, Harvard University Press and Oxford University Press, 1918), pp. 1-75; Charles L. Griswold Jr., "The Ideas and Criticism of Poetry in Plato's Republic, Book 10," Journal of the History of Philosophy, Vol. 19 (1981): 135-150; J. Hartland-Swann, "Plato as Poet: A Critical Interpretation," Philosophy, 26 (1951): 3-18; Philip H. Hwang, "Poetry in Plato's Republic," Philosophical Quarterly (1991): 29-37; Christopher Janaway, Images of Excellence: Plato's Critique of the Arts, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Murray Krieger, The New Apologists for Poetry (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1956); Penelope Murray, "Poetic Inspiration in Early Greece," The Journal of Hellenic Studies, Vol. CI (1981): 87-100; A. Nehamas, "Plato on Imitation and Poetry in Republic 10," eds., J. Moravcsik and P. Tempko, Plato on Beauty, Wisdom, and the Arts (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982); Morriss Henry Partee, Plato's Poetics (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1981); Stanley Rosen, The Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry: Studies in Ancient Thought (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988); Hermann Wiegman, trans. by Henry W. Johnstone, Jr. "Plato's Critique of the Poets and the Misunderstanding of his Epistemological Argumentation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, Vol. 23, No. 2 (1990): 109-124.

[2] See especially Murray W. Bundy, "Plato's View of the Imagination," Studies in Philology, 19 (1922): 362-403; idem, "The Theory of Imagination in Classical and Medieval Thought," University of Illinois

Studies in Language and Literature, 12 (1927):2-3.; also Gerard Watson, Phantasia in Classical Thought (Galway: Galway University Press, 1988).

[3] For one of the few discussions of this passage in the Laws, see Elizabeth Asmis, "Plato On Poetic Creativity," The Cambridge Companion to Plato, ed., Richard Kraut (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1992), pp. 338-364.