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Plato's criticism of Homer in Book X of the Republic

ANAIS DE FILOSOFIA CLÁSSICA

PLATO'S CRITICISM OF HOMER IN BOOK X OF THE REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT: Plato has been accused of trying to submit poets to a relentless political censorship. In this area, however, he is a man of his time. At Athens, it was the city and its highest authorities that organized and directed all poetical and theatrical competitions, which were religious, political, social, and aesthetic events.

KEYWORDS: Homer, poets, Plato, censorship

RESUMO: Platão tem sido acusado de tentar submeter os poetas a uma censura política implacável. Nesse campo, todavia, ele é um homem de seu tempo. Em Atenas, foram a cidade e suas mais altas autoridades que organizaram e dirigiram todas as competições poéticas e teatrais, que eram eventos religiosos, políticos, sociais e estéticos.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: Homero, poetas, Platão, censura.

In the few lines that conclude the long exposition on the critique of poetry at the beginning of Book X of the *Republic*, the essential elements of Plato's position on the poet Homer are set forth, using Socrates as his mouthpiece.

And so, Glaucon, when you happen to meet those who praise Homer and say that he's the poet who educated Greece, that it's worth taking up his works in order to learn how to manage and educate people, and that one should arrange one's whole life in accordance with his teachings, you should welcome these people and treat them as friends, since they're as good as they're capable of being, and you should agree that Homer is the most poetic of the tragedians and the first among them. But you should also know that hymns to the gods and eulogies to good people are the only poetry we can admit into our city. If you admit the pleasure-giving Muse, whether in lyric or epic poetry, pleasure and pain will be kings in your city, instead of law and the thing that everyone has always believed to be best, namely, reason.

Resp. X 606e1-607a8, transl. G.M.A. Grube rev. by C.D.C. Reeve, and other passages as well

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This passage contains two parts. In the first part, Socrates, acting as Plato's spokesperson, expresses his admiration for Homer, and in the second he considers that the poets' production must be subject to certain constraints.

1. *Sincere admiration*

Socrates agrees in admitting “that Homer is the poet of poets, and that he is the first of the tragic poets” (607a2-3). The judgment on Homer's quality and importance as a poet expresses a deep, sincere feeling, which is however qualified by a reference to truth:

I'll tell you, even though the love and respect I've had for Homer since I was a child make me hesitate to speak, for he seems to have been the first teacher and leader of all the fine tragedians. All the same, no one is to be honored or valued more than the truth. So as I say, it must be told

(*Resp.* X 595b9-c3)

Indeed, since his youth Socrates has admired Homer, whom he considers as the leader of the poets, and especially of tragic poets¹ (see also 605c and 607). These poets dramatized myths mentioned by Homer, adapting them to the ideology of the city². In short, Socrates acknowledges that Homer was the subject of his admiration, affection, and respect, from his earliest youth, but he subordinates this evaluation to his search for the truth. However, these feelings are tempered by a radical critique.

2. *Critique: Homer the imitator*

In order to gain a correct understanding of the critique Socrates levels against Homer and the tragedians, one must resituate oneself within the context of Platonic doctrine.

2.1 *Distance from visible reality*

Plato defends a paradoxical philosophical doctrine, characterized by a twofold ontological revolution. 1) The world of sensible particulars perceived by the senses, in which we live, is a mere image of a world of intelligible realities (or Forms) which, as models of sensible particulars, constitute genuine reality. Unlike sensible things, the Forms possess their principle of existence within themselves. 2) Man cannot be reduced to his body, and his

¹ It should be noted, moreover, that comedy is forbidden in the city of the *Republic* and that its actors can only be strangers in the city of the *Laws*.

² See Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mythe et société en Grèce ancienne*, Paris, Maspero, 1974. Reprinted several times.

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genuine identity coincides with what we designate by means of the term “ soul ”, whatever may be the definition proposed of this entity, which accounts, not only in man, but also throughout the universe, for all motion, both material (growth, locomotion, etc.) and immaterial (feelings, sense perception, intellectual knowledge, etc.). Throughout the history of philosophy, this twofold reversal has enabled the specificity of Platonism to be defined.

The definition of the poet as an imitator takes its place within this twofold reversal of perspective. To illustrate what imitation consists in, Socrates takes the famous example of the bed³. First there is the real bed, which is the model of the sensible bed. It is at a second level of reality, for it is a mere image of its model, the real bed. Finally, there is the bed imitated by the painter or poet, the former using colors and the latter using speech, which is a mere image of an image, viz. the sensible bed. This image of an image is akin to a reflection in water, or a simulacrum. If one considers things from an epistemological viewpoint⁴, in which an object corresponds to each of the soul's faculties, the model is the object of science, which is on the side of truth, whereas the image is the object of opinion, which is on the side of the plausible. Dealing really with sensible particulars involves two types of technique: the technique of the person who uses it, and the technique of the person who fashions it. And imitating sensible particulars produces an image of an image; it is therefore on the side of illusion.

2.2. *Imitation and ignorance*

The first two techniques require knowledge of certain sensible particulars, a knowledge that lacks the stability of science, but that is undeniable. Let us take the example of a flute: it is the person who knows how to play the flute who will indicate to its manufacturer how he must fashion the instrument (601e-602a)⁵. This is what explains the relative lack of distinction between technique and knowledge that can be noted in Plato's first dialogues: technique is a branch of knowledge, insofar as it presupposes knowledge of the way in which the technical activity must suit its object. With this important qualification that technique proceeds from the convergence of two kinds of knowledge of the object: that of the artisan, and that of the user of the object.

In contrast, the person who imitates a sensible object, whether poet or painter, has no knowledge or opinion concerning it. He limits himself to fashioning an image of an image, or

³ On this passage, see my article: “ Le divin planteur (*phytourgós*) ”, *Kairos* 19, 2002, p. 31-48.

⁴ See the famous image of the line (*Republic*) VI 509d-511e, and the work by Yvon Lafrance, *Pour interpréter Platon. La ligne en République VI 509d-511e*, Montréal / Bellarmin – Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2 vol. 1987-1994

⁵ In the context of an economy in which use-value prevails over exchange-value, the manufacturer is subject to the user; hence an aversion to work. On this, see Philippe Hoffmann, “Le travail antique selon Jean-Pierre Vernant, ou de Marx à Aristote et Platon”, in Anne Balansard (ed.). *Le travail et la pensée technique dans l'Antiquité classique*, monographic issue of *Technologie, Idéologie Pratiques*, 15, 2003, 23-38

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an illusion. The imitator is thus distant by three degrees from genuine reality, and hence from truth. We can therefore understand why the poet is denounced as someone ignorant, and this ignorance makes him impotent. The poet imitates the doctor, but he is unable to cure anyone. The same holds true for all the rest, and especially when one tackles the most important and beautiful subjects, which Homer nevertheless evokes: legislation, the command of armies, inventions, and way of life. Homer shows himself to be incapable of making human beings better, in public or in private life.

2.2.1 *Public*

With reference to the public sphere, Socrates addresses Homer in these terms:

«(...) then tell us which cities are better governed because of you, as Sparta is because of Lycurgus, and as many others – big and small – are because of many other men? What city gives you credit for being a good lawgiver who benefited it, as Italy and Sicily do to Charondas, and as we do to Solon? Who gives such credit to you? » Will he be able to name one?

I suppose not, for not even the Homeridae⁶ make that claim for him.

Well, then, is any war in Homer's time remembered that was won because of his generalship and advice?

None

Or, as befits a wise man, are many inventions and useful devices in the crafts or sciences attributed to Homer, as they are to Thales of Miletus and Anacharsis the Scythian?

There's nothing of that kind at all.

Resp. 599d4-600a8

As the Athenian Stranger repeats in the *Laws*, legislation is the ideal means for inducing all the citizens to practice all the virtues (688a-b). The most famous legislators are then mentioned: Solon for Athens, Lycurgus for Sparta and Charondas for Catania and for Chalcidian colonies in Sicily and in Southern Italy. Homer did not carry out any war, and no invention can be attributed to him, as to the two sages Thales⁷, who was a symbol of ingenuity, and Anacharsis⁸.

2.2.2. *Private*

The practice of virtue in the private sphere remains to be discussed: this is where one's way of life plays a role. On this level, Plato compares Homer to Pythagoras:

⁶ Experts who recited and expounded Homer throughout the Greek world.

⁷ For an inventory of his discoveries, see D.L. I 23-25.

⁸ He was said to have discovered the anchor and the potter's wheel (D.L. 105).

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Then, if there's nothing of a public nature, are we told that, when Homer was alive, he was a leader in the education of certain people who took pleasure in associating with him in private and that he passed on a Homeric way of life to those who came after him, just as Pythagoras did? Pythagoras is particularly loved for this, and even today his followers are conspicuous for what they call the Pythagorean way of life.

Again, we're told nothing of this kind about Homer. If the stories about him are true, Socrates, his companions, Creophylus, seems to have been an even more ridiculous example of education than his name suggests, for they tell us that, while Homer was alive, Creophylus completely neglected him⁹.

Resp. X 600a9-c1

In this passage, Socrates displays irony when evoking the name of Creophylus. This name is in fact ambiguous, depending on how one interprets the first term of the composite. It could be understood as *kréon*, an Epic form of *kreíon*, which comes from *kreísson*, “the strongest one”: it designates a master or leader, and is often used in the *Iliad*. One might also understand it to refer to *kréas*, which means “meat”, or better yet, to *kreion*, the table on which the meat is placed. In the former case, Creophylus means “he who comes from the family of masters”, and in the second, “from the family of butchers”. The name is obviously to be understood in the first sense, but Socrates ironically chooses the second one; taken in this sense, “Creophylus” is ridiculous.

It should be noted that Creophylus is cited in order to compare Homer to Pythagoras, who was famous for having inaugurated among his disciples a “way of life” that imitated his own, out of veneration¹⁰. Unlike the Pythagoreans, Homer was completely indifferent to Creophylus. What is more, unlike the Sophists, Protagoras and Prodicus, who were celebrated by their disciples¹¹ in various cities, Homer and Hesiod, who had none, remained alone, travelling from city to city without disciples. This lack of recognition is proof that they did not make anyone better.

3. *Homer as educator of Greece*

Nevertheless, Socrates agrees with the admirers of Homer:

And so, Glaucon, when you happen to meet those who praise Homer and say that he's the poet who educated Greece, that It's worth taking up his works in order to learn how to manage and educate people, and

⁹ A textual problem makes this phrase difficult to translate.

¹⁰ See Jamblique, *La vie de Pythagore*, introduction, traduction et notes par Luc Brisson et Alain Segonds, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1996, 2011²,

¹¹ See also *Gorgias* 519c-d.

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that one should arrange one's whole life in accordance with his
teachings ...

Resp X 600e2-5

It should be noted that this phrase is in the past tense. Homer was the educator of Greece, and this kind of education must be rejected, in order to inaugurate a new state of affairs.

3.1 *Shaping tradition*

Yet in what sense can the great poet Homer be considered, even by Plato, as the Educator of Greece?

In ancient Greece, poets did not try to innovate, as is the case today, for they confined themselves to shaping the value system and the collection of knowledge that a community had judged worthy of being kept in memory. The poet transmitted this content in the form of tales, whether versified or not, first orally and then in writing: this is what we designate as “myths”¹². The poet was supported on the one hand by his official interpreters, the rhapsodes or *aidoi*, who recited or sang to musical accompaniment poems, especially Homeric poems, at contests ; and on the other hand by the actors and the chorus-members who perfumed tragedies and comedies on stage, also in the context of contests.

3.2. *Shared knowledge*

It is because he diffused his shared knowledge among all that a poet like Homer could be considered an educator. As soon as they were able to understand ordinary language, all children heard these “myths” told by their grandmother, their mother and their nursemaid. When they went to school, the children of well-off families exercised their bodies by gymnastics, and learned to read and write from the work of the poets, which they learned to appreciate. Poetry, accompanied by music, and even illustrated by dance, constituted what was called “culture” (*mousiké*), which, together with gymnastics, constituted the two pillars of “education” in ancient Greece. The influence of the poets did not stop there, however, for the entire population of the city could attend the poetic and theatrical competition organized by the city. These competitions were events that were at the same time artistic, social, political, and religious. And they were open to all, not only male citizens, to whom political activity was reserved, but also metics, slaves, women, and children.

¹² *Platon, les mots et les mythes*, Textes à l'appui. Histoire classique [directeur P. Vidal-Naquet], Paris (Maspero) 1982, 239 p., four appendices. Bibliography, index of passages from ancient authors cited or mentioned, index of modern authors, index of main Greek terms. Second revised and updated edition, Paris (éd. La Découverte), 1995. English translation in Brisson, Luc & Naddaf, Gerard, *Plato, the mythmaker*, Chicago and London (Chicago Univ. Press) 1999, LXVI-188 p.

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4. *The consequences of imitation in politics and in ethics*

Imitation thus constituted a matter of key importance on the political and ethical level, insofar as it acted as the vehicle for a tradition that directly modified the behavior, not only of the interpreters of this kind of discourse, but also of their audience. Poets and their interpreters expected their audience to imitate the characters they put on stage, and this mimeticism entailed an overall general conformity with regard to the models represented onstage or evoked in recitations. In short, the myths fashioned by the poets had the goal of molding the behavior of their addressees throughout their lives, and not only those who could benefit from a system of education in the strict sense. It is in this sense that Homer, the poet of poets, could be considered the educator of Greece¹³. This is a fact: for Plato, however, it was a catastrophe, for two reasons: the examples proposed are condemnable, and the pleasure caused by myths makes the soul become degenerate.

4.1. *The question of exemplarity*

With regard to contemporary human beings, the characters represented by poets all occupied the position of models, either because they were superior in nature to human beings, who solicited their help through prayers and sacrifices – this was the case for gods, demons, and heroes – or else, often, because they had had an exceptional destiny, whether they be the dead or certain human beings of the past. Yet as Xenophanes¹⁴ had already denounced, these mythical characters were often described as delinquents: how, then, could they be taken as models? Plato acknowledges this, and deplores it, for he wanted to change the behavior of his fellow-citizens; this explains the critique of traditional poetry he carries out in books two and three of the *Republic*.

This critique goes straight to the point: the poet cannot represent these characters (gods, demons, heroes, inhabitants of Hades and human beings of the past) as contravening the rules established in the city, like the worst of human beings. As far as the gods or demons are concerned, they must be represented as they are (380d-382c), while respecting two principles: 1) god is the cause of good alone (379b-380c); and 2) god does not change (380d-382c). The myths about the world of Hades, which make people fear death (383a-387c), must be rejected, especially among those who are destined to be initially soldiers. One must avoid representing heroes in an unfavorable light, whether they moan or utter indecent laughter. Finally, people of the past must never be represented as offenders or inferior beings (392a-c).

¹³ *Republic* X 606e-607a.

¹⁴ Xenophanes, DK 21, B11, 14, 15, 6.

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It is thus easier to understand this exhortation in the passage cited at the outset: « But you should also know that hymns to the gods and eulogies to good people are the only poetry we can admit into our city. » (607a3-5). If one restricts oneself to these two literary genres, one will reach the goal Plato set himself: making all the citizens practice all the virtues.

4.2. *Care of the soul*

Acknowledging that culture is directed toward the soul and the entire city, which it is able to mold by means of imitation, Socrates recommends the subordination of poets who fashion *mûthoi*, which could be defined as tales that are not subject to falsification, with regard to the philosopher, who produces *lógoi*, or argued discourse that claims to reach the truth¹⁵.

The poet seeks only to bring about pleasure and pain in his audience. Within the human soul, these are affects that are attached to what is least elevated in the soul: the desiring species. A good life implies that the desiring species be under the domination of reason. Consequently, the productions of poets must be monitored by philosophers, who represent reason. Only in this way can the city no longer be given over exclusively to pleasure and pain, and be guided by reason, since for Plato the ethical question cannot be separated from the question of politics.

By subordinating the poet to the philosopher in the city, Plato sought the subordination, within the human soul, of pleasure and pain, of fear and hope, to the knowledge possessed by the intellect. This is why, at first, the myths that are accepted will be given to nursemaids, so that they may take care of the children's education¹⁶. Moreover, neither the guardians nor the philosophers will be imitators – that is, poets or their interpreters – and as far as the imitation in which education consists is concerned, they will be imitators of virtue, for the imitation that begins from childhood transforms the soul and even the body, right from the earliest age¹⁷. The city of the *Republic* cannot do without the poet, for human beings cannot neglect the desiring part of their soul, but Plato refuses to give pre-eminence to pleasure in the city and in the human soul, which must remain vigilant.

Rejecting the pre-eminence of pleasure and pain in the soul had consequences not only in his life, but also after death, for the soul has an immortality that make it transfer for a specific time from one body to another (608c-613e). The process of retribution is based on a

¹⁵ As I explained in *Plato, the mythmaker* [1982], transl. By Gerard Naddaf, Chichago, Chicago Univ. Press 1992, Plato was the first to give *mythos* the meaning of “myth”.

¹⁶ *Republic* II 377c.

¹⁷ *Republic* III 395b-d.

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rigorous criterion. The body in which a soul is reincarnated depends on the activity of that soul in its previous life. The more that soul makes use of its intellect, the higher it rises in the hierarchy of living beings; and the more it has abandoned itself to pleasure or has let itself be overwhelmed by pain, the more it descends, becoming incarnate in the body of an animal. The myth of Er, which concludes the tenth book of the *Republic* (614a-621b), illustrates this, as is too often forgotten. Paradoxically, it is thus in a myth that one finds the most severe criticism of the poets, fashioners of myths.

5. *The Athenian context*

Plato has been accused of trying to submit poets to a relentless political censorship¹⁸. In this area, however, he is a man of his time. At Athens, it was the city and its highest authorities that organized and directed all theatrical competitions, which were religious, political, social, and aesthetic events. From beginning to end, each had to submit to very strict rules, and to the surveillance of named or elected judges. It was the city that chose poets and plays, and paid the actors. It defined by law the framework in which the contests took place. Judges, placed under the supervision of the eponymous archon, determined the winner. At the end of the contests, it was the city that rewarded the author, the actors, and even the *chorêgos* who had financed the chorus that had been victorious. Legislation in this area was extremely restrictive. The same held true for all the other “cultural” contests that were held at Athens and many other cities. At Athens, tragedy was considered a production of the city under the control of the city. Properly speaking, the city was the author of the tragedy, and even the subject, which formed itself by the drama through which it represented itself to itself. What is considered censorship was, at the limit, merely a dramatization of the city's authority¹⁹.

Plato continued along this path, justifying this censorship by means of philosophical arguments. The critique of Homer must therefore be replaced on an ethical and political level, not on an aesthetic one.

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¹⁸ Karl Popper, *The open society and its enemies, I*, London (Routledge), 1945, 1966⁵. The defense of Plato by Julia Annas, *An introduction to Plato's Republic*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981 is ridiculous.

¹⁹ This is explained very clearly in *Histoire de la littérature grecque*, by Suzanne Saïd, Monique Trédé and Alain Le Boulluec, Collection Premier Cycle, Paris (PUF) 1997, 117 ff.