Plato’s Poetics

José Angel García Landa
Universidad de Zaragoza
1986

1. The Theory of Ideas
2. Theory of Literature in Ion
3. Theory of Literature in the Republic

1. The Theory of Ideas

In Plato (427-347 BC) we find, as we will later in Aristotle, a theory of literature which is a component part of a whole philosophical system. That is, Plato sets literature in the wider context of human activity in general. Still more, he sets literature in the frame of a general theory of reality. This theory we call Platonism, and it has been enormously influential. It is all the more alarming that it is from this higher viewpoint that Plato seems to condemn literature. For the first time, the theory of literature has been provided with an explicit philosophical basis, and the surprising result is the disparagement of literature. It has always seemed somewhat of a paradox that Plato, the most poetical of philosophers, who wrote his books in dialogue form and often uses myths and fables to explain his meaning, should be an enemy of poetry. This is nevertheless the case. However, this statement should be qualified. Plato does accept some kinds of poetry, and he was in spite of himself a great lover of poetry. Otherwise, he would not have feared it as he did, and would not have cared to warn against it.¹

Plato adapts in a single theory the teachings of Heraclitus and Parmenides, as well as the Pythagorean number theory. "Plato distinguishes between the continuous and boundless stuff of our sensory experience, and the indeterminate world of becoming, and a real or rational world of limit, that is, of ratios between both unit numbers and geometrical lines."² The rational principle in man is called the logos, and it allows us access to the only real world beyond the false appearances of the material world: the realm of ideas, of pure concepts or essences. In Greek thought the opposition between limit and lack of limit is crucial: the idea, the essence, are limiting principles: they define things as they are, they give them a being and a form, whereas matter as such is chaos, lacking in structure when not penetrated by the Idea. We think of concepts or ideas as something which is in some way derived from our sensory experience of the material world.

For Plato, it is the other way round: the ideas are the origin and the underlying structure of the material world. Mathematical entities are some way between the world of pure ideas and the world of sensory experience. The only adequate expression of ideas would be a mathematical expression. Mathematical relationships and forms are absolutely beautiful: art ought to be inspired by them and not by appearances.

Plato is an enemy of any kind of perspectivism in art, because perspective is a technique related to man's place in the material world: it shows things as they seem to be to an observer, and not as they actually are in themselves. Plato's age was one of subtle perspectival refinements in painting, sculpture and architecture, and of an increasing naturalism in art. Plato mistrusts this current tendency towards realism, and advocates stylization and formalization in art. Only pure forms can be beautiful, because only they are true and good. The identification of goodness, truth and beauty will be a characteristic of many idealistic theories of art throughout the history of criticism.

According to Plato, there are two ways to reach the realm of ideas. The first is that of the philosopher. The philosopher is the privileged person who learns that this world is a cave where we see only the shadows of true beings, and follows reason to get out of the cave and admire the realm of ideas, dazzling as the light of the sun (Republic VI). The other way to get out of the cave is that of the lover. The Platonic lover ascends a scale from bodily beauty not only to ideal beauty, but to the complete hierarchy of ideas (Symposium). Because beauty, truth and goodness are ultimately one, the lover becomes in the end a philosopher, so the two ways to the realm of ideas converge. Plato gives a tentative definition of the beautiful, restricted to the lower degrees of the scale: "beautiful" does not mean "convenient," "appropriate" or "useful"; we call beautiful "that which is beneficially pleasurable through the senses of sight and hearing."

Let us remark that the way of beauty to the world of ideas is not meant to include artificial beauty, the beauty of works of art. There is not in original Platonic thought a way of the artist to the world of ideas; the way of beauty is the way of the lover. Plato does not recognize in art a way to knowledge: however, later neo-Platonists like Plotinus and Proclus do, probably because of an Aristotelian influence. The original Platonic conception has important consequences for the theory of literature: it means that the beauty of literature is more apparent than real—that it is not linked to truth or goodness—that literature, in sum, is often false and immoral, and therefore dangerous.

There are scattered references to poetry throughout all of Plato's dialogues. However, his most important discussions of literature are to be found in an early dialogue, Ion (ca. 390 BC), and in a dialogue of maturity, the Republic (ca. 375 BC). A dialogue of Plato's old age, the Laws (ca. 335 BC), is also significant.
2. Theory of Literature in Ion

Ion is Plato's only dialogue entirely consecrated to the theory of literature. It is also the oldest extant book on the subject in the Western tradition. It is to be kept in mind, however, that Ion must be read in the wider context of the Platonic corpus, because it relates literature to the whole of human activity which is commented in the other works and given a place in the structure of reality.

Ion is a very short dialogue which involves two speakers: Socrates, who is usually Plato's mouthpiece in the dialogues, and Ion. Ion is a rhapsode, a curious mixture of actor, poet, singer and literary critic, who recites and praises Homer's epics in public performances. A rhapsode, the speakers agree, must understand the meaning of the poet and interpret the poet's mind to his hearers. Socrates argues that Ion does not speak of the poets by rules of art, because Ion acknowledges that he can speak only of Homer. If Ion's ability as a rhapsode were a craft or science, Socrates' argument runs, he would be able to speak of any poet, because all poets deal with the same subjects. Here Socrates makes comparisons with the art of criticising painting or sculpture. He concludes by telling Ion that his gift of word when speaking of Homer "is not an art, but an inspiration; there is a divinity moving you." 3 Ion's gift of speech is derivative from Homer's own poetical powers, just as a magnet can infuse its power through a chain of rings hanging from it. And Homer is not the first ring of the chain: his gift of poetry is also derivative:

For all good poets, epic as well as lyric, compose their beautiful poems not by art, but because they are inspired and possessed. And as the Korybantian revelers when they dance are not in their right mind, so the lyric poets are not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains: but when falling under the power of music they are inspired and possessed (Ion 14)

God uses poets as his ministers, as he uses oracles and prophets: he addresses us through them, as poets themselves claim. Poets are the interpreters of the gods. Rhapsodes must also be inspired, although, being the interpreters of poets, they are the interpreters of interpreters, and their role would seem to be less glorious. Anyway, Plato's praise of poetic inspiration is ambivalent: at times it becomes overtly ironic, so that in the end we are no longer sure that inspiration is such a good thing:

For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and reason is no longer in him: no man, while he retains that faculty, has the oracular gift of poetry. (Ion 15)

Ion acknowledges that he is out of himself when he recites the poems of Homer. Furthermore, the same effect is produced on his audience, which therefore becomes the last ring hanging from the magnet. Homer, and not other poets, is Ion's first link to the source of that magnetic force; that is why he is not inspired by other poets. This magnetic force is of course an irrational inspiration, and not an art with definite rules or understandable principles. Here we must understand "art" in the sense of "craft," "knowledge," or "science," as an ability directed by reason. According to Socrates, arts differ only by their objects, and so the poet has no business talking about arts other than his own. In fact, he has no business talking about anything: poets and rhapsodes have no proper object of knowledge. Ion ridicules himself by saying that he would be a good general in virtue of his ability to sing about battles. Socrates concludes that Ion is like shape-changing Proteus, inspired but with no art or shape of his own.

It can be argued that this is a dialogue against criticism, as well as a dialogue against poetry. As a rhapsode, Ion does not have any rational technique either. Anybody who can criticise a poet through a rational technique, art or science, ought to be able to criticise any other. So poetry and criticism are two different aspects of the same madness or divine dispensation.

Setting Plato's theory as expounded in Ion against his later thought, we may notice certain tensions which are left unresolved by Plato:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ion</th>
<th>Phaedrus, Timaeus, etc.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Divinity</td>
<td>Ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Inspiration)</td>
<td>(Reason)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poet</td>
<td>Craftsmen, Philosopher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beauty or number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Reason)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Philosopher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhapsode</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1
Unless Socrates in _Ion_ is being completely ironical in calling the poet a divine being, we must admit that there exists some connection between the activity of the poet and that of the philosopher, even if it is an abnormal one, even if the philosopher knows divinity through reason and the poet through madness. The fact that in later works Plato denies that there is such a connection, or does not care to develop it, has always puzzled the readers of _Ion_.

In any case, _Ion_ agrees in the main with the rest of the Platonic corpus. Reason leads to ideas, but the poet only copies shapes, he does not use reason. This view of literature is certainly an impoverished one, which ignores whatever is specific of literature: "Socrates treats the problem solely in terms of its subject matter or content: he simply ignores its existence as a formal structure" (Adams 11). Here can be found the origin of the moralistic and didactic criticism which separates form from content and sets external standards to the work of art, judging it by its subject matter and not by what the work does with that subject matter. Plato measures literature with the standards of science. This scientific approach is unfair, but nevertheless two important principles emerge from the discussion:

- Being able to compose poetry is not the same as being able to give a rationale of it.
- Poetry is not concerned with making scientific statements. This conception is in direct opposition to some contemporary views on the didactic aspect of poetry.

3. The Theory of Literature in the _Republic_

Other dialogues by Plato, such as _Meno_ or _Phaedrus_ seem to value more highly the fact that poetry is a form of divine madness. But these views are fragmentary, and Plato's main later pronouncements in the _Republic_ and the _Laws_ present us with a view of literature which is in the main negative. It is significant that both dialogues have a dominant social and political concern: they are the blueprints for ideal communities.

In the _Republic_, Plato discusses the role of poets in his perfect commonwealth in several places, above all in books II, III and X.

- Book II deals with the contents of educative literature. They can be either good or bad. Those erroneous tales about gods and heroes carrying out revenge, quarrelling, showing disrespect towards parents, etc., must be censored. "The founders of a state ought to know the general forms in which poets cast their tales and the limits which must be observed by
them. The traditional tales transmitted by Homer contain false ideas about the gods: divine beings are supposed to assume several shapes, and God is supposed to be the cause of all things, including evil. This is untrue for Plato's spokesman Socrates. God is essentially good, and is not the cause of evil in the universe. All these tales must be forbidden.

- Book III continues this discussion. The stories about Hades must portray it as a delightful place, and not as a terrible one, so as to obliterate fear of death in the warriors. The more poetical false stories are, the more harmful. The poets will no longer have the privilege of lying: it will be restricted to the rulers themselves, whenever public good demands it. "And therefore let us put an end to such tales, lest they engender laxity of morals among the young" (Republic 27). But the tales which tell of virtue, endurance, heroism, courage, etc., are to be admitted. So much, Plato says, for the content of the tales.

As for the style: "All mythology is a narration of events, either past, present or to come . . . . And narration may be either simple narration, or imitation, or a union of the two" (Republic 27). That is, the poet may speak in his own voice (simple narration) or he may speak in the voice of a character (imitation, mimesis). This is a different sense of mimesis from the one we found in Ion. Tragedy and comedy are wholly imitative, in dithyramb and other genres the poet is the sole speaker, "and the combination of both is found in epic, and in several other styles of poetry" (Republic 28). We may notice that this is the first theoretical definition of literary genres on a formal basis. But it is more than that: it is also the first theoretical approach to the problem of narrative voice. We may as well point out that "narration" is to be taken in the more general sense of "enunciation"; it is obvious that this classification accounts for other genres apart from narrative. Figure 2 reflects Plato's classification of narrative modes and genres.

Figure 2

Three types of narration:

1) Simple narration
(haplé diágenes)

2) Imitative narration
(mimesis)

3) Mixed narration

Dithyramb Epic, etc. Tragedy, comedy

---

4 Plato, Republic , rpt. in Adams 20.
Human nature, according to Plato, is incapable of imitating many things well; there is a need of specialization. That may be one reason why poets are either tragedians, or comedians, or epic poets. In any case, imitative genres are dangerous because imitations "at length grow into habits and become a second nature, affecting body, voice and mind" (Republic 29). Many of the themes the poet will be dealing with will be unworthy, and imitation of them would be below a reasonable man. Therefore, only one narrative mode is decent when dealing with unworthy themes, "unless in jest." Only the imitation of good men acting wisely is allowed. In general, the ideal poet will have a definite style: "His style will be both imitative and narrative; but there will be, in a long story, only a small proportion of the former" (Republic 29).

All these qualifications would seem to give more latitude to poetry than many interpretations of Plato would allow. However, Plato has indeed divided poetry into good or bad and poets into beneficial or pernicious:

And therefore, when one of those pantomimic gentlemen, who are so clever that they can imitate anything, comes to us and makes a proposal to exhibit himself and his poetry, we will fall down and worship him as a sacred, marvellous, and delightful being; but we must also inform him that in our state such as him are not permitted to exist: the law will not allow them. And so, when we have anointed him with myrrh and set a garland of wool upon his head, we shall send him away to another city. (Republic 30)

The form of the words in a poem has already been determined, as the content before it. But there is more in a poem than words. According to Plato, there are three parts in a song: words, melody, and rhythm. We see that in the Republic Plato has gone beyond Ion in that he no longer makes poets responsible for their raw material only: he also discusses questions of style, of the shape that the poets must give to that material. However, he does not grasp all the implications of form in a work of art, and this is a serious shortcoming of his theory even at this point.

So, words, melody and rhythm are the three aspects of a poem or song. Rhythm is what we call metre, accent and quantity. Melody is music, which is taken into account by Plato because lyrical poetry was sung in ancient Greece. Plato gives a careless account of the rhythms used in his time, saying that it is better to leave such things to the poets. He applies to music and rhythm criteria similar to those used in dealing with words. Those harmonics and rhythms expressive of sorrow or indolence must be banned. In Plato's view, therefore, harmony has ethical effects on the soul. This is an heritage of earlier Pythagorean doctrines.

Music and literature, therefore, are not banned by Plato, although some specific kinds of melodies and subjects are. On the contrary, music
and literature have an important role to play in education. They educate the soul before reason can start to act: so much greater the need of their having the right effect.

- Book VI of the Republic presents us with an ascending scale of types of knowledge: eikasia (sensory imaging, knowledge of that which can be imitated); piste (a kind of faith in the permanence of things beyond the changing stream of phenomena); dianoia (discursive understanding of mathematical figures); noesis (intuitive and true knowledge of permanent beings, ideas). In the light of previous discussion, the poet would seem to be restricted to eikasia.

- In Book X we find again the concept of mimesis or imitation. It is different from that used in Book III, which was written several years before. Here imitation has metaphysical implications, and is used as a pejorative term. Plato's definition of imitation runs as follows: Artificers make things following the Idea as a model: we can likewise make images of all particular things moving a mirror around. So, we have a scale going down from the Idea, through the things in the world, to images of those things reproduced by artificial means. The scale goes from God, through the artificer, to the artist (painter, tragic poet, etc.). "And so, if the tragic poet is an imitator, he too is thrice removed from the [philosopher] king and from the truth, and so are all other imitators" (Republic 35). To these notions we should add the cosmological variety of mimesis described in Timaeus: a lesser divinity or demiurge (that is, artisan) gave shape to the chaos of matter and created the universe taking the eternal ideas as his models. Figure 3 overleaf shows these different kinds of mimesis.

Although the dotted line is implied in Plato's discussion, is not taken into account by his theory. This is one of the many flaws in the whole reasoning—it would imply that the artist need not be a third degree, but only a second degree imitator. Besides, this scheme lacks integration with Plato's theory of divine madness as developed in Ion. Here there is no direct relation whatsoever between the poet and the divine realm of ideas.

---

5 Let us note in passing the resemblance between this mirror and later ones present in the definitions of realist art (by Stendhal, George Eliot or classical Marxism). The example of the mirror suggests the legitimacy of applying external criteria of fidelity to the image in the mirror.
Figure 3

Kinds of mimesis in Plato

- Ideas
  - Demiurge (Cosmical mimesis)
  - Natural beings
  - Artificer (Technical mimesis)
    - Artificial objects
  - Artist (Artistic mimesis)
    - Artistic imitations
      - Through speech
      - Through other media (painting, gestures, etc.)
      - Simple narration
      - Imitative narration
      - (Mixed narration)
One further problem concerning mimesis arises with the issue of fantasy. Are we to understand that artistic mimesis can only be an imitation of objects which exist in fact? There would be no place then for creative imagination—which is in fact a concept completely foreign to Platonic thought. Plato does, however, account for both kinds of imitation. In the *Sophist*, Plato draws a distinction between the art of making likenesses of actual things (*icastic* mimesis) and the art of making images of fantastic objects or beings (*fantastic* mimesis). He concludes, as might be expected, that this art of the fantastic is unworthy and indeed harmful. This is another vital blow dealt by Plato to any elements in literature that we might want to consider artistic, and even to the legitimacy of fiction as a poetic activity. It is perfectly coherent however with his rejection of perspectivism, with his notion of painting as the imitation of appearances and with his denial of a real knowledge of any craft to the poet. Real things are for Plato better than the fantastic, and better than their own images.

"The imitator has no knowledge worth mentioning of what he imitates" (*Republic*, 37; cf. *Ion*). He is not guided by reason, but by appearance, and so his is an unhealthy aim. The reasonable response to things of fortune does not lend itself to imitation; crowds are inclined to the imitations of irrational, useless and cowardly impulses. A completely virtuous life, Plato seems to say, would not be a fit subject for a tragedy or a comedy, and this does not say much in favor of tragedies or comedies.

There is no cathartic theory of art in Plato, as there will be in Aristotle. Instead, we find an anti-cathartic pronouncement. Sorrow repressed in ourselves breaks loose when as spectators we sympathize with another's misfortune. This is not a good thing for Plato: it is habit-forming and contagious. It weakens the soul instead of fortifying it. The same happens with all other passions induced by art. It could be said that, for Plato, art severs thought from the emotions and breaks them loose. There is no intellectual element in the effect of art on the spectator, just as there was no intellectual element in the inspiration of the poet. Later, we shall see that Aristotle's theory of catharsis has opposite implications.

As we have said before, this theory of Plato's does not mean that all art has pithentic effects. If the passions aroused by it are positive, art is beneficial, and this accounts for Plato's tolerance of some kinds of poetry: "hymns to the gods and praises of famous men are the only poetry which ought to be admitted into our state" (*Republic*, 40). Plato justifies this severe treatment with an allusion to an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy. He calls those defenders of poetry who are not themselves poets to prove "that there is a use in poetry as well as a delight" (*Republic*, 40).

The quarrel between philosophy and poetry is also the quarrel between the sophists and the philosophers in Plato's time, the quarrel between rhetoric and logic in the Renaissance, and the quarrel today between the Arts and the Sciences. It seems that the only possible agreement is to be found with a scientific account of poetry, or of literature
in general. The basis for such an account was already set by Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

In a later dialogue, the *Laws*, Plato brings forward similar arguments on the subject of poetry to those of the *Republic*. He sets as an example the poets of Egypt, who are subservient to the aims of the state. Plato, who is about eighty by the time he writes the *Laws*, selects old men as the most discerning public (other sections of the public listed by Plato include children, older children, young men, women, and people in general). Pleasure, he says, ought not to be the basis of the value judgments given by discerning judges. However, pleasure has a role in the evaluation of poetry, since pleasurable learning is most adequate when teaching to children by means of poetry. Plato insists again on the need of a censorship on literature.

We may conclude that Plato, like many others after him, including Tolstoy and many Marxist critics, has found something greater than art, and art has to be subordinated to this something. In his case, it is the welfare of the soul and the state. But in general, anyone who believes to have found Truth with a capital T will agree to some extent with Plato’s views on art. Whether we support or dislike this view, the role of Plato as a literary critic is an outstanding one. He raises or develops in an important way many of the topics that all later critical theories will have to deal with: the social role of the artist, the psychological effects of art, the formal grounds for a classification of literary genres, the debate on whether art is the product of technique or inspiration, the analogies between the different arts . . . The Platonic view of art can be regarded as one of two main perspectives on art, the other being the Aristotelian one.

—oOo—

---

6 Vernon Hall, *A Short History of Literary Criticism*. 