

PLATO'S USE OF POETRY *

JOHN FISHER

Plato is remembered for his intemperate, strident attack on the poets in *Republic X*. He is remembered for his not thoroughly convincing charge that poets, on the whole, have a destructive effect upon society because of their concern only with appearances, because of their commitment to the deliberate production of emotional states, and because of their deceit, their lies about the gods. What is much less frequently noticed about this castigator of the poets is that, far more than any philosopher of his time, and probably of all time, Plato *uses* the poets, that is, uses their poems and fragments of poems repeatedly in the development and articulation of his own ideas in the dialogues. These uses range over a wide spectrum of functions. What follows here is an account, inexhaustive, but I think fair to the facts, of how and why Plato can and does use the Greek poets, particularly Homer, in his expositions and arguments.

To understand Plato's use of poetry calls for an understanding of the general notion of "use". The ordinary synonyms, such as "employment" are of little exploratory or explanatory value, nor are the occasions when authors have found the term convenient to suggest such relationships as "learning from," as in Herbert Muller's *The Uses of the Past*, or "analysing so that our assessments shall be logically satisfactory," as in Stephen Toulmin's *The Uses of Argument*, or in Nietzsche's celebrated essay, *The Use and Abuse of History*, where, if we take the German title, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, seriously, use (perhaps not a felicitous choice by the translator) means something like "benefits" or "advantages". Inevitably, of course, the term does connote consequences, usually advantageous or profitable, but how the term functions remains to be explored.

* Research for this article was aided by support from the Research and Study Leaves Committee of Temple University.

If use is closely related to the concept of utility, as it surely seems to be — indeed romance languages do not distinguish between utility and usefulness— then the questions which we tend to think belong to ethics and economics, questions such as whether or not utility is an intrinsic quality of acts or rule or commodities, or an inherent property, or some other, should not be ignored. If the utility of grain is the same after an abundant harvest as it is in time of famine, as W.F. Lloyd argued in his influential Oxford lecture of a century ago, then the term utility cannot express some quality inherent in a commodity, although his conclusion that therefore it is “a feeling of the mind” does not follow.

There are three aspects of the employment of the term “useful” with which we must be concerned if we are to understand the concept of use. The first has to do with specific properties of the entity which is said to be useful. The second has to do with the agent for whom it is useful and with his ability to do something with, or to be in some way related to that entity. The third has to do with the end or the purpose for which he finds or makes it useful. In simple terms: X is useful to A for P .

Consider the properties of an apple. Among these are certain properties shared with all entities; existence, the ability to be referred to, etc. Beyond these are ranges of properties which may specifically apply; being red, weighing 120 grams, and other physical properties. There are also ranges of properties which cannot apply, being read, having an IQ of 120, or other intentional properties of an agent. Furthermore it may be said that apples have certain functional properties such as the capability of being eaten, or being painted by an artist. One might very well object to considering such as properties, for as long as the apple is only *capable* of being eaten, it is not eaten; but whether or not one is comfortable with calling such capabilities properties matters little. As concepts they lead us conveniently to the notion of ends. The usefulness of an entity applies only to specific possible ends. I can eat an apple to nourish my body, to relieve boredom, to keep the legendary doctor away. I cannot eat an apple in order to make it rain in Spain or in order to pay my taxes or to make $2+2=5$.

Some entities seem to have other properties as well. A book may be 5” by 8” by 2”, be maroon and leather-bound. It may have various functional capabilities (which derive from the physical): It can level my desk if placed under a corner. Furthermore, it may be said to be instructive, historically accurate, deeply moving, or aesthetically valueless. These too, whether or not one wishes to call them all real features of the book, do lead us to the ends; a level desk, an aesthetic experience, truth, etc.

And an agent is necessary for the notion of usefulness to obtain. Nothing is useful to the Sun or to Venus, and water is useful to plants only if we metaphorically consider them as agents. Plants use water to grow in the same sense as planets use gravity to stay in orbit. This usefulness is picturesque, but misleading. It is because I find my desk askew that I find a book useful to level it. It is because I have no currency in my pocket that I use a credit card. It is only because of agency that these entities can be said to be useful. Xenophon suggests that a flute can be useless for one who cannot play it, but indeed be useful, because others can. If there were no agents there would be no uses.

The fact that something can be used to satisfy divergent kinds of ends should not exclude from our consideration the question of standard or normal use. Aristotle's functionalism caused him to argue in his discussions about nature that some things do have natural ends. An acorn's natural end is to become an oak tree, even if the squirrel considers its nutritive value more important to him. A book can be used to level a desk, but that is not its standard use. That is not why books are made, nor is it what books are used for most of the time. Books are made to be read, and resultantly can convey information, refer, convince of some alleged truth, move the reader emotionally, please him aesthetically, outrage him politically, satisfy him religiously, and so on.

Is there a standard use of poetry? Of course poetry is used for various ends. It can be used to persuade (as in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*) or to give a warm feeling (as in the poetry of Edgar A. Guest). It can be used to sell products, to satisfy a creative urge, to express devotion or patriotic pride, to work out vague feelings, to increase the earnings of the poet, and so on. Not every one of these is the business of poetry as poetry, however. A definition of poetry is far beyond the ambitions of this essay, but it is of interest to note that sometimes, as, for instance, in Buchler's recent book poetry is defined by showing how poetry functions as poetry.¹ For our purposes it is sufficient to note that poetry consists of sounds, of ideas, and of an organization which permits the interrelationships of ideas, symbols and meanings to be exploited. "The business of the poet," said I. A. Richards, "is to give order and coherence, and so freedom, to a body of experience."² A poem is not just a decorated idea. Heidegger was not altogether wrong in insisting, in *Vortraege und Aufsaeetze* that the nature of poetry lies in thinking, and it is this aspect, rather than the purely formal that the most effective uses of poetry are found. These general observations obtain for all poetry, of any type, of any era.

Now the particular poetry which was available to Plato was not the poetry of Coleridge or Wordsworth or Stevens or Spender. It was largely Homeric and had its own particular characteristics. What these were, emerges from a serious reading of the poets, or, lacking this experience, with considerable loss, from the reading of the Platonic dialogues in which the excerpts appear. An analysis of the poems is not the goal here, but an analysis of the *use* of the poems, even though this might violate what some would consider the standard use of the poem.

The number of instances of poetic references in Plato depends upon how one counts, and whether allusions or only direct quotations are allowed to be called instances. By the most conservative methods of cataloging, there are at least several hundred very specific references to the poets in the dialogues. Indirect references or unacknowledged utilizations escalate the count dramatically, but these are not our concern. The question at issue is how Plato, in clearly identified situations of direct reference to the poets, uses the poetic lines for his own ends. The citations given here are not arranged in order of importance, nor chronologically. To raise the issue of importance would lead us suddenly and incorrigibly away from the topic, and because of the wide disputes about the dating of the dialogues, to assume a chronology and follow it would raise secondary issues which once more would direct us from the matter at hand. Therefore the arrangement of data in what follows is of no significance at all.

I. Trivial uses of the poets—

It is a conspicuous trait in Plato, as well as in many writers, to include the words of well-known authors in their works, not as authoritative, not as suggestions that the contexts were in any way parallel, but, it would seem, for no other reason than the writer liked the words, and considered them fitting at the place.

"From these notions, then, 'grasp what I would tell,' as Pindar says," Plato writes in *Meno* 76d, referring to a passage of Pindar only known fragmentarily today. Early in *Phaedrus* (227d) Plato uses the poet in the same way: "What? Don't you realize that I should account it, in Pindar's words, 'above all business' to hear how you and Lysias passed your time?"

The *Symposium* is laced with such references, all out of context, and suggesting nothing but the erudition of the author and his entrapment with a poetic phrase which is sometimes identified, sometimes not. "And now I will tell you about another thing 'our valiant hero dared and did' in the course of some campaign." The words, placed in the mouth of Alcibiades, refer to the historical Socrates, not

to Odysseus, as in the Homeric reference. On several occasions in the *Symposium* these uses are called "tags" by Michael Joyce in his almost paraphrastic translation. "If," says Eryximachus (177a), "I may preface my remarks by a tag from Euripides, 'the tale is not my own,' as Melanippe says,..." Again (214b) Alcibiades uses Homer's *Iliad* in the same way. "What do you say?" retorted Alcibiades, "We have to take your orders, you know. What's the tag? — 'A good physician's more than all the world'."

Republic is not without its casual utilizations of the poet's words, as, for instance in 411b the Homeric expression "feeble warrior" is used as a set of words familiar to the hearers which embellish the arguments concerning the guardians. In 424b Plato quotes a line from the first book of the *Odyssey*, the song "which hovers newest on the singer's lips." An example of less precisely fixed references can be found in 328e. "...the thing that the poets call 'the threshold of old age'." In *Laws* II, 660e, the unjust man is pitiable and miserable, "even though he were 'richer than Midas or Cinyras,'" "a reference to Tyrtaeus 12.6; and in the tenth book the indolent man is called what Hesiod called him, "most like a stingless drone" (901a). Homer too is used on those pages to provide the choice words describing the seamen who are "turned from their course by the 'flow and flavor' of wine."

These uses are trivial only in the substantive sense. They do perform certain literary tasks. They make the prose more dramatic and readable. They catch the reader's attention. They add to the aesthetic value of the speeches, but they do not contribute to the content of the work. The cases here cited are only a very small sample of the enormous number of instances available in the dialogues,

II. Stylistic use of the poets

While the trivial uses of the words of the poets might contribute to the literary value of a dialogue they do not as such alter style. The inclusion of passages as well as words does affect style and is deliberately used in certain dialogues to achieve a stylistic effect. Consider *Symposium* 195d :

For it is Homer; is it not, who writes of Ate as being both divine and dainty — dainty of foot, that is. "How delicate," he says — How delicate her feet who shuns the ground, Stepping a — tiptoe on the heads of men.

This technique affects style in two ways : (a) It is a style, or part of a style of writing. To lace one's prose with snippets of recognized verse is to have already made a commitment of style. Style, of course, is not just formal syntax. It presupposes something more than just linguistic considerations. Exactly what this something

more is generates all the debates. Undoubtedly there are expressive components and other elements, the analysis of which is beyond our present concerns. Nevertheless, to choose this device as an element of one's commitments is part of what it means to adopt a style. (b) It generates a style. Only a page or two beyond the previous quotation Plato has Agathon say "And now I am moved to summon the aid of verse, and tell how it is (Love) who makes.

Peace among all men, and a windless, waveless main;

Repose for winds, and slumber in our pain.

This is reminiscent of Homeric style, indeed even to the point of using Homeric expressions like "windless calm" (*Odyssey* V, 391), but it does not explicitly refer to the Homeric work, nor literally quote from it. Plato gives every indication that he is quite capable of, and willing to utilize the stylistic power of the poets, and with significant effect.

Sometimes the effect is very pronounced. Plato even writes verse in the Homeric style, vaguely attributing it to "certain Homeric scholars in their unpublished works." (*Phaedrus* 252b), and adding his own punning embellishments.³

III. Positive use of the Poets' Insights

One of the largest categories of instances of the citation of poets is the one based upon agreement with what the poets have said. A generalized paraphrase of the comments associated with these instances would be "It's just like Homer said," or, "The poet was right when he said..." This use is not an appeal to authority. Indeed it is just the opposite. The insight of the poet is vindicated. His observation is correct, not because he made it, but because of the evidence provided.

In *Phaedo* 94c-e, Plato reflects upon his argument about the soul and attunement and notes,

Well, surely we can see now that the soul works in just the opposite way...It is just like Homer's description in the *Odyssey* where he says that Odysseus

Then beat his breast, and thus reproved his heart;

Endure, my heart; still worse hast thou endured.

Do you suppose that when he wrote that he thought that the soul was an attunement, liable to be swayed by physical feelings? Surely he regarded it as capable of swaying and controlling them, as something much to divine to rank as an attunement. In that case there is no justification for our saying that soul is a kind of attunement. We should neither agree with Homer nor be consistent ourselves.

Socrates, in discussing with Laches the possible inconsistency of being courageous and yet beating a strategic retreat, in *Laches* 191ab, says,

Why, as the Scythians are said to fight, flying as well as pursuing, and as Homer says in praise of the horses of Aeneas, that they knew "how to pursue, and fly quickly hither and thither," and he passes an encomium on Aeneas himself, as having a knowledge of fear or flight, and calls him "a deviser of fear or flight."

Laches replies, "Yes, Socrates, and there Homer is right."

Not only Socrates, but his antagonists in argument use the poets in this way. Callicles, in *Gorgias* 484b, says, "It seems to me that Pindar expresses what I am saying in that ode in which he writes,....." and suggests that what Euripides says in *Antiope* is true, not because of Euripides' authority, but because his judgements turn out to have been vindicated by Callicles' experience.

In *Philebus* 47e Socrates asks whether it is necessary to remind ourselves of some lines in *Iliad*, and Protarchus replies, "No, what you say is precisely what must happen." The poet makes the same point, but his insights simply parallel those of the philosopher. The poet is not cited as a source of truth, but a confirmer of truth. Poets can be reliable, at least at times. What they say is frequently true. They are "among the inspired and so, by the help of their Graces and Muses, often enough hit upon true historical fact" (*Laus*, III, 682a). Being correct "often enough" is a far cry from being always reliable. Indeed, sometimes the truth is the very opposite of what the poets say.

IV. Negative use of the alleged insights of the poets—

If the accusations against the poets in *Republic X*, accusations which result in their banishment, are more than the verbal fallout of a tantrum, we must expect the poets to be put down elsewhere, not just for having a deleterious effect upon society (because of their engendering irrational emotional states) but because they are simply wrong in what they say.

A simple instance can be found in *Euthyphro*. In 12ab, Socrates is straightforward :

What I have to say is not so hard to grasp. I mean the very opposite of what the poet wrote.

Zeus, who brought that all to pass,

And made it all to grow,

You will not name,

For where fear is, there too is reverence.

On that I differ from the poet. Shall I tell you why?...I do not think that "where fear is, there too is reverence." For it seems to me that there are many

who fear sickness, poverty, and all the like, and so are afraid, but have no reverence whatever for the things that are afraid of.

Sometimes the poet is wrong, not on factual grounds, but on formal grounds. Simonides is attacked by Protagoras in *Protagoras* 339a-d because his poems are inconsistent. Protagoras had made being an authority on poetry the most important part of one's education, and that meant being able to criticize a poem logically as well as testing it against the facts of experience. His rejection of Simonides is countered by Socrates, not by an appeal to authority, but by conceding that inconsistency is bad, and that poets can be inconsistent, yet insisting that Simonides is not really inconsistent on *this* point. That a poet speaking nonsense must be unceremoniously attacked is an unalterable consequence of Socrates' commitment to truth.

It sometimes would appear, as some have suggested, that poets are used as authorities by Plato, and that their words appear to be used authoritatively. If it happens at all (and we shall examine that problem shortly), it is surely not always the case. In the often quoted passages in *Republic* II Socrates says (379c,d), "Then we must not accept from Homer or any other poet the folly of such error as this..." No poet must be allowed to tell us falsehoods about the gods (381d). Sometimes what they say is the very opposite of the truth. The arguments of the early part of book III make clear that a knowledgeable person should have little difficulty discerning the simple falsities of Homer and the other poets when they write about the gods. Their statements are so ludicrous that only our awareness that derisive laughter can be unwholesome prevents our laughing the poets right out of court. In book X, at the final dispatch of the poets, Plato acknowledges his respect for Homer, the first teacher of the beauties of tragedy, yet, he adds, "We must not honor a man above the truth." The poets can be used, even when wrong. Their falsities can make the philosopher's truth clearer and more compelling. In cases where the poet's error is popularly accepted, and bears upon the promulgation of the philosopher's truth, the poet will be used, and Plato will say, "The truth is the antithesis of what the poet says."

V. The Alleged Authoritative use of the Poets—

There is something odd in thinking that the poets could be authoritative for Plato. Sometimes one finds the poet used as an authority by persons engaged in arguments against Socrates, as by Callicles in *Gorgias* 484-485. But if the use is genuinely that of authority it is not "What Euripides says is true" (484e) as a matter of fact, but that it is true because the poet says so. In other passages, however, the words of Homer are used with what would seem to be something

closer to authority. The citation of Homer in *Republic* 468d concerning the honoring of valiant youth sounds like more than a passing observation that Homer was as a matter of fact correct. "We will then, said I, take Homer as our guide in this at least" Socrates concludes.

The admonition to use the poet as guide occurs on more than one occasion in Plato. Socrates, in his charming conversation with Lysis and Menexenus, turns to Lysis and says,

Let us proceed, however, on this line of inquiry no longer — for I look upon it as a very difficult sort of road — but let us go back again to that point at which we turned aside, and follow in the steps of the poets. For poets, I conceive, are as good as fathers and guides to us as mothers of wisdom. (Lysis 213e-214a).

Homer is appealed to in a direct way at the end of *Laches*, where Jowett translates Socrates in the following way: "If anyone laughs at us for going to school at our age, I would quote to them the authority of Homer, who says, 'Modesty is not good for a needy man'."

VI. The Use of poets as sources of ideas—

It would not be difficult for Plato, or any other honest thinker, to discover that many of his own ideas and the ideas current at this time could be discovered in the works of earlier thinkers. We can never assume, however, that an earlier idea is necessarily the cause or the direct ancestor of a later idea merely by virtue of its temporal priority. There is a big difference, on the one hand, in noting that the doctrine of universal flux in Heraclitus can be found in a "primitive state of elaboration" in Homer, and noting, on the other, that the earlier formulation influenced the later, and was indeed the cause of Heraclitus' belief. Nevertheless, Socrates, in noting that Protagoras, Heraclitus, Empedocles, and indeed perhaps all the philosophers except Parmenides, agree on the primacy of becoming, asserts that the *Iliad* mentions that all things are the offspring of a stream of change, and says emphatically "Who would challenge so great an array, with Homer for its captain, and not make himself a laughingstock? (*Theatetus* 153a). But Theatetus' ideas are not Socrates'. It is quite common for his adversaries in the dialogues to be pictured as deriving their ideas from the poets. "It is likely that you acquired this idea from Homer" he flatly tells Polemarchus in *Republic* I (334a).

Some attributions of origins can be found for Socrates' ideas. The poets are credited with originating the myth of the metals in *Republic* III, and Hesiod specifically in VIII (547a). Yet myth is not doctrine. It is a device to facilitate

belief. The contributions of the poets to the beliefs of Plato himself are not so readily admitted. Some aspects of the afterlife are clearly derivative, such as the recognized reference to Tatarus in the *Iliad*, which is cited in the discussion in *Phaedo* 112a, but there is little to suggest that Plato was aware of any serious contributions of the poets to his basic views of immortality. There is very little in common between Homer's *psyche*, the ghost present in a living person which leaves at the instant of death, and Plato's surviving soul. If a Homeric influence is there it is only through the transforming apparatus of the Orphic religion. In general Plato is quite reluctant to cite precursors of his philosophical beliefs, especially among the poets, although is not so tight-lipped concerning the philosophers, such as the Pythagoreans. But either Plato saw no influence of the poets, or he refused to admit it, or indeed his ideas were not to any significant extent influenced by the poets. The last is the most believable choice.

Conclusion

This sketchy catalogue of some uses of the poets by Plato leaves unanswered the question why, and unresolved the misgivings about the appropriateness of such actions by one whose philosophy is generally seen as irreconcilably hostile to the poet and his work. The degree of hostility, of course, is a matter of dispute among commentators, but to deny that Plato sees the poet as an unworthy rival to the philosopher, not only in an ideal state but in any mode of practice, would be to close irresponsibly one's eyes to the recurring references in the dialogues, and to a central and unalterably held theme in the developed philosophy.

Plato's utilization of the words of the poets in what has been characterized above as a trivial sense causes us no difficulties. In spite of his conviction that the poets have been literally bad for the existing state and ideally bad for the ideal state, Plato was a product of a time and a culture in which the educational system was built around the epic poets. The picture which Protagoras gives in the dialogue called by his name (325-327) is not a fictional one. The children of wealthy parents were inspired by the stories of good men of old in the poetic writings. Later they studied the lyric poets, and thus became "more civilized, more balanced, and better adjusted in themselves, and so more capable in whatever they say or do,..." Homer and the later poets were the teachers of Athens. It was only as an adult that Plato challenged that role, and even as an adult he could not escape the consequences of an aristocratic education in Greece. His mother Periktone traced her lineage to Dropides, kinsman of Solon. His father Ariston was a distinguished citizen, and his stepfather Pylilampes was a friend of Pericles, and ambassador for the king. That heritage guaranteed an early

training in the poets which was so deeply ingrained that it, for Plato as well as for the rest of the educated ones resulted in both conscious and unconscious, deliberate and accidental, uses of Homeric terms and phrases, much as the Puritans used, and the Puritan tradition still uses. Biblical quotations to clarify, embroider, and accent all discourse. Homer and the other poets represent a literature and a vocabulary with which Plato was most familiar. It could not fail to color his speech and writing. It should be hardly surprising to read "As Homer puts it..." (*Republic* VII, 516d), or "To quote Homer..." (*Theaetetus*, 183e), or "As Hesiod says..." (*Theaetetus*, 207a).

There seems to be good evidence that Plato's misgivings about, indeed his fear of what the poet could do to the youth and ultimately the society, are not merely musings, but the result of first-hand knowledge. Considering the dialogues not as philosophy but as literature, Plato emerges as the consummate poet. The arguments that certain extant fragments of lyric verse were written by Plato may be shaky, but the great dramatic dialogues are examples of the kind of moving, emotionally powerful works that his philosophy rejects. This tension between the poet and the philosopher does not escape him. Even if one rejects *Epistle* II as spurious (a generous concession to scholarly skepticism), there is enough suggested in *Epistle* VII to assure us that Plato's philosophy was intended to be taught in the Academy, not in the dialogues. They at best dramatize the thought of Socrates and indicate the contrast of Plato's commitments with those of the competing schools. Even the later so called unsocratic writings contain only those aspects of of Plato's philosophy which he made public by addressing a broader range of hearers, and these writings, even the relatively dull *Laws*, are still distinctively poetic works. The real philosophy is not capable of being encapsuled in writing. "I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in the future, for there is no way of putting it in words, like other studies," he writes in *Epistle* VII (341c) and adds that if there were to be such a treatise written, *he* would be the best prepared to do it. But not only *will* he not, he *cannot* write it, and, by obvious inference, no one else can either. *Epistle* II adds, "...there is not and will not be any written work of Plato's own. What are now called his are the work of a Socrates embellished and modernized" (314c). But in works that are called Plato's, and are indeed his, the words and the style that his education and training have insinuated into the writings have, regardless of his criticisms, made him a poet. The use of the teachings of the epic poets in either a positive or negative sense is also a literary device which often proved successful for Plato. The *ad hominum* arguments which do sometimes appear in Plato's works are passing philosophical slips. He never mounts an attack on the content of the teaching of the poets solely on the fact that it was a poet who said it. In spite of

the viciousness of his attack in *Republic*, and the parallel running antagonism toward Sophism, Plato was quite capable of acknowledging the worth of an insight, even when it came from a poet. Not only can accepted virtues be celebrated in poetry, but the poet may be the one whose formulation of certain virtues should be emphasized. Even in *Republic*, poetry has a functional role. The trouble is not that the poet is always wrong. Often the trouble is that he waffles. He lacks the canons requisite for public morality. Thus the great admiration expressed for the Egyptians in *Laws* 656. They, at least, drew sharp lines.

The negative use of Homer is particularly easy to justify. If his teachings are familiar and often false, it is the writer's responsibility to use the poems and append refutations. If Hesiod, who was greatly influenced by Homer, felt the responsibility to announce his opposition, why not the philosopher? If Pindar, of whom it is traditionally said that he spoke only what he believed, could attack Homer with a kind of grudging admiration :

On his falsehood and his winged cunning a majesty lies
and tricks and deceives us with tales
and blind is the heart of the multitude of man,

(*Nem.* VII 22-24).

how much more has the philosopher responsibility to point out the errors. Greeks, unlike moderns, felt no awkwardness in calling these errors "lies", and their forthrightness may be a contributing factor in our tendency to think that Homer was the authority for all of Athens who had to be attacked for his falsehoods. We seldom speak today of poets lying, whether or not there is any significant intentional ground for the untruth. In his parallel discussion of myth Gadamer writes :

It is now said, not that poets tell lies, but that they are incapable of saying anything true, since they have an aesthetic effect only and merely seek to rouse through their imaginative creations the imagination and the emotions of their hearers or readers. ⁴

The alleged use of the poets as authoritative is a larger puzzle, and, indeed, if it actually occurred, would be inconsistent with the philosophy of Socrates taught, and that of Plato hinted at, in the dialogues. As the educational system in Athens admirably utilized the poets' compendia of practical wisdom it was easy for an authoritative ethics or political philosophy to blur itself into power. This ethics and derivative political theory outraged Plato. It is hard to imagine a genuinely authoritative poetical utterance in the thinking of one so convinced of the destructive social effects of the poet's work. A close look at the texts indicates a

consistent practice of avoiding giving any authority to the poetic works. The *Laws* say a good deal about the establishment of authorities in all areas of life, including the arts. But these were to be government agencies, and the procedure a far cry from accepting the authority of Homer. Traditional authorities of all kinds are suspect. The context is medicine, not poetry, but the position of Socrates in *Phaedrus* 270c is consistent with the stance of the dialogues in general.

Phaedrus : If we are to believe Hippocrates, the Aesclepiad, we can't understand even the body without such a procedure.

Socrates : No, my friend, and he is right, but we must not just rely on Hippocrates, we must examine the assertion and see whether it accords with the truth.

The appeal to Homer at the end of *Laches*, which Jowett renders "...quote to the authority of Homer," can be read, in fact, should be read in a much weaker sense, and if one considers the context, it is anything but an argument from authority. Confidentially, he says, each of us should seek out the best teacher for ourselves and for our youth, and, "if anyone laughs at us for going to school at our age I would, quoting Homer, say to him, "Modesty is not good for a needy man'." Now that is not at all like using Homer as an authority for what one accepts. It is using Homer to get agreement from people who do accept his authority, but don't know what you are really up to. There is some innocent misunderstanding today about the alleged authority of Homer at the time of Plato. Never in Athens were the poems of Homer considered sacred. Pindar could with impunity call them lies. For the untutored masses to treat Homer as "authoritative" meant little more than to admit to Homer as the source of their ideas, perhaps to act as if these ideas were correct, but certainly not to treat them as absolute religious truths. The fact that there is no passage in Plato in which he uses the poets as authorities makes him, on this crucial point, in spite of his fear and distrust of Homer, and the ultimate banishment of the poets, not all that different in his thinking from the masses, none of whom had to worry about Homeric heresies or other consequences of strict authoritarianism.

The masses did get their ideas from Homer, at least many of their pivotal ideas. They were derived from the oral tradition, the purely oral nature of which, incidentally is much less confidently held today than in earlier periods of scholarly research. The educated minority got some of their important ideas from Homer too, but from reading him in their schools, in their tutoring in poetry. As a source of pleasure, of motivation, of ideas, Homer was available to all. Perhaps it was the awareness of this wide Homeric audience which led Plato to reach out beyond the band of students in the Academy to write dramatic dialogues. As Stanley Rosen once perceptively observed :

There is a quality that Plato and Homer have in common; owing to the harmony of their expression they are accessible to everybody, no matter how one wishes to approach them. ⁵

The paradox of Plato's use of the poets becomes less paradoxical the more we think of Plato as artist. "Plato was always sensitive to the poetic genius," said Shorey, "and there was no time when he might not have praised Homer without conspicuous irony." ⁶ The trouble, as Plato saw it, was that the poet aimed at pleasure, not the Good, and therefore his fine lines had to be kept under the control of the philosopher. The poet can contribute to philosophy, but his was not the time, nor Athens the place for the undisciplined enjoyment of the poet's art. Indeed nowhere, not even in the glory of the ideal state, can the poet be left to his own devices. But his works can be used by philosophers like Plato, who by their distinctive activity do not merely proclaim the truth, but equip their hearers to understand and evaluate that which is offered as the truth. Michael Polanyi summed it up in his convincing arguments about the role of the reader, suggesting that the reader or hearer imposes limits on the meanings which the poets put in their works :

The *use* of a work of art by others is not, therefore, like the use of an invention, such as the telephone. We do not have to recreate A.G. Bell's imaginative vision of the telephone in order to use it ... But we do have to achieve an imaginative vision in order to "use" a work of art, that is, to understand and enjoy it aesthetically. ⁷

That is what Plato was able to do with poets. The tensions were there, but they became creative in the imaginative aesthetic vision. And through this purely aesthetic relationship with the poets his work was enriched, the arguments made more understandable, and the poet-philosopher was born. Philosophy as well as literature is the better for that.

Notes—

1. Justus Buchler, *The Main of Light : On the Concept of Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 1974.)
2. I.A. Richards, *Science and Poetry*. 2nd ed. (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1935), p.6.
- 3 See my "Plato on Writing and Doing Philosophy," in *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. XXVII, No. 2 (April-June, 1966), 163-172
4. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 243.
5. *Plato's Symposium* (Yale University Press, 1960), xxxix.
6. *The Unity of Plato's Thought* (University of Chicago Press, 1903), p. 81.
7. Michael Polanyi, *Meaning* (University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 85.

Professor of Philosophy,
Editor : *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*
Temple University, Philadelphia (U.S.A.)