

from *Preface to Plato*, by Eric J. Havelock

[1] [Plato argues] that the artist produces a version of experience which is twice removed from reality; his [the artist's] work is at best frivolous and at worst dangerous both to science and to morality; the major Greek poets from Homer to Euripides must be excluded from the educational system of Greece. And this extraordinary thesis is pursued with passion. The whole assault occupies the first half of [book 10]...

[2] Let us for a moment consider further the tone and temper of Plato's attack. He opens by characterizing the effect of poetry as a 'crippling of the mind'. It is a kind of disease, for which one has to acquire an antidote. The antidote must consist of a knowledge 'of what things really are'. In short, poetry is a species of mental poison, and is the enemy of truth. This is surely a shocker to the sensibilities of any modern reader and his incredulity is not lessened by the peroration with which, a good many pages later, Plato winds up his argument, 'Crucial indeed is the struggle, more crucial than we think—the choice that makes us good or bad—to keep faithful to righteousness and virtue in the face of temptation, be it of fame or money or power, or of poetry—yes, even of poetry.' If he thus exhorts us to fight the good fight against poetry, like a Greek Saint Paul warring against the powers of darkness, we can conclude either that he has lost all sense of pro-

portion, or that his target cannot be poetry in our sense, but something more fundamental...

[3] There has been natural reluctance to take what he says at face value... Just before the peroration, has he not said that poetry may offer a defence of herself if she can? Has he not confessed to her overpowering charms? Does he not admit reluctance to expel her, and does this not mean that in effect he recants? He does indeed so confess, but to think that his confession amounts to a recantation profoundly mistakes his intention. Indeed, the terms in which he makes the concession to poetry, to plead her case if she chooses, are themselves damning. For he treats her in effect as a kind of prostitute, or as a Delilah who may seduce Plato's Samson if he lets her, and so rob him of his strength. She can charm and coax and wheedle and enthrall, but these are precisely the powers that are so fatal. If we listen, we dare to do so only as we counter her spell with one of our own. We must repeat over and over to ourselves the line of reasoning we have previously followed. We must keep on our guard: 'We have our city of the soul to protect against her.'

[4] The mood of this passage uncovers the heart of the difficulty. Plato's target seems to be precisely the poetic experience as such. It is an experience we could character-

ize as aesthetic. To him it is a kind of psychic poison. You must always have your antidote ready. He seems to want to destroy poetry as poetry, to exclude her as a vehicle of communication. He is not just attacking bad poetry or extravagant poetry. This is made even clearer during the course of the argument he builds against her. Thus the poet, he says, contrives to colour his statement by the use of words and phrases and to embellish it by exploiting the resources of meter, rhythm and harmony. These are like cosmetics applied as an outward appearance which conceal the poverty of statement behind them. Just as the graphic artist employs illusionism to deceive us, so the acoustic effects employed by the poet confuse our intelligence. That is, Plato attacks the very form and substance of the poetized statement, its images, its rhythm, its choice of poetic language. Nor is he any less hostile to the range of experience which the poet thus makes available to us. He can admittedly represent a thousand situations and portray a thousand emotions. This variety is just the trouble. By his portrayal he can unlock a corresponding fund of sympathetic response in us and evoke a wide range of our emotions. All of which is dangerous, none of it acceptable. In short, Plato's target in the poet is precisely those qualities we applaud in him; his range, his catholicity, his command of the human emotional register, his intensity and sincerity, and his power to say things that only he can say and reveal things in ourselves that only he

can reveal. Yet to Plato all this is a kind of disease, and we have to ask why...

[5] For him, poetry as an educational discipline poses a moral danger, and also an intellectual one. It confuses a man's values and renders him characterless and it robs him of any insight into the truth. Its aesthetic qualities are mere frivolities and provide unworthy examples for our imitation. Thus argues the philosopher. But we surely, in estimating the possible role of poetry in education, would turn these judgments upside down. Poetry can be morally uplifting and inspire us to the ideal; it can enlarge our moral sympathies; and it is aesthetically truthful in the sense that it often penetrates to a reality as to a mystery which is denied prosaic intellects... the more of this kind of language you can put into a human educational system the better.

(p. 2-6)