ANTIDOTES AND INCANTATIONS: IS THERE A CURE FOR POETRY IN PLATO’S REPUBLIC?*

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It is a factor of cardinal importance not only for the reading of Plato’s dialogues but for the whole history of Western aesthetics that as regards the philosophical evaluation of poetry we can identify not just one but two ‘Platos’, and in consequence two possible Platonisms—two ways of thinking which can both lay claim to some basis within arguments and feelings expressed in Plato’s work. There is, to put it concisely, the seemingly Platonic attitude (and, consequently, the Platonism) which criticises, censors and even ‘banishes’ poets, and which speaks in terms of unmasking the false pretensions and the damaging influences of poetry. But there is also the Platonic stance which never ceases to allow the voices of poetry to be heard in Plato’s own writing, which presupposes not only extensive knowledge but also ‘love’ of poetry on the part of Plato’s readers, and which at certain key junctures claims for itself nothing less than the status of a new kind of philosophical poetry and art: the status, indeed, of ‘the greatest music’ and even of ‘the finest and best tragedy’.1 This complex doubleness in the dialogues’ perspectives on poetry has always been recognised by some of Plato’s most sympathetic admirers, both in antiquity and in more recent times. Yet it has been largely suppressed by the orthodoxies of modern scholarship, especially in the anglophone world. The greatest Neoplatonist reader of Plato’s attitudes to poetry, Proclus, was in no doubt on the matter: adapting a phrase from Republic X and calling Homer ‘the teacher not only of tragedy but also of Plato’s own entire use of mimesis and his whole philosophical system’, he carries his perception of the fusion of

* This chapter started life as a commentary, at the Princeton Classical Philosophy Colloquium of December 2002, on a paper by John Ferrari, whom I thank for the original stimulus of our exchanges. An Italian version formed the 7th Carchia memorial lecture in Rome, March 2007, and some of my ideas were also presented in research seminars at the Universities of Columbia and Durham. I am indebted to my hosts and audiences on all these occasions.

1 The ‘greatest music’, Phaedo 61a; cf. Phaedrus 248d, 259d. The ‘finest tragedy’, Laws 7.817b.
poetry and philosophy in Plato to a point which rules out any unmodified idea of exiling poetry from the city or the soul.2 The notion of Platonist writing as itself a kind of poetry has roots, as I have already mentioned, in explicit moments of self-consciousness in the dialogues, as well as in their multiple literary qualities. An awareness of this far-reaching fact continued to have significance for a range of readers from the Renaissance to Romanticism, including (to limit myself to English examples) such figures as Sidney, Shaftesbury, Coleridge, and Shelley. But on the landscape of modern criticism it has been largely overshadowed by the other ‘Platonism’ already cited, and above all by the conviction that Plato’s attitudes to poetry were summated in the Republic’s motif of ‘banishing’ (most of, and indeed the ‘best’ of) the poets from the ideal city.

The main aim of this paper is not to reconsider the senses in which Plato’s own writing contains elements of poetry, but to tackle head-on the bleak and I think mistaken modern orthodoxy that the idea of banishing the poets is somehow the philosopher’s supreme, definitive utterance on the subject. What I wish to do is to trace a deep ambiguity—a mixture or intersection, if you like, of the two Platos and/or Platonisms I have sketched—in what is almost always taken to be the ‘proof text’, the primary exhibit, of those who believe that the ‘banishment’ or repudiation of the poets, including Homer and the tragedians, is the whole (or the main) story of Plato’s relationship to poetry. I am referring to the first half of Republic Book X (595a–608b), where, on the standard reading, Socrates not only returns to but reiterates and revalidates the verdict of exile passed on the mimetically versatile poets in Book III (most vividly, though not without ambivalence, at 592a). This apparent reaffirmation of the verdict of exile is not only juxtaposed with but, so I shall maintain, dramatically undercut by Socratic expressions of hesitation and attraction towards poetry—in short, by indications of lingering if equivocal ‘love’ of poetry. To dwell on the supposed banishment, as so many critics do, without seeing the eloquent, complex force of the continuing attachment to poetry is to miss a whole layer of Plato’s own writing and thinking in this context. Furthermore, to read the arguments of Book X (as, once again, many do) without taking full account of the framing of these arguments by Socrates’ remarks both at the start of the book and in what I shall call

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2 Proclus In remp. Platonis 1.196.9–13 Kroll, with Halliwell (2002), 323–334, for the larger background to this remark.