CHAPTER SIX

SPECTACLES FROM HADES.
ON PLATO'S MYTHS AND ALLEGORIES IN THE REPUBLIC

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Republic book 10’s critique against poetry begins in a rather peculiar way:

I will have to tell you, although a sort of reverential love I have had for Homer since childhood makes me hesitate to speak. You see, he seems to have been the first teacher and leader of all these fine tragedians. All the same, a man should not be honoured more than the truth.¹

(595b–c)

It is Socrates who says this to Glaucon, and indeed he, and Glaucon were not educated in Kallipolis, but like all Greeks, under the guidance of Homer, and it is no wonder therefore that he has such a reverential love for his first teacher. But it is difficult not to hear here also the voice of Plato himself who cites Homer in so many places in his dialogues. And one should thus, perhaps, not wonder that much either why, at the end of his philosophical inquiry about the true nature of Homer’s poetry (as well as tragedy—and also comedy—which are ‘led’ by Homer), he makes Socrates emphatically say that:

if the imitative poetry that aims at pleasure has any argument to show it should have a place in a well-governed city, we should gladly welcome it back, since we are well aware of being charmed by it ourselves, but also that it is not pious to betray what one believes to be true.²

(607c)

Socrates, and obviously Plato too, are fully committed to sticking to his ‘pious’ engagement vis à vis truth, but the great pleasure Homer gives must be taken into account, as well as that reverential love they have for him from

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¹ ῥητέον, ἥν τ’ ἐγὼ: καὶ τοι φιλία γέ τίς με καὶ αἰθῶς ἐκ παιδὸς ἤχουσα περὶ Ὁμήρου ἀποκωλύει λέγειν. ἐσθιε μὲν γὰρ τῶν καλῶν ἀπάντων τούτων τῶν τραγικῶν πρῶτος διδάσκαλος τε καὶ ἡγεμόνις γενέσαν. ἀλλ’ οὐ γὰρ πρὸ γε τῆς ἀληθείας τιμητέος ἀνήρ ... I am quoting Reeve’s translation (2004), with (sometimes) slight modifications.

² δέως δὲ εἰρήσθω ὃτι ἡμεῖς γε, ἐὰν τίνα ἔχοι λόγον εἰπεῖν ἡ πρὸς ἱδόνην ποιητικὴ καὶ ἡ μίμησις, ὡς χρή ἄυτὴν εἶναι ἐν πάλιν εὐμομομένη, ἄσμενοι ἄν καταδεχομένα, ὡς σύνων γε ἡμῖν αὐτοὶς κηλουμένοις ὑπ’ αὐτῆς: ἀλλὰ γὰρ τὸ δοκοῦν ἄληθες σῶ ὄσιν προδιδόναι.
childhood on. Hence the proposal to allow ‘its defenders—the ones that are not poets themselves, but lovers of poetry (philopoietai)—to offer a defence in prose on her behalf, showing that she gives not only pleasure but also benefit (ôphelimos) both to constitutions and to human life’ (607d).\(^3\)

As some interpreters have suggested,\(^4\) it is rather difficult not to see here an allusion to Plato’s own myths, especially the myth of Er that follows which is explicitly presented as a sort of rewriting of Homeric poetry (614b), and is full of Homeric references, and reminiscences. And there too, it must be added, Plato also makes it very explicit that Glaucon is very keen on listening to it because of the great pleasure he will gain,—probably a pleasure somehow similar to the one he has gleaned from Homeric poetry from childhood on. So, if this suggestion has some plausibility, how should this benefice be understood?

This whole passage should be read, I suggest, as an echo of the end of the first critique of poetry in book 3, where Plato opposes mimetic Homeric (and tragic, and comic) poetry which is ‘by far the most pleasant to the children,’ but deleterious to ‘our government’ (397d–e), to the ‘poet and storyteller (muthologos)’ he advocates ‘for the benefit (ôphelia)’ of his future guardians, who must be ‘more austere and less pleasurable’ (398b). The poet advocated here is a lyric poet who will be asked by the philosophers to write, and recite (and make recite) ‘hymns to the gods, and eulogies to good men’ (607a).

To be sure, in the case of the muthoi that these hymns and eulogies are supposed to relate, the benefit is quite straight: it is by way of our admiration towards those morally excellent persons (heroic citizens, or morally perfect gods), and their deeds that we should be encouraged to ‘imitate’ them. This lyric poetry has clearly a direct, educative purpose: to offer youth morally excellent role models to emulate, and to booster the moral motivation of adults.

The case of the Platonic muthoi is obviously different: they are addressed to an Athenian (or more generally Greek) audience of people living in a democratic city, who, like Socrates and Glaucon, have been educated under the guidance of Homer. Yet even if Plato’s myths, or prose poetry, are not to

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\(^3\) δοῦμεν δὲ γέ που ἄν καὶ τεῖς προστάταις αὐτῆς, ὅσηι μὴ ποιητικοὶ, φιλοποιηταί δὲ, ἤνει μέτρου λόγον ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς εἰπέν, ὡς ὦ μένον ἥδεια ἀλλὰ καὶ ὠφέλημα πρὸς τὰς πολιτείας καὶ τὸν βίον τῶν ἀνθρώπινῶν ἑστιν.

\(^4\) See Babut (1983), 51; Rutherford (1995), 215. An alternative interpretation has been offered by Else (1972) who sees here a sort of invitation to the young Aristotle to defend poetry, which he eventually does in his Poetics, but, needless to say, this is pure speculation, and does not take the context into consideration.