# CHAPTER I

# SOCRATES AND THE RHAPSODE

§ *Early poets as critics,* The Frogs, *poetry in the scales—II. Plato's* Ion, *character of a rhapsode, character of Socrates, some embarrassing questions and unfortunate answers, the magnet and the iron rings, a light, winged and holy thing, poetry as inspiration, rhapsode vs. charioteer, pilot, and general, poetry as information—III. other works of Plato:* Meno, Phaedrus, *contradictory passages about inspiration,* Republic *and* Laws, *poetry and morals, poetry feeds and waters the passions, showing poets the gate, quarrel between poets and philosophers, Homer tells lies, poetry as imitation, the merely dramatic sense, the metaphysical sense, the painter and the three beds, the cinematic cave, the line and the four grades of knowledge—IV. Platonic "ideas,"* Phaedo, anamnēsis, Symposium, Phaedrus, *"love" and the "beautiful," the classic Platonic theme, varied senses of* to kalon, Philebus, *Xenophon's* Memorabilia, Greater Hippias—*V. reality and mathematics,* ratio, logos, *geometry of the five elements, visual art,* Philebus, *mixed pleasures,* Sophist, *eikastic and phantastic,* skiagraphia, *"dynamic symmetry," illusion and formalism, Cratylus and the image of Cratylus* §

BECAUSE POETS HAVE A STRONG TENDENCY TO FORM OPINIONS ABOUT THEIR craft and to use these opinions as part of the message of their poems, we are likely to find literary theory of a sort as far back as we can find poems. When Homer begins his epics with an invocation to the muse, he is uttering a theory about his poems—namely, that they are written, or had better be written, with the help of divine inspiration—and this is an idea which has played a considerable role in the sub-

sequent history of poetics. During the several centuries that elapse between Homer and Plato, the first philosopher of literature whose ideas we shall examine with any care, other Greek writers, Hesiod, Solon, Simonides, Pindar and the rhetoricians and dramatists of the fifth century, made various critical remarks—that poetry is charming, that poetry is instructive, that it comes natural to a genius, that it has to be learned by art, that it is like painting, that it consists in a clever use of words—and to these opinions we shall here and there have occasion to allude in retrospect.

In Athens towards the close of the fifth century, after the great Periclean age, the comic dramatists, who made satirical criticism of life in general their business, had some sharp things to say about literature. Especially Aristophanes, and his special literary target was the modernist tragic dramatist Euripides. The earliest piece of extended literary criticism which survives from classical antiquity is an agon or debate in the *Frogs* of Aristophanes (405 B.C.), where Dionysus, patron and god of the theater festivals, has descended into Hades for the purpose of bringing back to earth the recently departed Euripides, but in the end actually makes the award to the good old-fashioned writer Aeschylus. The announced standards of criticism are "skill in the art" and "wise counsel for the state." The latter of these is perhaps the more important, but the actual decision of Dionysus seems to rest not so much on an appeal to either standard as on the fact that Aeschylus is the poet who takes his fancy. Some specific poetic traits are amusingly criticized—the wild and whirling magniloquence of Aeschylus (his "hippalectors" [1] and "tragelaphs" [2]), the sentimental fondness of Euripides for lame beggars as heroes. But the thing that a critically inclined person may remember most vividly is a certain directness in the form of argument. Scales are brought out, and the poets are weighed against each other line for line.

DIONYSUS: Now, then, each repeat a verse.
EURIPIDES: "I wish that Argo with her woven wings."
AESCHYLUS: "O streams of Spercheius, and ye pastured plains."
DIONYSUS: Let go!—See now—this scale outweighs that other. Very considerably.

—lines 1381–5 [3]

Although this is a parody of critical procedure, one might take it as a symbol of what is often most refreshing in early critical documents—a certain frontal naiveté, an immediate shrewdness of inquiry which the inheritors of criticism have long since, and by necessity, obscured in their more sophisticated formulations. To be able to speak about

[1] Horse-cocks, gryphons.
[2] Goat-stags, fantastic animals such as were known on Eastern carpets.
[3] Translation of J. Hookham Frere.

Homer's epics, not as the remote and venerable source of a classical tradition 3,000 years old, but as heroic poetry currently recited at popular festivals, and to be able to speak about tragedy and comedy as social and religious forms of art which had developed only within a preceding half century of Athenian prosperity—these were great advantages to the free-lance speculator on general problems of human existence who is the central figure in the next critical work which we are to consider.

## II

PLATO's *Ion* was written sometime in the first decade of the fourth century, a few years later than the death of his master Socrates in 399. Like the agon in the *Frogs* of Aristophanes, this piece of criticism takes the dramatic form. It is a philosophic dialogue, the scene being at Athens a short time before the close of the Peloponnesian war and the temporary eclipse of Athenian democracy. The interlocutors are Socrates and the rhapsode Ion, the latter just returned from Epidaurus, where he has won first prize at a festival in honor of Asclepius. A rhapsode (as we conceive him, and indeed largely on the evidence of this dialogue) was a person who might be described, in terms of our own culture, as a sort of combined actor and college teacher of literature. He gave public recitations from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, especially of the more exciting passages; and he undertook to deliver critical and moral lectures. He must have drawn large audiences (even if we take the 20,000 mentioned in the dialogue as a great exaggeration), and he sometimes succeeded in moving these audiences very deeply, even to tears. He appeared in rich attire, perhaps wearing a golden crown, and he received a handsome pecuniary reward. He is representative of the older, literary, and unsystematic Greek education (*paideia*).

Socrates as he confronts Ion in this dialogue may be taken as representing a spirit of criticism which was increasing with the sad experiences of the city state. A mere sophist in the *Clouds* of Aristophanes, as he appears in his *phrontistērion* or "thinkery," corrupting a youth to turn against his father, Socrates is transformed into a subtle philosopher and relentless enemy of ignorance as he appears in the dialogues of Plato. In a friendly and restrained yet insistent way, Socrates, as if seeking to know something of our literary professor's trade secrets, succeeds in asking him some uncomfortable questions and in eliciting some unfortunate answers. Ion admits, for instance, that although there are many poets, and although they speak often on the same topics, he himself is skilled only in reading Homer, and he is interested only in Homer. He drops off into a doze when somebody talks about any other poet. Enough comes out to make it appear that anything Ion has to say about Homer

is scarcely said with the help of what Socrates would call art and knowledge (*technē kai epistēmē*). Ion has no rational technique, for a technique or art is a unified thing (*holon*). Or, as we might say, the term "poetry" if it means anything intelligible is a univocal term, not a quibble. Anybody who can criticize one poet ought to be able to criticize another.[4]

A general tendency of the Socratic argument to thrust at the poet himself through his punier representative the rhapsode[5] culminates midway of the dialogue in a celebrated speech which likens the poet to a magnet radiating a kind of divine power (*theia dunamis*) out through a chain of iron rings, the rhapsode and his audience. Both poets and rhapsodes utter what they do by a divine dispensation, a form of madness.

> 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 the mind is no longer in him: when he has not attained to this state, he is powerless and unable to utter his oracles.—534[6]

This passage has, during later centuries, sometimes been used for the purpose of invoking Plato as a witness in the cause of poetry. Shelley, for instance, translated the *Ion* and in his own *Defense of Poetry* echoed this passage. Yet it is perhaps worth noting that Ion himself is reluctant to accept this version of his talents.

> That is good, Socrates; and yet I doubt whether you will ever have eloquence enough to persuade me that I praise Homer only when I am mad and possessed; and if you could hear me speak of him I am sure you would never think this to be the case.—536

And in fact the heavy reiteration by Socrates of the idea that the poet is out of his mind or senses—not acting by art, not his own master—does not seem an unequivocal compliment. One might easily come away with the impression that this is a lame alternative to the rational explanations

[4] At the end of Plato's *Symposium*, Socrates, having outlasted all the other guests in an all-night drinking party, is seated, as dawn breaks, with the tragic poet Agathon on one hand and the comic poet Aristophanes on the other, forcing them to admit, drowsily, that since poetry is *one* art, a comic poet should be able to write tragedies, and a tragic poet comedies. Despite literal interpretation by the Platonists this looks like an ironic counterpart of the argument from fact to theory in the *Ion*. In the *Symposium*, Socrates, starting with a theory, urges it against the well-known contrary fact: that poets do *not* work by a scientific technique.

[5] Craig LaDrière, "The Problem of Plato's Ion," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, X (September, 1951), 26–34, elaborates the view that the dialogue is aimed not at poetry itself but only at the art of criticism.

[6] Quotations from Plato's *Dialogues* in this chapter are in the translation of Benjamin Jowett, the third edition, revised, first published in 1892. The Fourth Edition of the *Dialogues*, revised by order of the Jowett Copyright Trustees, 4 vols., Oxford, 1953, does not make substantial changes in any of the passages which we quote.

which Socrates has apparently tried so hard to elicit. A second series of questions, leading to the conclusion of the dialogue, is not calculated to minimize such an impression.

SOCRATES: Then which will be a better judge of the lines which you were reciting from Homer, you or the charioteer?

ION: The charioteer.

SOCRATES: Why, yes, because you are a rhapsode and not a charioteer.

ION: Yes.

SOCRATES: And the art of the rhapsode is different from that of the charioteer?

ION: Yes.

SOCRATES: And if a different knowledge, then a knowledge of different matters?

ION: True.

SOCRATES: You know the passage in which Hecamede, the concubine of Nestor, is described as giving to the wounded Machaon a posset, as he says,

> "Made with Pramnian wine; and she grated cheese of goat's milk with a grater of bronze, and at his side placed an onion which gives a relish to drink." [*Iliad* XI, 639–40]

Now would you say that the art of the rhapsode or the art of medicine was better able to judge of the propriety of these lines?

ION: The art of medicine.—538

Socrates drives the inquiry along for some time in this manner, obtaining admissions about the rhapsode's incompetence in one art after another, until at length he is in a good position to raise the question whether any art at all remains the peculiar possession of the rhapsode himself.

SOCRATES: . . . Do you, who know Homer so much better than I do, Ion, select for me passages which relate to the rhapsode and the rhapsode's art, and which the rhapsode ought to examine and judge of better than other men.

ION: All passages, I should say, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Not all, Ion, surely. Have you already forgotten what you were saying? A rhapsode ought to have a better memory.

ION: Why, what am I forgetting?

SOCRATES: Do you not remember that you declared the art of the rhapsode to be different from the art of the charioteer?

ION: Yes, I remember.

SOCRATES: And you admitted that being different they would have different subjects of knowledge?

ION: Yes.

SOCRATES: Then upon your own showing the rhapsode, and the art of the rhapsode, will not know everything?

ION: I should exclude certain things, Socrates.

SOCRATES: You mean to say that you would exclude pretty much the subjects of the other arts. As he does not know all of them, which of them will he know?

ION: He will know what a man and what a woman ought to say, and what a freeman and what a slave ought to say, and what a ruler and what a subject.

SOCRATES: Do you mean that a rhapsode will know better than the pilot what the ruler of a sea-tossed vessel ought to say?—539–40

So the argument swings back to where it was before. We observe that a momentary attempt by Ion to move into an area which we might call something like "general human nature" is quickly checked by Socrates with a question which insists on the technical or scientific. At the conclusion of the dialogue Ion is reduced to the comic position of maintaining that his being a rhapsode implies at least that he would be also a good general—perhaps because, as Plato explains in Book X of the *Republic*, the reading of Homer was traditionally supposed to have something to do with the art of warfare.

In the starkest and least reducible sense the questions put to Ion amount to these: What does poetry tell us? What is the source of the poet's power? And, though this is left more obscurely implicit: What is the relation between the poet's source and the nature of what he actually says? At the beginning of his *Theogony* the poet Hesiod had qualified the traditional appeal to the Muses with a voucher for their veracity. The Muses had actually appeared to him and said:

> Many feigned things (*pseudea*) like to the truth we know how to tell; yet we know how, when we are willing, to tell what is true.—*Theogony*, 27 ff.[7]

By a kind of joke or sleight of argument Socrates combines a partly negative answer (poetry and rhapsody—in their own right and as such

[7] Cf. W. C. Greene, "The Greek Criticism of Poetry, a Reconsideration," in *Perspectives of Criticism*, ed. Harry Levin (Cambridge, Mass., 1950), p. 21.

—do not tell us anything scientific) with a positive answer about the divine origin of poetry and rhapsody. One of the traditionally respectable accounts of poetry (Not only had Homer and the other poets invoked the Muses, but Pindar, for instance, had maintained that poetry proceeds from genius, *phua,* rather than art, *technē*) is put in such a context as to suggest a certain emptiness. Either Ion has been teasing, Socrates implies, and deceitfully refusing to reveal his rationally understood professional secrets, or else there is nothing rational for him to reveal. He is either dishonest or divinely mad. The cross-examination has carefully kept out of sight whatever may be the rhapsode's type of actual professional discourse, the external manifestation of his "madness" —though from the start Ion has been eager to give an exhibition of that. Overlooking a degree of unfairness in the procedure of Socrates, we may say that we are invited by this dialogue to consider at least two principles which are not on the face of the matter absurd: 1. Being able to compose poetry is not the same as being able to give a rationale of it; 2. poetry is not concerned with making scientific statements.

## III

It is possible to point out places in the dialogues of Plato where he seems to treat poetic inspiration very respectfully. In the *Meno* (98–99), for instance, a useful kind of "right opinion" (rather than "knowledge") is conceded to statesmen, interpreters of oracles, seers, and "all poetic persons"—and all these are divinely inspired. And in the *Phaedrus,* although poets rank only sixth in a hierarchy of the elite (248), and although the chief aim of the dialogue is to assert the philosophic or dialectical responsibility of rhetoricians, there is more than one hint that a philosopher is the better for a dash of madness. As for the poet, the *Phaedrus* contains a very strong statement of his dependence on divine madness—in a passage (245) which may be looked on as reversing the ironic emphasis of the parallel passage in the *Ion.*[8] But a history of arguments about poetry will have to claim some license to look rather for ideas in full bloom than for the person behind the ideas. It is another kind of job to try to harmonize all the statements in the dialogues of Plato.

After the *Ion,* the place where we find Plato's mistrust of poetry

[8] See R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford, 1938), pp. 46–7, for a good instance of the argument that Plato was really a friend of the arts. We proceed here on the assumption that the student of poetry need not be really much concerned to enlist Plato on the side of poetry, nor much discomfited to believe that on the whole Plato disapproved of poetry. Plato may conveniently be taken as the representative of an impressive and fairly coherent system of anti-poetic. From early times, the attack upon poetry has often enough been made in his name.

expressed in the simplest and most practical terms is the passage on the "musical" education of the "Guardians" in Books II and III of the *Republic*, a work, be it remembered, of Plato's mid-career and maturity. Here, and again in Book X of the *Republic*, in a more metaphysical context, and in the *Laws*, the compromise *Republic* of Plato's old age, we encounter his well-known objection to the moral effects of poetry. Poetry "feeds and waters the passions," creating division and unsteadiness in the heart, or frivolous laughter, and producing the opposite of civic virtue. The Guardians of the Republic will in fact have the duty of showing poets the gate.

> And therefore when any one of these pantomimic gentlemen . . . comes to us, and makes a proposal to exhibit himself and his poetry, we will fall down and worship him as a sweet and holy and wonderful being; but we must also inform him that in our State such as he 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. For we mean to employ for our souls' health the rougher and severer poet or story-teller, who will imitate the style of the virtuous only, and will follow those models which we prescribed at first when we began the education of our soldiers.—III, 398

A passage of similar tenor in the *Laws* speaks of an ideal, civic-minded poet, a man "more than fifty years old," a safe one for composing patriotic songs. But such a one was not to be found among the actual poets—Homer, the tragedians, the writers of comedy.

> We are ready to acknowledge that Homer is the greatest of poets and first of tragedy writers; but we must remain firm in our conviction that hymns to the gods and praises of famous men are the only poetry which ought to be admitted into our State. For if you go beyond this and allow the honeyed muse to enter, either in epic or lyric verse, not law and the reason of mankind, which by common consent have ever been deemed best, but pleasure and pain will be the rulers in our State. . . . But that she may not impute to us any harshness or want of politeness, let us tell her that there is an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry.—*Republic* X, 607

The quarrel between the poet and the philosopher is the deep end of the quarrel between the poet and the moralist. If poetry produces immoral results, this happens not without certain causes in the nature of poetry itself—one of these, for instance, is the very fact that poetry deals with a variety of motives and feelings, the good and the bad, pleas-

ure and pain. In Books II and III of the *Republic* it appears that poetry is engaged in fictions—often, moreover, in wicked fictions—wicked lies. Homer and Hesiod and the dramatists, instead of representing God as good and the source of all good (instead of telling the truth about which Hesiod's Muses boasted), give us an anthropomorphic, wrangling, deceitful, and revengeful crowd of deities. These poets show heroes as emotional and cowardly, wicked men as prosperous, and just men as wretched. Earlier exegetes, forsooth, had invented a pretty way of defending these impieties by saying that they were "allegorical." They were supposed to conceal an acceptable message at a more abstract level.

At this stage of the argument appears the incidental concept of "imitation" (*mimēsis*)—which, with a certain modification, becomes in later passages the center of Plato's poetics. Certain poems, he observes in Book III, simply tell what happened; others actually imitate what happened—dramas, of course—and these are the most dangerous ones, because the most contagious. A man who is to play a serious part in life cannot afford to imitate any other kind of part. (Let the slaves and hired strangers, he says in *Laws* VII, 817, act our comedies for us.) It is needless to try to guess how consciously Plato's view had developed by the time he wrote his second discussion of poetry in the *Republic*, that of Book X (it was written perhaps some years after Books II and III). In any case the concept of imitation[9] has now become markedly more pejorative and is furthermore now applied to poetry as if it were inseparable.

> Speaking in confidence, for I should not like to have my words repeated to the tragedians and the rest of the imitative tribe—but I do not mind saying to you, that all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, and that the knowledge of their true nature is the only antidote to them.—595

The reasoning is made clearer in a very explicit analogy between a poet and an illusionist painter of a bed.

> And the painter too is, as I conceive. . . . a creator of appearances, is he not?
>
> Of course.
>
> But then I suppose you will say that what he creates is untrue. And yet there is a sense in which the painter also creates a bed?
>
> Yes, he said, but not a real bed.

[9] Richard McKeon's exposition of the analogical series of meanings enjoyed by the term *mimēsis* in Plato's works ("Literary Criticism and the Concept of Imitation in Antiquity", MP, XXXIV, August, 1936, 1–35) tends to soften the application of the term to poetry in these contexts, but the pejorative implications can scarcely be dismissed.

And what of the maker of the bed? were you not saying that he too makes, not the idea which, according to our view, is the essence of the bed, but only a particular bed?

Yes, I did.

Then if he does not make that which exists he cannot make true existence, but only some semblance of existence; and if any one were to say that the work of the maker of the bed, or of any other workman, has real existence, he could hardly be supposed to be speaking the truth.

Beds, then, are of three kinds, and there are three artists who superintend them: God, the maker of the bed, and the painter?

Yes, there are three of them.

God, whether from choice or from necessity, made one bed in nature and one only; two or more such ideal beds neither ever have been nor ever will be made by God.

And what shall we say of the carpenter—is he not also the maker of the bed?

Yes.

But would you call the painter a creator and maker?

Certainly not.

Yet if he is not the maker, what is he in relation to the bed?

I think, he said, that we may fairly designate him as the imitator of that which the others make.

Good, I said; then you call him who is second [1] in the descent from nature an imitator?

Certainly, he said.

And the tragic poet is an imitator, and therefore, like all other imitators, he is twice removed from the king and from the truth?

That appears to be so.—596–7

With the allusion to the ideal bed, the work of God, we are involved in the Platonic metaphysics of transcendental reality, a system of ideas which needs to be clarified by reference to two passages which inter-

[1] The words in Plato's text are actually "third" and "thrice," but their meaning depends on the classical or inclusive method of counting.

vene in the *Republic* between the discussion of poetry in Books II–III and that in Book X. One is the allegory in Book VII of the cinematic cave in which men sitting on a bench with their backs to an opening and a great fire beyond, see only the shadows of a sort of passing puppet show cast on the wall before them. Such is our own experience of what we think to be reality. The other passage is the more technically instructive figure of the "line," in Book VI, with its four ascending phases of knowledge: the lowest *eikasia*, or sensory imaging (of the surface of things and their shadows—the aspects of the bed which can be painted); the second, *pistis* (faith), a kind of trustful apprehension of the solid yet mutable things of our world (beds and horses); the third, on the upper side of a major central division, *dianoia*, discursive understanding of mathematicals or geometric figures; and at the top, *noēsis*, intuitive and true knowledge of permanent beings, the forms or ideas (*eidē*).[2] For the moment let us not attempt to say more precisely what these last are.

## IV

PLATO's doctrine of ideas is perhaps most often known in its rather vague relation to the "beautiful" (*to kalon*) and to love (*erōs*), and in this relation chiefly through three other dialogues, the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. In the first of these, the conversation on immortality held by Socrates with his friends on the day he is to drink the hemlock, we find the doctrine of *anamnēsis*[3] (Wordsworthian otherworldly recollection) as an explanation of how we come to be possessed at all of ideas more perfect than the things of our worldly experience. As for beautiful things, they are indeed beautiful "by reason of beauty"—that is, by participating in the beautiful—but beauty is named only as one among other kinds of perfection (75a–d; 100c–e). The discourse is ascetic rather than aesthetic, stressing preparation for immortality by philosophic discipline. But in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*, the preparation, or approach, is that of the lover, by way of mortal beauty. The lover graduates, in the *Symposium* (210–12), from single beautiful bodies to all beautiful bodies, from bodies to forms, and from forms to practices and notions, until he contemplates "the vast sea of beauty"; and in the *Phaedrus* (249, 265–6, 277), he graduates from bodily beauty not only to ideal beauty but to "wisdom, goodness, and the like," all the hierarchy of ideas. The lover becomes in effect the philosopher.

[2] Both *dianoia* and *noēsis* come under the generic head of *epistēmē* (knowledge), what Socrates found wanting in Homer and Ion. Both *eikasia* (the awareness of images, *eikones*) and *pistis* come under the generic head of *doxa* (mere opinion) and both refer to the world of becoming, *ta gignomena*.

[3] See too the *Meno*, 82–5, where Socrates elicits geometrical reasoning from a slave boy.

An honest reading of these and other passages in Plato can scarcely blink the fact that the bodily beauty alluded to is that of the boy lover. (*Orthōs paiderastein* reads one phrase of the *Symposium*, 211, rendered by an eminent Victorian translator as "true love.") Pederasty was a Spartan cult, supposed to induce military virtue, and, as the first two speeches of the *Symposium* and the temptation of Socrates described in the same dialogue by Alcibiades make sufficiently clear, it had a vogue among Athenian intellectuals during Plato's boyhood. "Love is of generation," says the *Symposium* (206), "of birth in beauty." "Souls which are pregnant conceive wisdom and virtue" (209). The beautiful notions begotten through this love make a clear enough contrast to the results of heterosexual love.[4] Without wholly endorsing the charge of one writer on this theme,[5] that these dialogues have been the "sulphurous breviary" of homosexual literary cults in all succeeding ages, we incline to say that the general warmth and color of the dialogues, the brilliant use of allegorical imagery like that of the soul as charioteer and the higher and lower passions as his pair of horses in the *Phaedrus*, and the vivacious drama of the conversationalists at the banquet—Aristophanes, Agathon, Alcibiades, Socrates—on the attractive theme of love, have helped a great deal to make the aspect of Platonism that relates to "love" and "beauty" best known and best liked among literary students during every Renaissance. Yet these topics have furnished not so much a workable theory about the nature of poetry as inspirational subject matter for literary treatment—the "Idees on hie . . . which Plato so admyred" in Spenser's *Hymne of Heavenly Beautie* or the conception of Platonic pure love in the Fourth Book of Castiglione's *Courtier*.

The term "beauty" (*to kalon*) is used in the Platonic dialogues to refer rather loosely to a wide range of natural objects, artifacts, institutions, and ideas. In the *Philebus* (64e) we have the relatively helpful concept of beauty as measure and proportion (*metriotēs kai summetria*) and the distinction (51c) between the beautiful in itself and the relatively beautiful. In the *Memorabilia* of Xenophon (III, 8; IV, 6) Socrates produces the concept of the beautiful as the convenient (i.e. the "functional"—a dung basket, if well made, is beautiful; a golden shield, if not well made, is ugly). And the dubiously Platonic *Greater Hippias* presents him in his most sustained effort to face the difficult problem. He disposes easily of such too concrete suggestions by the sophist as that a beautiful horse or a beautiful maiden may be adduced to define the

[4] In the *Phaedo*, as Socrates prepares for the draught of hemlock, the women of his family are admitted to see him, but briefly and grudgingly toward the close of the day.

[5] John Jay Chapman, *Lucian, Plato, and Greek Morals* (Boston, 1931), p. 133. Cf. the more sober account by Warner Fite, *The Platonic Legend* (New York, 1934), Chap. VIII, "Platonic Love." Plato censures this kind of *eros* in *Republic* III, 403 and *Laws*, 636.

concept of the beautiful (*parthenos kalē kalon*), or that whatever is gold is beautiful. (What about the chryselephantine statue of Athena? says Socrates. Why didn't Phidias make it all gold?) Canvassing the problems of the convenient, the appropriate, and the useful—in fact, the whole difficult problem of terminal and instrumental values—he arrives at the tentative (and far from ridiculous) conclusion that the beautiful may be that which is beneficially pleasurable (*hēdonēn ōphelimon*) through the senses of sight and hearing (419). But the idea of the "beneficial" persists in betraying the instrumentalism of the concept. The conclusion is that the discourse has been useless. And even these efforts at definition are not very precisely reflected in the *Symposium* or in the other classic places where Plato discusses beauty and love.

## V

LET us turn back, toward a colder side of Plato's theory of ideas which we have already hinted. The presence of the hypothetical *mathēmatika*, the geometric forms, at the third level of the scale of knowledge in Book VI of the *Republic* might lead one to wonder whether any more purified element of the mathematical is implicit in the highest level, that of the pure forms. A pronounced attention to mathematics and geometry as one stage of the Guardian's education, in Book V of the *Republic*, might suggest the same speculation. Students of the Platonic text and of other evidence about Plato's thought, especially the criticisms of Aristotle, do in fact distinguish two strains in his theory of ideas. One is the Socratic or logical, the argument that our use of general terms and class conceptions entails the existence of real and transcendent unities corresponding to these conceptions. It is an argument which receives heavy criticism, apparently from Plato himself, in the *Parmenides* and other late dialogues. The second is a more subtle ontological attempt to get at the permanent and necessary structure of reality, a development of Pythagorean number theory in which Plato distinguishes between the continuous and boundless stuff of our sensory experience, the indeterminate world of becoming, and a real or rational world of limit, that is, of *ratios* between both unit numbers and geometric lines. The word for the rational principle is *logos*—the same word that appears in the crucial definition of geometric ratio in the Fifth Book of Euclid. At the level of *mathematicals* or geometric figures, one may have, let us say, a multiplicity of isosceles triangles, all of different sizes and hence participating in the diversity and indefiniteness of material extension. The final oneness, or what they have in common, is their ratio, something intelligible though unimaginable. As Aristotle was to put it:

> Further, besides sensible things and Forms he says there are the objects of mathematics, which occupy an intermediate position, differing from sensible things in being eternal and unchangeable, from Forms in that there are many alike, while the Form itself is in each case unique.—*Metaphysics* I (A), 6.[6]

What may be difficult for us to conceive is that the theory posits such a number or ratio as the real idea behind each of the ordinary and immediately concrete names which we give to objects. As a modern interpreter has put it:

> The idea of man is not the general term which designates all perceived men. The idea of myself is not what I sense when I consider myself introspectively. The idea of fire is not the general term (or any notion in the mind of which the general term is a symbol) referring to all cases of perceived fire. Nor is the idea of fire that notion given by a definition which distinguishes fire from all other factors in the universe, in terms of perceived properties. All the so-called concepts which we use in ordinary discourse, and which most modern philosophers have in mind when they refer to Plato's theory of ideas,—all such notions are not ideas, in the Platonic meaning of the term. They are merely nominalistic terms referring to factors in "the class of the mixed." Ideas are purely in the class of the limit and they cannot be illustrated by pointing to anything immediately sensed. . . . "ideas," whether they be the idea of the fire, the idea of myself, or the idea of the good, are ratios which only an analytical mathematical symbolism can express and only the pure scientific intellect can grasp.[7]

Perhaps the most easily grasped evidence that Plato really thought this way is to be found in his late cosmological dialogue the *Timaeus*, (53–6), where, taking advantage of the fact that there are five, and only five, kinds of regular polyhedra, he assigns a basic structure, the real idea, to each of what were then supposed to be the four primary elements: fire, earth, air, water, and to a fifth imagined element, "ether." Fire, as we might guess from its volatility and sharpness, has for its mathematical the regular pyramid or tetrahedron, and for its "idea" the ratio of magnitudes which defines the tetrahedron. Earth, as the most solid and least movable element, has the cube or hexahedron; and so forth with perhaps less plausibility, according to the lightness and number of faces of the octahedron (air), the icosahedron (water), and the

[6] See *post* Chapter 2, p. 22, n. 1.

[7] F. S. C. Northrop, "The Mathematical Background and Content of Greek Philosophy," in *Philosophical Essays for Alfred North Whitehead* (New York, 1936), pp. 32–3. By permission of Longmans, Green & Co., Inc.

dodecahedron (ether).[8] Until very recent times the five regular solids were known as the Platonic bodies. The better part of the soul, Plato said in *Republic* X (602), trusts to measure and calculation. In the *Theaetetus* (143b) he said that God himself is a geometer (*geōmetrein*). He is said to have inscribed over the entrance to his school: "Let no one ignorant of geometry enter" (*Ageōmetrētos mēdeis eisitō*).[9]

One will be perhaps likely to think that this side of Plato's theory, hyperintellectual and even frigid, must have seemed even to him far less relevant to the nature of literature than the more visionary conceptions which we have described somewhat earlier. It is possible, however, that through another group of arts which were highly cultivated in Greece during Plato's time—the visual—at least a remote kind of relevance may be inferred. One of Plato's later dialogues, the *Philebus*, is a discussion of pleasure and knowledge in which he attempts for one thing to distinguish what he calls mixed pleasures (those that follow on pain or are somehow dependent on it—and here he puts the pleasures of tragedy and comedy) from certain kinds which he considers more pure and hence more nearly related to the good. One passage of this dialogue has often been produced in our day as a charter from antiquity for theorists of "significant form" in the visual arts.

> I do not mean by beauty of form such beauty as that of animals or pictures, which the many would suppose to be my meaning; but, says the argument, understand me to mean straight lines and circles, and the plane or solid figures which are formed out of them by turning-lathes and rulers and measures of angles; for these I affirm to be not only relatively beautiful, like other things, but they are eternally and absolutely beautiful, and they have peculiar pleasures, quite unlike the pleasures of scratching. And there are colours which are of the same character, and have similar pleasures.—51[1]

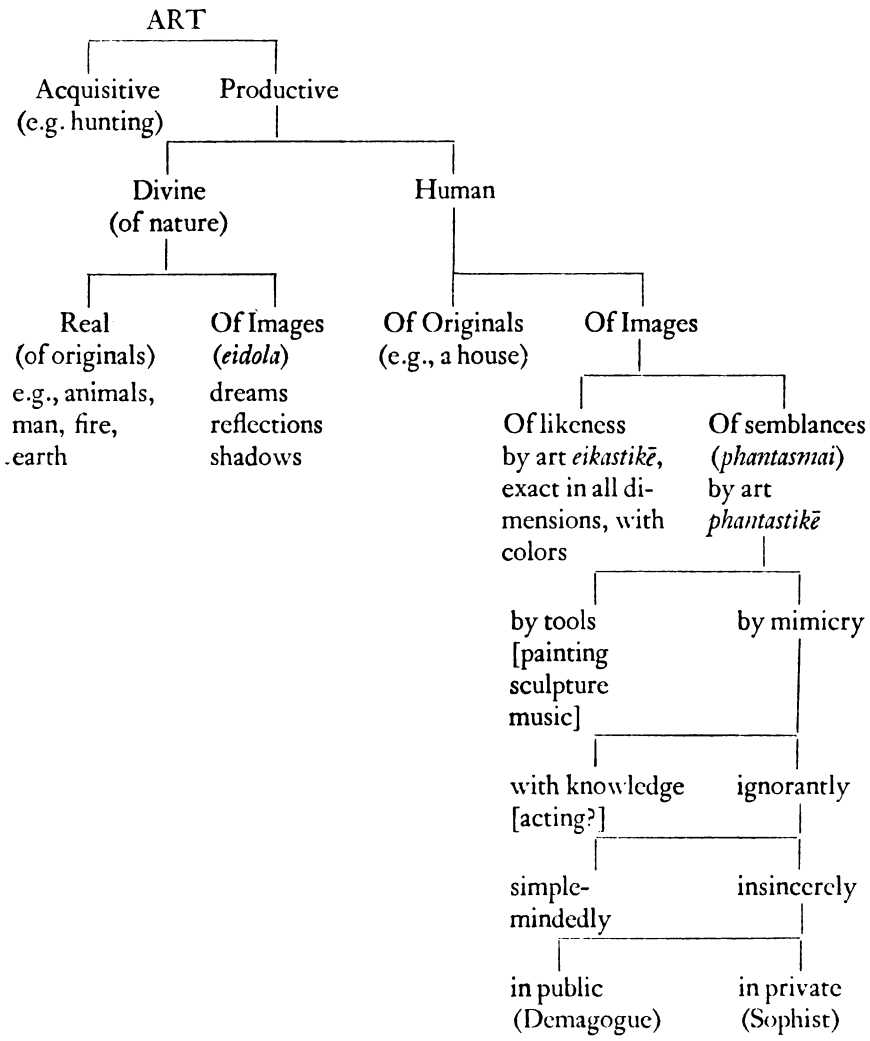
Let us place in conjunction with this a tabular view of the imitative arts digested from several places in another late dialogue, the *Sophist* (219, 235, 264, 266). The sophist himself, viewed by Plato as a special kind of

[8] *Timaeus*, 53c–56c. Francis M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology, The Timaeus of Plato Translated with a Running Commentary* (London, 1937), pp. 210–22. The assignment of the dodecahedron to ether is not explicit in Plato but was apparently made so in early Platonic commentary. See the quotation from Plutarch's *On the E at Delphi* (XI) in Cornford, p. 220; Paul Shorey, *What Plato Said* (Chicago, 1933), p. 408; *Epinomis* 981, 984.

[9] Adolph Busse, ed., *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca*, XVIII (Berlin, 1900), 118, the commentary of Elias. Cf. Aristotle: "Mathematics has been turned by our present day thinkers into the whole of philosophy" (*Metaphysics*, I, 9).

[1] Cf. E. F. Carritt, in *Philosophies of Beauty* (Oxford, 1931), pp. 29–30; Herbert Read, *Art Now* (New York, 1933), p. 101; R. H. Wilenski, *The Meaning of Modern Sculpture* (London, 1933).

imitator or deceiver, is the object of definition, but some incidental light is cast in another direction.




The part of the table which specially concerns us is the division between eikastic (or realistic) images and phantastic (or imaginative). Here Plato seems to be attempting to deal, though perhaps not very decisively, with a question which is prominent in ancient theory of art, that of illusion. There is a passage in the *Iliad* of Homer—often quoted by historians of literary theory—where the shield made by Hephaestus for Achilles is described with great admiration—the images with which it was adorned were so life-like that the furrows of a ploughed field, though wrought

from the gold, seemed black. During the lifetime of Plato himself Greek visual art seems to have been moving rapidly in the direction of naturalism and illusionism. Art historians of the formalist school like to tell us that even the Great Period of Greek sculpture (that of the pediments of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, for instance, or the Periclean Parthenon at Athens) is a degeneration from a more formal (and Egyptian) antiquity. Visual art was already tending toward the Rogers-ware style of Hellenistic narrative and genre sculpture (the dying Gaul, the old market woman). Later documents of antiquity, especially the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder, record such instances of illusionist virtuosity in Plato's day as that of Zeuxis, who painted grapes so well that they attracted birds,[2] or that of Parrhasius, who painted drapery that appeared to move. These achievements seem to have arisen out of one of the chief developments during the fifth century in theatrical design, that of *skiagraphia* (shaded painting) or perspective scenery. At the same time the formal and geometrical element of visual art continued very prominently in the architecture by which Plato was surrounded. Modern investigation has fairly well demonstrated that the art of Greek vases and temple architecture was based on the principle of "dynamic symmetry"—the commensurability of area rather than of line and above all the commensurability generated by extreme and mean ratio, the "Golden Section." [3]

The relation between illusion and formalism in Plato's day was scarcely simple—as may be instanced even in the "fantastic" art mentioned by Plato in the *Sophist* (235e). Painters and sculptors, he points out, strive for the proportion that will *appear* beautiful. Those who carve colossal figures, for instance, make the upper parts larger so that from the ground they will be seen in usual proportions. A Byzantine Greek chronicler has preserved the story that when Phidias produced his statue of Athena in competition with that of a rival, the people were ready to stone Phidias when the statue was seen lying on the ground.[4] Such proportioned illusion as this Plato classes with the work of the sophist. Yet even the architectural formalism of Plato's day depended on the same adjustments—as in the well-known entasis or swell of the temple columns, in virtue of which they look straight as one sees them from below.

Let us move toward a close of this discussion by placing side by side two more Platonic passages, the first from an early dialogue about verbal images or names, the *Cratylus.*

[2] Pliny, *Natural History,* XXXV, 36, 60: ". . . *uvas pictas tanto successu ut in scaenam aves advolassent.*" See Pierre-Maxime Schuhl, *Platon et L'Art de Son Temps* (Paris, 1933).

[3] Among a number of works on this subject by Jay Hambidge, see especially *Dynamic Symmetry, The Greek Vase* (New Haven, 1920), *The Parthenon and Other Greek Temples, Their Dynamic Symmetry* (New Haven, 1924), *Practical Applications of Dynamic Symmetry* (New Haven, 1932).

[4] Tzetzes, *Historiarum Variarum Chiliades,* VIII, 353–69, ed. T. Kiessling (Lipsiae, 1826), pp. 295–6.

> I should say . . . that the image, if expressing in every point the entire reality, would no longer be an image. Let us suppose the existence of two objects: one of them shall be Cratylus, and the other the image of Cratylus; and we will suppose, further, that some God makes not only a representation such as a painter would make of your outward form and colour, but also creates an inward organization like yours, having the same warmth and softness; and into this infuses motion, and soul, and mind, such as you have, and in a word copies all your qualities, and places them by you in another form; would you say that this was Cratylus and the image of Cratylus, or that there were two Cratyluses?—432

The second, from the attack on poetry in Book X of the *Republic.*

> Then the imitator . . . is a long way off the truth, and can do all things because he lightly touches on a small part of them, and that part an image. For example: A painter will paint a cobbler, carpenter, or any other artist, though he knows nothing of their arts; and, if he is a good artist, he may deceive children or simple persons, when he shows them his picture of a carpenter from a distance, and they will fancy that they are looking at a real carpenter.—598

The minimal conclusion to be drawn from all the evidence would seem to be that Plato has confronted the very difficult problem of the relation between formalism and illusionism in art and, in line with the austerity and subtlety of his basic mathematical view of reality, has expressed his mistrust of the realistic trends of his day and has cast a perennially influential vote in favor of some kind of visual formalism.[5] If this part of his theorizing does not go far in telling us about the nature of poetry, at least it offers a prototype for theories of "stylization" or "detachment" which have never since in the history of poetics been altogether submerged. In what is no doubt its excess of detachment Plato's theory offers an approach by contrast to—as indeed it was historically the point of departure for—the more empirically weighted and warmer theory which we shall encounter in the next chapter.

[5] Plato's formalism seems not to extend to auditory art. See his rules for moral fitness in modes of music, *Republic* III, 398–400, and his censure of "the bare sound of harp and flute," *Laws* II, 669.