

Cultural Crisis in Both Plato's State and Our Time's Literature

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Abstract:

Plato's problem is with "orality" represented in the person of "the poet" who has no ability "to tell the truth" whereas our present time's dilemma has something to do with "the canonized literature" where the minority is intentionally ignored or marginalized. Hence, truth is avoided and/or ignored by both the poet and the canonized literature.

At that time Plato seeks and sees solutions in "literacy", we may search for a space for the marginalized part of literature –literature of those powerless, colonized, ignored, and oppressed people who are able to represent themselves and tell their part of truth to other different generations.

Key Words:

Canon, literacy, literature, orality, Plato, & truth

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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 (Havelock 6).

What differs our time from Plato's time is a cultural change. Plato's problem with the poets of his time is due to a cultural shift. He wants to move his society from orality to literacy. Nowadays, the cultural studies movement tries to have another cultural shift with the Western canonized literature. Due to political factors, such as race, gender, class, etc., the present cultural studies call for reformulating what has been canonized. While Plato's motives have been explained and summarized in the above quotation, many studies and researches have discussed the readiness of new cultural movements to get rid of the canonized literature.

In Book II, Plato calls most of the poets liars. They have no attention to tell the truth because they are inefficient conveyors of information. Hence, he calls for establishing "a censorship of the writers of fiction" (Plato II, 62); i. e. the poets. People use to memorize poetry in

order to preserve and transmit the values and mores of their cultures without the least amount of interpreting and analyzing. Thus, the oral state of mind stops against rationalism, use of experience and analysis. On the contrary, Plato wants the guardians of his Ideal State to reconsider, analyze, and evaluate instead of memorizing only; “they should become the ‘subject’ who stands apart from the ‘object’” (Havelock 47).

Whereas in our time, Gerald Graff (1992) points out that “literature departments were being taken over by ‘urban guerillas,’ who are not really interested in literature at all and view it merely as a tool of oppression” (19). These guerillas try to erase the traditional values and mores of the Western culture from the minds by “deliberately failing to introduce them [the youth] to the history and literature in which those values are embodied” (Graff 20). In brief, what they are interested in is politics rather than beauty, truth, and aesthetic qualities of literature. Hence lies the problem.

In his time, Plato attacks poetry and specifies reasons for his attack. First, Plato expresses his displeasure with the content of poetry which attracts the minds. Plato himself acknowledges this attraction when he says, “Homer is the greatest of poets and first of tragedy writers” (X, 301). He attacks poetry because it defines God as imperfect, depicts the ancient heroes as wicked and coward people, and suggests the hereafter world as a gloomy, unattractive place. This poetry gives rise to corruption --images of God and ancestors are shaken in the youth’s eyes-- and speaks to emotions and feelings. Such poetry will not inspire the guardians to fight and die for the sake of the Republic. In addition, poetry stirs emotions and disables reason which is the only means that leads to truth.

However, Havelock (1963) claims that “at the beginning of the tenth book he [Plato] has forgotten he was ever as tolerant as that [in Book II with the poets]” (11). Indeed, Plato does not exclude all poets from his Republic as it seems for some people. Plato admits those who are serious in their poetry into his Ideal State: “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” (Plato X, 301). In fact, Plato fears the poets’ influence on the youth. Thus, Plato’s issues are educational: “Our story shall be the education of our heroes” (Plato II, 61). Nowadays the cultural studies movement tries to reform, if not to change, the Western canon in the schools.

Second, Plato connects the issue of “mimesis” (imitation) with the poets. In his poem, the poet produces a superficial imitation of the carpenter’s bed (Plato’s example), which is actually an imitation of the ideal bed. Hence the poet is twice far away from the ideal form, i. e. the truth.

Accordingly, he is a misleading, and inefficient conveyor of information. The poet of such a kind is not supposed to be allowed in Plato's Ideal State.

Plato attacks poetry which is central to the Greek education for the above reasons while the cultural studies, such as feminism attacks the present Western canon for other reasons that in a way or another have the same nature. Canon is used to distinguish those 'major' works and authors from those classified 'minor' ones. Certainly such authors as Milton, Shakespeare, Chaucer, etc. occupy a position in the canon of English literature. Classical Greek, Latin, and English literature are very dominant within college curricula in the West and elsewhere because of the powerful influence that these cultures had and still have upon other present cultures. In recent years, different cultural studies tend to attack this canon for ideological and political factors such as race, class, gender, etc. However, the most common charge is that the Western canon has been formed and adopted by a group of white male critics and educators. This canon reflects the interest of these groups. It excludes the voices of other minorities such as blacks, Native Americans, women, etc.

This charge causes the emergence of defenders and attackers of the traditional Western canon. Indeed, the charge of the cultural studies raises some possibilities:

- 1-Expanding the humanities curricula to include a great variety of works,
- 2-Establishing other oppositional canons, such as black canon, feminist canon, etc.,
- 3-Repudiating the idea of canon and refusing the distinction among works whatever they are (for these possibilities, see Childers (1995) pp. 37-38).

Anyhow, Plato has chosen the repudiation of the orality in his time. But nowadays the cultural studies movement should notice that the traditional canonical texts are those upon which more studies are directed. Those texts "have been fundamental in the shaping of Western Culture" (Childers 38). In addition, the measure of the greatness of all people is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced.

In brief, the comparison between the status of poetry in Plato's time and the status of the Western canon in our time might be seen and summarized as follows:

First, both Plato's and the cultural studies' attacks are reactions. Plato reacts to the oral culture and insists on a change from the orality — for its negative sides— to the literacy (writing as far as Plato is concerned). The cultural studies movement requests a look at the present Western canon, and wants a position in this canon for its members to be heard.

Second, both are political in one sense or another. Plato's challenge to the orality tends to have a political dimension for the title The Republic refers to some kind of state and deals with how it is organized. In addition, Plato speaks as an authoritarian who is ready to sacrifice anything— even the creativity and freedom of art— for the sake of his Ideal State. Nowadays the challenges of the traditional canon are primarily political in nature, coming from women and different minorities demanding their right to be heard. In addition, there are parallels between Plato's censorship of poetry and some modern regimes' ruthless censorship of literature, particularly when some regimes become subject to the minorities' influence. Hence, some limitations might be put on literature.

Third, a common thing between Plato's attack on poetry and the present cultural movement's attack on the Western canon is what Paulo Freire (1996) calls "banking education" in his Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Though Plato attacks Homer's banking educational system, he prescribes what should be learnt to his guardians in his Republic. Thus, while trying to get rid of the old system, Plato gets involved in another kind of banking education for his Ideal State. What is available today all over the world is different banking educational systems designed by the ruling regimes. The cultural studies try at least in some countries to influence these regimes to reformulate the canon. Whenever this influence succeeds, the success is implemented by the regime in a form of "banking education."

Fourth, there is some kind of contradiction in both Plato's argument and that of the cultural studies movement. Though Plato calls for analytical, abstract inquiry, i.e. problem-solving of the old Homeric banking system, yet he contradicts his theory when he insists on a special 'guardian' education to be banked into leaders. On the other hand, the cultural studies movement contradicts itself in the sense that it calls for erasing the Western canon from the youth's minds and making a gap between the individual and his or her culture while this movement attempts to give the individual his identity. There is no identity without tradition.

Generally speaking, Plato's argument connects us with the beginning of the Western Metaphysics. It is important for us to read Plato in order to understand how cultural changes take place and to recognize the influence of cultures over each other; Plato's argument is a reaction to the orality that has been in his time. On the other hand, young generations are to be introduced to the history and literature in which the Western culture and values are embodied. In addition, one should look at the truth, beauty and aesthetic qualities that lie in studying the traditional canon rather than the political dimensions of race, gender, nationality, etc. Accordingly, "the best

solution to today's conflict over culture is to teach the conflicts themselves . . . cultural studies and women's studies courses should be in dialogue with traditional ones" (Graff 12-13). One has to become pragmatic, try to understand each other, and connect the youth with their tradition.

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