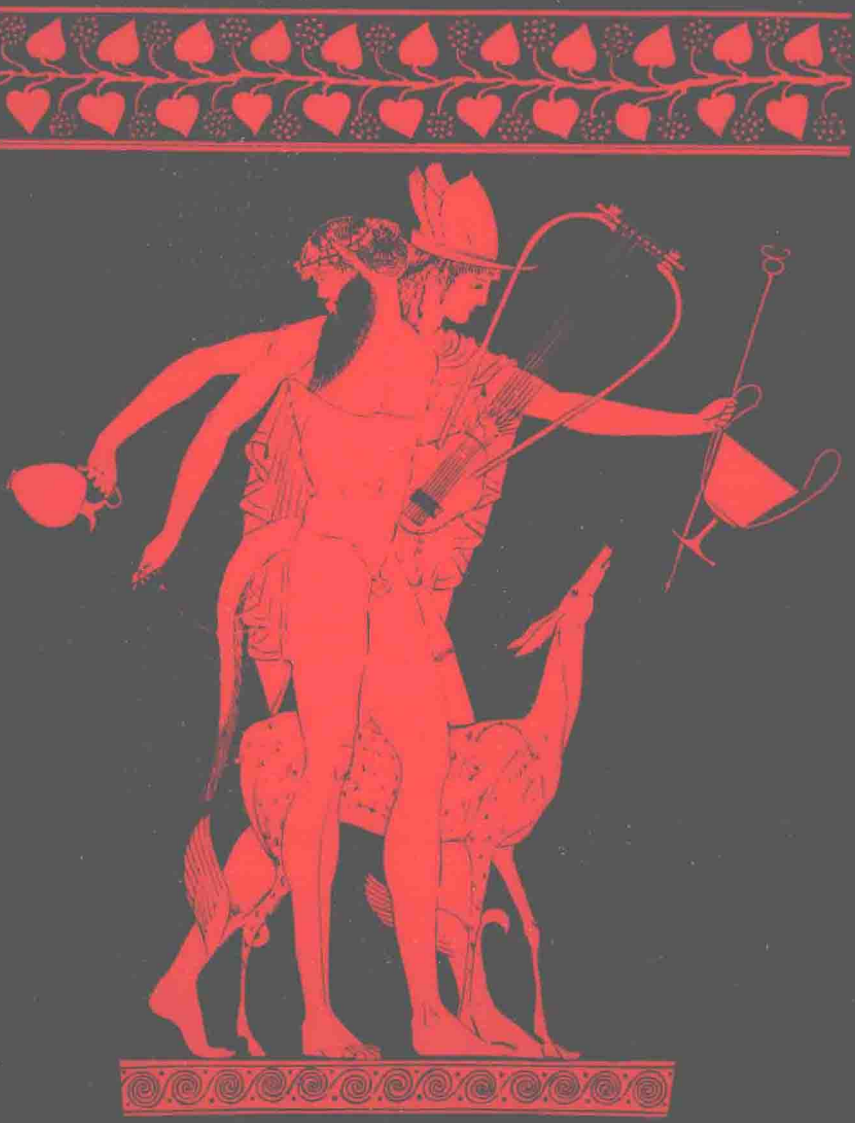
PREFACE TO PLATO



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TO MY FATHER

FOREWORD

THE present volume is offered as the first of what it is hoped will be a series of studies designed to demonstrate what may be called the growth of the early Greek mind. By this I do not mean another history of Greek philosophy in the accepted sense of that term. All human civilisations rely on a sort of cultural 'book', that is, on the capacity to put information in storage in order to reuse it. Before Homer's day, the Greek cultural 'book' had been stored in the oral memory. Discoveries and conclusions associated with the recent decipherment of 'Linear B', fascinating and fashionable though they are, must not be allowed to obscure this essential fact. Between Homer and Plato, the method of storage began to alter, as the information became alphabetised, and correspondingly the eye supplanted the ear as the chief organ employed for this purpose. The complete results of literacy did not supervene in Greece until the ushering in of the Hellenistic age, when conceptual thought achieved as it were fluency and its vocabulary became more or less standardised. Plato, living in the midst of this revolution, announced it and became its prophet.

Direct evidence for mental phenomena can lie only in linguistic usage. If such a revolution as outlined did take place in Greece, it should be attested by changes in the vocabulary and syntax of written Greek. The semantic information hitherto compiled in Greek lexicons will not help us much, in so far as the various significations of words are arranged for the most part analytically rather than historically, as atoms of finite meaning suspended in a void, rather than as areas of meaning which are contained and defined by a context. The effect is to foster the unconscious assumption that the Greek experience from Homer to Aristotle forms a cultural constant capable of being represented in a sign system of great variety, to be sure, but consisting merely of sets of interchangeable parts.

The enterprise which lies ahead would therefore be to seek to

document the growth of an abstract vocabulary in pre-Platonic Greek, considered not as an addition to the tongue (though this also must be taken into account) but as a remodelling of existing resources.

Such an enterprise to be worth anything must be built on foundations laid by others, and indeed my debts are diverse, for the synthesis here offered has relied on many separate findings of classical scholarship in fields at first sight unrelated. Any attempt to reinterpret the history of the Greek mind as a search for concepts not yet realised and for a terminology not yet invented confronts a formidable obstacle in the traditional reports preserved in Hellenistic and Roman antiquity. These assume that the earliest philosophers of Greece were engaged from the first with metaphysical problems, and formulated solutions which presuppose a mastery of the abstract: that in fact they were philosophers in the modern sense of that word. The publication of Diels' *Doxographi Graeci* in 1879, while it demonstrated the dependence of these reports upon the metaphysical portions of the lost history of the physical philosophers by Theophrastus, did nothing to impair their ultimate authority, as can easily be seen from an inspection of the pages of such a work as Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophy*. After all, what could be a sounder authority than this work of Theophrastus, Aristotle's pupil and successor, and a pioneer historian of thought? The findings of Cherniss (1935) established the conclusion that the metaphysical interpretations of pre-Platonic thinkers which are found in Aristotle's own works are in large measure accommodated to the problems and indeed the terminology of his own system. It remained for McDiarmid in 1953 to point out that the Theophrastean account of the First Causes which formed the underpinning of the whole later tradition appears itself to have been based on a collation of Aristotle's own notices, and could therefore claim an authority no greater than do they. At a stroke, one may say, an elaborate structure, which has enjoyed prestige in modern scholarship at least since the first appearance of Zeller's magisterial history of

ancient philosophy, fell to the ground in pieces. If the doxography depends on Theophrastus, if Theophrastus in turn is a mirror of Aristotle's historical opinions, and if these place early Greek thought in a context of problems which are Aristotelian but not Presocratic, then the tradition cannot be historical. This conclusion is still unpalatable to many scholars, but it is difficult to see how it can be evaded. Familiarity is no guarantee of fidelity.

The next task might seem to be to construct a corrected account of the metaphysical positions of early Greek thinkers. My reader will realise that in the light of these findings I have felt it possible to take a more radical step, and to call in question the whole assumption that early Greek thought was occupied with metaphysics at all, or was capable of using a vocabulary suitable for such a purpose. It becomes possible to remove a screen of sophistication which has hitherto intervened between the modern historian and the early Greek mentality, and to view the latter afresh as a phenomenon of essential naïveté, the nature of which began to be partly visible to the modern eye as soon as Diels published in 1903 the first edition of the *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, for in that work, by organising the *ipsissima verba* on the one hand and the tradition on the other in mutually exclusive sections, he revealed a linguistic conflict between the two which might be judged irreconcilable.

But if the early Greek mentality was neither metaphysical nor abstract, what then was it, and what was it trying to say? The resources of epigraphy, marshalled in the first instance by Carpenter, supplied the next clue. For epigraphy pointed to the conclusion that the Greek culture was maintained on a wholly oral basis until about 700 B.C. and if this were true, then the first so-called philosophers were living and speaking in a period which was still adjusting to the conditions of a possible future literacy, conditions which I concluded would be slow of realisation, for they depended on the mastery not of the art of writing by a few, but of fluent reading by the many.

Those few who had elected themselves to be the prototypes of future philosophers did so by virtue of their attempt to rationalise the sources of knowledge. What then had been the shape of knowledge when preserved in the oral memory and stored there for re-use? At this point, I turned to the work of Milman Parry, and thought I saw the outline of the answer, and an answer also to the problem of why Xenophanes, Heraclitus and Parmenides, to take the first three thinkers who survive, spoke in the curious ways they did. The formulaic style characteristic of oral composition represented not merely certain verbal and metrical habits but also a cast of thought, or a mental condition. The Presocratics themselves were essentially oral thinkers, prophets of the concrete linked by long habit to the past, and to forms of expression which were also forms of experience, but they were trying to devise a vocabulary and syntax for a new future, when thought should be expressed in categories organized in a syntax suitable to abstract statement. This was their fundamental task, and it absorbed most of their energies. So far from inventing systems in the later philosophical manner, they were devoted to the primary task of inventing a language which would make future systems possible. Such, in simplified outline, was the new picture which began to emerge. I think that even so I would not have been so ready to undertake the responsibility of drawing these implications from Parry's work had it not been for a prophetic article by Nilsson, published in 1905, which speculatively set forth the probably oral character of early Milesian publication.

These were the original guide posts which pointed along the path of this investigation. That which in my book will appear first in exposition, namely the Platonic attack on the Greek poetic tradition, came last in realisation. Meanwhile, fresh support for a re-examination of the history of what is called early 'philosophy' has begun to appear in a new quarter, with the appearance of several studies of early vocabulary usage. It was Burnet's article 'The Socratic Doctrine of the Soul' which here broke new

ground, when it demonstrated that a notion normally taken as fundamental to any kind of speculative activity was in fact probably invented in the last half of the fifth century. Stenzel's monograph on Socrates which appeared in Pauly-Wissowa in 1927 supplemented this insight by proposing the general thesis that Socraticism was essentially an experiment in the reinforcement of language and a realisation that language had a power when effectively used both to define and to control action. Studies by Snell and von Fritz have drawn attention to the fact that the terminology which in Plato and Aristotle seeks to define with precision the various operations of the consciousness, in categories which we usually take for granted, had in fact to pass through a considerable period of development before reaching such precision. It is a fair presumption that until the fit word is present, you do not have the idea, and the word to become fit requires a suitable contextual usage. Signs are not wanting that scholarship is now preparing itself for the same genetic-historical approach in other areas of terminology and of thought, as for instance in seeking to understand original Greek conceptions of time.

One should of course here acknowledge the general stimulation given to this type of study in the classical field which has been imparted from other disciplines, particularly those of comparative anthropology and analytic psychology. Historians of early Greek thought do not have to accept all the theories of Lèvy-Bruhl in order to prove their debt to him. If in early Greek rationalism there can still be seen the persistence of religious symbolism and ritual tabu, if the worlds of Homer and Plato can be viewed in terms of a contrast between shame culture and guilt culture, such general theses do nothing to impair the purport of the present work, but rather give it a certain support. Nevertheless, it remains true that the crux of the matter lies in the transition from the oral to the written and from the concrete to the abstract, and here the phenomena to be studied are precise, and are generated by changes in the technology of preserved communication which are also precise.

My manuscript was read in draft by Professors Christine Mitchell, Adam Parry and A. T. Cole, and their numerous corrections and improvements, here gratefully acknowledged, are incorporated in the text. It is impossible that in an enterprise which cuts so wide a swathe error should be lacking, but I may hope that its correction by others will lead to further investigation of problems here partially exposed and no doubt imperfectly solved.

E. A. H.

Cambridge, Mass.
April 1962.

NOTES

Modern authorities have for brevity's sake been identified for the most part only by surname and pagination. To complete the identification, the reader is referred to the bibliography. Where distinction is needed between two or more works by the same author, his surname identifies the work listed first under his name and for the others abbreviated titles or dates have been added.

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THE NECESSITY OF PLATONISM

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THE IMAGE-THINKERS

CHAPTER ONE

Plato on Poetry

IT sometimes happens in the history of the written word that an important work of literature carries a title which does not accurately reflect the contents. A part of the work has become identified with the whole, or the meaning of a label has shifted in translation. But if the label has a popular and recognisable ring, it can come to exercise a kind of thought control over those who take the book in their hands. They form an expectation which accords with the title but is belied by much of the substance of what the author has to say. They cling to a preconception of his intentions, insensibly allowing their minds to mould the content of what they read into the required shape.

These remarks apply with full force to that treatise of Plato's styled the *Republic*. Were it not for the title, it might be read for what it is, rather than as an essay in utopian political theory. It is a fact that only about a third[1] of the work concerns itself with statecraft as such. The text deals at length and often with a great variety of matters which bear on the human condition, but these are matters which would certainly have no place in a modern treatise on politics.

Nowhere does this become more evident to the reader than when he takes up the tenth and last book. An author possessing Plato's skill in composition is not likely to blunt the edge of what he is saying by allowing his thoughts to stray away from it at the end. Yet this terminal portion of the *Republic* opens with an examination of the nature not of politics but of poetry. Placing the poet in the same company with the painter, it argues that the artist produces a version of experience which is twice removed from reality; his 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 the book. It is clear at once that a title like the *Republic* cannot prepare us for the appearance in this place of such a frontal attack upon the core of Greek literature. If the argument conforms to a plan, and if the assault, coming where it does, constitutes an essential part of that plan, then the purpose of the whole treatise cannot be understood within the limits of what we call political theory.

To the overall structure of the work we shall return a little later. Let us for a moment consider further the tone and temper of Plato's attack. He opens by characterising the effect of poetry as 'a crippling of the mind'.[2] 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.'[3] 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 proportion, or that his target cannot be poetry in our sense, but something more fundamental in the Greek experience, and more powerful.

There has been natural reluctance to take what he says at face value. Plato's admirers, normally devoted to his lightest word, when they reach a context like the present start looking around for an escape hatch, and they find one which they think he has provided for them. Just before this peroration, has he not said that poetry may offer a defence of herself if she can? Has he not