

Schlegel and Plato on Idealism

Natalie Mathes

The George Washington University

German Romantic author Friedrich Schlegel was largely concerned with demonstrating that the humanities have a critical role in society. Situated in the Age of Enlightenment, he was heavily influenced by the notion that progress was immanent and necessary, and yet the various revolutions that accompanied the Age of Enlightenment had complicated conventional understandings of how progress was to be achieved. The American, French, and Industrial revolutions inaugurated a “seismic transformation of European culture,” and Kant’s ‘Copernican Revolution’ brought about a need for new paradigms of understanding. Specifically, Schlegel shared in the values placed on equality, fraternity, and freedom with the French Revolution.¹ These ideals were met with great enthusiasm, and were emphasized and reiterated in Schlegel’s work and the work of the other Romantic authors. They also largely came to constitute what was understood by the term ‘Romantic’ in the contexts of ideology, literature, philosophy, and poetry, though most Romantics would, however, reject the notion that such media of expression could be considered distinct.² At the same time as the aftershocks of what Schlegel called the “earthquake” that was the French Revolution, publication of Kant’s *The Critique of Pure Reason* spawned a “crisis of understanding the conditions and limits of human reason.”³ Thus during this time of great transformation and instability, “Romanticism came to symbolize the consciousness of the new age,” offering a new means for progress, and a new portrayal of what ought to constitute an ideal state.⁴

While Romantic authors such as Schlegel were clearly responding to their own historical situation in their works, Frederick Beiser notes that during the “formative years of the Romantic generation” there was also a significant revival of interest in Plato in Germany.⁵ He writes,

It was in the 1760s that Hamann and Herder wrote about Plato or Platonic themes. New editions and translations of his writings frequently appeared. It was in the 1780s that writings of the Dutch Platonist Franz Hemsterhuis appeared in German translation. They were one of the most important sources for [early German

1 Saul, *The Cambridge Companion to German Romanticism*, p. 6.

2 Saul, *ibid.*, p. 2.

3 Saul, *ibid.*, p. 9.

4 Saul, *ibid.*, p. 2.

5 Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism*, p. 68.

Romanticism] since the Schlegel brothers and Novalis were among his enthusiastic students.”⁶

According to Beiser throughout the 1790s Schlegel developed a philosophy “fundamentally Platonic in inspiration” where he begins moving towards his doctrine of “absolute Idealism” in which “everything in reality conforms to reason, which consists in the forms, ideas, or purpose of things.”⁷ He quotes Schlegel’s notes from his lectures in the early 1800s, “Plato contains proper wisdom; the whole spirit of philosophy is in him. He knew everything, namely the whole, that upon which everything rests.”⁸ We can see the basis for the claim that Schlegel, along with other German Romantic authors, had genuine interest in and drew a great deal from Platonic philosophy.

Schlegel’s “Dialogue on Poesy” is one such work where I argue this inspiration is clearest. Though it’s of course important to recognize that Schlegel is responding to his own sociohistorical context, I hope to demonstrate that there is in fact another dialogue being carried out in his work: not only can this dialogue be understood as providing a proposal for the role poetry could play in helping citizens of his day to achieve an ideal state, but also in providing a defense against the concerns about and critiques of poetry in society as expressed in Plato’s treatment of the ancient myths. In order to demonstrate the nature of Schlegel’s defense, however, it is first necessary to consider what poetry was like in Plato’s time as compared to Schlegel’s time as well as Plato’s critical view of the role poetry ought to play in attempting to achieve an ideal state.

Luc Brisson and Gerard Naddaf’s work in *Plato the Myth Maker* provides a thorough historical account of the origins of the Greek term *muthos*, and how it’s distinct from *logos*. *Muthos*, as Plato seems to have employed it, describes a “discursive practice to which the poets gave a form.”⁹ Rather vague, nevertheless Brisson and Naddaf go on to describe how in ancient Greece, the mark of an educated man was essentially being able to speak well in public, which had the consequence of there being little need to read books, further emphasizing the importance of the aforementioned “discursive practices.”¹⁰ Naddaf writes, “While it is generally true that myths are transmitted orally,” such as with the myths articulated in Plato’s Socratic dialogues, “it is also true that in the Greek oral tradition, myths were communicated in the form of poetry.”¹¹ It was the goal of the poet to “mold the souls of their public” in

6 Beiser, *ibid.*, p. 68.

7 Beiser, *ibid.*, p. 69.

8 Beiser, *ibid.*, p. 70.

9 Brisson, *Plato the Myth Maker*; p. ix, xi.

10 Brisson, *ibid.*, p. xxi.

11 Brisson, *ibid.*, p. xi.

accordance with community values. They would pursue this goal while relying on “sentiment, pleasure, and especially fear,” leaving much of their performance to be composed “in the heat of the moment, in response to the audience and the context.”¹² Here, Brisson and Naddaf are helping us to understand what the ancient practice of myth-telling was like, including the details of how it was carried out as poetic performance. According to Naddaf many theorize that poetry initially served as a sort of mnemonic technique which helped poets to remember the long Homeric epics, for example.¹³ We can understand therefore that poetry, as a discursive practice in ancient Greece, was a performative medium for expressing what Plato coined *muthos*, or myth: unfalsifiable, non-argumentative discourse between a poet and his audience, or an “instrument which tradition employed to convey values and inherited explanations” to the public.¹⁴

Plato expressed several notable concerns about the role of poetry in society. There is confusion about how to interpret an apparent contradiction between Plato’s repudiation of allegory in his myths and his simultaneous utilization of myths in allegory. In other words, despite his condemnation of poetry as opposed to his preference for philosophy which strongly implies that he favored philosophy as the superior means for striving towards truth and wisdom, Plato’s method is rather poetic and Socrates is portrayed as a rather “poetic soul.”¹⁵ Nonetheless, we can turn to the myths themselves to understand at least how Plato expresses these concerns regardless of whether they were concerns Plato himself had.

In Plato’s *Ion* we are presented with what is generally admitted to be amongst the earliest dialogues to invoke a “long-standing quarrel between poetry and philosophy.”¹⁶ Ion, described as a young rhapsodist, relays praises of the divine poet Homer to Socrates. Socrates then engages Ion in conversation about the nature of his enthusiasm.¹⁷ While Socrates finds this enthusiasm commendable, he points out that Ion is able to speak well about Homer not by way of employing any intellectual faculties of his own, but because his enthusiasm makes him a subject of divine inspiration, or a “medium of divine utterance.”¹⁸ Socrates goes on to describe how with inspiration such as Ion’s, the divine is the starting point and the poet is the “first link,” the rhapsodist such as Ion is the second link, and he who listens to the rhapsodist (Socrates in this case)

12 Brisson, *ibid.*, p. xii, 7.

13 Brisson, *ibid.*, p. x.

14 Brisson, *ibid.*, p. 7, 13, 137.

15 Duncan, “Plato and Poetry,” p. 483.

16 Duncan, *ibid.*, p. 482.

17 Plato, *Ion* 534b.

18 Duncan, *ibid.*, p. 481.

is the third.¹⁹ According to Socrates' critique, poetry, as well as admiration of poetry, is founded not in reason but in a sort of passive receptivity to divine inspiration. In this way, that the poet isn't genuinely creating something real or original. That the poet is divinely inspired, and that the rhapsodist is enthused, renders both ignorant of real truth and cognizant only of this second-, or third-order expression of it. In addition, because no reasoning faculties were employed through this process, they are unable to develop the capacity to come to their own understanding of truth through dialogue with one another. Instead, though inspired and enthused, they are essentially merely relaying what was expressed to them by the poet. Thus, in *Ion*, we can understand Plato to be demonstrating that poetry is inferior to philosophy in helping citizens to achieve an ideal state.

As detailed by Brisson, the poet makes appeals to the emotions of the audience for the purposes of persuasion. Duncan reaffirms Plato's concern with this as he says, "Truth is not reached by impression unless the impression is examined and confirmed by reason."²⁰ This provides additional insight into why Plato preferred philosophy to poetry as philosophy involves reasoning and contributions from all participants in the conversation. Brisson notes that when audience members are persuaded by the myth the poet recounts, they "surrender their liberty;" they are led by way of appeals to fear or pleasure "without being fully aware of the fact" to retain the values conveyed in the myth and to shape their behavior "according to a system of inherited values" which they played no part in helping establish. Brisson notes further that these myths become reference points "in every essential area of existence" as they even propose explanations for the origins of the cosmos and the nature of the world.²¹ Plato affirms that mythology has a role in society as he himself so often told of myths in his teachings but he considered myths to be objects of philosophical reflection, not sources of poetic performance. The concerns Plato expresses about poetry therefore were partially that citizens' liberty would be compromised and that their reasoning faculties would be gradually degraded as they find truth not through participation in philosophical dialogue but by subordinating their beliefs under inherited values expressed in myth as poetry.

To understand Plato's greater confidence in philosophers' ability to reach the truth over poets, it's important to understand what specifically Plato means by 'Truth'. The concept of truth in the Platonic dialogues is always understood as unattainable in its entirety. Despite Plato's encouragement of philosophy as means to attaining truth, one cannot possess the entire truth by way of philosophical dialogue. In Plato's *Phaedrus* Socrates claims that absolute

19 Plato, *Ion* 536a & Duncan, *ibid.*, p. 482.

20 Duncan, *ibid.*, p. 488.

21 Brisson, *ibid.*, p. 9.

truths do in fact exist and that in the time before our souls are incarnated, we catch glimpses of them. He calls these absolute truths ‘the Forms’ which are transcendent as they reside above the heavens as the complete essences of things such as Beauty, or Goodness.²² According to the myth, through incarnation we forget what we’ve seen and so our only understanding that the Forms exist in their absoluteness is accomplished by way of our earthly experiences of them. However, earthly experiences of the forms are deficient; our notions of Beauty and Goodness are derived from sensible particulars, or half-truths, which don’t capture their whole essence. Thus our attempts to express our understanding of the forms are always unsatisfactory as they always refer us back to our muted, fleeting, earthly experiences of them. Truths, such as Love, are really experiences of recollection of that which we saw before our souls took human form.

In the *Phaedrus* Plato argues that we need to approach the endeavor of learning about the Forms indirectly, and with the help of others. By philosophizing about myths, as compared to receiving the supposed embedded value of the myth as conveyed by a poet, we circumvent the limits of language and catch fleeting moments of understanding for ourselves. Through philosophical discussion and debate about how to interpret the myths, certain aspects of the myths, or even the entire myths, resonate with us or shock us with a particular force that would not transpire by way of direct analysis. Ancient poetic practices did not involve conversation of this sort thus our reasoning faculties would not be put to use if we were mere listeners instead of interlocutors. Further support for this sentiment can be found in Plato’s *Letter VII* when Socrates states that “knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after a long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightaway nourishes itself.”²³ Naddaf concludes that this “dialectical teaching is thus a social process” and that it “requires a live exchange of ideas in the quest for truth.”²⁴ Thus we can see why Plato favored philosophy over poetry as means for educating ideal citizens and thus an ideal state.

Throughout his works Plato raised these concerns about the role poetry plays in society including that poetry is not founded in reason but in passive receptivity to divine inspiration, that consequently the practice of poetry obscures the truth rather than fosters recollection of it, that it neither requires nor encourages citizens to employ or develop their faculties of reason, and that it undermines the importance of mutual participation in a dialogue. I argue that

22 Plato, *Phaedrus*, 247c-d.

23 Plato, *Letter VII*, 341c.

24 Brisson, *ibid.*, p. xxii.

these concerns have not gone unanswered. Though Friedrich Schlegel's "Dialogue on Poesy" is often read as his response to the deadening divisions that he felt plagued his own times, many of the specific concerns Plato expresses are addressed. In this way, I argue Schlegel's piece also serves as a sort of defense of poetry, a response to the critiques Plato makes, and thus as a way of continuing the philosophical dialogue and debate which Plato himself started and encouraged in antiquity.

A prominent concern Plato expresses about the role of poetry in society is that poets do not employ their faculties of reason in their performance but that instead the poet is merely an instrument of divine inspiration. As a result, the poets and the rhapsodists become primarily preoccupied with their interpretations which are second- or third-order expressions of the divine, thus they distance themselves from the truth. Schlegel responds to this concern by urging that modern poetry be based in a new mythology of Idealism. Idealism articulates a pantheistic worldview in which a divine presence permeates all that exists. As in the works of Baruch Spinoza who Schlegel specifically cites, reason is employed rigorously to reach this pantheistic conclusion.²⁵ Spinoza is renowned for his utilization of the "geometric method" to reach the rational conclusion that all is connected by an infinite divine presence. In this way Schlegel argues that divine inspiration does not inhibit the capacity to reason as Plato thought, but rather Schlegel asserts that divine inspiration and enthusiasm *reveal* reason.

Nevertheless, though he agrees that all possess the *capacity* to understand Idealism as a rational conclusion, Schlegel *does not* argue that this is an understanding that people implicitly possess. The "Dialogue on Poesy" introduces us to a circle of friends discussing the role poetry might be able to play in improving society. Ludoviko, the first to speak, proposes that poetry ought to be rooted in a new mythology of idealism just as ancient poetry was rooted in ancient mythology. Antonio complains that while the Idealists assure him that Spinoza's work is good, he finds it "incomprehensible": "Every work of genius was clear to the eye, but eternally hidden to the understanding." Ludoviko convinces Antonio that what separates the ability to recognize such genius from the ability to understand it is the very enthusiasm or divine inspiration which Plato argued inhibited the exercise of the reasoning faculties²⁶. Thus while one comes to understand the nature of divine inspiration by way of reason, as per Spinoza's pantheism, this reason can be rather incomprehensible when expressed in the rigorous manner of Spinoza's work. It is poetry which employs reason but manifests it in enthusiasm. This is the "symmetry" which Antonio recognizes between works of genius and deeper comprehension. In

25 Schlegel, "Dialogue on Poesy," p. 185.

26 Schlegel, *ibid.*, p. 188.

other words, reason is made more comprehensible in the form of poetry, which is itself henceforth grounded in Idealism, the pantheistic view that the divine permeates all.

Schlegel in fact begins this work by noting that although people of modern times find themselves buried beneath “self-made unreason,” all are nonetheless capable of recognizing the importance of poetry and that poetry itself can be understood as universal and thus unifying, as well as emancipatory.²⁷ In this work Schlegel is arguing in line with the Romantic notion that the only way for true freedom to be attainable is to establish a way of being in the world that would allow each person to flourish as an individual; true freedom could only be attained for oneself, by oneself. Though Schlegel is responding to the political circumstances of his own times, he is also providing a response to the concern Plato expresses that poetry causes citizens of a state to surrender their liberty and submit themselves to the poet’s will. In the Enlightenment, poetry did not involve the same performative spectacle as it did in antiquity. Consequently the poet did not have the same ability to react to an audience and appeal to their emotions, so perhaps Plato’s concerns hold less weight in that historical context. Nonetheless, Schlegel insists that the role of the poet in society ought to be to provide the poetry as means by which citizens can emancipate *themselves*, as this was the only way to attain true freedom; as Antonio says, “We abide by the meaning of the whole alone; that which charms, touches, occupies, and delights the sense, the heart, the understanding, and the imagination individually appears to us as nothing but signs, means for the intuition of the whole at the moment when we lift ourselves up to it.”²⁸ Plato favored philosophy because it enabled individuals to employ their reasoning faculties and come to their own understanding of the truth, but here Schlegel is conveying the idea that poetry can do something similar to what Plato thought philosophizing about myths does. That the “whole” appears to us individually and we lift ourselves up to it is significant as it demonstrates how the calling of the artist is emancipatory: the poet provides citizens with poems which serve to lead citizens to an understanding of the reasoning of which Idealism is the conclusion. At the same time, since reason is a unifying force as it is the same in everyone, poetry not only makes reason more accessible to those who struggle with the complex methods of philosophical discourse such as Spinoza’s but it also enables each person to emancipate themselves as each person can come to understand this unitary reason on their own. Thus we can see that individuals can achieve their own freedom for themselves and it is the role of the artist/poet to provide the means for such individualized emancipation.

Accordingly, Schlegel argues that poetry ought to be the means for

27 Schlegel, *ibid.*, p. 181.

28 Schlegel, *ibid.*, p. 189.

allowing citizens to understand reason, therefore creating harmony amongst individuals given that reason is unitary and thus unifying, while also helping each citizen to emancipate themselves. In this way, Schlegel provides a response for Plato's concern that poetry does not require employing one's reasoning faculties, that it compromises the liberty of a state's citizens and that it makes the poet a mere instrument of divine inspiration. For Schlegel poetry is essentially based in reason, poets must necessarily employ their reasoning faculties. Additionally, the poet should provide the means for citizens to emancipate themselves rather than to lead citizens to surrender their liberty in any way. This concept of the role of poetry may largely result from Schlegel's historical context as Schlegel's poetry is not as performative as Plato's poetry. Nonetheless, for Schlegel the poet is very much an instrument of divine inspiration. Plato was concerned that poetry by being an instrument of divine inspiration could not create anything new but as expression of an interpretation of the truth, would essentially create and further a separation from the truth. Schlegel and the Romantic authors do not share in this concern, however. As advocates of pantheism, they argued that the divine permeated all, including all citizens; this informed their egalitarian politics and their encouragement of the revolutions of their day. Divine inspiration was not seen as a problem but instead a necessary condition of pantheistic Idealism. Plato's view of society was more hierarchical as those who engaged in philosophical discourse were understood to attain clearer perception of the truth since some people could get closer to the truth than others, Plato's conceptualization of society justifies some degree of elitism.

The German Romantic authors are read always in their historical context as so much of their work is a response to the sociopolitical circumstances of their time and a perspective on how to manage modern society. Schlegel's "Dialogue on Poesy" is clearly written out of dissatisfaction with the division and obscurity that plagued his day and age. Yet to read his work only as a response to his immediate historical conditions is to miss out on another dialogue he is carrying out through this work, specifically with the critique of poetry made in antiquity, interest in which underwent a revival while he was a student. His dialogue thus carries value not only for understanding the nature of the influence which Plato's teachings had on German Romanticism but for continuing the dialogue that started millennia ago about how to understand the role poetry and art ought to play in society and whether they can help us achieve an ideal state.

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