

BOOKS FOR PHILOSOPHERS

Plato's Republic and Rousseau's *Émile*

Ana Cláudia Santos

In this paper I shall analyze Plato's and Rousseau's arguments against the educational value of poetry, describing their particular projects in the *Republic* and in *Émile*. I will try to demonstrate that poetry's total or partial sacrifice is associated with the search for an ideal of a philosophical life.

In the beginning of *Émile*, Rousseau distinguishes two different types of human education, directed to different objects: the public education of the citizen and the domestic education of the individual. To know what a good public education is Rousseau advises us to read Plato's *Republic*, the most beautiful educational treatise ever written, according to him¹ (*Émile* I, 40). In Rousseau's view, what Plato did was less to create chimerical institutions than to purify men's hearts (*Émile* I, 40). We will now see in which way the *Republic* aims at a general purification of men, which will therefore contribute to the organization of a great city. Education is thus thought to serve the city's welfare² (*Republic* 424 b).

The founding of an imaginary city proceeds from the attempt to define the virtue of justice. Through the correspondence between the city and the individual ("perhaps, there would be more justice in the larger object, and more easy to apprehend" – *Republic* 369 a), a city's birth and development is examined, leading to the conclusion that justice means each one man being able to "perform one social service in the state for which his nature was best adapted" (*Republic* 433 a). The city's origin "is to be found in the fact that we do not severally suffice for our own needs, but each of us lacks many things" (*Republic* 369 b). The proposal of creating an imaginary city (*Republic* 369 c) is followed by the idea of educating its men in imagination, as if stories or fables were being told (*Republic* 376 d).

The goal of education is to develop man's natural qualities, but if those qualities don't exist, the best education will be useless. The education of the guardian should follow the Greek tradition of music and gymnastics (the first designed for the soul, the second for the body). Socrates does not believe that "a sound body by its excellence makes the soul good, but on the contrary that a good soul by its virtue

¹ All *Émile* references are to Allan Bloom's translation. Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Emile or On Education*. [1762]. New York: Basic Books, 1979.

² All *Republic* references are to Paul Shorey's translation. Plato. *Republic. The Collected Dialogues, including the Letters*. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (ed.). New York: Bollingen Foundation. 1966.

renders the body the best that is possible” (Republic 403 d). Through a balance between the soul’s philosophical and courageous faces, music and gymnastics should work together in forming and perfecting the soul (Republic 410 c, d). At the end of Book V, in response to the possibility of the existence of a real city like the one Socrates imagined, he states that his could only be a city ruled by philosophers (Republic 473 d). According to the principle of justice found, one sort of men, the philosophers, “by their very nature, belong to the study of philosophy and political leadership, while it benefits the other sort to let philosophy alone and to follow their leader” (Republic 474 c). To have a philosophical nature means having good memory, learning easily, being superior and a friend of truth – only those deserve to be educated to serve philosophy and the city.

A philosopher’s education should begin in childhood, going on through adolescence: “while they are lads and boys they should occupy themselves with an education and a culture suitable to youth, and while their bodies are growing to manhood take right good care of them, thus securing a basis and a support for the intellectual life” (Republic 498 b). When they reach maturity, more specific and severe studies must be undertaken, starting with mathematics (which stimulates the intelligence), then geometry and astronomy, being dialectics the end and the higher kind of study (Republic 534 e). However, children shouldn’t be forced to follow these studies (Republic 536 d); they shouldn’t be educated by compulsion but by play, in order to discover their preferences (Republic 537 a). They shouldn’t be left free before a constitutional government (so to speak) is established within them, and “by fostering the best element in them with the aid of the like in ourselves, have set up in its place a similar guardian and ruler in the child, and then, and then only” they are let free (Republic 590 e, 591 a). In the Republic, the best education (a philosophical one) is thought to serve the interests of the city.

Rousseau’s *Émile*, like the Republic, is all about education, the art of forming men. Says Rousseau, in the beginning of his book: “We are born weak, we need strength; we are born totally unprovided, we need aid; we are born stupid, we need judgment. Everything we do not have at our birth and which we need when we are grown is given us by education” (*Émile* I, 38). If Rousseau’s project succeeds, his pupil, *Émile*, will first of all be a man. Only after being educated to be a man can he be educated to be a citizen. Therefore, he will not be raised as an ordinary child, but rather as a “natural man” – and that is a dear notion to Rousseau. First the child must follow nature’s path (that’s to say, man’s animal and original dispositions); then, only when he reaches adolescence, a social education can take place. We should notice that Rousseau’s goal is not to make his *Émile* a savage, but to make him live like a natural man until he is ready to enter society and become one of its members. *Émile* will be, most of all, a morally and intellectually autonomous human being, a superior kind of man.

It is the master's job to grant that the pupil follows nature's inspiration (I, 61). If the child leaves nature too early, he's corrupted. What must be done in order to prevent him from doing it? The child must think he is free and must learn to be self-sufficient and depend on others the least possible. If he thinks someone rules over him, he will want to rule over the others. It's important, then, that his wills are limited to his strengths. According to Rousseau, happiness means not to have more wills than faculties – that's why imagination, the source of desire, is the biggest responsible for human misery. If the child is used to have everything he wants, he will believe "himself to be the owner of the universe; he regards all men as his slaves. When one is finally forced to refuse him something, he, believing that at his command everything is possible, takes this refusal for an act of rebellion (Émile II, 87). Émile will not know the world by man's laws and authority, he will learn instead by his own experience and impotence. Instead of depending on men, he will depend on things – on the necessity of things, which defines nature. Therefore, the master will not try to persuade him not to do something, he will prevent him from doing it (without letting the pupil know) – thus, if there is no authority but only necessity, the child will think that he is free. Says Rousseau: "Let him always believe he is the master, and let it always be you who are. There is no subjection so perfect as that which keeps the appearance of freedom. (...) Doubtless he ought to do only what he wants; but he ought to want only what you want him to do" (Émile II, 120). The master is truly "the minister of nature" (Émile IV, 317).

For Rousseau, childhood is the sleep of reason. Émile must be treated as a physical being and Plato is again praised for raising the children "only by festivals, games, songs, and pastimes" (Émile II, 107). Like Plato, Rousseau thinks that the body must obey the soul, and in order for it to do this, "the body must be vigorous (...) The weaker the body, the more it commands; the stronger it is, the more it obeys" (Émile I, 54). So, the child must be always in motion, and preferably outdoors. He must play, jump and run as much as he wants. One of the peculiarities of Rousseau's method lies in the delay of the child's academic education. History and languages should be taught as late as possible; moreover, Émile will learn how to read and write only when he feels the need to know how to do both. Rousseau describes his as the "inactive method" (Émile II, 117). The studies must be adequate to the child's faculties. It's better to let him be a slow learner than to teach him what he can't understand (according to the master). The child must be used to think by himself before he learns from other men – and from books, which "only teach one to talk about what one does not know" (Émile III, 184). In Rousseau's view, it's better to waste time than to use it poorly (Émile III, 172); it's better to remain ignorant than to be mistaken.

The time for study begins only in adolescence, which is delayed to the age of fifteen. Like Plato's instruction of the philosopher, Émile will learn the most important sciences: mathematics, geometry, and physics. But he will learn them according to nature; "he will doubtless

have to be guided a little – but very little, and without its becoming apparent” (Émile III, 171). As Rousseau explains, the spirit of his education “consists not in teaching the child many things, but in never letting anything but accurate and clear ideas enter his brain” (Émile III, 171). Common sense is the best instrument for learning. The child must remain in ignorance of ideas which are not within his reach (Émile III, 178). Therefore, notions of social relationships are not taught before the age of fifteen. The beginning of Émile’s social education resembles Plato’s account on the origin of a city, in the sense that men are always in need of other men’s skills: “Let us suppose ten men, each of whom has ten sorts of needs. Each must, for what he needs, apply himself to ten sorts of work; but, given the differences of genius and talent, one man will be less successful at one sort of work, another man at another. (...) Let us form a society of these ten men and let each apply himself, for himself and for the nine others, to the kind of occupation which suits him best. Each will profit from the talents of the others as if he alone had them all” (Émile III, 193). It is man’s weakness which makes him sociable (Émile IV, 221). In adolescence, Émile will learn the value of friendship and later he will know love. That’s also the time when imagination, dormant until then, is aroused, the time when he is able to identify with other people, to be sensitive to their sufferings and compassionate (Émile IV, 222). Émile will at last be a good friend, then a good husband, and on top of that a good citizen, because he didn’t deviate from the path of nature and remained the good man he naturally was meant to be.

We saw that Émile’s knowing should be practical, not bookish. Rousseau is constantly emphasizing the uselessness of books. They are the worst enemies of children. Émile’s book will be nature, and his first actual book will be *Robinson Crusoe* – that novel about a solitary man alone in an island shall provide him instruction and entertainment (Émile III, 185). At the same time, he shouldn’t learn anything by heart, for knowing by heart exercises the memory but prevents him from acquiring a true knowledge. That’s why, according to Rousseau, fables can instruct men, but fail at intending to instruct children, who are not able to understand their allegorical meanings. Émile won’t know fables by heart, not even the ones by La Fontaine – every fable has moral content, and children lack notions of morality. History isn’t also a study suitable to children, since true historical knowledge involves a moral awareness that they do not have. The words from history are empty, and the ones from fables are just charming. Poetry is not therefore a good choice for the education of children, if they are to be raised according to the truth of things. Only adults can understand poetry, and Émile will start reading good books when he is about twenty years old. Like in the *Republic*, Émile’s education becomes more specific and philosophical as he grows older. The little boy, who was treated like a pure physical being, a savage and a solitary, is now prepared to embrace his roles in society with clear and true ideas about things and men.

I shall now describe Plato's position concerning poetry's educational role in the city. On Books II and III, when referring to the guardian's traditional education, Socrates claims that old fables are essentially false. As such, after a censorship over these stories, they "will induce nurses and mothers to tell to the children and so shape their souls by the [accepted] stories far rather than their bodies by their hands" (Republic 377 c). Socrates adds that the greater stories must be rejected, for they surely provide the pattern for the lesser ones (Republic 377 c). Homer and Hesiod are accused of misrepresenting gods and heroes. For this reason, their stories shouldn't be repeated to children, who "are not able to distinguish what is and what is not allegory, but whatever opinions are taken into the mind at that age are wont to prove indelible and unalterable. For which reason we should do our utmost that the first stories that they hear should be so composed as to bring the fairest lessons of virtue to their ears" (Republic 378 d, e). Fables must then be purified from its fake meanings, which can stimulate lies. For Plato, fables are seen as a model for social conducts, being condemned all representations of fear, pain, laughter and erotic impulses.

Not only is the matter of the stories subject to censorship, but also its forms. Simple narration is better than narration through imitation – meaning tragedies and epic poetry (Republic 394 b). Imitations are dangerous, and "if continued from youth far into life, settle down into habits and second nature in the body, the speech and the thought" (Republic 395 d). Accordingly, the melodies and the rhythms must also be purified, for "gracelessness, evil rhythm and disharmony are akin to evil speaking and the evil temper" (Republic 401 a). Simplicity gives temperance to the soul and health to the body, while variety stimulates license in the soul and illness in the body. For Plato, mimetic art is a sort of fake, delusional knowledge, comparable to dreams: "is not the dream state, whether the man is asleep or awake, just this – the mistaking of resemblance for identity?" (Republic 476 c).

On Book X, Plato reinforces the need to dismiss mimetic art from the city. Mimetic poetry destroys the intelligence of its listeners (Republic 585 b), for it imitates appearances, not reality (Republic 598 b). Starting with Homer, mimetic poets haven't true knowledge about what they talk about, and imitation is like playing without seriousness (Republic 602 b). As Socrates implies, Homer, traditionally regarded as Greece's greater educator, does not deserve this title (Republic 606 e). The only poetry allowed in the city are hymns to the gods and praises of good man (Republic 607 a). However, Socrates admits that poetry may return from the exile, after she has pleaded her defense: "And we would allow her advocates who are not poets but lovers of poetry to plead her cause in prose without meter, and show that she is not only delightful but beneficial to orderly government and all the life of man" (Republic 607 d). We may think that this plead is precisely what Aristotle did in the *Poetics*.

In her essay "The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists", Iris Murdoch concludes that Plato's fear of poetry was really a

fear of pleasure³ – the (dangerous) pleasures of art, which are much more pernicious as it becomes elaborated and sophisticated. Plato (and Rousseau, altogether) understood how serious art is and how strong are its effects on men. Murdoch notices that, for Plato, sophists and artists are alike in the fact that they are the worst kind of liars, who play with our sense of reality – and for Plato, true knowledge is based on a real understanding of the world: “The artist begins indeed to look like a special sort of sophist; and not the least of his crimes is that he directs our attention to particulars which he presents as intuitively knowable, whereas concerning their knowability philosophy has grave and weighty doubts” (Murdoch, 413, 414). As Murdoch observes, Plato was a puritan who heated the theatre, like all puritans (Murdoch, 397). The same can be said of Rousseau, who feared the seductions of the theatre. For the artist, the fire on the cave is like the sun outside of the cave – he deals with shadows, not with sun lighted objects: “his whole criticism of art extends and illuminates the conception of the shadow-bound consciousness” (Murdoch, 390). Plato’s objections to poetry have, for Murdoch, a religious nature. Artists trivialize the gods and the most sacred subjects, and darken the powers of thought, since for them plausibility is more important than truth (Murdoch, 443). Art is regarded as a sort of dream which distracts men from reality and prevents them from reaching a true knowledge – the knowledge of the Good.

I shall now bring forth the idea that, while attacking poetry and the arts, Plato and Rousseau were interested in supporting a philosophical education of men. If their methods succeed, men will become able to think and reason better than anybody – that is to say, they will become philosophers, good men and good citizens. Art is sacrificed for the sake of philosophy (we should recall the words of Socrates: “there’s an old quarrel between poetry and philosophy”). What is curious is that both the *Republic* and *Émile* look a lot like novels, in the sense that the educational and political principles developed in them are embodied in conventions which “survey the entire human condition”, according to Allan Bloom: the founding of a city and the rearing of a boy⁴.

Rousseau was aware of the literary aspects of his work, as well as Plato. In the first book of *Émile*, Rousseau speaks of *Émile* as “the abstract man, exposed to all the accidents of human life” (*Émile* I, 42). In the last book, Rousseau declares that it makes little difference to him if he has written a romance, for it was the fairest of all, the “romance of human nature”. His book “ought to be the history of human species” (*Émile* V, 416). In the *Republic*, the founding of an imaginary city is compared to poetry, painting and sculpture. As we’ve seen, Socrates begins the *Republic* dialogue with the idea of educating the imaginary

³ Iris Murdoch. *Existentialists and Mystics. Writings on Philosophy and Literature*. Peter Conradi (ed.). New York: Penguin Books. 1999. 400.

⁴ Allan Bloom. «Introduction» to *Emile or On Education*. 28.

men of an imaginary city, as if a story was being told. Later on, Socrates clarifies that their purpose was not to demonstrate the possibility of the realization of these ideals, and asks: “Do you think, then, that he would be any the less a good painter, who, after portraying a pattern of the ideally beautiful man and omitting no touch required for the perfection of the picture, should not be able to prove that it is actually possible for such a man to exist?” (Republic 472 d). At the end of Book VII, Glaucon observes: “A most beautiful finish, Socrates, you have put upon your rulers, as if you were a statuary” (Republic 540 c).

In the “Introduction” to his English translation of *Émile*, Allan Bloom writes that both the *Republic* and *Émile* “are books for philosophers and are meant to influence practice only in the sense that those who read them well cannot help but change their general perspectives”⁵. Plato didn’t mean to write a ruler’s manual and Rousseau didn’t mean to write a manual for educators. They address fellow men and hope that their books (which are less about giving advice than presenting possibilities) will instigate thought rather than a true reform of reality. The reason why I think the *Republic* and *Émile* are books for philosophers lies in the fact that they are really about philosophers. Plato wanted his city to be ruled by philosophers, men who have certain qualities; Rousseau wants his boy to have certain qualities, which can easily be related to the ones pointed out by Plato. Both are worried about having a true knowledge of things and hope to teach man how to avoid the corruptions of fake knowledge. Ultimately, that search for the true knowledge is what characterizes a philosopher.

⁵ Allan Bloom. «Introduction» to *Emile or On Education*. 28.