

Writing In Justice: Plato's *Republic* and Alasdair Gray's 'Five Letters from an Eastern Empire'

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'People should [...] be worried about the possible effects, on one's own inner political system, of listening to [poetry] and should tread cautiously; and they should let our arguments guide their attitude towards poetry.'

'I couldn't agree more,' he said.

Plato, *Republic*, 608a¹

'But a poet must feel the cracks in the nation splitting his own heart. How else can he mend them?'

I said, 'I refuse to mend this cracked nation'.

Gray, 'Five Letters from an Eastern Empire', p.118

Plato's *Republic* has a crucial position as a background text to any political fable. Often regarded as the first utopian novel, the dialogue presents an attempt to describe an ideal society, through an analysis of how to educate people in order that they become ideal citizens. This takes place within the philosophical framework of a search for a definition of justice. A crucial part of the analysis, and one which has generated much debate, concerns a proposed censorship of the arts, in particular, of poetry and painting.

Like Plato's text, Alasdair Gray's 1984 'Five Letters from an Eastern Empire' (hereafter FLEE), published in 1984, presents a world alien to the reader, offering a description of that world's ideological structures and social practices. Yet unlike the ideal city of the *Republic*, it is portrayed in ways which are almost entirely negative; the text might be said to count as dystopian rather than utopian. Again, since FLEE takes the epistolary form, it reveals only one side of a dialogue. Rather than taking a godlike overview, as the group in Plato's text do, FLEE is written from the point of view of an individual citizen of an obsolete nation.

However, a simple comparison between the *Republic* and any literary text is problematic; the project is undermined by Socrates'

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attack on the arts, which may be said to derogate literary artworks regardless of subject matter. At the core of Socrates' insistence on the justice of censorship is a contrast drawn between modes of writing, between philosophy and literature, where only the former can be rational and tell the truth, since the latter is fundamentally a source of intellectual weakness and moral turpitude.

Socrates' strong views on the potentially subversive effect of poetry on both the individual, and as a result, the state, has led to many detractors from this supposed utopia, yet philosophers are still unable to agree on a way of successfully defending the arts against the attack. In this paper I will attempt to clarify the problem set by Plato in the *Republic*, and then go on to claim for Gray's text a philosophical significance, by showing that FLEE presents a new and radical approach to the puzzle.

I

Fiction becomes an issue in Book 2 of the *Republic* when a story, told by Glaucon, threatens Socrates' proposition that the just life is always more rewarding than the unjust life. The story tells of a person who learns how to make himself invisible, uses this power to commit crimes without getting caught, and eventually usurps the King. Glaucon suggests firstly that everyone would behave in such a way if they could get away with it, and secondly that if a person were to behave justly, that they would not be happier or live a more rewarding life, but rather that the opposite would be true.

It comes as no surprise to the reader, then, when in Book 3 Socrates warns of the dangerous power of stories and how they may affect societies. As a result, citizens of the ideal society may only be exposed to literature which has undergone heavy censorship. The role of fiction in the new republic is to work with the society and so texts must be approved by the philosopher guardians of the society.

Part of the reason that poets are considered so dangerous in the *Republic* is that they produce artefacts which are the enemies of reason, inciting subversive elements and exciting baser instincts. This is because they appeal to the irrational part of our nature and encourage emotional reactions to events:

If you admit the entertaining Muse of lyric and epic poetry, then instead of law and the shared acceptance of reason as the best guide, the kings of your community will be pleasure and pain. (607a)

In Book 10, Socrates places his criticisms in the context of an ancient quarrel between poets and philosophers. Historically, both of these professions claimed to offer truths about our lives and the world. In crude terms, the philosophers represent oracular competition for the poets. Yet for Plato, only the philosophers—who will also rule his utopian society—have access to true knowledge and the Forms, or the ideal world of universals. According to Platonic metaphysics, the world that we see and live in is an imperfect copy of this ideal—and only truly real—world, and it is this world which artists choose to represent. By analogy, Socrates argues that this places poets at a third remove from reality. Moreover, to write in a literary form is to admit to not really knowing about the subject; after all, Socrates says:

I'm sure that if [the poet] really knew about the things he was copying in his representations, he'd put far more effort into producing real objects. (599b)

Here Plato focuses on the creators for criticism; it is their failings which make their works dangerous. Literature is intolerable in the ideal society because its creators are writing about subjects of which they have no knowledge, and truths to which they have no access.

Poets may be admitted back into the republic if, instead of writing 'for pleasure', they 'come up with a rational argument for their inclusion' (607c). Alternatively, those who are not poets, but who could argue for poetry, may be allowed to defend it in the poets' absence (607d). Most importantly, the readmission of literary artists into the republic should not involve 'compromising the truth as we see it' (607c). Literary artists, then, must adapt their conceptions as well as their expressions to those of philosophy, and if they cannot, must rely upon others outside the field of literature to prove the potential and worth of literature, by interpreting the literature which attempts—but fails—to justify itself.

To summarize, I take Plato's *Republic* to propose, essentially:

1. That poets present a danger to society because their skill is in manipulating their readers and producing ideas in such a form that they will be accepted without question as true.
2. That where philosophy expresses and develops the rational and the true, literature may be associated with false non-rational emotions. As such, literary artefacts are ethically unstable.
3. That literary artists are intellectually inferior to philosophers, and to write literature is to admit to a lack of knowledge about philosophical matters.

4. That literature may be manipulated by philosophers to become ethically and socially acceptable, perhaps even valuable. Hereafter I will refer to these tenets as the four Platonic claims.

II

As a painter and a poet, Gray has a vested interest in defending his professions against the attack presented in the *Republic*. Moreover, the themes of political censorship of the arts and the more general notion of what might be said to constitute a right way to live come up again and again in Gray's work. Here, I want to focus upon the way in which FLEE manages to adopt and develop ideas about poetry and poets from the society recommended as utopian in the *Republic*, in order to expose them as malign and corrupt.

In the *Republic*, Socrates and his acquaintances mentally construct a society which they believe to be ideal. FLEE presents a reification of this society, turning it from being ideal, in both senses of the word, into being real, by recording an individual's experience of life in it. Gray's story focuses upon the rulers', or philosopher headmasters', relationship with the poets, and so can be understood as a demonstration of the workings of the four Platonic claims. It suggests what they mean, shows how they work as ideology, and warns of that to which they may lead.

The first Platonic claim I identified was the notion that poets present a danger to society because their skill is in manipulating their readers and producing ideas in such a form that they will be accepted without question. The rulers of the obsolete nation in FLEE are acutely aware of the danger presented by poets. The headmaster tells Bohu, 'more than two poets would tear [the emperor's] kingdom apart!' (FLEE, p.88). Bohu takes this as a joke; but the severe measures taken to control poetic production suggest otherwise. The headmaster of literature tells Bohu after releasing him from the windowless prison where he is starved of food and human contact in order to develop his poetic sensibilities:

This education [...] destroys the mind it does not enlarge. You are my first success. (FLEE, p.103)

Another restriction of Bohu's profession as a poet is in the type of poetry which he will be producing. The segregation of dramatic types; having one artist specialize in tragedy and one in comedy, is in keeping with Socrates' instructions for poetic controls in Book 3 of the *Republic*

(394–5). Imposing strict boundaries is a way for the rulers of both worlds to limit art, to minimize the danger presented by poets by placing them in categories which define and delimit their task. In *FLEE* the distinction between the two genres is presented finally as a way for the state to propose the same political concepts to different audiences, and in this sense Bohu and Tohu are simply two means to the same end. In the second letter, Bohu speaks of both his own and Tohu's roles as occasional propagandists:

the headmaster of civil peace sometimes asked me to improve the wording of rumours authorised by the emperor, while Tohu improved the unauthorised ones that were broadcast by the beggars' association. (*FLEE*, p.105)

In the final letter, the reader discovers that both Tohu and Bohu were trained with the intention of making this their only role. The poems they were to be asked to write would function as palliatives to the populace. In order to prevent them from being a danger to this society, the 'poets' themselves were to be made tools of the state.

So, the rulers of the society in *FLEE* accept the principle of the first Platonic claim. But their response is not merely to impose censorship, but rather to have absolute control over poetic production, such that those who read the poems will be manipulated on the terms of the state, unquestioningly accepting ideas which it is in the rulers' interests for them to accept.

Yet the effects of these attempts at political control through poetry are not quite as planned; the 'order-to-write' (*FLEE*, p.94), which is so long in coming, will not lead to 'writing-to-order'. Neither Tohu nor Bohu seem able to manipulate readers into accepting the ideas encoded in their poetry. Tohu tries to write a poem defending the state's barbarism, but ends up making martyrs of the rebels, according to the headmaster of literature (*FLEE*, p.131–132). Bohu, on the other hand, writes a poem of protest against 'The Emperor's Injustice' (*FLEE*, p.127), before committing suicide. Like the rulers, he is convinced that people will accept unquestioningly whatever he writes, and says that he has no doubt that, were the poem released, 'the common people would rise and destroy [the rulers]' (*FLEE*, p.128). In fact the rulers read the poem very differently, and believe that it will convince the people that the genocide was necessary and just.

Both poems, then, are considered by the guardians to have the opposite meaning to that intended; in each case the meaning of the poem is separated from the intentions of the poets. In this way Plato's

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attempt to blame poets for the interpretations of their works is shown to be misguided. Literary artists do not write in order that their ideas may be understood and blindly accepted.

Throughout the story the reader is denied any certainty as to whose words are being read. Four of the letters are dictated by Bohu, although readers are warned:

the postman who re-writes letters before fixing them to the pigeons always leaves out the dangerous bits. (FLEE, p.96)

The form of FLEE insists that readers take responsibility for their own readings, accepting nothing that they find in the text unquestionably as true.

The second Platonic claim proposes that where philosophy expresses and develops the rational and the true, literature may be associated with non-rational emotions and the false. In response, one might either suggest that the associations are wrong; that literature need not be defined negatively, and in fact that it may be associated with the rational and the true, or one might instead question the value system which equates the emotional with the false and the rational with the true. Gray's story plays effectively with aspects of both of these objections.

For Plato, the emotional triggers of poets and their works are highly dangerous. Similarly, in FLEE, the emotional tendencies of the poets must be placed under the most strict controls.

Tohu has been educated to envy and fear everyone, especially me, while I have been educated to feel serenely superior to everyone, especially him. (FLEE, p.88)

The relation between the emotive forms is constructed in antagonism. Other emotions, which may be more difficult to control, are not permitted. All Bohu's feelings will be controlled artificially, never to be allowed free reign:

the doctor put something in the tea which made me quick and happy. (FLEE, p.92)

Moods are to be induced in the poet; his real emotions are not to be allowed to interfere with his poetic services to the state. The headmaster of literature insists that:

large appetites must be given a single direction or they will produce a mere healthy human being. (FLEE, p.103)

The philosopher headmasters succeed in forcing Bohu's desires down

a single direction, and consider themselves blessed as a result with 'exactly the poem we require' (FLEE, p.130). The headmaster of literature goes on from this assessment to provide a detailed analysis of the poem Bohu has written, justifying it step by step, and demanding for it a place in the public domain. The form that this defence takes initially is the claim that the poem is true, in the sense that:

A poet's intuitive grasp of reality was never more clearly demonstrated. (FLEE, p.131)

What makes it true, we are told, is that it is completely devoid of emotion:

He presents the destruction as a simple, stunning, inevitable fact. (FLEE, p.131)

If a poem is written emotively, as Tohu's poem was, it is indefensible for Plato, since it would involve the citizens' 'being caught once more by that childish and pervasive love' (*Republic*, 608a). Without emotion Bohu's poem will serve the state well. This emphasizes the second Platonic claim, but also the fourth, because this claim of objectivity is consistent with the target set by Plato for literature to become philosophy; for it to become acceptable to his ideal society.

The rulers of the society then, control the minds of the citizens:

A poet cannot know his theme until the Emperor orders it. (FLEE, p.93)

This is Plato's third doctrine, which asserts that literary artists are intellectually inferior to philosophers, and to write literature is to admit to a lack of knowledge about philosophical matters, realized. In this society, poets are forced to recognize their intellectual inadequacy by abdicating epistemological responsibility, even with regard to their own work. Yet this law, stated as fact by Bohu, is immediately undermined by his confession that he has worked out for himself the subject upon which he will be asked to write:

I knew I would be commanded to celebrate a great act and the greatest act of our age is the building of the new palace. (FLEE, p.93)

The emperor in FLEE seeks to preserve his power by making the skills of others depend upon him. Although it is eminently possible for poets to know their own themes, by 'outlawing' such knowledge, the emperor is able to manage the creative output of poets working within his nation. Yet he controls minds only in the sense that he has made it socially unacceptable for poets to assert their own themes; what they are actually thinking still enjoys free reign. What FLEE emphasizes

again in this context is that the supposed ignorance of artists is not a fact but rather a construction adopted by Socrates in order to defend his own philosophic way of thinking and writing.

Bohu is to begin his education by 'memorizing all the classical literature' (FLEE, p.101); when this is done, he is forced into a darkened room where sensory deprivation and social isolation are designed to develop his imagination. This is Bohu's introduction to an ideal world, but he refuses to abandon his past—although Bohu does hallucinate, it is about those things which he knows; sometimes characters from his past, and sometimes characters from the stories he has read (FLEE, p.102).

In the *Republic*, it is this potential for and tendency of literature to be related to life that makes it most dangerous because readers are said to trust absolutely the poet's representation of the world.² Yet we have already seen that this notion is mistaken on two counts; that readers do not always see a poem in the way that the poet did, and secondly that on the evidence of FLEE readers would be ill advised to trust absolutely in anything they read. However the headmaster guardians believe that they have found a solution to the problem of poetry as stated by Plato, and this solution involves putting into practice the suggestion made by the fourth Platonic claim; that literature may be manipulated by philosophers to become ethically and socially acceptable, perhaps even valuable.

In the *Republic*, readers are told that the 'friends of poets' may, in philosophical form, make the case for certain works of poetry to be acceptable (607). When Bohu dies, he is quite reasonably convinced that the poem he has written on 'The Emperor's Injustice' will never be revealed in public (FLEE, p.128). Yet the final letter of FLEE enacts the process of poetic salvation suggested by Socrates in Book 10 of the *Republic*, as Bohu's poem of protest is turned into the propaganda which he died to resist producing. The poem first appears as part of Bohu's suicide note, or the fourth letter, in which context it appears to be an elegy, mourning the destruction of the old capital and its population (FLEE, p.127). But the headmaster follows Plato's prescriptions perfectly, not only in presenting a permissible version of the poem as non-emotive and rational, and thereby, as true, but also because he writes his critique in a strictly logical form; insisting upon one particular meaning which everyone is required to accept if they are to be said to understand the poem. The headmaster seems to have a certainty which Bohu had lost by the time of his death, answering objections without listening to them

(FLEE, p.130), and proclaiming the effect of the poem on its readers:

The Emperor's Injustice will delight our friends, depress our enemies,
and fill middling people with nameless awe. The only change required
is the elimination of the first syllable in the last word of the title.
(FLEE, p.132)

According to my interpretation, this is the type of literary criticism which Plato regards as saving literature for a just world. My reading of FLEE shows him to be mistaken, suggesting rather that such interpretations, despite their prestigious ancestry, are stylistically mindless, semantically crude, and morally questionable.

The headmaster anticipates objections to his interpretation of Bohu's poem from two of the rulers; the headmasters of civil peace and moral philosophy. Yet their objections are not what the reader might expect from the purveyors of such arts—the headmaster foresees their protestations that the truth of the poem is unimportant, that what matters is the possibility of it proving to be successful propaganda. This concern mirrors Plato's own, which involves the premise that the actual truth value of poetry is relatively insignificant. What does count for the author of the *Republic* is that for which poetry is claiming truth. For example, Socrates expresses concern about the gods being made to look violent or immoral in stories written by Hesiod and Homer:

Even if such tales were true, I should not think that they should be lightly told. (377e)

Things are to be complicated even further in FLEE as the headmaster reveals that strictly speaking, the events described in the poem are not true at all, but that the fact that the poem has been written, the fact that the rulers now have the propaganda they need to justify the genocide, means that it will take place. Superficially, this serves as a tragic climax; the realization on the part of the reader that Bohu has brought about a slaughter in the very act of protesting against it. A more serious aspect is brought into play when the war which the poem tells of is instigated as a result of the poem being read in a certain way. It is as if the writing of a subject makes it true, when granted permission by the ideal reader who is, in accordance with Socratic recommendations, both a philosopher and a ruler. Writing brings about a particular reality. If it says it is so, then it becomes so. The power of the author to make things happen textually presents a danger for Plato, but FLEE shows that it also represents an opportunity. Limits are placed upon oneself as a writer, and all one has to do is to declare oneself free of those limits, and one becomes free. Bohu does this in the poem he writes, but

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paradoxically fails to see his role as a free poet. It is in dying that he seals the fate of the innocents, including, crucially, his home and parents. Bohu says:

the emperor's justice has destroyed my past, irrevocably. (FLEE, p.117)

In fact it is the poem of that title, created by Bohu himself, which will do this.

The description of Bohu's education in FLEE demonstrates how the guardians might control the literature which is read and monitor those who read it, to make literature work for society. And as FLEE points out, it is this attitude of the rulers, and not the poetry, which presents a danger to democracy. Bohu says of the propaganda war which exploited the skills of himself and Tohu:

We both put out a story that citizens who worked hard and did not grumble would be employed as servants in the new palace. This was true, but not as true as people hoped [...] the mass of new servants come from more docile cities than the old capital. (FLEE, p.106)

In fact, as Bohu discovers later, the old capital and its inhabitants are destroyed as a result of having been urged by their publications to remain compliant in adversity. The passivity brought about by the publications approved by the state leads to the tyrannical crushing of the old capital's population. As a result, the manipulation on behalf of the headmaster philosophers does not serve to make the writing of the poets 'ethically and socially valuable'; precisely the opposite is the case.

It has been noted that FLEE tells the story of a society from the perspective of one individual. Significantly, this individual is a poet, into whose life and experiences the reader will be given a special insight. Bohu ends his first letter with the confident and proud assertion that 'I am a poet' (FLEE, p.97). Yet Bohu will not enter a canon, but will rather be positioned as founder of a new one.

I said, 'Am I a poet now?'

He said, 'Yes. You are the emperor's honoured guest and tragic poet, the only modern author whose work will be added to the classics of world literature.' (FLEE, p.103)

This emphasis on Bohu's role as representative poet is crucial to the reading of FLEE as response to the attack on literature in the *Republic*, since he is the narrator of the story; FLEE is a defence of poetry written by the poet himself. It is not in a form which he has been trained to

produce; it seems to bear little or no relation to the 'classics' of the eastern empire. But readers are made aware that Bohu is prepared to reinterpret the tradition, as for example when he is castigated by the janitor for walking across the lawn, instead of through the maze, and so breaking the rules of the new etiquette:

I said 'It is not a rule of the etiquette, it is convention of the etiquette, and the etiquette allows poets to be unconventional in their own home.' (FLEE, p.92)

Most of the rules of the 'new etiquette' concern restrictions on expression. On the way to the palace Bohu reports that the new members of the 'honoured-guest-class'

said many things we would not be able to say under the rules of the new etiquette. (FLEE, p.88)

Other rules involve translation, information upon which may be found in the 'dictionary of etiquette' (FLEE, p.96). So the new etiquette defines ways in which ideas might be expressed, much in the same way that the *Republic* tries to argue that there are some ideas which cannot possibly be expressed in the form of literature.

I have tried to show that Alasdair Gray's FLEE constitutes a defence of the power of literature to express ideas in terms both moral and philosophical. Most importantly, it does this on its own conditions. FLEE's rebellion serves as a warning against any argument to which we are only allowed to reply 'I couldn't agree more'. But this isn't the end of the matter, for as Socrates says:

what's in the balance here is absolutely crucial—far more so than people think. It's whether one becomes a good or a bad person, and consequently has the calibre not to be distracted by [...] poetry from applying oneself to morality and whatever else goodness involves. (*Republic*, 608b)

In fact FLEE puts to us the notion that what sort of person one becomes has more to do with how one positions oneself in relation to one's experiences, than to what experiences one is exposed. By shrinking away from the power of literature, and punishing the poets for their creative powers, societies engage in unjust practices. Engaging with literature can mean learning from it. In fact because Plato's text itself qualifies as a literary work, this is a point ultimately made by the *Republic* as well. The author's concerns to prove literary writing false and immoral are undermined by the form in which he has chosen to write. Like Bohu's poem, Plato's *Republic* is a text which is shown to have a life of its own.

Notes

- 1 All references are taken from Plato's *Republic*, trans. and ed. by Robin Waterfield, Oxford, 1993.
- 2 All references are taken from 'Five Letters From an Eastern Empire', in Alasdair Gray, *Unlikely Stories Mostly*, Harmondsworth UK, 1984 c.1983, pp.85-133.
- 3 For a simple outline of some principle points of disagreement, see Charles Karelis, 'Plato on Art and Reality', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 34 (1976): 315-321, esp. p.315.
- 4 *Republic*, 595a-602b.
- 5 On Plato's pervasive awareness of 'fiction's universal pretensions', see Anthony Skillen, 'Fiction Year Zero: Plato's Republic', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32.3 (1992): 201-218, p. 204.
- 6 For a full account of what Plato might mean when he says that poetry should be excluded from the ideal state partly on the grounds that it isn't true, see M. Pabst Battin, 'Plato on True and False Poetry', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36 (1977): 163-174.