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It is reasonable to assume that a philosophy always unfolds its arguments between two imperatives – one negative, the other positive – which define, on the one hand, the vice that destroys true thought, and on the other, the effort, or even the asceticism, which makes true thought possible. It is thus that the philosopher, that polyvalent worker, builds the frame for that canvas in which he will convey the sense of the world.

Plato, with whom everything begins, also begins these operations of framing. Negatively, you must prohibit every commerce with the poem, especially the descriptive or lyrical poem, restricting yourself to patriotic and warlike rhythms alone. The poets must be chased from the ideal city. Positively, you must submit yourself to a decade of studies of the most profound and most difficult mathematics – in Plato's day, this was spatial geometry, whose methods had just been invented. Let no one enter this city who is not a student of geometry.

Seen from the vantage point of our intellectual situation, these imperatives are both violent and obscure. This is why, after all, "Platonist" is in general not a flattering epithet – not for Heidegger, Popper, Sartre, or Deleuze, nor even for the hard Marxists of the golden age, or for the logicians, whether Viennese or Yankee. "Platonist" is almost an insult, as it was for Nietzsche, who argued that the mission of our age was to "be cured of the Plato sickness." Let us say in passing that since (philosophical) remedies are often worse than the malady, our age, in order to be cured of the Plato sickness, has swallowed such doses of a relativist, vaguely sceptical, lightly spiritualist and insipidly moralist medicine, that it is in the process of gently

dying, in the small bed of its supposed dramatic comfort. Those who wish to have done with Plato expose themselves to speculative euthanasia. But why did I call these imperatives of Plato "violent and obscure"? It is violent to suppress the intense use of language, the enchanted reinvention of the word, the compact exploration of the infinite power of saying, which poetry, and it alone, succeeds in distilling. And it is violent to oblige us to follow, via the mathematical page, the constraining intricacies of ciphered black signs, leading to conclusions whose connection to the empirical world is so tenuous that popular wisdom regards them as nothing but a useless ordeal, reserved for

alain badiou
translated by alberto toscano
PLATO, OUR DEAR PLATO!

plato, our dear plato!

an aristocracy of semi-madmen, those who have "a head for maths." The mad, headstrong Platonists?

the poet who wanted to chase away the poets

It is also obscure that Plato the stylist – the author of those great prose poems, the myths in which he tells us of the fate of souls on the shores of the river of forgetting or of the white and black horses of action – tackles poetic imitation with such rare violence, to the extent of declaring, at the end of the *Republic*, that of all the policies he advocates, the most important is the banishment of poets. And obscure too is the fact that the same thinker who has left behind only theatrical dialogues, who often abstains from concluding, and who – unlike Descartes, Spinoza, or Kant – never presents anything in an axiomatic or formally demonstrative form, makes the destiny of the philosophical path so utterly dependent on the traversal of an immense mathematical antechamber.

Doubtless, we must first of all understand the extent to which the two imperatives of the Platonic framing are tied to one other, inasmuch as they are both linked to the Platonic definition of philosophy.

Philosophy is first and foremost that which interrupts the authoritarian regime of the True without falling for the frivolity of relativism or scepticism. An authoritarian regime exists when the truth of a statement depends, not on the argument that supports it, but on the position of the one who pronounces it, whether God, king, priest, professor, or prophet. A relativist or sceptical frivolity reigns when the critique of the authoritarian regime of the true leads to the suppression of the absoluteness and universality of truths. In its Platonist sense, philosophy exposes what it says to public judgment, presupposes shared logical rules, and enters into dialogue with the first-comer. In so doing, it divests the authority of the one who pronounces the statement, in favour of the intrinsic value of what is stated. But, symmetrically, it retains not only the absoluteness of the true, but also the idea that human thought, far from being limited,

finite, relative, and destined to doubt, is instead entirely dependent on this absolute, which it can and must encounter.

Now, poetry, as generous as its beauty may be, is indubitably an authoritarian form of declaration. It draws its authority only from itself, abhors argument, and states *what is*, in the sensory form of what imposes itself without having to share this imposition. It holds itself at the threshold of the Absolute, but too often regards itself as the self-proclaimed guardian of this threshold. Inversely, mathematics disciplines thought through explicit rules, not through the singular genius of language, and offers to everyone a shared demonstration, whilst never giving up on ultimate clarity – as complicated as its construction may be. It informs the True without conceding anything to the trembling or existential doubt before that whose cruel necessity it unveils.

So, it is necessary to affirm that, contrary to what is generally said, it is mathematics which is democratic and poetry which is aristocratic, or royal.

We can thus begin to understand why it is necessary today to be a Platonist. For the democracy of opinion, which is everywhere praised and exalted, is the exclusion of the true; it bestows royalty on that perfectly empty figure which is the individual, who thinks himself the free poet of his existence all the more inasmuch as he takes his place in commercial imitations. On the contrary, true democracy, as Plato saw, is equality before the Idea and the repudiation of imitative "communications." Today in particular, when, as in Plato's time, the city is collapsing into futility, democracy is equality before the political Idea, which must be reinvented against its dissolution in the play of interests.

One will only democratically return to the poem if one subordinates it, in the guise of the pure Idea, to the matheme's arid power of illumination. This was, after all, the project of Mallarmé, and of anything of worth within contemporary poetry. A Platonist poetry, one will say, like the one which declares, with Pessoa, that "Newton's binomial is as beautiful as the Venus of Milo." And a democratic poetry, which

breaks with the sophistic idea of individuals and promotes the access to the real. "Real" threefold, unusable name: Beautiful, the Good.

It is true that we possess not this essentially democratic chance. Pessoa himself, having reaffirmed the equivalence of the Beautiful and the Good, that "the trouble is, nobody has the equivalence (Newton's Binomial, Milo). Well, Plato universally requires for caring about it. Teaching makes the world infinitely more interesting.

Our Plato, our dear Plato! With the available means, let us affirm the Principle, against the phantom of this "freedom" with which we are burdened, the freedom to depend on insignificant objects and minuscule desires.

notes

1 This text was originally published in "notre cher Platon!" in *Magazine* (Nov. 2005): 32–34. We are grateful to Badiou for his permission to publish it. [Translator's note]

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