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The Ancient Greek Philosophers and the Function of Literature in Modern Techno-Space

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Abstract

In an age of breakdown and disorder, that has seen the collapse of traditional beliefs, augmented by loss of spiritual and moral certainty, we human beings, with the aid of scientific and technological advancement, catalyst disorder by dropping bombs, by exhausting natural resources, and by being a threat to the entire eco-system and to fellow human beings for our material and sensual ends. However, the human soul is quintessentially 'good' and always craves for 'order'. The objective of this paper is to show that literature is one of the forms in arts, which presents a sample of 'order', capable of permeating and setting the same kind of resonance in a receptive soul that had been dampened down from its normal function by material super flux and technological destructive interference. The paper begins with the views of Hesoid and Anaxogoras on moral order and well-ordered nature respectively. Then it explores Plato's philosophy on art and society. Followed by an analysis

of *Poetics* as Aristotle's answer to Plato and a study of Longinus' *On Sublimity*, the paper synthesizes the function of literature in the modern world.

Keywords

Greek Philosophers; Function of Literature; Modern Techno-Space.

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The moral order in Hesoid's view is fashioned for the good of man and from this idea it is a short step to say, without reference to gods, that there is an impersonal force controlling the structure of the universe and regulating its process of changes. For Anaxogoras, the world and all its objects appeared to him a well-ordered and intricate structure reacquiring as a principle of explanation, a being with knowledge and power. Such a rational principle is what Anaxogoras proposed in his concept of mind, or nous, as the principle that provides matter with 'order'. To Plato, the progenitor of western didactic

theory, it seemed that natural disorder in the state is caused by the same circumstances that produce disorder in the individual, namely the uncontrolled drives of appetites that lead to internal anarchy. In *Republic* Plato describes the tripartite nature of the soul, having reason, spirit and appetite. For Plato morality consists in the recovery of reason, which in turn must regain its control over the irrational parts of the self. This he believed could be achieved by one's intellectual ascent and love for truth, beauty and goodness. Perhaps that is why he divides schooling in to physical training for the body and music and poetry for the soul in the second book of his *Republic*. His vitriolic criticism of poetry and its representation is directed against a culture that believed literally, "the poets know all crafts and all human affairs" (Leitch 36). Otherwise Plato's Socrates in the *Republic* would not regularly cite Homer, but with some censorship.

Countering Plato's notion of poetry as degraded imitation, his protégé Aristotle sees poetry as universal knowledge of human behavior. In his *poetics* he stresses the universal aspect of poetry, by contrasting it with history, which "tends to express the particular" (Leitch 88). In addition to its cognitive value, poetry has considerable psychological significance also. In the same work he emphasizes the emotional aspect of tragedy, centering upon the notion of catharsis. He says that "a tragedy is the imitation of an action...with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions" (Stumpf 106). Thus he claims that a good poetry has positive emotional effect on its audience by purging and purifying the hearer's spirit. Likewise, Longinus' *On sublimity* differs from Platonic doctrine, which distrusted the frenzied and irrational flights of poetic inspiration and banned poetry from ideal republic. In this respect Longinus' treatise is more like Aristotle's *Poetics*, for they both, take note of the formal techniques and psychological effects of literature. He asserts that "real sublimity contains much food for reflection, is

difficult or rather impossible to resist and makes a strong and ineffaceable impression on the memory” and is the “echo of a noble mind” (Leitch 139).

To illustrate all the above positive comments on literature, *Paradiso* Canto III from Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* is taken for the study, though it may seem so paradoxical as to why one should ever turn to Dante, since the modern mind is with a literature based exclusively on the experience of technomotorized modern life without any regard for religious or moral perspectives afforded by Dante.

In the first Heaven (*Paradiso* Canto III) Dante observes a host of blessed spirits who remain with the sphere of the Moon because they were, through no fault of their own, inconstant to their vows. Among them Dante gets the vision of the first blessed spirit, Piccarda Donati, a Florentine. When Dante enquires her fate, she recalls how her own brother had her abducted from the convent, where she had taken vows as a nun and forced her to marry one of his political friends. Dante has compassion and invites her to join with him in his heavenly ascent to “see more and to be still more close to Him” (l 66). Her refusal and explanation of her soul’s place in the sphere assigned by God reveals how the blessed ones “delight in their conforming to His Order” (l 54) and how they “do not thirst for greater blessedness” (l 72). She continues:

The essence of this blessed life consists
In keeping to the boundaries of God’s will,
Through which our wills become one single will...
And in His will there is our peace (l 179 – 181,185).

Then Dante is enlightened “how every place in Heaven is in Paradise” (l 187). Any discerning reader will be able to see, in the lucidity and profundity of the above lines, its irresistible enduring appeal to the human soul and how literature could articulate deeper truths of life as philosophy would do. Literature is always concerned with many of the permanent human interests such as love, reality and so on. Any such topics are bound to have been treated

countless times before. But the greatest exemplar of poetic objectivism and rationalism, Dante gives a wider view of life, with an increased perception and enhanced reality. In *Paradiso*, as in the case of the above canto, the temporal is treated as the eternal; even abstract things are sensible and the most abstruse concept is inseparable from its form. The concreteness and unity, along with the poet's capacity to make even immaterial, corporeal, result in a system that could ascribe a place to everything one can conceive in life. Perhaps these unique traits of Dante's poetry would have inspired T.S.Eliot to assert that "Dante's is the most comprehensive and the most ordered presentation of emotions" (Eliot 193) and to comment "When Dante says 'la sua voluntade nostra pace' it is great poetry and there is a great philosophy behind it" (Southam 39).

Therefore, it is evident from the above case that literature is capable of felicitously fusing with philosophy and has the potential to instill 'order' into the human soul by infusing virtue, harmony and grace, even to the modern men, who live in a perpetual moral holiday and the techno-driven, chaotic God free zone .

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