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## PLATO AND POETRY

The great challenge for any interpreter of Plato's views on poetry is to appreciate why he is so uncompromisingly hostile towards it.<sup>1</sup> That he should seek to subordinate poetic to philosophic measures of expression and understanding is not in itself surprising. Philosophy has long had a need to keep poetry in its place – as Plato, alluding to the 'ancient quarrel' between the two, was among the first to tell us (*Rep.* 10.607b). But what is striking in Plato's attitude is that even when he comes to acknowledge a usefulness in poetry – its role in educating the young, in civil celebration, in persuasion of many sorts – he is not content (as is, say, Aristotle) to grant its virtues, unstintingly, while nevertheless delimiting their scope; rather, he regards poetry at all times and in all its uses with suspicion, as a substance inherently volatile. He recognises that human society is not possible without some form of poetry, but discerns in this fact a mark, so to speak, of our fallen state. Many philosophers have measured their distance from the poets; but Plato would put them beyond hierarchy altogether; would banish them – at least, would banish those he confesses to represent poetry at its greatest – from his ideal society.

### *1 Poetry as performance: the example of Ion*

We shall not appreciate the reasons for Plato's hostility towards poetry unless we bear in mind how poetry would typically reach the public in Plato's day.<sup>2</sup> In a modern culture our most frequent direct contact with the literature deemed important in our society (and in the West this would of course include the very poets on whom Plato targets his attack) comes either through private and (at least potentially) reflective reading, or in the context of the classroom; and is supplemented in the case of drama by visits to the theatre, to see actual performance. In Plato's culture, live performance was the norm. Private reading and study of literary texts, to the extent that it was practised at all,

<sup>1</sup> In this chapter 'poetry' will often be a translation of *μουσική*, and this includes music and dance, as well as metrical language.

<sup>2</sup> Havelock, *Preface*, chs. 2 and 8.

seems to have been confined to a tiny minority of enthusiasts and intellectuals. Most citizens experienced poetry – not drama merely, but also the Homeric epics and lyric poetry – as members of an audience (or, indeed, as performers themselves) in various well-defined social settings: seeing tragedy and comedy at the annual dramatic festivals, hearing their Homer performed by professional rhapsodes, taking their turn with a song or two at drinking-parties. And all would have felt these (rather than reading or study) to be the proper contexts for poetry – oral memorisation and recital dominating even the schoolchild's poetic training. So that in order to gauge Plato's critique we must first banish any image of the serious reader curled quietly in an armchair with the *Iliad*, and think rather of the audience at a performance by the rhapsode Ion, tears in their eyes as they listen to Hector bidding Andromache farewell (*Ion* 535b–e). For Plato, the typical experience of poetry is never anything like private contemplation; and our most appropriate context for comparison is the experience of the theatre-going or, it may be, film-going public.

This aspect of poetic experience, its 'theatricality', is a major target of Plato's hostility; above all because poetry has at least the appearance of human talk, of saying something; and Plato believes that its theatricality, so far from strengthening poetry's voice, has a tendency to hamper its ability to speak to us. In his earlier dialogues he makes this point by turning traditional claims about poetry to his own purpose: most especially the claims that the poet is divinely inspired, and that he is a kind of teacher to his audience (in the *Republic* and later dialogues we will find him setting up a more innovative critical apparatus and linking it more explicitly and technically with his metaphysics and psychology). These claims are not unconnected, of course. When Hesiod promises to instruct Perses about going to sea for trade – while admitting that he himself has been to sea only once, and has no personal skill in sailing – he warrants his confidence by appeal to the poetic voice which the muses breathed into him on Helicon (*Works and Days* 646–62). In order to see how Plato attempts to break this connection between poetic inspiration and understanding, let us consider his most important treatment of poetry prior to the *Republic* (indeed, the only dialogue entirely devoted to the topic of poetry): the *Ion*.

Socrates' strategy in conversation with the rhapsode Ion is to get him to see that poetic inspiration is not a prerogative of the poets alone (although only to poets is it traditionally assigned), but is transmitted by them to intermediaries, such as actors and rhapsodes, enabling them to perform the poetry; and so the contagion spreads to its final carrier, the enthusiastic audience. Perhaps we wish, reading this dialogue, that Socrates could have had his discussion with a real poet, not a 'poet's interpreter' (as Ion is called at 530c3–4). Indeed, our unease may be compounded by the fact that the rhapsode occupied a niche to which no single modern calling corresponds; for not only was he something of an actor, giving emotional recitations of

the Homeric poems at public festivals, but also something of a literary critic, able to discourse at length on the virtues of his chosen poet, Homer (Socrates twice has to restrain Ion from launching into his stump lecture, at 530d9 and 536d8). But on reflection we see that, for the twist Plato wishes to give to the concept of inspiration, a rhapsode rather than a poet makes the best choice as conversational partner. Poets, after all, then as now, were not judged on how well they could talk about their poetry, but on the quality of the poetry they produced. Rhapsodes, by contrast, win garlands not just by performing Homer, but by praising him (530d6–8); for which it seems necessary that they should penetrate the poet's thought (530b10–c6). But if their supposed penetration can be revealed as a meagre affair, and moreover if its meagreness is shown to derive from its reliance on the same capacity for inspiration that empowers not only their own performance but also the creativity of the poets they perform and the receptivity of their audience, then we will be led to doubt whether poetry ever transmits anything more than inspiration; whether the understanding which the poets claim to transmit by virtue of divine *afflatus*, and which seems to be embodied in the rhapsode's interpretation of the poet's thought, is anything more than an appearance of understanding. This is the pattern of argument in the *Ion*, and its target is a rhapsode rather than a poet because only the rhapsode made his understanding of poetry an object of professional discourse distinct from the performance of the poetry itself – thus laying that understanding bare to Socrates' attack.

But let us look more closely at how Socrates presses his case. As a rhapsode, Ion specialises in the poetry of Homer to the exclusion of all others, and announces himself satisfied with this limitation (531a). But he cannot justify his satisfaction by comparing Homer with other poets; for he admits that he is quite unable to talk of other poets, nor to listen to talk about them without falling asleep. Only Homer stirs him to loquacity (532c). Well then, Socrates responds, it cannot be 'through art and understanding'<sup>3</sup> that Ion becomes so prolix; otherwise he would have something to say about the other poets too, just as a knowledgeable critic of arts such as painting or sculpture or indeed of rhapsody would have something to say about all its famous practitioners: not simply an Orpheus or Phemius but Ion of Ephesus as well (532c–3c). What is more, the same can be said about the verbal fluency of Homer himself; since the readiness with which Homeric *trouvailles* come to Ion's lips, claims Socrates, is due to none other than that divine inspiration which Homer and other poets cite as the well-spring of their own poetry. And Socrates imposes a new psychological shading on that traditional concept.<sup>4</sup> *If the poets insist that they get what they have to say direct from the muse, we must take them at their word, and consider them not responsible for what*

<sup>3</sup> τέχνη καὶ ἐπιστήμη, 532c6.

<sup>4</sup> It may be that Democritus anticipated Plato's conception of poetic inspiration: fr. B18 and 21 Diels-Kranz (and further Verdenius, 'Principles', nn. 133 and 134).

they say. They should be compared with ecstatic Corybants, who can dance well only when ‘possessed’<sup>5</sup> by their god; no longer in full control of their actions, but ‘out of their minds’<sup>6</sup> (533e–4e). And inspiration in this sense is passed on from poet to performer; for Ion admits under questioning that when performing Homer he is taken out of himself and possessed by the narrative, so that his eyes brim with compassion and his hair bristles with fear – emotions which he transmits in turn to the audience (535b–e). Socrates compares this to the way a lodestone can magnetise an iron ring, which in turn magnetises another ring, until a whole chain is formed; so the power of the muse passes through her poet and his rhapsode to the audience (533de; 535e–6b). And that is why Ion bubbles over with opinions about Homer but is empty of ideas about other poets; and why the poets themselves tend to be good at only one genre of poetry, not all; or why poor Tynnichus should have produced only one worthwhile poem in his entire output, but that one a song that all sing and love: because neither Ion nor Homer speaks with ‘art and understanding’ but rather through the happy chance of ‘divine gift and possession’<sup>7</sup> (534b–e; 536b–d).

Socrates does not actually deny that poetry and rhapsody are arts; he denies that what poets and rhapsodes say (as professionals) is said with art and understanding on their part. Thus, it is striking that Socrates should first deny Ion’s Homeric disquisitions the status of art and then include rhapsody among the ‘arts’<sup>8</sup> of which there are connoisseurs. But he seems to be driving a wedge between Ion’s undoubted artistry as a theatrical performer (he comes to the dialogue fresh from victory at Epidaurus, 530b1) and his less than artistic understanding of what Homer’s poems have to say. The need for this distinction is set by the following crucial fact: that a poem is both a product of theatrical skill or art and a stretch of language, in which things get said. Unlike the painter or sculptor, poets and rhapsodes create and perform through talk. But talk (not paint or stone) is also the medium through which non-performers express and communicate their non-theatrical understanding of things. Hence (Plato argues) we have a tendency in our estimation of poetry to confound the values of performance with the values of understanding, and not see how the former undermine the latter. When Socrates drags Tynnichus’ name in the mud, this is not a low blow or a merely *ad hominem* argument, but makes a quite general and valid point: that it is perfectly possible (even if we think it unlikely, or believe that it has never actually happened) for a good poem to be produced by a bad poet. That is, we can appreciate what is said in poetic language quite without regard for its conditions of production. Not that we do not use our understanding in appreciating what a poem says,

<sup>5</sup> κατεχόμενοι, 533e7.

<sup>6</sup> οὐκ ἔμφρονες, 534a1; ἔκφρων, 534b5.

<sup>7</sup> θεῖα μοῖρα καὶ κατοκωχή, 536c2.

<sup>8</sup> τεχνῶν, 532d3. So too, poetry is described (by implication) as an ‘art’ (τέχνη) at 532c8–d2.

but that, precisely, we *use* our understanding – use it only as a means towards appreciating the poem as a theatrical product, as performance.

Plato concludes that poetry does not properly engage the understanding – the criticism encapsulated in his description of poets, actors, and audience alike as inspired and out of their minds. But it is important to see that he is not accusing anyone in this magnetic chain of being actually crazy. This is clear from the fact that he allows Ion to note (without challenge from Socrates) that even as his eyes brim with inspired tears of sympathy he is paying sharp attention to the reactions of the audience, intent on making them weep so that he can laugh all the way to the bank (535e–6). Ion is not actually lost in a world of his own; but his mind is lost to its proper function of understanding. It is a slave to the theatrical event (the image of the chain is especially appropriate here<sup>9</sup>): merely instrumental to his need to place himself imaginatively in the narrated scene, and to make the audience do likewise.

This point is developed through the curious discussion in the second half of the dialogue (536d–42b), which is designed to show that even when Ion is at his most professorial, he is still running on ‘inspiration’ rather than understanding. We recall that Ion not only recites the Homeric poems but delivers encomia of their poet; and he now insists that in the latter role he is hardly ‘possessed’ or ‘mad’ (536d4–7). Lecturing, we might agree, is a lot different from acting. In reply, Socrates presses the issue of what in Homer Ion is best able to praise, eventually securing his agreement to the absurdity that generalship alone is what study of Homer qualifies a rhapsode to talk about, and that rhapsody and generalship are identical (540d–e). The reason Ion proclaims himself expert in generalship is that he ‘knows what is suitable for a general to say’ (540d5); and the reason he finally opts for generalship as the rhapsode’s *métier* rather than any of the many other skills that Socrates first proposes (540b6–c8) – despite his initial claim that rhapsody gives him knowledge of what is suitable for anyone, in whatever social role, to say (540b3–5) – seems to be that warfare is thought of as Homer’s major theme,<sup>10</sup> and the scenes and projects of generalship, accordingly, make up the domain in which Ion’s imagination is trained to roam most freely, and with which he most readily identifies himself. The point, then, is that Ion’s lectures are not so different from his acting after all. In both cases he is not talking about something, but merely performing through talk. He thinks he knows how to talk about Homer, but Socrates has shown that he knows this only in the sense that he claims to know about generalship. He knows what is suitable for one talking about Homer to say. But he knows this through the same capacity for enthusiastic and imaginative identification (what Socrates calls ‘inspiration’) that he employs to perform the *Iliad*; which is why

<sup>9</sup> Notice the pun to this effect at 536a7–b1.

<sup>10</sup> See 531c4; cf. *Rep.* 10.599c7–8.

he falls silent when other poets are in question. He knows what to say only to the extent that he knows what the words should be in this case; he does not understand why those words, not others, should be said (he knows Homer's poems, but does not know their place as poetry). In that sense, a rhapsode (and, by implication, the poet and the audience too) is, as it were, always acting, even when the person he acts is himself.

Perhaps we feel that Plato has given Socrates too easy a time in this encounter. Ion is a self-important and transparently silly creature; and the satire at his expense inclines us to dismiss the argumentation of this dialogue as something of a skit. Let us grant that Ion himself employs his understanding no more properly in speaking about Homer than in performing him; why should we therefore accept as a general point that inspiration disables understanding in the poetic chain, and not rather conclude that Ion is a poor specimen? And why does Plato allow Socrates to beat Ion down from the rather promising position (at 540b3–5) that as rhapsode he learns what it is appropriate to say across the whole gamut of social roles, to the patently absurd claim that, no, he learns only what a general will say? The discussion had seemed on the verge of isolating what we would call the 'fictionality' of poetic discourse; of declaring outright that when Homer makes his swineherds speak he is not bent on giving a lesson in pig-keeping but on adding a plausible voice to the full and varied choir of the *Odyssey's* fictional world – not knowing what the swineherd knows, but knowing what he will say.

But to be dissatisfied in this way would be to miss Plato's point. Just as Tynnichus is not after all the hapless butt of an *ad hominem* argument, but his case allows us to derive a quite general conclusion, so Plato's satirical portrait of Ion is no mere indulgence of animus against poetry, but a weight-bearing pillar in the structure of his argument. It is not that a poet of Homer's stature would not have done better in discussion with Socrates than does his wretched epigone. The point, rather, is that only in discussion with a philosopher does Ion's wretchedness show; in other words, that poetry, being oriented towards the values of performance, is by its nature indifferent to the wisdom of its practitioners. Ion, do not forget, is a *good* rhapsode – a first-prize winner. Whether or not Ion had held on to his position about what he knows would make not the slightest difference to the fact that he does indeed know how to speak as a man or woman should speak, or as citizen and slave should, or ruler and ruled – and can come up with the quotations to prove it (as he does, for example, at 537a4). It is to make us appreciate the irrelevance of Ion's shallowness to the quality of his theatrical achievement, that Plato makes him so shallow. Provided that, in performance, what strikes the audience's eyes and ears has at least the appearance of being wrought with understanding (that the characters speak as such characters *should* speak), it does not matter how, exactly, either rhapsode or poet has brought the thing off, whether their ability to create and evoke the appearance of a living world in performance

stems from genuine understanding or merely from a gift for capturing the look and feel of a world, for saying the appropriate words in the appropriate tone – the gift upon which Ion relies to lecture on Homer as well as to perform him, thus clarifying the limitations of that talent for readers of this dialogue.

The chief indictment laid against poetry in the *Ion*, then, is simply this: that since poetry in its proper form is theatrical performance, it can be fully appreciated and evaluated in terms of its effects alone (of how it comes across in the moment of performance) and without regard for how those effects are brought about – the source from which they derive their power. Hearing it put thus, we may not think of this as an indictment at all. That is because it is a point we tend now to make by invoking the concept of ‘fictionality’. Any ‘fiction’ has a certain life of its own. We could become enthralled by *Hamlet* even if the script had somehow been worked up by monkeys; or by the *Iliad* even if its medium is a monkey like Ion. And we tend not to see anything wrong with this, because fictionality is a concept that applies primarily to artistic language as such, or in a larger sense to artistic creations in general (insofar as paintings or sculptures can be thought of as fictions). Questions of right and wrong in the practice of art (hence the possibility of censorship) we consider mostly in terms of how we as audience are affected by such creations: whether we learn from them, are emotionally enriched by or otherwise benefit from exposure to them, or the opposite. But the fictionality of the work we take for granted; poems, plays, novels just *are* fictions; and whether, as such, they are good or bad for you is a quite separate question.

Plato thinks of this differently. It is significant that the discussion in the second part of the *Ion* verges on isolating the concept of fictionality but stops short; for as we shall see, Plato never in fact works with this concept, and still less does it have any verbal equivalent in his Greek. What dominates his thinking about poetry (and art in general) is not fictionality but ‘theatricality’: that capacity for imaginative identification which inspired poets and performers and satisfied audiences alike employ. Fictionality belongs to the artistic product; theatricality belongs to the soul. And by thinking of poetry in terms of theatricality rather than fictionality, Plato makes poetry through and through an ethical, not an aesthetic affair. There are not two separate domains of inquiry for Plato here: the fictionality of literature (its aesthetic status) and the psychology of literary production (its ethical effects). Theatricality promotes in poet, performer, and audience alike a psychological stance that is not to be confined to aesthetic contexts but occupies an important place in our regular ethical lives. But Plato further believes that in this ethical role it is liable, if not carefully circumscribed, to have a pernicious effect. In order to see how this can be so, we want above all to hear more about the audience, and how theatricality stirs their souls. But in the *Ion*, Plato takes aim primarily at poetic professionals, and does not dwell on the larger ethical context set by their audience – although he prepares the space into which



his theory can grow, in Socrates' all too brief description of the audience as the final link in the magnetic chain of inspiration (535e). The fuller theory arrives, we shall find, when the concept here called 'theatricality' crystallises around a term in Plato's language: *mimēsis* – 'imitation'. The crystal blooms in the *Republic*; but in preparation for considering that work let us range a little further among the dialogues.

## 2 Poetry and the professors

We have seen how in the *Ion* Plato seizes upon the traditional inference from the poet's status as an inspired performer to his ability to teach and inform his listeners, and how he disables this inference by contrasting inspiration with understanding and verbal performance with genuine communication. Various points to which the *Ion* devotes concerted attention are mentioned in some other early dialogues more briefly, or else developed further, by comparison to their treatment in the *Ion*, but tangentially to a dialogue's major topic. In the *Meno* Socrates is at something of a loss to fathom the success some political figures have undoubtedly achieved in managing the city's affairs, while nevertheless not meeting the criteria he thinks appropriate for those who can be said truly to understand what they are able to do; and he has recourse (at 99c–e) to comparison with inspired poets and prophets, and the now familiar claim that since their words are not their own responsibility but are vouchsafed them by divine gift, they speak without properly understanding what they speak about. In the *Apology* Socrates mentions the poets alongside politicians and craftspeople as one of the groups in the city whom he sought out because they seemed to possess various kinds of knowledge that he did not, but in whom he was disappointed. We have seen Socrates distinguish Ion's artistry as a performer from his shallow understanding of the momentous subjects he evokes; so in the *Apology* (22b–d) he declares that the poets he questioned seemed to understand less than anyone about the matters raised in their poems, and that they were like craftspeople in presuming that their skill in crafting objects of beauty gave them wisdom in the most important things also. And in the *Gorgias*, (501d–2d) the poet's skill (demoted in the schema of this dialogue to a mere empirical knack) is invoked in yet a different comparison, with the practice of rhetoric – the practice upon which the dialogue is centred. Poetry, being speech directed at large audiences, is a kind of 'public oratory' (*dēmēgoria*, 502c12), and like the orator, the poet aims primarily not to improve his audience, but to satisfy them. We recall that Ion's critical intelligence was employed most intently on giving his audience a good cry.

However, Plato is also concerned to show that, if poetry in its traditional manifestations is not a trustworthy medium of teaching, neither is it worthily used in the new style of teaching introduced by the sophists. This becomes

apparent from a survey of the scene in the *Protagoras* (338e6–48a9) in which Protagoras and Socrates interpret and discuss a poem by Simonides. We encounter here a kind of literary criticism quite different from the unrelieved praise that an Ion would lavish on his Homer. Protagoras insists no man can call himself educated unless he can take what the poets say and assess how ‘correctly’ (*orthōs*, 339a2) it is said; and he further claims that by turning to poetry in this way he and Socrates can continue their discussion of virtue, only with reference to a different medium (339a). Plato invites us to judge this proposal by the exegesis he then has the sophist give of a poem addressed by Simonides to his patron, the tyrant Scopas. From the forty-line poem<sup>11</sup> Protagoras selects the opening couplet, in which the poet avers how difficult it is to become a good person; he secures Socrates’ agreement that the poem as a whole is a fine and ‘correct’ piece; and then produces a later couplet in which Simonides appears to contradict himself by taking issue with the sage Pittacus for an apophthegm much the same as Simonides’ own opening lines. With that, his exegesis is done. He sits back, amid the praise and applause of his audience, to savour Socrates’ confusion (339b–d). Plato’s satire of the kind of literary criticism indulged in by the sophists, then, is transparent.

But it is important to see that Plato also measures a certain distance from Socrates’ own handling of the poem. He warns the reader to cast a critical eye on Socrates’ procedure by having Socrates confess to somewhat shady tactics in his immediate reaction to Protagoras’ exegesis: telling Protagoras that he thinks the poem consistent, but admitting to the companion to whom he narrates this conversation that at that moment he felt far less assured than he allowed himself to sound (339c8–9); and admitting also that he provoked the long and fruitless intervention of Prodicus for no better reason than that he needed to play for time while he thought up a worthwhile response (339e3–5). Thus alerted, we are the less surprised to find that with the interpretation he eventually does produce, Socrates exploits the poem for his own purposes quite as much as Protagoras – nobler though those purposes might be.

To begin with, he gives no serious, impartial consideration to the possibility that Protagoras might be right. He is ‘afraid’ that the sophist might be onto something (339c8), and his next move is to buy time to consider ‘what the poet meant’ (339e4–5). His immediate feeling, then, is that Protagoras ought to be wrong, that Simonides is consistent, and that his task is to wrest a consistent sense from the poem. We might think to justify his reaction as based on a principle of literary-critical generosity: of assuming the author innocent, as it were, until proven guilty. But it is hardly appropriate thus to attribute an established code of literary-critical investigation to the man whom we will later find recommending that the exegesis of poetry should simply be dismissed

<sup>11</sup> Fr. 542 Page.

from any discussion aiming at truth, since no one can settle a poem's sense (347e–8a). Socrates is motivated not by literary-critical, but by ethical principles. When he claims to have looked into the poem sufficiently (339c1) and to know it by heart because it has been a matter of special concern to him (339b5–6), his assurance is not supported by his having worked up a careful interpretation of the piece; for he is unpleasantly surprised by Protagoras' accusation, and has to invent his own exegesis from scratch.

What he means (we are led to suspect) is that he has been much concerned not with the poem as such, but with what he takes the poem to be about: the difficulty of becoming good. The poem's value for him is emblematic: this is the point of his quoting the appeal of the 'besieged' Scamander to his brother Simois when he calls on Prodicus to help prevent the 'sacking' of Simonides (340a). Simonides represents their cultural heritage, their home (Socrates chooses to emphasise that Prodicus is a fellow-countryman of the poet, 339e6); and there is something no less sacrilegious in the *parvenu* Protagoras' opportunistic carping at the famous singer (with whom Socrates, acting as bulwark, here identifies himself, as Scamander did with Troy) than there was in Achilles' hand-to-hand combat with a very god (*Il.* 21.315). In effect, Socrates is adopting towards Simonides the stance that, in the course of his exegesis (345e–6b), he says Simonides and praise-poets of his sort adopted towards their patrons. In both cases, there is a presumption of piety. Simonides is not going to make a point of Scopas' imperfections (although one hopes they were not gross); and Socrates will not go out of his way to denigrate his cultural forebears, any more than (to use the analogy he applies to Simonides) he thinks we should gloat over and trumpet the faults of our fathers, or of our fatherland – any more than he would allow Crito, in the dialogue of that name, to entice him into railing at his native Athens. Protagoras, we can see, is just such a gloater, amazing his audience by scoring points off the greatest names. Socrates, by contrast, prefers to allow Simonides the same monumentality that the poet himself helps confer on the subjects of his praise (indeed, by one modern reading of this much-contested poem its opening lines constitute a claim to just this artistic power<sup>12</sup>).

But if we look askance at Protagoras' ethic, we can hardly fail to be troubled also by the consequences of Socrates' piety when he is called upon to deliver a full-scale interpretation of the poem. Most readers are struck by its perversity. Whenever Simonides appears to say something that Socrates finds ethically unacceptable, he refuses to believe that the poet could have meant what he, Socrates, wants him not to have meant and is prepared to reinterpret syntax and sense in the most unlikely directions in order to get his way (as at

<sup>12</sup> Svenbro, *Parole*, pp. 144–61. For an English-language survey of scholarship on the poem consult Walter Donlan, 'Simonides, Fr. 4d and *P. Oxy.* 2432', *TAPA*, 100 (1969), 71–95.

343d6–4a6, and 345d7–e6).<sup>13</sup> Precisely because Socrates wears this poem like a badge of honour, he cannot bring himself to unpick its thread. He interprets the poem as if it were a proto-philosophical argument between Simonides and Pittacus (for it was through such lapidary mottoes as Pittacus' 'it is hard to be good', that philosophy was conducted in those days); but an argument in which Simonides sounds suspiciously like Socrates himself. Which is why his prefatory story of how the Spartans – renowned throughout Greece for philistinism – are in fact, in their brusqueness, crypto-philosophers of the lapidary Pittacan sort (342b–3c), can be read as a parable of literary criticism. These traditional slogans ('Know Thyself', 'Naught in excess') do indeed contain a philosophy, but only if unpacked through the philosophic activity of one who lives by them, as Socrates does. He knows as well as anyone that the Spartans are no philosophers; but the point is, from their pithy mottoes alone, who can tell? Everything and nothing can be built on such generously pregnant phrases. Moreover – and here we come to Plato's, in contrast to Socrates', purpose in this scene – much the same (within less extreme limits) can be said of poetry. What Simonides' poem has done for Socrates is stoke his enthusiasm to cope with the problem of which it speaks, as have the Delphic mottoes. This emblematic, inspirational function, Plato thinks, is poetry's *raison d'être*; for poetry is performance, and as such, we have seen, will involve argument (if it does) not for its own sake, but for the sake of the performance. But Protagoras, wearing his literary-critical cap, has assessed the poem as if it were an argument, pure and simple. Thus pressed, Socrates has had to follow suit in Simonides' defence, and has reinterpreted the poem as if it were itself the kind of philosophic argument to which it provokes him – as well as re-moulding the social and historical context in the shape of the archaic 'philosophy' his interpretation requires. But he cannot bring himself to treat Simonides' sentences with the care that he would generally devote to examining the opinions of a partner in argument (his interpretation, we saw, is quite irresponsible), and with his exegesis complete, pleading now with Protagoras to have done with poems and get back to their original discussion of virtue, he explains why: because Simonides cannot answer him back. Treat poetry as argument, and you will quickly find that it only appears to have a voice; for your neighbour thinks the poet means one thing, you think he means another, and a new argument begins: not over what the poet says, but over what he means. And it is an argument to block the progress of all others; for since a poem, unlike a poet, cannot answer our questions, the argument will be interminable (347c–8a).

The moral of the scene is certainly not that literary exegesis is worthless and should be abandoned; indeed, Plato demands that his readers think through their own understanding of the poem, and of poetry, if they are to

<sup>13</sup> Consult the commentary by C. C. W. Taylor, *Plato: Protagoras* (Oxford, 1976).

appreciate the inadequacy of the interpretations that his characters propose. The moral is rather that analysis of poetry, even of poems about virtue, cannot do the job that Protagoras claimed it could: to continue the investigation of virtue in another mode. For all that the sophists have found a way to include the poet's voice in their new, contentious style of teaching, Plato here implies that any impetus they may have given to the traditional view of poets as teachers is only spurious.

It is important to understand that Socrates' piety towards Simonides is not the piety of intellectual acquiescence. Given what we have heard him say about poets in the *Apology*, that would be strange indeed. So too in the *Hippias Minor*, another dialogue in which Socrates steers a sophist away from appealing to poetry on the grounds that the poet is not there to explain what he meant, Socrates makes no bones about disagreeing with what he takes to be Homer's opinion once he can get Hippias to espouse it as his own (365c–d) – indeed, the great advantage of being aware of his own ignorance, he insists, is that he is never afraid to disagree with the wise, knowing that he is likely to learn from his mistakes (369d, 372c). Translate a poem into a set of opinions, and Socrates will be as argumentative about them as you please. But a poem is not meant to be a set of opinions (this, surely, is the point of the repeated claim that poetry cannot answer back); it is meant for performance. And it is in the face of poetry's value as performance, the inspiration it can be, that Socrates is genuinely acquiescent and modest.

And not without good reason, it must be said. The Socrates of the earlier dialogues especially, as we have seen, is just not very good with poetry, at least in the technical sense. Moreover, the loving satire of Socrates in these dialogues opens a distance between Socrates as character and Plato as author. Socrates does well to be pious and to attempt simply to leave the poets out of his kind of discussion, but the Plato who shows us this Socrates in dramatic fictions is more a poet and a literary critic than such a character could ever be, and need not be bound by modesty. Moreover, if his ambition is to draw the blueprint of the ideal society as a whole, he cannot just set the poets aside, but must brace himself, given his beliefs, for confrontation with them. The theory that emerges still comes, of course, from Socrates' lips; but a Socrates to whose idiosyncrasies rather less attention is paid than in such dialogues as the *Protagoras*.

### 3 The Dionysian chorus

From Plato's treatment of poetry in his earlier dialogues, as well as of the literary criticism of his day, two main rubrics of complaint have emerged. On the one hand he is disappointed by the intellectual quality of those reputed wise in a practice traditionally thought not merely to entertain but also to teach, and he subjects characters representative of the current scene to comic

persiflage. On the other hand he traces the particular behaviour of his satirical butts to its roots in the nature of poetry, in order to make the general point that, since poetry as such is not thought and feeling but the performance of thoughts and feelings, the poet or performer need have no proper understanding of what he says, but may as it were be aping the appropriate words; and further that the literary critic who construes poetry as direct opinion is therefore mistaking its nature. However, it is one thing to show that poetry does not positively require from its participants a proper understanding of what is performed, and quite another to show that it is not even hospitable to such understanding. The example made of Ion supports only the former point. And although Socrates' description of inspired poets as out of their minds certainly suggests the latter claim, taken by itself it is hardly more than an exaggerated insult. It is only in the *Republic* that Plato offers theoretical arguments to sustain that second claim, and so justify the exclusion of Homer and the tragedians from his ideal society.

Consider here a few pages from the last work that Plato wrote, the *Laws*. This chronological skip will prove convenient because in the *Laws* Plato tends to declare his philosophic beliefs quite flatly, as if summarising them for posterity (for which purpose the Athenian Stranger proves a more amenable mouthpiece than Socrates), but often without the fullness of argument that supported similar views in previous dialogues. By turning now to the passage in Book II (667b–71a) in which he considers how poetry should be judged and by whom, we will therefore be able to compare a somewhat textbook-like statement of Plato's later position with the opening sallies that have occupied our attention so far, and so register developments with special clarity. It will then be time to consider the *Republic*, which is home to the strongest arguments instrumental in that development.

Rather than begin from the failings of poetry's practitioners and infer characteristics of the practice in order to explain those failings, Plato here begins from assumptions about the nature of poetry and draws inferences about its practitioners and judges – in particular, about what they need to know in order to practise and judge. All poetry is mimetic (668a7), and the correctness of an image in general depends on its 'equality' (*isotēs*, 667d5) with the original, that is, its faithful recreation of what the original is like. As such, the judgement of poetry is not to be left to taste; for from the mere fact that a poem pleases us nothing follows as to whether it is a faithful imitation or not (667d–8b). Rather, with any artistic creation one must first know 'what it is', that is, 'what it intends and of what it is in fact an image'. Only so can we judge whether the intention has been correctly or incorrectly followed through; which itself is a precondition for the third and highest stage of judgement, distinguishing what is good from what is bad (668c4–d2). The Athenian clarifies his remarks by appeal to the visual arts. If we did not even know that the painting or sculpture before us represented a man, we would

be hard put to assess its correctness – whether it conveys the appropriate proportions and shape and general appearance of a man. But knowing the one and the other, we would also be in a position to judge how fine the work was (668d2–9a4).

That poetry is imitation is presented as a matter of common agreement among poets, audience, and actors alike (668b9–c2). It is not, however, a notion of which we have heard anything in the earlier dialogues. There, poetry was the topic of farce, and Socrates seemed anxious to dismiss it from serious colloquy. Here poetry is set apart from the mere ‘game’ of harmless pleasure (667e) and given serious standards to meet, in order to take its place in the well-run society – for the Athenian at this point is establishing the importance of a ‘Dionysian chorus’ of older men whose task it would be to select and perform the best sort of poetry for the benefit of the entire city. Yet things are not as changed as they may seem. The standards to be met by poetry are not distinct standards of its own, but are constraints of truth and understanding imported from the kind of serious discourse in which Socrates wished to be engaged. Imitation is parasitic on what is imitated; it is from our understanding of what humans are like that we judge the sculpted man. In the case of the visual arts, Plato seems to think, this understanding need be nothing too difficult, a familiarity with and appreciation of how things look; whereas poetic image-making aims to capture what is far more difficult to understand and far more important: not just how people look, but how they act, and how they are motivated to act. Hence the Athenian says that lack of understanding in poetry can dispose us to look kindly on the wrong sort of behaviour (669c1). That is, through poetry we can misrepresent and misunderstand what is ethically appropriate – as when in drama, complains the Athenian, language suited to men is given a woman’s melody, or the gestures of freemen are set to rhythms appropriate for slaves (669c–d).

Clearly, then, the goodness of the imitation is being thought of as inseparable from the goodness or appropriateness of what is imitated, and poetry would ideally demand nothing less than an understanding of how an entire society should regulate itself. But while we all know what proportions are appropriate to the human body, and therefore (at the simplest level) what a painting or sculpture of a man should look like, our knowledge of what constitutes appropriate behaviour in human society is considerably less secure and far more a matter of dispute, so that even at the simplest level we may be mistaken about how a dramatic imitation of human ways and actions should go.

Thus, whereas we can hardly imagine a person so benighted as not to recognise what a (realistic) painting of a man is intended to represent, with poetry even this first step is problematic. This, says the Athenian, is because most people learn their songs and dance-steps through compulsory drill, as a result of which they are able to perform without understanding the several

elements of their performance (670b8 – c6). In other words, in the case of poetry (but not in the visual arts) it is possible to participate in a performance or enactment of its various images without appreciating what they are images of, but merely mouthing the words and going through the motions. And the problem is compounded by the fact that, although (in Plato's view) the different musical rhythms and modes to which words were set correspond as images to different ethical dispositions (a topic developed at length in the third book of the *Republic*), it was no easy matter to say which correspond to which – hence the Athenian deplores the latest practice of elaborating music without words, in which it is 'very difficult to say what is intended and what, among the worthy imitations, it is meant to be' (669e1 – 4). As a first step, then, the Dionysian chorus must not merely be drilled into performance but must willingly and capably 'follow along with' the rhythms and melodies they perform: that is, they must appreciate and understand<sup>14</sup> what the musical images are images of (670c8 – d4) (the analogy with painting shows that this, rather than a knowledge of musical theory, is meant).

We recall that there were two higher stages of artistic judgement: judging the correctness of an image, and whether it is good or bad. Here again the issue is presented as more complex in poetry than in the visual arts. The Athenian had asserted that, knowing everything about a man's appearance to be correctly represented in a painting or sculpture, we can then 'necessarily' and 'readily' tell how fine or beautiful it is;<sup>15</sup> to which his interlocutor, Cleinias, had been allowed the surprised response that, at that rate, we should all be connoisseurs (668e7 – 9a6). This may be Plato's way of acknowledging the short shrift he gives to the ambitions of painting and sculpture as art forms; but more importantly it makes the point that even in real life, let alone in painting, a person's bodily beauty is a beauty of *appearance*. It would make no obvious sense to say: 'he looks very handsome, but actually he isn't'. By contrast, it makes all too much sense to say of someone that he only seems a fine person, but in reality he is not. Hence this difference: to capture the appearance of a beautiful person in a visual image (and here we should bear in mind the tendency to idealism in the visual arts of the time) can be readily thought of as the creation of something visually beautiful; but to capture ethically fine behaviour through poetic image-making is not for that reason to produce something ethically fine, since beauty of soul (unlike physical beauty) can properly belong only to people, not to their products; nor is it (necessarily) to *do* something ethically fine, since the poet may work from a knowledge of the appearance of virtue merely, not of its reality.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, it is in the case

<sup>14</sup> The Greek term συνακολουθεῖν (670d2) has a similar semantic stretch in this respect to our 'follow along with'.

<sup>15</sup> The Greek term καλός (see 669a3–4) ranges the semantic domain of both 'fine' and 'beautiful'.

<sup>16</sup> In Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 3.10.1–8, where Socrates talks with sculptors, the discussion brings out the limitations of the means available in that art for the portrayal of character and the soul.



of poetry above all that the second and third levels of artistic judgement become importantly distinct. The poet ought certainly to know more than the rote-learning public, for he must at least intend an object for the images that he makes; and if he is to avoid the dramatic hybrids that now bedevil the stage, he should attain to the second level, that of correctly matching image to object. But he can do this without reaching the third level, without being able to judge whether or not his image is 'fine', where that means ethically fine in its effects (670c4–1a1). This is a task for the Dionysian chorus, who must not only be able to select from the panoply of poetic devices those appropriate for whatever is to be represented (the second level) but also (the third level) to make a judgement of what is appropriate for men of their years and character – that is, for model citizens – to sing (670d4–6).<sup>17</sup> They do not simply know the poetic means that best captures each ethical pattern – something a poet could know while being acquainted only with what seems or is generally thought to be virtue – but, insofar as they are models for the community, in judging what is appropriate for themselves to sing they are judging for themselves where virtue lies – not only for their own satisfaction, however, but in order to 'lead the young' (here usurping the poet's didactic role) 'to embrace worthy patterns of behaviour' (670d6–e2).

What emerges most clearly from this passage of the *Laws* by comparison with the earlier dialogues, then, is that while on the one hand Plato is taking poetry more seriously than he seemed prepared to in the earlier works, and granting it an educative purpose in society, on the other hand he is still much concerned to keep poets and poetry in a subordinate position. Elsewhere in the *Laws*, indeed, we find versions of the accusation that poets are crowd-pleasers (700d–1b), as seen in the *Gorgias*, and of the familiar claim that poetic inspiration is a kind of madness (719c–d). Nor should we be misled by the importance we have seen accorded the 'intention' of the artistic work (at 668c6 and 669e4) into comparing it with the modern literary-critical notion of the recovery of authorial intent – as if Plato were now proposing that in order to evaluate poetry we should carefully unpack the contents of those poetic skulls which previously he had told us were empty of rational thoughts. It is not what the author but what the *work* 'intends'<sup>18</sup> that the Athenian insists we should know; not an elaborate scheme in the poet's head but (as the examples in this passage and the previously translated gloss at 668c7 together show) simply an answer to the question: 'What is this image an image of?'

<sup>17</sup> ἐκλέγεσθαι τε τὰ προσήκοντα refers to the second level of competence and the specification ἃ τοῖς τηλικούτοις τε καὶ τοιούτοις ἕδειν πρέπον encapsulates that sense of what it is to be a model citizen which only those at the third level of competence possess. That there are two distinct levels to be discerned in these lines is supported by the otherwise otiose collocation of προσήκοντα with πρέπον.

<sup>18</sup> βούλεσθαι ('to want'). A further example of its use with an inanimate subject ('myth') comes at *Theaetetus* 156c3, where its sense approaches that of 'to mean', 'to signify' (compare the French *vouloir dire*).

The answer may not, indeed, be simple to give, at least in the case of poetry; but its difficulty will not derive from the hopelessness of the attempt to inspect a poet's inner purpose; and it makes for only the first and most straightforward stage of poetic judgement, not its ultimate criterion. That criterion is rather the constraint imposed by the actual nature of the subject-matter than by the poet's intentions towards it. And that is why Plato aims to put poetry under the control of those who understand and actually live the good life. He does not even exclude the possibility that poets could be among their number; but what he does think crucial is to establish that, if so, it would not be as poets that they figured there. He acknowledges, to put it another way, that a poet is not a moralist *manqué*, is not trying and failing to come up to the standards that the Dionysian chorus imposes; and for that very reason he imposes the Dionysian chorus upon the poet.

Underlying that acknowledgment and justifying this imposition is the analysis of poetry as *mimēsis*. The poet has a skill all his own: not understanding, but capturing the appearance, the look and feel of human life. But just as an image is, or rather should be (in Plato's view), for the sake of its original, the art of image-making is destined to be the helpmate of the art that seeks truth. Poetry cannot, so to speak, be trusted on its own, but as the ward of a philosophic guardian can put its talent to good use.

#### 4 'The Republic': a poetic training

The dominant theme of the critique of poetry in the earlier dialogues, we saw, is that poetry is theatrical performance, and for that reason dangerously independent of the understanding by which it may or may not be informed. The theme of the account just perused in the *Laws* is that poetry is imitation, and has for that reason a potentially important role in education, provided that it is controlled by those best qualified to judge the models that education should set before us.

The two themes are connected in the following way. The theatricality of poetry does not reside in the poem considered as a stretch of language but in an aspect of the psychology of those who participate in the performance of that stretch of language (a description that includes the audience): namely, in their capacity for imaginative identification with what is to be represented. Theatricality contrasts in this respect with what we call the 'fictionality' of poetry, although the two notions can be brought to bear on the same issue of the independence of a poetic creation from the understanding of its creators (and appreciators). Now, it may seem that when Plato comes to construe all poems as imitations he is shifting his emphasis from the psychology to the properties of poetic discourse itself, hence in the general direction of fictionality. This thought might be encouraged by the analogy with the visual arts, since the status of painted or sculpted 'imitations' of a man is presented as

depending (not on psychology but) only on the fact that the image, while clearly not a real man, is related in a certain way to real men. But here we must bear in mind the Athenian's warning that things are not so simple with poetry. Certainly, the actor on stage is as clearly not Oedipus or Agamemnon in person as the painting is not actually a man; but let us recall this difference: that whereas a painter (at least as Plato understands painting) attempts to capture only how people and things look, a poet captures how people behave. The result is that in the case of poetry the image and that of which it is an image are not so clearly distinct from each other as in the visual arts. A poetic performance (the image) engages its participants not simply in the look but, as we say, in the whole 'feel' of the human action it portrays; and since emotions and ethical attitudes are a crucial part of that action, by allowing ourselves to identify with what is depicted (by participating, that is, in the performance) we come in some sense to reproduce those emotions and attitudes, that 'feel', within ourselves – as opposed to reproducing or considering the look of a thing in a material image outside ourselves. Not that a painting of, say, some harrowing scene, vividly executed, cannot move or shock us; but a canvas on a wall tends to invite sustained and relatively detached meditation rather than sympathetic participation in the portrayed scene.

Imitation in poetry, it turns out, is therefore accomplished by just that theatricality on which the earlier dialogues were focused. For if poetry in Plato's scheme is imitation, it is not for all that conceived of as a merely mechanical snapshot of life, which could as it were be held up alongside its object of comparison ('imitation' as a theoretical term is not to be rejected, then, on the strength of the criticism which would now accrue to such a conception). In our passage from the *Laws* the old men of the Dionysian chorus do not check prospective poetic works against an itemised list of the merits in their own lives; rather, they choose to perform what feels right for them, and the 'pleasure free from side-effects' which they take in their performance (the pleasure of identifying with the models they represent) is itself a part of the example they set for the young in how to 'embrace worthy behaviour' (*Laws* 2.670d6–e2). Rather than produce a snapshot of the virtuous life, they enact a representative component of it. In a poetic performance, then, the image and what is imitated become, in a sense, one. Therein lie both its potential benefit and its danger. And it is just insofar as the visual arts maintain a stricter demarcation between image and what is imitated that Plato is inclined to think of them as relatively trivial.

But this is to state in general terms what requires elucidation from the detailed text of the *Republic*; for it is there that the transition between the earlier and the later stance is made out. Let us turn first to the recommendations for training the new generation of Guardians, the ruling-class of the ideal society: a training in which poetry plays a considerable role. The discussion

of that role begins towards the end of the second book and takes up most of the third; and its structure reveals what is truly new about Plato's mature critique of poetry in relation to the tradition. After all, by acknowledging once more the didactic function of poetry (after the violent break of the earlier dialogues) Plato was to that extent returning to a traditional position; and his disapproval of a gamut of poetic topics and themes, although more radical than any that came before, had both philosophic and more conventionally poetic precedent (for example in Xenophanes and Pindar).<sup>19</sup> But censorship of the content of poetry, of what is and is not to be said, makes up only the first part of his critique (2.376c–3.392c). He follows this with an analysis of the manner in which a poet says what he has to say, introducing the issue of poetry's mimetic nature as evinced by its use of imitative verbal techniques (3.392c–8b); after which he considers how melody, rhythm, and choreography are to fit with this enterprise, both ethically and mimetically (3.398c–403c). And in his account of verbal technique he judges the value of poetic imitation not only by appeal to the worth of what is imitated but also in terms of the worth of the activity of imitation itself – in terms of the effect of its use on the character of the user (394a–8b). But that effect, at least if our imitative bent is allowed to go its natural way, he finds to be pernicious. Thus poetry is to have its wings clipped not only for the ethical content it happens to have but – far more radical and unavoidable a challenge – for the ethical effect of the imitativeness that is in its very nature. This is the truly path-breaking aspect of Plato's critique (although his case for it is not made out in full until Book X, for reasons which we shall consider).

But let us look first at the rather less controversial part of the critique, Plato's proposal to set limits on the content of poetry for educational purposes. I say 'less controversial' because his primary and repeated concern throughout this account of the Guardians' education is the question of what should be allowed to reach the ears of the impressionable young;<sup>20</sup> and the general aim of his restrictions, that of not exposing the young to fictional models of behaviour (to use the modern term) that might be a bad influence on them, would be shared by many today – as attested, for example, by calls for scaling down the violence shown on television.<sup>21</sup> However, the example from television offers an illuminating contrast as well as a parallel. The modern fear is, often enough, that the impressionable viewer will simply ape the actions portrayed on the screen; that if beating up old men is made to look thrilling, some among the thrill-seeking young will be tempted to beat up old men. The nearest Plato comes to this notion is in talking of the very youngest children, those of an age to listen to their mothers' or nurses' fairy-stories (377c) and who cannot tell what is allegorical from what is not (378d), when he worries

<sup>19</sup> Xenophanes fr. B1, B11, B12 Diels-Kranz, and Pindar, *Olympian* 1.28–36.

<sup>20</sup> See 377a4, 378a3, 378d6–7, 388d2, 389d7, 395d1, 401c6, 402a2.

<sup>21</sup> Nehamas, 'Imitation', pp. 50–1.

that to tell them the story of what Cronus did to Uranus is tantamount to inviting them to take pleasure in the prospect of extreme revenge on their oppressive parents (378b). But Plato is hardly envisaging that the little mites have no sooner heard the story than they go looking for daddy's scythe. He is saying that such stories influence childhood fantasy, and fantasy has an effect on the development of character. The sway of poetry over actions, then, is only indirect, insofar as action stems from character.

This pattern becomes firmly established as Socrates moves on from stories of the gods to stories of heroes, and to the inadequacy of the model they provide for virtuous conduct. General attitudes and emotional poses, rather than particular types of action, are what he fears the young Guardians will emulate; shuddering along with Achilles at the bleakness of death and so softening themselves for their task of defending the city in war (387c); weeping unabashedly with the same hero over Patroclus, thus sapping their endurance of future grief (388d); and, in general, learning to condone unacceptable behaviour in themselves on the grounds that they find it exemplified by heroes and by gods – that is, by beings thought of as greater and better than mere mortals, hence as role-models (391c–e; cf. 378b4–5). Thus what Socrates imagines traditional poetry to encourage, and what he warns against, is not so much the spectacular violence or exotic sexuality that is the fodder of modern censorship – behaviour more likely to be entertained in fantasy than enacted – as certain weaknesses of character to which we are all prone, and which are, so to speak, only a movement of the soul away.

The ground for so stringent a censoring of poetry is prepared in the speech of Adimantus towards the beginning of the second book (362e–7e). The burden of the speech is roughly that, with the poets for friends, Justice has little need for enemies. The poets tend to exalt virtue so high that the path to reach it comes to seem impossibly arduous, while the wheeling and dealing that goes on below they attest (even as they condemn it) to be more practicable and more likely to bring pleasures and rewards in this life (364a–b). For this reason they and we can more readily identify with what they condemn than with what they exalt. Small and weak as we are, we can at least beg mercy of the gods, they say, and make up in foxiness what we lack in strength (364e, 365c) – how we learn to love our little selves! And even the rewards of justice are imagined as just that: rewards, as if the aim of a superior breed of fox (366e). The effect of the speech, then, is to disarm the temptation to think of the poets as honest realists, painting human frailty and the bitterness of life in its true colours. To describe human nature in this way is rather – perhaps despite the poet's best intentions – to make a self-fulfilling prophecy of ethical doom. It is not to face facts, but, as it were, to create them – to turn out an audience in the poet's own pessimistic image.

Accordingly, when Socrates comes to censor poetry for his own ethical purposes, we are not to see him as imposing an ethical agenda on what was

previously innocent of any such thing, but as adjusting and controlling a poetic effect that previously occurred more haphazardly. While admitting that we find it sweet to indulge and pity our faults and frailties – in theatrical guise no less than in our own actions (387b2–6, 390a5) – Socrates refuses to accept that we cannot be brought up in such a way as to find that sweetness in justice, and in the images of justice (401c6–d3). If the poets tell stories of the stony road to virtue and the rewards of opportunism, Socrates will counter by disseminating a ‘Phoenician Tale’ that will make it positively attractive for the citizens of his ideal society to be civic-minded (414b1–6, 415d3–5); not, however, by offering vulgar rewards, but by instilling a confidence in the social arrangements that will have the effect (as we eventually discover) of permitting all to take pleasure in what is worthy of pleasure (9.586d–7a). And in the *Laws* this theme of using the sweetness of poetry to promote the sweetness of justice becomes still more explicit.<sup>22</sup>

This need to make a matching but corrective *riposte* to the poets underpins Socrates’ aggressive advertisement of the place of ‘falsehoods’ and ‘lies’ in the Guardians’ education.<sup>23</sup> The Phoenician Tale itself would be a ‘noble lie’ that we were telling the citizens (414c); and all education, he startles Adimantus by saying, should begin with falsehoods – although he quickly soothes him by explaining that a child’s education should begin with myths, which ‘taken as a whole, are false; though there is some truth in them’ (377a). We are being asked to understand Socrates’ censorship as an extension of a use of ‘falsehood’ that we would all recognise as noble. Indeed, what Socrates intends to disseminate is in the deepest ethical sense not false at all, but true. Thus he is careful to say, as he rejects each unsatisfactory myth and portrayal of character, that not only is it morally harmful but also ‘untrue’ (or ‘inconsistent’).<sup>24</sup> Yet he also asserts that even if the unsavoury myths *were* true we should not tell them, not casually at least, to the young (378a; and cf. *Laws* 2.663d6–e2). Plato allows the moral impulse to show from behind the arguments of falsehood because, while believing he can construct theological and cosmological arguments that confute the cosmic perspective which he attributes to the poets (and in which they find the ground for their ethical views), arguments of which Socrates offers us a glimpse at the end of Book II, he nevertheless does not want to rest his ethical case on such speculative reasoning alone.

This point needs explanation. The whole purpose of Socrates’ pruning and manipulation of the poetic environment in which his Guardians mature is to bring them up in the belief and the sentiment that the just life is also the most truly pleasant life – the belief which the argument of the *Republic* is designed

<sup>22</sup> *Laws* 659d, 663–4a, 802c–d.

<sup>23</sup> The Greek term ψεύδος and its associated verbal forms can refer to both intentional and unintentional falsehood.

<sup>24</sup> See 378c1, 380c3, 381e5, 386b10, 391b7.

to vindicate for us. We can readily see why such a 'noble lie' is noble; but in what sense is it a lie? Not because Socrates believes it false; on the contrary. It is a lie only because it is the kind of truth to which we can 'give the lie' in our souls – whatever the cosmic way of things may be, and however neat the theological arguments that Socrates produces. Conversely put: not only is it a truth, but it is a truth that we must make for ourselves. But we shall be unable to make it come true unless we are sheltered while impressionable from the full knowledge of how we can also give it the lie (thus the good judge must be a 'late-learner' of the nature of injustice, 409b4–c1). And it is in this sense that Socrates would tell lies: in that he would consciously suppress the full complexity of what he knows in order to manipulate the young towards ethical truth (as he insists all mothers attempt to do, although perhaps not so consciously, 377b–c). His strategy thus combines the two acceptable types of intentional falsehood which he says humans must use to the extent that they do not have the perfection of gods (382c6–d3): first, the medicinal lie, by which the natural weakness and lack of sense in children is adjusted and tempered.<sup>25</sup> (The foundation for this point was laid in the example from the first book, at 331c, of how one would not return a dangerous weapon to a friend, and would resort to lying to prevent this, if the friend had lost his wits in the meantime; cf. 389b–d); and second, the mythological lie, in which, not knowing 'what the truth about ancient things actually is', we construct a story as like the truth as possible – that is, the kind of merely plausible and/or ethically appropriate account that even the most philosophic cosmology, as in the *Timaeus*,<sup>26</sup> let alone the tales we would tell to children, cannot rise above. Notice, again, that Socrates is not here isolating the fictionality of poetic myth; rather, he emphasises that it is speculative. Whereas fiction for us has positive and autonomous value, a speculation, while useful (382d3), remains a second-best, a stab at truth. We might compare – however trivial the comparison – the 'lie' that today's children are told about Santa Claus. Insofar as it is not simply an adult indulgence – the desire to live vicariously in a kinder world, as seen through the eyes of one's children – it has the worthy purpose of giving children a breathing-space in which to develop values appropriate to a kinder world, values resistant to the tarnish of cynicism that the world will attempt to impose, and from within which the historical falsity of the story, when unmasked, will seem an unimportant matter: the story itself all the more deeply true for that.

But this comparison may seem not just trivial, but misleading. For none but children believe in Santa Claus, whereas Socrates with startling ease extends the purview of his censorship in several casual-sounding statements (and for all that young people remain the focus of his concern in these books)

<sup>25</sup> See 377b1–3, 378a3.

<sup>26</sup> See e.g., 29c4–d3, 48d1–e1.

to include the adult audience.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the Phoenician Tale is to be told to all, even the rulers themselves (414c1–2). It seems that no one in Plato's ideal society would, in the terms of the comparison, ever grow out of a literal belief in Santa Claus; and this offends (as it should) our liberal belief that at some stage people must be considered sufficiently adult to be left as the best judges of whether the poetry to which they expose themselves does them harm or not. The matter is complicated by the fact that the 'rulers' at this point in the argument of the *Republic* are not yet the 'Philosopher-Kings' who eventually emerge as the ruling class. Still, we must bite the bullet here and not conceal from ourselves that Plato believes that some – most – adults remain in an important sense children throughout their lives. It is not just for children but also for the benefit of 'men who must be free, and fear slavery more than death' that morbid visions of Hades are to vanish from poetry (387b4–6). In the *Phaedo* Cebes requests Socrates to pile on the arguments for the immortality of the soul not so much for Cebes' own sake as for that of the 'child inside' of him who fears the bogey of death (77e3–7). In the psychology of the *Republic* the soul is divided into three parts; and the lowest part is made up of impulses and appetites which, if allowed to dominate over the other parts, will emerge, in extreme cases, as the worst kind of childish indulgence. It could also be described, we shall see, as by nature the most 'theatrical' part of the soul. We all carry this theatrical child and its potential tyranny around inside us through life; and this fact has two consequences: first, that the theatrical stimulus of poetry must be carefully monitored even for adults, and second, that being adult (in the conventional sense) does not automatically qualify one to do the monitoring.

The argument is not fully made out in these terms until the tenth book; but it is expressed in a preliminary way in the next stage of the critique in Book III – the stage at which we first encounter the more radical and innovative aspect of the critique, its potshot at poetry's mimetic nature. The account is preliminary in the sense that it remains at a somewhat limited, technical level, not straying from the mechanics of poetic expression, since it cannot extend its range (as happens in the tenth book) by appeal to a psychological and metaphysical apparatus that at this point in the *Republic* has yet to be established. But it is worth digging a while around the technical roots of that fuller growth.

Plato flags both the technical level of the passage and the fact that something rather new is afoot by having a puzzled Adimantus request a gloss first of Socrates' distinction between content and 'diction' or form (*lexeōs*, 392c6), and then of the example he gives to illustrate what he means by diction: the contrast between 'simple narrative' and 'narrative through imitation' (392c6–d7). Adimantus' puzzlement need indicate no more than that the

<sup>27</sup> See 378d1, 380c1, 387b4.



terms have a technical air, not that they are Platonic neologisms. What is distinctively Platonic is rather the focus on the ethical aspect of such technicalities. For although our key term, 'imitation', is here made the focus of attention (and this is the first time in the *Republic* that it has come to the fore) in what may seem a rather specialised, almost syntactic application – to denote narrative couched in direct rather than indirect speech – nevertheless we swiftly discover that far more important distinctions than the merely syntactic are at issue. The desire to speak in a voice other than one's own becomes fraught with unwelcome implications.

Consider how Socrates explains himself to Adimantus. With reference to the opening lines of the *Iliad*, he first describes how Homer shifts from plain narrative of Chryses' embassy to the Atreids, in which the poet does not attempt to make us think 'that anyone other than himself is speaking', to delivering the priest's indignant appeal to the kings 'as if he himself were Chryses'; and Socrates then goes so far as to offer an actual sample, with a view to pre-empting Adimantus' further puzzlement, of what Homer might have composed had he decided not to 'hide himself' but to express the whole passage without imitation – a sample which he speaks in prose rather than verse because he is 'no poet' (392e–4b). In effect, Socrates impersonates Homer; that is, he says what he imagines Homer might have said had he couched the opening of the *Iliad* in indirect prose – but how differently from the way in which Homer impersonates Chryses! Socrates resorts to impersonation only as a teaching-aid, to clarify the unfamiliar for Adimantus (392d8–e1, 393d2–3), and even then he can speak in no way other than his own ('I am no poet'). By contrast, impersonation is the very backbone of Homer's achievement: witness how laughable and lifeless Socrates' paraphrase sounds (not for nothing does he warn us of his lack of poetic talent).

In this long preamble, then, Plato is concerned not only to familiarise his audience with certain technical distinctions but, more importantly, to illustrate (rather than describe) the ethical dimension of these technicalities (and for the same reason that the character Socrates has recourse to illustration over description). For consider how Socrates proceeds. Having established his technical terms he next asks whether the young Guardians should be allowed to be 'imitative' (*mimētikous*, 394e1), a term which, we discover, has both a quite formal reference and an ethical connotation. Formally, the Guardians are to perform poetry which contains little direct speech, and then only that of good characters (396c–e). Thus they are not to be 'imitative' in Socrates' sense, since he means by this word not just 'engaging in' but *prone* to imitation (at 395a2 he glosses the phrase 'will be imitative' as 'will imitate many things'). Ethically, Socrates assumes that the use of direct speech in poetry will engage the Guardians' 'desire to speak as if they were that person' (i.e. the speaking character), with the result that they 'would not be ashamed of such an imitation' if the character were good, whereas they would not want 'seriously

to liken themselves' to a bad character (396c7 – d5). Here it is especially crucial to recall how far the modern model of the contemplative reader is from Plato's thoughts. The Guardians are to *perform* this poetry; imitation is as much what they do as it is what the poets do (e.g., 395d7); so that the responses of an actor rather than of a reader offer a better analogue, however approximate. It is this anticipated seriousness of ethical engagement that underpins Socrates' claim that imitations, if performed regularly from childhood, tend to become established in our own habits and behaviour, both in our bodily demeanour and our patterns of thought (395d1 – 3). 'Imitation', indeed, is too pale a word in English for what Socrates evidently speaks of here: 'identification' or 'emulation' would be closer to the mark.

Looking again at the little parable of imitation that Socrates' own preamble provides, we can now see that it follows the pattern he lays down for his Guardians. He employs imitation only as a tool to advance understanding (as the Guardians are to imitate only as an aid to living the reflective life) and the voice he produces (as the Guardians should limit themselves to voices to which they would wish to own up) remains recognisably his own – Homer becomes Socrates, not vice-versa. And just as Socrates' limp metaphor showed imitation to be the very life of Homer's verse, so the Guardians are contrasted with a type who, through bad upbringing (396c2 – 3), would think no topic unworthy for imitation, but would attempt to 'imitate everything seriously and before large audiences', not only villains and madmen but also dogs and sheep and the sound-effects of such things as thunder or wagon-wheels or blaring trumpets (397a – b, 395e – 6a).

Superficially, we are some distance from Homeric poetry here; for these are the theatrical tricks of tragedy and comedy, while Socrates seems to judge the epic style closest of any current type to the poetic discourse a Guardian would employ (396e4 – 8) (similarly in the *Laws*, at 2.658c – d, the Athenian judges tragedy to be the preference of 'educated women, youths, and pretty much the public at large', Homer and Hesiod the preference of old men such as himself). Nevertheless, imitation is as constitutive of Homer's ambition as it is of the ambition of this vulgar ventriloquist. For although epic poetry, with its single metre and generally elevated tone, approaches the even and relatively unchanging style declared fit for a Guardian (397b6 – c1), comparison with Socrates' metaphor shows (if such a demonstration were needed) that Homer is not simply out to impart information about what happened at Troy (information which Socrates' version adequately encapsulates) but is intent as it were to give us the whole Troy, to surround us with the panoply of its leading voices. This is to use imitation not as the Guardian would use it, as an aid to make vivid his ethical ideal, but rather as a way of understanding the ethical implications of a complete series of events, wherever it leads. We are to judge Agamemnon's offence by hearing the indignation in Chryses' voice; but so too we are to come to terms with

the larger tragedy of the events at Troy by hearing Achilles cry out in anger, in grief, in moments of despair. In an essential respect, then, Homer is akin after all to our 'vulgar' imitator (397a1). For notice that Socrates does not criticise this latter because the models he chooses to imitate are disreputable (although some will be), but simply because he does not discriminate between what is and is not reputable in choosing his models, but imitates anything and everything in all seriousness (397a2–4). That is, he treats imitation as an activity good in itself rather than dependent for its value on the goodness of what is imitated. But no less does Homer, in treating imitation as his favoured procedure of understanding. Socrates, by contrast, although he holds that imitation of good models is a proper part of the Guardians' education, insists that bad models can and ought to be understood without imitation (thus his Guardians are to 'know and recognise' mad and wicked characters, but not to perform or imitate them, 396a4–6).

Imitation thus emerges as inherently suspect. It is valuable only when directed towards overcoming its own limitations, that is, as practised by Guardians who intend to become in life what they begin by merely imitating. The moment it is held to be valuable in its own right it begins to weaken the imitator's grasp of the best kind of life. At this stage in the argument of the *Republic* Socrates supports the point by appeal to the principle on which he is establishing the ideal society: that each person can do one task well, but if he or she attempts to be good at many, is likely to fail at all. So too, he begins by saying, we find that in the field of imitation one dramatist or actor will specialise in tragedy, another in comedy, and so on (394e2–5b1). However, the analogy will not go through in these terms, because of a peculiarity in poetic activity: namely, that the poet speaks mostly of others' tasks rather than his own; that he is, as it were, a professional busybody. Thus the tragedian only appears to have a single task; while at the ethical rather than purely technical level he will, as we have seen, attempt to be many people at once – to take on the perspective of a multiplicity of characters, in all seriousness, as a means of understanding the patterns of human life. In this sense the 'single' task of poetic imitation is in its very essence opposed to the principle of 'one person, one task'. (Recall that for Socrates the phrase 'is imitative' means 'imitates many things', 395a2.) The Guardians, even though they will imitate a plurality of characters – the brave, the self-controlled, the pious, 'and all such' – are imitating only what conduces to their one task of building a free society (395b8–c5); but for poets the imitation of human multiplicity, even if thought of as eventually conducive to a unified ethical purpose, is a good just in itself – a path of understanding. Hence, although Socrates begins by pointing out a technical sense in which poets conform to his social principle, it is on the strength of this principle that he ends the discussion by excluding conventional poets from his ideal city, insisting that there would be no place for their talent in a society devoid of 'multiplex' characters (397d10–8b4).

What justifies his shift is that in the course of the discussion he has brought out the ethical consequences of poetry's technical procedures.

Thus, while he began by distinguishing three modes of poetic discourse on a purely mechanical basis – as narrative, 'imitation' (direct speech), and thirdly a style which employs both these (394c) – he ends by adjudicating (on the grounds discussed) between a different triplet of poetic resources, between the 'austere', the 'sweet', and the 'mixed' styles. And here the styles are correlated and imbued with the ethos of their characteristic users: the austere being that especially wary use of imitation combined with narrative which the Guardian should adopt, and the sweet the style favoured by our ventriloquial type (the mixed is not further specified, but Homeric epic would fall naturally into place at this point in the spectrum, 397b6–e2). In mechanical terms, all three of these latter styles employ both narrative and direct speech, and so are to be classified under the third type of the former triplet. Plato's intent in this development is surely to stress that the important distinction in this domain is ultimately not syntactic, but ethical. The transition from the former to the latter triplet is potentially confusing to modern readers to the extent that we are less ready to correlate poetic styles with ethical dispositions; but some commentators have attributed the confusion to Plato himself.<sup>28</sup> Notice that Plato is careful to avoid such confusion as might arise between the third terms in either triplet, by referring to one as the 'mixed' type (397d3, 397d6), to the other as 'that which employs both' (394c4, 396e6), and never as a 'mixture'.

One further consequence of this development is that Socrates' restrictions on what the Guardians may imitate are looser than we might think; for we are not to think of him as denying them – at least, not by rigid application of a merely technical criterion – any and all poetry in which a corrupt character gives direct voice to his or her corruption. Socrates' crucial qualification is that good persons will not want 'seriously' (*spoudēi*, 396d4) to liken themselves to one worse than they (396d4–5). This is to be understood by comparison with the kind of response to poetry that Socrates precludes through censorship earlier in the book, the reception by the young of unworthy Homeric passages (388d2–7): such sentiments, he says, are dangerous if the young listen to them seriously and do not rather 'laugh them down' as unworthily spoken. The important point is not that the Guardians avoid at all costs either hearing or performing the direct speech of unworthy characters, but that they avoid any ethical engagement, any serious identification with such characters and their actions. That is why Socrates recommends (387e9–8a3) that laments not be assigned to male heroes but only to women – 'and not to serious

<sup>28</sup> E.g., Annas, 'Triviality', p. 27, n. 37: 'Plato finds it hard to make his mind up here'. Else, *Plato and Aristotle*, p. 36, thinks Plato is deliberately obfuscating things.

women either'<sup>29</sup> – or to men of low quality: because imitation of unworthy conduct in perceived role-models, rather than such imitation *tout court*, is what he is most anxious to pre-empt.

This also explains the two riders that Socrates adds to his prescription: first, that good persons may indeed imitate unworthy characters in all seriousness to the extent (and it will be minimal) that the character is doing something good (in other words, if the character is undergoing ethical reform, and to identify with this would be no bad thing); and second, that although a Guardian would be ashamed 'seriously' to imitate unworthy characters in their very unworthiness (as opposed to when they are doing good), he might yet imitate even these traits, but 'for play'<sup>30</sup> (396d3–e2). In context, the phrase seems to make room for a satirical kind of imitation,<sup>31</sup> in which the good could attend to or enact the actual voices of the bad while yet remaining disengaged – not treating them as role-models – and 'laughing them down' in the manner that we have seen Socrates wish the young would adopt in the face of unworthy Homeric sentiments. Not that Socrates actually develops this option for his Guardians: as we have seen, he does not imagine that the young will take Homer in any other way but seriously, and so resorts to censorship. But the qualification is of special relevance to anyone attempting to configure Plato's own literary practice with Socrates' prescriptions in this work. After all, the *Republic* itself boasts in its opening book a lengthy and direct 'imitation' of Thrasymachus, an unworthy character acting unworthily. Would it therefore be unfit for a Guardian of that republic to hear? We should notice how the blustering, overbearing Thrasymachus is portrayed more as a caricature than a character (as rudeness incarnate, so to speak) – a quality of portrayal common to all Plato's villains and buffoons, such as Callicles and Ion. Indeed, almost the only fully drawn, complex character in the dialogues is Socrates himself. Perhaps, then, Plato was out to mimic the voice of the enemy in such a way that we, the philosophic audience, neither so young nor so unsophisticated as to require the extreme protection of censorship, would be unable to identify with it but would be prompted to laugh its venom off.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> The Greek term σπουδαῖος means both 'serious' and 'good'; the more awkward translation keeps the echo of 'serious' imitation.

<sup>30</sup> παιδιᾶς χάριν, 396e2. Contrast the interpretation of Nehamas, 'Imitation', p. 49, who takes the phrase 'for play' to qualify the imitation of bad characters engaged in doing good.

<sup>31</sup> For this sense of παιδιᾶ ('jesting', 'comedy', 'satire'), cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 4.1128a19–24.

<sup>32</sup> Distinguish, however, Plato's attitude to theatrical comedy: esp. *Laws* 816d–e.

## 5 'The Republic': poetry overcome

Plato's fundamental criticism of poetic imitation, and thus of poetry as such, is that poets see imitation as good in itself, as a process of knowledge or understanding, regardless of what is imitated. But at this point we surely want to ask: what exactly is *wrong* with taking poetic imitation to be a process of understanding? Did we grant Plato too much by agreeing, in considering the Dionysian chorus of the *Laws*, that he had at least dismantled any necessary connection between the activity of poetic performance (that is, imitation) and proper understanding; for why not think of imitation as itself a kind of understanding – one among others, to be sure, but a fully fledged member of the species nonetheless? That is, by imaginatively participating in the represented situation we become familiar with it, through a 'sympathy' that implies no necessary approval of the actions or attitudes portrayed and therefore needs no censor, and so we come to understand it perhaps better than had we kept an analytic distance. Let us grant that poetic performance can be properly appreciated in terms of its effects alone, without regard for their source; but why worry over this, when the effects are effects of familiarity with expanded horizons? And if the portrayed situation has the breadth of an *Iliad*, the fullness of familiarity (greater than any Ion or trivial 'ventriloquist' could attain) offers scope for a lifetime. So we might reason. Plato's arguments to block this line of reasoning require him to build upon the foundation of nothing less than the psychology and metaphysics laboriously established in the ensuing books of the *Republic*, and to be invoked at the outset of his attack on poetry in Book X.

When discussing the Phoenician Tale that Socrates would disseminate among all members of his just society, including even the rulers, we noted that these 'Guardians' are distinct from the 'Philosopher-Kings' who emerge as heads of state in the subsequent account. These philosophers, by contrast, will be as aware of the conditions of their education as is the Socrates who lays down its pattern; for they are to accept voluntarily (if reluctantly) and in full conscience the requirement he enjoins upon them to descend (in the terms of the famous allegory) from unalloyed philosophic contemplation into the Cave of political life, and to govern in the ideal city (7.520d1 – e3). One way to see why they have advanced beyond the merely virtuous Guardians of the just society is to consider the comparison Socrates makes in Book III between learning to be a Guardian and learning to read (at 502a7 – c9). The Guardians must learn to recognise the 'forms' (*eidē*, 401c2) of courage and self-control and the other virtues as they crop up throughout social life, and no less in poetic imitations, just as we learn to read by recognising alphabetic letters as they crop up in an enormous variety of combinations, and would use the same skill to recognise images of letters encountered in mirrors. The point to emphasise is that the Guardians learn to read but do not learn about

reading; changing the metaphor slightly, they learn the grammar of virtue by learning to speak its language, but they do not become grammarians. One can recognise the 'forms' of virtue entirely from within one's own sense of the virtuous life, just by living it; or one can attempt not only to live that life but to grasp its conditions; not only to recognise but to understand,<sup>33</sup> to study the system of virtue (something Plato and we may be venturing by talking *about* how the Guardians learn virtue) – and then we approach Platonic metaphysics, and the 'Forms' we study begin, as it were, to merit their capital 'F'.

Commentators have worried<sup>34</sup> that if the 'forms' of virtue mentioned here are taken to be fully fledged Platonic Forms, the poetic images also mentioned would have such Forms as their direct object; and this would contradict the account given in the tenth book, according to which poets imitate the Forms only indirectly, by imitating manifestations of Forms in the world. Let us grant that 'transcendent' Forms have not at this point yet made their appearance in the text; but let us also understand how closely they are related to these 'immanent' forms – forms of virtue recognised as they turn up in life. Platonic Forms – to be quick about it – are permanent standards that make up the furthest background against which we live, and since they are our background we cannot fully express our understanding of them in explicit propositions. Plato puts them to work in what we would call cosmology and epistemology as well as ethical theory; but confining ourselves to the ethical aspect most relevant to our purposes here we may say that they represent an attempt to ground the best human life in a sense that there is such a thing as human nature, and that it has constants. And we can (inadequately) express the transcendence rather than immanence of the Forms contemplated by the Philosopher-King by saying that he operates not only *against* their background but with a conscious sense of them *as* background; a sense which makes the world a Cave, to be lived in with a measure of alienation.

The purpose of alluding to the metaphysical postulates of the philosopher's activity is to get at the psychology associated with it and so by contrast to explain Plato's hostility to the psychology of poetic imitation. Again, let us approach the point through Platonic metaphor. It is striking that when Socrates comes to describe how philosophers will bring about the ideal society, he chooses an analogy from artistic image-making: the philosopher will be like a painter, first scrubbing the canvas of the city clean, then sketching on it the shape of a new constitution, and finally filling in the mixed colours of flesh, all the time looking to the divine model in an attempt to create as close a likeness as possible in human terms to the Forms of virtue (6.500e–1c; cf. 484c–d). Whereas the 'models'<sup>35</sup> with which the Guardians and their

<sup>33</sup> The verb meaning 'to read' also means 'to recognise' (ἀναγιγνώσκειν); cf. γνωρίζωμεν, 402c5.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., Adam, *Republic*, I, p. 168.

<sup>35</sup> παραδείγματα: see 3.409a7–b2, 3.409c4–d2.

fellow-citizens had worked were empirically assimilable patterns of virtuous (and unvirtuous) behaviour and character, the 'divine model'<sup>36</sup> to which the philosopher looks is nothing less than the pattern of how the society must fit together as a whole. For the young Guardian, the models of virtue are scarcely distinct from the actual human paragons whom he begins by emulating and whose ranks he can hope (no longer merely an imitator) to join. But there is a sense in which the Philosopher-Painter must remain an imitator, in that he aspires to and attempts to identify with something that he must nevertheless recognise is not entirely him, and from which he must measure his distance – the 'godlike' element within him.<sup>37</sup> (We recall that painting is to be contrasted with poetry as an art in which the image and what is imitated are most evidently distinct from – distant from – each other.) It is akin to the thought that Plato conveys in the *Laws* by calling the social arrangements in the just city, in so far as they are an imitation of the best life, the finest and most genuine 'drama'.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, the imitation in which the philosopher engages is decidedly not a type of artistic imitation, nor (conversely) is Socrates making room here for a reformed kind of art that would imitate the Forms directly; this, in part, is the force of resorting to an analogy with artistic imitation in order to describe the philosophic. To imitate justice in poetry is to produce an actual imitation – a poem, or a performance of a poem; to 'imitate' the Form of justice is to live justly and aspire, in a self-consciously philosophic manner, to the just society.<sup>39</sup>

But what exactly are we to understand by Socrates' reference to the 'godlike' element within a person, and therefore to what the poet fails to emulate? Here we must consider the account of the three 'parts' of the soul, especially as developed immediately prior to the return to poetry, in Books VIII and IX. Plato's analysis of the psychology of human action develops from a focus on the frequent conflict between our reason (or better judgement) and our desires (in Book IV) into something less familiar. The soul is to be thought of as having three parts – three characters, almost – which in ascending order of worthiness are: one which loves 'gain' (in a wider sense than that of material profit; we might say rather that it is the part which 'loves to get its way'), one which loves honour, and that in us which loves wisdom (this being the godlike part). From the interplay of these three characters derive, not particular actions primarily, but rather the shape (or, it may be, shapelessness) of a whole life. That is why they do not represent simple

<sup>36</sup> τῷ θεῷ παραδείγματι, 6.500e3; cf. 9.592b2–3.

<sup>37</sup> θεοειδές τε καὶ θεοεικελον, 501b7.

<sup>38</sup> *Laws* 7.817a–d; cf. 803b; *Philebus* 50b.

<sup>39</sup> Nehamas, 'Imitation', pp. 59–60; Sörbom, *Mimesis*, pp. 133–8; cf. Vernant, 'Naissance', pp. 133–6. A notable formulation of the view they oppose is made in the classic series of articles by Tate, most explicitly in 'Maritain', pp. 116–17: 'like the genuine painter, he [the Philosopher-King] uses the "divine paradigm"' – to which we can object that Plato's analogy makes no mention of a 'genuine painter'.



'faculties' (such as reason or desire) but rather are characterised by (but have no monopoly over) the exercise of such faculties in the pursuit of their respective goals. Thus the wisdom-loving part (also called the 'commanding' part) has the special power and function of caring for the soul in its entirety; it does not want simply to further its own desires across the life of the person, but cares also that the other two centres of desire in the soul should find their proper place in that life (esp. 9.586d–e). It thus earns its title to be called the 'calculating' or 'reasoning' part in so far as it is devoted to a cause for which deliberation is essential: the ordering across a lifetime of impulses which are in natural contention.

So too, the Philosopher-King – in whom the wisdom-loving part is dominant – cares for (looks to the model of) the society as a whole, in contrast to the Guardian (a military type, and representative more of the honour-loving part) who is qualified to rule the city just in so far as he furthers his own natural interest in the virtuous life. But such a blinkered pushing of one's interest is a characteristic *par excellence* of the 'lowest' part of the soul, the lover of gain. This earns its title to be called the 'appetitive' part because it deliberates (if it deliberates) exclusively about the means of fulfilling its wants, whatever they may be, and never (unlike the wisdom-loving part) about those wants as such. It will manoeuvre as elaborately as need be to bring the others around to its own interests, but only in so far as they stand in the way of those interests; it does not care by what means their cooperation is secured, nor does it care what happens to their interests in the process. In this sense, as mentioned when considering Cebes' fear of the bogeyman, it is the 'child' within us.<sup>40</sup>

All this is vividly brought out in Books VIII and IX, in the narrative of how a philosophic life can degenerate through various stages into a tyrannical one. and given what we have just learnt about the parts of the soul, we can now understand better why Socrates should express the philosopher's alienation from the Cave by saying that its denizens seem to him to be dreaming, pursuing shadows (7.520c; so too those who cannot understand the Forms are said at the end of Book V to be 'living a dream', 476c). The metaphor becomes incarnate in the figure of the tyrant. He allows himself to be completely consumed by the desires of the lowest part of the soul, desires which, says Socrates, come into their own even for the best of us when we are asleep (9.571c–2b); so that the tyrant becomes in real life what the rest of us are only in our most unhealthy dreams (574e, 576b). And the pleasures to which he is addicted are for Socrates mere 'wraiths' (586c), or 'shadow-paintings' (583b, 586b) of genuine pleasure – this last a term commonly applied to illusionistic scene-painting in the theatre. The tyrant lives a dream,

<sup>40</sup> Jon Moline, *Plato's Theory of Understanding* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1981), ch. 3, and Annas, *Plato's Republic*, ch. 5.

we now see, because he is overwhelmed by that part of him which, in as much as it deliberates only about the means to its goal, but not about the goal as such, seeks only effects. The tyrant cares only to satisfy his addiction, but he does not care (for his appetite does not care, and he has become his appetite) what means he must employ, what path he must follow, to gain satisfaction. But the path of satisfaction has become his very life; and thus he cannot care about his life. From the perspective of one who can still care, this life is meaningless, a dream.

And here we have come back to the topic of poetry and theatre – as the metaphor from scene-painting will have suggested. For a constant theme of this account has been that poetic imitation is performance, and as such can be fully appreciated in terms of its effects in the moment of performance, regardless of its conditions or source. But to be content with mere effects is the mark of that in us which will steer us towards the least worthy pattern of life. Plato's strategy in the tenth book, then, is to take what we might think of as poetry's miraculous capacity to broaden our imaginative horizons and sympathetic understanding by means of the mere representation or appearance of a character or situation, and paint it in the unappealing colours of the tyrannical personality; of that in us which delights in 'appearances' in the loaded metaphysical sense that contrasts with the 'reality' – the meaningfulness – of a life lived in an attempt to know the Forms.<sup>41</sup> We are to see that this part of the soul is not only childish and appetitive, but quintessentially theatrical.

This is a tall order; for what can a Homer or his audience have even minimally in common with such a sick character as the tyrant? And if truth it be, it is an unpleasant truth: small wonder that Socrates, daunted by his ingrained respect for Homer, is reluctant to speak (10.595b9–c3). But let us move now from this general background to the detail of his argument.

That these preliminaries are necessary, Plato's own words clearly indicate; for Socrates announces as his reason for returning to the topic of poetry the intention to clarify and reinforce his previous criticism by appeal to the psychological distinctions that have now been set up (595a5–b1). In particular, we are to see why we must reject 'such poetry as is imitative'.<sup>42</sup> This statement has proved a persistent source of puzzlement and contention; for Socrates seems here to announce an attack on all poetry that employs imitation; yet in Book III we saw him actually recommend for the Guardians a style of poetry that 'imitates' worthy characters (397d4, 398b2), involving imitation in both the technical and the ethical sense – and which, moreover, he seems to be recommending at the conclusion of his critique in Book X, in the shape

<sup>41</sup> Notice in this connection the slur in Book VIII on Euripides as a friend of tyrants, 568a–b.

<sup>42</sup> αὐτῆς ὅση μιμητικῆ, 595a5.

of 'hymns to the gods and encomia of the virtuous' (607a4).<sup>43</sup> Yet the problem is only apparent, and can be dispelled entirely if we bear in mind that when Socrates asked in Book III whether the Guardians should be 'imitative' (394e1) he was asking whether they should be *prone* to imitation. The Guardian can be an 'imitator' of good characters without being 'imitative', because by confining his imitation (in both the technical and ethical sense) to characters such as he himself intends to become, he never has to make himself other than he is and become a double or multiplex personality (see 397e1), unlike the less worthy type who imitates indiscriminately and thus is truly 'imitative'. We should understand Socrates' reference to 'imitative' poetry at the beginning of Book X in just this sense: as poetry which values imitation as such, and so promotes the ethos of the unworthy imitator to whom we were introduced in Book III.<sup>44</sup> There is no contradiction with that book, nor even much of an enlargement from the sense in which imitation was spoken of there (which is why Socrates does not remark on any change of position); for we saw that the ethical sense (imitation as 'imitativeness'), of which the technical ('direct speech') is a symptom, was already present in Book III – only, now we are to focus exclusively on that ethical sense, and with the more sophisticated psychological apparatus that the intervening metaphysics has provided.<sup>45</sup>

Socrates begins with metaphysics: with an appeal to the Forms, applying what he calls 'our usual method' (596a5–6) to the question at hand. His only other appeal to this method as the means of resolving an issue under discussion had come at the end of Book V, when he had presented an argument to support his claim that in the ideal society philosophers should rule, in which he demonstrated that other enthusiasts who might appear equally devoted to learning new things were disqualified by their lack of understanding of such Forms (esp. 475e–6a). And the prime example of such enthusiasts had been the 'devotees of spectacle' (*philotheamones*, 475d2): avid theatre-goers who never missed a show, but wanted nothing to do with philosophic discussion, and saw no need for it. So here in Book X Socrates appeals again to the Forms in order to defuse the claim of a closely related group of pretenders to wisdom: the poets, whose imitations are thought of as a mode of understanding. He is out to show that they live in as much of a 'dream' as their willing audience, the devotees of spectacle: in contact only with 'appearances', not with the

<sup>43</sup> Keuls, *Painting*, p. 30, and Annas, 'Triviality', p. 7, provide modern versions of the view that the puzzle weakens Plato's argument. Even Nehamas, who wants to downplay its importance, thinks it cannot be completely resolved, 'Imitation', p. 51.

<sup>44</sup> The suggestion is not new: cf. Tate, 'Imitation', pp. 18–19; Belfiore, 'Theory of Imitation', pp. 126–7.

<sup>45</sup> There is no compelling reason to believe that Book X is an afterthought or appendix or in any sense insufficiently integrated with the body of the *Republic* as claimed by Else, *Structure and Date*.

reality of the Forms (5.476a4–7, 5.476c2–7). However, the poetic context introduced by the theatre-goers in Book V was only one example of an inadequate forum of understanding; Socrates there illuminated by contrast the understanding required to compass the rule of an entire society, and the Forms to which he appealed were correspondingly weighty: the just, the good, the beautiful. Here the focus is entirely on poetry. Socrates' question is 'what is imitation as a whole?' (595c7); and since he is thinking of imitation in the first instance as a kind of 'making', the making of images,<sup>46</sup> and since it is this activity that he wants to investigate, he directs Glaucon's attention to Forms of made objects: of artefacts such as couches and tables (596a10–b1).<sup>47</sup>

Fastening on the example of the couch, Socrates points out that there are three distinct levels at which such an object can be understood or apprehended, to which correspond three distinct kinds of 'making'. A particular wooden couch may be taken primarily as a representative of its type, of 'what a couch is' (597a2) – the Form of a couch. This Form is what the carpenter had to 'look towards' or consider as he made the material object now before us. That is to say that he had to bear in mind at every stage what a couch is *for* – that people would be *using* it.<sup>48</sup> Clearly, in making the wooden couch the carpenter does not also make what a couch is for. If anyone can be said to have 'made' this, it will be the same character that made human beings with the need to recline and a hankering for comfort: a creator-God of some sort. (This seems to be the sense in which Socrates can talk of apparently transcendent Forms of couches and tables that – as he made a point of telling us at 2.373a2 – were not even around in the earliest city but were a mark of the luxurious society that came after. These artefacts arose from permanent dispositions to luxury in human nature; were not so much 'invented', as 'discovered'.)<sup>49</sup> But if the carpenter's making is therefore parasitic on what the creator-God has made, there is a third kind of making, namely artistic imitation, which is parasitic on the creations of the carpenter. Thus if a painter, for example, makes a painting of a couch, he does not attempt to look at what a couch is for, but rather looks to the couches that carpenters make; these, moreover, he does not imitate as they are but rather as they seem: that is, he attempts to capture the 'look' of a couch. If the Form is what properly merits the title of 'reality', then what the painter and indeed any artist produces (the poets no less) is therefore 'at a third remove from reality' (596b–8d).

<sup>46</sup> See 596e5–11; cf. *Sophist* 265a–b.

<sup>47</sup> Socrates' manner of appeal to the Forms in Book X has provoked much controversy; cf. Nehamas, 'Imitation', pp. 72–3, n. 32.

<sup>48</sup> Notice 596b8: the carpenter looks to the Form in order to make the tables and couches 'which we use'.

<sup>49</sup> Noted and developed along different lines by Griswold, 'Ideas'.

This passage is easily misunderstood, and its model of the artistic process can then seem extremely crude.<sup>50</sup> Encouraged perhaps by Socrates' comparison of the painter to someone strolling the world with a mirror (596d8 – e6), and by his reference to children and foolish adults confusing paintings seen from a distance with the real thing (598c1 – 4), we might suppose that Plato thinks of the painter as finding a couch, setting up his canvas before it, and proceeding to produce a slavish copy to serve ambitions of *trompe-l'oeil*. Bad enough as a conception of what painting involves, this model seems still less applicable to poetry – yet Socrates never actually says or even suggests that the painter is out to produce as exact a copy as possible of some particular couch. He says that the painter (when he chooses to paint artefacts) imitates, not the Form, but 'the products of craftsmen'; and even then he looks to such material objects not as they are, and as they remain regardless of the angle from which we view them, but rather to just that aspect of them which changes along with our angle of view: 'the way they look' (598a1 – b5). In other words, what occupies in the painter's mind an analogous place to that occupied in the carpenter's mind by thoughts of the Form (as they produce their respective creations) are not thoughts of material couches or of some particular couch, but thoughts about how couches (typically) 'look'.<sup>51</sup> And these thoughts may be as 'abstract' as you please – at least as abstract as those the carpenter employs. That is, although the painter might be trying to evoke the look of some particular couch that he either remembers or has before him, and certainly the image he produces will present the couch from some particular angle, still, nothing in what Socrates says constrains the painter's ambition to mechanical reproduction of the world around him.

On the contrary, in pulling off the 'look' of an object or scene the painter would be striving as much to have this look come across as such to potential viewers as he strives to capture the object or scene; the former goal, indeed, is partly constitutive of the latter; with the result that it is not even a condition on his image (and Socrates never says it is) that it should be especially accurate, in a photographic sense, provided that viewers accept it as accurate – as conveying the look of a couch. The look of a thing depends as much on the psychology of the viewer as on the nature of the object viewed; and the concept thus provides considerable scope for sophistication in the artist. Socrates' appeal to the man with the mirror should not mislead us: its function is only to isolate the notion of making images of things as opposed to the things themselves (the focus is not on the 'making'; it is not an analogue for how the painter actually goes about his task: see 596e4 – 6). And as for *trompe-l'oeil*, the fact that Socrates specifies children and weak-headed adults as the dupes shows that this is not what is intended; for *trompe-l'oeil* is designed to fool

<sup>50</sup> Annas, 'Triviality', pp. 4–7; Keuls, *Painting*, esp. p. 43.

<sup>51</sup> Nehamas, 'Imitation', p. 58.

everyone. The statement draws on no more than the contemporary assumption that painting should be realistic; that a 'good painter' (598c2) will produce life-like images,<sup>52</sup> which will therefore have the potential to trick a sufficiently unsophisticated audience in favourable conditions of viewing. This is to prepare us for how poetry can trick a far more sophisticated audience – can satisfy the childish part within them – and with far more dangerous consequences.

Plato's view of painting is not the unacceptably crude position that it may seem. (Nevertheless, anyone disposed to think that when Van Gogh paints his wicker chair he captures not just its look but its very 'chairness' will still want to resist Plato's view. It seems a fact that painting has changed more radically than poetry since Plato's day; that certain developments in it go beyond what Plato could perhaps even have imagined. However, the more sophisticated view is at least arguable; and the position taken by Van Gogh's promoter at least debatable.) But let us understand that painting – indeed, this whole passage – is being used as an illustration on a simpler level of what in poetry is more difficult to grasp (a practice we have seen to be something of a habit with Plato).<sup>53</sup> If painters capture 'only' the look of their objects and scenes, poets capture, on this view, a fuller gamut of what they represent: the entire 'feel' of human behaviour. That is why the carpenter is no less simple an example of what it is to imitate the Forms than is the painter an example of what it is to imitate the world. The carpenter occupies the place in the hierarchy that, if we turn to more important matters, would be occupied by the Philosopher-King, who we have seen is also an imitator of the Forms: the just, the good, the beautiful. But in the measure of its greater importance the philosopher's task is also more difficult to explain. Both painter and carpenter produce material objects, indubitably distinct from themselves. But we have seen (when considering the Dionysian chorus) that in poetic performance the barrier between imitator and product of imitation is far less clear; and now we can see that this applies also to the philosophers, the product of whose imitation of the Forms is nothing less than their own lives, and life in the ideal society.

That this is Plato's thought emerges clearly when Socrates comes to complete his account of why artistic imitation grasps only appearance, not reality (announcing that he will not leave this 'half-said', 601a9–c4). For here he cuts manual craftsmanship back down to size. We recall that in looking to the Form of couch the carpenter was bearing in mind the use to which his product would be put. But it is no intrinsic part of his craft that he should

<sup>52</sup> In the analogous domain of sculpture cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 3.10.7.

<sup>53</sup> Most notably in the account of the Dionysian chorus in the *Laws* (esp. 2.668d2–9b3); cf. *Ion* 532e–3c; *Sophist* 234b–c (painting deceives only the youngest children in the way that sophistry deceives older youths); *Politicus* 285d8–6b3 (there are no visual images for the most important things in life).

himself be a user of his product. When it comes to couches, of course, he could hardly fail to be in practice; which is why Socrates chooses different examples to make the point: those of the bridle-maker and flute-maker (601c–e). For the maker may indeed be no horse-rider or flute-player (the obverse of the fact that it takes no great skill to use a couch). And Socrates' point is this: that in so far as the craftsman must look to the use of his product he must also look to its users. His skill is subordinate in this sense to the skill of the user; craftspeople comprise, we could say, a service-industry. By contrast, if Philosopher-Kings are makers at all, they are intrinsically the users of what they make. Alternatively put: they are makers only in the sense in which their task can be called imitation of the Forms, and compared to the act of painting the image of the ideal society; but what this amounts to is a user's skill, the skill of living and organising the good life.

None but the childish confuse the average painting with the real thing; and the role of the manual craftsman is clearly demarcated from that of the user of his products. Accordingly it poses no threat that a painter can paint or a craftsman make what they do not know how to use. But what makes poets so dangerous is that not only can they transport us into scenes, convey the feel of human behaviour, without being possessed of the understanding from which such behaviour would arise in life, but also, since their images do indeed convey an accurate feel of the entire situation, and because they are composed in a medium – talk, primarily – not obviously distinct from that through which the actual situation would find expression, poets, unlike painters or craftspeople, can readily convince us that what they produce springs from a full understanding of the user's skill to which it corresponds. And since the imitative scope of a Homer extends to nothing short of how the greatest communities are led by their princes, the user's skill he can appear to arrogate is the very highest: that which Socrates would reserve for the Philosopher-King (599c–d). Poetry is thus in direct competition with philosophy for the education of the ruling class.<sup>54</sup>

Socrates also offers social considerations in support of the contrast between different types of skill and its metaphysical basis when he confronts the imagined objection that surely a good poet, such as Homer, simply could not compose fine poetry on his chosen topic unless he had some worthwhile understanding of what he was talking about (598d8–e5). Socrates' response is to suggest that 'fine' poetry for such an objector is no more than poetry that is found convincing, and the objector is not allowing for the possibility that he has been too easily convinced – taken in by the appearance of understanding (598e5–9a4). Socrates backs up his response by pointing out that the social institutions of poetry are just what we should expect to

<sup>54</sup> A similar contrast between the respective place of craftspeople and poets in the ideal society was later drawn by Proclus, *In Rem Publicam*, I, pp. 48, 26–49, 12 Kroll.

accompany the imitator's as opposed to the user's skill. That is, for all that Homer seems to talk about how cities are to be governed, and for all that his poetry is esteemed as a public good and an education, neither Homer nor his successors, the rhapsodes, ever acted as lawgiver to a city, like Solon, nor contributed inventions of practical value, as did Thales, nor even, on a more private scale, established a sect devoted to a certain way of living the good life, as did Pythagoras (599d – 600c).

It is easy to find this criticism grotesque. What is to become of poetry, we want to protest, if it is to be measured by the yardstick of such grossly practical results? But Plato is not saying that we should apply so practical a yardstick to poetry; he is saying that, indeed, we should not, but that, if we suppose poets to have a user's rather than an imitator's skill on the question of how to live in society, we would be compelled to do so; for that is the yardstick we customarily apply to those we hold to be so endowed. And mention of the institutions that Homer did not establish reminds us by contrast of his actual social legacy: the guild of Homerids, the circuit of performance by travelling rhapsodes (599e6, 600d5 – 6). Poetry had its established portion in the life of the city, in the time of festivals and celebrations and of preparation for adulthood; and it perpetuated itself as an institution not by attempting to change society to its own genetic advantage, but by transmitting the (imitative) skill which entitled its practitioners to their allotted place in society (even though that skill might be used to say things which, if attended to, could bring about social reform). Poetry, in short, was an autonomous profession; whereas philosophy, in Plato's day and as Plato thought of philosophy, was not. Plato's Academy, we know, was politically active; philosophers, in his view, were to seek ultimately to change society, and at least (in Pythagorean fashion) to establish their own way of living the good life; but not, like poets, to be content to perform within society. In claiming for philosophers the user's skill in 'political' life he could not abjure, then, the practical yardstick. That Socrates never wrote a law is to be seen as a failure, both on Socrates' and society's part. The point is: it is at least not absurd for Socrates, still less for Plato, to have aspired to such an ambition; whereas it would be absurd – socially, professionally absurd – for a Homer.

But there is a further point in Socrates' appeal to practical success, namely an acknowledgment that, however worthy a part of one's ambitions it may be, it is an unreliable index of wisdom. This can be seen in Socrates' unfavourable comparison of Homer's reception to that of the sophists Protagoras and Prodicus, who managed to surround themselves with a coterie of enthusiasts convinced that they had found the only sages capable of telling them how to live their lives (600c – e). We hardly need to be acquainted with Plato's general suspicion of these figures – who were threatening to professionalise philosophy in much the way that he found a weakness in poetry – to sense the irony in the hyperbolic language of this comparison. The pair



of sophists offer a prime example of the ability to give an audience the impression of understanding how to live, without possessing or imparting the actual skill (cf. *Sophist* 234c–d). And this is directly relevant to the objection that Homer could not have composed as well as he did without properly understanding how to live the kind of life he spoke of. Socrates' reply is, in effect, that, however plausible this may seem, there is no use in simply insisting on it; for we all know of examples such as those of Protagoras and Prodicus which demonstrate that a guru can win unmerited conviction from his audience; and who is to guarantee that Homer is not the beneficiary – at a less sensational level, to be sure – of this type of response? The objector, then, must at least provide further argument to support his objection; and Socrates meanwhile is engaged in the further argument needed to show that poetic imitation not only need not be hospitable to the user's understanding, but if given its head is positively inhospitable to it; and moreover that what it offers does not deserve to be classed as a kind of understanding in its own right.

So far, then, Socrates has reasoned on both metaphysical and social grounds that the imitative artist has no intrinsic understanding – no understanding just by virtue of being an imitator – of the user's skill to which his imitations correspond; and that our epic and dramatic poets are imitative artists in the required sense (602b6–10). Put another way: the success of a good painting or poem can be completely explained without reference to the Forms. What painters produce is the look of a scene; but this 'look' (in an abstract rather than concrete sense) is also all that they need refer to as they work. Similarly, what poets produce is the feel of a situation, and all they need refer to as they work is this 'feel' – how human behaviour comes across. A poet could be entirely successful and yet remain trapped within the circle of social appearances, which would provide both the object and the outcome of his imitation.<sup>55</sup>

This argument would not be properly compelling, however, unless Plato can make it out in terms of the reception of poetry, in addition to its production. For what would it matter, really, how poets bring off their creations, if the effect of those representations on the audience were to provide them with the means of uncovering the very springs of the human behaviour represented? Here Socrates must call upon the resources of psychology, as elaborated in the preceding books; and it is the move that clinches his argument. His question now is: given the imitative nature of poetry, what in us – what element of our psychological make-up – is the target of its power (602c1–5)? And he represents his (psychological) answer as a direct elaboration of what he meant in demoting imitative art to the 'third remove from reality' (603a10–b2).

<sup>55</sup> Socrates uses the word *φάντασμα*, 'appearance' (in a sense that encompasses both 'look' and 'feel'), to describe both what the imitative artist produces (599a2) and the object he imitates (598b3): a point developed by Nehamas, 'Imitation', p. 62.

Socrates begins with a simpler illustration of what he wants to say, taken again from the visual arts (and making his method explicit at 603b9–c2). Painters, theatrical scene-painters especially, make much use of optical effects such as that of distance on apparent size, or of how a surface can appear concave or convex depending on the arrangement of its colours (602c7–d5). This ‘trickery’ works on us in a special way. To the extent that we are familiar with its operation, we are not fooled into thinking the distant object is actually smaller, or that the plane surface is actually convex; we are able to make comparisons, to ‘measure’ and judge in such a manner that ‘the apparently larger does not hold sway within us’ (602d6–9) – which is to say that we do not act on a belief that the man in the distance is a midget, nor would we attempt to get inside a stage-flat. Nevertheless, it often happens that even to one secure in this judgement ‘the opposite appears at the same time about the same object’ (602e4–6); that is, the man in the distance persists in looking smaller, the stage pillar we know to be flat still looks round (and by having Socrates say that this happens ‘often’ rather than ‘always’ Plato presumably alludes to the fact that in certain cases, especially on stage, our knowledge of how the effect comes about can actually kill the illusion). Appealing to the principle by which he first distinguished the parts of the soul (4.436b), Socrates points out that whatever in us judges the proper size of the object in the distance cannot be the same as that which contradicts it – that to which the distant object seems small, and which disposes us to insist that it does at least look small (602d8–3a2). The task of judging correctly he assigns to the highest, wisdom-loving part of the soul, the part which Socrates here recalls in its devotion to ‘measure and calculation’ and applauds as the ‘best’ element within us (602d1–2, 603a4–5). He does not further justify the equation, but Plato’s thought is that insofar as the wisdom-loving part cares for the entire soul and has as its greatest task the organisation of all impulses in the soul, including its own, across the course of a life, so on the more mundane level of vision it would fall to this part to take into critical account our impulse to discern a particular look in an object when seen from a particular distance or angle, an impulse that would put blinkers on us and lead us into all sorts of trouble if we were to follow its call exclusively (that is, if we were to believe that the man in the distance really is a midget), although, when adjusted for by our life-long experience of the effects of distance on size, it not only causes no trouble but provides essential information about where we stand in the world. Left to itself, however, it opposes the ‘best’ in us and so merits Socrates’ disapproval of it as ‘one of the base things in us’ (603a7–8). This it is that painting ‘consorts with’ and targets itself upon (602d1–4, 603a10–b2).

But Socrates does not dwell on how the base part merits its title in the workings of vision, nor on what we are to think of painting for consorting with it, but passes on to the parallel workings of human action (of which vision is but a small component) and its representation in poetry; and it is here that

he dwells on the attendant dangers (a contrast which suggests that Plato thought of painting not only as an art that was easier to comprehend, but also as comparatively trivial). Socrates adduces the example of psychological conflict in a man grieving over the loss of a beloved son. Grieve he certainly must, but to the extent that he is led by the best part of him, the part which looks to the long-term and has a sense of the man's place within society as a whole, he will 'be measured' in his grief (603e–f), and work to heal the wound that sequesters him from his fellows. He must resist wallowing in his grief; refuse, that is, to be ruled by the impulse to grieve (as opposed to avoiding grief altogether) – an impulse of the lowest part of the soul, which reacts immediately, almost as a reflex, to the situation at hand, and seeks satisfaction blindly. (This is a paraphrase of 603d–4d).

The example is taken from life, not fiction; Socrates has yet to say how poetry exploits such situations. This corresponds to his order of presentation in speaking of the visual arts, when he first described optical effects that apply in the world (effects of distance on size, of refraction through water), and only then turned to how scene-painting exploits similar effects (indeed, one of the effects mentioned, that a stick appears bent in water, scene-painting presumably did *not* exploit; the examples are primarily to illustrate the psychological process of vision) (602d1–2). The correspondence between the merely visual and the fully ethical types of psychological conflict is clear enough.<sup>56</sup> Once we have used our eyes in this world for but a little while, we understand that the person in the distance is not actually tiny, that the stick in water is as straight as it ever was; nevertheless, the stick does still look bent, the person still looks tiny, and no amount of understanding will (or even should) stop this effect, for it is part and parcel of how we apprehend the world. What we must avoid, however (and here we introduce the element of conflict), is being 'ruled' or led by the appearance, being inclined to throw the stick away because it is broken. So too, at a level of conflict vastly more difficult to cope with, the bereaved father who has lived long enough to see his way around life understands that this grief will pass and can console himself by taking the large view of human frailty – knows, as it were, the true size of his bereavement when measured against the fullness of a life. This knowledge will not stop him grieving (the stick still looks bent, the bereavement is still painful), nor should it; such reactions are part and parcel of how we actually register vicissitudes (as opposed to dismissing them, refusing even to apprehend them). But this knowledge will prevent the immediate reaction from ruling or obsessing him, and mourning from becoming the purpose of his life. Hence, Socrates sees fit to mention (604a) that the man would let himself go far more if alone than if in sight of others, for grief threatens to make him a world unto himself; makes him want to throw the stick of his life away, we might say, because it is broken.

<sup>56</sup> The correspondence has, however, worried some commentators, cf. Annas, 'Triviality', pp. 7–9; Murphy, *Plato's Republic*, pp. 239–43; Nehamas, 'Imitation', pp. 64–6.

Now consider what Socrates says of the poet's task at 604e–5a. That in us which is prone to complain, the lowest part of our souls which, given its head, would have us not merely grieve but indulge our grief, offers many and varied opportunities for imitation; but the thoughtful and steadfast character manifest in the father who is measured in his grief, being equable and relatively unvaried, is neither easy to imitate nor so readily understood by the audience, especially an audience as kaleidoscopic as that found at dramatic festivals. For both these reasons, poets incline to appeal through their imitations to our baser part.

Plato makes the point with tantalising brevity, but let us follow his lead (at 605a8–b2) and elaborate it through configuration with the example from scene-painting. Scene-painters aim above all at getting their props recognised, and since we recognise scenes not by virtue of what they are but by how they look, they tailor their efforts to that in us which picks up on the look of things rather than that which judges things as they are. So too poets, as imitators, aim at drawing us into their presentation by making us imagine ourselves as participants in the action, whether by identifying with one or more characters or simply by thinking of ourselves as bystanders, and just as by recognising a prop to suggest a house we can imagine ourselves entering it. But as we recognise stage-scenery by how it looks rather than by what it is, so we recognise poetic action by how it feels (which in the case of staged drama will include how it looks); only so can we be drawn into the imitation. Hence, poets will appeal to that in us which dwells upon the particular flavour of a human situation rather than to our capacity to minimise it; being vivid, after all, is what the medium of imitation both invites and excels at. It has an inbuilt tendency, then, to heighten the particular, to focus upon crises. But what is most characteristic of the better role-models is that insofar as they must adopt a particular perspective, it is one which would emphasise the particularity of a whole life at the expense of the particularity of its crises (the father grieves without dwelling on his grief); its crises will be less critical. Thus poetic imitation will centre on sensational characters, sensationally presented. There is something in this of Brecht's complaint that the 'hypnotic magic' of realistic drama works by 'drawing each trait of character from the narrow field within which everyone can say at once: that is how it is'.<sup>57</sup> Brecht worried that for as long as theatre remains dependent on the recognisable it would be impotent to challenge bourgeois complacency and so awaken our critical faculties; Plato is saying that by its dependence on the process of recognition and identification imitative poetry feeds our appetite for surrender to the moment (by offering like characters for our delectation), and dulls our more reflective part.

Here, despite what the comparison with Brecht may do to give us pause,

<sup>57</sup> See 'A short organum for the theatre', esp. sections 28–33, in John Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre* (London, 1964).

we will surely want to protest at what may seem Plato's intolerable cheapening of tragic poetry. Let us grant that a poet will gravitate towards the portrayal of crisis; still, why must we think of this as an appeal to our baser part, and suited to the worst kind of audience? To become involved in Oedipus' struggle as he thrashes at the tightening nets of fate and finally, in a supreme moment, in an agony of understanding, comes to accept responsibility for who he is – surely this can be to experience through the narrow focus of a moment the epiphany of a whole life, a perspective as all-encompassing as any could be? And surely such crises will be suited to a wide audience not because they touch the lowest common denominator, but because they invite a full range of exploration, from the shallowest thrill of shock to the most Nietzschean 'joy in the annihilation' of the hero.<sup>58</sup> And why can the model of an Oedipus not offer us food for reflection without tempting us somehow to emulate its undesirable aspects? This is a version, made specific to Plato's argument at this point, of the more general objection voiced at the beginning of this section: granted that to create poetry is by no means simply to teach or convey information in an especially lively fashion, still, why should we not regard the benefits of imaginatively partaking of an imitation in quite as positive a light as we do the sharing of information? Why should we not regard imitation as itself a kind of understanding? Perhaps the worthiest benefits yield themselves only to the worthiest among the audience, but at least at that level there is surely room for an experience far deeper than the sensationalism that Socrates here indiscriminately attributes to serious poetry.

Plato faces this, the most serious challenge, quite squarely; for the last and what Socrates calls the 'greatest' of the counts against poetry is precisely that even as experienced by the worthiest among the audience – never mind that tragedians and rhapsodes must in fact appeal to a wider public – it retains the tendency to exploit their worst part, and so corrupt them (605c6–8).<sup>59</sup> The response deserves step-by-step examination. Socrates keeps to the example of grief, and considers the reaction of even 'the best of us' in the audience while a hero draws out a long speech of bereavement or a group sings, beating the breast in mourning. 'We feel pleasure', he points out, 'and give ourselves over, following along sympathetically, and we praise in all seriousness, as a good poet, the one who can most readily put us in this condition' (605c10–d5). He contrasts the reaction that he and Glaucon had agreed would characterise the best of us when faced with actual bereavement; such a person, acting out of self-respect, would seek to behave in just the opposite manner of the characters on stage, that is, would attempt to still and quieten himself, believing this to be 'manly' conduct, whereas 'the other kind

<sup>58</sup> The phrase is from section 16 of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

<sup>59</sup> At 605c7 Socrates announces only that poetry is 'sufficient' to corrupt even the worthiest, but the conclusion to which he argues is stronger: that it actually 'nourishes' our worst part, and that this effect is 'not easy' to escape (606b7–8, 606d4–7).

of behaviour, which we were then praising, is womanish' (605d7 – e2). Seen from a modern perspective, Socrates has shifted his ground here. He first pointed out, quite impeccably it seemed, that the object of our praise, when we take pleasure in being moved to sympathetic grief, is the skill of the poet; but now he is saying that what we were praising 'then' – when we were a part of the audience – was not the poet for his portrayal of the 'womanish' behaviour, but the unacceptable behaviour itself. Can Plato not see the difference between praising a representation and praising what is represented? Apparently not, for Socrates proceeds to compound what we would think of as the confusion. How can it be right, he goes on, to witness a man acting as we ourselves would be ashamed to act and yet not to feel aversion but rather take pleasure in and praise his behaviour (605e4 – 6)? Not only our praise but also the pleasure we feel while in the audience would be pleasure at the behaviour portrayed rather than at the dramatic portrayal.

But let us look more closely. Plato has not selected just any example of behaviour that the best of us would shun in ourselves, but an example in which the unacceptable act is an act of expression. It is not the hero's grief that is found unacceptable – for the bereaved father also grieves – but the fact that the hero and others give full expression to their grief. This, and not grief as such, is the behaviour that stands in natural contrast with the attempt to endure and keep silent (at 605d8 – e1). Seen with this emphasis, Plato's apparent refusal or incapacity to acknowledge what we would call 'aesthetic distance' – that the pleasure the audience takes is not at the sorrow represented but at the representation of the sorrow<sup>60</sup> – becomes not only understandable but, we may even think, justifiable. When we praise the tragic poet for his 'imitation' of the grieving hero, and take pleasure in that portrayal, the object of our praise and pleasure is not the grief itself, but the poet's expression of grief. Yet this same behaviour – giving expression to grief – is what we witness in the figure of the grieving hero; and how better, after all, can the poet imitate grief directly than by showing us characters who themselves express their grief? Thus Plato does not shift his ground in this argument; for the behaviour we praise and savour in both the poet and his character is of the same type.

It is not that tragic poetry is somehow doomed to portray characters who indulge their 'complaining part' in an utterly exorbitant fashion. Rather, it is that tragic poetry must at least, of its very nature, air the complaint. Tragic poetry, we can say, just *is* the expression of human sorrow. And in this it stands intrinsically opposed to the ethos of the enduring soul, for whom sorrow is, precisely, to be endured, but not expressed. This is not a stricture tragic poets could evade (even if they wanted to) by portraying less extravagant sorrowers. Any expression of sorrow in so prominent and, as it were, well-lit an arena as

<sup>60</sup> The accusation is forcefully made by Nehamas, 'Imitation', p. 69.

the stage is too much: not because sorrow is to be denied, but because it is to work its way out in silence, in the background. To pluck it from the background and give it expression is to turn towards it, instead of working to get over it; to give it a value all its own and become hypnotised by its voice, rather than register and learn from what it has to say. That is why the type of troubled and breast-beating hero whom Socrates in Book III actually recommends the young Guardians should hear (390d) is Odysseus admonishing his heart to endure. Odysseus is not denying his wretchedness; but he is giving expression only to his endurance. We would not get very far with Plato, then, even if we could take him to one side and point out that it is not the represented sorrow that we in the audience are praising or pleased by, but the representation or expression of the sorrow; for what he takes to be bad, and to make tragic poets and audiences guilty equivalents of the self-indulgent hero, is just that: not the sorrow, but the expression of the sorrow.

That this is Plato's point becomes clear from the psychological analysis of the audience's response that Socrates proceeds to establish. The part of the soul to which tragic poets appeal when they give expression to human suffering and induce us to shed sympathetic tears is indeed the lowest part, which is 'hungry to weep and to get its fill of bitter lamentation' (606a4–5); for we saw it defined as the centre of immediate, unreflective reaction in the soul, and the urge to weep and lament – not just to grieve, but to express grief – is our immediate reaction to great sorrow. It is this urge that tragic poets 'satisfy and delight' (606a6–7). The audience feels pleasure not in that they are moved to sadness – sadness is no pleasure, after all – but in that they are allowed to give vent to their sadness by participating sympathetically in its poetic expression. Similarly, at a comedy we vent in laughter the urge to indulge a kind of buffoonery that we would be ashamed actually to play at ourselves (606c2–10).<sup>61</sup> Outside the theatre, as we have seen, our better, reflective part – at least in the best among us – would act to restrain the urge to give grief full expression. As members of an audience, however, our second thoughts take a different form. We reason that it is no shame to us, personally, to witness or hear of others giving vent to grief in a shameful way; yet by pitying them we are able vicariously to 'gain the profit' of pleasure – the pleasure of relaxing our guard on the tear-hungry part and giving it its fill (606a7–b5). We cream off the pleasure of letting ourselves go, but with no fear of suffering the pain of remorse. Put so disagreeably, it is no wonder that Socrates attributes this calculation (606a7–8) to a lack of proper education (by which he means an education from which, for one thing, such poetry would be absent). And in our eagerness not to be deprived of this pleasure if we can enjoy it with impunity, few of us pause to reflect that by allowing our plaintive

<sup>61</sup> In the *Philebus* (at 47e–50e) there is an analysis of comedy even more closely parallel to that of tragedy here.

part to wax strong in such contexts we make it harder for ourselves to resist its blandishments in our own personal sorrows (606b5–8).

We see, then, that so far from ignoring the phenomenon we know as aesthetic distance, Plato is in fact directing his attack upon it. The category of the 'aesthetic' only came to prominence, of course, in a later age; but in its appropriation of a zone of pleasure divorced in principle from ethical consequences Plato would surely have little difficulty discerning the line of reasoning he here attributes to the lack of proper education in even the best of us. Crucial to his argument, we have seen, is the premise that with certain feelings, such as the grief central to the experience of tragedy, shame attaches not to the feeling itself but to its expression. And shame is a public sensibility; it ties us to our fellows (recall that the grieving father was the more likely to let himself go if left alone than if in company, 604a2–4). But if public venting of grief is itself the shameful thing, then why should we think it makes a difference that what causes us to vent our grief in the public theatre is no private trouble of our own, but rather a fictional situation with which we allow ourselves to become collectively engaged? The public expression of grief takes place just the same; indeed, with a greater licence; hence Socrates insists we are nourishing exactly that part of us which hungers to lament over our private sorrows. From this perspective, the fact that by the conventions of performance we agree to suspend the sense of shame that would operate outside the theatre seems no better than a collective abdication of social responsibility. Plato is not denying the existence and power of these conventions; he is not pretending that the audience simply indulges in an orgy of losing itself in the fiction, and is not also measuring its distance from the feelings it allows to well up; this he acknowledges in describing the conscious acquiescence of our better part. But what he describes is truly the distance of 'spectacle' in the worst sense; for by allowing the plaintive appetite to have its head, the more reflective part is allowing it almost literally (as we might say) to *make a spectacle* of itself.

The premise crucial to Plato's argument at this point is clearly an ethical rather than what we would call an aesthetic premise; and if we grant its consequence, and wish either to controvert or to bolster the conclusion, we would have no option but to widen the focus from poetry to the entire ethos of Plato's ideal society. The implication of Socrates' conclusion (that poetic imitation brings about in our souls the rule of the lowest, appetitive part and so corrupts and makes us wretched, 606d4–7) is that we thereby start on the degeneration towards the tyrannical personality, in whom the rule of the lowest part has become unshakeable and whose life is the most wretched possible (9.578b). Socrates' assertion here that the rule of the lowest part will make us wretched is not warranted by the argumentation of Book X but rather by that of Books VIII and IX.

We saw that the tyrant's life is described in the ninth book as a waking



dream. The description is based on Socrates' account of sleep at the beginning of the book, in which he explains that our lowest urges come into their own when we sleep; that what we call sleep is really, for most of us, the sleep only of the highest part of the soul; for it is then that the lowest part 'wakes up' and does not hesitate to commit, 'so it thinks', the most shameless acts (571c – 2b). Whereas our best part, being devoted to the needs of the whole, is concerned primarily with the waking person, with our active and therefore 'actual' lives, our lowest part can 'wake up' – can fully manifest its nature – even in dreams.<sup>62</sup> It can do so because it has no care for the other elements in the soul, hence for the waking person, and can accordingly be satisfied by merely 'thinking' itself satisfied. As the source of immediate wants in the soul it seeks only satisfaction, however obtained. If a dream will satisfy, then a dream is as good as the real thing.

We can surely see, then, why this part of soul – the part which consumes the life of the tyrannical personality and turns it to waking fantasy – should be the 'theatrical' part. Just as in sleep our immediate urges slip the leash of reflection and cavort across the dreamscape, so we in the audience collectively agree to let loose and give expression to the impulses we would normally restrain, whether these are cheap and voyeuristic or appropriate to the deepest struggles and sorrows in life. Certainly, an audience is not asleep, but is able to monitor the course of its impulses. However, this is only to say that we are not just experiencing the impulse but dwelling upon it; not just 'feeling along' in a manner appropriate to the situation, but having the 'feel' presented to us through the magic of poetic imitation. And what we fail to reckon with is that if our lowest part comes into its own in dreams, so too is it being allowed to show its true colours in the collective dream that takes place in the theatre. It makes no difference that our reflective part is awake and watching while the other part cavorts; for by joining in the expression and imitation of grief or anger or lust (606d1) we do not simply grieve or feel angry or sexually excited but also dwell upon the feeling of these states of the soul. But just this is what it is for the lower part to rule in the soul: that its impulses are not restrained or kept in the background but find full expression. It does not matter that the audience-member has not actually been deprived of a son or frustrated by Agamemnon; the impulses that would come into play are given their head as if these things had actually happened, and to be given their head is all that they seek. They do not, so to speak, stop to ask after the cause of their freedom. Thus we cannot – at least, not with safety – join an audience for the purpose of extending our imaginative horizons beyond what we have ourselves experienced. The distinction between simulation and the real thing just does not apply to our immediate impulses.

<sup>62</sup> At 571d6 – 2b1 Socrates describes a regimen preparatory to sleep for the purpose of 'stimulating' our highest part and putting the other two truly to sleep. See Adam's commentary at 572a7.

We may be deterred from accepting this type of analysis, as some philosophers have been, by considering the particular audience-reaction of fear. As I sit in the audience and watch Frankenstein's monster march towards me on screen, or (in Plato's world) see the Furies rush onto the orchestra, can it be that the impulse gripping me is actual fear, and not to be distinguished from what I would feel in real life? Perhaps my skin crawls, my fingers tighten on the arm-rests – but still, if I were really afraid, would I not have to think that I were really in danger, and simply run for it? Surely, then, it is a 'make-believe' fear that I feel – and so too with the gamut of our reactions?

This objection can be successfully resisted even as an account of our reaction to horrific effects,<sup>63</sup> but it misses the high tone of Plato's account. When Socrates discusses how poetry can induce fear, at the beginning of Book III, the focus of his worry is that the bleak and pessimistic evocations of Hades in Homer will foster and indulge our fear of death, and only as a secondary matter does he add that since the very words used to name the place and its denizens can cause listeners to tremble, they should be expunged (386a – 7b). It is not the passing tremor caused by the sound or appearance of the imitation that he considers most dangerous, but the deeper fear of which it is a symptom – a fear which can hold sway over an entire life. So too what he seeks to induce by tampering with stories of the gods is no fleeting glow of piety but a sense that the harmonious life (as represented by such role models) is valuable or worthwhile, and a determination to live it; while what he seeks to avoid is a creeping contempt for the very fabric of our social life (see 3.386a1 – 4). The tenseness of the audience at a horror-show pales into triviality by comparison.<sup>64</sup> Plato is thus directing his criticism at the sort of poetic performance that arouses in the audience what we ought least to be inclined to dismiss as a merely 'make-believe' or 'fictional' reaction. And this will be performance of the noblest sort. For if my heart swells as I watch son part from mother, or lovers lose their chance of happiness, it swells not only for the characters but for the human situation to which the performance gives me access: I weep that sons must part from mothers, that things should be so. But so too when we part from our own mothers, or lovers; our feelings brim not simply at the moment, but at the consciousness that this moment has importance for a lifetime; that it is somehow exemplary. Our life at that moment, we might say, feels like a tragedy; and indeed, in Plato's view our heart swells no differently in the theatre than in real life. The difference comes in how we act on its promptings. In real life I would not sit and luxuriate in my fear of an approaching monstrosity, but would run; in real life I would not prolong and wallow in the grief of parting, but would help my partner to bear up under its strain.

<sup>63</sup> Alec Hyslop, 'Emotions and fictional characters', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 64, 3 (1986), esp. p. 294.

<sup>64</sup> Aristotle makes a similar point, *Po.* 1453b.

Readers can now, perhaps, feel something of the force of Plato's challenge. It is this: that poetic tragedy, despite what we may think, cannot help us cope with or even more richly appreciate the tragedies of life. It cannot do so because the way to cope with and appreciate and learn from the tragedies of life is to live them; and that means – if we are to live successfully – to bear up under their strain and not allow them to dominate. But that they should dominate is just what poetic tragedy does allow, by giving them full expression. Let me put this to the reader directly. Have you never felt, sitting there in the audience, or even perhaps through deep study of great tragic literature, that this after all – the vulnerability, the fragility of human life that tragedy portrays – is what is, at least in part, truly valuable in a human life, and to be embraced as intrinsic to our humanity? That life would be less if tragedy were absent from it? If so, you – we – have been prey to the temptation on account of which Plato would banish the greatest poetry. It makes no difference that the characters of the drama are perhaps shown learning from their struggles, coming to terms with them as Oedipus does; for by allowing full expression to the pain and sorrow with which he must come to terms, poet and audience risk making a fetish of it. Put brutally: we learn to kiss the boot that kicks us. And that is why it is not absurd for Plato to give poetry the unhealthy complexion of so addictive a personality as the tyrant. We would never be prepared to part with poetry, as Socrates by contrast declares himself ready to part from the poetry he loves, as if parting from a lover (607e4–5); for we prefer the tragedy of parting – the bitter thrill of it – to the sadness of having parted.

Let us, finally, not disguise from ourselves that it is the very greatest poetry that Plato would banish. A place will remain in the ideal society for 'hymns to the gods and encomia of the worthy' (607a3–4), with which we should compare the material to be sung by civic choruses of various ages, culminating in the Dionysian chorus, as instituted in the second book of the *Laws*. But no place is made for a kind of poetry, or poet, who could be any rival for the philosopher. These civic choruses are merely celebrating and confirming themselves in the shared values of the city: values for which philosophy is their guide. But the greatest poetry is that which threatens to become a value in its own right, and so an obstacle. Plato banishes tragedy from the stage for fear that it will prevent us coping with the drama of life.

## 6 *Plato as poet*

To what extent, if at all, does Plato envisage the possibility of a reformed and truly philosophic sort of poetry? Certainly, no one can claim to understand Plato's views on poetry without formulating a response to these questions. The matter can only be addressed briefly here, and consideration of it involves a shift from Plato's views on poetry to his views on a certain way of doing

philosophy. The nub of it is that for Plato there is no such thing as philosophic poetry, only (at closest) a poetic sort of philosophy.

We should begin by asking whether Plato leaves room in the *Republic* itself for a poetry that would not be confined to the inculcation of good habits in the young and to civic-minded celebration. At the outset of Book X Socrates declares that tragic poetry is harmful to 'all except those who have as remedy [*pharmakon*] an understanding of what it actually is' (595b3–7); and later (at 606b6) he alludes to 'those few' who are able to foresee its dangers. But we are surely not to think that the greatest poetry will have a place in the ideal society as the preserve of these 'few' – as if by coming to it forearmed they can appreciate it with impunity. For one thing, Socrates banishes the greatest poets 'from the city', without qualification (607b2–3). His talk of a 'remedy' is related to his closing description of his arguments as the 'spell' (*epōidē*, 608a4) that he sings to counteract the seductive pull in poetry, a pull instilled in him by his upbringing (607c6–d2, 607e4–8b2). The word translated as 'remedy', after all, also bears the more particular meaning of '(love)-philtre' or 'spell'. Being able to cast this remedial spell would not render Socrates immune to the effects of imitative poetry if he were to go ahead and participate in the imitation; rather, it enables him to hold aloof, unlike the rest of the audience, from indulging his inclination to participate.

The true account of these matters is expressed in the analogy of the Philosopher-Painter discussed at the beginning of the previous section. Plato's ideal is this: that imitativeness shall nowhere flourish, but that imitation, by contrast, is to be considered essential to human development both in the lesser guise of poetry (in educational and civic contexts) and in its highest manifestation as the philosophic life that imitates the Forms, emulating what is divine in us. The best sort of imitation is not poetry at all, but philosophy – an activity which cannot be distinguished, either in its products or procedures, from the practice of a certain kind of life. This position does not shift in any essential way (although it does undergo development) in dialogues thought to have been written after the *Republic*. In particular, we might think that the *Phaedrus* represents something of a change of heart, since Socrates there seems prepared to acknowledge that the 'divine madness' or inspiration characteristic of poets, as well as of prophets and ritual healers, should find a place in the philosophic life also, in the special kind of erotic love that philosophic characters conceive for each other (244a–5c). Has Plato perhaps returned here to the aspect of poetry which first aroused his hostility – poetic inspiration – in order to set the record straight? Yet in the same speech that begins with this generous acknowledgement Socrates proceeds to issue a ranking of types of life in which that of the philosopher, a 'follower of the muses and a lover', is at the top and that of the poet is in only sixth place, after statesmen, businessmen, doctors, and prophets and just before such clearly inferior lives as those of the demagogue and the tyrant (248d–e). On closer

scrutiny, we see that in the proem of his speech Socrates is casting the inspirational arts he names more in the light of their ancient achievements than of their future potential.<sup>65</sup> When he turns from such traditional piety to the new myth of the after-life (246a–9d) on which he is to ground a radical revision of the moral psychology of love (249d–57b), philosophers come into their own as the ‘followers of the muses’ *par excellence*. Philosophy is being portrayed as the inheritor of the role of poetry (and of other arts), not as its partner.

Certainly, then, we find a shift in position here by comparison to the treatment of poetic inspiration in the earlier dialogues; but the crucial element in that shift – the recognition that poetry can be put to positive use as the ward of philosophy – was already in place, indeed is the heart of the account, in the *Republic*. In the *Phaedrus*, by comparison with the *Republic*, Plato turns from the place of poetry in society at large to the life of the individual philosopher, and the place in that life of something comparable to poetic inspiration: the inspirational force of the philosopher’s falling in love. For in his direct encounter with beauty, in the shape of the beloved, the philosopher is confronted with something more than he can either properly articulate or fully understand, but which he aspires to make sense of – and this amounts to discovering himself as a philosopher – by building a philosophic life in partnership with the beloved. The ‘divine madness’ of philosophy is related to that of poetry much as imitation of the Forms is related to poetic imitation. While the poetic activity issues in a performance that has its place within life, philosophy issues in a ‘performance’ that simply *is* a life.

Nevertheless, to judge from those scenes from the philosophic life provided by Plato’s dialogues, the philosopher is not to scorn the resources of poetry. In the *Phaedrus* itself Socrates constructs an elaborate ‘mythic hymn’ (265c1), which he explicitly qualifies as ‘poetic’ (275a5), in order to give expression to the very difficulty that the philosophic lover encounters in understanding and articulating his love. As philosopher, after all, Socrates is no more exempt from this difficulty than is the philosophic lover of whom he speaks; hence his recourse to the confessedly inadequate medium of mythic allegory (246a3–6). Moreover, in several dialogues Socrates famously brings the discussion to an end with myths of the after-life: in the *Phaedo*, the *Gorgias*, and the *Republic*. We have seen that Socrates makes a place in his ideal society for the ‘mythological lie’ (*Rep.* 382d); a necessary place, given our need for speculation beyond the limits of what we can securely understand.

But there is more than this to the philosophic use of myth. In none of the dialogues is Socrates talking to citizens of the ideal society; rather, he talks to those interested in philosophy, or defends philosophy from its detractors. By propounding new myths of the after-life, Socrates is in a sense painting

<sup>65</sup> 244a8–c5 (esp. 244b6–7, 244c4–5), 244d6, 245a4.

a background for a new and philosophic culture – offering the frightened disciples he leaves behind in the *Phaedo*, for example, a vision on which to fix their shared aspirations when he is gone. He calls that myth a ‘spell’ that they must repeat to encourage themselves (114d7), as we have just seen him call the arguments of the tenth book of the *Republic* a ‘spell’ to counteract the temptation to participate in tragic performance, and as in the *Phaedo* (77e8) itself he refers to the series of arguments for the immortality of the soul by implication as a ‘spell’ for Cebes to cast each day on the child within his soul until the fear of death is lulled. Both argument and story have the power to change our lives, and Socrates accordingly uses both, provided the change is for the better. However, the type of life towards which he would direct us is nevertheless characterised by its dissatisfaction with myth. Socrates concludes the arguments of the *Phaedo* with the caveat that we should follow them up and clarify their assumptions (107b) – with the sense, then, of an ongoing programme of inquiry; but concludes his myth quite otherwise, with the caveat that no sensible person would insist on its details, but that to believe that something of this sort is true would be a ‘noble risk’ (114d). There is no implication that myth could provide a cutting edge for shared inquiry. In the *Phaedrus*, similarly, Socrates pushes discussion forward by turning from his mythic hymn to a more discursive investigation. The discussion is partly driven by dissatisfaction with myth, yet the effect of the dialogue as a whole is to recognise the human necessity of myth, together with the corresponding limitations of argument; much as the philosophic lover of the mythic hymn is driven to the philosophic life by struggling with the mystery of what is happening to him, a mystery he can never fully articulate, but can render less mysterious – can make his home in, his new culture.<sup>66</sup>

We can regard Plato’s own use of the dialogue form in much the same light. Not only is he careful to mark with caveats the various poetic resources to which he is nevertheless driven within the dialogues (myths, allegories, and images), but his decision to adopt dialogue as the mode appropriate to his philosophic writing is itself a way of marking that entire written corpus with a warning for the reader or audience. We do not know how the dialogues were disseminated. At one point in the *Laws* the Athenian suggests that the discussion on which he and the others have been engaged might stand as a paradigm for what the young should hear at school (7.811c–e). But this does not necessarily imply that Plato would recommend the *Laws* itself as some kind of textbook; and the *Laws* is in any case an uncharacteristic dialogue. More illuminating is the opening scene of the *Theaetetus*, in which Euclides and Terpsion, two of the companions of Socrates mentioned in the *Phaedo* (at 58c2) as present at his death, are shown arranging for a servant to read

<sup>66</sup> The *Phaedrus* offers Plato’s most concerted examination (as well as being itself, of course, a fine example) of a ‘poetic’ kind of philosophy (as opposed to philosophic poetry); cf. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas*.

to them from Euclides' record of the Socratic conversation that then appears as the main body of the dialogue.

But regardless of whether Plato's dialogues were themselves performed in a dramatic fashion,<sup>67</sup> there was that about them which would render their realisation quite distinct from a performance of conventional drama or even the recitation of epic: namely, that whereas these latter are an imitation of people's actions,<sup>68</sup> of which the activity of talk is only a part, in a Platonic dialogue the talk *is* the action, the whole of it. Even when Antigone is constructing a plea for justice, her arguments are motivated by what she has done (her burying Polynices), and elicit from Creon not merely a response, but punishment. In Plato's dialogues, by contrast, the talk of the characters not only expresses the ideals of the philosophic life but puts those ideals into practice (at least, when the character is a role-model). It is expression and action all at once. Its particularity as a (fictional) action or event is as a conversation between people who believe (and challengers who do not) that thoughtful talk in itself is among the most important actions of our lives, and is important just in so far as it attains to a truth not tied to the particularity of any one conversation. Witnessing Antigone's tragedy, hearing of the struggles of Odysseus, we are privy to actions which, however exemplary or revealing they may be, in some sense stand on their own. These things are happening, we tell ourselves in imagination, and what, now, shall we make of them? But as the audience of Platonic dialogue we hear talk which, just to the extent that we imagine ourselves present as it is spoken and identify with the ideals it expresses, directs us out again to the world beyond such fictions, telling us that the only reaction to its message which has value in itself is to recreate its ideal in our own lives. The written dialogue itself, then, has, strictly speaking, only instrumental value towards that end.

This point is made explicit in the *Phaedrus* (274c–7a).<sup>69</sup> The 'living discourse' of philosophic discussion is there contrasted with its written 'image', which can serve at best as a 'reminder' of what is to be understood in the philosophic life (276a8–9, 275c8–d2). Socrates compares the written word to a painted portrait, which may seem to be alive but cannot answer back if questioned; so speech, once written down, can say only the same thing over and over (275d4–9). Yet while fixed in this sense, it is extremely fluid in another; for a script will circulate indiscriminately among all audiences, incapable of selecting those who can receive it with understanding (275d9–e5). A living speaker, by contrast, and especially the philosophic discussant,

<sup>67</sup> Gilbert Ryle, *Plato's Progress* (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 23–32.

<sup>68</sup> See the description in *Rep.* 10.603c4–8, and compare Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy in *Po.* 6.1449b24–8.

<sup>69</sup> A similar point is made in the *Seventh Letter* (341b3–5a1) and in the *Second Letter* (314b–c). Scholars have doubted the authenticity of both works, but most especially the latter.

can choose an appropriate conversational partner, can answer when questioned and so can expect to sow the seeds of fresh speech in the soul of the hearer (276e4 – 7a4).

All this is akin to the point Socrates made when bringing discussion of Simonides' poem to an end in the *Protagoras*. Let us not become locked in an interminable discussion over what the poet meant, he pleaded. The poet is not here to tell us what he meant; we are left only with what he said. So too, any speech that gets written down is prone to divide along these two channels: it becomes something that has been said, quite apart from something that was meant. And the division is accentuated – as it is not in speech – by the sharp contrast between the fixity of the former, the actual text, as against the extreme plurality of interpretive guesses at what the latter might be. But this is not a counsel of despair. Plato is not suggesting that philosophy should not be written, and therefore that what he writes is somehow not philosophy, any more than he suggests in the *Protagoras* that literary exegesis is valueless. Rather, he is anxious to ensure that philosophic writing and reading should not become an end in itself, but should be practised with the sense that what ultimately matters is the way of life in which it can find a worthy place. It is to be approached, says Socrates, in the spirit of a 'game' (276d1 – 8).

Plato holds that practitioners of writing are especially liable to lose sight of this goal. However, it is important to see that not only does he not think this an inevitable outcome of writing, but that he is also quite aware that oral discourse is not automatically free of such hazards. For one thing, writing is not directly in question in the discussion of Simonides' poem in the *Protagoras*. The poem is introduced orally, and its impotence to answer back derives from its canonical status and the absence of the author: conditions which would apply even if the poem had never been written down but had been orally transmitted. But there is a fine illustration of Plato's sensitivity to this issue in the opening scene of the *Phaedrus* itself, in Phaedrus' characteristic shenanigans with the written scroll of a speech by the orator Lysias. Phaedrus is a great fan of all manner of intellectual talk, rhetorical as well as philosophical, and in the hope of a chance to give his personal re-creation of the rhetorical performance he had heard from Lysias on the morning of this conversation, he attempts to conceal from Socrates that he has managed to borrow the actual script of the speech from its author. But Socrates uncovers his ruse, and insists on having the written text read to him instead (227a1 – 8e5). Not that Socrates, as we have seen, is any friend to the written word; but he wants to preclude a mere pretence at living speech on Phaedrus' part. In re-creating Lysias' speech, Phaedrus would not have been intent on conveying what Lysias had said, for all his praise of its cleverness (227c5 – 8). Had this been his primary intent, he would have produced the script without further ado. Rather, what he longs for is to reproduce its effect of cleverness; to make himself over in the image of an artificer of words (as he tells us at



227d6–8a4). Phaedrus treats Lysias' script not as a simple tool of verbal transmission but as something magical: the bottled essence, as it were, of the performance that thrilled him so, and a potion which can transform him into his ideal. That is why he spared no effort to secure it from its author, yet is so ready to disown it before Socrates.

Phaedrus' behaviour illustrates two points. First, that the dangers Socrates later attributes to writing can also be run in spoken discourse; for had he let Phaedrus have his head, we would have heard *extempore* speech that took as its goal not the generation of fresh discussion, but the re-prompting of old applause. Indeed, to suppose that the medium of *extempore* speech is by its very nature invulnerable to these hazards would be to treat it with just the superstition that Phaedrus brings to the written word. The second point illustrated is that the written word is nevertheless especially apt to promote this problem. As a tool for capturing words in a permanent form external to and potentially independent of their user, writing encourages Phaedrus' fetishist illusion that it can somehow preserve and transmit the very power by which authors write, and through the possession of which they have something to say. In other words, the practice of writing and reading is prone to take us in with its appearance of autonomy and lull us into not feeling the need to step beyond its confines in order to seek the way of life that makes that practice meaningful. So it is significant that when Socrates later (at 264c1–5) uses the metaphor of a 'living creature' to describe the properly scripted composition, with head and feet and torso all in place and forming an organic whole, he emphasises only the external aspect of the organism, its array of limbs. Contrast the 'life' subsequently attributed to oral discussion: talk that 'has soul in it' (*empsychon*, 276a8), and in comparison to which the formal completeness of the organic composition seems but an external 'portrait of life' (*zōgraphia*), not life itself. Indeed, Plato may here be out to show the limits of what amounted to a commonplace of technique (albeit one he accepted for his own writing), since he has Socrates announce the recommendation of organic composition as something that Phaedrus, the rhetorical enthusiast, would say (264c2).

In sum, neither writing nor speaking matter just in themselves; both draw their value from their use in a way of life. Despite this, there is no reason to suppose that Plato's devaluation of writing in comparison to speaking is not seriously meant. Certainly it is not undermined by the irony that it itself is couched in writing; for Socrates does not say that writing inevitably lies, but only that its truth is liable to get lost. We are offered neither a self-defeating nor a self-overcoming text, but a serious warning.<sup>70</sup>

But to speak more generally in conclusion: when we consider Plato's use

<sup>70</sup> This brief allusion must suffice in response to the 'ironic' interpretations of Derrida, 'Pharmacie', and Burger, 'Plato's *Phaedrus*'. For further discussion see Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas*, ch. 7.

of the dialogue form in conjunction with the content of the dialogues in this way, we see that consideration of the dialogues' merely instrumental value is being continually urged upon us, independently of any explicit statements to that effect, by the simple fact that what we hear are philosophic voices in action. Plato's dialogues are not philosophic poetry; for poetry is of its very nature content when it has presented us with human action (however sophisticated a task such presentation may be, however suggestive the presentation), and leaves us then to cope, or meditate. The dialogues are, rather, a poetic and philosophic call to the philosophic life.