

The Trouble with Culture: Plato's Critique of Poetry

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James D'Olier Ansell

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Abstract

In this thesis I argue that Plato's critique of poetry, taken in its proper context, is a serious and relevant critique of popular culture. In the first chapter I argue that the poetic reforms proposed in Books 2 and 3 and Book 10 of *Republic* stand at the front of a total reform of Greek culture. I argue for the consistency of Plato's whole argument and then I claim that if we get Plato's targets right, not fine art or literature, and focus on appropriate modern analogues then we can see why his critique is still important. If we share his claim that we are influenced by popular culture in important and often insidious ways and agree that culture can promote corrupt values, then we have accepted the core of Plato's challenge. If we find his solution distasteful, then the task is to come up with a democratic alternative. In the remaining two chapters I focus specifically on the challenge to the poets, putting the other reforms to the side. In the second chapter I consider a possible reply to the challenge focusing on the worth of the poetry that was expelled. I first look elsewhere in the Platonic oeuvre at the account of beauty in *Symposium* and *Phaedrus* but I argue that neither of them gives anything like aesthetic value that could be usefully applied to poetry. Next I look to some modern accounts of aesthetic value. I argue that while they might go some of the distance against Plato's challenge, they face a difficult task because it is not sufficient positing the value, an account is needed of their positive benefit. In the third chapter I turn to a more direct response to the challenge. Arguably Aristotle offers such a response in the *Poetics* in terms of the notion of *katharsis*. I consider two interpretative candidates for *katharsis*. The first takes the benefit of poetry to be psychological – *katharsis* is a purgation of otherwise pathological emotions. I argue that this fails because it misunderstands precisely what Plato's concerns about poetry are, and, furthermore, this account could even be compatible with Plato's worries. The second interpretation takes the benefit of poetry to be ethical – *katharsis* is a type of ethical clarification which is beneficial in training our emotional responses. I claim that the clarification, and education, is worryingly conventionalist, and doesn't take seriously that Plato's target was popular culture and not great, educative literature.

in the introduction and
chapter 1, with books
for other readers.

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Introduction

Plato is famously critical and intolerant of what we now consider to be one of the high points of Greek culture: its poetry. In *Republic* he recommends a series of poetic reforms. He first takes the censor's pen to Homer, Hesiod, and Aeschylus. Second he bans all dramatic poetry, that is, comedy and tragedy. And finally he bans all epic poetry. Insofar as Plato's arguments against poetry seem to depend on parts of *Republic* that are truly dead and defy resurrection – the two-world metaphysics and epistemology, the authoritarian political proposals, and the tripartite psychology – their conclusions, in addition to being distasteful and counterintuitive, have been seen as hopelessly untenable. His fears about the pernicious effects of the greatest poetry of Greek culture are, at first glance, almost incomprehensible to modern readers. It is incredibly difficult to see how Plato could be right about the corrosive effect of Homeric epic on people's psychological well-being, and a world without the arts, which Plato seems to recommend, seems profoundly ethically and socially impoverished. In addition to the *prima facie* implausibility of the critique, it has been argued that Plato's arguments are bad arguments: at best they are simplistic and at worst they are so hopelessly riddled with irresolvable tensions as to make them incoherent.

In this thesis I contend that such an approach to Plato's views on poetry is mistaken. Plato is not a philistine armed only with crude arguments. I claim that far from being a dead issue, some of our own worries about popular culture dovetail with Plato's subtle concerns about the effects of poetry. If we understand that Plato's concern with poetry was not with poetry as fine art or literature, but rather as the pre-eminent form of mass entertainment, and grant him two related assumptions, then the critique becomes a live issue. The two assumptions are:

First, that there is an important and often insidious interplay between the individual and culture – culture not only reflects society's values but it also forms them.

Second, that popular culture is not the best source of value, and even that the values of popular culture might be bad for people.

Plato's concern with poetry was with that which played a central role in the transmission of cultural values; in essence his concern was with that which formed his society's self-image. He charges that both the content and the form of popular culture is corrosive and corrupting, a charge which some people make about some of the media, such

as television, which play a central role in forming modern society's self-image. Plato's critique identifies a problem with how culture influences society and how that influence can be harmful. But having identified the problem, he proposes an authoritarian solution: given our psychological weaknesses and the power of cultural influence, he proposes strict state control of all facets of culture as the only solution. But this is not his final word. Plato is prepared to readmit the poets that he expelled from the Callipolis, the ideal state created in *Republic*, if it can be shown by argument that the poetry is beneficial to the individual and the city. This is Plato's challenge.

The aim of this thesis is to show that Plato's critique of the poets is not simplistic, implausible, and incoherent as it has often been charged. It will be divided into three chapters. In the first chapter I lay out the Platonic challenge and then in the second and third Chapters I consider two responses to the challenge, an aesthetic reply and an Aristotelian reply, and I claim that both fail to answer the challenge.

In the first chapter I set out Plato's reasons for the expulsion of what he terms the poets of pleasure from the Callipolis. Specifically, I argue for three things. First, that Plato's arguments are coherent and consistent. Second, that they are not bad arguments. And third, that Plato's attitude towards poetry dovetails with some modern concerns that we have about popular culture.

Plato discusses poetry in two separate places in *Republic*: in Books 2 and 3 and then in Book 10. Plato is charged with being inconsistent in these discussions. First, it is argued that there are tensions between Books 2 and 3 on the one hand, and Book 10 on the other; and second, that there are tensions that cannot be resolved within Book 10 itself. I argue that a close reading of the text shows that this view is mistaken: on closer examination the text can support a more charitable reading than it is sometimes given in the literature.

I then argue that Plato's arguments are not implausible. For example, the proscriptions on poetry in Books 2 and 3 have at their core a concern that if children are exposed to inappropriate material from a young age, then it is damaging for them – a concern that is widely shared today. Later in Book 10 Plato gives an account of how adults are affected by the sounds and images that constitute culture, in ways not dissimilar to children, even when they know better. Plato accounts for how the artefacts of culture influence and form character and, in turn, how society is formed by the sort of character in the community.

Finally I argue that these concerns are similar to some of our concerns about the values, both implicit and explicit, that surround us in culture. Plato gives an account of how we absorb these values from culture, and how the wrong sort of value might be damaging. This is similar to some modern concerns about, for example, unhealthy female beauty ideals. Constant exposure to these images affects people's – both men's and women's – attitudes and expectations and this is often harmful. Having identified this problem, Plato proposes an authoritarian solution. I argue that while we might be disinclined to accept his solution, Plato's challenge is nonetheless a serious one. The core of Plato's challenge is to give an account of why the poets should be allowed to say what they please in whatever way they please given that what they say can cause substantial harm to both the individual and the city.

In the second chapter I consider an aesthetic response to Plato's challenge.

Plato's critique of poetry is thoroughly ethical and because of this he seems to miss something distinctive and important about the arts. We prize the arts because they are beautiful, or in modern terms, they have aesthetic value. If it can be established that beauty or aesthetic value can benefit people in a way that is not reducible to any moral or cognitive benefit, then aesthetic value could be the start of a reply to the challenge.

While Plato did not have the modern concept of aesthetic value, he did have the Form of Beauty. I first consider whether two different accounts of Beauty developed elsewhere in the Platonic oeuvre, in the *Symposium* and in the *Phaedrus*, might generate resources with which to respond to the *Republic's* challenge. I argue that neither of these accounts of Beauty represents a departure from any of the *Republic's* views on poetry and that the benefits to the individual from Beauty cannot be transferred to aesthetic beauty. In *Symposium* physical Beauty is useful in training the soul to apprehend the true, untainted Form of Beauty. When this is attained any physical beauty pales and the lover will come to despise it. In the *Phaedrus*, because of some revision to the *Republic's* psychology, Plato grants that particular examples of physical beauty, rather than the *Symposium's* Formal Beauty, can be good for the soul. But the usefulness of this benefit is limited. Plato thinks of the love in explicitly erotic terms and this cannot be transferred to artistic contexts.

Since Plato's accounts of Beauty do not help against the critique, I consider a modern account of aesthetic value. On this account aesthetic value is irreducible to moral or cognitive value. It has the advantage of answering two of Plato's charges against poetry. The first is that poetry panders indiscriminately to the basest pleasures of the worst parts of

the soul. On this view, poetry appeals to a distinctive sort of pleasure, aesthetic pleasure. The presence of aesthetic value can help distinguish between, for instance, sexual content that is pornographic and artistic sexual material. The second charge that a modern account can answer is that poetry has no internal standard from which to assess it. Plato's critique in *Republic* uses external, ethical or cognitive, standards to judge poetry. The presence or absence of aesthetic value provides this standard, unique to the arts, to judge them. I argue that despite these advantages, this account cannot be a definitive response to the challenge for two main reasons. First, even if this aesthetic value can be found and is *sui generis*, and irreducible to other value, it says nothing about the *benefit* of the exposure to this value. We assume that engaging with the arts is good for us, but it might turn out to be trivial or neutral, in which case, the harmful effects of poetry identified in *Republic* would be enough to justify disallowing uncontrolled poetry. The second reason is that even if the arts do have this aesthetic value, an account needs to be given, especially in the case of the popular arts, of what the relationship is between the aesthetic value of a work and the non-aesthetic value. I claim that privileging a work's aesthetic value in popular culture produces counterintuitive results. In the popular arts, and Greek poetry was a form of mass entertainment, it is more plausible to privilege the ethical over the aesthetic.

In the third chapter I consider an Aristotelian reply to the challenge.

While the aesthetic reply claims that there is a gap in Plato's approach to the arts, the Aristotelian reply claims that Plato was wrong about the effect of poetry. This chapter starts from a famous passage in *Poetics* 6 in which Aristotle describes the positive benefit of poetry as effecting the *katharsis* of pity and fear. I consider two interpretations of this passage and I argue that neither is sufficient to answer Plato's challenge. I begin by arguing for the legitimacy of using the *katharsis* passage as a response to Plato and then I look at the two interpretations of *katharsis* in detail.

The first interpretation of *katharsis* is purgative. In the theatre emotions are stirred up and then they are discharged. Discharging the emotions in this way is psychologically beneficial – people leave the theatre feeling calmed and relieved. I argue that there are two problems with this reading. First, if the emotions are taken as somehow pathological, then the model does not sit well with Aristotle's account of the emotions elsewhere. If the emotions are not pathological, then the account misses Plato's main concern which is the long-term effect of stirring up passions and any indulgence of the emotions at all. This

model of *katharsis* tells us what happens during or immediately after a theatrical performance. But *katharsis* is silent on the effects of poetry over time and the model could even be compatible with Plato's critique. More importantly, purgative *katharsis* claims in effect that beyond the immediate emotional relief that poetry provides, it has no long-term effects at all, that is, culture has no effect on society or individuals. I argue that this is deeply implausible.

A better interpretation of *katharsis* should give an account of the effect of poetry over time, and the educative interpretation does this. Poetry in general, and tragedy in particular, offers an important emotional training. It teaches us and clarifies our emotions improving our emotional sensibility. Thus the benefit of poetry on this account is ethical. I argue that this account does not answer Plato's core concerns about culture because of the education that is recommended by the account has at its core a certain cultural conservatism endorsing the values of the popular culture of the time. This is not a principled problem, but if the concern is that popular culture might be largely mistaken in its values, then the ethic implicit and explicit in the mass entertainment would largely reflect this. This is a problem because mass entertainment does not typically call for disengaged, interpretative readings of the texts. This is worrying because, on the educative interpretation, our emotional reactions to material on the stage shape our emotional reactions to similar material off the stage. Now if good poetry trains the emotions well, then it would follow that bad poetry would train them badly. The Aristotelian account gives us no mechanism of distinguishing that poetry which is (ethically) harmful and that which is beneficial but claims that poetry is generally beneficial, and this cannot be assumed. While Aristotle can explain how a greater variety of poetry is valuable, Plato's core concerns about the harmful effects of corrupting cultural values remain. Again, the Aristotelian reply does not answer Plato's challenge.

If I am right, then Plato's critique is still a serious one that deserves attention. The challenge remains for the poets, or their modern counterparts, to show that they deserve to practise their arts freely, even if they can be profoundly harmful. If we accept that Plato's worries have at their core genuine concerns, and if we are unhappy with his authoritarian solutions, then the challenge is to come up with a solution which meets our democratic intuitions and offers a solution to the problem. Either way, the challenge deserves serious attention.

1. The Platonic Challenge

In this chapter I set out Plato's critique of the poets in *Republic*. My intention here is to offer a charitable reading of a maligned part of Plato's thought. He treats the poets harshly: in the ideal state, the Callipolis, their style and content is to be carefully controlled, and no deviation is to be tolerated. Not much Greek poetry, prized as it is in the Western canon, would survive Plato's strictures. Consequently the temptation has often been just to show how Plato is wrong.

In addition to the distastefulness of Plato's conclusions to modern literary aesthetes, it has been claimed that the arguments, especially those in Book 10, are simpleminded and inconsistent: the Book 10 argument is inconsistent with the earlier discussion, and furthermore, on some readings, internally inconsistent. Besides this, Book 10 sits uncomfortably next to the rest of *Republic*: the main argument could, it seems, finish at the end of Book 9, but then we are surprised by a section in which we see again material that has already been discussed. Book 10 appears odd in other ways too. For instance, we notice how cramped and compressed the argument is compared to the rest of the work.

I contend that this sort of treatment does Plato a disservice. Plato's treatment of the poets is neither philistine nor the knee-jerk conservatism of a curmudgeonly old man. I argue instead that Book 10 is an integrated part of the main argument of *Republic*; it is internally consistent and consistent with the first discussion of poetry; further, the core of Plato's concerns do not depend on unworkable Platonic resources – while we may disagree with his solution, I suggest that Plato's concerns, understood in the correct context, dovetail with some of our own modern worries about the effects of popular culture.

The chapter will be divided into three sections. In the first I look at the first discussion of poetry in Books 2 and 3. I first contextualise the argument within Plato's larger political project. I then discuss Plato's attack. The attack divides into two separate, but related, parts: first Plato defines *what* stories the poets can tell and then he sets limits on *how* the poets can tell their stories. In the second section I look at the Book 10 arguments. I argue that the Book 10 discussion is consistent with and complementary to the earlier discussion. In the final section I consider some possible modern analogues as a way of assessing the usefulness and plausibility of Plato's critique.

The first attack: Books 2 and 3

The main task in *Republic* is to defend justice. At 369a it is agreed that since there is justice both in the city and in the individual, it is easier to look at justice in the city, and then to look for similarities in the individual soul. With this in mind the discussants¹ set out to lay theoretical foundations of a just city.

Socrates' ideal state is a small, austere, agrarian community. At 372ac he describes how the population of the city will live, how they will spend their leisure time, what they will eat, and how they will work. If the community is structured correctly, then 'they will live quite happily with one another. They will have no more children than they can afford, and they will avoid poverty and war.' (372bc²) Glaucon, however, objects that this would be a 'city of pigs.'³ (372c)

Instead of the city of pigs Glaucon proposes that they consider how justice would look in a different city, a luxurious city – what Socrates describes as a 'swollen and inflamed city.' (372c) This second city will have to be enlarged:

So once again we must enlarge our city, since our first, healthy city is no longer big enough. We must fill it with a great mass and multitude of things which are no longer what cities must have as a matter of necessity. For example, we must have hunters of all kinds, artists,⁴ all those using figure and colour for their imitations, and those using music,⁵ poets and their assistants – reciters, actors, dancers, producers. (373bc)

This passage, and the discussion leading up to it, is interesting for more than one reason. It is the first mention that Plato makes of the poets, and clearly he blames them, among others, for the unhealthy state of the city. However, as we will see, poetry was central to Greek culture privately, publicly, and religiously – quite unlike modern poetry. In effect, the cause of the ill health of the luxurious city is its culture.

¹ For Books 2-10 the three discussants are Socrates, Glaucon, and Adeimantus, the last two were Plato's brothers. Socrates, at least in Books 2-10, is Plato's spokesperson, and the views are not necessarily representative of the historic character of the early dialogues.

² Unless stated otherwise I use Tom Griffith's translation. For the Greek I use the Loeb edition.

³ Unlike today, pigs were not a symbol of greed but rather of a lack of sophistication or ignorance. (note 24, 372d)

⁴ Griffith translates *hoi mimētai* as 'artists'; literally it is 'imitators'. As we will see, imitation is a central concept in the critique of poetry, both in Books 2 and 3, and in Book 10.

⁵ The Greek word *mousikē*, cognate with 'music', usually translates simply as 'music', but in some contexts, as here, it covers both music and poetry, the arts presided over by the Muses.

Plato's use of terms from disease – swollen, inflamed, and unhealthy – to describe the luxurious city tells us how Plato sees his role, as well as giving the reader an indication of what is to come. Plato will go through Athens' cultural artefacts and, like a physician, purge what causes the city to be diseased. As we will see, it is the whole of culture that needs to be purified: the luxuries in Glaucon's city were familiar objects and practices from Athenian life. The simplicity and austerity of Socrates' city gives a rough guide to how the luxurious city should look at the end of its treatment – though there will be some differences.

The luxurious city would be considerably larger than Socrates' rural community. It would need more space for the cultivation of food to feed the urban population and so the city would need to be able to fight its neighbours and defend itself from external threats (373d). So the guardians who formed the army would have to be strong enough to fight against the city's enemies but subservient to the city so they would not themselves become a threat to the city. The guardians are to be to the city like a dog: loyal and subservient to its master, but vicious and dangerous to those it does not know (376a). The guardians, then, need a particular character – 'spirited, swift, and strong' (376c) – and so the discussion turns to the education that will forge the right character.

This brings us to the first attack on poetry. The stated aim of Plato's first discussion of poetry is to work out precisely what the guardians' education would have to be in order that they would develop the right sort of character. At this stage the 'right sort of character' is that which best serves the political demands on the guardian class. While the discussion starts with the education of the guardians, it quickly impacts beyond this. The argument is divided into two parts. The first focuses on the content of poetry, what stories the guardians should be allowed to hear. The second part looks at the style of poetry, that is, the way the stories are told. Before discussing the content Plato talks briefly about what sort of education would achieve his intentions and from when the education should start.

Plato begins with a surprising endorsement of the traditional education. 'Isn't it hard to find a better education than the one which has been developed over the years? It consists, I take it, of physical education for the body, and music and poetry for the mind or soul.' (376e) Of the physical and poetic education, the poetic education is more important and more basic because it is the first part of the education (377a). It is important that the discussion is about very young children because Plato thinks that this is the stage when they are the most malleable: 'That is the time when each individual thing can be most easily

moulded, and receive whatever mark you want to impress upon it.' (377b) Since children are so impressionable their storytellers should be supervised from the earliest stages, while children are still in the care of their mothers and nurses⁶ (377c). In what follows Plato goes through Greek literature, starting with Homer and Hesiod, and censors it with remarkable zeal.

Before looking at the sort of material that Plato thinks is inappropriate it is worth noting a few points about Greek poetry in general, and Homer and Hesiod in particular, and its relation to Greek religion. The relation between poetry and religion is important for two reasons. First, it makes the role played by poetry in culture clear. Second, given the status of Homer and Hesiod as religious experts, it shows us how radical Plato's reforms promise to be.

Without a definitive, canonical text Greek religion was characterised by a degree of diversity. There was a multitude of gods, which were assigned different and often overlapping functions, with differing statuses depending where and by whom they were worshipped (Morgan 227-8). However, despite this heterogeneity, Homer and Hesiod were consistently revered (Morgan 228; Bremmer 7). Herodotus notes that 'Homer and Hesiod are the poets who composed theogonies and described the gods for the Greeks, giving them all their appropriate titles, offices, and powers.' (2.53.2) Religion filtered through into all facets of life and there was no distinction between religious and secular poetry (Gould 19). The point is that Homer and Hesiod were considered religious authorities and their works an important theological, and so ethical, repository.

However, with Homer and Hesiod in mind, Plato objects that they often give 'the wrong impression of the nature of gods and heroes.' (377e) A little bit later he will charge that the myths are blasphemous (381e). Plato starts with stories of the gods mistreating each other. The first is the story of how Kronos was killed by his son Ouranos and how he in turn was killed by Zeus (377e-378a⁷). Although Plato claims that this story is not true, even if it were true it would not be suitable to be told, even to adults. If the story were true, then it ought to be kept in strictest secrecy: 'If there were some overriding necessity to tell them, then as few people as possible should hear them, and in strict secrecy. They should have to make sacrifice. Not a pig, but some large and unobtainable sacrificial animal, to make sure

⁶ Later, as part of the eugenics programme, Plato will go on to abolish the family making this supervision much easier (458c-462a).

⁷ Originally from Hesiod's *Theogony* 154-182, 453-506 (note 31, 378a).

the smallest possible number of people heard them.' (378a) This remark is interesting for two reasons. First, it shows that although Plato's interest with Homeric myth is (partly) theological, his first concern is political.⁸ He goes on to give an argument for why this story, and those like it,⁹ cannot be true (379ac¹⁰), but he is prepared here to grant that even if they are true, for the good of the city, they ought nonetheless to be suppressed. Second, it is the first indication that Plato's educational reforms will go beyond education – I return to this point below.

What, then, is wrong with the stories that give the wrong impression about the gods? Put another way, what benefit is achieved by censoring these stories? The problem is that they set a bad example for the young. Plato claims that young children are likely to 'take into their minds opinions contrary to those that we think it desirable for them to hold when they are grown up.' (377b, Shorey) Furthermore, young children are not able to tell when a story is allegorical, and the opinions, absorbed from the stories, tend to be 'ineradicable and unchangeable.' (378de) So, the young guardians 'are not to be told that if they committed the most horrible crimes they wouldn't be doing anything out of the ordinary... We wouldn't tell them that they would merely be acting like the first and finest of the gods.' (378b) Plato's fear is that if the gods are portrayed as having no problem with quarrelling, being petty and vindictive, then there isn't much hope that the guardians would learn that such behaviour isn't appropriate.

It is evident, if only from Plato's objections to the practice, that the Homeric myths would have been used as Bible stories are sometimes used to inculcate values in children. As Alexander Nehamas points out, Homer would have been used to teach children to learn 'to read, to speak, to think and to value.' (Nehamas, 'Imitation' 254) Clearly, Homer had a very different cultural status in Plato's time to what he has now. It is anachronistic to rush to

⁸ Gould, for example, discusses the Book 2 attack in theological terms without reference to the political benefits that Plato hopes the censorship will achieve (19-21).

⁹ Briefly, this is the content that would not be permitted, and Plato provides relevant passages that would have to be excised: First, the gods are not responsible for any evil, and so they don't entice mortals to commit evils (379a-80c). Second, because it is good divinity does not tell falsehoods so the gods do not appear in misleading dreams (380d-83a). Third, Hades is not full of horrors and so a good man need not feel grief for his own death, nor that of his family and friends (386a-87b). Fourth, both heroes and gods are role models for the youth and so are not to be shown lamenting, laughing uncontrollably, lying, being impertinent to those superior, overcome by sexual passion or the desire for food or drink or for wealth (387c-91e). (Paraphrased from Burnyeat 259)

¹⁰ The argument is that because the gods are good they cannot (logically) do anything harmful. If they cannot do anything harmful, then they cannot do anything evil. Therefore, they cannot be the cause of any evil in the world.

Homer's defence armed with our modern (literary) reactions to the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, thinking that censoring such great literature is philistine. We might not even be so tempted to come to Homer's defence if we bear in mind that Plato's main worry is with children reading Homer with all his (albeit poetic) sex¹¹ and violence¹² (Nehamas, 'Imitation' 253-54). Children's entertainment, reading materials, primers, and so on, are routinely controlled for the good of the children, and we find nothing odd in this practice: children ought not to be exposed to certain influences when they are too young because it might affect their sound development. We might disagree with Plato about the details of the content of what children ought not to see, but we would do well to remember that Plato's target at this point is the education of young children who cannot tell when a story is allegorical.

However, it is worth noting that while we might agree that there is nothing odd about restricting what children should be exposed to, there is an important difference between Plato's attitude towards censorship and modern attitudes. Modern worries often turn on the exposure of children to particular acts – for example, acts of sex and violence – and the possible effects of this exposure on their behaviour (Burnyeat 250). But Plato's concern that exposing children to inappropriate material is not that children will go out and act out what they see (Ferrari, 'Plato' 111). The fear is not that on hearing the myth of Kronos, children will cut off their fathers' genitals – Plato's worry is more subtle. Sex and violence¹³ are not problematic *per se* but particular acts in the context of a broadly inappropriate ethical background are problematic. All of the educational reform is aimed at the formation of the right sort of *character*, the sort of character which would best serve the needs of the city. The concern is that the values implicit in these stories can damage character development. Ferrari puts it this way: '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 indirect, insofar as action stems from character.' (Ferrari, 'Plato' 111)

Even if we agreed with Plato about the restriction on children's materials, we would, I take it, be less inclined to accept Plato's extension of the restriction imposed on children's

¹¹ Think of Odysseus taken prisoner as Calypso's sex slave (*Odyssey* 5.) or the entrapment of Ares and Aphrodite (*Odyssey* 8.266-366, mentioned at 390c) or Zeus being overcome by desire for Hera (*Iliad* 14.292-353, mentioned at 390bc).

¹² Think of the murder of Priam, Achilles' dragging Hector and so on.

¹³ We are told later that exposing guardian children to violence can be beneficial for the cultivation of the guardians' characters (466e).

material to adults at 378a¹⁴ (quoted above). Julia Annas argues that this move is paternalistic (Annas, *Introduction* 85). If there is no argument for why the ban should be extended, the plausibility of Plato's case is stretched. We distinguish between fully developed adults and children, and trust adults to choose for themselves. Annas suggests that we separate the philosophy of education from the broader political project because of the paternalism: that way we can see the virtues of the educational proposals more clearly¹⁵ (Annas, *Introduction* 86).

I contend that this is precisely the wrong way to understand Plato's philosophy of education for two reasons. First, Plato's cultural, educational, and political projects are closely bound together. He takes his cultural and educational project to be continuous, and the ideal culture, which forms correct character, is necessary for justice. This is suggested by the connection between the city and the individual introduced 368e-399a when Socrates suggests that they look for justice on a large scale in the city. Second, Plato's stance, though authoritarian, is not paternalistic on his own terms. When we are given a detailed account of how we absorb cultural influences later in Book 10, we will see that adults are affected by poetry in much the same way as children – it turns out that poetry can corrupt even good people. Before I can defend either of these points in any detail, we need to look at the reform in more detail. What we have seen so far is only the start of Plato's reforms. Once he has discussed the content Plato turns to the style of the stories.

Before we can consider Plato's worries about style, we need to note briefly *how* the Greeks would have experienced poetry. Books were rare and expensive. For this reason the usual experience of poetry for the majority of the population was, in different ways, performative: the Athenians would hear (or act in) poetic performances either on the stage at dramatic festivals, or at rhapsodic performances, or at symposia (Ferrari, 'Plato' 93). The early educational experience of poetry would typically consist in recitation and memorisation (note 33, 378e; Ferrari, 'Plato' 93). With this in mind let's turn to the discussion of style.

Plato starts his discussion of poetic style at 392d when Socrates asks Adeimantus 'Don't [the poets] achieve their purpose either by simple narrative, or by narrative expressed

¹⁴ Also suggested at 380c and 387b.

¹⁵ Apart from her worry about paternalism, Annas is quite sympathetic to the model of education. She claims that there are similarities between the Platonic focus on character and, for instance, the American education system (See Annas *Introduction* 86-8).

through imitation¹⁶, or by a combination of the two?’ Adeimantus’ puzzlement tells us that there is something new with which the audience would not be familiar (Burnyeat 266-7; Ferrari, ‘Plato’ 114-5). To familiarise us with the concept, Plato uses an extended example from *Iliad* 1. The scene is when the priest Chryses goes to the Achaean camp to ask them to return his daughter. When his request is refused he prays to Apollo against the Achaeans. When the narrative gets to Chryses’ prayer Homer quotes the prayer in direct speech. Socrates imagines how a performer acts when he reaches the prayer: ‘[H]e talks as if he himself *is* Chryses, and does everything he can to make us imagine it is not Homer speaking, but the priest. He talks like an old man.’ (393b, Griffith’s emphasis) This style of narrative, roughly first person narrative, is contrasted with Socrates’ prosaic rendition of the same passage (393e-94b). Socrates warns us that he is no poet (393e) and when he tells us the story his narrative stays as reported speech.

The first (tentative) definition of imitation is offered on the basis of the Chryses example: ‘[M]aking yourself resemble someone else – either in the way you speak or in the way you look – isn’t that imitating the person you make yourself resemble?’ (393c) The first thing to notice is, here at least, Plato clearly has some sort of performance in mind. We tend not make ourselves look and sound like Chryses’ when reading the *Iliad* in an armchair. Plato tells us about the sort of performance he has in mind in the *Ion*. There Socrates describes a rhapsode who ‘when he is dressed in an embroidered robe, and has golden crowns upon his head...appears weeping or panic-stricken in the presence of more than twenty thousand friendly faces.’¹⁷ (535d¹⁸) The Homeric performances were no modern poetry reading; they were much more emotionally charged with the good rhapsodes, such as Ion, regularly bringing the audience to tears¹⁹ (535e).

With this technical distinction between imitative and non-imitative narrative in place, Plato asks two questions.²⁰ He first asks whether the poets should be allowed to use imitation in their poems. Adeimantus takes this as anticipating the ban of tragedy and comedy that we will see in Book 10 (394d). His second question is whether the guardians

¹⁶ I follow convention (and many translations) and use ‘imitation’ for the Greek *mimēsis*.

¹⁷ The point Socrates wants to make in this context is that during the performance the rhapsode is out of his senses.

¹⁸ Jowett’s translation.

¹⁹ Ion tells us it is better to make the audience cry because then he can laugh all the way to the bank when he gets paid.

²⁰ Or, on some readings, the same question twice.

should be given to imitation.²¹ The answer is immediately anticipated by an appeal to the principle of specialisation²² introduced earlier. The following stretch of argument is odd, and it is difficult to understand exactly what Plato's target is. Before I offer a reading of it, I jump ahead a little to Plato's answer.

The guardians are not to be given to imitation. Instead:

If they do imitate anything, then from their earliest childhood they should choose appropriate models to imitate – people who are brave, self-disciplined, god-fearing, free that sort of thing. They should neither do, not be good at imitating what is illiberal, nor any other kind of shameful behaviour, in case enjoyment of the imitation gives rise to enjoyment of the reality. Have you ever noticed how imitation, if long continued from an early age, becomes part of a person's nature, turns into habits of body, speech and mind? (395cd)

Notice that the worry is more subtle than life imitating art. Immediately after the quoted passage Plato gives some examples of the sort of behaviour that the guardians should not imitate. Among the list is the imitation of women in childbirth and clearly there would be no risk of the (male²³) guardians going out and doing in real life what they had imitated. In a similar vein, albeit more curiously, the guardians are not to imitate 'thunder, the din of wind and hail, of wheels and pulleys, the sound of trumpet, pipe, panpipe, and every musical instrument, even the noise of dogs, or sheep, or birds.' Clearly, the worry is not straightforwardly that life will imitate art.

Putting aside the odd list of sounds just mentioned, which I will return to later, what is Plato's concern about imitation? The worry, as it was earlier in the discussion about content, is the effect of imitation on character. Annas suggests that Plato's worry is with identification needed for convincing performance:

To act the part of Achilles convincingly, I have to come to understand what it would be like to be Achilles – that is, what it would be like to be a Homeric warrior in a certain situation, who is led to say and do certain things. My experience, whoever I am, is likely to have been very different from Achilles'. I have to imagine what it would be like to lack certain experiences and to have had others, to have different attitudes and responses, to be someone to whom certain ways of acting, foreign to me, are natural. In the process I will come to understand why Achilles thought it all right, indeed required by

²¹ The Greek *mimetikos* is usually translated as 'given to imitation'. The sense, as we will see, is (roughly) 'prepared to imitate indiscriminately'.

²² According to the principle of specialisation everyone in Callipolis is to perform function and be expert in only one trade. See 396e-70c, 374ad.

²³ Plato hasn't yet announced that women could become guardians in Callipolis. That is much later at 451d.

honour, to do things which I would find cruel and senseless. To imitate Achilles successfully (whether acting or silently empathizing) is to understand why he did what he did, the situation now seen from his point of view (Annas, *Introduction* 96-97).

We tend to be more sympathetic to this identification because it broadens our ethical horizons. For Plato everything the guardians do should ensure that they have the right sort of character. Again, as with the reforms of the content, we might be sympathetic in the case of young children. The effects of play-acting might be more profound than we think, and Plato is right to take it seriously. If we are sympathetic to the ban on children seeing inappropriate material when young then we would probably be similarly sympathetic to restricting identification or emulation of inappropriate role models.

However, as in the case of content, the thrust of Plato's argument is that he will also ban inappropriate adult imitation. This is suggested by the surprising appeal to the principle of specialisation. How does the principle of specialisation relate to this type of imitation?

Burnyeat argues that Plato's interest here is in banning the guardians from becoming amateur poets themselves (269-273). Recall when Plato first introduces the Chryses example he talks as if it is the poet himself doing the imitation, not a performing rhapsode: '[H]e talks as if he himself *is* Chryses, and does everything he can to make us imagine it is not *Homer* speaking.' (393b, my emphasis) A little later when applying the principle of specialisation, Plato notes that people are not successful in both comic and tragic imitation (395a).

Burnyeat suggests that Plato is thinking of the magnetic chain of inspiration imagined in the *Ion*.²⁴ The Muse inspires the poet and when the performer speaks, through the chain of inspiration, the poet speaks through the performer. On this picture, when a rhapsode speaks it is Homer speaking through him, and so when we get to Chryses' prayer it literally is Homer who makes himself as close in style and manner to the priest.

Burnyeat argues that we should also use the chain of inspiration to understand the bizarre list of sound effects that the guardians will not be allowed to imitate. With the list in mind Burnyeat asks 'Is he talking about some crazy pantomime in which people mimic everything under the sun, including axles and pulleys? Or about the dramatists' use of sound-effects?' (270) In the *Ion*'s picture it is still the poet (who also produced the plays at the festivals) speaking through the sound effects: the poet's voice speaks through the whole

²⁴ See 535e-36a.

theatrical spectacle. The best way to make sense of this is as a ban on the practice, not uncommon among Athenian high society, of writing and producing plays (272).

This interpretation does well to explain the odd list of sound effects, but there are some reasons to doubt it. Firstly, the main thrust of the reforms in Books 2 and 3 is for the young guardians' benefit. I have noted that Plato thinks that the reforms will impact beyond children, but nonetheless they remain the central focus throughout the discussion. On Burnyeat's reading Plato has slipped to talking about adult guardians – it is implausible to think of the young guardians as producing plays at the larger festivals,²⁵ especially children too young to tell that a story is allegorical. Second, when Plato spells out explicitly the harmful effects of imitation, he says that it will manifest 'from earliest childhood' (395c). Plato worries about the effects of imitation undertaken from early youth, and this becomes difficult to understand if we think of the imitator as the poet.

Burnyeat is right that the guardians will not be permitted to become amateur dramatists, but I don't think that is Plato's main focus here. It would be fairly obvious from the first time the principle of specialisation was introduced. If Plato's focus is not primarily with dramaturgy, what is his concern?

Ferrari is helpful here ('Plato' 116-120). The imitator who is prepared to imitate everything and anything is contrasted with a better person who will be prepared to imitate good people, though not when the good people make mistakes or do evil deeds (396cd). The reason this is acceptable is, as we've seen, imitation from earliest youth shapes character. But the tragedy and comedy will present both good and bad characters, as well as good characters behaving badly. And it turns out that much the same is also true of Homer. Socrates' prosaic rendition of Chryses' prayer strips the verse of its power and, in more ways than one, its eloquence. Ferrari puts it this way:

[I]mitation 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 (116).

²⁵ The evidence suggests that boys attended the festivals, but we are not clear on the age when children were allowed to attend. See Pickard-Cambridge 263-64.

Making us see and hear the voices of the Trojan expedition for the pleasure of the audience is not to use imitation as a means to form character. Homer does not stop at telling us about disreputable behaviour, and so the Homeric rhapsode (or perhaps school-going child) would imitate the behaviour. Like the imitator of thunder and animals the Homeric rhapsode is happy to imitate all characters irrespective of how good or bad they are. But for Plato imitation is to be used solely for the cultivation of the right sort of character. Homer, and any one who performs his work, would be given to imitation in the sense that they are prepared to imitate anything. The claim is not that imitation happens in a different way but the distinction drawn is between indiscriminate imitation and using imitation towards a (political) end.

If this is right we can see that Plato's two introductory questions (393de) are separate but related. The guardians are not to be given to indiscriminate imitation required by comedy,²⁶ tragedy, and, it turns out, Homeric epic. The poets are permitted to use imitation in their poems, but within the ethical limits sketched later. This results in the expulsion of the tragic and comic poets, and probably Homer, though Plato will come back later and make the case against Homer explicit. Importantly, we can also see how these reforms have got us close to the poetry proposed in Socrates' first city. In that city after the meals the inhabitants would drink wine and sing praises to the gods (372b). Later in Book 10 when Homer has been expelled the only poetry that will be permitted are 'hymns²⁷ to the gods and verses in praise of good people.' (607a) Plato is concerned about the poetry the guardians perform, more than about their amateur dramatic aspirations – though of course they will not be allowed to become amateur dramatists.

So far we have seen how the content and the style of poetry are to be controlled in Callipolis. The content will not depart from Plato's reformed theology. The gods are good and so cannot be responsible for any evil in our lives. The style is to be reformed from the starting point that imitation affects character, so the only imitation permitted is of good people performing good deeds. Imitation at this stage has been defined as taking the look or manner of someone else.

²⁶ It is likely that some of the particularly disreputable imitation would happen in comedy. In *Thesmophoriazusae* Aristophanes has the tragic poet Agathon behaving like a woman. Elsewhere in the *Frogs* there is imitation of, well, frogs.

²⁷ When Plato talks of hymns we must not think of nineteenth century church hymns, but rather of the Homeric hymns which were extended poems, some over 600 lines long, in praise of the gods.

Plato's cultural reforms do not stop there however. Having dealt with poetry he moves through musical modes and instruments that would be appropriate for poetic performance. Again the focus is on selecting that which best forms or maintains the characters of the guardians. At the end of the discussion about music Plato tells us the scope of the reforms:

Is it only the poets we have to keep an eye on, then, compelling them to put the likeness of the good nature into their poems...? Don't we have to keep an eye on the other craftsmen as well, and stop them putting what has the wrong nature, what is undisciplined, slavish, or wanting in grace, into their representations of living things, or into any manufactured object²⁸?...We don't want [the guardians] browsing and feeding each day...and *without realising it* accumulating a single large evil in their souls. No, we must seek out the craftsmen with a gift for tracking down the nature of what is fine, what has grace, so that our young can live in a healthy environment, drawing improvement from every side...[being led] from earliest childhood into affinity, friendship and harmony with beauty of speech and thought (401bd, my emphasis)

Julia Annas objects to this passage that Plato does not explain how the terms applied to poetry, specifically imitation, can be useful in understanding the extension of the reforms to cover all of material culture: 'But how can we carry over the distinction between narration and role-acting to the arts that Plato mentions – painting, weaving, the applied arts, and architecture? We have no idea how we are to think of a good rug or house as akin to narration and a bad one as akin to role-acting.' (Annas *Introduction* 95)

We can answer Annas' worry if we think of buildings and embroidery that *do* narrate a story. The battles between the gods depicted on the Parthenon would not be permitted under the content reform. For embroidery Burnyeat suggests as an example the great robe carried during the Panathenaean festival (Burnyeat 258-9) which also showed mythical battles between gods and heroes. These buildings would not be bad because of their imitative features, but because of the content of the stories.

This, however, is not enough for Annas. She takes the definition offered after the Chryses example as a final definition. My suggestion, following Burnyeat, is that it is a tentative definition. Plato's interest in this part of the discussion is with the effect of imitation on the performer or imitator and not with the audience. In other imitative art forms such as painting, which Plato takes as his starting point in Book 10, the psychological

²⁸ Earlier Plato suggests some objects 'weaving, embroidery, building.' (401a)

effects are less interesting, both for the imitator and the audience. For these reasons, Plato starts with poetry.

Recall that imitation is initially defined as making oneself resemble someone else in speech or look. The effect for the audience, when watching the rhapsode, is that it actually sees Chryses. The Greeks clearly saw the characters on stage: Pickard-Cambridge tells us how the appearance of the Furies during a performance of Aeschylus' *Eumenides* shocked some women in the audience so greatly that they miscarried (Pickard-Cambridge 264-5). If this anecdote is true, what the women saw were not the actors, there is a sense in which they actually saw the Furies. This is the phenomenon that interests Plato – the phenomenon affects both the actor-imitator, which is explained in Books 2 and 3, as well as the audience, which, though hinted at in Books 2 and 3, is left largely unexplained until Book 10. Burnyeat suggests this final definition: 'Mimesis is the production of visual and auditory likenesses which give us that sense of actual presence.' (Burnyeat 266) The initial definition of imitation that came out of the Chryses example is a sufficient, though not necessary, condition for imitation. There is no reason why a rug with a picture on it would not be imitative in Burnyeat's sense – when we look at the battles on the Parthenon we do not see lumps of marble but the battles themselves, similarly on the Panathenaean embroidery. Plato's focus on imitation in education takes poetry as the starting point because there is a performer. Rugs, without inner lives, are not themselves affected by bearing pictures; people performing poetry are, and it is only much later in Book 10 when Plato returns to discuss this.

We are now ready to move on to the second attack in Book 10 where Plato tells us how poetry affects the audience. I suggested above that Plato's concerns dovetail with some modern concerns about the effect of culture on people. We have, however, seen only the half of the story. In Book 10 Plato will go on to tell us about the psychological effects of imitation generally and poetry in particular. We need to look at the Book 10 attack in more detail before we can start to assess the usefulness of Plato's account.

The second attack: Book 10

Book 10 presents more interpretative problems than Books 2 and 3 – both within the Book 10 argument itself and in relation to the first discussion. The main argument of *Republic* seems to be finished at the end of Book 9. However, having canvassed various constitutions

in Books 7-9 Plato returns abruptly to poetry and the immortality of the soul. In addition to the structural peculiarities there are a number of argumentative differences and difficulties that stand out. Julia Annas takes a strong line on Book 10 and says ‘we are driven by the peculiarities of Book 10 to see it as an excrescence...[it] appears gratuitous and clumsy, and it is full of oddities.’ (Annas *Introduction* 335) There are three positions to take with respect to Book 10: first, that Book 10 is itself inconsistent and also irreconcilably at odds with the earlier discussion of poetry, and, more generally, with the rest of *Republic*;²⁹ second, that there are some differences and shifts between Books 2 and 3 but these do not present a serious problem;³⁰ third, Book 10 is consistent both internally and with Books 2 and 3.³¹ In this section I take the third position. For reasons of charity it is preferable to read Plato as at least consistent, even if he is wrong in other respects. I argue that the text can support such a reading.

Plato returns to poetry right at the end of *Republic* and by the time he reaches this he has developed important resources, his psychology and metaphysics with its related epistemology, that will be used in the discussion.

Book 10 immediately returns to poetry:

‘There are many reasons...why I feel sure we have gone about founding our city in the right way, but I am thinking particularly of poetry.’

‘What in particular about poetry?’³²

‘In refusing to admit as much of it as is imitative.’³³ Now that we have distinguished the elements of the soul from one another, it is clearer than ever, in my view, that imitative poetry is the last thing we should allow.’ (595a)

Right from the start the passage is odd. The first difficulty is that Plato talks as if he banned imitative poetry in the earlier discussion. But at 395c Plato explicitly allows the guardians to imitate good role models and later at 397d Plato allows ‘only the pure imitator of the good man.’ There seems to be a tension because Book 10 claims all imitative poetry has been banned when Book 3 allowed some imitative poetry. Nehamas argues that this tension cannot be resolved (‘Imitation’ 254). He argues against an account which claims that Book 3 generates two senses of imitation: a good sort and a bad sort. The good sort would be

²⁹ Julia Annas takes this line. See *Introduction* 335-344; ‘Triviality’.

³⁰ Alexander Nehamas and Christopher Janaway take this line. See Nehamas ‘Imitation’; Janaway pp133-158.

³¹ Myles Burnyeat takes this line. See Burnyeat pp286-324.

³² Socrates’ interlocutor here is Glaucon.

³³ The Greek is ‘*to mēdamēi paradechesthai autēs hosē mimētikē*.’ Shorey’s translation is better than Griffith’s ‘Our refusal to admit any of the imitative part of it’.

mostly simple narrative but would imitate the appropriate role models for the guardians ('Imitation' 252-3). Nehamas finds that the three different styles of poetry 'all imitate, in the same sense, different objects.' ('Imitation' 253) If this is right, that all poetry is in some way imitative, then there is a problem. The problem is also within Book 10 because at the end of the argument Plato proposes to admit 'hymns to the gods and verses in praise of good men.' (607a) Nehamas' position is that this (irresolvable) tension is not serious. Finding that the tension cannot be resolved, Nehamas argues that Book 10 does not start with a back reference to Book 3. Rather 'we might instead take it to refer to his realizing that nowhere after Book III...is there any provision made for poetry in the organization of the city.' ('Imitation' 255) Nehamas reads the material in Book 3 as only impacting on the education syllabus and so by the time Plato reaches Book 10 no account has been given of what role poetry would play in adult life – given how important poetry was in Greek life, this would have been a glaring omission for Plato's audience. Nehamas concedes that this cannot do enough to resolve all the tensions – for example the back reference to the expulsion of the versatile imitator (398ab) at 607b. However, he thinks this tension can be minimised 'if we realize that there is more to the proscription of poetry than the single passage 398a-b, and that the major burden of that proscription is carried by Plato's silence as to the role of poetry in his city's life, then the conflict loses some of its immediacy and seriousness.' (Nehamas 'Imitation' 256)

The first problem with this reading is that Nehamas ignores that the reforms in Books 2 and 3 will also affect the adult population. As I argued above, Plato may be interested in children's education in Books 2 and 3 but he takes education and culture to be continuous: what is not suitable for an education syllabus would not, by the same token, be suitable for adults' cultural lives. By Book 10 Plato has not been silent on poetry, but he has been silent on why the extension of the ban to adults is justified – Plato promises that the elements in the soul will make the earlier expulsion clearer.

The second problem is that Nehamas doesn't take seriously that poetry *will* play a role in Callipolis – at the start of 'Imitation' he claims, 'Plato's attitude towards the poets is bald and uncompromising: He wants no part of them.' ('Imitation' 251) That poetry will play a role is indicated early on in Book 2 when Socrates describes his agrarian utopia:

‘Drinking wine after their meals, wearing garlands on their heads and singing the praises³⁴ of the gods, they will live quite happily with one another.’ (372bc) This is remarkably similar to the poetry that is allowed in Book 10 ‘hymns to the gods and verses in praise of good men.’ (607a) In the first quote Socrates lets poetry right into the centre of life. Poetry is to be recited by the citizens at meals together. And the hymns that Plato would have had in mind, as I have already noted, were not insubstantial. In addition to poetry in the home Plato gives (the right sort of) poetry a central role in the education syllabus. Plato takes poetry seriously. It is not that he doesn’t want any of part it, but rather he wants to tame it and put it to work to his own political ends.

Burnyeat offers a different reading of the preamble and, I think, a better one. He reads the phrase ‘as much as is imitative’ as picking up on genres of poetry. At 394bc three types of poetry are distinguished: that which is purely imitative, that which is mixed and that which uses only simple or ordinary narrative. At the end of the Book 3 discussion, tragedy and comedy, the purely imitative styles, have been banned.³⁵ This is consistent with the Book 10 preamble (Burnyeat 291). On this reading Plato looks back not to specific imitative utterances but instead to different types of poetry. That Plato is talking about genres of poetry is also suggested by what follows. Homer is singled out as the teacher of the tragedians (595c). Here Plato outlines what will be the target of what is to come and it is not all poetry. Plato returns to a type of poetry that was banned earlier and promises to look at it in light of the different elements of the soul. We do see something new when we see Plato explicitly connecting Homer with the tragedians. The significance of this will emerge later.

After the preamble (595ac), Socrates proposes to give a clearer idea of what imitation is. Socrates suggests that they ‘follow our normal procedure in starting the enquiry[.] We generally postulate a certain form or character...for each plurality of things to which we give the same name.’ (596a) Plato uses couches and tables for his example. Now each craftsman who makes a particular couch or table ‘looks at the appropriate form’³⁶ (596b) but does not make the form of the couch himself. Plato’s main interest is with a different type of

³⁴ The Greek verb here is *humnoushai*, which is cognate with ‘hymn’.

³⁵ Homer has not yet been banned, but heavily censored. The ground-work for his ban is in place. We have seen from Socrates’ paraphrase of Chryses’ speech how important imitation is in Homer’s project.

³⁶ Plato’s suggestion that there is a Form of a couch is surprising. For discussion on this see Burnyeat 245-249. For an alternative view see Annas *Introduction* 227-32.

craftsman. This craftsman can create 'all the objects which the individual craftsmen can create.' (596c) In more detail:

This same craftsman is not only capable of making any sort of furniture. He can also create all the things that grow out of the earth. He produces all living creatures – including himself – and on top of that produces heaven and earth, the gods, everything in heaven, and everything under the earth in Hades. (596c)

Such a craftsman would be remarkable, but the sense of creation Plato has in mind is different. In fact, anyone could be like this craftsman: the way to create everything in this way is to carry around a mirror (596d). Carrying around a mirror, the craftsman would create the objects as they appeared, but not as they really were. Plato claims that painters are this sort of craftsmen (596e). So, using couches as an example, there are three types of couch. First, there is the form of a couch which is made by god. Then there is the carpenter's couch which is once³⁷ removed from the truth. Finally, there is the painter's couch which is further removed from the truth. The ontological status of the painter's product, then, is three times removed from the truth. This is then extended to the tragedians: 'this is what the writer of tragedies, if he is an imitator, will be. Someone whose nature it is to be two removes from the king and the truth.' (597e)

I contend that this is not Plato's main concern. The main point in this part of the argument runs from 598ad. Socrates asks whether the painter imitates the craftsman's work or the form of the imitated object. The answer is that the painter imitates the artefact once removed from the Form (598a). It is then established that the painter imitates how the artefact appears rather than how it is. This is how Plato imagines the painter's craft:

[T]he art of imitation is a far cry from truth. The reason it can make everything, apparently, is that it grasps just a little of each thing – and only an image at that. We say the painter can paint us a shoemaker, for example, or a carpenter, or any of the other craftsmen. He may know nothing of any of these skills, and yet, if he is a good painter, from a distance his picture of a carpenter can fool children and people with no judgment because it looks like a real carpenter. (598bc)

Julia Annas reads this section, incorrectly in my view, as the first of three arguments in Book 10. The first two she accuses of trivialising literature and she takes this as a crucial step in trivialising it. Her first concern is that Plato uses painting as his starting point – all of the earlier discussion took poetry as the paradigm art form. And not just painting but, as

³⁷ The Greeks counted inclusively so in the Greek the carpenter's couch is twice removed from the truth.

suggested by the mirror, photo-realist or *trompe-l'oeil* painting (Annas, 'Triviality' 5). She reads the passage quoted above as saying that the painter is trying to fool people into thinking that the painting is a real carpenter. Taking this as her starting point, she objects that there is no obvious analogy between (illusionist) painting and poetry. Homer is not at all like an illusionist painter and so it is difficult to see from this bad analogy how his knowledge would be twice removed from the truth like the painter's (Annas, 'Triviality' 5).

Annas' reading here is remarkably uncharitable. In the quoted passage Plato says that the painter need not have the skills of the carpenter to be able to paint him. In one sense this is an obvious point, but if Plato has illusion in mind it becomes less clear why it is important. If Plato wanted to bring out the sense of realist illusion, then he could have used any example – a painter could paint a craftsman or anything else for that matter – but he insists that we imagine a shoemaker, carpenter or any other craftsman. This suggests that the (apparent) knowledge of a craft is doing some work in the example, and if it is, then it is difficult to see why knowledge of the craft would matter in the deception of illusionist, photo-realist painting. Annas' reading does not give us an account of why Plato insists on craftsmen in his example, which would not be obviously necessary were he to have mere illusion in mind.

A better reading, suggested by Burnyeat, is that the painter, if he is good, gives the impression that he knows something of the craft depicted. Because the painted carpenter looks like a real carpenter, fools and people with no judgment might think that the painter actually knew the craft of carpentry (Burnyeat 302-3). This reading is also supported by the paragraph which follows at 598cd (Burnyeat 304-5). There Plato talks about someone who has been taken in by a craftsman and thinks that the craftsman 'has *knowledge of all these crafts*, and of all the things each individual practitioner of them can know' (598d, my emphasis). Such a person would be simpleton. He would be a simpleton because he made the mistake of thinking that skill in imitation requires knowledge of the things imitated. A good painter can paint a shoemaker without any knowledge of shoemaking. Importantly, Plato writes the paragraph at 598cd in such a way that it can fit both painting and poetry – the carpenter example expressly only suited painting. The simpleton cannot tell imitation from real knowledge be it in painting or in poetry.

Plato's argument here is from analogy. He takes it as obvious that the painter need not have the knowledge of the crafts he imitates, and he wants to make a similar point about

poetry and the poets. Having made his point that the painters do not need knowledge of what they imitate, he moves to make the same point about the poets. He does this in detail from 598-601b. Having shown that the painter does not have knowledge Plato turns to the poets and the claim:

That the tragedians know about all the arts, that they know about everything human – as it relates to virtue and vice – and everything divine as well. The good poet, they say, if he is to do a good job of creating the things he does create, must necessarily create them with knowledge. (598e)

Plato's concern here is explicitly that people attribute knowledge to the poets. He starts with cases where knowledge is attributed to Homer about 'the greatest and finest things'³⁸... – war, military command, the founding of cities, a man's education.' (599d) Plato finds that Homer benefited no one with respect to these things.³⁹

So, Plato concludes that the poets, like the painters, do not require knowledge of what they imitate – as he has shown in the case of Homer. However, whereas the painter will only fool those with no judgment and children, the poet's imitations have a special appeal due to 'the power of bewitchment naturally possessed by the tools he uses.' (601b) This special bewitchment, as we will see shortly, comes out of poetry's appeal to the divided soul. Before moving on to the divided soul Plato has one more argument to show that the poets have no knowledge.

In the second argument that the poets have no knowledge of what they imitate, Plato distinguishes between the user, maker and imitator of an artefact. He starts with an analogy with painting. '[I]t's the person who uses a particular object who must necessarily have the most experience of it. He must act as a messenger to the person who makes it, telling him the good and bad points, in use, of the instrument he is using.' (601de) Plato's move is then to claim that this is not required of the painter. 'Will he have used the things he paints, and so have knowledge of whether they are good and right, or not? Will he have correct opinion about them through being compelled to associate with the person who does know?' (602a) The answer is 'no'. Generalising to all imitators, including poets, Plato concludes that 'First, the imitator has no knowledge worth mention of the things he imitates. His imitation isn't

³⁸ Plato politely says that it would be inappropriate to question Homer on his knowledge of the *technai*, such as medicine (599bc).

³⁹ Unlike Solon, no cities are founded on a Homeric constitution, no war was won under Homeric generalship, and there is no evidence of him having disciples whom he educated. (599c-600e)

serious. It's a kind of play. And second, all those who turn their hand to tragic poetry, in iambic or epic, are out-and-out imitators.' (602b)

Annas reads this (and what immediately precedes it) as the first of three arguments in Book 10 and the first of two that trivialise poetry. In the section just discussed she objects that Plato has changed focus. In the first argument Plato uses the Forms to show that imitators do not need knowledge. In this discussion focus shifts away from the Forms and it is not clear how they would fit into the discussion. Annas writes 'Forms are not used, and the contrast is no longer between Forms and particulars, but between using and making the same particular object, a bridle or a flute. Plato is here discussing the difference between knowledge and belief, and the poet's deficiency in everyday terms.' (Annas 'Triviality' 6) Her concern is that the second argument does not clarify or give further proof that the poet's knowledge is twice removed from the truth. This is for Annas further evidence that Plato is just confused.

We can answer this worry if we recall another occasion where Plato tailors his argument both for Platonic philosophers and people who do not share his intuitions. In Book 5 when Plato argues that philosophers should be kings he gives two arguments which show that only philosophers have knowledge (473c-76e). The first is designed to be acceptable to Glaucon who is broadly sympathetic to Plato's philosophy. The second is designed to convince the sight-lovers that they have no knowledge. In the same way here the point is made in two different ways. It is first shown by way of the ontological status of their products that the poets do not need knowledge for imitation. Clearly this should be enough for Plato, but he is happy to produce another argument which makes the same point without reference to Platonic resources.

I mentioned earlier that Annas reads this as the first of three arguments in Book 10. She reads the remark at 602b that imitation isn't serious as the conclusion of the argument making this point. The problem with trivialising poetry here is that the Books 2-3 discussion was premised on poetry's importance. It was necessary to censor poetry because of the damage it could do the characters of the guardians on the one hand, and the long term damage to the city itself on the other. If poetry is nothing serious and a kind of play, then it is difficult to see why it would justify expulsion. The mistake Annas makes is to think that Plato is trying to assimilate poetry to painting. He is not. There is an important difference between poetry and painting noted at 601b. Plato has already implied that imitation in

painting is not serious and a kind of play, which is why it can only fool children and people with no judgment. Plato also thinks he has shown, despite what people claim, that the poets do not really have the knowledge people attribute to them and so their imitations *ought* to be nothing serious and a kind of play, but there is a natural power of bewitchment possessed by poetry (601b) that painting lacks. This still needs to be explained and Plato does this by appealing to the tripartite soul (Nehamas 'Imitation' 264).

When Plato distinguished the tripartite soul he did it on the basis of motivational conflict. The same part of the soul cannot, at the same time, desire something and not desire it. The three parts of the soul are the rational part, the spirited part, and the appetitive part.⁴⁰ Using the tripartite soul Plato argues in the next section of argument that imitation, be it poetry or painting, does not appeal to the better rational part of the soul. Plato argues again from analogy and again he starts with painting.

At 602c Socrates asks what part of a person is affected by poetry. When Glaucon doesn't understand the question, he illustrates what he has in mind by making a similar point about eyesight. We do not only judge using our eyesight because:

If we rely on our eyesight, presumably, the same thing does not look the same size close to and far off...And the same things can look crooked and straight to people looking at them first in water and then out of water. Or concave and convex because of our eyes' variable perception of colours or shades. Our souls are clearly full of this kind of confusion. Things like shadow-painting, conjuring, and all the other arts of the same kind rely on this weakness in our nature to produce effects that fall nothing short of witchcraft. (602cd)

The point that Plato makes is that we are deceived by our eyes even though we know better. When we see a shadow painting or a stick in the water, knowing that the painting has no depth or that the stick is straight does not help us seeing them as having depth or being bent. We have two judgments about the same object which oppose each other. The principle that was used to distinguish the three parts of the soul is used again to claim that these two judgments are located in different parts of the soul. So, on the one hand, there is part of the soul which judges visually from a certain perspective and, on the other, another part of the soul which judges using past experience, measurement and pure thought. Of these two elements the part that judges perceptually is the weaker, and the part that measures, weighs, and counts (602d) is the better part (Burnyeat 223-8; Nehamas 'Imitation' 264-7). Plato's

⁴⁰ For detailed discussion see 436a45e.

point is 'painting – and imitation in general – operates in an area of its own, far removed from the truth, and it associates with the element in us which is far removed from intelligence.' (603ab)

The next move is to see whether a similar case could be made in the case of poetry – Socrates claims that an independent case needs to be made for the case of poetry because the analogy with painting is not sufficient (603bc). Plato goes about this in an odd way. He returns to consider how a good man would react on the loss of a close connection. A good person would be able to endure the loss best (603e). There are reasons why we should be able to endure such a loss:

In the first place, it is not clear how much is good and how much bad in situations of this sort. Second, if we look to the future, it does no good to take things hard. Third, nothing in human affairs is worth taking seriously. And fourth, grieving gets in the way of the things which ought, in these situations, to come to our assistance as swiftly as possible. (604bc)

While this is what reason (and custom⁴¹) require, there is still a conflicting desire to grieve and weep. So, on the one hand, there is a rational inclination to respond in the reasoned way that Plato describes, and on the other there is an emotional desire to weep and lament. This corresponds with the worst part of the soul: 'the element which draws us to mourning and recollection of our sufferings, which can never get its fill of these things – won't we describe this as irrational, lazy and a friend to cowardice?' (604d) Plato finds that the poetic imitator, like the painter, appeals to this base part of the soul. The poet appeals to the worst part of the soul at the expense of the rational part and in this way he is like the painter.

There are some problems with this second analogy with painting. First, Annas objects that the analogy is not helpful. She argues that there is no obvious correspondence between optical illusions and our desires. The problem is that the parts of the soul appealed to by poetry and painting are different:

The lowest part of the soul to which poetry appeals is one which itself gives scope for imitation, since it is the tendency to be led by emotion which provide most of tragedy's best plots. But this cannot be identified with the part which passively and unreflectively accepts appearances and is led to judge that a straight stick in water is bent. It is absurd to suggest that this is a rich source of dramatic material! (Introduction 338-9)

If the parts of the soul are so different then Plato cannot carry over any conclusions from painting to poetry. I take it that Annas is unhappy with Plato's conclusion at 605a that the

⁴¹ Griffith notes that the evidence about customary grieving was somewhat more ambiguous (note 14, 406d).

poet is on par with the painter, which she reads as the conclusion to (the second) discrete argument (running from 602c-605c) that trivialises poetry by assimilating it to painting.

This problem disappears if we read it as another step in the argument rather than a separate argument. The point is simply that both the painter and poet appeal to lesser parts of the soul and this does not require that they appear to the same part of the soul. If this is right then we run into the second problem with this part of the argument: Plato's talk about the divided soul is different to his earlier discussion of the soul. The differences are: first, he talks in vague terms of what seems like a bipartite division in which the rational element is set against the appetitive emotions; and second, as we've just seen, his discussion of how painting deceives us does not fit into this model.

The second difficulty is how to understand the relation of discussion of the divided soul in Book 10 to its first introduction in Book 4. Nehamas argues that in the case of illusionist painting Plato posits a division within the rational part of the soul. The reasons for this are: first, earlier the principle of division was based on motivational conflict not conflict of judgement; second, to think of the perceptual part of the soul as part of the appetitive soul would attribute thought to it; and third, that desire does not play any obvious role in our seeing the stick as bent ('Imitation' 265). If this is right then Plato introduces a new division within the rational part. This is new, but it is not obviously inconsistent with the division of the soul in Book 4. But whether it is entirely consistent with Book 4 can be put aside, since Plato's interest is not with painting but with poetry – besides, Plato admits that the analogy with painting is not enough, he has to make a separate case for the part of the soul that poetry appeals to (603bc).

There is still one more difficulty remaining for this part of the argument. Plato talks in terms that would fit a bipartite rather than tripartite soul. At 604e the contrast is 'the fretful element' with the rational part element which is 'calm, thoughtful, unchanging and true to itself.' The main problem with this shift to a bipartite division is that it doesn't explain how the spirited part would fit in. Earlier Plato distinguished three types of motivation that correspond with the three parts of the soul: rational, spirited, and desiring or appetitive. Each desire has different objects. The rational part desires what is good for the whole person, it desires the long term happiness of the being. The appetitive part contains 'sexual desire, hunger, thirst, and the turmoil of the other desires.' (436b) When it is first introduced, the appetitive part desires particular ends, and desires them without regard for

the greater good. Spirited desires are more complex. The spirited part desires to maintain the dignity of the person and so its characteristic emotion is anger. Plato's example of spirited anger is the anger Leontius feels towards himself after looking at a pile of bodies (439e-40a). His desiring part wanted to look, but the spirited part desired to avoid such shameful behaviour. The spirited part feels angry. Often, the spirited part works with the rational part but, as in cases of irrational anger, they can conflict (440b).

Annas objects that in Book 10 the contrast is between a rational part and a vague irrational, desiring part. It is difficult to see how a complex emotion such as grief would fit into the desiring part in the form we first meet it. Since there is no mention of the spirited part, it is difficult to see how it fits into the picture at all (*Introduction* 339-40).

It is quite easy to reply to this objection. Burnyeat notes that Plato started extending the scope for appetitive desires in Book 8 – there the appetitive part desires to dabble in philosophy and politics (561cd) – and what we see in Book 10 is consistent with that extension (Burnyeat 225). He also points to the implicit use of shame as an ally to reason, the role it often plays as a spirited emotion, at 604a. There Plato described how shame would keep the good man from weeping when surrounded by his equals. This suggests, against Annas, that grief, complex as it is, ought to be located in the (expanded) appetitive part.

Nehamas suggests another way of answering Annas' concern. He argues that Plato just doesn't need to distinguish between appetite and spirit for the point that he is making here. His point is just that imitation does not appeal to the rational part of the soul, whether it appeals to the desiring part or the spirited part is not important. There is no retraction of the tripartite soul, he just doesn't need to make the distinction between the non-rational parts ('Imitation' 67).

So far Plato has found that there are similarities between the painter and the poet. Neither has knowledge of the things they imitate and both appeal to lesser parts of the soul. There are differences though – these flaws in a painter are nothing serious but not so in the case of poetry. Plato has already hinted at the natural bewitchment of the poet's tools that the painter's lacks and with this in mind he turns to the gravest charge against poetry: 'Its

ability to corrupt even good people – with very few exceptions.’ (605c) This is the final step leading to the banishment of Homer and the rest of the poetry of pleasure.⁴²

Plato uses two examples to show how poetry can corrupt even good people. His first is weeping and lamentation:

The best of us, I imagine, when we hear Homer or one of the tragic poets imitating some hero in a state of grief, as he drags out a long speech of lamentation, or even breaks into song, or starts beating his breast⁴³... We enjoy it, and surrender ourselves to it. We follow and share the hero’s sufferings, treat them as real, and praise as an excellent poet the person who most affects us in this way. (605cd)

However, as we’ve seen (604bc), custom and reason demand that we keep this sort of emotion in check – besides good people are properly self-sufficient and will not be devastated at the loss of close connections (388). When we experience similar disasters, such behaviour isn’t appropriate – indeed we see something that we would be ashamed of doing. But when we watch poetry, ‘[w]e believe there is a positive benefit, which is pleasure, and would not be prepared to lose that by rejecting the whole poem. It is given to few people...to work out that the pleasure they take in what happens to others necessarily carries over into what happens to them.’⁴⁴ (606b) Gradually through the enjoyment of poetry the worst parts of us are nourished. Nourishing the lesser parts of the soul is dangerous because it destabilises the whole character.

The soul is destabilised when the lesser non-rational parts of the soul are nourished and they stop obeying the rational part of the soul. The rational part, as we’ve seen, is best suited to rule in the soul because it seeks the good of the whole soul (441e). When a non-rational part of the soul gains control, as in the case of Leontius, there is a ‘civil war’ (440b) in the soul. The appetitive soul has its desires without regard for any other considerations, and left unchecked this part of the soul becomes ‘insatiable’ (442a) and the end product is, on Plato’s terms, a pathological character.

⁴² I follow Plato in this terminological shift. Not all imitative poetry has been banished, as we’ve learnt from Book 3. Comedy, tragedy and epic, with their indiscriminate imitation and vulgar emotional appeal makes them particularly pleasurable. Plato says repeatedly that the right sort of poetry is less enjoyable – 397d, 398b, 604e are some examples.

⁴³ Cf *Ion* 535c: Ion describes one of his performances: ‘I frankly confess that at the tale of pity my eyes are filled with tears, and when I speak of horrors, my hair stands on end and my heart throbs.’ His audience is similarly affected.

⁴⁴ Compare this with the effect of imitation on the performer at 395cd.

This is the end of the argument against poetry. In what remains of the argument with a note of regret Plato expels the poets from the Callipolis but leaves a door open for them to return if they can give an account of why the poetry of pleasure is good both for the individual and for the city. Until this is provided, the only poetry that would be allowed in Callipolis would be 'hymns to the gods and verses in praise of good men.' (607a)

Before I assess the challenge and its plausibility, it is worth restating the Book 10 argument. I have claimed that we should read the argument as coming in three steps.

In the first Plato downgrades all imitation to show that imitators do not need to have knowledge of what they imitate. Two arguments are given for this. In the first, Plato relies on Platonic resources to show that imitation is twice removed from the truth. That no knowledge is necessary for imitation can be seen in the case of Homer who is credited as the educator of Greece, without evidence that he actually had this knowledge. The second way to make the same point does not rely on Platonic resources but rather on a distinction between the maker, user and imitator of an object. It is found that the user of an artefact has the best knowledge of the artefact. The maker has true belief because he has to interact with the user. Finally the imitator does not need knowledge or true belief since he bases his imitations on mere appearance. So, the conclusion of the first part of the argument is that the imitators do not have knowledge of what they imitate.

The second step is to show that imitation does not appeal to the rational part of the soul. The divided soul from Book 4 is used to show that imitation appeals to non-rational parts of the soul. Painting, however, appeals to part of the rational element of the soul and poetry to the appetitive part. Poetry is special in that it has powers of bewitchment that are not possessed by painting.

This power of bewitchment explains the third and final step in the argument. Poetry can damage even good people through the pleasure of the stimulation of the non-rational part(s) of the soul. It indulges emotions that are suspect and so strengthens them. Poetry destabilises the soul and so causes unhappiness despite the appearance of pleasure. Bad constitutions in individuals cause bad constitutions in the city⁴⁵ and so poetry becomes a threat to the possibility of justice. This is why it is dangerous and cannot be permitted in Callipolis.

⁴⁵ For detailed discussion on this point see Lear 'Inside' 190-194.

Assessing the attack: usefulness and plausibility

There is a lot that we would not agree with in Plato's critique. His authoritarianism is distasteful at best and chilling at worst. For example, the eugenics programme, the abolition of the family, the proposed expulsion of everyone over ten to the countryside if the philosopher-kings gain power, sounds alarmingly like some of the twentieth century's worst nightmares. Much of Plato's political project cannot, thankfully, be resurrected. If the political project cannot be resurrected, and insofar as the cultural project is intimately tied to it, then the cultural project and the critique of poetry should be buried with it. I contend that the conclusion about poetry is mistaken. In this section I argue that the critique of poetry has at its core important worries which we might share. If we share Plato's worry that there is an important interplay between the individual and culture (and vice versa), and that popular culture has got it wrong in important ways, then Plato's challenge is a serious one which deserves attention.

I start by locating poetry in its proper cultural context and suggest some modern analogues for poetry. Then I consider some of the social settings in which the Greeks would have heard poetry. Next I step back and return to Plato's statement of purpose at the start of Book 2 where he lays out the problem and gets ready to state his solution. I claim that this is not dissimilar to some worries that we have about modern culture. Then I look at his model of how we absorb cultural influences and I claim that this model is plausible. We are left to agreement with Plato's broad purpose and the thrust of his concerns about culture. The challenge then is to work out a democratic solution to rival Plato's authoritarian one.

Plato's interest with poetry was not similar to modern interest in literature. Indeed, he did not have a concept that corresponds with our 'art.' It is true that lots of the poetry that Plato would not permit in Callipolis are now considered exemplars of literature or art, but it was not so for Plato. To think of it as art in any modern sense is anachronistic and locates it in a peculiarly modern cultural context with which Plato would not have been familiar. If Plato did not have art in mind, then what did he have in mind?

Instead of thinking about fine art we should think instead about forms of mass entertainment. Annas suggests we should think about 'novels, movies and TV' (*Introduction* 94), Burnyeat adds to this list 'the recorded music (both popular and classical) with which we

are surrounded at home and in public places; popular magazines; radio...and the images in advertisements.' (249)

The clearest evidence that Greek poetry was truly mass entertainment was the theatre. Pericles instituted a subsidised ticketing scheme so that even the poorest (male) citizens could attend (Pickard-Cambridge 266-7). In *Symposium* Agathon is congratulated on his victory which was attended by 'thirty thousand Greeks.' (175e⁴⁶) While it is unlikely that this was an accurate estimate⁴⁷ – the Greek word *myria*, cognate with 'myriad', meant 'uncountable' as well as 'ten thousand' – the largest festival, the City Dionysia, was attended by as many as seventeen thousand people, an audience representative of the local (male) population (Nehamas 'Mass media' 287; Burnyeat 244). The audience was different to modern audiences in other ways too. Firstly, it was not quiet, respectful, and well behaved like modern theatre goers. The audience was inclined to express its approval or disapproval vociferously, either by shouting or hissing or, for cases of strong disapproval, by pelting the performers with foodstuffs⁴⁸ (Nehamas 'Mass media' 288). It should also be noted that these festivals were at the same time religious festivals: the performances were in the theatre of Dionysus and presided over by the god himself (Burnyeat 244). The point here is that the ancient theatre was much more socially charged than it is today. A rock concert would be a closer modern analogue than the modern theatre.

The theatre is perhaps the best example of how the Greeks heard poetry publicly, but poetry also featured in private life. Privately, poetry would typically have been recited at symposia. Symposia were private parties,⁴⁹ attended by men, at which there would usually have been feasting, drinking, poetry, and often sex.⁵⁰ All of this would take place while reclined on a couch.⁵¹ There would have been seven, eleven or fifteen couches, which would accommodate either one or two men. Symposia were attended by adolescent boys, but only men over the age of eighteen would have reclined and participated actively (Burnyeat 235-7, note 49, note 52). Poetry could feature in a couple of ways. In *Symposium* Plato describes

⁴⁶ Waterfield's translation.

⁴⁷ It is noted that Socrates' remark was sarcastic, but it is likely that his jibe was directed more at Agathon's skill rather than the size of his audience.

⁴⁸ Pickard-Cambridge tells of an occasion when the comic poet Athenaeus was violently thrown out of the theatre, though apparently this sort of behaviour was rare (273).

⁴⁹ Translated literally, the Greek *sumposion* means 'drink together'.

⁵⁰ Usually with female prostitutes. The flute girl sent away at *Symposium* 176e was probably a prostitute.

⁵¹ Notice that Plato talks about the form of a couch in Book 10 and not, as in some translations, a bed. Couches, as Burnyeat shows, would have been associated with poetry but not beds.

hymns to Zeus as part of the traditional religious rites for when the meal was finished (176a). While in *Symposium* the evening is taken up by speeches to love, often the symposiasts might recite or sing Homeric poems or other poems about heroes and gods (Burnyeat 236).

The point is that poetry was at the centre of socially charged occasions. It was, in Burnyeat's terms, one of the central vehicles for the transmission of cultural values. 'The symposium...is a prime setting for the young to be socialized into [a] tradition. The songs sung there become common currency. At the symposium you...acquire the group loyalties, values, beliefs, and knowledge which constitute...the shared bases of social action.' (Burnyeat 236) The same happens at the theatre, except there the audience is bigger and the occasion is that much more charged. In this way the poets were right at the heart of Greek culture.

Now recall Glaucon's luxurious city described in Book 2. Remember how it had 'artists, all those using figure and colour for their imitations, and those using music, poets and their assistants.' (373bc) We also saw how Plato described this city as unhealthy, swollen and inflamed. Given the cultural significance of the poets, it should now be clearer why he blames them for what he sees as an unhealthy city. He looks at the values of the popular poetry and finds that they have it wrong. In effect he looks at popular culture, the mass entertainment of his day, and finds that it is bad for the citizenry and so bad for the city. It is the values, beliefs, and knowledge that constitute culture which are the problem.

It is not uncommon to hear complaints about what we see in the mass media – we frequently hear about, for instance, models that are too thin. The representation of (Western) female beauty ideals is regularly blamed for the rise in eating disorders among women. Plato's divided soul gives an account of how we can be affected by these images even though we may know better – rationally the so-called ideals represent, in some cases, ill-health, but nonetheless they endure remarkably.

It might be objected that this one instance of a harmful norm is nothing like Plato's thorough mistrust of his culture's values. Giving just one example of a troublesome value does not get us close to the scale of Plato's reforms and so it is not likely to make us sympathetic to Plato's proposals. But consider the Western consumer culture⁵² and its associated values. If we step back to this level of abstraction we can see how we might start

⁵² If we think of the iconic food of Western consumer culture, McDonalds, and couple that with the beauty ideals, we can see how the culture might well produce the civil war in the soul that Plato talks about.

to be more distrusting of cultural values, values that are implicit in many of the sounds and images that saturate public and private life. Plato was troubled by the general character of the city. If we think of the consumer culture we might also be troubled by the general character of our (considerably larger) city.⁵³

Even if this is granted, it does not say much to redeem Plato's challenge. Plato's divided soul might be an adequate explanatory device to show how our better judgment is overcome by cultural influences. But this only goes to the start of the Book 2 reforms, the reforms of content. Plato has further principled worries about imitation and merely pointing to ways in which popular culture appears less than ideal doesn't recommend Plato's peculiar analysis of the phenomenon.

Against this, Alexander Nehamas argues convincingly in 'Plato and the Mass Media' that broadly Platonic worries about imitation motivate some criticisms of TV. Let us see why.

Nehamas' starting point is the claim that indulgence, at the theatre, of emotions which ought not be indulged ultimately shape our reactions to similar situations in our own lives. Plato's example is shameful weeping. In real life convention tells us that being strong in the face of loss is good. But when watching the theatre, and thinking the misfortunes are not our own, we let our guard down and indulge the desire to weep. While this seems harmless, Plato claims that the reactions will be transferred to our own misfortunes. We might not enjoy them, but we will, at least, not feel shame at weeping and lamenting. Nehamas claims that the fear that our reactions will be transferred from the theatre (or screen) to real life, and the assumption that underpins this worry, is central to his concerns about poetry and, he claims, modern concerns about TV (282).

This assumption is that imitation is transparent. The worry is that the representation or imitation of, say, sorrow is superficially identical to real sorrow. The superficial similarity masks the ontological difference – the actor isn't himself sorrowful, nor has he really experienced the misfortune in question. But nonetheless, our reaction to both is fundamentally similar – if it were not, then there would be no concern about it affecting our reaction to real sorrow (283-84).⁵⁴

⁵³ Even if we don't have any ethical concerns, we ought at least to have environmental reservations.

⁵⁴ It might be objected that we might easily agree with this assumption with children but be more dubious with adults. But there is an exclusively adult pursuit where the same worries are expressed: pornography. Some

What is important about this transparency? Recall the anecdote about the women miscarrying during the *Eumenides*. The women there reacted to the Furies on the stage with the same fear that they would react with were they to bump into some real Furies. The point for Nehamas is that *qua* popular entertainment the Greek theatre was, for both its audience and Plato,⁵⁵ transparent in this way. Nehamas claims that a medium's status as popular entertainment is particularly important here. Despite the evidence of convention and signposts that what is being viewed is imitative or representational, these tend, in popular mediums, to be overlooked (288). This contrasts with mediums which have been elevated to the status of fine art. 'The fine arts...bear an indirect, interpretative relationship to the world, and further interpretation on the part of audience and critics is necessary in order to understand it. It is precisely for this sort of interpretation that the popular arts do not seem to call.' (290) If it is generally believed that the fine arts require this, presumably, intellectual interpretation, and the popular arts do not, we can see how the in case of fine arts, the rational soul engages with the work first. What is seen is filtered interpretatively. In the popular arts, where this engagement is not called for or even appropriate, there is less chance of the rational soul subjugating the appetitive soul.

Nehamas gives a number of examples of critics who assume this transparency⁵⁶ and generate Platonic criticisms of TV (285-287). He claims that many of us are unwitting Platonists in this respect and in this way the challenge is still very much alive.

Nehamas limits his discussion to the Book 10 argument. As I have already noted, he takes, incorrectly I think, Books 2 and 3 to impact only on the education of the young guardians ('Imitation' 253-54; 'Mass media' 279). Because he is only focused on Book 10, Nehamas takes Plato's concerns to be with only (performed) poetry. He notes that while a lot of poetry is banned in Book 10, painting and sculpture, the other imitative arts, are not, and he takes this as the main evidence that Plato's interest with poetry is nothing like an interest in a fine art (281). I suggest that if we take the Book 10 discussion together with the earlier discussion we start to see how serious Plato's question is.

objections to pornography turn on how it makes men think about women and how it might influence their reactions to real women and real sex.

⁵⁵ Also, Nehamas notes, for Aristotle (283).

⁵⁶ In some instances TV itself exploits this transparency. The advertising slogan 'as seen on TV' doesn't make much sense unless it is assumed that when the product was seen performing its wonders, what we saw was unmediated and so 'real'.

To see Plato's worry about cultural influence, let us turn to an unusual reading of the famous cave allegory. This is the start of the myth:

'If we're thinking about the effect of *education* – or the lack of it – on our nature, here's another comparison we can make. Picture human beings living in some sort of underground cave dwelling, with an entrance which is long, as wide as the cave, and open to the light. Here they live, from earliest childhood, with their legs and necks in chains, so that they have to stay where they are, looking only ahead of them, prevented by the chains from turning their heads. They have light from a distant fire, which is burning behind them and above them. Between the fire and the prisoners, at a higher level than them, is a path along which you must picture a low wall that has been built, like the screen which hides people when they are giving a puppet show, and above them they make the puppets appear...Picture also, along the length of the wall, people carrying all sorts of implements which project above it, and statues of people, and animals made of stone and wood and all kinds of materials. As you'd expect, some of the people carrying the objects are speaking, while others are silent.'

'A Strange picture. And strange prisoners.'⁵⁷

'No more strange than us...Do you think, for a start, that prisoners of that sort have ever seen anything more *of themselves and of one another* than the shadows cast by the fire on the wall of the cave in front of them?' (514a-15a; my emphases)

Burnyeat argues that we can see Plato's cultural concerns in the cave, and not only his epistemology. At the end of the passage there is an odd claim that the prisoners see nothing of each other than that which they see on the cave walls. A literal interpretation of the passage quickly runs into difficulty because the prisoners are stationary, chained in their places. However, the images on the walls move, and it would be odd to think of them as imaging themselves as still in a world of motion (239). There are numerous other difficulties that a literal interpretation runs into.⁵⁸ So how should we take the passage?

The Cave is introduced to illustrate the effect of *paideia*, which covers both 'education' and 'culture', on the population. Burnyeat argues that the puppets represent the images and sounds of culture. Some of the models are silent, as paintings and sculptures are. Some of the models move and speak, just as actors on the stage move and speak. Both on the stage and in the images and shapes that surround us we see a complex reflection of ourselves. In the cave people learn from the images paraded across the walls, it forms their self image (Burnyeat 240-41). Notably the prisoners treat the representations as real, and this

⁵⁷ Socrates' interlocutor here is Glaucon.

⁵⁸ See Burnyeat 239-40.

takes us back to Nehamas' claims about transparency. They learn from these images which they treat as real. Burnyeat puts it this way, 'the Cave image shows the prisoners unaware that their values and ideas are uncritically absorbed from the surrounding culture. They are prisoners, as we all are to being with, of their education and upbringing.' (240)

Now we can see why Plato is particularly worried, as some modern commentators are, about the sounds and images that saturate culture. Often unconsciously, as Plato demonstrates, we are sensitive to sounds and images bypassing our better critical judgment. Because we treat the popular media as transparent it comes to reflect our values and commitments. It both reflects and forms our values – thin models are thin because that is what the public wants, but at the same time, the images of culture, in magazines, films, TV etc., have gradually, and perhaps without conscious effort, shaped thin women. The reflection that I have in mind is not a straightforward relationship. The relationship between a society's values and its culture is highly ambiguous and complex. Values are negotiated and contested and they also change and evolve – and Plato is aware of this and can account for it.⁵⁹ But this does not change the way we learn from culture and, often unconsciously, absorb values from it.

What Plato does with the divided soul is give us an account of how we are susceptible to culture. He gives an account of how culture changes over time, how little changes filter through culture unnoticed. He describes how 'it seeps imperceptibly into people's characters and habits. From there it brims over, increasing as it goes, into their contacts with one another.' (424de)

While we might not agree with the content of Plato's reforms, we share some of his concerns about the effect of culture. We could also take lessons from the systematic way in which he applies his reforms. His insight is that all of culture needs to be purified in order to create an ideal society. It is not enough to get the children's education right since that is not the sum of their cultural education. We cannot merely change the character of children's education to get society right (or, weaker, we cannot try to correct what is wrong) unless we try to change the character of the whole culture. But if we agree with Plato about the power

⁵⁹ His view on culture is perhaps less optimistic than ours. If left to its own devices, culture will *deteriorate*: the sketch of the different constitutions in Books 8 and 9 is an account of how mind deteriorates in relation to culture. While the culture in Callipolis would produce the most stable society, Plato admits that even Callipolis is unstable and would deteriorate because of mistakes in the eugenics programme, appointing the wrong rulers and so on (545d-47a).

of culture and agree that it is harmful, but are unhappy with his solution, the challenge is to come up with a democratic alternative.

2. An Aesthetic Reply

As we saw in Chapter 1, Plato's critique of poetry is thoroughly ethical. His primary concern is with the political effects of poetry on the city and the ethical effects on the individual. But this seems to leave a gap. We prize poetry and visual art because it has some sort of aesthetic value or because it is beautiful and that Plato does not consider this seems to miss something that is fundamentally important about the arts. We have the concept of the aesthetic and a notion of aesthetic value which explains why the arts are important for us.

In this chapter I consider whether aesthetic value, which has been linked with beauty,¹ is able to save some of the poetry expelled from Callipolis in *Republic*. I start within the Platonic oeuvre and consider whether Plato's discussions of beauty get us to a proto aesthetic value. First I look at the account of beauty in *Symposium*. I argue that the focus on beauty there is on tokens of beauty that only offer benefit as a means to ascend to the real Formal Beauty. Next I consider the *Phaedrus*. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato revises some of the psychological claims of *Republic*. I consider whether these, coupled with the dialogue's discussion of the benefit of beauty, offers a possible reply to *Republic*. I argue that the Beauty in *Phaedrus* is too closely tied with human beauty and human love to be useful for poetry. I also consider the apparent endorsement of the benefit of poetic inspiration and I argue that despite seeming promising at first glance, it is not a departure from anything we have seen in *Republic*. Finally I consider a modern account of aesthetic value. I argue that this account does not take seriously that Plato's target is popular culture. I claim that modern aesthetic value might be able to redeem the art world, but we would be less happy privileging it over the ethical or political value in the context of popular culture.

The *Symposium*, Beauty, and the Good

As we have seen, Plato challenges us in *Republic* to show that and how (unrestricted) poetry can be good for the individual and the city. Plato acknowledges that we get pleasure from poetry. This, rather than being a benefit, is one of the reasons why poetry is so dangerous: the pleasure beguiles us and then the poetry corrupts us. His critique is thoroughly ethical. This leaves a gap. Historically, the arts have been associated with beauty which has been

¹ It is noted that the link is tenuous, especially after the twentieth century.

linked with aesthetic value. Plato, of course, does not have a concept that corresponds to the aesthetic, but he does have the Form of Beauty.

Plato tells us about Beauty in the dialogue written just before *Republic* (Kraut xii), the *Symposium*. The symposium that is recounted² was the celebratory feast for Agathon's first victory with his first tragedy (173a³). Instead of turning the evening into a drinking party the symposiasts, some still hung over from the previous evening's revelries, decide to spend the evening in conversation. Love is the chosen topic (177ae). My interest in this section is with Socrates' speech which connects beauty with love, specifically whether the benefit of beauty could be used to reply to his charges against poetry.

Symposium, read beside *Republic*, is remarkable. Perhaps most striking is that two of the symposiasts are poets, the comic poet Aristophanes⁴ and the tragic poet Agathon, and that Plato treats both poets surprisingly sympathetically. He does satirise them, but then everyone is satirised, including Socrates – in the prologue Socrates is lost, quite literally, in thought (174e-75a). The person who is satirised most harshly is the doctor Eryximachus, who takes every possible opportunity to remind us of his substantial medical expertise. But even in that case Plato's satire is gentler than it is elsewhere. Ion, the rhapsode in the dialogue of the same name, is so pompous and self-important that he doesn't even notice that Socrates is mocking him. Aristophanes and Agathon, unlike Ion, who defends at least superficially absurd claims, are given important and complex speeches in *Symposium*. Both their speeches are more serious⁵ than the first three speeches and mark a change in tone of the work.

While Plato is gentler in his satire of the poets, his attitude towards them is still ambivalent. In a passage that anticipates some of *Republic's* critique, Socrates praises Agathon's speech for its 'elegant vocabulary and phraseology' (198b) while noting that its truth is doubtful: 'What you do is describe your subject in the most generous and glowing terms, whether or not there's any truth to them.' (198de) This should remind us of the

² The work is artfully constructed through layers of reported speech. Apollodorus relates the story of a feast that happened years ago (172c) that he did not attend but was told about by someone else, Aristodemus (173b).

³ Robin Waterfield's translation. For the Greek I use Dover's edition.

⁴ It is worth noting that Aristophanes would have already attacked Socrates in the *Clouds* – the *Clouds'* attack was mentioned in *Apology* 19b, one of the early dialogues.

⁵ It is difficult to determine how comic Aristophanes' speech is meant to be. There are comic elements in it, but there is an underlying frustration: sex is a poor substitute for the bliss that was lost, we might not find our other half and so on. Nonetheless, it is a serious account of love, and certainly more complex than the previous speakers' speeches (Waterfield 'Introduction' xxiv; Nehamas 'Symposium' 307-8).

worry in Book 10 that although Homer's (imitative) poems are splendid to the ears, when stripped of their fine language, they contain no truth (601ab).

In contrast to Agathon's beautiful phrases, reminiscent of his promise to speak the plain truth in the *Apology*, Socrates offers to give his speech if he can tell the truth in an unadorned style: 'I am prepared to tell the truth, if you'd be happy with that, but I must do it in my own way, because if I try to compete with your speeches, I'll just make a fool of myself.' (199ab) The speech that Socrates gives was, he claims, told to him by a Mantineaean priestess, Diotima. The speech can be roughly divided into two parts. In the first Socrates corrects Agathon's description of Eros, the god of love whose characteristics are the same as love's, as the youngest and most beautiful of the gods (201d-209e) and gives an account of why people love. In the second Socrates tells us about the benefit of love when he describes the remarkable ascent to Beauty (210a-12c). In order to understand how the ascent would work we need to look at the account of love, an account that is very different from our modern idea of love.⁶

The first part of the speech starts with the correction of Agathon's conception of the god.⁷ Eros is not the youngest and most beautiful of all the gods, in fact he is not even a full god, but a spirit between god and mortals. The mistake that Agathon made, which Socrates himself made before his discussion with Diotima, was to think of love on the model of the beloved, that which is loved, rather than that of the lover.⁸ The lover desires what he lacks and he desires the beloved, seeing that which he lacks in the beloved. Love is neither beautiful nor youthful because the lover typically desires these things, and it is agreed that we do not desire things which we already have (204ab). The characteristic of Eros, and so of love, is to desire the beauty and youth that he lacks.

Having corrected the account of the nature of love, Diotima turns at 204c to a discussion of why people love. The question that she asks is why people desire attractive people or attractive things (204d). Socrates' answer is that people desire such things because they want to possess them. Diotima presses the question and asks why people want to

⁶ The account of love with which it is most easy to identify is Aristophanes': we love that which makes us complete, we love our other halves. See 189a-193e.

⁷ See 195a-97e

⁸ We are now in the conventions of Greek homoerotic love. Older men (*erastai*) would often take younger boys (*eromenoi*) as lovers. The relationship was unequal: the older man would train and educate the younger in return for sexual favours. The (usually intercrural) sex act was for the lover's benefit and the beloved was expected to be unresponsive (Waterfield 'Introduction' xv-xvi).

possess these things. When Socrates doesn't understand, she rephrases the question: 'Well, suppose the questioner changed tack and phrased his question in terms of goodness instead of attractiveness.' (204de) Unsurprisingly, Socrates finds this question easier to answer: having good things makes people happy,⁹ and people desire good things because they want to be happy. Rephrasing the question in this way may seem odd to us, but it should be noted that the Greek '*kalon*', translated as 'attractive' by Waterfield, is wider than 'beauty' or 'attractive' or our other terms of aesthetic recommendation. Physical attractiveness or beauty is central to *kalon*'s meaning, but it is broader than this, including qualities that go beyond the aesthetic such as 'fine' or 'noble' (Janaway 59).

The startling consequence of 204de is that everyone is a lover in Diotima's sense. We all desire to be happy, and we desire the (good) things that will make us happy. By agreement at 204a, if we were to have that which makes us happy, we would no longer desire it or love it.¹⁰ But if everyone is a lover, then why is the term reserved for just one type of love (205b)? Diotima answers this objection with an analogy with craftsmen that works in Greek but not in English. The point of the analogy is that all craftsmen create but only poets are called creators. This makes sense in the Greek because *poiētēs* is literally 'creator' but is normally used to denote 'poet'. Similarly, *poiēsis* is literally 'creativity' but is normally used as 'poetry'. The point is that everyone is a lover insofar as we all desire good (205d). While the terminology of love is usually only applied to human lovers, it could be used to describe people who achieve happiness in other ways. In short, the object of love is simply goodness¹¹ (205e), which at this point is simply that which would make us happy.

So, when we love, we desire to possess goodness, but, Diotima adds, also to possess it permanently¹² (206a). It is concluded that, 'the object of love is the permanent possession of goodness for oneself.' (206b) This is the purpose of love 'in *all* its manifestations.' (206b, Waterfield's emphasis) This is the end of Diotima's generic account of love. Next, shifting back to conventional human love, Diotima presses on, 'we need to ask under what conditions and in what sphere of activity the determination and energy of people with this

⁹ The Greek is '*eudaimōn*'.

¹⁰ A corollary is that people who don't know what they lack will not want it. Ignorant people do not love or desire wisdom (204b).

¹¹ This move is preceded by an unmistakable reference to Aristophanes' speech: 'what of the idea one hears that people in love are looking for their other halves?' (205d) While Socrates can correct Agathon's speech because he used to have the same view about love, he cannot correct Aristophanes explicitly because Socrates is reporting Diotima's speech, told to him some time before the symposium.

¹² This is added without argument.

purpose may be called love. What does love actually do?’ (205b) The answer, initially baffling to Socrates, is that ‘[l]ove’s purpose is physical and mental procreation in an attractive medium.’ (206b)

Diotima claims that we are all pregnant with either physical or mental children. At a certain stage in life, and this is common to all creatures, we seek out the right conditions in which to give birth. In the case of real children we seek out an attractive partner, and bring forth children in a beautiful medium. For Diotima, all sex acts become a type of birth¹³ (206c) even if it does not result in actual pregnancy, which opens space for homosexual relations also being productive. The reason we want to procreate is that it is the closest mortals come to immortality. We continue to live through our children. But of course there are real children and metaphoric children. Heroic acts are an example of metaphoric children.¹⁴ People’s intellectual output is perhaps a less controversial example of metaphoric children. Diotima claims that these children are better than real children: ‘we cast envious glances at good poets like Homer and Hesiod because the kind of children they leave behind are those which earn their parents renown and “fame immortal”, since the children themselves are immortal.’ (209cd) Physical love then is the desire for beauty in which to reproduce.

I am interested in looking at the link between beauty and (pro)creativity, because it is here that there is hint of a different attitude towards poetry to that in *Republic*. The first hint of an improved role for poetry can be found in Diotima’s talk about people who are mentally pregnant and her elevation of the status of these children over real children. The reason they are elevated is because people who are mentally pregnant are pregnant with ‘[v]irtue, and especially wisdom.’ (209a) Examples of these children include ‘the creations brought into the world by the poets and any craftsmen who counts as having done original work, and then there’s the most important and [finest]¹⁵ kind of wisdom by far, the kind which enables people to manage political and domestic affairs.’ (209a) The attribution of

¹³ Waterfield notes that, in the case of heterosexual intercourse and procreation, the Greek belief was that the female had no role in the production of children except as a receptacle and incubator for the male seed. In this sense procreation is quite literally in a beautiful medium, without the medium contributing, and ejaculation would be a kind of birth (note 206e).

¹⁴ Diotima’s attitude here verges on cynicism: ‘Do you really think that Alcestis would have died for Admetus, that Achilles would have joined Patroclus in death, or that your Athenian hero Codrus would have died in defence of his son’s kingdom if they didn’t think their courage would be remembered for ever, as in fact it is by us?’ (208d) I would be inclined to answer ‘no’ to this rhetorical question.

¹⁵ Waterfield translates ‘*kalliste*’ as ‘most...attractive’ which is slightly awkward.

wisdom and virtue to the poets is surprising given what will come in *Republic*, and what has already come in, for example, *Apology* and *Ion* which both deny that the poets have wisdom.¹⁶ The thought about wisdom and virtue is not, however, developed further here. We can also note that the poets are not given any special status among other craftsmen, and that they are subordinated to political wisdom, the most beautiful wisdom. Despite these two concerns, there is nonetheless a hint of a more positive attitude to poetry.

Christopher Janaway argues (73 ff) that we should be wary of attributing to Plato any significant departure from the view about poetry in the earlier dialogues and from the soon to be written *Republic* for three reasons. First, Plato does not explain why mental or intellectual children are better than real children. 'The pretension to know that the *Iliad* and *Works and Days* are finer than any human child is unexplained. If fathers are not worshipped for producing their offspring, the reason is surely not that the product is generally shoddy and liable to die.' (74) Janaway is right that the reason fathers aren't worshipped is not because their children are liable to die, but presumably if it is immortality that is sought, then it seems that mental children would be better suited for bringing their fathers lasting fame and admiration. Few people are remembered just by virtue of having had children, but some people are remembered by virtue of their political, or poetic, or philosophical output, long after their deaths. Janaway's second reason for being suspicious of the passage is that there is no obvious place for the poets in the rest of Diotima's picture. We are not told what it would be for a poet to reproduce in a beautiful medium. We are given no clue as to what Homer would have loved – a person? a Muse? – to help him procreate. In the case of real children the beautiful medium, the woman, is necessary for procreation, but we are not given any detailed account of how this would work in the case of mental children. This is an important gap, but it is not the most important gap and so I will not suggest possible ways to fill it. The third and, I think, most serious reservation is that while we might have found a connection between beauty and the *creation* of art, no link has been established between beauty and the work of art, the particular poem. People desire to give birth in beauty to works, but nothing has been said about the beauty of the *works*. So, if Janaway is right, then my suggestion faces a difficulty. It seems that the positive attitude that is suggested can only

¹⁶ In *Ion* the poet's (and rhapsode's) craft is put down to divine inspiration. In *Republic*, as we have seen, it is shown that the poets have none of the wisdom attributed to them on account of their imitations.

be found in the wisdom and virtue of the poets, imbued into their works, a view which is unequivocally rejected elsewhere.

However, there might still some hope in another remark: 'All over the world, in fact, in Greece and abroad, various men in various places have on a number of occasions engendered virtue in some form or other by creating works of *beauty* for public display.' (209de¹⁷) This gives us some beauty in the work which is responsible for cultivating virtue in the population. While this might not be like modern aesthetic value, we do have a connection between the work, beauty and a positive benefit associated with that beauty. There are at least two possibilities here. First, this is just another aberration, following on the attribution of wisdom to the poets. The second possibility might be to take this benefit, connected as it is with a work's beauty, as part of the benefit of the ascent. Before I can discuss this, consider first the ascent.

At 209e Socrates' speech, and indeed the *Symposium*, could end. He has corrected Agathon explicitly and implicitly rejected the Aristophanic conception of love. So it is surprising when Diotima says that she will show Socrates where 'the mysteries...lead if you go about them properly.' (210a) In what follows we get an account of the intellectual ascent to the apprehension of Platonic Form. Diotima describes how we ascend from loving beauty in particular bodies, to recognising that the beauty in particular bodies is the same and so to love every body (210b). From this the lover should move to loving mental beauty. Instead of loving the beloved's beautiful body, the lover focuses on the right kind of reasoning, that which will help moral progress (210c). The next step is to look to people's actions, laws and sciences. At the top of the ascent the lover is faced by a 'vast sea of beauty.' (210d) This gets the lover to look directly at the Form:

What he'll see is, in the first place, eternal; it doesn't come to be or cease to be, and it doesn't increase or diminish. In the second place, it isn't attractive in one respect and repulsive in another, or attractive at one time but not at another, or attractive in one setting but repulsive in another, or attractive here and repulsive elsewhere, depending on how people find it...he'll perceive it in itself and by itself, constant and eternal, and he'll see that every other beautiful object somehow partakes of it. (211ab)

Diotima takes the benefit of making the ascent to Beauty itself as obvious. She asks rhetorically: 'What else could make life worth living, my dear Socrates...than seeing true

¹⁷ This excerpt comes after Plato has given Solon's and Lycurgus' constitutional children. I think it is clear that the benefit refers back to both Homer and Hesiod, and Solon and Lycurgus.

beauty?’ (211d) My interest is whether the arts can play a role in the ascent, with the beauty of the work mentioned at 209e helping us on the ascent. If we can tie the beauty of the work (produced in beauty) to the moral and personal benefit of the ascent, then we have a positive role for poetry, one which might form the start of some sort of aesthetic response to *Republic*. We could imagine including among the fine and morally worthy reasoning appreciation of beautiful artworks, be they musical or poetic or visual, and benefiting from them as we head up the ladder towards the Form of Beauty.

While acknowledging that this is tempting, Janaway warns that we should resist temptation: ‘the lure is to be resisted. We have no right to assume that Plato has waiting before him a smooth train of thought leading to a positive, quasi-modern account of the arts. (Besides, he was ‘on the verge’ of writing the *Republic*.)’ (76) He notes Plato’s stubborn silence on the arts in the ascent passage. Plato talks about the beauty of the ‘kinds of *reasoning* which help young men’s moral progress.’ (210c, my emphasis) Elsewhere Plato consistently denies that the poets do much that is reasoned, rather their craft depends on inspiration. This suggests that Plato’s silence on poetry in the ascent is a principled one, rather than an oversight. However, even if not mentioning poetry was an oversight, the ascent passage would not get us to a quasi-modern account of the arts for another reason.

On the *Symposium* view, beauty in mere physical objects or artefacts is to be transcended. As we make the step up from individual bodies, our love for them is (appropriately) diminished. As we make the next step up to knowledge and sciences (*technai*) we will ‘come to regard physical beauty as unimportant.’ (210c) This is hardly a comfort for those looking for a modern account, with some special value located in the work which is itself worthy of attention. In the *Symposium* any physical beauty is a poor token of the Form of Beauty, and we would do well to get past it quickly. Even if the arts are given a role on the ladder to Beauty, as shoddy physical manifestations far removed from real Beauty, it will be a very low rung indeed. The best role for the arts we can hope for from *Symposium* is some aesthetic benefit at an early stage of the ascent, but it would be something we need to get past in order to perceive the better Form of Beauty. In short, Plato would still regard the artwork as a lowly step far removed from proper beauty. Aesthetes who stay on the low rung enamoured with particular works would miss real beauty, rather like the sight lovers of *Republic* who ‘take pleasure in beautiful sounds and colours and shapes, and in everything which is created from these elements, but [whose] minds are incapable of seeing and taking

pleasure in, the nature of beauty itself.' (476b) What may have started looking like it could get us to a modern account of aesthetic benefit has taken a counterintuitive turn that regards any physical example of beauty as replaceable tokens that should be transcended in the pursuit of real beauty. We are told this explicitly in the *Symposium*, once the Socratic lover has ascended to the Form he will turn back and look at it and see that 'gold and clothing and good-looking boys and youth will pale into insignificance beside it.' (211d) A little later Plato talks of Beauty as not being 'tainted by human flesh and colouring and all that mortal rubbish.' (211e, my emphasis) Plato's focus is on beautiful bodies, but if we were to add to this the spectacle and sounds which so enamour the sight lovers, the same would apply. The sights might partake in Beauty, but it would be a poor example that is only worthy for the early stages of training towards real beauty.

There is a further reason why a modern aesthete might be concerned. Recall Diotima's suggestion at 204e that we can substitute 'good' for 'beautiful.' The reason this move makes sense is clear in the account of the Forms in *Republic*.¹⁸ The clearest statement of the relationship between the good and the other Forms is in Book 6 through the allegory of the sun.¹⁹

The allegory of the sun tells us how the Form of the Good is connected to the other Forms. In the sun allegory the Good is analogous to the sun. Our sight is our keenest sense (507c). But in order to see we need light in addition to eyesight. The best source of light is, of course, the sun: when we look at things in the dark they are dim and indistinct whereas in daylight the reverse is true (508cd). The sun is also responsible for the 'birth, growth, and sustenance' (509a) of everything that is seen. The Good enables us to see what is beautiful and beautiful things get their beauty from the Good, but the Good is ontologically superior and distinct from the other Forms (509b). Good is connected to the Beautiful, but they are not identical. Talking about the *Symposium* passage at 204e Janaway says 'This makes the class of things that are *agathos* and the class of things that are *kalos* coincident, the terms being "interchangeable...but not synonymous"²⁰ (72)

This close connection between the Beautiful and the Good, suggested first by the broader range of *kalon* and confirmed by the sun allegory, shows us how similar the vision of

¹⁸ Alexander Nehamas claims that in the middle dialogues, including *Symposium* and *Republic*, the Forms in Plato's ontology are not connected. See 'Introduction' xxi ff.

¹⁹ All three of the famous allegories, the sun, line, and cave, are intended to elucidate Plato's epistemology.

²⁰ The quote is from A. W. Price *Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle*.

Symposium is to that of *Republic*. The close connection of the Good and the Beautiful explains why Plato can criticise poetry on solely ethical grounds: if the Good and the Beautiful are linked, then the poetry that is expelled in *Republic* might be poetic, but it cannot be truly fine or beautiful. At most it can have the *appearance* of beauty, but of course, that is not enough. In Plato's connected cosmos something that is corrupt will not also be fine or beautiful. The *Symposium's* account of beauty does not help us to reply to the *Republic's* attitude towards poetry because their visions are ultimately similar.²¹

Before I look at a modern account of the aesthetic benefit of art, I turn to a Platonic dialogue in which it is claimed that Plato retracts some important psychological tenets of *Republic*, the *Phaedrus*.

The *Phaedrus*, Madness, and Poetry

Like the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus* is a rich and evocative dialogue. And like the *Symposium* there are speeches about love and talk of beauty, but *Phaedrus* has a wider range of concerns. It is unusual in a number of ways, perhaps most obvious, it is the only one of Plato's dialogues set outside Athens. Socrates, perhaps inspired by the beautiful surroundings of the countryside, gives two long speeches about love uncharacteristically claiming rhetorical skill. My interest in this section is with his second speech.

Martha Nussbaum claims that the *Phaedrus* is the apology that was called for in *Republic* 10. The apology is both for a particular conception of love as well as for poetic writing (203). Nussbaum's hope is that in Socrates' recantation in his second speech, Plato opens space for poetry that was closed in *Republic*. I start with this speech, following Nussbaum's reading quite closely – she is particularly optimistic that the revision of the *Republic* psychology opens space for the lower parts of the soul that Plato was so hostile to in earlier dialogues, and this in turn opens space for the pleasures associated with those parts of the soul, those which are excited by poetry.

I start with a significant departure from *Republic*, Socrates' endorsement of madness. This signals a departure from the psychology of *Republic*, and gives us way to discuss the new vision.

²¹ On this view, then, we are forced to take Diotima's claims at 209 about the wisdom and virtue of the poets as an aberration.

The *Phaedrus* is marked by madness. In the speeches, love is a kind of madness; Socrates himself is possessed by madness, which explains some of his uncharacteristic behaviour: Phaedrus, Socrates tells us, bewitched him and caused him to make the second speech (242b).

In the first two speeches of *Phaedrus* the account of madness in *Republic* is endorsed.²² The two speeches are Lysias', read aloud by Phaedrus, and Socrates' first speech. The speeches complement each other. Their advice to a young boy (*eromenos*) is not to choose as a mentor a man who is in love with him, but rather a self-controlled, rational person who is not in love with him.²³ The person who is not in love with the boy will benefit him best because his interest in the boy is pure, unspoil by confusing and distorting emotions. Madness is obviously dangerous and the self-controlled life recommended, indeed required, in *Republic* is obviously preferable.²⁴

Socrates' second speech starts with a forceful recantation of the first speech. Socrates uncovers his head, covered up to now out of shame, and says:

'There's no truth to that story' – that when a lover is available you should give your favors to a man who doesn't love you instead, because he is in control of himself while the lover has lost his head. That would have been fine to say if madness were bad, pure and simple; but in fact the best things we have come from madness, when it is given as a gift of the god. (244a²⁵)

This is different to what we see in *Republic*. There, as Nussbaum points out, madness was associated with the lower parts of the soul, the appetites and emotions, gaining control of the person at the expense of the rational part (Nussbaum 204 ff). At 400b madness is listed together with 'meanness of spirit, arrogance...and other faults of character.' There it is straightforwardly a simple evil. Later at 403b madness is connected with sexual pleasure. Since sexual pleasure is one of the keenest pleasures, it makes us irrational and we lose our self-discipline. Self-discipline is 'being obedient to [our] masters, and [ourselves] masters of pleasures of drink, sex and food' (389de) – in fact the model of the just soul. Letting any of the appetites get the better of our rational part leads to some form of insanity. The effects

²² Nussbaum argues that the *Symposium* presents us with the same vision. The choice there is between the rational Socratic love and the mad, destructive love of Alcibiades. For detailed discussion see Chapter 6: 'The speech of Alcibiades: a reading of the *Symposium*'.

²³ That is not to say that the relationship will nonetheless be sexual (note 20, 231a). Sex is not at issue, but the problems that are associated with emotional involvement, such as jealousy.

²⁴ For detailed and charitable discussion of the two speeches see Nussbaum 203-213; Nehamas, 'Introduction' xv-xix.

²⁵ Translated by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff.

of this madness, as Nussbaum puts it, are 'the loss of true insight and a tendency towards excess.' (205)

As we have already seen, most mimetic poetry has this effect: it nourishes the irrational, base parts of the soul at the expense of the better, rational element. The loss of insight because of tragedy, and poetry in general, is obvious as people come to believe the poets' 'insights' which are three times removed from the truth. In short, in *Republic* poetry is implicated in madness at least insofar as its effects are similar to madness.²⁶

But as we've seen, Socrates recants this at 244a: madness is not the simple evil that it was in *Republic*. What is the new vision, and how does it relate to poetry? What hope, if any, is there for the readmission of the poets banished in *Republic*?

The *Phaedrus* rehabilitates madness and particularly – though, as we will see, not exclusively – erotic madness. At first glance this might seem an odd place to look for a reply to Plato's attack on poetry, but we should note that in *Republic* Socrates speaks of poetry in explicitly erotic terms: 'we must do what lovers²⁷ do when they have fallen in love with someone and decided their love is not a good thing. They stay away. It may be a struggle, but they stay away nonetheless. It's the same with us.' (607e) In the *Phaedrus*' second speech Socrates recants, and, with the erotic metaphor from *Republic* in mind, we can see how space might open for poetry. So let us turn to see in more detail how Socrates rehabilitates madness.

I have already mentioned that the first two speeches advised the young *eromenos*, if faced with the choice, not to choose the *erastēs* who is madly in love with him. Instead he should choose the self-controlled suitor. Socrates begins his recantation with examples in which madness is an advantage over self-control. His first two examples are from prophecy. First, the Delphic priestess is possessed and her craft depends on it, without divine madness she would achieve nothing (244b). Second, madness is said to help families beset with plagues because of ancient sins, 'it turns up among those who need a way out; it gives prophecies and takes refuge in prayers to the gods and in worship, discovering mystic rites

²⁶ We might be able to tie madness more closely to poetry using *Rep* 400b. There the discussion is about certain musical modes and rhythmical metres that are implicated in various character flaws, including madness. If the metre associated there with madness were used in tragic performance, then it would be possible to tragedy quite closely with madness.

²⁷ These lovers are conventional lovers, not the generic, Socratic lovers of *Symposium*.

and purifications that bring the man it touches through to safety for this and all time to come.’ (244e) Finally, and most interesting for our purposes:

Third comes the kind of madness that is possession by the Muses, which takes a tender virgin soul and awakens it to a Bacchic frenzy of songs and poetry that glorifies the achievements of the past and teaches them to future generations. If anyone comes to the gate of poetry and expects to become an adequate poet by acquiring expert knowledge of the subject without the Muses’ madness, he will fail, and his self-controlled verses will be eclipsed by the poetry of men who been driven out of their minds. (245a)

What is most interesting here is not the claim that inspiration is necessary for poetry – that was claimed in the *Ion* – but that this inspired poetry is a good thing. The main point of the examples is to show that the assumption, which he and Lysias made initially, that madness is a simple evil, is false. Socrates’ ‘proof’ of this claim begins with a discussion of the soul.²⁸

The soul is still a tripartite soul structurally similar to what we are familiar with from *Republic*. Unlike *Republic* the soul is described in lyrical terms: ‘Let us then liken the soul to the natural union of a team of winged horses and their charioteer.’ (246a) The charioteer is plainly the rational part and the horses are the spirited and appetitive parts. The one horse is ‘beautiful and good and from stock of the same sort, while the other is the opposite and has the opposite sort of bloodline.’ (246b) Recall that in *Republic*, the spirited part often, though not always, assisted and was allied to the rational part (440e). Clearly the better horse is the spirited soul and the worse horse is the appetitive soul.

The structure of the soul is the same as *Republic*, as is the reservation about the appetitive soul – it is the worse of the two horses and makes driving the chariot a struggle (246b). But despite this, there is a change. The tripartite structure is now part of the immortal soul – even the gods have tripartite souls.²⁹ The thrust of *Republic*, and this is made explicit in the *Phaedo*,³⁰ is that we are identical with our rational souls, and our appetites are contingent features of animal incarnation. That the soul described in the *Phaedrus* always has this tripartite structure is important. Nussbaum argues this change in the soul reveals important revisions on the *Republic* psychology. First, the non-rational parts of the soul are given an improved motivational role. The charioteer cannot operate without the *cooperation* of the horses. The rational part is still to be master in the soul, but it is a master that cannot

²⁸ There is an argument for the immortality of the soul (245ce) that need not concern us here.

²⁹ This should not be surprising if we take the theology of the *Iliad*, strenuously denied in *Republic*, seriously.

³⁰ The *Phaedo* tells us that philosophy is a training for death, for when the philosopher, freed from the needy, corrupt body can pursue his true rational nature undisturbed (67e; Nussbaum 152).

function without its servants. Crudely, a chariot needs more than a driver and so the non-rational parts suddenly become more significant. Nussbaum puts it this way, 'If we starve and suppress emotions and appetites, it may be at the cost of so weakening the entire personality that it will be unable to act decisively; perhaps it will cease to act altogether.' (Nussbaum 214) In fact, instead of being starved, as in *Republic*, both of the horses are nourished. Nussbaum takes Plato here to retract large sections of *Republic*:

Plato seems to grant that the ascetic plan of the *Republic*, which deprives emotion and sense of the nourishment of close ongoing attachments, of the family, of dramatic poetry, may result in crippling the personality even while it purifies it. The starved philosopher may, in his effort to become an undisturbed intellect, block his own search for the good. (214)

The non-rational parts of the soul, but especially the appetitive part, are required, on this view, as part of the good life. Our everyday commitments, though not ideal, also become important and necessary for the good life.

Nussbaum also claims that in the *Phaedrus* the non-intellectual parts play a role in guiding the soul towards the image of wisdom that is beyond heaven³¹ (214). At 250d Socrates describes how beauty³² helps us in the search for wisdom. The Form of Wisdom that is beyond heaven cannot be seen except by rational apprehension (247c). Beauty, however, can be seen by vision and we all seek it, even base people (250e). However, in the case of higher souls, those who in heaven saw more of the Forms, before the soul's wings were severed, would gaze on beauty reverently:

[W]hen he sees a godlike face of bodily form that has captured Beauty well, first he shudders and a fear comes over him like those he felt at the earlier time; then he gazes at him with the reverence due a god, and if he weren't afraid people would think him completely mad, he'd even sacrifice to this boy as if he were the image of a god. Once he has looked at him, his chill gives way to sweating and a high fever...Now the *whole* soul seethes and throbs in this condition. (251ac, my emphasis)

The whole soul throbs and aches as it begins to grow wings again, as it might ascend to heaven again. The thrust of the passage is that the particular joy of the beauty of a single boy can benefit a lover. Not merely as an early stage in the ascent, like in *Symposium*: when the lover turns away from the beauty his mad fever cools and his soul calms (251d).

³¹ All souls are immortal. In heaven, those with the best trained horses rise to the top of heaven and see true reality in the Forms. Those with less well trained teams of horses often collide with one another and the wings break off the chariot causing the soul to fall to earth to be incarnate in a body (248a ff).

³² I return to discuss this beauty later.

Nussbaum argues that this passage shows us a different role for the soul. The whole soul is involved in the ascent; the wings belong to the whole soul (Nussbaum 216). This explains why the beauty of the particular is still important. The non-rational parts of the soul are involved in a way that they weren't in the ascent in the *Symposium*. Nussbaum describes the new picture: 'The deep, sensuous response to a person's splendour, the emotions of love and awe, the intellectual aspirations that this love awakens – all of these flow together, so that the person feels no gap between thought and passion, but, instead, a melting unity of the entire personality.' (216) On this reading, the image that emerges is strikingly different to that in *Republic*. The intellect is closer to the non-rational elements and the passions are integrated into the soul's natural desire for the Good.

The consequence is that the appetites and emotions are rehabilitated as part of the good life (Nussbaum 218-9). The love described in *Phaedrus* is a way to begin an ascent towards the Forms – the lovers' souls begin to grow wings again – but they are not debased by their association with *Symposium*'s 'human flesh and colouring and all that mortal rubbish.' (211e) Human beauty is valuable and unique, no longer a replaceable instance of beauty to be overcome in the search for the greater Form of Beauty. The love inspired by the particularity and peculiarity of human beauty is central to the whole soul's ascent.

Nussbaum claims that *Phaedrus* makes four revisions on the *Republic*'s vision: First, the appetites are no longer indiscriminately bad, animal forces. Second, the appetites do not necessarily lead to excess: carefully controlled, the appetites 'play a good and a necessary role in motivating the person, even teaching the person about the beautiful.' (221-22) Third, the passions have cognitive function which is necessary in the insight that love provides. Fourth, that rational part of the soul is not alone sufficient in the search for true insight, though it is still the primary guide (Nussbaum 221-2).

If she is right, then these revisions might be applied in useful ways to the expulsion of the poets. Poetry appeals to the appetitive parts of the soul, and this cannot be tolerated within *Republic*'s austere psychological vision. The *Phaedrus*' vision might, as Nussbaum suggests, be able to accommodate poetry as a way, and we need not specify how, of gaining (ethical) insight. Further, if we allow the appeal to the base parts of the soul and couple that with the benefit of beauty, then a promising gap seems to open. This gap seems all the more alluring with the ranking of souls at 248ce. When the souls fall to earth, those which have seen the most of the Forms in heaven will be incarnate in 'a man who will become a lover of

wisdom or of beauty, or who will be cultivated in the arts and prone to erotic love.’ (248d) Plato claims explicitly that a life devoted to the pursuit of the arts is equal to a life devoted to philosophy. This claim, extraordinary in terms of *Republic*, could make sense if Nussbaum is right about the retraction of *Republic*’s psychology. On her reading of the *Phaedrus* the best life is no longer possible without the cooperation, and not the repression, of the lower parts of the soul. Here the love of beauty, through the arts, seems to be an alternate route to true insight.

As promising as the ranking of lives seems, there is reason to be cautious. There is little doubt that Nussbaum is right that Plato revises his psychology in significant ways in *Phaedrus*, but there is little cause to think that the revisions are helpful against the *Republic*’s poetic reforms. I start with a reason why the ranking of souls at 248ce should not be taken as an endorsement of poetry or its benefit. Next I consider a possible objection that connects the opening of Socrates’ second speech with the ranking of lives.

The first thing to note about the ranking of lives is that if we take the life ‘cultivated in the arts’ as connected to poetry, then it must refer to the *pursuit*, not creation, of the arts. The reason is that shortly after ranking this life as the best life, the poet is ranked quite lowly. Strikingly the life of the poet is ranked sixth, below the prophet and above the life of manual labourer, the sophist, and, the lowest soul, the tyrant.³³ This life presumably would be the creation (or perhaps performance) of poetry. The separation that this implies between the craftsman and audience or consumer has no parallel – there is no distinction between the philosophical life, one who produces arguments and one who appreciates dialectic or argument. This split is odd and inexplicable. It becomes even more odd in light of the chain of inspiration imagined in the *Ion*. The madness of the poet was transferred to the audience, the final link in the chain. This suggests that there would be no reason to view the creation and consumption of art as being substantially different in its effects. Instead of taking the life devoted to the arts to refer to poetry or anything else we might term ‘the arts’, we should look for another interpretation of the passage.

Nehamas argues that the best soul at 248d should not be taken to refer to the creative artist or any arts at all. Rather he claims that *monsikos*, which he and Woodruff

³³ This reminds us of the ranking of the constitutions and corresponding souls in *Republic* 8 and 9. There too tyranny was the worst possible soul.

translate as 'art'³⁴, refers simply to harmony in the soul. We have already seen an outline of how *mousikē* can contribute to achieving this harmony. The model is illustrated in *Republic* Books 2 and 3. Nehamas points out that there is an explicit reference at *Republic* 411e-412a to the right music achieving the right balance in the soul ('Imitation' 261). This gets us back to *Republic's* view of poetry and the inappropriateness of feeding the appetites that might disrupt the harmony of the soul. Music, rhythm, and poetry play a central role in the education recommended in Book 3. The right blend of musical and physical education will produce a soul that is *mousikōtaton*,³⁵ most harmonious. This is enough reason not to take the highly ranked life devoted to the pursuit of the arts as a sign of Plato easing his stance towards poetry. That life is, in fact, ranked very lowly indeed.

It might be objected that at the opening of his speech Socrates praises the benefits of madness, including prophecy, ranked just above poetry, and in fact poetry itself is mentioned (245b, quoted above). Surely, this gives us a positive endorsement, certainly different from what we have seen in *Republic*?

Again, caution is required here. If we look closely at 245a there is nothing which actually conflicts or is incompatible with *Republic*. Although not explicit in *Republic*, we have seen from the *Ion* that inspiration is necessary for poetry. We also know from *Republic* that Homer's verses are among the most poetic, he surely outshines many other poets. But *Republic* disagrees with the *Phaedrus's* sentiment that Homer's poetry 'glorifies the achievements of the past and teaches them to future generations' (245a) because Homer has it wrong. His stories contain many falsehoods, not only about particular events but also about the nature of the gods, heroes, and, implicitly, the good life, that his myths are not suitable for children's education. Homer might be inspired, but his stories are nonetheless false and unsuitable for Callipolis. We can also note that it is not implausible that the poetry Plato allows in Callipolis would also require divine inspiration. Claiming that inspiration is necessary for good poetry is not the same as saying inspiration necessarily produces good or suitable poetry.

Even if the life devoted to the cultivation of the arts and the remarks about madness in the preamble to the speech do not give us any chance of rehabilitating poetry, there might

³⁴ In 'Imitation', written before his translation of the *Phaedrus*, Nehamas translates '*mousikos*' as 'musical' (261).

³⁵ '*Mousikōtaton*' is the superlative of '*mousikos*'.

still be hope from the life devoted to Beauty.³⁶ Unfortunately, it is more difficult to see how the *Phaedrus*' account of Beauty can be helpful for poetry than the *Symposium*'s account. The Beauty that makes the whole soul shudder is only obviously applicable to reciprocal human love – the relationship that Plato has in mind is between an *erastēs* in love with the (particular) beauty of his *eromenos*. Socrates rehabilitates the love that we lost in *Symposium*, but that love is too intimately tied to loving another *person* to be helpful to poetry.

The *Phaedrus*³⁷ makes some interesting and significant revisions on *Republic* but there is little evidence that Plato softened in his attitude towards poetry. The *Phaedrus* is more playful and certainly much more literary than *Republic* and this is mirrored in its less ascetic outlook. This is consistent with my reading of *Republic*'s cultural reforms. The content of Plato's reforms is austere and ascetic, but the worries that underpin the critique are coherent without the Platonic resources that account for the asceticism. In the remaining section I move away from Platonic accounts of Beauty to consider briefly a modern account of aesthetic value.

Aesthetic value, Beauty, and Poetry

In the introduction I claimed that Plato seems to ignore aesthetic value, or at least, he does not have the concept at work in *Republic* when the poets are expelled. So far, I have tried to attribute some sort of proto-aesthetic value through Platonic Beauty. What is modern aesthetic value, what is its link with beauty and what hope does it have for a reply to Plato's challenge?

Janaway suggests some constraints and advantages that an appeal to aesthetic value would face. I start with these. The main challenge is to show why aesthetic value, whatever it is, would be beneficial to the individual and to the city. Janaway claims that aesthetic value has two advantages as a reply to Plato's challenge. The first advantage is that aesthetic value gives us a particular pleasure that poetry appeals to. Instead of appealing indiscriminately to the lowest parts of the soul, poetry appeals to or produces a definable pleasure.³⁸ The

³⁶ Recall that the lives were love of wisdom, or love of beauty, or someone who is cultivated in the arts and prone to erotic love. The disjunctions are exclusive (note 81, 248d).

³⁷ Plato's work in the last part of the dialogue is metaphilosophical. Philosophy becomes acceptably more poetic. For discussion on this see Nussbaum 223-227; Janaway 168-170.

³⁸ I assume that there is link between aesthetic pleasure and aesthetic value.

second advantage is that through an account of aesthetic value we can generate independent standards from which to judge the arts, an internal, aesthetic, standard rather than the ethical standard that Plato recommends in *Republic*. Janaway claims that aesthetic value might go some of the way towards a reply, but eventually faces a perilous task because the challenge requires that a positive benefit has to be shown. The aesthetic reply in effect asks us to give an account of why the arts should be part of the good life. That is, what would we benefit from aesthetic value? I supplement this task with another worry that the response would have to answer. Modern aesthetic value is taken to be independent of moral and cognitive value. This leaves some difficult questions about the relationship between this aesthetic value and the other value of a particular work. I argue that while we might take it as obvious that the art world should be exempt from moral limitations this is not so obvious in popular culture, which, as I have already noted, was Plato's main concern. Outside the art world we are less comfortable with politically or ethically harmful works – such as some propagandistic works – and separating out an independent value that might trump these other concerns produces counterintuitive results.

It is noted that modern aesthetic value and related concepts are subject to extensive dispute and controversy. The account that I give cannot be definitive nor does it need to be uncontroversial. My interest is first with an apparent gap in Plato's critique of the arts; second, with how aesthetic value might benefit his account; and, third, whether this can form the basis of a reply to the challenge.

I start with Janaway: 'To move to a convincing theory of the aesthetic, we must try to specify a kind of response, be it pleasure or satisfaction or liking, which is *sui generis*, irreducible to other forms of response, and possessing a unique value for the person who has it.' (192) One account of aesthetic pleasure which meets these requirements is Kantian:

In Kant's influential treatment aesthetic pleasure is characterized as the by-product of a nonconceptual and disinterested judging of whose focus is exclusively the formal purposiveness of the object judged. In being nonconceptual it is distinguished from pleasure taken in an object as good, since such a judgment always presupposes a concept of the object as being of one kind or other. In being disinterested, that is, not founded in the subject's personal desires, needs, or susceptibilities, it is distinguished...from sensory pleasures such as those of a warm bath or the taste of raspberry. (Levinson 4)

This type of aesthetic attitude distinguishes the aesthetic response sharply from the cognitive aspects of an aesthetic object. Aesthetic engagement and its accompanying pleasure does

not presuppose the poet or artist have knowledge of what is produced or have an expert *technē* or skill (Janaway 192). So, we would be able to engage with Homer aesthetically without endorsing any of his ethical or technical expertise. Plato's Book 10 objections that Homer's knowledge is three times removed from the truth would not tell against any aesthetic value that the work might have. Similarly, the disinterestedness requires that we engage with the work itself, in particular, the aesthetic properties, whatever they might be, that are located in the work. Aesthetic properties would be apprehended perceptually, but there would a difference between an ordinary sensory reward, the taste of raspberries, and an aesthetic reward: 'To appreciate the taste of a raspberry aesthetically is to register not only the brute taste but also, so to speak, its form – that is, its relation to other simpler qualities in the taste, or to one with which it contrasts in imagination.' (Levinson 8) Even if there is a connection between aesthetic pleasure and other pleasures, and I take it no plausible account of aesthetic pleasure could deny this link, aesthetic pleasure would be a higher order pleasure. We might then be able to engage with, for instance, the harmful tragic emotions while locating them in an aesthetic context, and this sort of engagement with them would be qualitatively different from another experience in which the tragic emotions are evoked.

Disinterestedness has another consequence. If separated from our subjective concerns, sensibilities, needs, and so on, the engagement requires standards that would be reasons for others' aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic pleasure. Janaway puts it this way: aesthetic judgments 'do not merely assert a subjective like or dislike, but are judgments which claim validity for the whole community. The reasons I have for my judgment are also reasons for others. There can thus be standards of aesthetic value to which a whole community in principle assents.' (192)

Janaway argues that this aesthetic engagement offers replies to Plato on two points. First, any artwork no longer appeals indiscriminately to please the base parts of the soul. Rather, artworks appeal to a definable aesthetic pleasure. Although there is a connection between aesthetic pleasures and other pleasures they are not the same. Pornographic work can be distinguished from other work with sexual content because pornography appeals straightforwardly to base sexual pleasures³⁹ (Janaway 193).

The second advantage is that aesthetic value and aesthetic pleasure generate internal standards from which to judge works. Works can be judged by their aesthetic value, which is

³⁹ At 605e Plato puts sexual desire at the top of the list of desires that are affected by poetry.

more than individual expressions of taste. Aesthetic value is not a function of subjective responses to the work.

An aesthetic judgement claims that the work *is* a good or bad one, going beyond a mere report that some subjective response has occurred. The judgement is shareable. A community can come to agree that a work is aesthetically fine or aesthetically poor, by agreeing in their aesthetic response to it, and by discourse which fixes the reasons for that response. So although the aesthetic domain is in a sense unprincipled...it is not without standards. Art can have genuine standards which need not be moral or cognitive. (Janaway 192)

These two replies would do significant work against Plato's critique. But is it enough to answer the challenge? Janaway answers 'no'. The reason for this is that the Platonic challenge was to show why poetry, or more precisely, certain types of poetry, would be beneficial to individuals and so to the city. The account that has to be given has to explain why this aesthetic pleasure, associated with a work's aesthetic value, is good for the individual and the city.

This task is more difficult than what it might seem at first glance. We know that there are other non-aesthetic responses that are irreducible to moral or cognitive value which are valuable to the person who has them. Examples would include pleasures such as a warm bath, or smelling a rose, or a cool drink on a hot day, but we would not be inclined to claim that these should be privileged in an account of the good life in the same way as we privilege the arts. If aesthetic pleasure turns out to be trivial like the pleasure of smelling a rose, then Plato's expulsion, though regrettable, would not be the loss that reactions to Plato's critique have suggested. If aesthetic pleasure is important, then an account needs to be given why it is important.

Perhaps this could be done without too much difficulty. After all, Plato does grant that beauty, grace, harmony, and so on are important because they produce the right sort of citizen. Now, if these are aesthetic properties, or associated with aesthetic properties, it seems that Plato could accept the new concept and not change his position at all. The arts would play a significant, albeit tightly controlled, role in Callipolis. An account of the aesthetic would need to tell Plato why the poetry that he banned would be better suited to provide aesthetic pleasure than that which he allowed in Callipolis.

What would be necessary for this account? To be successful, it would have to explain what the relationship is between the aesthetic properties of a work that and the non-

aesthetic, moral or cognitive, properties. Jerrold Levinson argues that any account of aesthetic pleasure would have to explain how we can take aesthetic pleasure in a work's non-aesthetic properties without that pleasure reducing to moral or cognitive pleasure (Levinson 3-4). Undoubtedly we seem able to do this. We can take a certain attitude towards works that privilege the aesthetic properties, or see the moral or cognitive properties through the aesthetic properties. We can look at a deeply immoral work, such as Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, through an aesthetic lens to see her use of cinematography, imagery, and so on, rather than the moral or political content of the work. I would imagine an audience looking at the film in this way would be looking at it disinterestedly, in short treating it as a work of art.

Now consider *Triumph of the Will* in its original context. Outside of the art world, as part of the Nazi cultural project, the immoral, propagandistic features of the work seem to become more important. As the noxious piece of propaganda that it was, the film becomes more dangerous precisely because it is such a good film. The film becomes more sinister when screened to an audience, as part of a greater cultural project, in order to inculcate certain values in it.

These two audiences look at the same work in two different ways. I take it that Plato would be interested in Riefenstahl's effect on the second audience, the contemporary audience, rather than the first. In the second case *Triumph of the Will* becomes another of the images on the cave wall that shape society. This is why it is disturbing: it is intended to transmit cultural values.

For the first aesthetic audience, interpretative space opens between the audience and the art work. Engaging with it outside of its cultural context disarms it, and it becomes possible to look past the immoral intention and content of the work. We can probably agree that it would be difficult to make a case to ban *Triumph of the Will*, because it is difficult to see how it would harm people. But if this judgment is made from an aesthetic stance we can see how it misses what is dangerous about the work. It is when the audience is not disinterestedly engaged that it becomes dangerous.

The point is that we need to avoid anachronism to take Plato's worries seriously. His target is not the art world. He is silent about the art world, and perhaps, though on balance this seems unlikely, he could tolerate it. If we take works outside the art world, and place them in a position where they might seriously influence culture, then we can see why Plato

might well be right that ethical concerns trump aesthetic value. And if this is right, then we need to look elsewhere for a reply to his challenge.

3. An Aristotelian reply

I argued in Chapter 2 that an aesthetic reply, which would depend on particular works' beauty or aesthetic value, is not an adequate reply to Plato's challenge. In this chapter I consider an Aristotelian reply. In the *Poetics* Aristotle offers this famous definition of tragedy:

Tragedy, then, is a representation of an action which is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude – in language garnished in various forms in its different parts – in the mode of dramatic enactment, not narrative – and through the arousal of pity and fear effecting the *katharsis*¹ of such emotions. (1449b³)

My concern in this chapter is largely with the last phrase of this passage. It is a notoriously controversial phrase because, as Stephen Halliwell notes, 'we do not really know what [Aristotle] meant in this context by *katharsis*. We can be moderately confident only that it offers a response to the Platonic view that tragedy arouses emotions which ought, for the sake of general psychological and moral well being, to be kept in check.' (Halliwell, *Commentary* 89-90) In this chapter I consider two³ interpretations of the *katharsis* remark and I claim that both are unsatisfactory responses to Plato's challenge.

The two interpretations are: first, that *katharsis* is purgative; and second, that it is educative. I am not concerned primarily with which is the better interpretation of the *Poetics* remark, if indeed there is one: the accounts of *katharsis* need not be Aristotle's, but they should be broadly Aristotelian. My main interest is in the way(s) in which *katharsis* could offer a reply to Plato's challenge at 607de.

The chapter will be divided into three sections. In the first I defend the legitimacy of using the *katharsis* remark as a reply to Plato; in the second I consider the purgative interpretation; and in the third I look at the educative reading. I argue that neither interpretation is adequate as a reply to Plato.

¹ To avoid endorsing any interpretation of this phrase I follow Halliwell and use the transliterated Greek rather than the English 'catharsis', or any of the other terms used in translations, throughout. Liddell and Scott gloss *katharsis* as 'a cleansing, a purification' (338)

² I use Halliwell's translation throughout. For the Greek I use the Loeb edition.

³ There is a third interpretation that I will not consider here: *katharsis* as purification, watching tragedy somehow purifies the emotions. I do not consider this interpretation because similar objections to those brought against purgation can be brought against purification. In a different reading of purification, Gerald Else takes the emotional purification to be something that happens on the stage to the performers rather than in the audience (221-232). While Plato is interested in the effect of poetry on the performers, as in Book 3, part of what is most interesting is the effect of poetry on the audience. For this reason I do not consider Else's account.

***Katharsis* as a response to Plato**

Before I discuss the interpretations of *katharsis*, there are two related reasons why we might be wary of using the *Poetics* remark as a reply to Plato.

The first reason, which Alexander Nehamas points out, is that the *katharsis* remark expressly covers only the emotions of pity and fear (Nehamas, 'Pity' 306). At *Republic* 606d Plato charges that poetry is bad for 'sex, anger, and *all* the desires, pains and pleasures.' (my emphases) His charge is general. While Plato does single out pity and fear for special abuse – not only in Book 10 but also in Books 2 and 3 – they are simply examples of a general point that he wants to make. Since Plato's charge is broad, it would be inappropriate to read a phrase that singles out only two emotions as a reply. It would be inappropriate because it risks making Aristotle look silly. In reply to a broad complaint, Aristotle gives an underspecified and mysterious mechanism, *katharsis*, that explains how poetry might be good for two quite specific emotions while remaining silent on all the other emotions, desires, pleasures and pains (Nehamas, 'Pity' 306).

Whether the *katharsis* remark can be read as a reply to Plato turns on whether pity and fear head an open ended list of emotions that might be affected by poetry. Sexual desire heads the list of desires perverted by poetry mentioned by Plato at 606d and it is difficult to see how pity and fear would be able to tell us anything interesting about the sexual desires that he thinks are aggravated by poetry. Pity and fear seem too different to sexual desire and so it is difficult to see how the same mechanism can improve both emotions and sexual desire. To be helpful in understanding how sexual desire could benefit from poetry a separate account is needed. Nehamas puts it this way: 'the idea that exposure to fiction and to the sexuality it contains and represents is bound to improve our inclinations toward *ta aphrodisia* is a view extraordinarily difficult to accept, especially in the absence of an explicit and detailed account of the mechanism through which such a result can be produced.' ('Pity' 306) If this is right, then Aristotle's remarks, read as a reply to Plato, fail to answer most of Plato's worries and it would be more charitable not to read Aristotle as responding to them in the *katharsis* remark.

I agree with Nehamas that Plato's sex remark and the generality of the charge do seem to present a problem. However, I think that there is a way of getting around the problem if we look at the Aristotelian soul. If we take pity and fear to stand at the front of a

list of *emotions* rather than an open-ended list of *all* the desires, pleasures, and pains, and note that he thinks that there is a whole class of desires that, unlike the emotions, cannot be trained, then we can safely read the *katharsis* remark as an answer to the general charge with a minor qualification.

Consider first the Aristotelian soul. Like Plato, Aristotle has a tripartite model of the soul, but there are some differences. The lowest part of the Aristotelian soul is the vegetative part. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes this as common to all creatures and responsible for nutrition and growth (1102a⁴). This part of the soul is completely unresponsive to reason – Aristotle contrasts it with the other non-rational part that is ‘lacking in reason, but nevertheless, as it were, partaking in it.’ (1102b) Presumably, if the vegetative part of the soul is unresponsive to reason then its associated desires and pleasures – the desire for food and drink can be located in this part of the soul uncontroversially – would not be affected by training. We might be able to train ourselves to resist vegetative desires, but we will not be able to make the desire, say, for food disappear, no matter how good our starvation training is. Contrast this with the emotional part. Part of being virtuous is having the emotions appropriate to a particular situation. Self-controlled or *enkratic* people will have the right intention and perform the right action but with the wrong emotions, perhaps resenting right action while doing it. The point is that Aristotle thinks that we train the emotions such that the appropriate emotions are present, but we cannot train the vegetative desires in the same way. If this is right, then there is a whole class of desires and pleasures that will not be affected by *katharsis*. If we take *katharsis* to be the benefit of poetry, then the vegetative emotions will not be benefited by poetry simply because they are unresponsive to reason. Now if sexual desire, which heads Plato’s list of desires affected badly by poetry, can be located in the vegetative part – that sexual or procreative desires are common to all creatures suggests that it could be – then we can see that an Aristotelian account of the benefit of poetry would not mention sexual desire, and the rest of the vegetative desires, precisely because these desires are unresponsive to reason or training. So instead of taking Aristotle as responding to Plato’s general charge, my suggestion is that pity and fear head an open list of *emotions*, and that Aristotle is silent on other desires because poetry cannot benefit them. In short we can take Aristotle to be responding to Plato if we

⁴ I use Crisp’s translation.

extrapolate from pity and fear, the tragic emotions, to all the *emotions* affected by poetry, but stop before all desires, pleasures, and pains.

It might be objected that this leaves most of Plato's charge unanswered. I may have explained why the positive account need not mention some of the desires that poetry perverts, but we still have to answer Plato's worry that poetry perverts them. There are two possible answers to this worry. First, if poetry can offer the benefit to part of the soul it is implausible to think that it would, at the same time, be doing the severe damage that Plato thinks it is. It is more likely that the effect on the vegetative desires would be neutral. Tragedy is not pornographic, and just as we would not expect pornographic material to offer any benefit to the (tragic) emotions, we would not expect tragedy to do anything remarkable to our sexual desires. Second, we can note that Aristotle is just not as hostile to the vegetative parts of the soul as Plato is. Plato, at least in the early and middle dialogues, is an ascetic who views these pleasures as debasing us. While Aristotle does take rational activity to be our most important function, the other parts of the soul are not thereby devalued. For Aristotle we are part animal and are no worse for it. So that poetry stirs up these desires, if indeed it does, need not be a problem for Aristotle.

The second reason why we might be wary of reading the *Poetics* remark as a counter to the challenge is that while Plato is especially concerned about tragedy, it is not the only form of poetry that would be banned in Plato's Callipolis: comedy and epic, notably Homer and Hesiod, were also banned. How could a passage that shows that tragedy is good for us be a promising response to the blanket ban that Plato argues for? Given that Plato does allow some poetry, it seems that an account is needed for all the poetry that is expelled from Callipolis and not just tragedy.

If Aristotle's defence of tragedy is successful, it is easy to see how it could be extended to epic. In Book 10 Plato names Homer as the first tragedian and the teacher of all the tragedians (607a). And in fact, Aristotle agrees with Plato that epic is sufficiently similar to tragedy. He notes in *Poetics* 5 that 'Epic conforms with tragedy insofar as it is a mimesis, [in the metre],⁵ of ethically serious subjects; but it differs by virtue of using *only* [a single

⁵ Halliwell has 'in spoken metre' for the Greek *ton dia metrou*. I am unhappy with 'spoken metre' because epic was often sung, as I have noted earlier in Chapter 1. The contrast is between epic metre and the variety of metres that are found in tragedy – the choruses, for example, used different metre to the main narrative – and not, I believe, between spoken and sung verse.

metre]⁶ and narrative mode.’ (1449b, Halliwell’s emphasis) While epic lacks the dramatic enactment characteristic of tragedy, the rhapsodic performances of epic still provoked strong emotional responses, as Plato tells in the *Ion*. Ion gives an account of how his performances – with this we are reminded what a talented rhapsode he is – would bring his audience to tears (535e). This emotional discharge seems sufficiently similar to the effect of tragedy for it to be an instance of *katharsis*.

Extending the apology to comedy is more difficult. I will not fill in all the detail but there are two reasons why I think that Aristotle’s remarks about tragedy could be used to show that comedy is also beneficial or at least not harmful.

First, whatever *katharsis* is, it is a psychologically or ethically beneficial process. On the one reading it is a matter of expelling unhealthy emotions, such as pity and fear, by stimulating them and discharging them in a safe environment. I don’t know what emotions, if any, were paradigmatically associated with comedy,⁷ but whatever they were, it is not obvious why, if they were harmful like pity and fear, exciting and indulging them at the theatre couldn’t discharge them like the tragic emotions. A detailed account would be necessary to defend this properly, depending on what the emotions are, but this will suffice here.

If *katharsis* is educative, then it is not obvious why comedy could not play a role in our ethical educations. While Aristophanes’ plays are obscene it would be shallow to claim they are of no interest beyond that. For example, while the *Lysistrata*’s idea of a sex strike as a protest against state policy is amusing, the play makes a serious comment about war – a comment that would have been directly relevant to Aristophanes’ audience, made as it was near the end of the destructive Peloponnesian War. It is not obvious that this could not also be a place for ethical clarification along with tragedy. Again, more detail has to be filled in to defend this properly, but my point is simply that at first glance there is no obvious reason why the *kathartik* benefits of tragedy would not also be found in comedy.

The second reason is that there is evidence elsewhere that Aristotle thinks comedy just doesn’t have the bad effects on the adult soul that Plato thinks it does. While there is some similarity between Plato’s and Aristotle’s views on the psychological effect of poetry on the young, there is disagreement on the effect on adults. They both worry that *young*

⁶ Halliwell has ‘spoken metre’ for the Greek ‘*to metron haploun echein*.’

⁷ For discussion on what the emotions might be see Leon Golden ‘Aristotle on the Pleasure of Comedy’.

people seeing inappropriate things at the theatre shapes, albeit indirectly, their reactions to real life outside the theatre (*Pol* 1340a; *Rep* 395cd). Because of this Aristotle says in the *Politics* ‘younger people should not be permitted to witness iambus or comedy until they reach the age when it is appropriate for them to recline at the communal table and drink wine,⁸ and their education has rendered them immune to the harm such things can do.’ (1336b⁹) We can agree with Aristotle on this point and avoid the problem. Whatever the effects of comedy are, they are ultimately harmless, but not beneficial like tragedy, provided the right education is in place.

So, if there is space to read the *katharsis* remark as a response to Plato, then let us turn to the interpretations of the response.

***Katharsis* as purgation**

In this section I consider the purgative interpretation of *katharsis*. I argue that it fails to answer Plato because it ignores his concern about the long-term effects of poetry and gives an account of the immediate emotional effects of poetry. The purgative interpretation is silent on the long-term dangers of poetry. In fact, though this is speculative, Plato’s worries could be perfectly consistent with this interpretation of *katharsis*.

Evidence for the purgative interpretation of *katharsis* is found elsewhere in the *Politics*:

[W]e claim that music¹⁰ should not be used for the sake of one benefit but several – for it is for the sake of education and [*katharsis*]¹¹ (I shall not elaborate on what I mean by [*katharsis*] here, but I shall return to it in my work on poetics and discuss it in greater detail)¹²...For any emotion that strongly affects some people’s souls (for example, pity, fear, or inspiration) is present in everyone, although to a greater or lesser degree. For there are some who are prone to become possessed by this motion. But under the influence of sacred melodies (when they make use of the ones that induce a frenzy in their souls), we see that they calm down, as if they had received medical treatment and a purifying purgation. The same thing, then, must be experienced by those who are prone to pity or fear, by those who are

⁸ That is, at a symposium.

⁹ Reeve’s translation.

¹⁰ Recall that *mousikē* covered both poetry and music and that poetry was characteristically heard to music.

¹¹ Reeve translates *katharsis* as ‘purification’.

¹² A notorious unfulfilled promise. Clearly it does not refer to the *katharsis* passage from the *Poetics* because there is no detail there. Reeve takes Aristotle to be referring to a lost second book of the *Poetics* (note 42, 1341b).

generally emotional, and by others to the extent that they share in these emotions: they all undergo a kind of [*katharsis*] and get a pleasant feeling of relief. (1341ba)

This passage, with its explicit medical reference, shows us how tragedy can help otherwise pathological emotions. Aristotle agrees with Plato that tragedy stirs up pity and fear. However, through the dramatic structure of the events on the stage,¹³ the emotions are discharged. This reading has the added advantage of explaining why we enjoy the otherwise unpleasant emotions that tragedy evokes. We feel the relief as the unpleasant emotions are discharged with the completion of the action and this is the pleasure of tragedy.

The implication of the *Politics* passage is that the emotions are problematic for everyone. The same poetry gives relief to people who are particularly prone to pity and fear as well as to everyone else since we all are affected by such emotions to an extent. So, on this reading it is the emotions themselves that are purged: a person is purified or cleansed in the sense that the pathological emotions are expelled (Nuttall 6). Now, the suggestion that pity and fear are pathological has a distinctly Platonic ring. Plato tells us repeatedly that a person has to guard against these dangerous emotions lest indulging them the non-rational parts of the soul are strengthened at the expense of the rational part. Plato's view, as we've seen, is that poetry stimulates these bad parts of the soul in precisely this way. To achieve justice in the soul, the non-rational parts of the soul are to submit to rule by the rational part. If the *Politics* passage is read as an account of medical purgation it seems to imply a similar account in which the emotional part of the soul is base. On this view there is agreement between Plato and Aristotle about pity, fear and the emotions in general and the role that they should play in the good life, but there is disagreement about how to respond to them. On the one hand Plato's model suggests a type of what might now be termed repression. Aristotle, on the other, thinks that these emotions should be indulged in the theatre where they will be discharged. The treatment is homeopathic: to cure the bad emotions, people are exposed to theatrical action that evokes the troublesome emotions in the audience. People do not come out of a tragic performance charged up but subdued. Nuttall puts it this way: 'He is thinking like a civic governor and is saying to his dead teacher, Plato, "you've got the psychology wrong; people leaving a tragic performance don't smash up shops and beat up

¹³ I will return to Aristotle's account of the structure of tragedy later. Here it is enough to note that in the definition quoted above Aristotle is clear that the action in tragedy is complete. I take it that the completeness that forms part of the definition is related to Aristotle's later description of the plot structure of tragedy. The end of a tragedy, according to Aristotle, is unrelated to any further events (1450b).

peaceable passers by; they are strangely quiet.” (Nuttall 6) It is clear on this reading why *katharsis* would be a response to Plato’s challenge: tragedy is beneficial to individuals because it helps to manage bad emotions.

In the introduction I said that the account need not be Aristotle’s, just Aristotelian. However, as Jonathan Lear argues (‘Katharsis’ 316-17), in some respects this account is scarcely Aristotelian. Aristotle has a much more nuanced account of the emotions. This is clear in his account of virtue in, for example, the *Nicomachean Ethics*. To make this point clear consider again the Aristotelian soul. In the *Ethics* Aristotle claims about the vegetative part of the soul that it ‘plays no role in virtue.’ (1102b) Not so for the emotional part:

[F]ear, confidence, appetite, anger, pity, and in general pleasure and pain can be experienced too much or too little, and in both ways not well. But to have them at the right time, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way, is the mean and best; and this is the business of virtue. (1106b)

Aristotle’s attitude in the *Poetics* is that pity and fear are the appropriate responses to tragedy. This, taken with Aristotle’s endorsement of pity and fear (and other emotions) as appropriate outside the theatre, makes it difficult to understand Nuttall’s claim that, ‘Aristotle and Plato are united in their fear of emotion, or the things which emotions can do...While emotion...need not be morbid...any more than bodily waste matter is morbid, it is quite clear that it is something we would wish to be rid of.’ (Nuttall 8) Aristotle agrees in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the emotions can be vicious, but at the right time, in the right way, and so on, they are appropriate, indeed constitutive of virtuous action. It is difficult to see, first, that Aristotle feared emotion and second, why we would want to be rid of the emotions which are appropriate to the occasion.

If Aristotle is not hostile to the emotions, what follows for the purgative interpretation of the *katharsis* phrase? That is, is it possible to think of tragedy, and poetry in general, as effecting purgation of the emotions without thinking of the emotions as pathological or something we’d rather be rid of? We might latch onto the corporeal metaphor of expulsion from the relief at the end of tragedy.¹⁴ At the end of the play there is a certain relief. I do not know what the details of this account would be, but we can note that whatever they are, they would not be enough to answer Plato’s concerns.

¹⁴ Lear argues that this move makes choosing between metaphors unexceptionable and there is little to choose from the different interpretations (‘Katharsis’ 315).

As I argued in Chapter 1, Plato worries about tragedy not because people are affected immediately by poetry. The effect of exposure to the wrong sort of poetry would be gradual and insidious. The right poetry and music leads children ‘imperceptibly’ towards goodness. On hearing the wrong material, people can take evil into their soul without realising it (401cd). The most serious charge brought against poetry in Book 10 is that it can corrupt even good people. Now it would be absurd to think of a Platonic philosopher king being corrupted immediately by exposure to poetry – leaving the theatre charged up and ready to mimic the actions just seen on the stage. Plato’s fear is that poetry filters through the whole of culture and shapes the character of the culture. It is not right to think of Plato as giving us an account of an infection theory of the arts. We do not see violence on stage and then immediately become violent: Plato’s account is more subtle, and, I have argued, more plausible. Plato’s concern is with the long term ethical and political effects of poetry that is intemperate, immodest, and so on – but not all poetry, as I argued in Chapter 1, there is good poetry which Plato assigns an important role in Callipolis.

Contrast this with the purgative model of *katharsis*. The relief that purgation gives us is immediate either in the performance itself or directly afterwards. This is completely silent on the effects of poetry over time. Nuttall might be right that the audience leaves the theatre subdued and quiet, but that says nothing about how they are affected by repeated theatre attendances, how their souls and their moral outlook might be damaged by repeated exposure to poetry. Just because there is the emotional relief that Aristotle identifies,¹⁵ correctly it seems, this does not mean that poetry might not wreck long term damage on the psyche and consequently on the character. The relief might be similar to the relief from the indulgence of an addiction. Such indulgence is pleasurable and gives a person calming release, but the addiction is harder to resist later and so the damage is done. In the same way even though people may emerge from the theatre calmed the damage has been done. An adequate reply to Plato must show how purgative *katharsis* affects us over the long term, what the psychological benefit would be.

It might be objected that my addiction suggestion was off the mark. There is no need to think of any long-term detrimental effect on the adult soul once the emotion has been discharged. Perhaps a better way of thinking about *katharsis* would be, as Nuttall

¹⁵ Plato does not talk about tragedy in terms of relief, but it might be possible to think of the pleasure that the non-rational soul takes in indulging the emotions as providing some sort of relief, despite this part of the soul’s insatiability.

suggests, on a model of sexual release (6-7). There is a build up of sexual desire which starts to frustrate the animal. As a purely natural function there is no long-term harm in releasing the tension, but the release is nonetheless important for the proper functioning of the animal.

Thinking of poetry in this way might readmit the poetry that Plato expelled, but it comes at a cost. As Thomas Gould points out, poetry might be saved in the Callipolis but, ironically, it is given a much less significant role than that which Plato attributes to it. Poetry has the function of cleaning out, in precisely what sense is not important, our emotional lives periodically (Gould 266). Beyond that it serves no greater political purpose. Aristotle cannot be accused of trivialising poetry, but the role that he grants it on this view is unremarkable. It will play a role in the early education,¹⁶ and then after that it has no significant effect on the audience except immediate emotional relief. Plato granted (the right sort of) poetry a role in maintaining the right sort of character in the city – as I have said repeatedly, Plato never did banish the poets, he just tamed them to his own political ends. Other poetry cannot be tolerated on account of its bad consequences; poetry's effects are profound and serious. Compare this with the effect of poetry on an adult Aristotelian soul. After a certain age it gives us some sort of relief, but beyond that it is harmless, and it is difficult to see how poetry could be important. Plato's account is interesting precisely because he takes poetry as something serious which has important effects in the city. It is because of its effects that poetry has to be so tightly controlled. On this Aristotelian account, poetry is nothing but play, frivolous and, if we follow Nuttall's model of sexual release, masturbatory.

In reply to an account of the subtle, gradual effects on the emotions and character of the surrounding culture, the purgative model of *katharsis* essentially denies that the sounds and images that surround us in popular culture have any effect on us. This is, I think, deeply implausible. While Plato might be accused of overstating the case, it would be equally mistaken to reply that society and individuals are not affected by culture. Television's effects might not be as bad as its critics claim, but it would be wrong to claim that it has no long-term

¹⁶ See *Pol*/VII.17.

effect, either individually or culturally. Just as Plato might overstate his case, it would implausible to think that Athens was not affected at all by the theatre.¹⁷

A better reading gives an account of how poetry might affect us over time, and I suggest that the educative interpretation of *katharsis* can do this.

***Katharsis* as education**

In this section I consider the educative interpretation of the *katharsis* remark. I argue that while this interpretation is preferable to the purgative interpretation it too fails to answer Plato's concerns about poetry.

I start following Nussbaum's account of the benefit of tragedy.

Let us begin with a passage from *Poetics* 4:

Poetry in general can be seen to owe its existence to two causes and these are rooted in nature. First, there is man's natural propensity, from childhood onwards, to engage in mimetic activity (and this distinguishes man from other creatures, that is thoroughly mimetic and through mimesis takes his first steps in understanding). Second, there is the pleasure which all men take in mimetic objects.

An indication of the latter can be observed in practice: for we take pleasure in contemplating the precise images of things whose sight in itself causes us pain... Here too the explanation lies in the fact the great pleasure is derived from exercising the understanding, not just for philosophers but in the same way for all men. (1448b)

This is a strikingly anti-Platonic passage. Aristotle claims that we start learning from mimetic objects. As we've seen, Plato thought that mimesis was thrice removed from the truth – recall the inhabitants of Plato's cave: their 'knowledge' was as shadowy as the (mimetic) images paraded across the wall in front of them. While Aristotle claims that we are naturally disposed to learn in this way, Plato would agree that mimesis is formative, but he would deny that there is any genuine understanding. For Plato, its role in early education is to form character *before* reason emerges (402a). By claiming that we learn from mimetic objects, Aristotle also offers a different account of the pleasure of tragedy to Plato. Plato's view is that we enjoy tragedy because the appetitive soul enjoys outpourings of emotion. The appetitive part is drawn towards suffering or expressions of suffering because it can never

¹⁷ Sparta, unlike Athens, did not have any large scale theatrical festivals. They did however, have choral festivals. It has been suggested that Plato had the Spartan model in mind when he proposed his poetic reforms. Undoubtedly he considered Sparta superior and attributed this to cultural differences.

get enough of the strong emotions. While the emotions might seem unpleasant, the appetitive soul gets a certain pleasure out of them. For Aristotle, the pleasure comes from the way mimetic objects stimulates understanding. What then is this understanding, and how does poetry help us towards it?

Nussbaum argues that the sense of '*katharsis*' that Aristotle has in mind is 'clarification':

When we examine the whole range of use and the development of this word-family, it becomes quite evident that the primary, ongoing, central meaning is roughly one of 'cleaning up' or 'clarification', i.e. of the removal of some obstacle (dirt, or blot, or obscurity, or admixture) that makes the item in question less *clear*.¹⁸ (389, emphasis in original)

The emotions can be trained and clarified for both Plato and Aristotle because they are partly cognitive; they are more than mere feelings. In addition to feelings they include beliefs that ground the feelings. So, using Nussbaum's example, anger is a combination of the belief that one has been wronged together with together a painful feeling. The painful feeling is connected to the belief in such a way that if one were to find out that one was not wronged the resultant feelings would no longer be anger but rather irritation, or something similar. If anger does persist, then there is a sense in which the emotion is false because its related belief is false (Nussbaum 383).

For Aristotle every emotion will have its own distinctive belief/feeling couplet. Now recall that the *katharsis* remark singles out pity and fear. Plato is particularly hostile to these two emotions in Book 10, and, to a lesser extent, in Books 2 and 3. Because of this, Nussbaum takes pity and fear to be particularly important. To see why, let us consider pity and fear in more detail, bearing in mind that the emotions are partly cognitive.

In the most general terms, pity is a painful emotion directed at the sufferings of others. Aristotle tells us in the *Rhetoric* that the beliefs necessary for pity will include, though need not be limited to, the belief that the suffering pitied is *real*, that the suffering is serious, that that suffering is undeserved or at minimum that the suffering outweighs desert, and, importantly, that similar suffering might befall us or people whom we love (1385b). It is easy to see why these beliefs are necessary for pity. If we find out that someone's expression of pain was insincere we will no longer feel any pity for her. If we find out that someone in a wheelchair was not paralysed and but had a minor ailment, then we would not feel the

¹⁸ For an alternative view on the etymological case for reading *katharsis* as clarification see Nuttall 9-13.

same pity as we might for a paralysed person. If we found out that someone injured herself deliberately or while doing something silly then we will not feel the same pity as we would if it were an accident. As for the belief that similar suffering might befall us, Aristotle thinks it is obvious that people who are very fortunate will not feel pity. Aristotle describes the feeling that such people would have as 'presumptuous insolence.' (1385b¹⁹)

Fear is related to pity. The suffering that we pity in others, we fear for ourselves (1386a). In more detail, fear is a painful feeling combined with the belief that there is destructive and painful event in the future. For Aristotle, 'fear is caused by whatever we feel has great power of destroying us, or of harming us in ways that tend to cause us great pain.' (1382a) It is more obvious in this case why extremely fortunate people would not fear. Someone who has always had the family, wealth, and beauty that the *Nicomachean Ethics* tells us are important for the flourishing life²⁰ (1099b) would likely be less conscious of how easily it can be lost. Think of Croesus, for instance. Croesus, Herodotus tells us, was a fabulously wealthy king of Lydia who thought himself the most fortunate person in the world and was later struck down by nemesis for this hubris. What is interesting about Croesus' story is that he could not understand why Solon could not agree that Croesus was the happiest person because, with all his fortune, he could not imagine losing it all (I.30). What is important to note here is that both pity and fear require the belief that we can be harmed.

If tragic suffering constitutes real harm, then it shows a commitment to moral luck. Plato denies, implicitly and explicitly, that there is any moral luck. Homer's stories of heroes' sufferings were false, good people do not suffer. Aristotle admits that goodness is fragile and that tragedy is a real possibility for good people. Let us look at the evidence for this in Plato and then in Aristotle before seeing how this could be a reply to Plato's critique of poetry.

For Plato the flourishing life consists in achieving the right psychological state, which we learn in *Republic* is justice. The main challenge of *Republic* is for Plato to show that justice is *always* better than injustice, even in the most serious counterfactual situations. In one of the counterfactual situations, Plato is challenged to show that being a just person wrongly

¹⁹ W. Rhys Roberts' translation.

²⁰ I use the terms 'flourishing', 'happy' and '*eudaimonia*' interchangeably to capture the assessment of state of a person's *whole* life, common to both Plato and Aristotle.

tortured and executed²¹ is preferable to being an unjust person who appears to the world to be just (361e). For this to be possible, happiness or *eudaimonia* is wholly a function of an internal psychological state. Since *eudaimonia* is an internal state, it is not vulnerable to chance. When the just person is executed, given her character, she cannot really be harmed. The harm that is inflicted is only apparent. She is identical with her just character, not her body, and her character is internal and invulnerable.

This extreme view on moral luck is evident in Plato's accounts of Socrates' trial and death. In *Apology*, when he has been sentenced, Socrates tells his jurors that, as a good man, he cannot be harmed by the sentence (41ae). Secure in his goodness, Socrates cannot be harmed and so, despite being undeserved, his execution is not tragic. In the *Phaedo* Xanthippe, Socrates' wife is sent away from the prison cell because of her weeping (60a). Her weeping was inappropriate on a deep level: it is inappropriate not just because it was a nuisance, but because there was nothing to mourn. Plato makes the point in a slightly different way elsewhere in *Republic*. He insists that the guardians should not mourn the loss of close human connections, their family and friends. He tells us explicitly at 387de that in this respect the guardians ought to be self-sufficient since their happiness does not depend on this sort of fragile connection. They will be self-sufficient because happiness is achieved by rational activity of the just soul and is not dependent on external fortune.

For Aristotle on the other hand, the picture is more complex, and, I think, more intuitively plausible. He grants that happiness is, with qualifications, dependent on certain external goods. He says this explicitly at *NE* I 8: '[H]appiness obviously needs the presence of external goods as well, since it is impossible, or at least no easy matter to perform noble actions without resources. For in many actions, we employ, as if they were instruments at our disposal, friends, wealth, and political power.' (1099ab) As Aristotle would have been acutely aware these are fragile goods that are easily lost.²² But while these external goods may be necessary for *eudaimonia* they are certainly not sufficient. People who have been badly brought up would not be happy in Aristotle's technical sense, even with the right external goods. While vicious people will not be able to achieve *eudaimonia* despite the presence of the right external goods, people who have been well brought up will be able to bear misfortune and reversal of fortune better than other people are. In this way good

²¹ The suffering imagined is extreme: '[T]he just man will be whipped and put on the rack, will be thrown into chains and have his eyes burnt out. Finally after all these injuries, he will be crucified.'

²² For examples from Aristotle's own life see Gould 13-15.

people will flourish throughout their lives in spite of external fortunes. The virtuous person 'will bear changes in fortune in a particularly noble way and altogether gracefully, as one who is "genuinely good"²³.' (1100b) While the virtuous person would be better able to survive reversal of fortune, some virtuous people, such as Priam,²⁴ who suffer extreme misfortune and radical reversals could not be described as flourishing (1100a). In short, Aristotle's picture, at least in the *Ethics*, admits moral luck.

Although granting moral luck in the *Ethics*, Aristotle seems more ambivalent in a passage in *Poetics* 13. Aristotle is discussing the best sort of plot structure and character type and he says, 'good men should not be shown passing from prosperity to affliction, for this is neither fearful nor pitiful but repulsive.'²⁵ (1452b) If Aristotle is deeply committed to the fragility of goodness, it difficult to see why the fall of an outstandingly good man would not be pitiful. A little later Aristotle says that the ideal tragic hero is to be someone who 'is not pre-eminent in virtue and justice, and who falls into affliction not because of evil and wickedness, but because of a certain fallibility (*hamartia*).'²⁶ (1452b) One way of understanding this requirement is that Aristotle is more equivocal about moral luck than he appears in the *Ethics*.²⁶ Halliwell takes Aristotle to be far enough from Plato not to deny that an outstandingly virtuous person can fall, but he is nonetheless concerned that the events that cause such a person to fall would be 'inexplicably cruel and arbitrary.' (Halliwell 125) Aristotle's insistence elsewhere on the coherence and comprehensibility of tragedy rules out this sort of plot. While this sort of plot might be possible, it is ethically dubious, and by that token a bad place for ethical training – arbitrary events do not seem a promising place to look for ethical insight. In spite of the ambivalence about moral luck in the *Poetics* (and perhaps in the *Ethics*) Aristotle does grant moral luck a role in the virtuous life, and this becomes ethically significant.

Nussbaum claims that the disagreement between Plato and Aristotle about poetry comes out of their different views on moral luck and that Aristotle's view on moral luck is central to his rehabilitation of poetry in general and tragedy in particular (378-83). She reads this controversial passage from *Poetics* 6 as a summation of Aristotelian views on moral luck:

²³ The quote is from Simonides (note 8 1100b).

²⁴ Priam ruled Troy during the Trojan War.

²⁵ The Greek has the remarkably strong (tragic) word '*miaion*' which is literally polluting. In *Oedipus Rex*, Thebes is afflicted by Oedipus' *miaion*, his pollution from killing his father and marrying his mother.

²⁶ For a view that takes Aristotle to be more Platonic about moral luck, even in *NE*, see Gould 15-16.

The most important of these elements is the structure of events, because tragedy is a representation not of people as such but of actions and life, and both happiness and unhappiness rest on action. The goal is a certain activity, not a qualitative state; and while men do have certain qualities by virtue of the character, it is in their actions that they achieve, or fail to achieve, happiness. (1450a)

Events in the world and characters' actions become important because certain external goods are necessary for *eudaimonia*. Tragedy provides us with detailed examples in which characters fail to achieve *eudaimonia* despite being essentially good characters. For example, Oedipus' actions are well-intentioned throughout the play. But unknown to him and through no fault of his own, his well-intentioned actions produce hideous results: on hearing of his curse he leaves those who he believes to be his father and mother in Corinth, and then unwittingly kills his real father and marries his mother. *Oedipus Rex* shows how a gap opens between being good, having a just character, and achieving *eudaimonia* (Nussbaum 380-81). In the *Antigone* whichever action Antigone chooses – either burying her brother or leaving him unburied – her action will be impious or criminally disobedient because of irreconcilably conflicting values. Again a gap opens between Antigone's good character and her achieving *eudaimonia*, this time because events in the world prevent blameless action.

Nussbaum claims that tragedy is properly concerned with exploring this gap and that it is precisely in this exploration that tragedy becomes a rich source of ethical insight. For Plato, who denies that goodness is fragile, action becomes strictly irrelevant because being a certain sort of character is sufficient for *eudaimonia*. For Aristotle, on the other hand, family, friends, wealth, and beauty, all vulnerable external goods, can assist or frustrate our achieving *eudaimonia*. Tragedy shows us characters with commitments with which we would all be familiar in action, and thus it shows us how these commitments are valuable. This is how tragedy can ethically beneficial.

It might be objected that *eudaimonia* being fragile is not something that we would actually learn from the theatre. The disagreement about moral luck cannot be settled on the basis of evidence: Socrates' death is not tragic according to Socrates or Plato, but it was for Xanthippe – there is agreement on the evidence but different conclusions are drawn. How could tragedy hope to teach us which is correct? I suggested above that Aristotle's account of moral luck is more intuitively plausible than Plato's. One of the reasons it seems so plausible surely has to be that we bump up against moral luck in our day to day lives. Even if our losses and frustrations are not on the same scale as tragic heroes', we know what it is

like to lose friends, perhaps family, wealth and so on, and that these losses are significant. If this is right, then the claim that goodness is fragile does not seem a particularly promising candidate for what we learn from tragedy. If we know the central ethical truth of tragedy, what is the ethical benefit?

It is easier to say what we do not learn than what we do. It is fairly clear, I think, that we do not learn any new or controversial moral claims from tragedy. The tragedians do not tell us parables and their work is not a particularly rich place to look for practical moral advice. In some cases the advice would be self-evident and trite – although it is not a classical tragedy, we might read *King Lear* as warning us to be careful of flattery, but this reading would be patently shallow and unsatisfactory (Janaway 197). More seriously, if we are searching the tragedies for practical moral advice, it is not clear from, for example, *Oedipus Rex* what the advice *could* be. Despite taking certain actions in order to avoid his fate, Oedipus nonetheless succumbs to it. There is no obvious practical advice here about how to live well: Oedipus cannot escape his fate and this is (part of) the horror of the play. So, what is the ethical benefit of watching a tragedy?

The benefit of tragedy is not learning any novel ethical claims, but rather it gives us a chance to clarify our emotions. Nussbaum puts it this way: ‘pity and fear will be sources of illumination or clarification, as the agent, responding and attending to his or her responses, develops a richer self-understanding concerning the attachments and values that support the responses.’ (388) This deeper self-understanding comes through engagement with our emotional responses.

Let us see how this would work in an example. Consider Sophocles’ *Antigone*. The action in *Antigone* centres on Antigone and her uncle, Creon. Antigone’s brother Eteocles defeats an invading force lead by his brother Polyneices. The brothers kill each other in the subsequent fighting and Creon ascends the Theban throne. Creon’s first act is to bury Eteocles but he denies any burial to Polyneices as punishment for his treachery, and he threatens anyone with death who performs the burial rites. Antigone, declaring loyalty to divine law rather than human law, defies Creon and performs the requisite rites. In what follows, both Antigone and Creon are destroyed: Antigone dies at Creon’s orders and although he survives Creon loses everything.

Nussbaum's suggestion²⁷ is that we see in both Antigone and Creon, in very different ways, a simplified view of value and commitment. For Creon the only good is civic good, the well-being of the city. This is the only value and it trumps all other value – importantly in the play familial ties and divine duties. Despite his crimes against the city, the gods require that Polyneices be accorded burial rites, and Creon, as his uncle, is required to provide them. However, given that the only value is the good of the city there is no tragic dilemma for Creon: he is not caught between the civil need to punish Polyneices and fulfilling his divine duties. In his opening speech, Creon declares where his allegiance and commitment lie: 'And any man who owes allegiance/ Greater to his own dear kin than to his country,/ I call that man no man at all.' (lines 173-5) His singular conception of value absolves him of any familial or religious obligations. Indeed he takes his conception of value to be universal: it would be 'unbearable' (line 292) and 'impossible' (line 300) for the gods not to punish an evil man – where evil is understood narrowly as being harmful to the well-being of the city – thus he absolves himself of any rites that the gods would ordinarily require him to perform.

Antigone also has a simplified view of value and she too does not see a dilemma. But, unlike Creon who takes civic duty as the only value, she sees her only duty as the divine duty. She is prepared to sacrifice her life and all her other commitments in pursuit of this duty, since divine law trumps all other commitments. She sees her duty to her dead brother as more important than the duties she would have were she to have children or a husband²⁸ (lines 965-6).

The characters' different conceptions of value play out in different ways. Antigone's final speech shows a change in her attitude. While she does not recant, she does show regret about what she has lost. She laments that without friends or family (the ties that she scorned earlier), she is now alone, having lost everything: 'Neither with the living or the dead do I belong/ I am not dead and I no longer live.' (lines 903-4) We pity her as she goes to her death, painfully aware of the importance of everything she has lost. Creon, on the other hand, recants at Teiresias' advice but it is too late and he still loses everything – Haemon, Creon's son, betrothed to Antigone, and Eurydice, Creon's wife, kill themselves out of grief.

²⁷ I draw heavily on her reading of the *Antigone*. See Chapter 3 'Sophocles' *Antigone*: conflict, vision and simplification'.

²⁸ The reason for this is that husbands and children are replaceable whereas her brother was not, given the death of her parents.

He comes to see that civic good is not the only good and that more flexibility and sensitivity is required in our often conflictual webs of value and commitment.

Both Antigone and Creon learn through their grief that the simplistic view of value obscures ties that are important and constitutive of happiness. As we pity them we are given chance to clarify and deepen our understanding of our own similar commitments. The reflective engagement with our commitments invited by our pitying of Creon and Antigone shows us something about living well. We become more ethically sensitive, and our ethical outlook becomes richer. This is the ethical benefit of tragedy.

The benefit is partly cognitive, but it also trains the emotions. We see that pity and fear are appropriate in certain contexts and come to feel the right pity and fear off the stage. Notice that in this respect at least, Aristotle is quite close to Plato. They share the belief that our emotional reactions to action on the stage are sufficiently similar to action and events off the stage (Nehamas 'Mass Media' 283).²⁹ Pitying tragic material on the stage is essentially the same as pitying tragic happenings in the world, and it is this similarity that makes pitying in the theatre appropriate training of pity outside the theatre. Without assuming this similarity, it would be difficult to see how the *emotions* could be trained except by experiencing real, rather than mimetic, pitiful or fearful events. If the emotional experience evoked by imitation is qualitatively rather than quantitatively different from the real-life experience, then the training would be of another type of emotion.

So, if there is agreement between Plato and Aristotle on how poetry affects us, but disagreement about the benefit of that effect because of different accounts of moral luck, then it seems that the Aristotelian reply should do enough work against Plato's strictures. Tragedy is not harmful if we grant that there is moral luck. Just as Plato's hymns to the gods serve a positive ethical function, it seems that Aristotle's positive account of tragedy, together with his sensible views on moral luck should be enough to rehabilitate tragedy, and poetry generally, against *Republic's* critique.

²⁹ This might seem to conflict with the claim, made earlier, about the emotional relief of watching tragedy: Nuttall claims that Aristotle corrects Plato by pointing out that people do not leave tragedy riled up as we might expect from watching pitiful or fearful things. We could have the same reaction to the events on the stage and, because of the completeness of the action, leave the theatre subdued as we might from a tragic event in real life – Oedipus is on a number of occasions roused to anger, but by the end of the play he is subdued. The point is that the claim about the similarity of our emotional reactions to the events in the theatre and off the stage need not conflict with the earlier claim about the relief of tragedy.

There are two worries here, one more serious than the other. The first is that Nussbaum's account of the educative benefit of tragedy depends on a resource, moral luck, that is not directly relevant to comedy. At best it seems that the Aristotelian rehabilitation will only readmit tragedy and epic but will have nothing to say about comedy because comedy does not depend for its material on moral luck. In the introduction I suggested that an educative account should be able to be extended to comedy, but if moral luck is so important to the account, then it is difficult to see how it can be extended with the same resources. If this is right, then a different account would have to be given to explain the benefit of comedy.

This objection can be answered if we disagree with Nussbaum that it is moral luck that motivates Plato's poetic restrictions. It is possible, as I did in Chapter 1, to talk about the expulsion of the poets without mentioning Plato's views on moral luck. I think that even if Plato and Aristotle were to share views on moral luck that would not change Plato's views on poetry – just as if the traditional theology of quarrelsome, vindictive, and capricious gods was correct, that would not justify telling those myths (378a). For psychological (and political) reasons it was important that the tragic emotions be controlled, not primarily because they are false, which of course they were for Plato. Plato's reforms in Books 2 and 3 are started without any uniquely Platonic resources and are proposed as those which will best serve certain political ends. The first reform of the education syllabus is supposed to develop spirited guardians, and inculcating certain beliefs about moral luck serves this end. At this stage of the argument Plato does not need to take a position on moral luck. Later in Book 10 Plato talks about pity in the same way as he talks about raucous laughter. His first example is the danger of the pity and grief that tragedy evokes (606b) and then Plato switches to comedy: 'The same argument applies to laughter' (606c). Plato's objection to poetry here clearly is not primarily based on moral luck: his reasons are, and for Plato these are intimately related, political and psychological.

What follows for Nussbaum's account? I think we can agree with her about moral luck and if we couple this with a rejection of Plato's political project, then we can agree that tragic values are important. We can also agree with Aristotle (and perhaps Plato) that the emotions need training. Without Plato's austere political proposals, then space does open for tragic values and tragic emotions. For reasons that Nussbaum suggests the theatre does seem well-suited to this training. Having rejected the political proposals, space might also

open for comedy. Tragedy trains the emotions and offers opportunity for an enriched self-understanding. There is no obvious reason why comedy could not do similar work.

At first glance then it seems that shifting the weight of the rehabilitation away from moral luck might actually benefit the Aristotelian account. More poetry is saved and so more of Plato's critique is answered.

This leads me to the second worry. My concern is that the education that is recommended by educative *katharsis* is likely to be conservative and conventionalist endorsing what is good in popular culture as well as that which might be harmful. By doing this, the reply fails to answer Plato's core concerns. I note that this is not a problem for Aristotle given a methodological difference between Plato and Aristotle.

Before it is possible to make this argument, it is necessary to discuss the relationship between folk ethics and popular culture, and the relevance of this relationship to Aristotle's methodology.

For popular culture to remain popular there will be broad agreement between the audience and author which places certain limitations on material. For an example of this, think of the film *Brokeback Mountain*. This film would not have been the popular success that it was, inasmuch as it was, fifty years ago given different attitudes towards homosexuality. The claim is that folk attitudes towards certain moral issues place constraints on the material on screen. Of course there might be innovation on the stage but it will happen against a background of broad moral agreement. With this tacit agreement between audience and author popular culture is often quite conservative. And the same was true of the Greek theatre.

The organisation of the theatre contributed to a certain cultural conservatism. Playwrights could be punished if their plays were too upsetting: Herodotus gives an account of how Phrynichus, one of Aeschylus' contemporaries, was fined a thousand drachmas for his play, now lost, *The Capture of Miletus*, and forbidden from staging the play again (VI.21). The upset³⁰ there was political and caused by extra-dramatic events – the offence was because of the shame about, well, the capture of the city Miletus by the Persians (Pickard-Cambridge 274) but it still makes the point that if the content was not to the audience's satisfaction there were consequences for the playwright.

³⁰ Both the audience and the political powers were offended.

There were limitations on plays' content in other ways too. The choruses were publicly funded. Magistrates or archons selected the dramatists (note 29, 377c) and they would appoint *choregoi*, wealthy citizens who would fund the choruses for the production of the play. Pickard-Cambridge notes that there isn't detailed evidence of precisely what interest the *choregoi* took in the content of the plays, but there is, for example, evidence of both Aeschylus' and Phrynichus' association with Pericles and Themistocles whose political aims were reflected in some plays (Pickard-Cambridge 90). If playwrights offended enough there was a threat of funding being withdrawn – Socrates makes this threat to anyone in Callipolis whose plays do not conform to the Book 2 reforms (383c).³¹ In short playwrights would write with these dangers in mind.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the ethical conservatism of the theatre is found in the audience's reaction to the theatre. Pickard-Cambridge tells how the audience took the moral content of the plays seriously, even if it was in an unsophisticated fashion. Consider the audience's reaction to Euripides:

Euripides is rich in sentiments which might be tumultuously applauded...or equally tumultuously hissed, if the audience disapproved, as they did when in *Danae* they heard an eloquent passage in praise of money, and were only quieted when the poet sprang forward and advised them to wait and see what happened to the character who uttered the sentiment. (Pickard-Cambridge 274)

In this incident the poet has to calm the audience so that the play can proceed, and he does so by reassuring them that the values endorsed in the play are those which they would agree with. Euripides was famous as an innovator but he was never as successful in the dramatic contests as the more traditional Sophocles – Sophocles won the first prize seventeen times against Euripides' five (Pickard-Cambridge 278). The point is that the Athenian theatre, as popular entertainment now, tended to reflect the values and commitments of the audience.³²

This is what I mean by saying that the theatre was by and large ethically conservative. It endorses and reflects the values of the audience. This, I have argued, is one of the reasons Plato was concerned about poetry and this is illustrated in Burnyeat's cultural interpretation

³¹ This is before the prohibition of dramatic poetry.

³² The values of the ruling classes were also reflected. Plato would agree with this. In Books 8 and 9 he tells us how the government would reflect the types of character that form the society. A democratic city would have many democratic souls, a tyrannical city, tyrannical souls and so on. Each soul values particular things and this would be reflected in the culture. For more discussion on this point see Lear 'Inside and Outside the *Republic*' 320-25.

of the Cave myth. If the educative interpretation of *katharsis* is correct, Aristotle claims that the everyday folk ethic reflected in the theatre is a good place to start in an ethical education.

Perhaps this shouldn't be surprising because Aristotle's ethics and philosophical method explicitly takes folk opinion seriously. To see this consider two passages from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. First, right at the beginning of the work Aristotle is talking about the subject matter of ethics:

Our account will be adequate if its clarity is in line with the subject matter, because the same degree of precision is not to be sought in all discussions, any more than in works of craftsmanship. The spheres of what is noble and what is just, which political science examines, admit of a good deal of diversity and variation, so that they seem to exist only *by convention and not by nature*. (1094, my emphasis)

Later, when giving an account of *akrasia* Aristotle says:

As in our other discussions, we must first set out the way things appear to people, and then, having gone through the puzzles, proceed to prove the received opinions about these ways of being affected³³ – at best all of them, or, failing that, most, and the most authoritative. For if the problems are resolved, and received opinions remain, we shall have offered sufficient proof. (1145b)

In the first excerpt Aristotle tells us that we have to be content with a level of imprecision in ethics, instead we should be prepared to look at convention. This leads us to the second passage. Aristotle explains how he approaches a philosophical problem, in this case *akrasia* or weakness of will. The problem with *akrasia* is that the received wisdom, from Socrates, was that the phenomenon wasn't possible: we would not knowingly do what we knew was not good for us, when we do what is bad for us we must act in ignorance (1145b). While the received wisdom denied the phenomenon, this was 'plainly at variance with the way things appear to people.' (1145b) The best account will be a synthesis of both the received wisdom and the opinions of the many. Reaching this solution probably involves modification of both the received wisdom and the views of the many, but both need to be considered and accommodated. In the case in question, Aristotle's account of *akrasia* agrees with Socrates that there is a failure of knowledge, but it is a failure of perceptual knowledge rather than knowledge of the universal – *akratic* behaviour is still done in ignorance. But, the conventional wisdom is also saved: we can do something that we know is not good for us. The point to note is that Aristotle takes the opinions of *hoi polloi* seriously

³³ That is, akratic behaviour.

This method places constraints on philosophy, and ethics in particular, that Plato does not have. In *Republic* Plato is happy to go wherever the ‘wind, or the argument, blows us.’ (394d) His attitude towards poetry, for example, illustrates the lack of conventional constraints on his philosophical method. I have already noted that Plato’s expulsion of the poets was neither philistine nor knee-jerk conservatism. When he finally expels Homer in Book 10, he notes, with certain regret, that rationality requires that poetry be banished (607b). That most people think that Homer is the educator of Greece is not enough to justify keeping his poetry in Callipolis. Even if everyone takes poetry as a source of ethical knowledge or thinks that it is harmless, too bad. Plato’s proposals were revolutionary and would result in significant change in Greek society³⁴ and culture, and for Plato, that this would conflict with established convention is not itself an objection.

It might be replied that Plato also has resources that Aristotle explicitly denies. We have seen that Aristotle says we should look to convention to understand and give a satisfactory account of ethics. Plato looks to the Forms: the laws that govern Callipolis can be seen in the Form of Justice. With these resources Plato, unlike Aristotle, is able to treat ethics like a precise science – we have already seen in the cultural reforms how precise Plato’s demands are, right down to the musical modes that will be acceptable in Callipolis.

While Plato has these additional resources, it should be noted that they are not necessary to produce surprising (ethical) results from argument alone. Peter Singer is an example of a Platonic philosopher in the limited methodological sense of one who follows the argument wherever it leads. He produces ethical conclusions that are deeply counterintuitive³⁵ starting from principles that most people would agree with. For Singer argument alone is enough to justify radical social and societal change. On the basis of consistent rational argument ‘the whole way we look at moral issues – our moral and conceptual scheme – needs to be altered, and with it, *the way of life that has been taken for granted in our society.*’ (Singer, ‘Famine’ 230, my emphasis) The claim of the paper from which this comes is that many of the spending practices of rich countries and their citizens cannot be justified in the face of poverty elsewhere. One implication of Singer’s argument is that the

³⁴ The three waves of radical social reform are the abolition of the family, equality for women and rule by philosopher kings.

³⁵ For example Singer argues that formulated properly the principle of equality would allow, under certain conditions, for infanticide, euthanasia, as well as some surprising conclusions about animal rights. See, for example, Peter Singer *Practical Ethics*

distinction between charity and duty collapses and consequently much more is morally demanded of us.³⁶ Singer does not use Platonic Forms to generate his radical ethic: his starting point in 'Famine' is that suffering is bad and that we ought morally to take whatever steps we are able to prevent suffering without sacrificing whatever is of comparable moral significance (Singer 231). From this starting point Singer sets sail, following the argument wherever it might lead, and, without Formal help, ends with some surprising results.³⁷ Clearly many of Singer's views are at variance with popular folk morality. If we accept these views, then it becomes obvious that popular culture, which by and large reflects folk values, would be a bad place for our ethical training.

In Chapter 1 I argued that we can make sense of Plato's worries about culture if we focus on that in culture which is harmful. In his educative account of poetry, Aristotle focuses in on that which is beneficial in poetry and claims that this is enough to rehabilitate the poets. We need not deny that some tragedy might be important for our emotional training. But if popular culture has it wrong, then we can see clearly why this account would not be satisfactory: TV might have some good programmes, but for many people is that is not enough to redeem it.

It might be objected that I have overstated the case. Even though there might be some conservatism in popular culture, we can still be profoundly enriched by Greek poetry and this suggests that conservatism is not as deep as I claim. In a suggestive passage Aristotle seems to agree. He tells us in *Poetics* 9 that:

[P]oetry is both more philosophical and more serious than history, since poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars. A 'universal' comprises the *kind* of speech or action which belongs by probability or necessity to a certain *kind* of character – something which poetry aims at *despite* its addition of particular names. A 'particular' by contrast, is (for example) what Alcibiades did or experienced. (1451b, Halliwell's emphases)

This passage is remarkable for a few reasons. Firstly, we can note the correction of *Republic's* claim that there is an ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy. Here Aristotle claims that poetry is itself philosophical. And if poetry is somehow universal then it seems that we might be able to reply to the charge that tragedy is conservative. If Nussbaum is right about the source of tragedy's material, then, insofar as we are all affected by moral luck, it seems

³⁶ In this case we would have to sacrifice most of our wealth and many of our (expensive) leisure activities.

³⁷ This not the place to consider whether Singer is right, or to look at these conclusions in any detail. Suffice to say it is remarkably difficult to resist him.

that tragedy might be appropriately universal. How are we to understand the history claim, and can it reply to the charge of conservatism?

Nussbaum argues that the passage should be read with the claim in *Poetics* 13, quoted above, that tragic heroes should not be exceptionally good or faultless. She takes some form of identification as an important part of the educative experience. The good but imperfect characters recommended by Aristotle are important in order that we can identify with the protagonists because proper identification requires that the characters be good in 'a representative and not an idiosyncratic way.' (Nussbaum 386) The problem with real, historic characters and events is that they are not properly representative: 'Because Alcibiades is such a unique and unusual figure, we do not regard what happens to him as showing a possibility for ourselves.' (Nussbaum 386)

If this was the right interpretation, which I don't think it is, it would not help against the charge of conservatism. Plato would turn around and say the representative goodness that Nussbaum appeals to is what is wrong with tragic heroes. On his view it is precisely what the characters value, which would be conventionally representative, that would be wrong. That Odysseus weeps because he misses his wife is precisely what is wrong and detracts from the character's goodness. It should be fairly obvious that what constitutes 'representative' goodness will be culturally relative: what constitutes representative goodness in industrial Western society will be very different from that in fifth century Athens which would in turn be different from that in Heroic Greece, Homer's world.

However, the reason why I think that Nussbaum's interpretation is mistaken is that that we do not identify with the characters but rather, as I suggested above, we identify with the concerns of the characters – we don't think of ourselves *as* Antigone, but we can pity her because we can relate as she comes to see how important everything that she loses is. If that is right there is no reason why we should not be able to identify with Alcibiades. It is fairly obvious that the particulars of Oedipus' downfall do not show us any real possibility for ourselves – few of us fear murdering our fathers and then marrying our mothers, and watching *Oedipus Rex* does not make us more fearful of this fate – but we can identify with certain features of his situation. We see someone succumbing to a monstrous fate despite taking what he saw as the best actions with the best intentions. This, in general terms, we might see as a possibility for ourselves, but not the specific, highly idiosyncratic details of Oedipus' fate. Oedipus' downfall did not depend on any details of his (possibly

representative) goodness but rather on the idiosyncratic details of his fate. This suggests that the claim that poetry is philosophical should be not taken as Nussbaum reads it. So, how should we take the claim? What are the universals that Aristotle talks about and why do they make poetry philosophical?

Halliwell argues that we should take the history claim with the preceding few chapters in which Aristotle is interested in plot structure and the role of character (Halliwell *Commentary* 105). Let's start with Aristotle's constraints on plot structure, which of all the elements in a play is the most important³⁸ (1450a). From the first definition of tragedy, quoted in the introduction, the action has to be serious and complete. By 'complete' Aristotle means the plot will have a beginning that does not have any necessary link with any prior event; a middle that has necessary links with the beginning; and an end that has links with the middle but need not have links to any further actions or events. Aristotle goes on in *Poetics* 8 to talk about the unity required of the plot structure. Unity is not generated from the action centring on a single character but rather from a tightly structured plot: 'its parts, consisting of the events, should be so constructed that the displacement or removal of any one of them will disturb and disjoint the work's wholeness.' (1451a) The point is that tragic plots should be structured such that character, events, and actions are all connected. So, for example, Oedipus' actions at each stage of the play are understandable in relation to the previous action and are consistent given his character. So, given the type of character that he is, his previous actions, and the behaviour of those around him, Oedipus would necessarily press on to get the truth about his birth from the Corinthian herdsman despite Jocasta advising against it. Halliwell claims that this is what Aristotle had in mind when talking about universals and the sense in which action in tragedy would be probable or necessary (Halliwell *Commentary* 107).

The universals that are properly the subject of poetry derive from the completeness and internal connectedness of tragic plot. Aristotle's insistence on plot unity is something that is absent from life off the stage. What happens often does not correspond with what ought to have happened: there is no evidence of the probability or necessity that is exhibited by events on the stage. Off stage character, events, and actions do not have the unity and coherence that we see in action on the stage. It is not that there is a principled difference

³⁸ The other five elements are 'character, style, thought, spectacle, lyric poetry.' (1450a) Aristotle thinks this list is exhaustive.

between history and poetry.³⁹ It might be possible to turn historical events into poetry, but it would require that events be carefully selected in order that they display the requisite unity.

Aristotle might be right about this, that poetry can exhibit this sort of unity and so be philosophical, but it doesn't help against the charge that the ethical refinement or education is conservative in the way described above. Poetry is philosophical, according to Aristotle, in virtue of plot structure. But Plato's concerns grow out of, on the one hand, content, hence the content reform in Books 2 and 3, and imitation on the other, but neither of these worries are connected with the unity of plot structure and character. It is difficult to see then how the history claim can help against the charge that poetry was conservative, endorsing everything that was problematic about Greek culture as well that which was good about the culture.

But it might still be objected, even if Aristotle's claim about the universality of poetry does not work against the charge of conservatism, surely we might be able to make the claim in a different way. We *do* still find Greek poetry enriching despite the cultural distance between us and Classical Greece. Even though there is much that we would not agree with in the tragedies⁴⁰ – slavery and sexism spring to mind⁴¹ – we often forgive these as regrettable signs of the times. As Nussbaum argues, these tragedies can be a place for ongoing ethical enrichment despite whatever conservatism may be found in the poetry.

But caution is required here. I have already noted that most of the audience's responses to the plays were unsophisticated, and they would not have had to look past what we might be inclined to forgive. Slavery and sexism formed part of the moral background against which the main action took place. Even though these might not be central to the play, they form part of the value system which would be endorsed and accepted as part of the complete world of values contained in the play. If sexism and slavery are acceptable cultural norms there is no need for the audience to look past them and forgive them.

³⁹ Nussbaum notes that were Aristotle thinking of Thucydides, whose history is more philosophical in Aristotle's sense, rather than Xenophon or Herodotus, then he might have been more sympathetic to history (note 386). G. E. M. de St Croix argues that it probably was Thucydides that Aristotle had mind (and that Aristotle was mistaken about his estimation of Thucydides). See G. E. M. de St Croix 'Aristotle on History and Poetry'.

⁴⁰ Pickard-Cambridge puts it this way: 'Parts of them may not be to our taste, and we blame them on the conditions of their time.' (277)

⁴¹ Both can be found in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. It is perhaps more surprising in Plato given *Republic's* views on the equality of women.

Nussbaum's reading of Aristotle might be able to rehabilitate tragedy as an acceptable sort of poetry, but it is not enough for a general rehabilitation because it doesn't take seriously that which might be harmful about poetry. Classical tragedy might have been well-suited to shaping Greek attitudes to moral luck, but would also have contributed to shaping other distasteful parts of culture. Aristotle and Plato are in broad agreement about how poetry affects us. Plato finds nothing to redeem tragedy, epic, and comedy and so expels it from the Callipolis. Aristotle finds some benefit to tragedy, but it is not clear that it would be enough to redeem it given the other harm that poetry might do.

Conclusion

If I am right that the replies sketched above are inadequate as a reply to Plato's challenge, then there is still more that needs to be said about Plato's challenge.

If we accept that Plato's concerns about culture are right, that cultural values and the mediums that transmit cultural values are potentially harmful and dangerous, then we need to come up with a solution that is less authoritarian than Plato's. We are more democratically inclined than Plato and we value free speech much more than Plato did, and an account would need to be provided of how this could be compatible with the worries about culture.

If we are unhappy about Plato's critique, then there is space to see whether his concerns, and the concerns of his contemporary counterparts, are justified. That is, whether there is any empirical (psychological) support for the claims about the effects of culture.

There are, of course, other readings of the critique that place more emphasis on the metaphysics of Book 10. On these accounts what is really interesting, and this has had metaphilosophical consequences for the status of aesthetics within philosophy, is Plato's denial that the poets speak any truth. The privileging of a certain type of truth opens space for a different sort of response to the challenge. If the status of the Socratic philosophical project, established on this view in opposition to a culture of poetry and tragedy, is itself interrogated, then, insofar as the critique of poetry is an integrated part of *Republic*, it impugns the critique of poetry.¹

The critique of poetry is not the dead issue built on lousy arguments that some commentators have suggested. It still raises interesting, challenging, and perhaps even relevant philosophical and political questions.

¹ For discussion on this see Janaway 192 ff.

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