

## Against Mimetic Poetry

HEARERS of mimetic poetry will suffer damage to their intellects, Socrates claims, unless armed with the drug that will counteract it. The drug is knowledge of the nature of mimetic poetry (595b5–7), and the point is even clearer, he says, ‘now that the parts of the soul have each been separately described’ (595a7–b1), as they were earlier in the *Republic*. In fact the arguments against mimetic poetry come in two pairs: two arguments dealing with the parts of the soul appealed to and fostered by mimetic poetry come after a pair of epistemological arguments, concerning the poet’s lack of knowledge.

The first of these epistemological arguments (598b8–601b8) purports to establish the conclusion that poetry is *mimēsis* and raises the concomitant objection that poets lack knowledge. I shall call it the ‘painter of craftsmen’ argument, after the unusual analogy which frames it:

As, for example, a painter, we say, will paint us a cobbler, a carpenter, and other craftsmen, though he himself has no understanding of any of their crafts; but nevertheless he might deceive children and foolish people, if he were a good painter, by painting a carpenter and exhibiting him at a distance, so that they thought it was truly a carpenter.<sup>1</sup>

Here, I claim, Plato leaves his discussion of ‘*mimēsis* as a whole’ and moves on to new business. What work does this passage do? It presents us with an example of what went before—an image of a thing of a certain kind, an ‘appearing thing’ and not a real thing, and hence a case of *mimēsis*. But it is, apparently, the oddest example to choose. Firstly, such a succession of craftsmen hardly provides painting with its most characteristic subject-matter. Since in the previous sentence ‘everything’ is what *mimēsis* can render, why pick on paintings of carpenters and cobblers? And secondly, of what interest can it be that children and fools might be taken in by certain images? Why build such atypical reactions into the ‘example’? Thirdly, why include the detail that the painter does not understand the crafts belonging to those he makes

<sup>1</sup> *Rep.* 598b8–c4. My translation, partly based on that of Shorey.

images of? The earlier 'painter of a bed' did not (or need not) understand the craft of carpentry, because he was making an image of a bed and not a real bed. That is fully intelligible. But the 'painter of craftsmen' is making an image of a craftsman—why then is his lack of ability to make beds, or shoes, at all to the point?

I believe there is a satisfactory answer to these questions. Plato is not now explaining the nature of *mimēsis* in general. We do not have to regard all the features of this 'example' as intended to be typical of painterly activity, or as defining features of *mimēsis*. At this point Plato enters the second stage of his argument, in which *poetry* specifically is to be scrutinized. That may seem to stretch incredulity even further, since Plato does not mention poetry or poets at all in the passage quoted. But the same example returns later, with a reference back to its first occurrence, and this time Plato leaves us in no doubt as to its point:

Shall we then lay it down that all of the poets, beginning with Homer, are *mimētai* of images of excellence and of the other things about which they make poetry, and that they do not lay hold on truth, but as we were just now saying, the painter will make what *looks* like a cobbler, even though he understands nothing of the cobbler's craft and nor does his audience, whose perception depends only on the shapes and colours? . . . In this way, I think, we will say that the poet, understanding nothing but how to *mimēisthai*, lays on with words and phrases the colours of the several crafts so that other such people whose perception depends on his words think—whether someone speaks in rhythm, metre, or harmony about cobbling or generalship or anything whatever—that he speaks extremely well.<sup>2</sup>

Plato introduces the 'painter of craftsmen' stealthily, without explaining his function; but he then immediately embarks on an elaborate argument concerning poets, whose culmination is the passage just quoted. The 'painter of craftsmen' thus provides an analogy for the poet, and in particular for the tragic or Homeric poet.<sup>3</sup>

Mimetic poetry portrays characters in action: 'human beings acting voluntarily or under compulsion, and believing that as a result of these actions they have fared well or ill, also suffering and rejoicing in all this' (603c4–7). Sometimes these characters are generals, rulers,

<sup>2</sup> 600e4–601b1. This translation is also partly based on Shorey, but owes a lot to Halliwell (1988).

<sup>3</sup> Halliwell's view (1988, 120) seems just right: 'Plato is using the extreme case of visual illusion as a blatantly rhetorical means of preparing the ground for his main argument—that poetry is falsely credited with a standing (that of ethical wisdom etc.) which it has no claim to.'

prophets, charioteers, doctors—exponents of a *technē*. So when Plato talks of the poet ‘laying on with words and phrases the colours of the several *technai*’ this is part of what he means: using language, the poet can create a character which the audience accepts as possessing any of the many brands of human expertise. But, as Plato suggests, in addition the poet’s characters may have, acquire, or be seeking understanding of the goods and evils of human life and of the ways of the gods: they are locatable somewhere on the spectrum of ethical knowledge. Enmeshed with the analogy between the poet and the ‘painter of craftsmen’, a more familiar analogy is also at work: having ethical knowledge is analogous with possessing a *technē*, and so making poetic characters who appear to possess ethical knowledge is analogous with making characters who appear to be exponents of a *technē*. The painted images of cobbler, carpenter ‘and the other craftsmen’ are included, I suggest, wholly for the sake of analogy and correspond in this way to the characters who appear in poetry, displaying to us what we take for virtues (or the lack of them).

What then of the other questions we posed about the ‘painter of craftsmen’ analogy? What is the interest of the mistakes of fools and children? And of what import is the painter’s ignorance of the crafts of those he portrays? The point is that poets who write of generals and rulers and charioteers do so in ignorance of any of these areas of human expertise; and in like manner (as Plato sees it) poets who write of human goods and evils do so while lacking ethical knowledge. To make a successful poetic character, Plato is saying, it no more takes knowledge of the truths about value in human life, than it takes expertise in shoemaking to make a convincing visual image of a cobbler. This is his fundamental point. The fools and children are analogous to those people who do not realize this—those who believe, falsely, that poets themselves have knowledge of every conceivable kind.<sup>4</sup> The analogy is thus slightly off-centre. Fools and children mistake a painted image at a distance for a real thing. Those who ascribe knowledge to poets do not mistake Homer’s characters for real persons; what they do is mistake the poet for a really knowledgeable person. Plato’s rhetorical point is that this mistake puts those who perpetrate it on a par with the children and fools of the analogy.

Read this way, the analogy embodies a mismatch between (in the case of the ‘painter of craftsmen’) mistaking *an image of a person* for

<sup>4</sup> Again I am in agreement with Halliwell here (see 1988, 121).

a real person with expertise, and (in the case of poetry) mistaking the maker of an image of a person for a person with expertise. But is that an objection? We must make sense of the mistake perpetrated about the products of the 'painter of craftsmen': there must be some analogous mistake with regard to the poet's product. The suggestion might be that people are deceived into thinking they are seeing real kings speaking and real deaths occurring, when they are experiencing poetic representations. But two points weigh strongly against that. It would have been laughable to suggest to the Athenians, with their vast collective experience of dramatic art, that an audience is commonly duped in this manner. And secondly Plato never elsewhere says anything to this effect: he never maintains that an audience are under any childish illusion of seeing real characters. (That the Athenians believed most of the protagonists of their poetry to be historical figures should not distract us. Some they *knew* to be real people, such as Xerxes, who appears in Aeschylus' *Persians*: my point is that even then the Athenians who saw this play did not think they were seeing Xerxes—and that Plato did not think they did.) What Plato does say in the passage we are about to examine is that people make foolish claims concerning the abilities of the poet. For his comparison with the 'painter of craftsmen' to be effective, Plato must reveal some mistake which it is clearly foolish or childish to make. He seems to have one vivid idea in mind throughout: that of people falsely believing in the existence of some real, knowledgeable person. On my reading there is an illusion of such a person both in the specially concocted example of the 'painter of craftsmen' and in the real case of the poet, so that the analogy is not hopelessly flawed.<sup>5</sup>

Now to the argument with which Plato supports his analogy of the poet with the 'painter of craftsmen'. I offer a schematic summary:

1. If someone *S* claims to have met a person who has knowledge of all the crafts (*dēmiourgiai*), and who knows everything each other

<sup>5</sup> An alternative reading of the analogy has been offered by Elizabeth Belfiore (1983). Belfiore agrees that the mistake Plato alleges about poetic *mimēsis* is not that of falling under the illusion of taking mere images for real things. But she also argues that in the illustrative half of the analogy, the 'painter of craftsmen' image, the mistake of the fools and children 'is not about ontology, but about a craft, carpentry' (44–5), and that the mistake made is, in both halves, 'veridical'—wrongly taking the content of painting (carpentry) and poetry (*aretē*) for true. This reading makes the analogy structurally more perfect than the one I propose. However, for some critical comments see Janaway (1991), 6–7.

person knows, only more accurately, then it is likely that *S* is simple-minded, and has been deceived by a magician and *mimētēs*, because of an inability to distinguish knowledge, ignorance, and *mimēsis* (598c7–d5).

Plato continues with the remark, 'Next we must examine tragedy and its leader, Homer'.<sup>6</sup> The point is that there are people who stand in just this relation to these poets:

2. We hear from some people that Homer and the tragedians know all the *technai*, and all things, human and divine, pertaining to excellence and evil (598d8–e2).

Plato would expect us to infer:

3. It is likely that the people making the claim of knowledge for these poets are simple-minded, and have been deceived by a magician and *mimētēs*, because of their own inability to distinguish knowledge, ignorance, and *mimēsis*.

The final conclusion Plato is aiming for is that Homer and the tragedians are nothing but *mimētai*, that they make only an image of the appearance of certain things, and hence are 'removed from truth'. But first he has to deal with the argument used by the friends of the poets, which is as follows:

4. (i) Homer and the tragedians are good poets (make poetry finely).
- (ii) A necessary condition for the ability to make (good) poetry about a subject-matter *X* is knowledge of *X*.
- (iii) Therefore, for any subject which Homer and the tragedians make poetry about, they must have knowledge of that subject (598e3–5).

Sometimes the views expressed in this little argument 4 (i)–(iii) are attributed to Plato himself,<sup>7</sup> despite the fact that he attacked an almost identical position in the *Ion*, and despite the fact that the overall argument works only if this is the reasoning of Plato's opponents. (He asks

<sup>6</sup> 598d7–8: This is the first explicit proposal, since the topic of '*mimēsis* as a whole' was broached (595c7), to examine poetry specifically; and note that not all poetry is included at this point.

<sup>7</sup> e.g. Nussbaum (1982), 84; Collingwood (1938), 49. Adam (ii. 396–7) is clear, on the other hand, that this is a view Plato is attacking, as are Halliwell (1988), 45, 121, and Osborne, 59–60. For Grube (1935, 190 n. 3), Plato agrees with 'the ordinary Greek view' that good poets have full knowledge, but 'does not agree that the so-called "good poets" like Homer have any such knowledge'. But Plato does not regard Homer as merely a 'so-called' good poet, nor does he share the 'ordinary' view he goes on to argue against!

shortly 'whether there is something in what they say, and in truth good poets do have knowledge'—only to deny that there is anything in what they say.) Furthermore, if 4 (i)–(iii) constituted Plato's own view, he would have to say that Homer is not a good poet. But he nowhere disputes Homer's claim to be a good poet, recognizes him as 'most poetic' (*poiētikōtatos*, 607a2), and expresses reluctance to criticize him (595b9–c3). (This also parallels a feature of the 'painter of craftsmen' analogy: it is if the painter 'is a *good* painter' that some people may be misled on seeing his work.)

So far, then, we have two views about the status of the poets, and Plato now offers to decide between them. He states the issue with complete precision. It is: whether the friends of the poets

have met with *mimētai* and been deceived, and on seeing their works do not perceive them to be twice removed from what is and easy to make for someone who does not know the truth—for it is appearances not real things that they make—or whether there is something in what they say, and in truth good poets do have knowledge of the things about which they seem to speak well to the many. (598e5–599a4.)

Plato does not deny 4 (i). Instead, he attacks 4 (ii) and (iii) with two counter-arguments. The first is as follows:

5. (i) If anyone was able to produce both some real product *X* and images of *X*, then they would prefer to produce *X*.
- (ii) If Homer and the tragedians had knowledge enabling them to produce what they make images about, then they would not have chosen to make images about it.
- (iii) But Homer and the tragedians chose to make images or appearances, not real things.
- (iv) Therefore, Homer and the tragedians have no knowledge of the kind of real things they make poetry about (599a6–b8).

5 (iii) is Plato's own premiss.<sup>8</sup> It can safely be taken for granted that, *qua* poet, Homer makes appearances or images of things. The question is: what kind of ability does making them require? The argument 5 (i)–(iv) is valid. But, if 5 (iii) is uncontentious, 5 (i)—also Plato's own premiss—is not. Plato has no right to the assumption that poetry is an activity of such obviously low value. The upshot of his whole argument might be that poetry is worthless, but he should not assume that *en*

<sup>8</sup> Cf. the parenthetical remark 'for it is appearances not real things that they make' at 599a2–3.

route. So the first counter-argument against the friends of the poets is not convincing.

The second counter-argument to show that good poets do not require knowledge is a brief survey of the empirical evidence concerning the achievements of poets, mainly those of Homer.

6. (i) There is no evidence of Homer (or any poet) exercising abilities in medicine, generalship, government or education.
- (ii) Anyone who had such abilities to offer would not have been allowed by their communities to 'go about rhapsodizing' like Homer and Hesiod. (In other words, there would have been evidence of their exercising these abilities, if they had had them.)
- (iii) Therefore, the poets all lack knowledge and are mere *mimētai* (599b9–600e3).

This argument is no stronger. The supposed survey of evidence is based on (to put it mildly) too small a sample, and one could no doubt easily supply counter-instances where a poet has had some of the abilities mentioned. The second premiss is again dubious because it begs the question, attributing Plato's own low evaluation of poetry to the communities in which poets have lived.

However (especially for readers of the *Ion* and the *Gorgias*), it is not difficult to see that good poetry does not require knowledge, and all Plato needs, to show this, is one clear example where a good poet's work springs from no first-order knowledge of his subject-matter. If Homer is a good poet and lacked the knowledge in question, then such knowledge cannot be a necessary condition of successful poetic image-making. Plato appears at times to think he has shown that poets *cannot* have knowledge of what they make poetry about. What is more convincing is that they *do not need* such knowledge as a condition of making good poetry, that any knowledge a good poet were to have about *X* would be coincidental, and would not account for the goodness of his or her poetry about *X*—the reason being that good poetry is a form of good image-making, in Plato's sense, and nothing more. The poet's words conjure up an image of a sorrowing or jealous or cowardly person, of a person deciding what it is right to do or bowing before what honour dictates, and so on. Success in this enterprise can be no more—Plato alleges—than satisfying the audience, who lack knowledge of good and evil (vouchsafed, remember, only to philosophers who can grasp Forms), with a stretch of fictional behaviour they

can accept as a credible portrayal. Success in the poet's enterprise does not, then, require the poet to have knowledge of good and evil either.

Plato brings home his conclusion in the way we discussed earlier: the good poet is analogous to the ignorant 'painter of craftsmen', who is nevertheless a good painter. Even if poets are not necessarily ignorant, the analogy holds. The convincing appearances of persons knowledgeable in various ways—the characters poets make—are liable to give rise to false beliefs about the poets' own capabilities. The beliefs that the poets' knowledge is compendious, and that knowledge of *X* is a necessary condition for making good poetry about *X*, can be shown to be false. Given the fact that these false beliefs are held, together with Plato's premiss 1 concerning the likely cause of such beliefs, there is a coherent case for concluding that Homer and the tragedians are *mimētai*. Their ability, in other words, is just an ability to make images of the way things of certain kinds appear, and is not essentially fed by knowledge. Homer and the tragedians (and all poets, Plato says) are in this sense 'removed from truth'.

Plato rubs salt in the wound by saying that because the poets know nothing except how to make appearances, but are thought to speak well about many topics, their activity must be one of 'enchantment' (*kēlēsis*, 601b1). It is the metre, rhythm, and harmony, or what Plato now refers to as poetry's 'musical colours' (601b2), which spellbind the audience, blinding them to the ignorance from which the poetry really stems. Strip these colours away from poems, and 'you know what they look like', says Socrates. (I think of Tolstoy's hilarious 'stripped-down' narration of Wagner's *Ring*: 'Three Norns plait a golden rope and talk about the future. They go away. Siegfried and Brünnhilda appear. Siegfried takes leave of her, gives her the ring, and goes away [etc.].')<sup>9</sup> What is left of poetry without its superficial means of 'enchantment' is bald and banal, like the plain faces of those who have lost their youth and with it their only attraction (601b6–7).

The second epistemological argument against mimetic poetry (601b9–602b11) is what we may call the 'user/maker' argument. This is distinct from what went before, and alleges that the *mimētēs* of any thing has neither knowledge nor true belief about it. Plato returns to a general point about *mimēsis*, illustrated by reference to another painter, who this time paints a horse's reins and bit. In contrast with the saddler and bronzesmith who would make the real reins and bit, the painter—of

<sup>9</sup> Tolstoy, 212.

course—does not understand how the reins and bit should be. But then Socrates suggests that ‘not even the maker of them, the bronzesmith and saddler, understand that, but only the person who knows how to use these things, the rider.’<sup>10</sup> It is like this with everything, he continues: there are three *technai*, one which uses the thing, one which makes it, and one which imitates it. And only the user of something has knowledge of how it should be, that is, of the thing’s ‘excellence and fineness and rightness’, also of its ‘deficiency’.<sup>11</sup> The maker is compelled to consult the user, and thereby acquires a correct belief about the excellences and deficiencies of reins and bits, or flutes, or anything. The point is supposed to stretch to ‘every artefact, creature, and activity’: for everything, the criterion of its being fine, excellent, or right is what use it has (601d4–6), and only the thing’s user will know what it takes to have an excellent thing of a particular kind. As a general principle this seems unlikely. Even allowing that everything has a ‘use’, many things do not have the kind of expert users who have superior understanding of excellences and deficiencies. The beds and tables from the earlier discussion are a case in point.<sup>12</sup> One even suspects that the majority of things we use have excellences and deficiencies which it takes a designer or producer to point out. I may understand why a thing is excellent for my purposes without knowing much about it at all. (Think of computers.) Another possible worry is that in the previous argument the maker of a bed could ‘look to’ the Form. If that entails knowing what makes some particular bed a good one (which is not clear), then it is odd that now the maker has only true belief.

However, the passage at least asserts a more refined charge against mimetic poetry. We might have swallowed the previous argument that Homer lacks knowledge of the various *technai* and of human excellence, but still think him and his colleagues useful for getting things right in a way which fell short of knowledge—mimetic poets may have and communicate true beliefs, for all that Plato has said. His real interest now is in the claim that mimetic artists have neither knowledge nor true belief about the excellences and deficiencies of what they represent.<sup>13</sup> Painting reveals that making the appearance of musical instruments, riding tackle, and so on, demands neither knowledge nor

<sup>10</sup> 601c11–13, translation by Halliwell (1988).

<sup>11</sup> *aretē, kallos, orthotēs* (601d4), *ponēria* (602a9).

<sup>12</sup> Halliwell’s point (1988, 129). For other difficulties, see *ibid.* 129–31, and Annas (1981), 337.

<sup>13</sup> See 602a8–9 for exactly this claim.

true belief about the excellences and deficiencies of such objects. That is surely true. So will it not also be true that the mimetic poet, who makes only images of persons and actions, requires neither knowledge nor true belief about the genuine nature of excellence and deficiency? If so, Plato continues, the mimetic poet will be altogether lacking in wisdom (*sophia*, 602a11–13) concerning the things he writes about, but will not let that prevent him composing, for what he represents will be guided instead—reiterating a point from the previous argument—by ‘what appears fine to the multitude who themselves know nothing’ (602b1–4—cf. 601a4–9).

At the end of the ‘user/maker’ argument Plato’s epistemological charges against mimetic poetry are complete:

We have a reasonable agreement that the mimetic practitioner knows nothing significant on the subjects of his imitation, but that *mimēsis* is a game and not a serious matter; and that those who put their hand to tragic poetry, whether in iambs or in hexameters, are all mimetic practitioners *par excellence*.<sup>14</sup>

The claim that Plato has made, then, is that the tragedians and Homer are practitioners of *mimēsis*, making only images of the way things appear, and that as such they lack both knowledge and true belief concerning anything they write about. They are good poets only because their use of metre, rhythm, and harmony succeeds in enchanting their audience. If their poetry has any value, it is only that of a pleasing game. Poetry itself does not have any serious ethical or educational weight. A prevailing theory that would counter this says that the ability to make good poetry must stem from knowledge of its chosen subject-matter. But this theory is false, and to accept it is to have been duped by a kind of ‘magic’—the pleasure which fine poetry is capable of inducing. Plato’s position is not substantially different here from what it was in the *Ion* and the *Gorgias*. The difference is that he can now claim to have developed, in the main body of the *Republic*, a positive account of what it is to achieve knowledge, and of the pursuits which do have ethical and educational weight.

The theme of ‘enchantment’ runs throughout the Book 10 discussion of poetry. Scholars have pointed out a number of allusions here to *Gorgias*’ doctrine of the power of language.<sup>15</sup> For example, when Plato writes that the defenders of Homer have probably ‘been deceived by

<sup>14</sup> 602b6–10 (Halliwell’s translation).

<sup>15</sup> See Pohlenz, 463 ff.; Flashar, 68–72, 111; Belfiore (1983), 59 n. 32; Verdenius (1983), 30; Halliwell (1988), 128.

some magician and imitator they have met, into the opinion that he is all-wise',<sup>16</sup> the sentence is packed with Gorgianic words: *goētēs*, *exapatān*, *doxa*—magician, deceive, opinion. It may not be too fanciful to see a link with Gorgias in Socrates' opening announcement that he will provide an antidote to mimetic poetry. The antidote is a *pharmakon*, the word Gorgias uses when he compares the action of a speech to that of a drug.<sup>17</sup> Socrates' *pharmakon* is then a drug against a drug. Later he says in the same vein that we should repeat the truth about poetry to ourselves as a constant charm to ward off its spell (608a3–5). Plato apparently agrees with Gorgias that speech, when used by mimetic poetry, drugs and bewitches the soul. But whereas for Gorgias this was the only option—charming the soul and bending opinion was all that any speech could do—Plato contrasts this effect of speech with different practices (reasoning and discovering truth) that involve another *part* of the soul. Hence the other opening remark that the dangerous nature of mimetic poetry can be more clearly revealed 'now that the parts of the soul have each been separately described'.

There follow two psychological arguments against mimetic poetry, which I shall call the 'conflicting attitudes' argument (602c1–605c5) and the 'greatest charge' argument (605c6–606d7). They capitalize on earlier passages in the *Republic*, where Plato argued that each human soul has an internal structure and is not a unity. Conflicting attitudes such as desires can be explained, he claimed, as originating in distinct 'parts' or aspects of the self.<sup>18</sup> There is the reasoning part, with which we desire to think rationally and gain knowledge, there is the part which has appetites for things such as food and drink and sex, and there is the 'spirited' or emotional part 'with which we become angry', and which seeks honour and victory. The *Republic's* most important single idea is that justice comes about, in the individual as much as in the city, when each of the parts which constitute the whole performs its own function, not seeking to usurp the functions of the others. In a healthy soul, the reasoning part rules, taking thought for the overall good of the individual and setting criteria for which of the appetitive desires is followed; the spirited, irascible part allies itself with the reasoning part.

<sup>16</sup> My translation of 598d2–3, *entuchōn goēti tini kai mimētēi exēpatēthē, hōste edoxen autōi passophos einai*.

<sup>17</sup> *Helen*, §14 (Diels–Kranz 82 B 11).

<sup>18</sup> The parts are introduced in Book 4 (434d–444e). Plato does not refer always to 'parts'—his terminology is vague and variable. Moline argues convincingly against equating the 'parts' with 'capacities' in modern psychology.

When the rule of the reasoning part is challenged or overthrown there occur various kinds of disorder or imbalance in the soul which lead to a more unjust and, Plato argues, an unhappier individual. Worst of all is to be governed by that part of us which has unruly and unnecessary desires—the kind which erupt in sleep, when one seeks gratification in gluttony, murder, and unchecked sexual intercourse, even with one's mother.<sup>19</sup>

It is notorious that Plato does not stick with these three parts of the soul in Book 10, but relies mainly on the thought that the soul has parts (or rather a part) other than the reasoning or learning part which is 'highest' and 'best' and fitted by nature to rule in us. However, there are points of continuity with the earlier discussions of the soul, which help us to understand the psychological critique of mimetic poetry. The first point is that in Plato's picture of the soul each of the 'parts' is regarded as a quasi-autonomous centre of attitudes.<sup>20</sup> Each 'part' is a centre of desires, beliefs, or belief-like ways of apprehending the world, and also has particular pleasures associated with it.<sup>21</sup> Plato can say that, when we are confronted with some state of affairs, each part of us will apprehend it and react to it independently. Part of us will desire and enjoy things which another part of us shuns and finds distressing. The second point of continuity is closely related: Plato relies on a principle enunciated in Book 4, according to which 'one thing cannot act in opposite ways or be in opposite states at the same time and in the same part of itself in relation to the same other thing'. 'If we find this happening', says Socrates, 'we shall know that we are not dealing with one thing but with several' (436b8–c1). I may, for example, desire something merely to satisfy an appetite, but also not desire it because I have learned it not to be good, or because I would be angry at the loss of

<sup>19</sup> 571b4–d4 (Book 9). The allusion to Oedipus seems to prepare the way for the critique of tragedy in Book 10. Gould makes much of this connection, and thinks that Plato's remark about 'not refraining from any kind of food' may allude to the tragic figure Thyestes, who eats his own children at a banquet (see p. xviii, 30).

<sup>20</sup> Moline, esp. 6–14, brings out this point. See also Annas (1981), 131, 142–6.

<sup>21</sup> Burnyeat's succinct remark is helpful: 'it is as mistaken to suppose the lower two parts of the soul incapable of thought or judgement as it is to deny desires and pleasures to the top part' (1976, 35 n. 22). See 580d3–581c6 (each part has its kind of pleasure and desire; each is predominantly a *lover* of something); 571c3–d4 (in sleep the 'animal' part of us autonomously exercises desires and experiences pleasure); 574d5–575a6 (ethical beliefs are overwhelmed in the individual by the beliefs of his lustful part); 442c10–d1 (an individual has *sōphrosunē* (self-control) when 'all the parts hold a common opinion that reason should rule'). See also Irwin (1977a), 191–2, 195; Lovibond, 36 ff.; Penner (1971), 100–3; Moline, 10–12.

esteem which having it would bring. If I seek out and take pleasure in something and at the same time wish to avoid it, then I am not, for explanatory purposes, merely one thing.<sup>22</sup>

So the question is: What in a human being does *mimēsis* relate to when it exercises its power? (602c4–5). *Mimēsis* is ‘at third remove from the truth’,<sup>23</sup> so it can hardly be the wisdom-loving *logistikon*, the part ‘by which we learn’, that *mimēsis* engages. To illustrate a split in the soul here, Plato reverts to painting, and explicitly discusses visual illusions:

The same magnitude does not appear to our sight to be the same size when we look at it from nearby or from a distance . . . And the same things seem crooked when we see them in water and straight when we see them out of it; the same things appear concave or convex because our eyes are confused by colours, and every confusion of this kind clearly exists in our soul. *Skiagraphia* relies upon this weakness in our nature and is nothing short of bewitchment [*goēteia*]; so does conjuring and other such trickery. (602c7–d4.)

That we succumb to optical illusions does not itself illustrate that the soul is split into parts. But now follows the crucial point: at the same time we are able to use measuring, counting, and weighing, which work against the tendency to believe that we see a genuinely bent stick, or a genuinely concave surface among the painted scenery, and so on. These activities are the function of the *logistikon*, the calculating or rational part of the soul (602d6–e2). The basic argument here is as follows:

1. It is impossible for the same thing to hold opposed beliefs about the same object at the same time.
2. We believe at the same time (e.g.) that we see a flat surface and that we see objects with depth.
3. Therefore, two distinct parts of us must hold these two beliefs.

Brushing aside the most obvious philosophical worry—whether this type of illusion involves false *belief*<sup>24</sup>—we can understand how Plato, arriving at the view that there is complexity within the soul, must

<sup>22</sup> Plato’s example of Leontius being angry with himself for wanting to look at dead bodies (*Rep.* 439e7–440a6) raises an interesting question: are we considering conflicting attitudes directed towards a single object, or a conflict between, say, a desire and an aversion to that desire? (See Irwin (1977a), 191–2.) This distinction lurks under the surface of Book 10’s discussion of attitudes to grief.

<sup>23</sup> The point reiterated at 602c1–2, just before the question of parts of the soul is addressed.

<sup>24</sup> Raised by Halliwell (1988), 134.

locate the propensity to error in 'one of the inferior elements in us' (603a7–8). Being duped could hardly be the function of a *better* part of us. The most obvious way to take the division in the soul here is as a split between the *logistikon* and part of the soul distinct from the *logistikon*.<sup>25</sup> Then the argument continues more or less as follows:

4. It is the function of the *logistikon* to correct our beliefs by applying the standards of measurement and calculation.
5. Therefore, it is the function of something other than the *logistikon* to believe that depth is perceived, even when the correct belief (that we see a flat surface) has been arrived at by measurement and calculation.

Having reached the idea that some 'inferior part of us' is in play, Socrates makes one of his rudest pronouncements about the arts, saying:

Painting, and mimetic art [*hē mimētikē*] as a whole, produces a work that is far from the truth; it consorts with a part of ourselves that is far from intelligence and is its companion and friend for no healthy or true purpose. . . . Mimetic art, being an inferior thing and having intercourse with something inferior, produces inferior offspring.<sup>26</sup>

The metaphor is deliberately insulting: mimetic art is nothing but a cheap prostitute with which a cheap part of the mind can have a good time. In substance these remarks are hard to reconcile with the 'non-illusionistic' interpretation I have given of *mimēsis*. The problem is this: How can Plato be in a position to conclude that all *mimēsis* appeals to an inferior part of the soul? He claims that illusionistic painting appeals to an inferior part of the soul on the grounds that it induces conflicting beliefs: optical illusions are explained in terms of two differently functioning parts of the soul, and *skiagraphia* exploits the mind's propensity to optical illusions. But this tells us nothing about *mimēsis* as a whole, unless *mimēsis* as a whole is conceived as illusionistic. Unless the earlier talk about 'an appearing bed' is taken after all to refer to an illusion, Plato's argument here cannot work. Either he has no

<sup>25</sup> The view of e.g. Adam, ii. 408, 466–7; Crombie, i. 146, and probably the majority view (although among those who hold it there is no consensus about whether it makes for coherence or not—for contrasting assessments, see Annas (1981), 338–9, and Belfiore (1983), 50–6). A minority view is that the *logistikon* itself has two contrary attitudes and is split into two parts (see Nehamas (1982), 64–6, and Murphy, 239–41, criticized by Halliwell (1988), 134).

<sup>26</sup> 603a10–b4. My translation, adapted from Grube's.

right to his conclusion that all *mimēsis* appeals to an inferior part of us, or his overall theory of *mimēsis* is the implausible illusion view.

It may be that Plato makes no distinction between 'appearance of X' and 'illusion of X'. This would not be surprising since his terminology for both is the same. (What we earlier translated as 'the appearance of a bed' was *phainomenē klinē*, literally 'an appearing bed'. When he talks of illusions it is *to phainomenon meizon ē elatton*, literally 'the appearing larger or smaller', or 'what appears larger and smaller'.) If *mimēsis* always makes only 'appearances', and if there is an inferior part of the soul which is prone to believe in 'appearances' that are at variance with measurement, it may look as if we need no further argument for the conclusion that *mimēsis* always appeals to the inferior part of the soul. But take images of people in mimetic drama or in an ordinary non-illusionistic painting: if we are able to gaze on these without the kind of conflict of beliefs that Plato explains by invoking the soul's different parts, then there is no direct argument yet for the conclusion that these works as such—mainstream examples of *mimēsis*—appeal to an inferior part of the soul.

We discover, however, that the attack on mimetic poetry is not really furthered by Socrates' general disparagement of *mimēsis*. For he says immediately that we must not trust the comparison with painting, but must give a separate account of mimetic poetry. The ensuing argument against mimetic poetry does not rely on the analogy with visual illusions:<sup>27</sup> it has nothing to do with illusions as such, and everything to do with conflicts of attitudes of a different kind. The vicissitudes of life give plenty of opportunity for 'internal dissension' within the soul (603d2–3). One's child dies—Plato's example. One feels intense grief and has the desire to lament endlessly, to abandon oneself to sorrow. But one also has the desire to act rationally, to do what is for the best. This can be used to show another split in the soul. Simple, unreflective expression of grief is one attitude towards a death. But one may take a different attitude to it, reflecting that the value of such events is never clear-cut, and that the importance of anything human is not very great (604b10–c1). Moreover, one may challenge one's own desire to indulge in grieving, and, while still having that desire, seek also, at least in public, to moderate one's grieving, subordinating it to other concerns rather than submitting to it. One has two conflicting attitudes, then,

<sup>27</sup> As emphasized by Adam, ii. 408–9, and Halliwell (1988), 136—the latter against Annas' claim (1981, 339) that the present analogy with painting is by itself supposed to 'prove' something about poetry.

towards one's own propensity for violent and prolonged expression of grief, pulled one way by rational desires for the good, another way by the grief itself.<sup>28</sup> By analogous reasoning to that used before, there must here be two parts of the soul. There is a part of us which calculates, deliberates,<sup>29</sup> and (metaphorically now) measures our behaviour.<sup>30</sup> Another part, which Plato calls 'irritable' and 'variegated',<sup>31</sup> behaves like a child crying and hugging its own wound (604c8–9) and gives in uncritically to emotion. The part which seeks to moderate grief and act always in a consistent manner, calmly seeking the best according to 'reason' and 'custom', is the familiar *logistikon*, the superior rational part which governs in a healthy soul. However we read the analogy with visual illusions, the two cases of conflict have a common feature: the desire to indulge the disorderly, childish part of us persists despite rational judgement to the contrary, just as we continue to fall prey to optical illusions however well-established our correcting beliefs may be.<sup>32</sup> It is this pertinent observation about two cases of conflicting attitudes which gives a solid core to the otherwise rather troubled analogy.

But now the most important question is: How can the conflict of attitudes towards grief and its manifestations be used against mimetic poetry? Plato first lights upon grief and other emotions within the represented story. The objects of poetic *mimēsis* are 'people acting voluntarily or under compulsion, and believing that as a result of these actions they have fared well or ill, also suffering and rejoicing in all this',<sup>33</sup> and

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *auto to pathos*, 604b1. *Pathos* 'covers . . . both the objective suffering and the corresponding emotion' (Halliwell (1988), 138); Gould, 32 n. 3, takes the *pathos* to be 'the pitiable event', in this following Adam, ii. 410.

<sup>29</sup> The best part of us engages in calculation (*logismos*, 604d5) about how to behave so as to secure the best long-term outcome. One should deliberate (*bouleuesthai*, 604c5) about how to arrange one's affairs as reason (*logos*) chooses.

<sup>30</sup> Plato's way of speaking of 'moderation' keeps the link with 'measuring' alive: *metriasei . . . pros lupēn*, 'he will be measured with regard to his sorrow' (603e8).

<sup>31</sup> *aganaktētikos, poikilos* (604e1–2, 605a5). The former epithet reminds us of the 'spirited' part of the soul from Book 4, the latter of the appetitive part (Nehamas (1982), 67). (See also Adam, ii. 406.)

<sup>32</sup> See Penner (1971), 100–2; Nehamas (1982), 65–6; White, 253.

<sup>33</sup> 603c4–7. There is probably another reference to Gorgias here—he said of poetry 'at the actions and physical sufferings of others in good fortunes and in evil fortunes, through the agency of words, the soul is wont to experience a suffering of its own' (*Helen*, §9). Plato later echoes this when he says: 'Only a few will reflect that the enjoyment will be transferred from the spectacle of another's sufferings to one's own'. 604e5–6, *allotriou . . . pathous hē mimēsis autois gignetai* also puns on the same passage of Gorgias. See Belfiore (1983), 59 n. 32.

this kind of subject-matter tends to be full of people indulging their emotions, governed by a part of themselves other than the *logistikon*. The calm, rational, good-seeking reaction to events does not lend itself to depiction and would not make for a drama pleasing to the mass audience (604e3–605a6). Guided by the aim of producing pleasure rather than that of making the spectators better, poets depict multifarious behaviour which lacks the measure and composure associated with the best part of the soul. This, Plato then suggests, strengthens and nourishes that inferior part of the soul in the spectator, setting up a civil war within us, whose end result is the destruction of the *logistikon* (605b4–5). So mimetic poetry encourages us to acquire attitudes towards our emotions, and propensities to behave in certain ways, all learned through the gratification of a pleasing image, rather than by applying thought to which way of feeling and acting is best.

Though its conclusions are broadly parallel to what we have seen elsewhere, this argument is ambitious and full of slippery assumptions. Plato assumes that dramatic portrayals of characters guided by emotion and/or appetite will be enjoyed only by a corresponding ‘inferior’ part of the spectator—presumably because he thinks that what we enjoy about these portrayals is feeling (or imagining that we feel) what the characters feel, and hence engaging the same part of the psyche as we see expressed by them. He also assumes that this enjoyment will change us by progressively strengthening the part that does the enjoying, and that someone who enjoys seeing a dramatic representation of some way of behaving will come to behave in that way in life outside the drama. Perhaps Plato’s position is not altogether unfamiliar: many people today believe that the depiction of violence feeds an aggressive part of us that may vent itself in real actions or in a more tolerant attitude towards real violence which we witness. But Plato’s assumptions may still be questioned. He regards drama as a wholly permeable medium, as if our response could not be to the dramatic representation as such and did not essentially discriminate between a real course of events and a fictional one.<sup>34</sup> This assumption seems naïve. However, the issue is addressed more subtly in the second psychological argument against mimetic poetry.

This second psychological argument presents Socrates’ ‘greatest

<sup>34</sup> See Nehamas (1988) on this (esp. 218–19), and on the modern parallel: ‘the greatest part of contemporary criticisms of television depends on a moral disapproval which is identical to Plato’s attack on epic and tragic poetry’ (222).

charge' against it<sup>35</sup>—that it is powerful enough to 'corrupt' or 'impair' even good men, with very few exceptions, and so is dangerous. As basis for this charge, we must confront another psychological fact:

When even the best of us hear Homer or some other tragedian making a *mimēsis* of one of the heroes sorrowing and stretching out a long speech of lamentation or a chorus beating their breasts you know that we enjoy it, surrender ourselves, share their feelings and earnestly praise as a good poet the one who affects us most in this way. (605c10–d5.)

However reflective we are, however governed by reason, however desirous of the good, we still cannot resist feeling a pleasure in tragic drama, which arises out of an identification with the characters' emotional situation. Danger lurks in the poet's uncanny ability to draw us into the feelings of the drama and provide a pleasure which will override whatever reflective capacities we may have. In these circumstances, regarding ourselves as safe because of the remoteness of the fictional sufferings, we are prone to indulge the very part of ourselves which, in the previous argument, we saw to be at variance with the *logistikon*:

The part which is forcibly controlled in our private misfortunes and has been pining to weep and adequately lament, as it is by nature desirous of this, is the very part which receives satisfaction from the poets in the theatre and enjoys it. That part of ourselves which is the best by nature [the *logistikon*] . . . relaxes its watch over the wailing part because it is watching another's suffering and there is no shame involved for itself in praising and pitying another man who, in spite of his claim to goodness, grieves excessively. Moreover, there is, he thinks, a definite gain, namely pleasure, and he would not welcome being deprived of it by despising the whole drama. Only a few will reflect that the enjoyment will be transferred from the spectacle of another's sufferings to one's own, and that one who has nurtured and strengthened the part of him that feels pity at those spectacles will not find it easy to hold it in check at the time of his own misfortunes. (606a3–b8.)<sup>36</sup>

In feeling pity, we indulge the 'lower', 'wailing' part of ourselves because of the sheer fact that it brings pleasure to do so, and this

<sup>35</sup> Socrates says 'we have not yet made the greatest charge against it' (*ou . . . to ge megiston katēgorēkamen autēs*, 605c6). What is the 'it'?—poetry, *mimēsis*, or mimetic poetry? The pronoun *autēs* seems to refer back, but there is no clear noun (such as *poiēsis*, *mimēsis*, *mimētikē*) for it to refer to. However, 'the mimetic poet' (605b7) was the subject of the previous paragraph, and Homer and the tragic poets are the principal target of the 'greatest charge'.

<sup>36</sup> The translation 'the wailing part' (for *tou thrēnōdous toutou*) I owe to Belfiore (1983), 57.

indulgence spills over into our real-life attitudes. However, the most serious charge has several further sophistications. Firstly, we do not merely experience pleasure in 'sharing' the character's emotions, but we consciously assign a positive value to the having of this pleasure. And secondly, the circumstances in which we can gain this pleasure, sunk in concentration on a theatrical performance, rob us of the ability to consider whether what we are experiencing will smuggle itself into our attitudes towards our own lives, and remove our capacity to take a view about whether this is beneficial. The pleasure of mimetic poetry is so strong that it takes away the power to decide rationally whether submitting oneself to this pleasure is beneficial or not. But thirdly, Plato charges, what we grow accustomed to feeling and approving in a drama will shape our responses in ordinary life, whether we realize it or not. The same point covers comedy as well: we take a pleasure in seeing the ridiculous enacted, but run the risk, while off our guard, of becoming 'comedians in our own life', of taking indulgent pleasure in things which our better judgement would bid us take seriously as objects to be hated.<sup>37</sup> Along with the dispositions to pity, grief, and ridicule, mimetic poetry also 'nourishes and waters' many others which 'ought to wither' and should not gain the upper hand in the polity of the soul: many 'appetites, pleasures, and pains', including those concerned with sex and anger.<sup>38</sup>

Thus the greatest charge against mimetic poetry is that, willy-nilly, we receive from it a training in many real-life feelings and ethical attitudes, which works by by-passing rationality, giving pleasure to a 'lower', indulgent part of the soul, and thereby disabling the power to reflect on the question of its own influence and value.<sup>39</sup> The charge that Plato is naïve about *mimēsis* may be softened to some extent by this argument. He does not overlook enjoyment of the dramatic representation *per se*, nor the rational defences which can in principle prevent reactions to fiction from spilling over into real life. Instead he makes the positive claim that drama, with its apparent 'zone of pleasure divorced . . . from ethical consequences',<sup>40</sup> encourages an emotional involvement that disarms those defences even when they are strong and confuses us as to whether we approve of the representation *per se* or

<sup>37</sup> See 606c2–9.

<sup>38</sup> See 606d1–7. The list includes both 'appetitive' and 'spirited' elements.

<sup>39</sup> Plato's psychology here has been found both 'crude' (Crombie, i. 150) and 'of considerable interest and importance' (Belfiore (1983), 61).

<sup>40</sup> Ferrari's phrase (1989, 138).

the type of person and action depicted. As Giovanni Ferrari puts it, 'so far from ignoring the phenomenon we know as aesthetic distance, Plato is in fact directing his attack upon it.'<sup>41</sup>

Aesthetic distance, then, feels like a safe distance, but it is not. Indeed, it is not even a true distance, because, while on the rational level we know the fiction for what it is and deliberately reckon on benefiting from harmless pleasure taken in it, on a less discriminating level we *feel* in an involved way emotions concerning the fictional situation. Because the psyche is split, we can be 'in' the drama, even while we claim to be appreciating it from 'outside'. The effect of this circumstance, Plato alleges, is that enjoyment is 'transferred from the spectacle of another's suffering to one's own'. It is not just that I become more prone to indulge my pitying and fearful part in real life—itself a bad effect, according to Plato. I also learn the habit of *enjoying* sufferings and later cannot resist aestheticizing my own life. So 'aesthetic distance' is doubly dangerous, for Plato. It not only lulls us into an unhealthy state of complicity with the worthless parts of our psyche, but also breaks out of its proper artistic sphere and eats into life itself. The calculating *logistikos* cannot resist because, by the time it realizes the danger, it no longer rules the soul.

The well-known 'banishment' follows. Against the claims of those who say that he educated Greece in human affairs and still can teach us how to organize our lives, and in the face of his being 'most poetic', Homer is not to be received into the model city. Why not?

Hymns to the gods and eulogies of good men are the only poetry which we can admit into our city. If you admit the Muse of sweet pleasure, whether in lyrics or epic, pleasure and pain will rule as monarchs in your city, instead of the law and that rational principle [*logos*] which is always and by all thought to be the best. (607a3–8.)

The power and comprehensiveness of his poetry make Homer seem to be an educator, but his real success is only in engendering pleasure of a certain kind. Plato is not exactly opposed to pleasure, but rather to pleasure and pain *ruling* in the place of rational truth-seeking. His reasons for excluding poetry are now complete, he says.<sup>42</sup>

Plato seeks in these final paragraphs to locate his attitude to poetry in a traditional 'ancient quarrel' between philosophy and poetry, and

<sup>41</sup> Ferrari (1989, 138).

<sup>42</sup> 'Poetry', without qualification: 607b1–3.

is at pains to spell out his motivation. It is not from 'harshness and boorishness' that he attacks poetry (though poetry has often descended to mere abuse of philosophy<sup>43</sup>), but, on the contrary, as a lover who has been convinced that his attachment must cease because it will bring him no good, and forces himself to stay away (607e4–608a5). He even wishes that poetry could put forward an argument for its own value, because it is hard to cast off something one has been brought up to cherish, and because if poetry really does have a positive value, we shall benefit greatly. We should listen to a defence of poetry, from any source, in a friendly spirit. But the task of any defender will be a stiff one: to show that poetry is 'not merely pleasure-giving, but beneficial to cities and to human life' (607d8–9).

Plato banishes mimetic and pleasure-giving poetry from the 'city of words', but envisages that in the real world it will continue to be there. 'We shall listen to it', he says<sup>44</sup>—but the important question is: With what attitude? Plato's answer is that we should sacrifice an almost irresistible pleasure for the sake of a higher principle: the truth about what is good or bad.

As long as it is not able to put up such a defence, we shall listen to it but repeat to ourselves like an incantation the argument we now put forward and be careful not to fall again into that childish and popular love. We shall go on repeating that such poetry must not be taken seriously as if it had any contact with truth and were a serious matter, but that the man who is anxious about the government of his soul must be careful when he hears it, and that what we have said about poetry must be believed. . . .

The struggle to become good or bad is important, my dear Glaucon, I said, much more important than people think, so that it is not worth being led on by honours, wealth or any office, nor indeed by poetry, to neglect justice and the rest of virtue.<sup>45</sup>

We must certainly consider how we might make the defence of poetry which Plato invites—a task of some difficulty which I reserve until my final chapter. But how good is the prosecution case in the first place?

<sup>43</sup> 607b6–c2 quote a few instances of such abuse, whose sources are, unfortunately, unknown.

<sup>44</sup> Gould (221) takes the view that this 'probably means, not "as we enjoy poetry", but "as we listen to poetry's defence of itself"'—but (whether or not the text supports Gould's idea) would not poetry's defence of itself also be poetry? Plato pointedly contrasts poetry's self-defence with a defence in prose by non-poets (607d6–9).

<sup>45</sup> 608a2–b8 (Grube's translation, slightly adapted).

Many writers<sup>46</sup> have been convinced that there is no case to answer—on the grounds that Plato's arguments are bad, unclear, or insincere—or else that Plato can be brought to drop the charges: we secure an admission that in other places he explicitly or implicitly defends poetry (or some restricted class of 'real' or 'good' poetry). Either way, *Republic* Book 10 can be made to emerge as something that a philosopher of art does not have to worry too much about. Whether Plato's views elsewhere mitigate the attack on poetry can be answered only when all the evidence is in, and we still have to examine a number of works written later than the *Republic*. But what of the idea that Book 10 itself does not present a case worth worrying about?

One problem here is the temptation to detach the discussion of mimetic poetry from the central themes of the *Republic*. Few would wish to concede to Plato outright his views of knowledge and truth, pleasure, desire, and the best constitution for the human soul, let alone his doctrine about the manner in which philosophy can lead us to knowledge in the ethical sphere. But for all that, and for all its own doctrinal quirks, Book 10 is the final chapter of a systematic ethics and epistemology, and if we treat it as a self-contained treatise on the arts, many of its assumptions will seem gratuitous and baffling. We ought to be asking whether the account given of the arts would be persuasive to someone who accepted the *Republic's* account of the soul and how it acquires justice. If you believe that the *logistikon* should govern in a healthy individual, and that nothing should be allowed to hamper it in its quest for the eternal truth about what Good is, and that fostering pleasures associated with the appetites and emotions will set up the rule of something other than the *logistikon*—then when you find intelligent people sitting in enjoyment of a representation of Medea planning the murder of her children, should it be beyond contention that this is a perfectly fine thing for them to do? Should it be *obvious* to Plato why this kind of activity has a positive value? The first prerequisite for

<sup>46</sup> They protest too much: Plato is assailed with 'gross illogicality and unfairness', 'passionate, hopelessly bad arguments', 'trivial or sophistic arguments which he can not himself have regarded as conclusive', and a position which is 'quite unacceptable' (how dare he!)—but then again it is said that he is only 'enjoying himself by over-stating his case', that a 'comparison with other dialogues makes it quite clear that [these sections of the *Republic*] do not contain his considered opinion', and that we should 'construct a nobler and more generous theory of Aesthetic Art' on his behalf. Perhaps there is a hidden 'commendation of good art' even within Book 10 itself, or is Plato 'struggling after a theory of aesthetics which does not find full expression before Hegel'? (Sources: Warry, 55, 65; Annas (1981), 344; Greene, 54–5; Cross and Woosley, 281; Crombie, i. 147; Adam, ii. 393; Grube (1935), 192; Grey, 298.)

allowing the case against mimetic poetry to come to court is to realize that its issues are ones which Plato cannot avoid raising if his work is to have integrity.

The second prerequisite is to examine our own prejudices. In particular, that anachronistic and loaded concept, 'Art', should not be deployed until we have understood what Plato achieves without using it. We may be tempted to imagine teaching Plato this concept of ours, and patiently leading him out of error: 'You see, these things that you are attacking are Art. If something is Art it invariably has the following value . . . and does not really need any further justification.' ('Thank you for clearing that up', he might reply—though this strategy would rebound on the champion of Art, if the concept is, as I argue later, an almost vacuous one for the purpose.) But we should first establish what, if anything, is wrong with his position as it stands. Otherwise there is little chance of a fair hearing, since 'attacking Art' appears to count as either blasphemy or blatant stupidity.

Plato's epistemological arguments, as I have interpreted them, fail to convince in points of detail: recall the implausibility of the user/maker dichotomy, the sweeping empirical claims about poets' lack of practical expertise, and the question-begging assumption that no one would want to make a *mimēsis* of something if they could make a real thing of the same kind. The psychological arguments, for their part, rely heavily on the principle that conflicting attitudes cannot stem from a unitary entity, and on a puritanical prescription<sup>47</sup> about which psychological reactions and modes of behaviour one should approve in oneself. Overall Plato proceeds on a naïve notion of artistic representation, as the production of 'appearing things' whose status is wholly derivative from the kind of thing they appear to be. He is sometimes under suspicion of making no distinction between appearance and illusion. He uses illustrative analogies—the painter of craftsmen and the 'bent-stick' visual illusion cases—which are over-stretched and potentially misleading, and he is, perhaps, vague as to whether his points apply to all poetry and which poetry really counts as mimetic.

Yet, despite these flaws, there is a coherent and interesting case to be heard. Firstly, what do mimetic poets characteristically do? They represent persons acting, suffering, and exhibiting varied psychological reactions to events in their lives. Their best subject-matter is provided

<sup>47</sup> 'Extreme emotional puritanism' (Halliwell (1988), 151). But if 'puritanism' means a blanket hostility to all pleasure, Plato is not guilty of it (Ferrari (1987), 99).

by characters in situations which call for a wide range of elaborately expressed emotions. If *mimēsis* is understood as the intentional production of an appearance of a thing of some kind, then clearly these poets perform *mimēsis*, and may be classed with the most usual kind of visual artist. However, in dramatic poetry, *mimēsis* has an especially potent effect on the human mind. It produces images of persons and their actions so successfully that the spectator is drawn to feel emotionally involved in the drama. Poetry uses a number of 'musical' means—rhythm, metre, and harmony—without which the narration would not be captivating to the same degree. To feel emotions along with characters who are portrayed by such poetic means affords an intense pleasure. When poetry enchants us so much that we identify with the characters and feel its powerful effect on us, we praise its producer as 'a good poet'.

It would surely be hard to deny any of this. The next part of the case asks: What value do these activities of producing and hearing mimetic poetry have? Essentially, two prevailing views are canvassed and rejected. The first says that the mimetic poet is an educator, whose ability to write finely stems from knowledge, or at least from true beliefs about human affairs in all their many aspects—the value of mimetic poetry is that we learn from it, often about weighty matters. Plato dismisses this view, and in so doing makes a good point: the theory of poetry which explains its success in terms of a compendious knowledge on the part of the poet is a foolish mistake. We must realize the difference between the ability to make a fine, pleasurable, enchanting, and (as we say) convincing artistic representation, and the ability to know or even be right about the highest truths of human existence. It is implausible to say that the two could not even coincide. But where Plato is surely right is in saying that they are distinct and may float free of each other, and that those who think otherwise are sunk in a deep error which not only renders their philosophy of poetry childish but makes any proper ethical thinking impossible.

The second view which Plato opposes locates the value of mimetic poetry in the pleasure it gives. We count this pleasure itself as a benefit. But pleasure ought not to be self-guaranteeing: we must ask why, if at all, the pleasure characteristic of mimetic poetry is good for us to have, and in order to do so we must analyse its nature. Plato suggests, with great plausibility, that we are not beings in full rational control of our reactions, and that mimetic poetry appeals to the psyche by engaging a more primitive 'wailing' part of us. While our rational defences are

relaxed, because we are aware that the situation is remote, poetry, with its ability to create a convincing world in appearance and its splendid, involving 'musical colours', makes us feel emotions which in other circumstances we might choose to check as unworthy or dangerous. Once one has surrendered oneself, the emotions are hard to resist and the pleasure in feeling them is intense. To keep oneself away from such experiences is akin to separating from someone with whom one is in love. Who would maintain, after this analysis, that Plato lacks insight into the nature of mimetic poetry or understanding of why people think it is a good thing? He understands these matters well, but thinks we must tear ourselves away from pleasures if by rational argument we can recognize them as undesirable.

In broad terms what Plato has said about the nature of mimetic poetry—what it is and does—is persuasive. That, together with its roots in his ethics and epistemology, makes his prosecution worth hearing. There are some obvious points for the defence to fasten upon. Something is still missing from Plato's account of what it is to take pleasure in a representation, and we are likely to wonder whether our reactions to tragedy really spill over into our lives in such a wholesale and pernicious way. We may claim that even repeated exposure to drama does not change the whole balance of the soul, or that it does, but in a beneficial way. Or we might suppose its effect harmless enough that the value of mimetic poetry is found, after all, in a perfectly innocent pleasure. But Plato's monolithic standards for what constitutes a healthy individual and what it is to understand good and evil also stand out as targets. Plato may have some misconceptions about the arts, but let us not forget that he also pits them against a vision of attaining excellence and truth to which nothing human could ever be equal.