Introduction

This is a book about ancient philosophical poetics. It is not concerned with ancient literary theory, criticism or scholarship in general. Those are interesting topics with important implications for our understanding of ancient poetry.[1] Here, however, our concern is with ancient attempts to answer specifically philosophical questions about poetry.

Specifically philosophical questions? That is not a well-defined or stable class. But I take it to include, for example, such questions as these. *What* is poetry? How is it related to, and differentiated from, other human practices and products? *Why* is poetry? What motivates its production and consumption? If it is a universal human behaviour, common to cultures all over the world, how is it rooted in human nature? What does poetry contribute to human life? What is the point of it? In what ways may it be of value? Are we doing it properly? Eating is a natural human behaviour, but people are prone to eat things that are bad for them. Is the consumption of junk poetry harmful? How could we tell if our taste for poetry is leading us astray? If poetry is potentially dangerous, should society protect us by regulating its production or dissemination? Should there be laws to promote its true purpose? If we live in a society without such laws, how can we organise our own lives to ensure that we, and those for whose well-being we care, have a healthy diet, whether of food, or of poetry? These questions take us far beyond technical aspects of poetics, and beyond aesthetics narrowly defined. There are broader issues in, most obviously, ethics and politics, but also in psychology and anthropology. These in turn lead us on to theology; to questions about the fundamental structures of reality, the sources of knowledge, and the grounds of value; and also, of course, to differing conceptions of philosophy itself.

[1] Heath 2002: 99–134.

Such an expansive agenda demands selectivity. Plato and Aristotle select themselves. Plato, an elusive ventriloquist, resists systematisation. The *Republic*, which is the main focus of Chapter 2, by no means exhausts his engagement with poetry (some other strands will make their appearance in later chapters); but it provides an opportunity to follow the development of a sustained argument about poetry in the context of larger concerns. Aristotle, by contrast, is systematic, in the sense that he is constantly alert to connections between different parts of a hugely ambitious, though always provisional and evolving, philosophical project. Chapter 3 therefore takes the *Poetics*, which is primarily technical in its concerns, as a starting-point from which to work outwards to other texts so as to clarify philosophical premises left unstated in the *Poetics* itself.

By the criterion of philosophical stature, Plotinus would be our third selection; but he does not have an extensively articulated poetics. Proclus, who brought the later Platonist synthesis to a peak of sophistication, is too complex to be dealt with adequately in short compass. My approach to later Platonist poetics therefore examines the dynamics of a philosophical tradition rather than the thought of a single dominant figure. Chapter 4 exhibits an important transition in Platonist thinking about poetry, and explores the background to it. The conclusions to which that transition led are likely to strike modern readers as implausible and, when proposed by philosophers who present themselves as followers of Plato, paradoxical. Chapter 5 confronts this paradox, surveying the Platonic resources which motivated and made possible the later Platonist approach, and illustrating some of its variants. Plotinus provides one of three case studies; the others are Maximus of Tyre and Longinus. These selections may seem odd: Maximus would not figure on any list of the greatest philosophers of antiquity, and the attribution of the treatise *On Sublimity* to Longinus is disputed. But the case against Longinus' authorship is, in my view, inconclusive, and Maximus proves to have more substance – as a representative figure, at least – than may appear on superficial acquaintance.

Maximus' orations and the treatise *On Sublimity* have at least the merit of survival. I have chosen in this book to concentrate mainly on extant works because it is hard to determine what philosophical positions were developed, and how they were argued, in texts that cannot be read *in extenso*. That is my excuse for giving only brief attention to Epicurean poetics, which must be precariously reconstructed from fragmentary (and often tendentious) evidence. The Stoics, too, are under-represented,

figuring only insofar as their modifications of certain traditional conceptions of poetry were reabsorbed (with further modifications) into later Platonism. Selectivity, as I have said, has been unavoidable.

But let us begin at the beginning: how did poetry become an issue for philosophy?

CHAPTER ONE

Poetry: the roots of a problem

1 ARCHAIC POETRY

One of the earliest surviving Greek poems describes the poet's encounter with the Muses. While Hesiod was tending his sheep on the slopes of Mount Helicon, the goddesses 'taught him beautiful song', gave him a staff (the characteristic accoutrement of the poetic performers known as rhapsodes), breathed a divine voice into him, and commissioned him 'to hymn the race of blessed immortals'. In the course of this encounter, the Muses say (*Theogony* 26–8):

> Shepherd bumpkins! Utter disgraces! No more than bellies! We know how to tell many falsehoods resembling real truths, and we know, when we choose, how to sing true things.

These puzzling words, by turns mocking and cryptic, are commonly understood as endorsing the truthfulness of Hesiod's poem. But why, in that case, would Hesiod have advertised his patrons' deceptive potential? One possibility is that he needed to explain discrepancies between his own and others' poems. If so, there is no attribution of authority to poetry in general: Hesiod claims a special (though not necessarily unique) authority for his own poetry. But this claim to authority depends on three premises which there is no reason to grant: that Hesiod is telling the truth about his encounter with the Muses; that he correctly understood the Muses' words as a promise to tell him the truth; and that the Muses made that promise truthfully. The first two premises are unsupported; the Muses' own words undermine the third. An audience might reasonably view the content of Hesiod's poetry agnostically, therefore. So might Hesiod himself. In attributing these words to his Muses he acknowledges the uncertainty inherent in any human attempt to account for the origins of the universe and the history of the gods. These are matters beyond direct human knowledge, exceeding our capacity to distinguish truth from plausible falsehood. We are dependent on insights that come from outside

us, and cannot confidently pass judgement on the authenticity of what we receive.[1]

The Muses' deceitfulness should not surprise us. Archaic poetry takes it for granted that gods are deceptive. In epic narrative, mortals are unaware of the divine determinants of their experience. Priam's confidence that Hector's piety protected his body in death, even though it did not save his life (*Il.* 24.425–8), is true as far as it goes. But sacrifices will not save Troy from destruction: Zeus has given greater weight to the wishes of Hera, who is motivated by an intense personal hatred (4.1–68). Priam does not know this, and the limitations of his insight are not corrected when Hermes, the god with whom he is unwittingly conversing, finally abandons his disguise (24.459–69). Moreover, Homer's gods are capable of deceiving humans into self-destructive wrongdoing. Athene disguises her identity when – on Zeus's instructions – she induces Pandarus to break a truce (4.69–104). Even when its divine origin is revealed to the recipient, advice may be deceptive: Agamemnon's dream, though truly sent by Zeus, is untruthful (2.1–40).

The narrator of the *Iliad* makes clear his (and our) dependence on the Muses for information about matters beyond our reliable knowledge. When he invokes the Muses, he contrasts their eye-witness knowledge with human ignorance: only the renown of past deeds has reached our ears (*Il.* 2.484–92). The poet's song will be reliable if the Muses respond positively to his request. But the transmission of the 'renowns of men' is recognised by poet and characters alike as a function of epic (*Il.* 6.358; 9.189, 526; *Od.* 3.203–4; 8.72–4, 580; 24.296–8). If poetry is a vector of renown, and renown is not a reliable source of knowledge, then poetry cannot be consistently reliable. Perhaps not all poetry is inspired by the Muses; perhaps, as in Hesiod, the Muses do not always tell the truth.

The *Odyssey*, too, expresses an awareness that poets are purveyors of falsehood. Odysseus, a notably untruthful story-teller, is repeatedly compared to a bard. When Alcinous pays him this compliment (*Od.* 11.363–9), it is not the manner of Odysseus' story-telling that carries the conviction of truth (Alcinous says explicitly that falsehood cannot reliably be discerned from the way people speak) but his physical appearance (which Athene has altered: 8.18–22). Eumaeus' use of the comparison is even more telling (17.513–21): he is warning Penelope not to trust the stranger, whose skilful stories he rightly disbelieves (14.166–9, 363–5, 378–89).

[1] Hesiod is more assertive in *Works and Days* 10: 'I shall speak real truths to Perses.' Here his theme, ethics and farming, falls within the bounds of human experience.

Archaic audiences would not have found this puzzling. Poetry did not transmit stories in fixed canonical versions; fluid traditions gave rise to multiple conflicting variants. Adaptation and innovation can be detected in the Homeric poems themselves, and Hesiod corrects the *Theogony*'s account of Strife (225–6) by distinguishing two kinds of strife in *Works and Days* (11–26). His Muses had misled him on this point, at least.

It does not, however, follow that archaic poets had no influence over their audiences' beliefs. A common framework underpinned the polyphony of conflicting detail, and the tradition's repeated rehearsal of a shared pattern of cultural, ethical and religious assumptions would have had a powerful cumulative effect in reinforcing and transmitting certain patterns of thought. Audiences do not need to think about ideas made familiar by repetition. Indeed, poetry may actually inhibit the ability to think critically about its content, or to exercise reflective control over the effect its content has on them. In archaic and classical sources there is a sustained emphasis on the intensely, bewitchingly pleasurable nature of poetry. Its sound, rhythm and other formal qualities astound and seduce, as does the imaginatively compelling impact of its narrative content. Hesiod's Muses were born to be 'forgetfulness of ills and relief from cares' (*Th.* 55). In the *Odyssey*, when a singer's performance goes well the audience listens with silent, rapt attention (1.325–6). This effect is compared to enchantment (1.337, 17.518–21).[2]

2 PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE

Poetry, then, is a medium which cannot guarantee the truth of the things it tells us. Nor can we reliably assess their truth, both because they are beyond human knowledge and because poetry's bewitching psychological power puts us into a state of mind that inhibits reflection. For that very reason, poetry's rehearsal of a familiar worldview is likely to influence our beliefs, values and behavioural tendencies at a level so deep that we are unaware of what is happening to us, and unable to control it. In this sense, it may be correct to say that 'from the beginning all have learned from Homer' (Xenophanes B10) or that 'most people's teacher is Hesiod' (Heraclitus B57). Here we glimpse the beginnings of critical scrutiny of poetry early in the history of Greek philosophy.[3]

[2] This section draws on Heath 1985: 258–62. Other views of the *Theogony* proem: e.g. Bowie 1993, 8–23; Finkelberg 1998: 131–60. Early poetics: Walsh 1984: 3–36.

[3] Introduction to presocratic philosophy: Warren 2007; see further Long 1999; Curd and Graham 2008. General discussions of the issues touched on in this section include Most 1999; Morgan 2000: 46–88.

The fragments of Xenophanes' poems give some idea of the grounds on which he developed his wide-ranging critique of traditional poets.[4] Homer and Hesiod are condemned for attributing immoral behaviour ('stealing, adultery, and mutual deception') to gods (B11–12). He describes stories of gods fighting Titans and Giants as useless fictions (B1.21–3), and rejects stories of the birth of gods (B14). Hesiod's *Theogony* included both kinds of story, as did other early poetry. But Xenophanes' revisionary account of the world and the gods went deeper. Everything that has traditionally been believed about the gods is wrong: 'there is one god, greatest among gods and men, not at all like mortals in body, nor in mind' (B23). We do not learn this from the Muses, but must search for the truth for ourselves: 'the gods did not disclose everything to mortals from the beginning, but mortals in time by searching improve their discoveries' (B18). No one has, or will ever have, clear knowledge of gods: even if someone happens to say exactly what is the case, it is only opinion (B34). But some opinions should be credited: 'let these things be believed, as being like real truths [*eoikota tois etumoisi*]' (B35). That last phrase, though not identical to Hesiod's 'resembling real truths [*etumoisi homoia*]', is close enough to suggest a deliberate echo and a pointed challenge.

What is the nature of that challenge, and how radical an innovation was involved? Early Greek poets, I have argued, had a subtler self-awareness than is often recognised.[5] The seeming modesty of the claim which Xenophanes makes for himself looks questionable in this light. The traditional poet can be genuinely modest about his poetry's claim to truth. Adopting a heteronomous pose, he has no need to authorise the content of his poetry himself; its authority depends on the Muses, who (we are reminded) need not tell the truth. By contrast, the philosopher's bid for epistemic autonomy means that he must be *self*-authorising. This is so even where the truth-claim is qualified. Though he disclaims access to truth as such, Xenophanes is nevertheless confident that he has achieved something sufficiently like the truth that it has a claim on our acceptance; and he is confident that he has through his own powers succeeded in discovering enough about truth to enable him to distinguish authentic from deceptive likeness to the truth. Why should we believe him?

[4] Commentary: Lesher 1992. See also Granger 2007a.

[5] Contrast e.g. Most 1999: 343: 'Homer and Hesiod claim that … the only validation of their poetry is that it tells the truth, conforming veridically to a real past or present state of affairs. The epic Muse guarantees a superhuman knowledge of matters distant in time and space or otherwise remote from ordinary human knowledge.'

Why, for that matter, should we believe Parmenides?[6] Like Hesiod, he claims dependence on divinity; his goddess, like Hesiod's Muses, speaks both truth and falsehood. She, however, tells us which is which, contrasting 'the unshaken heart of truth' with 'the beliefs of mortals, in which there is no true conviction' (B1.29–30). Whatever we may or may not conjecture about Parmenides' ecstatic experiences,[7] the only reasonable grounds for assent is the force of the goddess's arguments: she herself urges him to judge what she has said by reason (*logos*, B7.5–6). This is good advice: we cannot do better when we need to make up our minds about truth and falsehood than to follow the arguments that seem best to their conclusions.

But philosophers notoriously disagree with one another. Heraclitus derided not only Hesiod, but also Xenophanes, Pythagoras and Hecataeus (B40).[8] If philosophers cannot agree among themselves on which philosopher's arguments are best and which conclusions should be accepted, how can we trust what any of them says? This point is philosophically serious: philosophical disagreement (*diaphōnia*) was used by ancient sceptics as a reason for suspending judgement.[9] That does not let the poets off the hook; but it puts the philosophers on a hook of their own. They cannot question poetry from a standpoint that is beyond question. How, then, will they convince us that they have good reason for saying the things they do about poetry, and about the worldview expressed in poetry? Within a traditional culture, the familiarity of basic assumptions may pre-empt the question of their truth. Philosophical critique removes that complacency; at the same time, it prompts questions about the philosophers' counter-traditional claims that will not be easy to answer.

[6] Commentary: Coxon 2009; Palmer 2009 provides a demanding analysis. See also Granger 2008.
[7] Gemelli Marciano 2008.
[8] See Granger 2004. Commentary: Robinson 1987.
[9] S.E. *P.* 1.165 (cf. 1.88–9); Cic. *Ac.* 2.117–47. See Barnes 1995a: 1–35.

CHAPTER TWO

A radical solution: Plato's Republic

According to early Greek poets, poetry bewitches us (§1.1). The state of mind it puts us into inhibits us from thinking critically about what it is saying. It may shape our thoughts, imaginations and actions at a level too deep for us to be aware of or control. That psychological power was still felt in the fifth and fourth centuries. Gorgias speaks of poetry's overpowering emotional impact: 'its hearers shudder with terror, shed tears of pity, and yearn with sad longing; the soul, affected by the words, feels as its own an emotion aroused by the good and bad fortunes of other people's actions and lives' (B11.9). In Plato's *Ion* a rhapsode describes how the recital of dramatic or pathetic scenes from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* grips the emotions of performer and audience alike (535b–e). In the *Republic*, Socrates acknowledges how intensely we enjoy sharing the emotions of characters in epic or tragedy (10, 605c–d). He strongly disapproves: our enjoyment of this emotional stimulus is morally dangerous. Socrates also maintains, as Xenophanes did (§1.2), that poetry's theological falsehoods pose a threat to our moral integrity (2, 337d–383c). The critique of poetry in the *Republic* is the primary focus of this chapter. Sporadic reference will be made to other works, but there will be no attempt to produce a synthesis of Plato's views on poetry.[1] Since Plato is an implicit background or explicit source to most subsequent discussions of poetry, there will be opportunities to fill in some of the gaps in later chapters (especially, but not only, §5.1). Here we will take the opportunity to examine in some detail the philosophical critique of the poetic tradition in its most

[1] Good brief accounts of Plato on poetry: Asmis 1992; Ferrari 1989; Moss 2007. More extended treatments: Burnyeat 1999; Halliwell 2002: 1–147; Halliwell 2011: 155–207; Janaway 1995. Collections of papers: Moravcsik and Temko 1982; Destrée and Herrmann 2011; Boys-Stones and Haubold 2009 (focusing on Hesiod). Mason 2010 provides a short introduction to Plato; see further: Benson 2006; Kraut 1992; Fine 2008. Introductions to the *Republic*: Pappas 2003; Ferrari 2007. For a broader perspective on Plato's political philosophy (including *Laws*) see Schofield 2006.

sophisticated and radical form – a complex but (I shall contend) coherent argument about poetry, developed in the context of broader issues.

1 DOES PLATO MEAN WHAT HE SAYS?

To speak of Socrates' critique of poetry may give a misleading impression. There is not (as is sometimes carelessly supposed) a wholesale rejection of poetry as such. Socrates takes it for granted that poetry has a place in human life, and conducts a searching enquiry into which *kinds* of poetry can safely be retained. The outcome is radical, even so: Homer and tragedy are banned. But this proposal should not be taken out of context. Radicalism pervades Plato's responses to culture and society across the board. If Socrates is right, says an opponent in another dialogue, human life will be completely overturned (*Grg.* 481c); Socrates would not demur (*Crito* 49d). Existing societies are so comprehensively defective that they do not provide a starting-point for reform. A clean slate is needed. The existing civic order must be erased before constructive work begins: philosophers must come to power, and everyone over the age of ten must be sent out of the city into the countryside (*Rep.* 7, 540d–1b). 'This', as Socrates dryly acknowledges, 'is not very easy' (6, 501a).

The radicalism of Plato's proposals may prompt us to wonder whether he really means what he says. A prior question is: does he really say it? Here is how the *Republic* begins (1, 327a):

> I went down to the Piraeus yesterday with Glaucon, the son of Ariston, to offer my prayers to the goddess, but also because I wanted to see how they would manage the festival, this being the first time it was held.

The 'I' is not Plato, but Socrates. The *Republic* is a report of what happened when Socrates visited the Piraeus the previous day, and Socrates is the only speaker. What he reports is a conversation, and he tells us what he and various other people said in the course of the discussion. But Plato never speaks in his own voice: he says nothing on his own account about poetry, or about any of the other issues discussed in the *Republic*.[2]

Given the historical Socrates' significance to Plato, it is possible that his fictive counterpart serves as an authoritative spokesperson, to whose conclusions Plato is fully committed – though Socrates' elusive ironies and disclaimers of knowledge make him an unlikely candidate for such a role.

[2] Plato's use of the dialogue form: Kosman 1992; Frede 1992; Kahn 1998; Rowe 2006; McCabe 2008; Gill 2009.