

INTRODUCTION

A. N. Whitehead once remarked that the European philosophical tradition could be characterised as ‘a series of footnotes to Plato’.¹ The same might be said of the history of Western thinking about poetry and art. When P. banished poetry from the ideal state in *Republic* 10 (607d6–e2) he suggested, however equivocally, that if lovers of poetry could show that poetry is not only pleasurable, but also useful to civic society and to human life, he would be prepared to listen. Aristotle was not the only one to take up that challenge. From antiquity to the Italian Renaissance, from Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defence of poetry* (1595) to Shelley’s essay of the same name (1821), in twentieth-century writers as diverse as Jacques Derrida and Iris Murdoch, the potency of P.’s influence can be felt.²

The Greeks had no word to denote those activities that we now subsume under the term ‘art’. *Technē* covered anything from poetry, painting and sculpture to shoemaking, carpentry and shipbuilding, there being no linguistic or conceptual distinction in the Greek world, or in antiquity generally, between crafts and the ‘fine arts’. Moreover, art was not thought of as something that could be separated from morality. As Tolstoy put it, ‘the ancients had not that conception of beauty separated from goodness which forms the basis and aim of aesthetics in our time’.³ Indeed aesthetics as a distinct field of study goes back no further than the eighteenth century, when the German philosopher, Alexander Baumgarten, first coined the term

¹ *Process and reality* (New York 1930) 63.

² For P.’s influence on Aristotle’s *Poetics* see Halliwell (1986) 1–6, 19–27, 331–6; for the Neoplatonist defence of poetry against P.’s attack see Russell (1981) 65–6, 104–10; A. Sheppard, ‘Plato and the Neoplatonists’, in Baldwin and Hutton (1994) 12–18; for bibliography on Platonism in Renaissance poetics see nn. 59 and 60 below; on Sidney see pp. 26 and 31 n. 75; for Shelley see J. A. Notopoulos, *The Platonism of Shelley: a study of Platonism and the poetic mind* (Durham 1949) and below pp. 31–2. For the twentieth century see e.g. J. Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson (Chicago 1981); Murdoch (1977) and (1993); P. Conradi, ‘Platonism in Iris Murdoch’, in Baldwin and Hutton (1994) 330–42.

³ *What is art?*, trans. A. Maude (Oxford 1930) 91; cf. Murdoch (1977) 6–7, 12 where she notes that for P. ‘the aesthetic is the moral’.

with the publication of his *Aesthetica* in 1750. But in a very real sense the history of Western aesthetics begins with P.⁴ Many of the questions which we still debate today were first raised in P.'s work. What is poetry, and indeed art in general, and how does it operate? What is and should be the function of imaginative literature in society? Is it dangerous in that it encourages emotions and feelings which ought to be kept in check, or is it therapeutic in that it allows us to give vent to our emotions in a harmless way? Should there be censorship? Is literature (which now, of course, includes television and film) a form of escapism or does it deepen our insight into the nature of people and the world around us?

The extent of P.'s influence is all the more remarkable in that, unlike Aristotle, he never wrote a treatise on the subject of poetry. His views have to be extracted from a number of different dialogues, and his discussions of poetry are always embedded in some wider context; poetry is never treated as a subject in itself. Indeed to talk of P.'s 'view of poetry' is already to imply a systematisation of his thought which diminishes its richness. We cannot speak of a Platonic theory of poetry, but rather of a collection of texts in which various attitudes, images and myths about poetry are expressed.⁵ In the *Ion* and the *Phaedrus* poets are described in what appear to be terms of extravagant praise, yet in the *Republic* poets are categorised as at best worthless, at worst dangerous, and expelled from the ideal society. The very diversity of P.'s treatment of poetry has generated a range of responses quite unlike that provoked by any other author. Thus he has been seen as a puritan, a philistine and the enemy of poetry, indeed Nietzsche described him as 'the greatest enemy of art Europe has yet produced'.⁶ But he has also been hailed as the originator of the Renaissance conception of the divinity of poetry, and of the

⁴ See Schaper (1968), a thoughtful and perceptive study. The topic is also discussed by e.g. S. Halliwell, 'The importance of Plato and Aristotle for aesthetics', in *Proceedings of the Boston area colloquium in ancient philosophy* v (1989), edd. J. J. Cleary and D. C. Shartin, 321–57.

⁵ For a comprehensive survey see Vicaire (1960). The following general discussions are also useful: Else (1986) 3–64; Halliwell (1988) 3–16; Ferrari (1989) 92–148; Asmis (1992).

⁶ *Genealogy of morals*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York 1969) 3.25.

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Romantic myth of the artist. It would be impossible to cover every aspect of P.'s thinking about poetry within the confines of the present study. Instead I shall focus my discussion on the two great themes which dominate P.'s treatment of poetry: the idea of poetry as *mimesis*, and the concept of poetic inspiration.

1. *MIMESIS*

Mimesis is a protean term, whose precise connotations vary according to context, but broadly speaking *mimesis* and its cognates indicate a relation between something which is and something made to resemble it.⁷ Already before P. the *mimēisthai* word group covered a wide range which included vocal mimicry, dramatic enactment or impersonation, the imitation of behaviour in a more general sense (e.g. modelling oneself on someone else) and visual representation.⁸ P.'s own use of the terms is highly flexible: mimetic language is used not only of the arts of poetry, painting, music and dance, but also, for example, of the relationship between language and reality, and of that between the material world and its eternal paradigm; even the life of the philosopher is said to 'imitate' the forms.⁹ McKeon (1952)

⁷ For this definition see McKeon (1952) 152.

⁸ See e.g. Hom. *h. Ap.* 163, the earliest occurrence of the word group; Aesch. *Cho.* 564; Ar. *Thesm.* 156, 850, *Frogs* 109; Eur. *Ba.* 980; Thuc. 2.37; Eur. *Hipp.* 114, *El.* 1037; Aesch. fr. 78a7 Radt; Hdt. 2.78, 3.37; Eur. *Hel.* 74. These various meanings are not, of course, mutually exclusive. Pre-Platonic usages of the μιμῆισθαι word group are discussed by Else (1958) cf. (1986) 26, who discerns three main strands of meaning: (1) miming, that is the mimicking or impersonation of another as in a dramatic performance; (2) imitating or copying another's behaviour in a more general way; (3) making a visual replica of something as e.g. in a wooden image. See also Havelock (1963) 57–60. Nehamas (1982) 55–8 has some pertinent points to make, noting in particular that the μιμῆισθαι word group 'as it was traditionally applied to poetry, speaking, and dancing, meant primarily *acting like* someone else' (58). See also Halliwell (1986) 109–16 for a thorough and judicious discussion of the pre-Platonic evidence.

⁹ For μίμησις and poetry see e.g. *Rep.* 595b4–5, 597e6, 600e4–5; for painting *Rep.* 596c–e, *Crat.* 430b, *Soph.* 234b–c; for music and dance *Rep.* 399a–c, 400a, *Laws* 655d, 798d–799b, 816a. On language see *Crat.* 423b–424b; on the material world as an 'imitation' of the eternal see *Tim.* 39e, 48e, 50c; for the philosopher imitating the Forms see *Rep.* 500c. For further discussion of the subject of *mimesis* in general in P.'s work see McKeon (1952) and Halliwell (1986) 116–21.

150 draws attention to the scope of *mimesis* terminology in P.'s work, pointing out that though these words are defined in the course of the various dialogues, they do not have fixed or univocal meanings.

The notion of *mimesis* is first introduced in the *Republic* in connexion with literature at 392d5 in terms which suggest that what follows will not be entirely familiar to P.'s readers (see on 392d7–8). Socrates is considering the whole question of what kind of literature his putative guardians should study, and having considered the content of such literature, he then moves on to its form. Any story or poem, he says, narrates things past, present or future, and for the purposes it employs either *diegesis*, or *mimesis*, or a mixture of both. For example, when a poet speaks in his own person as Homer does at the beginning of the *Iliad*, Μῆνιν ἄειδε θεά κτλ., that is *diegesis*, which we might translate as 'pure narrative'. But when he speaks as if he were one of his characters, as, for example, when Homer speaks in the voice of the aged priest Chryses, addressing the Achaeans in the opening scene of the poem at lines 17–21, that is *mimesis*. On the basis of this distinction S. divides literature into three kinds: one kind uses *mimesis* alone, the obvious examples being tragedy and comedy; another, such as the dithyramb, consists entirely of narrative; a third kind, exemplified by Homer's poetry, uses a mixture of *diegesis* and *mimesis*, with the poet speaking sometimes in his own person, sometimes in that of his characters. The notion of *mimesis* is introduced here in the context of a discussion of *lexis*, but it rapidly becomes clear that more is at stake than verbal expression. For when someone speaks in the voice of another (whether poet or reciter) he makes himself like that person not just in voice, but also in character: he adopts his looks, his gestures and even his thoughts, so that in a sense he almost becomes that person (see on 393c5–6, 395c7–d3). *Mimesis* thus has profound effects on character.

S. expands on this theme a little later at 400c–403c when he summarises the aims of the first stage of the guardians' education in *mousike* in a passage which highlights the significance of imitation in general.¹⁰ Emphasising the paramount importance of environment for the training of character, S. says that if the young are surrounded by images of goodness and beauty they will absorb good-

¹⁰ Else (1986) 37–8. See also Gill (1985).

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ness into their souls like people living in healthy climes, where ‘the breeze brings health from salubrious regions’ (401c6–d1). It is therefore necessary to give orders, not only to poets, but also to all artists and craftsmen, that they should portray the image of goodness in their works and avoid everything that is ugly and bad (401b1–8). The implication of this passage is that poetry and art have a vital role to play in the education of the young, and indeed this is why S. takes such pains to discuss the content of primary education in the preceding section, laying down guidelines (τύποι) for poets to follow (376e–400b). It is clear, of course, that poets and artists will be subject to the dictates of the rulers, who will give them orders about what can and cannot be portrayed (401b cf. 398b1–3). Nevertheless the models of goodness which they produce will make a deep impression on the souls of the young, and train them to appreciate goodness wherever they find it.

In the light of all that is said here we would expect S. to advocate the virtues of poetic *mimesis* in his discussion of *lexis* at 392d5–398b4. But in fact he concludes (a) that potential guardians should imitate only good men (396c5–d3), and (b) that they should imitate as little as possible, using the mixed style exemplified by Homer, but with a small amount of *mimesis* (396e4–7, cf. 395c3–7). These views are not incompatible, but there is a certain ambivalence in P.’s attitude: if imitating a good man fosters goodness of character why restrict the amount of *mimesis* a young person can use? Why shouldn’t young guardians spend all their time impersonating good characters? P. seems to be caught between the view that *mimesis* is beneficial provided that its object is suitable, and the feeling that there is something potentially harmful about *mimesis* in itself.¹¹

The ambivalence deepens when S. returns to the subject of poetry in book 10 and says that they were right to have excluded mimetic poetry from their city (595a5). But in book 3 it was expressly stated that the austere poet who imitates the speech of a good man would be acceptable in a well governed state (398a8–b1).¹² Furthermore in

¹¹ See Annas (1981) 99. Havelock (1963) 11 (see also 22–35) draws attention to the ‘strong undercurrent of suspicion and dislike for the dramatic empathy as such’ which is evident in P.’s discussion of *mimesis* in book 3.

¹² For attempts to resolve this discrepancy see on 595a5.

the course of book 10 a more complex view of *mimesis* is developed with reference to the Platonic theory of Forms, according to which a metaphysical hierarchy is established, consisting of Forms, the sensible world, and imitations of the sensible world (595c7–597e10). Taking painting as the paradigm of *mimesis*, S. argues that the painter is like someone holding up a mirror (596d8–e6), who produces reflections of objects in the sensible world, which are themselves less real than the Forms which alone have true existence. Since poets are also imitators, they, like painters, are condemned to operate at the third level of reality, their products being nothing but worthless imitations of an imitation of reality (597e6–8, 600e4–5). The notion of *mimesis* developed here, which depends on the example of painting, seems quite different from that expounded in book 3 in the context of what kind of poetry the guardians ought to perform. There *mimesis* involved a deep identification on the part of the imitator with the object of his imitation, whereas now *mimesis* involves the notion of a counterfeit copy (see on 597e3–4). P. seems to oscillate between regarding the poet's *mimesis* as potentially beneficial (398a8–b1, cf. 401b1–3) and condemning it as trivial play (602b8). This ambivalence arises partly from the fact that the products of *mimesis* can be evaluated in two distinct ways, either in terms of the objects imitated (whether they are good or bad), or in terms of the quality of the imitation (how good the likeness is). As far as P. is concerned, existing poetry fails on both counts: poets imitate the wrong kind of behaviour and therefore corrupt the souls of their listeners (605c10–608b2); but they are also incapable of producing a true likeness of goodness and the other moral qualities because they do not know what goodness is (598d7–600e6). Hence Homer and his fellow poets are to be banished entirely from the ideal state. There might be room for poetry of a very restricted sort, provided that poets are prepared to follow the guidelines laid down for them by the rulers (398b2–3, 401b1–3 and see on 607a3–5) and imitate only what is good. But this is the death of poetry as we know it.

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P.'s view that poetry is a worthless imitation of an imitation of reality would seem at first sight to be incompatible with the picture of

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the poet as a god-like being who pours forth beautiful poetry when inspired by the Muses' power. And it is noticeable that, with one exception to which I shall return, P. keeps the ideas of *mimesis* and inspiration apart. P.'s descriptions of poetic inspiration occur over a long period of time, ranging from his earliest works to his latest,¹³ and there is considerable uniformity in what he says. Throughout P.'s work the mental state of the inspired poet is described in similar terms: the poet, when composing, is in a frenzy and out of his mind; he creates by divine dispensation, but not with knowledge. So much is certain. But critics are, and always have been, deeply divided over the question of how seriously we should take P.'s mythical account of the poet's divine inspiration.¹⁴

Greek poetry before P. abounds with allusions to the idea of poetic inspiration. From Homer onwards poets invoke the Muses' aid, calling on them, as daughters of Memory, to provide them with knowledge, to instil sweetness into their song, or to assist them generally in the composition and performance of their poems.¹⁵ Poetry is regularly portrayed as a divine gift, which the Muses bestow or teach,¹⁶ and a whole range of imagery is developed to express the relationship between the goddesses and their chosen protégés. For example, the poet is the messenger, servant or herald of the Muses, he rides in their chariot or culls his songs from their gardens and glades.¹⁷ But despite the poet's dependence on the Muse, it is never suggested that he is merely the unconscious instrument of the divine: poetry is presented both as a gift of the Muses and as a product of the poet's own invention.¹⁸ His gift may be inexplicable, but it is not irrational.

¹³ The most important texts are *Ion*, *passim*; *Ap.* 22a–c; *Men.* 99c–e; *Phdr.* 245; *Laws* 719c–d. See Appendix, pp. 235–8. For discussion of the topic see the authoritative article by Tigerstedt (1969).

¹⁴ See Tigerstedt (1969) 18–29 for a survey of interpretations of the dialogue.

¹⁵ See e.g. Hom. *Il.* 2.484–92; Hes. *Th.* 104; Alc. fr. 27; Ibyc. fr. 1. 23–6; Sol. fr. 17; Pi. *Nem.* 7.23–4, *Pae.* 6.50–8; Ar. *Ach.* 665–75, *Thesm.* 107–10. For further references, bibliography and discussion of pre-Platonic concepts of inspiration see Murray (1981); Verdenius (1983) 37–46; Nagy (1989) 24–9.

¹⁶ See e.g. Hom. *Od.* 8.44–5, 62–4, *h. Ap.* 440–2; Hes. *Th.* 22–34, *Op.* 661–2; Sol. fr. 440–2 and in general Sperduti (1950).

¹⁷ See e.g. Pi. *Ol.* 9.80–1, *Pae.* 6.6, fr. 150; Bacch. 5.14, 9.3, 13.230; Ar. *Frogs* 1300 and see on *Ion* 534c5–7.

¹⁸ See e.g. Hom. *Od.* 22.347–8; Pi. *Ol.* 3.4–6, 7.7–8 and Murray (1981) 96–7.

And hand in hand with the notion of inspiration goes the idea of poetry as a craft.¹⁹ Already in the *Odyssey* (17.382–5) the bard is described as a *demioergos*, a worker who is prized for his technical skill, and there are frequent references to the poet's expertise in early Greek poetry, expressed by terms such as *oida*, *epistamai*, *sophos* and *sophia*.²⁰ The increasing use of craft metaphors to describe the poet's activity from Pindar onwards is also indicative of the importance attached to the craft elements in poetic composition, and by the end of the fifth century we find the poet himself referred to as a *poietes* (maker), and his art as a *technē*.²¹ Thus in pre-Platonic literature poets are portrayed both as *sophoi*, 'wise men', who have access to knowledge through the inspiration of the Muses, and as skilled craftsmen.

Poetic inspiration is one of the major themes of P.'s *Ion*. The ostensible subject of the dialogue is the nature of the rhapsode's skill: why is it that Ion excels in speaking about Homer, but is at a loss as far as any other poets are concerned? The reason, S. claims, is that Ion's ability as a rhapsode depends not on *technē*, but on a divine force which emanates from the Muses (533d1–2). Just as a magnet attracts iron rings and induces in those rings the power to attract others, so the Muse inspires a chain of people possessed by divine enthusiasm, and the rhapsode is the middle link in that chain: first comes the poet, then the rhapsode, then the audience. This image of the magnet underlines the interconnexion between the various elements in the chain of poetic communication, but in what follows S. puts the emphasis increasingly on poets, and his own language becomes increasingly poetic. In the dazzling central speech of the dialogue (533e–534e) S. builds up a picture of the poet as a 'light, winged, holy creature', who cannot compose until he is out of his mind and possessed by the Muses' power. Beautiful poetry can only be produced when the poet is devoid of reason and filled with

¹⁹ See Harriott (1969) 92–104; Murray (1981) 98–9; Verdenius (1983) 20–4; Nagy (1989) 18–24.

²⁰ See e.g. Hom. *Od.* 11.368; Archil. fr. 1.2; Sol. 13.52; Theogn. 770, 772 and for further references Verdenius (1983) 21–2.

²¹ *Poietes* is first used of the poet at Hdt. 2.53; for *technē* of the poet's work see e.g. Ar. *Peace* 749, *Frogs* 762, 770, 780, 850, and see further Verdenius (1983) 23–4.

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divine enthusiasm, like a Corybantic dancer or a participant in the ecstatic rites of Dionysus. The god takes away the poet's senses and uses him, like a seer or a prophet, as a mouthpiece for the god's message so that the poems he utters are 'not human and of men, but divine and of the gods' (534e2-4).

Here P. takes over the traditional view that poets are inspired by the Muses, and revitalises it, partly by breathing new life into a cluster of metaphors about poets and poetry which, though not entirely dead, had nevertheless become conventional, partly by inventing some extraordinarily powerful images of his own, notably the poet as Corybant or Bacchant.²² The total effect of his highly skilful 'collage' (Velardi (1989) 57) is to provide an overwhelming image of irrationality, at least so far as the poetic process is concerned. The value of the end product is not overtly questioned in the *Ion*, and in so far as S. touches on the subject, he is apparently complimentary: poems are consistently described as *kala* ('fine') throughout the dialogue. But P. transforms the traditional notion of poetic inspiration by emphasising the passivity of the poet and the irrational nature of the poetic process. He differs most significantly from his predecessors in maintaining that inspiration is incompatible with *technē*.²³ As we have seen, the craft elements in poetry had always been important, and by the time P. was writing, the word *poiētes* had come to designate the poet *par excellence*. The poet might claim to be divinely inspired, but he was also a professional, a master of his *technē*, just like any other craftsman. P., however, is not interested in the mechanics of composition or in the technical aspects of the poet's work. He denies poets *technē* not because he regards them as shoddy craftsmen, but because they have no knowledge of what they say. The more irrational the poetic process, the less can the poet claim knowledge either of how he makes his poetry or of what his poetry says. Although in other dialogues P. occasionally implies that poets know about such things as diction, metre, rhythm and melody (see on *Rep.* 393d8) he always insists that they do not understand the subject-matter of their poetry, whether it concerns chariot-driving, medicine or virtue.

²² For details see on 534a1-d1.

²³ On the radical nature of P.'s views see Tigerstedt (1969) and (1970); Murray (1981) and (1992); Woodruff (1982).

P. constructs his account of poetic inspiration in the *Ion* ambiguously. By using the language of divine possession he maintains a link with the traditional concept of poetic inspiration, but turns that concept upside down. In the early Greek poets, the divine origin of poetry is used to guarantee its truth and quality,²⁴ and there is still an implication of that sort in S.'s words here, especially at 534d. Despite its eulogistic tone, however, the central speech of the *Ion* undermines the authority traditionally accorded to poets by depriving them of *technē*. And we cannot ignore its context: the image of the magnet at the beginning (533d3 cf. 535e7–9) emphasises the interconnexion between the various elements in the chain of poetic communication – Muse, poet, rhapsode and audience – so that it is difficult to separate our judgement on the activity of the rhapsode (which must surely be negative) from our judgement on the activity of the poet. Like Ion himself we are left in a state of *aporia*, unable to decide how to read S.'s apparent eulogy of poets.

The negative implications of P.'s idea of inspiration are also apparent in other dialogues. For example, in the *Apology* (22b–c, quoted on p. 235) S. professes to be dismayed to find that the poets whom he questioned were quite incapable of explaining the meaning of their poetry, and concludes that they compose not through wisdom (*sophia*) but by a kind of instinct and inspiration (φύσει τινὶ καὶ ἐνθουσιάζοντες) like seers. Again, as with the *Ion*, the value of the poetry itself is not necessarily diminished by the fact that poets cannot understand their own productions; but the status of poets is inevitably called into question.²⁵ The implication of this passage is that poets are neither *sophoi* in the traditional sense, nor craftsmen, a point which S. underlines by comparing them unfavourably with *cheirotechnai*, skilled craftsmen, who at least have technical expertise in relation to the crafts which they practise. P.'s reluctance to grant poets the status even of skilled craftsmen, both here and elsewhere in his work (see on *Rep.* 601d1–2), must surely be seen against the background of the increasing professionalism of the poet's vocation in contemporary society.

The same opposition of inspiration and *technē* occurs in the fa-

²⁴ See Murray (1981) 90–2; Verdenius (1983) 27–8.

²⁵ Cf. *Men.* 99c–e quoted on pp. 235–6.