Introduction

Tragedy has always fascinated philosophers. In what follows I attempt to provide an account of what, over the past two and a half millennia, they have had to say about it. What has fascinated above all is the paradoxical character of our enthusiasm for tragedy. Tragic drama portrays the destruction of individuals who are, if not always perfect, at least outstanding, the finest among us. It portrays, that is, *distressing* events, events which presumably give rise to the 'negative' emotion of distress. Yet our enthusiasm shows that there must be something beneficial, something 'positive', we derive from tragedy. Generally philosophers have believed that to outweigh the distress, the benefit must be very important indeed, so important as to render tragedy the highest form of literature, frequently of all art. Schelling coined the phrase 'tragic effect' to designate this benefit, and the question of just what it consists in will be the focal concern in the following chapters.

In the main, philosophers have given one of two kinds of answer to the question of the tragic effect. They have located it either on the level of sense and emotion or on the level of intellect and cognition. The tragic effect has been identified either as a special kind of (possibly bittersweet) *pleasure* – 'tragic pleasure', as I shall say – or else as the acquisition of some kind of *knowledge*. The two kinds of effect are not, of course, mutually exclusive and some philosophers, we shall see, have allowed 'the' tragic effect to embrace both kinds of effect.

To enquire into the effect, or effects, of tragedy is to ask about its goal, what Aristotle would call its *telos*, or 'final cause'. Such an

enquiry is, of course, intimately connected with an enquiry into what one might regard as tragedy's 'formal' cause, its form and content. And so philosophers of tragedy generally also address the question of what tragedy is, how it is to be distinguished from other literary forms. They become interested, for example, in the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy or in the necessity or otherwise of tragedy's exemplifying the so-called unities of action, time and place. This means that their interests sometimes overlap with those of dramaturgical theorists. The two disciplines should not, however, be confused with each other. As I shall briefly indicate at the beginning of Chapter 3, whereas philosophers of tragedy are focused on the tragic effect and are alive to its paradoxical character, dramaturgical theorists have historically paid little sustained attention to the goal of tragedy, focusing instead on the means of achieving it. Tacitly they have agreed with Horace that the goal of tragic drama, as with every other kind of drama, is simply 'applause', the pleasing of an audience. And typically they have assumed that there is nothing particularly problematic about the nature of such pleasure. Since this is a book about the philosophy of tragedy, there is a great deal of theorising about tragedy that it will not discuss.

No doubt there are some important philosophers of tragedy I have omitted. I considered, for instance, including Miguel de Unamuno but failed to make much headway with him. The book nonetheless aims to provide at least a relatively comprehensive survey of what Western philosophers have said about tragedy, beginning with Plato and ending with Žižek. And so it has something of the character of a textbook. With this in mind I have been relatively fulsome in citing secondary discussions of my target thinkers, intending to provide suggestions for 'further reading'. Yet the book is not really a textbook, not just a survey, for in the final chapter I attempt to use the critical engagement with my target philosophers of tragedy in order to arrive at some definite conclusions with respect to the questions that have concerned them.

1

Plato

CULTURE WARS IN FOURTH-CENTURY ATHENS

The philosophy of tragedy begins with Plato (c. 428–347 BCE). Specifically it begins with Plato's banning of tragic poetry, along with poetry of most other kinds, from the ideal state, the constitution of which he constructs in his most famous dialogue, the *Republic*. Before attending to his specific arguments for the ban, we need to attend to the motivation for this act of apparent barbarism.

Plato tells us pretty clearly what his motives are. He is, he says in the *Republic*'s Book X, prosecuting an 'ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry' (607b). In describing the quarrel as 'ancient' he is referring to the critiques of poetry made by some of his pre-Socratic predecessors (in spite of their being themselves, inter alia, poets). Xenophanes (c. 570–475 BCE), for example, complains that 'Homer and Hesiod ascribe to the gods whatever is infamy and reproach among men' (Fragment 11), while Heraclitus (c. 535–475 BCE) observes, maliciously, that '[b]eing a polymath does not teach understanding: else Hesiod would have had it' (Fragment 40).[1]

As we shall see, Plato expands on these objections and adds new ones of his own. But why did he consider it important to perpetuate the 'quarrel'? Partly because of the enormous prestige of the poets as repositories of ultimate wisdom concerning the proper conduct of life.

[1] See Kaufmann (1969), p. 3.

Homer, in particular, he tells us, was revered above all others as 'the poet who educated Greece' (*Republic* 607a) – a reverence, we shall see, Plato considers entirely unmerited. More important, however, is the fact that poetry, recitations of epic and lyric poetry together with the tragic festivals, constituted almost the totality of what we would now call 'the media'. In Greece, poetry performed what is now performed by radio, television, film, print media and the Internet combined. Poetry in ancient Greece was, among other things, popular culture. Although only thirty-three have survived in their entirety – likely the most frequently copied and therefore the most popular – literally tens of thousands of tragedies were composed for the tragic festivals. The 'big three' alone, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, wrote more than three hundred tragedies among them. In Athens somewhere between seventeen thousand and thirty thousand people – in other words, something approaching the totality of the citizenship – would attend the festival.[2] Plato's proposal to severely censor poetry, especially tragic poetry, was thus an expression of fear, fear of the power of 'the media'. Let us turn now to the details of his perpetuation of the 'ancient quarrel'.

PRELIMINARY SKIRMISHES

Plato's principal arguments for banning the poets occur in Book III, and even more importantly in Book X, of the *Republic*. Sprinkled throughout earlier dialogues, however, are regular criticisms of the poets which, while not amounting to arguments for a ban, seem to be designed to weaken the poets' standing, somewhat in the manner of picadors weakening the bull in preparation for the matador. The *Cratylus*, for instance, complains that it is in tragedy that the vast majority of 'myths and falsehoods' are preserved (408c), while the *Gorgias* complains that, like flute players, the writers of tragedies have no aim other than to gratify, that they give no thought to educating the audience or to refraining from saying anything 'corrupt' (501e–502b). (Plato has a certain point here. Though the judges of the tragic festivals, which were also competitions, were supposed to be independent and impartial, they could often be swayed by the

[2] See Nehamas (1988), p. 223.

huge audience, who, if they did not like a performance, would imitate and mock the actors, throw food at them and bang on their wooden benches. With this in mind, playwrights would sometimes distribute small gifts in an attempt to curry favour with their audience.)

THE UNRELIABILITY OF INSPIRATION

The most thoroughly developed of these preliminary arguments is what I shall call 'the unreliability-of-inspiration argument'. This argument first appears in an early dialogue, the *Apology* (22b–c), which probably means that it was first put forward by the historical Socrates himself. It is developed in greater detail in another early dialogue, the *Ion*. Poets, the *Ion* argues, 'like soothsayers and prophets', produce their works under inspiration. Poetry, that at least which impresses, is produced out of a state of 'Dionysian ecstasy' in which the poet is possessed by the gods, by the muses in particular. Divine possession bypasses his reason so that he is 'beside himself' (533d–535a).[3] What makes this argument puzzling, at least to the modern reader, is that while the idea of divine possession seems to enjoin respect and even reverence for the poet, the *Ion* clearly intends the remark as a criticism.[4] To see why it is a criticism, we need to see what he takes to be unflattering about the comparison with soothsayers and prophets.

The *Meno* deploys the same comparison as the basis for a criticism of statesmen such as Themistocles (the Athenian leader at the time of the war against the Persians). Such leaders, Plato claims, are like 'soothsayers and prophets' – and, again, 'poets' – in that 'though

[3] The Roman poet Horace points out in his *Ars Poetica* that Plato inherited this idea from Democritus, who, he notes, allowed only the 'mad' poets to enter 'Helicon, the home of the muses' (Horace [1995], p. 16).

[4] It is also at least initially puzzling to the reader of the *Phaedrus*, in which divine inspiration, 'heaven-sent madness', is said to be essential to good poetry (245a). This commonly leads to the suggestion that what Plato says about poets in the *Phaedrus* contradicts what he says in the *Ion*. But, in fact, this is not so. As we shall see, the underlying thought in the *Ion* is that the 'inspired' poets are unreliable as sources of *knowledge*. What the *Phaedrus* asserts is that 'inspiration' is necessary to poetry being *good poetry*. And these are consistent assertions: Plato's overall point seems to be that even good poetry is not a reliable source of knowledge. Since the discussion of poetry in the *Phaedrus* immediately precedes Socrates' own poetic myth of the soul's fall from and return to the 'rim of the heavens', this probably tells us something about the intended status of that myth.

they say many things when inspired', they have no 'knowledge' but only 'right opinion'. This is true even though many have good track records, are right in 'much that is of importance in what they say and do' (*Meno* 99b–d). Where, then, lies the problem? Why should we worry that they cannot explain their judgments, cannot support them with reasons, support which would elevate their 'right opinion' to the status of 'knowledge'? One problem is that statesmen who operate on an intuitive basis 'cannot make others like themselves because it is not knowledge which makes them what they are' (*Meno* 99b). Without an articulated theory of statecraft from which their correct judgments are derived, their gift for getting things right cannot be taught, cannot be passed on to others. And so it is of inferior value. The other problem with intuitive statesmen, the *Meno* seems to suggest, is that although they get things right 'when inspired', they can also get things disastrously wrong when not. Those who operate on the basis of what the Germans call *Fingerspitzengefühl* (literally, the 'feel of things in the tip of the fingers') rather than theory are liable to make bad 'judgment calls' when the muse deserts them. And the gods, as Shakespeare notes, are capricious.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato makes a similar point, not about politics, but about the related practice of rhetoric. Popular rhetoricians can often, certainly, achieve their goal of producing conviction in the minds of their audience, but their procedure does not amount to a *techne*, a disciplined craft or science. As the *Gorgias* puts it, even the most successful of the popular rhetoricians have, not a *techne*, but merely a 'knack' (462b). To transform a 'knack' into a genuine *techne*, the *Phaedrus* goes on to argue, rhetoric needs to be organised into a systematic body of knowledge that exhaustively classifies all types of personality (modern psychology attempts this with classifications such as 'introvert', 'extrovert', 'anal retentive' and 'oedipal'). With each personality type it then must correlate the type of rhetoric most likely to be successful with that kind of person. In other words, what transforms a 'knack' into a *techne* is, once again, theory, science. In order to really know *how* to do something – convince an audience or rule a state – one needs to possess a theory, to know *that* various propositions are true. As to why a knack is inferior to a *techne*, the answer, we must assume, is the same as before: knacks cannot be taught and are subject to 'off' days. (This claim that genuine 'knowing-how' must be

grounded in 'knowing-that' has been dubbed by one of the first of its modern critics, Gilbert Ryle, 'the intellectualist legend'.)[5]

Returning now to poetry, the problem with its being based on inspiration rather than a genuine *techne* must be that although, as their reputation has it, the poets perhaps do offer many, even deep, truths, like soothsayers and prophets they cannot be relied upon to do so consistently. Some of their deep-sounding utterances are liable to be arrant nonsense. And in any case, the 'knack' that the best of them perhaps have is one that cannot be taught and so cannot be passed on to others.

If we ask what links the unreliability and unteachability objections, the answer seems to be *control*: control of the natural and human environment. Since inspiration is fickle, the utterances of prophets and poets are unreliable. And even in the rare case where one of them is almost always right, their gift still cannot be communicated to others, which means that whatever control they facilitate is limited to their own time and place. What we need – whom we need to support and revere – is not prophecy and poetry but rather the sciences, at the apex of which stands philosophy. Only reason and scientific theory can produce genuine *techne*; only reason can provide us with the 'technology' to exert effective control over our environment.

Plato did not, of course, succeed in banning the poets. But it is true that, as Socrates was teaching and he writing, the great age of Greek tragedy was coming to an end. Nietzsche, as we shall see, claims that this was no mere coincidence. Rather, it was 'Socratism' that *caused* the 'death' of tragedy. What brought tragedy to an end was the faith shared by Socrates and Plato that, in principle, scientific reason can 'reach … down into the deepest abysses of being, and … is capable, not simply of understanding existence, but even of *correcting* it'.[6] Nietzsche suggests, in other words, four things: that Socrates and Plato saw control, 'correction', of the natural and human environment as a goal of

[5] Ryle (1949), pp. 30–1. Although the debt is not acknowledged, Ryle's critique of Plato is inspired to a significant degree by Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which Ryle had reviewed for the journal *Mind* in 1928, a year after its appearance. There is also evidence to suggest that Ryle's critique was influenced by Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. Both philosophers point to shaving as a knowing-how that lacks an underlying knowing-that.

[6] BT 15.

overriding importance; that they viewed the mytho-poetic thinking of their poet-predecessors as an ineffective way of achieving that end; that scientific thinking was the effective alternative; and finally that this rationalist view achieved dominance in the fourth century BCE, which brought about the demise of the tragic festival as a culturally important event. Our discussion of Plato's commitment to *techne* conceived in terms of the 'intellectualist legend' suggests that there is much substance to this view.

'THE POETS LIE TOO MUCH'

I turn now from Plato's undermining of the poets to the *Republic*'s arguments that they should actually be suppressed. I shall begin by discussing the argument that appears in Book III (377d–380c) – 'the power-of-role-models argument', I shall call it – before proceeding to the two principal arguments of Book X.

'Homer, Hesiod and other poets', Book III complains, 'tell lies', 'false stories', a claim echoed by Nietzsche (a former professor of Greek) in the quotation from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*[7] that provides the heading to this section. The poets tell lies, Plato claims, in particular about the gods – Hesiod's tale of Cronus's revenge on Uranus, for instance. (Uranus imprisoned Gaia's and his own youngest children in Tartarus, a dark place deep within the earth, which naturally upset their mother. And so she fashioned a sickle and asked her sons to castrate their father. Only Cronus, the youngest and most ambitious of the Titans, was willing to carry out the order, throwing Uranus's severed testicles into the sea.) Such stories, the power-of-role-models argument claims, have a bad effect on children, since a boy is effectively told that 'in committing the worst of crimes he is far from doing anything outrageous', that in dismembering an errant father, a son is 'only following the example of the first and greatest among the gods' (378b). Poetry is thus to be severely censored so that, further buttressed by the arguments of Book X, the conclusion is reached that only 'hymns to the gods and eulogies of good men' (607a) are allowed to be performed in the ideal state.[8]

[7] Z II 17.

[8] As Walter Benjamin points out (see p. 193 below), in the *Apology* and *Phaedo*'s account of Socrates' serene death, the martyrdom and death of a morally perfect individual,

One might be inclined to ask how Plato knows that the poets 'lie too much', why he thinks he has superior access to the truth about the (in this case pre-Olympian) gods than do the poets who lived three centuries before him. But he is, surely, not really claiming to possess such access – he admits at one point that the poets' tales are quite possibly 'not wholly destitute of truth' (377a). What he is really engaging in is religious reform. His real point (a tacit subscription to Feuerbach's thesis that gods are no more than human projections) is to insist upon moralising the concept of a god. Instead of being, as it were, ancestor figures possessed of all-too-human attributes, albeit on a grander scale, the gods, Plato insists, if they are to be counted as gods, must be good and the author only of what is good in human life. We must, he says, reject Aeschylus's claim that 'God plants guilt among men when he desires utterly to destroy a house' and insist instead that 'God is not the author of all things, but of the good alone' (380c). Particularly with the introduction of a monotheistic God, the *Timaeus*'s craftsman of the cosmos, Plato has effectively invented the Christian concept of the morally perfect, omni-benevolent (although not omni-powerful) divinity. What he really means is that the poets give the gods a 'bad image'. And that has a bad effect on individuals and thereby on society as a whole. Since gods and heroes are 'role models' for impressionable youth, in particular, bad gods produce bad characters.[9]

There can be little doubt that Plato is correct in claiming that glamorous figures in works of (for instance, graphic) art encourage spectators to imitate their actions. It is the basis of most advertising, and corporations are not known for spending money on advertising without good evidence that they are spending it effectively. There are eminently good reasons for keeping violence, horror and pornography out of the hands of children and, save for an attachment to free

Plato effectively provides a model of what tragedy *should*, in his view, be. That this is his intention is made virtually explicit in the *Laws*, in which he has the Athenian lawgiver say to a hypothetical group of tragedians, '[W]e ourselves are the authors of a tragedy, and that the finest and best we know how to make; at any rate, our entire state has been constructed so as to be a "representation" of the finest and noblest life – the very thing we maintain is most genuinely a tragedy. So we are poets like yourselves, composing in the same *genre*, and your competitors as artists and actors' (817b 1–9).

9 Plato also complains that the poets produce the same effect by showing good people coming to bad ends (see Chapter 2, p. 38).

speech which makes us put up with some of its consequences, out of the hands of adults too.

But are we really willing to consider the tragic poets (assuming they are included among the 'other poets' who 'lie' about the gods) to be on the same level as the purveyors of the pornography of sex and violence, as we must if we are to have any sympathy with their banishment? One obvious and relevant difference is that, while there is no such requirement in pornography, in Greek tragedy the 'flawed' hero almost invariably comes to a bad end, namely, death. In Book VIII of the *Laws*, a late dialogue, Plato seems to admit as much and to slightly weaken the *Republic*'s ban on tragic poetry. In support of the 'complete unanimity of opinion' concerning the morally 'revolting' quality of incest,[10] he observes that

> in the high seriousness of tragedy, too, when we see a Thyestes [who slept with his daughter] on the stage, or an Oedipus [who slept with his mother] or a Macareus, the clandestine lover of his sister [w]e watch these characters dying promptly by their own hand as a penalty for their crimes. (838c)

Greek tragedies are not, of course, simple morality tales, but as most of the philosophers to be discussed in the following chapters acknowledge, they possess a powerful ethical content. A further disanalogy between tragedy and the pornography of sex and violence is that in Greek tragedy the violence is almost always offstage (and sex entirely absent). One hears about it rather than sees it. It is, for instance, only through the chorus that we learn of Oedipus's blinding himself with the broaches torn from his dead mother/wife's body. There is, in short, a world of difference between directly and graphically portrayed sex and violence that is accompanied by not a hint of 'redeeming ethical value' and merely reported sex and violence that is accompanied by a high level of redeeming ethical value.

THE PAINTING ARGUMENT

I turn now to the two central arguments against the poets that occur in the *Republic*'s Book X. The first is designed to demolish the epistemic

[10] A dissenting voice is Richard Wagner's. In *Die Walküre*, the knowingly committed incest between the siblings, indeed twins, Sigmund and Sieglinde that gives birth to Siegfried is treated as true love.