Mimesis, Matthew Potolsky, New York: Routledge 2006

INTRODUCTION
Approaching Mimesis

Mimesis is among the oldest terms in literary and artistic theory, and it is certainly among the most fundamental. It so defines our way of thinking about art, literature and representation more generally that we rely on the concept even if we have never heard of it or do not know its history. Most often (but inadequately) translated from the Greek as 'imitation', mimesis describes the relationship between artistic images and reality: art is a copy of the real. But this definition hardly accounts for the scope and significance of the idea. Mimesis describes things, such as artworks, as well as actions, such as imitating another person. Mimesis can be said to imitate a dizzying array of originals: nature, truth, beauty, mannerisms, actions, situations, examples, ideas. The word has been used to describe the imitative relationship between art and life, as well as the relationship between a master and a disciple, an artwork and its audience, and the material world and a rational order of ideas. Mimesis takes on different guises in different historical contexts, masquerading under a variety of related terms and translations: emulation, mimicry, dissimulation, doubling, theatricality, realism, identification, correspondence, depiction, verisimilitude, resemblance. No one translation, and no one interpretation, is sufficient to encompass its complexity and

the tradition of commentary it has inspired. Nor can any one translation account for the range of attitudes mimesis evokes. Mimesis is always double, at once good and bad, natural and unnatural, necessary and dispensable. It is the sincerest form of flattery as well as the trade of pirates and plagiarists, the signal behaviour of great artists as well as apes, parrots and children.

The many meanings, attitudes and metaphors that mimesis elicits demonstrate its overriding significance to Western thought. Mimesis has been a recurrent, even obsessive, concern for artists and philosophers for thousands of years. There are few major discussions of art that do not engage the concept at least obliquely. Not all art is, strictly speaking, mimetic, but the very concept of art, for Western culture at least, is inconceivable without the theory of mimesis. For the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, who introduced the term into literary theory over two thousand years ago in his dialogue the *Republic*, art 'merely' imitates something real. It is an illusion, he argues, and thus needs to be distinguished from truth and nature. It is no exaggeration to say that the entire history of literary theory has turned upon challenges to, and modifications or defences of, this definition. As the twentieth-century French philosopher Jacques Derrida has written, 'the whole history of the interpretation of the arts of letters has moved and been transformed within the diverse logical possibilities opened up by the concept of *mimesis*' (1981: 187). Without a knowledge of mimesis, one simply cannot understand Western theories of artistic representation – or even realize that they are theories rather than facts of nature.

But mimesis has always been more than a theory of art and images. From its very origins in Greek thought, mimesis connected ideas about artistic representation to more general claims about human social behaviour, and to the ways in which we know and interact with others and with our environment. More recently, it has informed research in psychology, anthropology, educational theory, feminism, post-colonial studies, political theory, and even neo-Darwinian biological speculation, as well as literary and artistic theory. The word mimesis originally referred to the physical act of miming or mimicking something. Plato and his student Aristotle carried this common human behaviour over to the realm of artistic production: art imitates the world much as people imitate each other. The ability to create and be moved by works of art,

they suggest, is an essential part of what it means to be human. Their argument underlies many familiar ideas about art and representation. Take, for example, the claim that great art conveys universal truths. We commonly believe that art, unlike laws, rituals or social structures, is not limited in its value or significance to a particular age or culture, and that it speaks to a transcendent human nature. Or take the equally familiar idea that representations have irresistible effects on human behaviour. Although we know that books, movies and video games are not 'real', we nevertheless believe that they have a profound influence on young viewers and readers in particular. Contemporary psychologists call this the 'Werther effect', after a novella by the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), which is said to have led many readers to imitate the suicide of its tragic young hero. Recent experiments, however, have demonstrated that children are much better able to imitate live actions than those they see on television (see Hayne *et al.*, 2003). Adults also tend to imitate children as much as children imitate adults. These facts should be obvious, yet the ancient Greek idea that mimesis strikes at and speaks to something deep within human nature continues to shape our everyday beliefs about and practical relationships to art and literature.

The impossibility of disentangling the aesthetic, social and psychological meanings of mimesis is a recurrent crux in the history of literary and artistic theory. As the classics scholar Stephen Halliwell has noted, Western thought has historically been divided between two fundamental ideas about art that come from the combined approaches of Plato and Aristotle. The first idea imagines that art reflects the world as it is, that it copies a material reality outside the work. The second idea defines art as a self-contained 'heterocosm' that simulates a familiar world, and in effect copies our ways of knowing and understanding things (Halliwell, 2002: 5). These ideas entail significantly different assumptions about the relationship between art and human nature, in particular, about whether mimesis has its roots in nature and objective reality or in culture and custom. According to the first idea, mimesis gives a more or less accurate rendering of what is, and thus depends for its production and reception on the reality of the material world and the unchanging operations of the human eye or ear. So long as we can perceive the world as it really is, we should be able to discern whether a

work accurately imitates reality. According to the second idea, however, mimesis need not reproduce what actually is, only give a persuasive, or 'lifelike', simulation of it. Because the effectiveness of this simulation depends in large part upon our particular beliefs about and ways of knowing the world, it is inextricably bound up with mind and culture. If the first idea is true, art is like a mirror turned to the world. If the second idea is true, it is like a mirror implicitly turned to the spectator and his or her beliefs. In neither case, however, can we think about mimesis without some reference to human psychology or culture.

As we shall find, the first idea about mimesis is often asserted but is very difficult to demonstrate, particularly for literary works, which cannot literally 'mirror' anything. The most interesting debates in the history of mimesis concern the second idea. For Aristotle, who first proposed this idea, mimesis is effective if it resonates with basic cognitive operations. Art appeals to reason, specifically to our inherent sense of what is probable or necessary, and thus should be comprehensible across cultures and historical periods. But recent theorists have pushed Aristotle's suggestion that art simulates the world much further, arguing that mimetic artworks appeal only to our conventional beliefs about reality. The word convention describes a customary and usually (but not necessarily) unspoken rule or agreement that guides social life or artistic production. Conventions are collective beliefs that over time or by force of habit gain the status of objective facts. It is conventional, for instance, for students to raise their hands if they want to ask or answer a question in class, much as it is conventional for a sonnet to concern love, and for landscape paintings to exclude prominent human figures. There is nothing inevitable about these conventions, but at the same time we never think to question them. They comprise a kind of 'second nature' within culture.

According to conventionalist accounts of mimesis, artist and audience share a set of conventions so familiar that neither side recognizes that it is trafficking in conventions rather describing objective reality. The mimetic effects of the artwork are produced by a proper 'match' between the work and the expectations of its audience. Fidelity to convention, not fidelity to nature, is the source of mimesis. The conventionalist account makes mimesis radically dependent on the social and historical context in which a work is produced and received. Different

cultures have different ways of describing reality, and different historical periods are dominated by different conventions, so a work that 'matches' the expectations of one culture or historical period might seem strange or artificial for another. Conventionalist accounts of mimesis are common in debates about the nature of artistic realism, the subject of chapter 5, but I shall also stress the extent to which other forms of mimesis also rely for their effect on a combination of social and artistic conventions. For example, mimesis in the theatre, the subject of chapter 4, depends just as much on the conventional expectation that audience members sit silently and treat the stage as if it were a separate world as it does on the actor's ability to feign a character. If the audience members insisted on conversing with the actor or walking up on stage during the performance, then the theatrical illusion would be difficult to sustain. We shall also find, however, that some of the most powerful recent discussions of mimesis, informed by psychology, anthropology and evolutionary biology, explain conventions as only one aspect of a more primal mimetic drive in human beings that transcends cultural and historical differences. Seen from this perspective, following a convention is just another form of imitation.

Despite its centrality to the history of theory, or perhaps because of it, the word mimesis has led a rather uneventful intellectual life. It is, of course, a key term for literary and artistic theory. But simply tracing out the various uses of the word itself over the history of criticism would not be especially illuminating. The theory of mimesis remains so tied to its origins in the works of Plato and Aristotle that few thinkers before the twentieth century sought to redefine or rethink it in any substantial way. The term is monolithic, an overarching concept that theorists are compelled to accept or reject, but do not feel free to decisively transform. An article on mimesis from the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* summarizes the eighteenth-century attitude toward the topic in these terms: 'The idea of imitation having been thoroughly discussed and analysed, nothing much was left to be done' (Tatarkiewicz, 1973–4: 3, 229). A similar sense of belatedness and inevitability marks the entire history of mimesis, despite the fact that much was, and has continued to be, done with the idea.

This does not mean, however, that mimesis lacks a significant history, or that it has not taken distinct forms in different cultural contexts. True

to its definition, mimesis is an excellent mime, changing its name and interpretive scope to suit each new environment. For this reason, I will treat mimesis not as a single coherent theory organized around a clearly defined key term, but as what the German scholars Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf call a 'thematic complex' (1995: 309). The theory of mimesis comprises a constellation of philosophical problems, familiar images and metaphors, conceptual oppositions and archetypal human relationships that are bound together by the influential writings and cultural authority of Plato and Aristotle. My aim in this book is to catalogue the elements of this thematic complex, trace out their interrelations and define their uses at key historical moments. The theory of mimesis develops out of a series of returns to the Greek context. The concept shifts and changes with each return and in each of the philosophical and cultural contexts in which it arises. This history is itself mimetic, based on changing relationships between the 'original' and its myriad 'copies', between the Greek masters and their devoted or rebellious disciples. At no point, however, does it go wholly beyond the framework Plato and Aristotle established, despite repeated claims to the contrary by theorists.

The mimetic quality of the history of mimesis poses a conceptual problem. Since all historical writing relies on mimetic techniques such as narration, example and illustration, a history of mimesis risks becoming hopelessly entangled in the story it tells. 'The fact that mimesis cannot be represented without the use of mimetic processes', Gebauer and Wulf comment, 'poses the fundamental problem of theory formation in reference to our object. What is the relation between the representational and the represented world?' (1995: 21). With this question in mind, I have combined various approaches to the thematic complex of mimesis that together will provide a concise 'portrait' of the subject. Like the theory it follows, the book unfolds through a series of returns to the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Rather than telling a single linear narrative, I have presented several overlapping but relatively autonomous historical narratives, each structured by one of four key themes common in discussions of mimesis since antiquity: the imitation of role models; theatre and theatricality; the idea of realism; and the foundation of mimesis in human behaviour. My discussion of these themes centres on different historical periods, but they are not unique

to any one period. In constructing this highly intricate history, I have looked to works spanning nearly twenty-five centuries and drawn from many disciplines: art theory, literature, philosophy, theatre history, psychology, sociology and anthropology. My ultimate aim is less to define mimesis itself than to document the many and often conflicting ways in which artists and philosophers from Plato to the present have tried to define it.

The book opens with two chapters on the origins of the theory of mimesis in the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Beginning with a discussion of the word's etymology and early usage, these chapters reconstruct the definition of mimesis in Plato's *Republic* (chapter 1) and in Aristotle's *Poetics* (chapter 2), and describe the cultural and political contexts in which the concept develops. Both philosophers distinguish mimesis from reality, but they take very different approaches to its nature and effects. Whereas Plato regards mimesis as a dangerous and potentially corrupting imitation of reality, Aristotle treats it as a foundational aspect of human nature, with its own internal rules and proper effects. And whereas Plato associates mimesis with violence, extreme emotions and the irrational, Aristotle regards it as a rational and fully valid practice. These two positions define the contours of the debate over mimesis in Western culture, and continue to inform discussions over the value of art.

The next three chapters of the book turn to an exposition of three major thematic elements that have shaped discussions of mimesis, and the social and artistic conventions commonly associated with them. Chapter 3 looks at the role of rhetorical imitation, that is, the imitation of exemplars and role models, in ancient Roman and Renaissance thought. Beginning with the eighteenth-century English poet Alexander Pope's suggestion that imitating Homer is no different from imitating nature, the chapter considers how this notion of mimesis, in the guise of the Latin word *imitatio*, comes to supplement the Greek focus on art as an imitation of nature with theories about the way artists should imitate one another. *Imitatio* defines mimesis in terms of tradition, convention and example. The chapter traces this interpretation of mimesis from its origins in Plato and Aristotle to its centrality for ancient Roman writers such as Horace, Seneca, Virgil and Longinus, and then to Renaissance figures in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century

Europe, such as Petrarch, Erasmus and Sir Philip Sidney, who self-consciously imitated the Romans. The chapter concludes with an account of the decline of *imitatio*, and the origins of our current notions of originality, in early Romantic thought at the end of the eighteenth century. For the Romantics, *imitatio* is merely conventional, and cannot be the activity of true genius.

Chapter 4 focuses on another thematic version of mimesis: theatre and the theatrical. Where *imitatio* frames mimesis as a relationship between the poet and his or her role models, theatre foregrounds the relationship between art and its audience. Theatre greatly complicates traditional models of mimesis based on the examples of art and poetry, since it is grounded on the relationship between spectacle and spectator, and not on any single material 'quality' of theatrical artwork itself. Theatre is a way of seeing and acting, governed by social and artistic conventions, and not a singular thing. The chapter begins by tracing the origins of this idea of theatre from the early Latin church father Saint Augustine, who wrote in the fourth century CE, to current theorists of theatre and performance such as Richard Schechner and Josette Féral. I then turn to the development of the so-called *theatrum mundi* metaphor, which imagines the world itself as a kind of theatre. This section focuses on a reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a veritable compendium of attitudes toward theatrical mimesis. The chapter then discusses modern ideas about actors, acting and the theatricality of social and political life, moving from the eighteenth-century French philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot to twentieth-century theorists such as the German playwright Bertolt Brecht and the American sociologist Erving Goffman.

Chapter 5 looks at debates over the nature of literary and pictorial realism and, more broadly, at the way mimesis defines the relationship between art and the world. What makes a work of art seem real to us, and why is realism so often considered the ideal for artistic representation? The chapter addresses these questions by returning to the two historical poles for understanding mimesis I introduced above: art as a mirror and art as a simulation. I trace these contrasting attitudes towards realism from ancient Greece to the development of linear perspective in fifteenth-century painting, and then to the rise of nineteenth-century novelistic realism and its two most important twentieth-century critics,

Erich Auerbach and Georg Lukács. The final section of the chapter looks at some varieties of anti-realism. Critics of realism, from the late nineteenth-century writer Oscar Wilde to the twentieth-century French critic Roland Barthes, suggest that art impoverishes itself, or deceives its audience, if it seeks only to depict the world or reflect the prevailing conventions of its age.

The last two chapters of the book focus on twentieth-century theories of mimesis and, in particular, on recent accounts of the relationship between mimesis and human nature. For many twentieth-century figures, mimesis is a primary human activity, not a secondary and derivative repetition of something else. These figures seek to extend the theory of mimesis beyond art and representation to questions of identity, desire and language. While they often critique Plato, the theories in fact revive the ancient association of mimesis and human behaviour that motivated Plato and Aristotle. Chapter 6 considers the importance of imitation to the origins and development of identity. The chapter begins with the work of the late nineteenth-century sociologist Gabriel Tarde, who saw all social behaviour as forms of imitation, and then looks at the notion of 'identification' in the thought of the influential twentieth-century psychoanalysts Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, as well as among contemporary theorists of race and gender who both draw upon and greatly complicate this notion. Identification, for Freud, is a form of unconscious imitation, in which we model ourselves upon another person. Lacan and other theorists point to the ways in which Freud's theory highlights the social origins of individual identity. They argue that 'natural' gendered behaviours or racial differences are not expressions of an inner essence but effects of imitated conventions.

The final chapter considers the role of mimesis in twentieth-century theories of culture. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of mimetic themes in the writings of Rousseau, and the nineteenth-century German social theorist Karl Marx. Both Rousseau and Marx suggest that society is governed by forms of mimesis, although they disagree over whether the imitation is conscious or unwitting. I then turn to late nineteenth-century anthropology, which commonly drew upon the traditional language of mimesis to explain pre-modern ideas about magic and the nature of images. For intellectuals of the next generation, this theory of 'sympathetic magic' offered new ways of thinking

about mimesis in modern society as well. I look first at a group of theories from the 1930s and 1940s, proposed by Walter Benjamin, Roger Caillois and Theodor Adorno, that cast mimesis as a foundational human tendency and a distinct way of knowing the world. The chapter then turns to the French literary critic René Girard's theory of mimetic desire, first developed in the 1960s, which suggests that all of our wants are driven by imitation of others and not by inherent needs. The chapter concludes with an account of the concept of the simulacrum developed by French theorists of the 1960s and 1970s. The simulacrum, a copy without a single original, stretches the Platonic understanding of mimesis to its limits, and offers a new means of analysing the 'magical' effects of modern media culture.

My conclusion moves from the psychological and anthropological account of mimesis in the last two chapters of the book to a brief discussion of the recently developed field of 'memetics'. Drawing upon genetics and evolutionary biology, memetics tries to understand the spread of ideas according to the model of Darwinian evolution. Just as sexual reproduction spreads genes, so acts of imitation spread what theorists call memes. This theory is only in its infancy, but it has become a controversial topic and constitutes the latest addition to the thematic complex of mimesis.

Given the concise nature of this book, and the great complexity of the theory I discuss, my account of mimesis might usefully be seen as a series of snapshots (the metaphor is inevitably mimetic) that will cumulatively provide readers with a framework, a family album as it were, for understanding mimesis. There are many other potential snapshots that one might take from the long history of the concept. Readers might go on to explore the crucial role mimesis plays in Christian thought, for example, or the ways in which post-colonial theorists have illuminated the refashioning of Western ideas about mimesis by peoples subjected to Western imperialism. The concept of imitation is also important to film theory and to the Marxist concept of ideology, and it arises as well in a wide variety of scientific fields, from experimental psychology to cognitive science, and even robotics. The list of suggested readings at the end of this book offers some additional ways into the thematic complex of mimesis. This complex, as we shall find, is remarkably rich. In fact, the theory of mimesis might be said to have

the paradoxical status of the map in the 1935 fable by the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, 'On Exactitude in Science' (1998). This map is so detailed that it exactly covers the territory it surveys, and soon becomes all but indistinguishable from it. The theory of mimesis has so woven itself into the texture of Western thinking about representation that the first step in understanding the concept is recognizing that it is a concept, a map, as it were, of the relationship between art and nature, and not a perennial feature of the landscape.

PART ONE

Foundations

1

PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

THE INVENTION OF THE IMAGE

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato provided the first and unquestionably the most influential account of mimesis. Although he refers to mimesis at many points in his career, the most important discussion of the topic comes in his dialogue the *Republic*, a wide-ranging work of political, ethical and literary theory that was probably written around 380 BCE. Plato does not simply comment upon an existing notion of mimesis in this dialogue but radically redefines art as essentially mimetic, as a representation of something else. This notion is so fundamental to the way we understand art that it is no exaggeration to claim that art itself, as a distinct human product, is a Platonic invention. Plato's theory of mimesis is very complicated, but is made even more so by the fact that, in this dialogue as elsewhere in his works, Plato speaks through the figure of his deceased teacher Socrates, so we are never certain whether any given utterance should be taken seriously or ironically. Nevertheless, the effect of this theory is so profound that no discussion of art and representation can avoid some engagement with Plato's definition. To this extent, the history of literary and artistic theory begins with Plato's account of mimesis.

The word mimesis can be traced to the fifth century BCE, but it is rare before Plato adopted it in the following century, and its specific meanings remain the subject of scholarly dispute. Mimesis derives from the root *mimos*, a noun designating both a person who imitates (compare the English word 'mime') and a specific genre of performance based on the imitation of stereotypical character traits. Very little is known about these performances. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle mentions 'the mimes of Sophron and Xenarchus' as a form of 'imitation by means of language alone' (1951: 9). Other scattered references occur in Greek writing, but there are no surviving examples of these performances. Some scholars have claimed they were religious rituals, but it is now generally accepted that Aristotle refers to a Sicilian dramatic genre in which actors would depict scenes from the lives of commoners (Else, 1958: 76). While it is difficult to discern a clear development in meaning, early uses of mimesis and related words refer chiefly to the physical mimicry of living beings by bodily gesture or voice, and only more rarely to paintings or statues. Yet even in its earliest uses, mimesis never simply meant imitation. From the very beginning it described many forms of similarity or equivalence, from visual resemblance to behavioural emulation and the metaphysical correspondence between real and ideal worlds (Halliwell, 2002: 15).

As the French classical scholar Jean-Pierre Vernant has argued, Plato's use of the word mimesis marks a crucial turning point in the history of Greek ideas about art: the emergence of a recognizably modern notion of the image (*eidolon*). Prior to Plato, Vernant notes, Greek culture regarded images as an actualization or 'presentification' of what they represent. Archaic statues of gods, for example, were understood not simply as illusionistic depictions of a deity but as an actual revelation of a divinity that would otherwise be invisible (Vernant, 1991: 153–5). Plato transforms mimesis into a far-reaching technical concept that defines the representational arts as such. It is, Vernant suggests, 'the first general theory of imitation' in any Western culture (1991: 180). This theory is hardly neutral in its aim or effect, for Plato's innovation fundamentally devalues the image. Where archaic Greek thought regarded images as embodiments, Plato classes the image with a group of behaviours and phenomena that had previously been understood as distinct. Miming, emulation, pictures, mirrors, shadows,

echoes, dreams, reflections and even footprints are henceforth regarded as 'semblances'. They are grouped together in their difference from, but resemblance to, real objects (Vernant, 1991: 166). The effect of this transformation is radical, redefining art as mere appearance, not a real thing. Neither craft nor creation, it is now an image or imitation of something else. Plato's definition at once makes and unmakes art, defining it as a recognizable category of human action, and yet draining it of any independent reality.

POETRY AND CENSORSHIP: BOOKS TWO AND THREE

Plato approaches mimesis in two contexts in the *Republic*: first in books two and three, and then in book ten. In neither context does Plato explicitly set out to define the arts. Rather, the question of mimesis emerges from the discussion of broader topics: political organization, education, the ideal of justice and the nature of philosophical knowledge. But mimesis is never simply an aesthetic category. Instead, it is posed as a potential threat to the ideals of justice and reason. In a turn of argument that will inform almost every theory we will encounter in this book, Plato ties mimesis to much broader questions of human nature and political life. These associations arise from the argumentative context in which Plato introduces his theory. Towards the beginning of the dialogue, Plato's speaker Socrates proposes constructing a city as a way of more effectively discerning the constitution of the human soul. Much as a just city should be governed by its wisest citizens (the philosophers), so the just soul should be governed by its best part (reason). This city will allow Socrates to argue for the ideal of reason on a larger canvas than the individual life. Mimesis will be introduced in the course of this discussion of the city, and so becomes a microcosm for the problems of political and ethical theory that Socrates takes up.

Socrates begins by imagining a city in which each individual performs one task in accordance with his or her nature, and for the good of the collective. There is a farmer, a weaver, a carpenter, and so forth. Each focuses on his or her proper task and does not try to do anything else. Even when this first city expands to encompass trade and wage labour, what scholars have termed Socrates' 'principle of specialization' remains intact. But Socrates' auditors believe that the citizens of this city could

not do without certain pleasures and would soon come to reject the frugal life Socrates proposes. So in place of his 'healthy' city Socrates begins to describe what he calls a 'feverish city' (Plato, 1991: 49). It is here that the word mimesis makes its debut in the dialogue. This unhealthy city, Socrates suggests, will need luxuries along with its basic functions. Chief among these luxuries is mimesis:

> Then the city must be made bigger again. This healthy one isn't adequate any more, but must already be gorged with a bulky mass of things, which are not in cities because of necessity – all the hunters and imitators, many concerned with figures and colors, many with music; and the poets and their helpers, rhapsodes, actors, choral dancers, contractors and craftsmen of all sorts of equipment, for feminine adornment as well as other things.
>
> (Plato, 1991: 50)

This list associates art and mimesis with superfluity, effeminacy, violence, theatricality and social hierarchy. Arriving along with hunters, workers, actors and the makers of women's adornments, mimesis is defined as secondary and unhealthy. It is a luxury, not a necessity. Even before he formally introduces his definition of art, then, Plato separates mimesis from the real, the rational and the essential, and equates it with pleasure and emotion rather than truth, reason and the necessities of life.

The first discussion of artistic mimesis as such comes somewhat later in book two. Having set out the basic structure of his city, Socrates considers those who will defend its citizens, the guardians. Here again, the account of mimesis arises from a discussion of politics and conduct. Socrates and his auditors worry that those individuals best suited to protect the city from external threats might themselves threaten the populace, since the aggression they properly turn outward can also be turned inward and threaten the city itself. For this reason, Socrates outlines a course of education for the guardians. It is often said that Plato simply opposes poetry, but Socrates in fact advocates the use of stories in education. Noting that young children are easily moulded and readily assimilate themselves to 'the model whose stamp anyone wishes to give' them, he argues that the guardians can be shaped ethically by the stories they hear (Plato, 1991: 54). Socrates imagines this shaping quite literally.

He compares it to the way gymnastics shapes the body, and suggests that mothers and nurses can shape the souls of children with tales in much the same way that they shape their bodies by massaging them as infants. While gymnastics and massage give the child a beautiful form, stories give them a beautiful soul. Later in the dialogue, Socrates describes this beauty as a kind of ethical 'grace'. The properly trained guardian will act intuitively in the interest of justice, just as a wrestler's body moves intuitively in the midst of a match.

Stories are central to this training, but they must be used carefully. Inaugurating a line of argument that we still encounter in discussions of the influence of television and movie violence on young viewers, Socrates claims that artistic imitation inevitably begets behavioural imitation. Telling stories to young children will produce imitations of the good or bad actions that the story represents. Socrates makes this point explicitly in book three: 'Or haven't you observed that imitations, if they are practiced continually from youth onwards, become established as habits and nature, in body and sounds and in thought?' (Plato, 1991: 74). The initial 'stamp', whether good or bad, repeats itself in the conduct of the child throughout life. For this reason, Socrates suggests, 'we must supervise the makers of tales' to ensure that the guardians are stamped with the right behaviours. The rulers of the city will have to 'persuade nurses and mothers' to tell the young only 'the approved tales' (Plato, 1991: 55).

Socrates wants to control both the subject of the tales, and the way (and by whom) they are told. The guardians, he claims, should be prevented from hearing 'untrue' stories about the gods. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has noted, every story Socrates would censor describes acts of 'depropriation': violence, adultery, political usurpation, shape-changing, trickery, madness (1998: 130). The first story he excludes from the education of the guardians concerns strife within the divine family: the epic poet Hesiod's tale of how Uranus tried to prevent the birth of his son Chronos, who in revenge castrated his father (Plato, 1991: 55). Above all, Socrates notes:

> it mustn't be said that gods make war on gods, and plot against them, and have battles with them . . . provided that those who are going to

> guard the city for us must consider it most shameful to be easily angry with one another.
>
> (Plato, 1991: 56)

In book three, Socrates continues his list of prohibited stories and behaviours. To encourage manliness and bravery among the guardians, Socrates forbids stories about the torments of the underworld, any depictions of heroes lamenting their fate, laughing uncontrollably, disobeying their superiors or being immoderate in their desires for sex, food or money. Following the principle that imitation begets imitation, he wants to prevent the guardians from repeating any activities that would be unbecoming of the defenders of a city. Even though Socrates gives stories an important place in the education of the young, then, he follows his initial implication that mimesis is excessive, unnatural and false. Indeed, mimesis is an effective educator precisely because it is false. Its power to circumvent reason turns ethical training into a matter of automatic and unthinking imitation rather than rational choice. It acts like a drug, Socrates suggests, that is useful when administered correctly, but dangerous when given indiscriminately (Plato, 1991: 60).

Socrates extends his account of the ethical influence of mimesis on its audience to the effects of literary style on the performer. Like their content, the form of stories shapes the souls of those exposed to it. This is true both of children and adults, as Socrates subtly broadens his account of mimesis from the training of the young to a generalized psychology of artistic response. Socrates divides narration into three types: simple, mimetic and mixed. In simple narration, the poet speaks in his or her own voice, telling a story without taking on the role of any of the characters. This is the style of historical narrative. In mimetic narration, by contrast, the narrator imitates the character in voice or gesture, as in a theatrical performance: 'he gives a speech as though he were someone else' (Plato, 1991: 71). Mixed narration, the main style of epic, and, as many commentators have noted, of Platonic dialogue, combines the two methods. At times the poet narrates, and at times he or she mimics the voice of a character. It is important to note that ancient Greek poetry was spoken, usually by travelling performers called rhapsodes, who would recite or act out scenes from Homeric epics and other works. Literate individuals would read poetry out loud even when

alone. So when Socrates defines the different types of narration, he has in mind a performance rather than a strictly written literary style. He pictures the rhapsode or the reader 'becoming' the character he or she speaks about.

This context explains what might otherwise seem to be an odd claim. Socrates suggests that the guardians should not be mimetic narrators, and that what they imitate in any context should be severely limited. He gives four reasons for prohibiting such imitations, each of which draws a connection between mimesis and human behaviour. First, the mimetic narrator, for Socrates, is inherently a liar. He conceals his personality behind that of his character, and thus opens up the possibility of other deceptions. Second, mimetic narration violates the principle of specialization. The only task of the guardians is to protect the city, but imitating others is akin to performing their tasks as well: 'he'll hardly pursue any of the noteworthy activities while at the same time imitating many things. . . . The same men aren't capable of doing both.' Third, the imitator cannot avoid a certain contamination by the object of imitation. The guardians must be careful to mime only appropriate behaviour, 'so that they won't get a taste for the being from its imitation' (Plato, 1991: 73–4). For this reason, Socrates insists that they should only imitate good and courageous men, rather than women, slaves, bad men, inhuman sounds (thunder, animals) or the insane. This leads to the fourth reason Socrates prohibits most imitation among the guardians: the character of the imitated inevitably reflects upon the imitator. A good man, Socrates notes, will feel ashamed at imitating a common man: 'he can't stand forming himself according to, and fitting himself into, the models of worse men'. Indiscriminate imitation fragments the personality, makes one 'double' or 'manifold' (Plato, 1991: 75–6). In the end, Socrates argues that the mimetic poets should be exiled from the republic.

MIRRORS AND FORMS: BOOK TEN

The aims of this exile become further reaching when Socrates returns to his discussion of mimesis in book ten of the *Republic*. We have seen how the discussion in books two and three subtly moves from the effects of mimesis on children to its potential effects on adults. Book ten redefines

these effects in philosophical terms. Socrates returns to the status of mimesis after he has finished outlining the structure of his republic and the human soul. His reflection on the soul has persuaded him, he says, that he was entirely correct in banishing the mimetic poets. The best republic and the best life are both governed by reason, but mimesis is contrary to reason in almost every way. Socrates' inquiry into the opposition between mimesis and reason is complicated and takes up much of book ten. For the sake of simplicity, we can distinguish three grounds upon which Socrates bases his critique: the reality of mimesis; the relationship of mimesis to knowledge; and the effects of mimesis on the emotions.

Plato begins his discussion of art in book ten by challenging the reality of mimesis, its status as a thing with unique properties. This challenge follows upon a distinction Socrates introduced in a famous allegory he constructs in book seven. The so-called 'allegory of the cave' imagines humans as prisoners watching shadows cast on the wall of a cave. What these prisoners take to be reality is, from the perspective of philosophy, mere illusion. Since they, and implicitly we, know nothing beyond the shadows they see, the prisoners can have no grasp of reality, nor any sense of why the world as they know it is false and incomplete. All they know from birth to death are shadows, not realities. Socrates imagines one prisoner being released from his chains and turning towards the light and the actual objects that cast the shadows, and then working his way out of the cave to look directly at the sun. This prisoner's new perspective is akin to philosophical education. What common people take to be reality is for the philosopher less real than truths grasped by means of reason alone. As the German philosopher Martin Heidegger suggests, in his essay 'Plato's Doctrine of Truth' (1947), the allegory of the cave begins a revolution in the Western concept of truth. No longer a fundamental trait of the material world, truth now resides in the intellect alone (Heidegger 1998: 181–2). In Plato's rendering, the world itself becomes an imitation, and is thus always suspect.

This redefinition of truth has important consequences for the account of mimesis in book ten. Artistic images, Socrates suggests, are only shadows of the things they imitate, which present the physical appearances of things, not their rational truth. Images are, to this extent,

inherently corrupting for the philosopher, regardless of whether they depict virtue or vice. Socrates advances this argument with two analogies. The first analogy compares mimesis to a mirror. Socrates asks his auditors to imagine a great craftsman, who has the ability to create everything in heaven and earth. The auditors doubt the existence of such a craftsman, but Socrates notes that his power is in fact quite simple. 'It's not hard' to make all things, he claims:

> if you are willing to take a mirror and carry it around everywhere; quickly you will make the sun and the things in the heaven; quickly the earth; and quickly yourself and the other animals and implements and plants and everything else that was just now mentioned.
>
> (Plato, 1991: 279)

This metaphor mocks the idea that art requires special skills and methods. The craftsman does not in fact make anything, but only passively reflects what already exists, and does so 'quickly', almost automatically. Mimesis produces mere 'phantoms', not real things. It is at once dependent and deluded, just as a mirror is empty and inessential without something to reflect. The same thing, Socrates argues, is true of artistic images, which reflect the world but have no essence of their own. 'The painter is also one of those craftsmen, isn't he?' Socrates asks. Yet the mirror-bearing 'craftsman' foolishly believes that he does in fact create something. Not content simply to produce couches and tables, the artist wants to usurp the power of the gods, and claims to create the heavens and the earth, and even seems to 'create' himself. But this power is an illusion, for the artist does not make the 'being' he represents, he only reflects 'something that is like the being, but is not being' (Plato, 1991: 279).

To reinforce this association of art and 'mere' appearance, Socrates introduces another analogy, based on his so-called theory of forms. He asks his auditors to imagine three kinds of couches. The first couch is 'in nature'. This is the idea of a couch produced by a god (Plato, 1991: 279). The second couch is material, the kind made by a craftsman. The third couch is an imitation painted by an artist. Socrates argues that each couch has a different relationship to reality and truth. The real maker of any couch is the god. The one true couch is the rational idea of a couch, and

hence the 'original' for any other couch. Platonic philosophy uses reason to identify the singular essence of the good or the beautiful – its unitary 'form'. Along the same lines, Socrates argues, the god's couch is most real because it is purely conceptual. Although it is material, and thus real in the colloquial sense, the craftsman's couch is nevertheless at a remove from the true reality. The craftsman looks towards the rational form of a couch when he makes any given material couch. He crafts an approximation of the original, gives material form to the concept in his work. The imitated couch, in turn, is twice removed from the real one. The painter relies entirely upon the craftsman's couch when he or she makes an imitation. Ignorant of the god's couch, the painter gives us only the appearance of a material couch. Moreover, the painter can only represent one side of the object. He or she imitates how the couch looks from one limited perspective, not what it essentially is. 'Therefore', Socrates concludes, 'imitation is surely far from the truth . . . because it lays hold of a certain small part of each thing, and that part is itself only a phantom' (Plato, 1991: 281). The artist may be able to fool children and madmen, but those in possession of reason will see through the ruse.

Socrates next turns to the threat that mimesis poses to knowledge. The ability of the imitator to craft any object, he notes, has long deceived people. Imitators may appear to know about the objects and actions they depict, but this knowledge is illusory. Socrates points to the example of the great epic poet Homer, whose works the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* had a standing in Plato's culture akin to the standing of the Bible for much of European and American history. Socrates complains that Homer often depicts battles and civic deliberation, but could not have had any real knowledge of warfare or governance. Indeed, by his very nature, the imitator lacks knowledge: 'Do you suppose', Socrates asks:

> that if a man were able to make both, the thing to be imitated and the phantom, he would permit himself to be serious about the crafting of phantoms and set this at the head of his own life as the best thing he has?
>
> (Plato, 1991: 282)

Mimesis is not serious; it is mere play rather than true knowledge. Artists such as Homer 'don't lay hold of the truth' but only mime the appear-

ance of wisdom (Plato, 1991: 283). Socrates introduces another tripartite distinction to press his point. The user of any object, he argues, will have the most intimate knowledge of its virtue, beauty or utility. Only a flute player, for example, can adequately judge the quality of a flute. The user, like the philosopher, looks towards the rational idea of an object, considers the object against the concept that defines it, and the purpose it serves. The flute maker, by contrast, needs the user's guidance to ensure that the product he or she crafts will perform as it should. While the user has genuine knowledge about flutes, the maker can only hold what Socrates defines as good or bad opinions about them. Imitators have neither knowledge nor opinion about what they imitate. A painted flute cannot be played and teaches us nothing about what a flute really is or does. Imitation is twice removed from genuine knowledge, just as it is from reality. This analogy again tries to strip mimesis of any pretension to craft. All three figures might well be considered craftspeople: the user makes music, the maker makes a flute, and the imitator makes a painting. But for Socrates, imitators merely mirror the work of others, and have no knowledge of what they represent.

As a source of knowledge, Socrates continues, imitation is not only dishonest but also potentially corrupting, and appeals to the worst part of the psyche. Like an optical illusion, it introduces confusion into the soul, and undermines the powers of reason and calculation. Socrates uses the image of a stick placed into a pool of water to explain this effect: although this stick is really straight, it looks bent in water. The eyes alone might be fooled by appearances and lead one to conclude that the water has bent the stick. Only rational knowledge of how water affects the appearance of objects reveals the truth. Whereas the senses give us contradictory evidence, reason and calculation lead to truth. The imitators actively appeal to the confusion of the senses. They elevate shadows over truth: 'imitation keeps company with the part in us that is far from prudence' (Plato, 1991: 286). The representational arts, to this extent, are inherently opposed to reason and philosophy, and forever dwell at the bottom of the cave.

Having challenged the reality and rationality of mimesis, Socrates turns to the effects of art on our emotions. His main target now is tragedy rather than painting. This shift deserves some attention. Although he defines all of the representational arts as mimetic, Socrates

had clearly been concerned from the start with stories. In books two and three he focuses on the effects of myths and methods of narration; throughout book ten he takes aim at Homer, and he begins this book by arguing that the city should exclude all poetry, not just the imitative kind. But the first two steps in the argument about mimesis in book ten are based on an analogy with painting and mirrors rather than stories or poems. The movement from visual to linguistic imitation is problematic. Language does not imitate in the same ways that images do. As even ancient philosophers recognized, words are signs with conventional meanings, not images of what they name. The word 'mirror' does not reflect in the same way that a physical mirror does. Socrates tries to bridge this gap between words and images with an argumentative sleight of hand: he suggests that his criticisms of imitation based on sight also apply to imitation based on hearing. Accordingly, he treats poetry as yet another form of illusion. But language, of course, entails more than hearing, much as painting entails more than mere seeing. By reducing poetry to perception, Socrates can extend his claim that mimesis requires no skill and has no reality to tragic drama.

The analogy between art and optical illusions, as we saw, suggests that mimesis divides the mind, setting the claims of the senses against reason. Something similar occurs in the context of tragedy. All poetry, Socrates argues, imitates 'human beings performing forced or voluntary actions', reflecting upon the consequences of those actions and feeling pain or pleasure in response (Plato, 1991: 287). The division between action and emotion in tragedy is similar to the division between the senses and reason in the visual example. Tragedy imitates human actions as a means of stirring our emotions, and thus divides us against ourselves. Socrates elucidates this point with the example of a man who has lost a son. Although this man would be grieved by his loss, reason instructs him not to express his emotion in public. He is divided between his emotions and his intellect, between what Socrates characterizes as a childish and irrational desire to indulge in his pain and a mature recognition that he must stoically accept what fate has brought him. Tragedy, however, encourages us to indulge in suffering. It is easier to imitate violent emotion than rational contemplation. Emotion is noisy and visible, while the prudent individual is difficult to understand from without. Much as the painter imitates what a couch looks like

rather than what it is, so tragedy only shows what human character looks like from the outside. Thus it is drawn to, and inherently appeals to, the emotional part of our nature, producing 'a bad regime in the soul of each private man' (Plato, 1991: 289).

Since it appeals to the emotions rather than to reason, tragedy has far-reaching consequences for the audience. Just as children imitate the stories they hear, audiences at the theatre identify closely with what they see depicted on stage. Even the best among us are led to 'give ourselves over to following the imitation', and suffering along with the hero (Plato, 1991: 289). Mimesis produces sympathetic imitations in the viewer, the effects of which go beyond the space of the theatre. Tragedy teaches us to enjoy the expression of emotion in other contexts as well, and thus weakens the hold reason has over our souls. Having enjoyed the emotional displays on stage, we become less ashamed of expressing emotions in our own lives: 'the pitying part [of the soul], fed on these examples, is not easily held down in one's own sufferings' (Plato, 1991: 290). Rather than being ruled by reason, we are now ruled by emotion. This danger is, for Socrates, cause enough to extend his earlier exile of the mimetic poets from the republic. Following Homer and the tragedians only brings misery: 'And if you admit the sweetened muse in lyrics or epics, pleasure and pain will jointly be kings in your city instead of law and that argument which in each instance is best in the opinion of the community' (Plato, 1991: 290). No longer satisfied to exile only the mimetic poets, Socrates now banishes all poetry from his republic.

POETRY AND THE CITY

Why would Plato's most extensive and influential discussion of mimesis come in the midst of a dialogue on political and ethical theory? This question has long been a matter of debate among scholars, and it is clear from his arguments throughout the work that Plato wants his readers to reflect on the relationship between mimesis and politics. It is no accident that Socrates responds to the danger of mimesis with political acts: official censorship and exile. And throughout the dialogue, Plato insistently joins the seemingly insignificant act of mimicry to the very fate of the community. Both discussions of mimesis in the *Republic*

begin by defining and criticizing artistic mimesis, but end with considerations about the safety of the republic and the 'regime' of the soul. Indeed, the word mimesis covers a striking range of human activity for Plato. Initially, and most obviously, it describes the activity of the representational artist. Both poetry and painting imitate the real: material objects in painting, and human action and emotion in poetry. But mimesis is also a part of education. Children imitate the stories they hear, and this imitation shapes their souls. Thus Socrates insists on supervising the tellers of tales and ensuring that their narratives do not engender problematic imitations in the audience. Socrates also associates mimesis with artistic performance. Rhapsodes and actors imitate, and thereby take on the qualities of, the characters they describe. In order to prevent mimetic contamination, Socrates argues that the rulers of the republic must supervise the kinds of imitations the guardians perform, as well as those they hear. By the end of book ten, mimesis has come to characterize the whole of aesthetic response. No longer a quality of just the pupil or the performer, mimesis describes the identification of an audience with the spectacle on stage. Swept up by tragic emotion, the members of the audience imitate privately the sufferings they see on the stage. From creation to reception, art and influence are defined by mimesis.

This progression from individual artist to collective response, and from the behaviour of children to the nature of the soul, makes artistic mimesis a microcosm of political life. It encompasses both the individual and the social world, and affects citizens from birth to adulthood. Plato offers hints throughout the dialogue that his subject is larger than stories and pictures. Mimesis enters the dialogue along with luxury and political corruption, and the initial discussion of poetry concerns the education of the guardians needed to protect the city from its enemies and from itself. The stories Socrates chooses to exclude from his educational programme nearly all describe strife within the community. Throughout the dialogue, moreover, Plato subtly opposes mimesis to the ideals of masculinity. He associates imitation with women, children and the insane, all of whom were expressly excluded from Athenian political life. His specific prohibitions, and even his seemingly incidental examples, often highlight the association of mimesis with those excluded from political participation. The actors,

for example, arrive in the city along with the makers of women's adornment, and it is nurses and mothers whose storytelling must be controlled. The guardians are forbidden to imitate slaves, and Socrates worries that painters might trick 'children and foolish human beings' into believing they are true craftsmen (Plato, 1991: 281). Tragedy, finally, encourages men to cry like women and children.

Two of Plato's parables in the *Republic* also hint at the political implications of mimesis. The most obvious is the allegory of the cave, which a number of twentieth-century philosophers have linked to modern political methods. The cave depicts political life as a kind of totalitarian theatre, in which unknown and unseen individuals present the chained prisoners with images that distract them from the truth of their condition. What seems real to the people is in fact a show intended to keep them pacified. The political implications of the cave are by no means coincidental, for the prisoner who is freed and leaves the cave is a figure for Plato's ideal philosopher king. Having seen the truth behind the images, this prisoner can return and govern his still-deceived fellow prisoners. This story informs Plato's famous notion of the 'noble lie' that rulers are allowed to tell the populace in order to ensure their happiness. An earlier parable, the ring of Gyges, implicitly sets the stage, as it were, for this political theatre. In book two, one of Socrates' auditors, Plato's brother Glaucon, tells the story of a shepherd who discovers a gold ring that makes him invisible. Amazed by this power, the shepherd seduces the king's wife and then kills the king and takes over his position (Plato, 1991: 38). Although this story comes well before the discussions of mimesis, it suggests, much like the allegory of the cave, that political power lies in the control of images. Just as the invisible rulers of the cave use shadows to subdue the populace, so the shepherd uses his power over visibility to dethrone the king.

All of these examples suggest that Plato's theory of mimesis is very much a theory of political life. The imitator is not just a bad craftsman but a danger to the health of the republic; mimesis is not just a matter of stories and pictures but a problem for the nature of humanity itself. This claim often strikes modern readers as odd, but it is firmly grounded in the political context of Plato's age. Scholars have noted that Plato's exile of the poets is part of a larger debate in Greek culture over the respective place of poetry and philosophy in the education of the young

and the conduct of public life, a debate clearly inflected in the dialogue by the highly patriarchal nature of this culture. As Eric Havelock has argued, Plato's criticisms imply that poetry held a monopoly over social and political life (1963: 36). Socrates himself refers at the end of his discussion of mimesis in book ten to 'an old quarrel between poetry and philosophy' (Plato, 1991: 290), and before he challenges the status of poetry near the end of the dialogue, he half-jokingly asks his auditors not to 'denounce me to the tragic poets and all the other imitators', as if they might see his argument as a power play (Plato, 1991: 277). The history of this struggle between poetry and philosophy, Havelock argues, arose out of a larger transition in the classical world from an oral to a literate culture. Prior to the fifth century BCE, Greek culture was maintained and transmitted by the rhapsodes who memorized and recited the great epics. Poetry was a repository of cultural wisdom, and the Greeks gave to Homeric epic in particular an authority and respect in public life far exceeding that which we accord to literature today. Much more than an ancient poet laureate, Homer was a cultural encyclopedia, offering the means of training leaders and providing models for civic virtue.

As Havelock suggests, the rise of writing during Plato's age had profound effects on the nature of knowledge. Although Plato often denounced writing (most famously in his dialogue the *Phaedrus*), and although the dialogues are staged as discussions, his philosophy is firmly grounded in the newly literate milieu. Preliterate cultures preserve communal knowledge largely through poetic techniques such as repetition, formulaic expressions, variations on familiar mythic paradigms, all of which aid memory. Such knowledge is founded on the interaction of speaker and auditor. Writing transforms knowledge into something visible, concrete and standardized. It makes possible precisely the emphasis on reason, calculation and conceptual analysis that characterizes Platonic philosophy. Socrates' exile of the poets in the *Republic*, Havelock argues, is part of a larger cultural struggle to assert the value of rigorous philosophical inquiry and literate culture over poetry and oral culture for contemporary Greek public life. The definition of poetry as mimesis is a conceptual revolution, a definitional *coup d'état*. Figured as secondary and derivative, distinguished from reason and truth and associated with femininity and childhood, poetry comes to seem inappropriate to the needs of current Greek society.

It is a technology of the past, limited to and by oral culture, and bound up with the interaction of mother and child rather than the political deliberation of mature men. It may be worthy of respect, but it is no longer suitable for new political realities.

2

ARISTOTLE'S *POETICS*

SECOND NATURE

Aristotle's *Poetics* is the single most influential work of literary criticism in the Western tradition and, along with Plato's *Republic*, is a foundational text for the understanding of mimesis. Very little is known about the origin and composition of the treatise, but it is most likely an incomplete or fragmentary compilation of lecture notes on tragic drama and related subjects, written sometime between 360 and 320 BCE, and probably addressed to and later compiled by students at Aristotle's school, the Lyceum, in Athens. The *Poetics* has long shaped critical accounts of ancient drama, and was treated by playwrights as a prescriptive guidebook for hundreds of years after its rediscovery and translation into Latin by scholars in the early Renaissance. Aristotle's chief subject is Greek tragedy, but his account of this form engages far-reaching questions about the nature of mimesis that powerfully revise Plato's theories. Aristotle's approach to mimesis is understated. What seem to be superficial assertions about narrative form or audience response are guided by sophisticated ideas about mimesis that, in many cases, have yet to be fully assimilated into contemporary popular discussions of art and literature.

Although it is often said that Aristotle's account of mimesis in the *Poetics* is a critical response to Plato's exile of the poets in the *Republic*, the relationship between the two philosophers is somewhat more complicated, and remains a matter of scholarly debate. Plato was Aristotle's teacher, and although he is never named in the treatise, his presence is unmistakable. Aristotle borrows a number of formulations from Plato, and challenges his teacher's claims about the nature and effects of mimesis, often in terms that seem directed against specific arguments Socrates makes in the *Republic*. Crucially, however, he does not question Plato's basic assertion that all art is essentially imitative. Even in his criticisms of Plato, Aristotle reinforces the conceptual hold of Platonic mimesis over Western art theory. Like Plato, Aristotle groups all the arts under the rubric of mimesis. And again like Plato, he contrasts the representational arts with other forms of human inquiry, such as science and history, that are conventionally associated with truth and reality. His defence of mimesis also turns on a fundamentally Platonic concern: reason. Aristotle counters Plato's assertion that mimesis is opposed to reason, and argues instead that tragedy offers quasi-philosophical insights into human actions. Mimesis, for Aristotle, is a real thing, worthy of critical analysis, but its definition still relies, like nearly all of the theories we shall discuss in this book, on the framework set up by Plato.

At the same time, Aristotle offers the most persuasive response to Plato's critique of mimesis. In many ways, the history of Western literary criticism is a repetition in different terms of the fundamental claims about mimesis in Plato and Aristotle. Unlike Plato, for whom mimesis is a mirror of something else and therefore potentially deceptive, Aristotle defines mimesis as a craft with its own internal laws and aims. The opening sentences of the *Poetics* establish this premise:

> I propose to treat of poetry in itself and of its various kinds, noting the essential quality of each; to inquire into the structure of the plot as requisite to a good poem; into the number and nature of the parts of which a poem is composed; and similarly into whatever else falls within the same inquiry. Following, then, the order of nature, let us begin with the principles which come first.
>
> (Aristotle, 1951: 7)

Aristotle says that he will treat poetry 'in itself', and not primarily as a reflection of something else. The poem, for Aristotle, is much like a natural object. We can study its parts and structure, classify it according to kind and aim, and determine in individual cases whether the object achieves its inherent objectives (whether it is 'good'). It is an appropriate subject for philosophical inquiry, which conforms to fixed principles and 'the order of nature'. Poetry might be said to imitate the processes of nature, and not just its physical forms.

Aristotle's metaphors for poetry throughout the *Poetics* stress the naturalness of mimesis. Whereas Plato's most common metaphors – mirrors, shadows, optical illusions – highlight the artificiality or unreality of art and literature, Aristotle's metaphors emphasize their similarity to natural objects. For example, in asserting that artistic beauty depends on the order and magnitude of the parts, Aristotle draws an analogy between art and animals: 'As, therefore, in the case of animate bodies and organisms, a certain magnitude is necessary' (1951: 31). Elsewhere, Aristotle compares the unity of plot to that of a body. Good plots 'resemble a living organism in all its unity, and produce the pleasure proper to it' (Aristotle, 1951: 89). In what might otherwise seem an extraneous or overly speculative discussion, Aristotle also offers a natural history of drama. Beginning in mere improvisation, and inspired by different aspects of Homeric epic, both tragedy and comedy developed according to the natural propensities of the poets drawn to each style. Serious poets wrote tragedies, while more frivolous ones turned to comedy. The development of tragedy, like that of an animal species, was governed by its inherent qualities: 'Having passed through many changes, it found its natural form, and there it stopped' (Aristotle, 1951: 19). Even the specific focus on tragic drama, which typically concerns troubled families, joins the definition of artistic genre to questions of biological gender and generation.

Aristotle's initial analysis of mimesis also embodies the argument that art has a specific nature of its own. The first three chapters of the *Poetics* differentiate what Aristotle calls the media, the objects and the manner of mimesis for the different representational arts. In each case, Aristotle borrows and modifies a distinction from Plato, or introduces a distinction where Plato fails to make one. The medium of imitation concerns the 'materials' each art uses to represent people and objects.

For Plato, poetry and painting, epic and tragedy are essentially the same in their imitation of the real. Aristotle, by contrast, differentiates the arts by the materials they employ. Painters use figure and colour, musicians melody and rhythm, dancers rhythm alone, and poets rhythm, language and melody. These arts are all mimetic, but they imitate with different tools, or use the same tools in different combinations. Rather than being a mere imitator, the artist is a maker, a craftsperson. Aristotle points out that many works use the same media as poetry does, but are not for that reason alone poems. Greek medical and scientific treatises were typically written in poetic metres, but the mere use of metre does not entitle the scientist to the name poet. It is, Aristotle argues, 'the imitation that makes the poet', not the rhetorical form of the work (Aristotle, 1951: 9). Although it is mimetic, then, poetry has its own proper methods and aims and is not just a diminished version of science or philosophy.

Aristotle offers a similar critique of Plato in his description of the objects of imitation. The objects that poetry depicts, he writes, are 'men in action' (Aristotle, 1951: 11). Aristotle takes this notion straight from Plato's discussion of tragedy in book ten of the *Republic*, but gives it a new interpretation. The individuals and actions depicted in art, he notes, are necessarily of a higher or lower moral type. While Plato treats such types according to their good or bad effect on the audience, Aristotle finds in the varying objects of mimesis a way of differentiating among genres and artistic styles. Each artist, and each artistic genre, emphasizes one human type and the actions appropriate to it. Epic and tragedy present people as better than they are in life, whereas comedy presents them as worse. Aristotle stresses that the moral standing of artistic subjects does not immediately affect the moral standing of the audience. Moral distinctions are markers of poetic genre, and cannot be unproblematically compared to moral distinctions in life. If mimesis can diverge from a strict reproduction of life, then it does far more than mirror the real.

The third difference that marks the various mimetic arts is the manner of imitation. Aristotle draws upon the distinction Socrates makes in book three of the *Republic* among forms of narration. Like Plato, Aristotle allows for three types of narration, but he modifies the categories. Poets can speak in their own voice (as in history), imitate

the voice of the character (as in epic) or present the characters living and moving before the audience (as in drama). Aristotle's modification of Plato may seem minor, but it has far-reaching implications. Socrates treats the manner of imitation as a moral choice: the speaker who imitates another person 'hides' from the audience. Aristotle, by contrast, regards the manner of imitation as an artistic choice. The work can be narrated or performed, and the different forms of presentation are characteristic of different genres or artistic sensibilities. The manner of imitation, he suggests, should be judged not by whether it reveals or conceals the poet but by whether it is appropriate to the nature of the material. Although he is hardly an aesthete, Aristotle opens up the possibility, not fully explored until the nineteenth century, that artistic and ethical choices are distinct and should be kept separate.

Indeed, the careful distinction between art and ethics is a cornerstone of Aristotle's response to Plato. In a section of the *Poetics* devoted to formulating responses to certain unnamed 'critics' of poetry, Aristotle claims that the 'standard of correctness is not the same in poetry and politics, any more than in poetry and any other art' (Aristotle, 1951: 99). He distinguishes between 'essential' and 'accidental' errors in art. If a poet has imitated poorly or lacks skill, the error is essential. If, however, he or she has introduced 'technical inaccuracies' in the depiction of a craft, the error is accidental. It is far more important to imitate skilfully than to imitate exactly: 'not to know that a hind has no horns is a less serious matter than to paint it inartistically' (Aristotle, 1951: 99). Tellingly, Aristotle chooses the depiction of an animal (the hind, a female deer) to defend artists against their critics. If the work succeeds as art, he suggests, then it is not to be criticized for the factual failings that Plato attacks. Even the inclusion of impossible incidents can be justified 'if the end of the art be thereby attained' (Aristotle, 1951: 99). We should judge the success or failure of mimesis only in terms of its proper aims and methods, and not by a comparison with something else.

Aristotle also borrows, and effectively canonizes for later theorists, another key example from Plato: the behaviour of children. Plato regards the child's imitation as an instance of the broader dangers of mimesis. For Aristotle, children's imitations confirm the naturalness of mimesis. In an important passage from chapter four of the *Poetics*, he argues that poetry springs from two sources, 'each of them lying deep in our nature'.

First, mimesis is a natural capacity of all human beings, 'implanted in man from childhood', which distinguishes us from animals (Aristotle, 1951: 15). Humans are the most imitative of creatures, and we learn our earliest lessons through mimesis. Plato would most likely agree with this claim, but for Aristotle the association of mimesis with childhood points towards a broader claim about the value of art. As Stephen Halliwell has argued, Aristotle has in mind here the way children imaginatively act out adult behaviours and occupations (2002: 178). Such play has its own specific logic and developmental function, and does not simply ape what adults do, but fictionally recreates adult occupations. No one would fault children who play doctor for failing to cure the sick.

For Aristotle, as for Plato, children's play also provides a suggestive model for the way adults respond to mimetic works. Here again, he closely associates mimesis with the natural. This is the second 'source' of poetry. Like children, adults derive pleasure and knowledge from mimesis. Aristotle notes that we often gain pleasure in looking at representations of things that in themselves we find painful or repulsive, such as dead bodies or 'ignoble animals' (1951: 15). Mimesis provides fictional distance from things, so that the sufferings of tragic characters on stage can be pleasurable rather than painful, as they would be if they befell actual people. This fictional distance allows us to learn from representations, whereas we might respond emotionally to the actual experience. In this way, mimesis enables rational thought rather than, as Plato asserts, disabling it. Indeed, the pleasure of mimesis is closely tied to cognitive processes. Learning, Aristotle argues, is inherently pleasurable for all human beings, but mimesis allows for a particular kind of learning and pleasure: 'Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, "Ah, that is he"' (Aristotle, 1951: 15). At first glance, Aristotle seems to be suggesting that we simply compare the copy to the real thing, and gain pleasure through the comparison, but he is more likely arguing that mimesis provides insights into human action and character that we might not otherwise have. As he will argue later in the *Poetics*, mimesis concerns universals as well as particulars. The fictional distance inherent in mimesis allows a glimpse into the universal qualities of human life that are revealed by particular actions and characteristics. It teaches us what kind of person we are seeing

on stage. Aristotle argues further that, even if we have not seen the original, we still can still gain pleasure from 'the execution, the coloring, or some such other cause' (1951: 15). The material form of mimesis is part of what makes it both enjoyable and potentially educational.

TRAGEDY, PLOT AND REASON

As we have seen, Aristotle borrows many details in his account of mimesis from the *Republic*, but greatly complicates and revalues Plato's ideas. Aristotle stresses that mimesis, far from being an alien intruder in the otherwise harmonious soul, is in fact a natural aspect of human life, and even a unique source of learning. His use of organic metaphors and the example of childhood play reinforces the claim that mimesis need not be a threat to the soul or the city. We find a similar effort to revalue Plato's judgements in Aristotle's account of tragedy. Plato argues that tragedy dangerously stirs our emotions at the expense of our rational faculties. For Aristotle, tragedy is soundly rational. Indeed, although tragedy often deals with extreme emotions, irrational desires and supernatural forces, good tragedies are constructed rationally and engage the rational faculties of the audience. Even tragic emotions, Aristotle argues, can be made predictable and reasonable.

Aristotle begins his discussion of tragedy with a definition:

> Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action not narrative; through pity and fear effecting the purgation of these emotions.
>
> (1951: 23)

All tragedies have six parts: plot (*mythos*), character (*ethos*), diction (*lexis*), thought (*dianoia*), spectacle (*opsis*) and song (*melopoeia*). Plot is the arrangement of incidents; character is the particular moral qualities of the agents revealed by the plot; diction is the metrical arrangement of words; thought is the process of reasoning that characters use to defend or justify themselves; spectacle is the stage machinery; and song refers to the musical passages that were common in Greek tragedy. As is typical

with Aristotle, what initially seem banal and rather dry distinctions turn out to be complicated and far-reaching in implication. On one level, this definition simply categorizes tragedy as a form of mimesis: its medium is language and rhythm (diction, song); its objects are men and actions (plot, character, thought); and it is performed rather than narrated (spectacle). On another level, though, the definition proposes a comprehensive theory about the nature of tragedy and the rationality of mimesis.

There is a great deal to be said about each of these terms, but for our purposes we can attend primarily to plot. Let us begin with the first two parts of Aristotle's initial definition: that tragedy is the mimesis of an action and that this action is complete and of a certain magnitude. Completeness, for Aristotle, does not refer to a subjective sense of resolution but to the structural relationship of incidents:

> A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it.
>
> (Aristotle, 1951: 31)

While this passage might seem to border on tautology, Aristotle is making a major claim about mimesis. Simply describing an artwork as whole and complete flies in the face of Plato's claim that mimesis is dependent on something else and hence by definition incomplete. For Aristotle, the mimetic work can have its own internal unity, a unity governed by necessity and reason, not by chance, deception or individual whim. Beginning, middle and end are logical categories, not just temporal markers. The beginning causes something to happen, sets a chain of events in motion; the middle is caused by the beginning, and causes something else in turn; and an end is produced 'by necessity or as a rule' out of something else, but has no consequences of its own. One could define the principles of physics or of bodily functions in much the same terms. Reason and law are the foundation of mimesis, even if the story itself concerns lawless acts or emotional extremes.

A similar stress on rationality informs Aristotle's account of magnitude. Beauty, Aristotle claims, relies on both order (that is, completeness) and magnitude. While order is defined logically, magnitude is defined in terms of the audience and, more specifically, in terms of human cognitive processes. If order describes the rational relationship among the parts of a tragedy, magnitude describes the processes by which the audience discerns this relationship:

> a very small animal organism cannot be beautiful; for the view of it is confused, the object being seen in an almost imperceptible moment of time. Nor again can one of vast size be beautiful; for as the eye cannot take it all in at once, the unity and sense of the whole is lost for the spectator.
>
> (Aristotle, 1951: 31)

Smallness or largeness are not absolute qualities, but reflect the position and cognitive abilities of the viewer. A work has proper magnitude, conveys beauty and a sense of unity, if the spectator can grasp it in one view. 'Seeing' here, as elsewhere in Aristotle and Plato, is a key metaphor for knowing. The single 'view' refers to a single train of thought. The sense of unity we gain from a mimetic work is defined by the unity of the thought process it inspires. Thus the proper magnitude for a tragedy is 'a length which can be easily embraced by the memory' (Aristotle, 1951: 33).

Aristotle's emphasis on the rationality of mimesis explains his focus throughout the *Poetics* on plot. Aristotle claims that plot is the single most important element of tragedy: it is, he says, the 'soul [*psyche*]' of a tragedy, the very seat of its rational faculties (1951: 29). We are now more accustomed to understanding character as the key to literary art, but Aristotle ranks plot higher, chiefly because it is only through actions and choices that character is revealed. Action, for Aristotle, is a basic unit of human understanding. But even more crucially, plot epitomizes the rationality of tragic mimesis. Plot is not simply a mimesis of action but of action ordered and structured to achieve certain ends. Unlike the theatrical staging associated with spectacle, which Aristotle sees as irrational, plot is governed by reason. The incidents in a tragic plot should be unified by probability and necessity. Such unity does not

come from the focus on a single character, since an individual's life may contain many different plots. Nor can a single historical period or mythic tale be made without selection and reordering into a unified plot. Aristotle points to the example of Homer, who bases the *Iliad* on a major turn of events in the Trojan war, not on the entire conflict. The worst plots are episodic, where the events seem simply to follow one another in time, and not by any internal logic. Unlike good tragic plots, such episodic plots are not unified by probability and necessity and therefore do not appeal to reason.

Aristotle's focus on probability and necessity suggests that the realism of a mimetic work comes not from its reflection of the external world but from its congruence with the norms of human thought. The work strikes us as realistic because the events of the plot are joined according to the same rules that govern events in our actual experience. Reasoning in and about art is not essentially different from reasoning in other contexts. As in art, so in daily life we rely on logic (necessity) and belief (probability) in making choices. Mimetic artists are thus perfectly justified in seeking validation for their artistic choices in other places than brute fact. They might appeal to the example of Sophocles, who depicted people as better than they are, and claim that their art aims for higher truths. Or they might appeal to custom or received opinion – 'what is said' (Aristotle, 1951: 101) – even if those opinions are manifestly false from the perspective of philosophy. By the same token, unfamiliar or impossible actions can be plausible if they resonate with habitual manners of thinking. Aristotle notes, for example, that impossible incidents can be made realistic if they seem probable. Indeed, such incidents may be artistically preferable to the truth, so long as they are called for by the 'inner necessity' of the work: 'a probable impossibility is to be preferred to a thing improbable and yet possible' (Aristotle, 1951: 107). The effect of the work comes from the rational ordering of events, not from the realistic quality of the individual events the play represents. Even though Aristotle counsels the poet against including irrational events, he nevertheless acknowledges that, from an artistic perspective, the irrational 'sometimes does not violate reason' (1951: 107). Mimesis, in other words, need not be true to fact to be pleasurable and persuasive. It need only be true to the principles and normal processes of human cognition.

Aristotle also argues that the tragic action should adhere to reason and the norms of human cognition. This dictate applies both to the structure of the plot and to the behaviour of the main characters. Aristotle divides plots into two kinds – the simple and the complex. Simple plots are one and continuous, detailing, for example, the steady decline of a character's fortunes through a closely linked series of events, whereas complex plots are marked by a reversal and recognition. Reversals (*peripeteia*) occur when an action veers around to its opposite. Aristotle gives the example of a royal messenger in Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus the King* (*c.*426 BCE), who comes to give Oedipus the good news that he has become the king of Corinth, but instead accidentally reveals disturbing details about his origins. Recognition (*anagnorisis*) describes a character's change from ignorance to knowledge, which produces love or hate between persons or marks a change of fortune. Both reversal and recognition are grounded in reason. Reversals, for example, 'should arise from the internal structure of the plot, so that what follows should be the necessary or probable result of the preceding action' (Aristotle, 1951: 39, 41). Reversals that do not adhere to these laws will strike the viewer as arbitrary and unconvincing. Recognition also describes a rational process. Here the character reasons and draws inferences from various kinds of evidence, such as suspicious objects or other people. In both structure and unfolding, then, tragic plots rely upon, and inspire, a cognitive effort on the part of poet, characters and audience.

Indeed, poetry approaches the status of philosophy for Aristotle. Against Plato's claim that there is an ancient war between poetry and philosophy, Aristotle argues that poets, somewhat like philosophers, concern themselves with universal principles of action and character and not with mere fact. More than simply imitating what is or has been, poets relate 'what may happen' according to probability and necessity, or what is broadly and characteristically true of a given type of situation (1951: 35). Historians, by contrast, are limited to what has happened. This makes poetry a higher pursuit than history. The historian expresses the particular, and remains tied to facts. The poet, by contrast, expresses the universal by way of particular characters or actions: 'how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability and necessity' (Aristotle, 1951: 35). Thus poetry is 'more

philosophical' than history. This is true even when the poet takes a historical subject. The poet, Aristotle writes, is 'the maker of plots rather than of verses' (1951: 37). Aristotle again condenses a major point into an unassuming comparison. Mimesis is defined not by its repetition of the real but by its ability to reveal universal truths in particular characters and actions. While Plato sees the poet's divergence from fact as a key failure, Aristotle regards it as part of the poet's most characteristic power. History, bound as it is to repeating facts, comes closer to Plato's account of mimesis than poetry does.

THE TRAGIC EFFECT

Aristotle extends his claim that mimesis is rational to his account of the ways in which tragedy affects its audience. Although the tragic effect is fundamentally emotional, the particular emotions Aristotle identifies, and the process by which the poet produces them in the spectator, are entirely rational. Unlike Plato, Aristotle does not simply oppose the emotions to reason, nor does he insist that tragedy's ability to rouse the emotions threatens to destabilize the city and the soul. For Aristotle, emotion is the proper issue of tragic mimesis, not its problematic side effect. Such response is predictable, closely tied to the development of the plot, and can be managed by the poet. Poets fail when they do not produce tragic emotions – not, as for Plato, when they do. Thus Aristotle explains how tragic poets can best produce the 'essential tragic effect' (1951: 29), and suggests that tragedy's power to rouse the emotions, far from being a danger to the spectator, is a natural and rational response to mimesis. The particular emotions Aristotle identifies are produced by both identification and reflection on the part of the spectator. The end result of these emotions is not more emotion, as Plato insists, but a release or refinement of emotion, and a consequent improvement of the spectator's emotional state.

According to Aristotle, tragic emotions are a result of the plot structure as a whole, and not just a catastrophic event at the end. They are most effectively produced in the audience by surprising turns of events. But surprise is only effective if it seems to issue from the causal logic of the plot: 'The tragic wonder will then be greater than if they happened of themselves or by accident; for even coincidences are most

striking when they have an air of design' (Aristotle, 1951: 39). Even the most horrifying event will seem arbitrary, and thus fail to elicit the proper emotions, if it strikes the audience as improbable. Aristotle gives the example of the statue of Mitys at Argos, which, according to legend, fell on and killed the man who murdered Mitys. Although the incident seems to arise out of mere chance or by way of irrational forces, it has what Aristotle calls an 'air of design': even though the coincidence seems supernaturally motivated, it is internally logical, and so satisfies our sense of probability and necessity. Aristotle further suggests that the true tragic pleasure should arise not from the spectacle, but from the inner structure of the plot: 'For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt with pity at what takes place' (1951: 49). Emotions produced by spectacle alone, such as frightening masks or special effects, will engender a sense of the monstrous and not of the feelings proper to tragedy. Such emotions are irrational, and 'within the action there must be nothing irrational' (Aristotle, 1951: 57).

Aristotle identifies two essential tragic emotions: fear (*phobos*) and pity (*eleos*). Pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, and fear by 'the misfortune of a man like ourselves' (Aristotle, 1951: 45). Both of these emotions presuppose a complex cognitive process. Whereas Plato imagines emotion in the audience as an imitation of the emotions depicted on the stage, Aristotle describes a form of psychological identification. The effects of fear and pity that we experience in the theatre, while genuine, differ from the effects of these emotions in daily life. In other contexts, we might run from something we fear, or offer help to an object of pity. Yet much as mimesis allows us to view dead bodies dispassionately, so it also allows us to experience our emotions dispassionately, to enjoy them rather than suffer from or react to them. Aristotle never explicitly describes this process, but he clearly associates tragic emotion with the same cognitive processes that define our response to plot more generally. Even in the grip of emotion, the spectators reflect upon the actions of the tragic character, and compare the character with themselves. Only certain situations rouse tragic fear and pity. We do not feel pity for every misfortune, but only for those that come to people who do not deserve it. We must therefore have a sense of what would be probable in order to discern an unmerited misfortune. Similarly, we

feel fear only when we can relate what befalls the tragic character to the circumstances of our own lives. We implicitly compare ourselves with the character, and imaginatively put ourselves in his or her place. Much as pity demands both sympathy and moral judgement, so fear demands imagination and self-reflection. Mimesis allows us a form of distance that enables rational reflection on even disturbing sights, and tragedy in particular produces emotional effects out of a rational reflection on the course of human life.

Aristotle's detailed account of how mimesis affects our emotions stands in notable contrast to Plato's suspicion of all tragic emotions. Whereas Plato sets emotion and reason in opposition, Aristotle suggests that tragedy produces emotions rationally, and that the key tragic emotions are themselves grounded in reason. Aristotle also challenges Plato's account of the emotions roused by mimesis in his controversial claim about the ultimate effect of tragedy for the audience. Plato argues that mimesis arouses emotions that would best be suppressed. Aristotle claims, by contrast, that tragedy can lead to the 'purgation' (*katharsis*) of the emotions. This is the final clause of his initial definition of tragedy: 'through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions' (Aristotle, 1951: 23).

There are few passages in the history of literary theory that have produced as much debate and speculation as this so-called 'catharsis clause'. On the most basic level, Aristotle seems to be arguing that tragedy does not simply arouse emotions but allows for their beneficial release or transformation. Tragedy is broadly therapeutic rather than pathological, allowing us to experience fears or fantasies vicariously so that we do not need to enact them in life. But this is where uncertainty sets in. Part of the difficulty of understanding this clause lies in the many meanings and uses of the word catharsis in Greek culture. Each meaning suggests a different account of the function of tragic mimesis. Etymologically, catharsis means to prune or cut away. Plato often uses some derivative of the word to describe the way philosophical dialogue removes our incorrect opinions. Accordingly, some scholars have suggested that Aristotle imagines catharsis as a kind of 'intellectual clarification' (Golden, 1992). Eighteenth-century theorists, by contrast, understood the purifying effect of catharsis as a form of moral improvement. The German critic and playwright G. E. Lessing, for example,

argues in his *Hamburg Dramaturgy* (1767–69) that tragic catharsis brings about 'the transformation of passions into virtuous habits' (1962: 193). Tragedy makes us better citizens by making us more humble and sympathetic.

But other contexts for the word go against this notion. The most common uses of the word catharsis in ancient Greece described a ritual purification or a medical purge. The notion of purification suggests that tragedy improves us either by washing away our problematic emotions or by purifying the emotions themselves. The medical definition would claim that tragedy literally purges us of unhealthful feelings. This interpretation, first proposed by Jacob Bernays in 1857, was important for modern interpreters, notably Bernays' nephew by marriage, Sigmund Freud. But the purgative account sits uneasily with Aristotle's claim that tragedy is both pleasurable and intellectually illuminating. Construing Aristotle's syntax differently raises another question: does tragedy purge existing emotions, those the audience members bring with them to the theatre, or does it purge emotions that it arouses? The various meanings of word of catharsis seem to suggest the former, but the attention Aristotle gives to fear and pity points us to the latter. In this reading, tragedy would provide a kind of emotional purgation by rousing fear and pity and allowing us to enjoy them, not by removing the fear and pity we bring to the theatre or by altering our general emotional state. Catharsis would describe the proper result of the tragic plot. In a suggestive reworking of this reading, the twentieth-century French playwright Antonin Artaud reimagines theatre as a plague that brings forth 'all the perverse possibilities of the mind' (1958: 30). For Artaud, the aim of catharsis is metaphorically to sicken the audience, not to cure it.

These disputes over the meaning of catharsis are unlikely to be answered in any definitive way. But this should not distract us from the originality of Aristotle's conception. Although Aristotle canonizes Plato's reduction of all art to mimesis, he also provides what remains the most powerful defence of art in the history of literary theory. Alongside the claim that mimesis is natural, rational and educational, the notion of catharsis implies that art might also be beneficial. In his acknowledgement that it is secondary and derivative, Aristotle gives art a primary and crucial function. The effects of this double argument continue to resonate in current discussions of art.

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