



The Philosopher and the Beast: Plato's Fear of Tragedy

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Abstract

It is well known that in Plato's utopian ideal state there is no room for free artistic expression: artists are mistrusted and art works heavily censored. Less known is that, once they are properly selected and purified, art works are particularly valued by Plato. However, Plato completely disapproves of a certain category of art, which he defines as 'mimetic'. 'Mimetic art' is a priori disqualified by him as morally bad, misleading and dangerous. It is therefore categorically forbidden in the ideal state. In practice, Plato identifies 'mimetic art' chiefly with Greek tragedy. We will go into a Jungian explanation of why this is the case. I hope to show that psychologically speaking Plato's ideal state is an unstable construction. It is built on the repression of unconscious powers that may erupt any time. Tragedy is threatening to this construction because it undermines the unrealistic Platonic conception of man as an autonomous, rational being.

To cite as

Kardaun, M., 2014, 'The Philosopher and the Beast: Plato's Fear of Tragedy', *PsyArt* 18, pp. 148–163.

I – Introduction

In the second half of the fourteenth century, a few decades before the reintroduction of the complete text of the Platonic dialogue *Republic* in Western Europe (in Latin), the Italian humanist and poet Giovanni Boccaccio could still safely claim that Plato's attack on poets and poetry was only meant to expel some admittedly obnoxious comic poets, and that he certainly had not intended

to banish great literary artists such as Homer or Hesiod from his ideal city.¹ However, when the first translation of the *Republic* appeared in 1402, it was clear for all to read that it was indeed artists of the caliber of Homer and Hesiod who were under attack.

The re-availability of the text of the *Republic* did not resolve the dissatisfaction with Plato's views on literature. No less than in the fourteenth century, it is still hard to accept that perhaps the greatest literary philosopher ever to exist would order the removal of Homer, "the most poetic of poets and the first of tragedians,"² from his commonwealth. This is all the more strange since every so often Homer or other poets are invoked in the dialogues in support of a philosophical argumentation. Apparently Plato sees no harm at all in using literary works to his own advantage.³ Yet banishing all "pleasure-indulging literature, whether in the form of epic or drama"⁴ is what he explicitly and repeatedly recommends, and there can be no doubt that he means it.

To be sure, Platonic literary theory is a complicated matter. Small wonder that there have been misunderstandings. Some decades ago it was not unusual for scholars to say that Plato's treatises on poets and poetry were confused.⁵ However, the philosophical difficulties of Platonic aesthetics are hardly insurmountable. With a little effort they can be overcome. In the second section of this paper I will summarize Plato's views on the function and the essence of art, including literature. As will be made clear, these views form a logically coherent and perfectly comprehensible theory that fits well with Plato's overall philosophy.

The real problem with Plato's view then is not so much a matter of logic, but should be located elsewhere. In the third and final section I will formulate some depth-psychological observations pertaining to Plato's position on art and artists, because, even though its philosophical coherence and relevance are much less problematic than is generally thought, Platonic art theory does have some characteristics that may be called eccentric and require additional, psychological explanation. Thus I do not agree with the general tendency in clas-

¹ Boccaccio, *Genealogia deorum gentilium*, liber XIV, caput 19. For Plato's imputed reservations against only bad poets Boccaccio expresses warm sympathy: "Ego autem non urbe, sed orbe tales exterminandos fore existimo – indeed I think they ought to be not expelled, but exterminated."

² *Rep.* 607 a2-3.

³ Plato's oeuvre contains plenty of positive references to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, such as *Symp.* 195 d4-5, *Phaedo* 112 a2-3, *Rep.* III 389 e4-9, *Rep.* III 390 d4-5, *Rep.* VI 501 b6-7, *Laws* III 681 e1 – 682 a5, *Laws* X 904 e4, etc. Also Hesiod is sometimes approvingly cited in the dialogues, e.g. *Rep.* V 466 c1-3, *Laws* IV 718 e5 – 719 a2. To be sure, both Homer and Hesiod are also quite often cited with disapproval by Plato, especially in books II and III of the *Republic*. The same goes for Pindar and other Greek poets: quotations are found all over the Platonic dialogues, both positive and negative ones.

⁴ *Rep.* X 607 a5-6.

⁵ E.g. Cornford 1945, pp. 321-322, Else 1986, pp. 3-5, and many others.

sical philology to object to psychological analysis with regard to Plato and Platonism on the grounds that this type of research “will hardly satisfy anyone who is convinced of Plato’s having a well-balanced personality”.⁶ To this typical remark many replies are possible, of which the most important is perhaps that depth-psychological explanations are not necessarily at variance with the value and dignity of their object, be this a theory or a person. Secondly, at least from a common-sense point of view it cannot be denied that Platonic philosophy, including Platonic art theory with its rigorous censorship and suppression of free speech, is somewhat unbalanced, if not weird. While acknowledging that psychological explanations should of course never serve as an excuse to neglect accurate research of what Plato attempts to convey philosophically, I think it is worthwhile to look into some of the more peculiar aspects of his philosophy from a Jungian perspective. In our investigation we will pay special attention to the question why it is that Plato turns so vehemently against dramatic art forms.

II – Platonic Art Theory in a Nutshell

In what follows only a brief and simplified account of Platonic art theory can be presented.⁷ Incidentally, I find this ancient art theory rather brilliant, but this by no means implies that I share Plato’s opinion concerning the desirability of art censorship. Two things have to be distinguished: on the one hand there is Plato’s analysis of what art essentially *is* – to my mind this analysis is constructive and worthwhile –, and on the other there is the policy on art which Plato recommends. Anyone who cares even a little bit about democracy will find this policy unacceptable.

A common, though inaccurate,⁸ reading of Plato’s views on art is the following. According to Plato – it is said – art, including literature, has a low ontological status. It is mere mimesis, ‘trivial imitation’ that is. Being mimesis, art is at two removes from True Reality (the transcendent world of the eternal Forms), or in other words, art is just a copy of a copy, and therefore it is necessarily untrue and cannot but have a bad moral effect on its public.

One of the disadvantages of this still popular reading is that it depicts Platonic art theory as rather naively inconsistent, since Plato definitely does not always speak with disapproval about art. On many occasions he makes it clear

⁶ Verdenius 1978, p. 268.

⁷ For details and full references see Kardaun 2000.

⁸ These untenable and rather shallow older views on Platonic art theory, that are unfortunately still found in many (art historical) handbooks, are deserted by the majority of scholars in the field of ancient philosophy and aesthetics. See Palumbo 2008, pp. 9-153; De Rijk² 2008 [2006], pp. 310-311; De Rijk 2002a, p. 22; De Rijk 2002b, p. 135; Rowe 2002, p. 300; Petersen 2000, pp. 19-35; Kardaun 2000 and 1993; Koller 1980 and 1954; and many others.

that works of art can be ‘true’⁹ and benefit society.¹⁰ Also it is quite evident that Plato acknowledges that literature and art can play a positive and important role in education.¹¹ Naturally we do not wish to have Plato contradicting himself in claiming on the one hand that art is necessarily untrue and bad for compelling, ontological reasons, merely in virtue of its being mimetic, and on the other that some works of art can nevertheless be true and worthwhile, in spite of their being mimetic. That would be rather silly.

The problem in the older readings is connected closely with a misunderstanding of the key term *mimesis*, as if this Greek word meant ‘(trivial) imitation’. But linguistic research¹² has shown that in Plato’s oeuvre – as in ancient Greek literature in general – the focal meaning of ‘mimesis’ is not ‘imitation’ but ‘representation’.¹³ Therefore, though it is true that Plato regards art, including literature, as essentially mimetic and also that he holds at least some works

⁹ Mind: ‘true’ not in the sense that they faithfully copy concrete reality, but in the sense that they represent something of the eternal Forms. E.g. μῦθοι– ‘literary stories’ – are always fictional, but this does not necessarily prevent them from being true in a higher sense. Cf. *Rep.* II 377 ff, where Plato distinguishes between fiction which is ‘true’ and fiction which is not, and where he suggests that ‘untrue’ fictional representations of the gods are to be rejected under any circumstances, whereas ‘true’ fictional representations may sometimes turn out to be acceptable. A nice example of traditional literary fiction that is explicitly declared to be ‘true’ by Plato is found in *Laws* III 680-682. And of course we may safely assume that Plato’s many myths of his own, in which the gods always appear as the source of good things only – such as the myth of Er (*Rep.* X 614-621) or Plato’s reconstruction of what happened before our time in the golden days of Cronos (*Plt.* 269-274; *Laws* IV 713 f.) –, convey a higher kind of truth as well, even though they cannot be said to be literally true. For the relation between Platonic myth and higher truth, see also Zeller 1859, pp. 361-363.

¹⁰ E.g. *Ion* 533-6; *Meno* 99; *Phdr.* 244-5; *Laws* III 682. Even in the notoriously anti-poetic third book of the *Republic* Plato gives us an example of literary fiction that benefits society. He brings up an old myth from the traditional poetic repertoire which he strongly wishes to be universally believed in the ideal state, namely that all men are actually born from Mother Earth; they are to honour their mother, that is their native country, and to consider themselves as brothers. To some men, however, the god who made them added gold, whereas for the creation of others he used less precious kinds of metal; hence the state’s natural hierarchy (*Rep.* III 414 b8 – 415 c7).

¹¹ In *Rep.* II 376 e2 – III 402 a4 Plato discusses what kinds of literature and music are likely to produce good warriors. He approaches his subject *ex negativo* in that he talks mainly about his reasons for prohibiting the greater part of existing works. At the same time, however, he makes it crystal clear that literature and music, once they are properly purged, are of paramount importance to the development and maintenance of the ideal state: art works are necessary tools to mould young, pre-philosophical souls and make them receptive of Platonic philosophy.

¹² See Palumbo 2008, pp. 9-26 and *passim*; Kardaun 2000, pp. 137-143; Petersen 2000, *passim*; Kardaun 1993, *passim*; Dalfen 1974, p. 196. Also Christopher Rowe, who in 1994 (pp. 222-223) and 1997 (pp. 402-418) was still hesitant, seems to have been won over (Rowe 2002, p. 300).

¹³ Mind that there is no English equivalent of general application for the Greek word μίμησις. Therefore, depending on the context, different renderings may be needed, varying from ‘representing’ to ‘reflecting’, ‘expressing’, ‘mirroring’, ‘copying’ and ‘imitating’. However, it is important to keep in mind that the ancient Greek word μίμησις does not have any intrinsic connotation of triviality or superficiality. Insofar as μίμησις can be rendered by ‘(trivial) imitation’ at all this is brought about by the context. To give an example: when a bad flute-player wants to be mistaken for a good one, he “should try to imitate (μιμητέον) good players in the

of art in contempt as being nothing but a copy of a copy, it cannot be their mimetic quality in itself that makes these works of art mere imitation.

To understand Platonic art theory it is imperative to consider Plato's sophisticated use of the concept of mimesis ('representation'). In the *Republic* Plato tells us that all poetry is mimetic – meaning that the essence of literature consists in its representing something in a non-discursive, immediate, picture-like way –,¹⁴ but that we nonetheless have to distinguish between decent, narrative poetry,¹⁵ which is simply mimetic, and offensive, mimetic poetry,¹⁶ which is extra mimetic or mimetic in a double sense: when compared to plain narration mimetic poetry contains an extra pictorial element. Narrative poetry may occasionally succeed in faithfully representing the eternal Forms, but mimetic poetry never does; instead of representing the Forms themselves, mimetic poetry represents only copies of the Forms in an inessential way. In other words, it is at two removes from True Reality and therefore nothing but imitation.¹⁷

This last category, mimetic poetry, has to do with direct speech, or more generally with impersonating or acting. In practice, when Plato speaks of 'mimetic poetry', it is chiefly drama he seems to have in mind (and to a lesser

outward appearances of their art" (Xenophon Mem. I, VII 2). This is one of the relatively rare occasions where the translation 'imitate' is appropriate, but plainly the connotation of superficiality is brought about not by the word μιμητέον, but by the explicitly mentioned "outward appearances of the art" (τὰ ἔξω τῆς τέχνης).

¹⁴ Note that pictures can be pictures in words. Cf. *Soph.* 234 c6, where Plato speaks of εἰδωλα λεγόμενα, translated by L. M. de Rijk as 'images in speech' (De Rijk 1986, p. 82). Incidentally, Aristotle categorizes literature (and art in general) in very much the same way as Plato, namely as an image-producing profession. According to Aristotle literature resembles painting in that literature, just like painting, is pictorial in the sense that it does not argue logically to make a point, but presents images (*Poetics* 25.1460 b7-9).

¹⁵ With narrative poetry (ἄνευ μιμήσεως ἀπλῆ δυήγησις, *Rep.* III 394 a7-b1) Plato means poetry that does not contain direct speech and is hence not mimetic in form. Some lines further in the *Republic* we are told that narrative poetry tends to have a decent subject-matter, whereas poetry which conveys its messages either wholly (drama) or partly (epic) through mimesis practically always has a morally bad subject-matter (*Rep.* III 394e – 398b). The combination of direct speech with a largely bad content makes this so-called 'mimetic poetry' offensive and dangerous. Mimetic poetry is therefore categorically forbidden in Plato's ideal state, whereas narrative poetry is only heavily censored (*Rep.* X 595 a – 608b).

¹⁶ Among the expressions that Plato uses to designate 'mimetic poetry' we find for example (sc. ποίησις) ὄση μιμητική (*Rep.* X 595 a5).

¹⁷ In most of the older readings of the *Republic* (Havelock, Diès, Verdenius, Copleston, Else, and others) the distinction between poetry in general and mimetic poetry in particular is neglected or misunderstood. As far as I can see, in modern times W.K.C. Guthrie was the first to recognize the crucial difference between literary works that are at one remove from Reality, since they represent the Forms directly, and literary works that are at two removes from Reality, since they only represent the concreta in their concrete ontic status (Guthrie 1975, pp. 545-8). A nice detail is that long before Guthrie the Neo-Platonist Proclus seems to have already noticed the conspicuous fact that Plato does not categorically condemn literature as such, but only a special sub-category, namely so-called 'mimetic literature', i.e. literature that is even more mimetic than literature normally is; for details of this reference, see Hub 2009. The suggestion that Plato uses the expression 'mimetic poetry' in a tautological way is no option at all, see Kardaun 2000, pp. 144-158 and Kardaun 1993, pp. 63-65.

extent also the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, particularly those parts in which Homer uses direct speech).¹⁸ Plato warns against mimetic art in general¹⁹ and drama in particular, and wants to have it forbidden in his ideal state.

Let me try to explain how the Platonic system works by giving an example.²⁰ The doctrine of Forms is well known: there is only one paradigmatic Form ‘Virtue’, but there are many concrete examples – or to use the technical term, instances – of Virtue, consisting in for example virtuous acts. According to Plato his much admired teacher Socrates is himself an instance of the eternal Form ‘Virtue’. Now, if you are an artist, you may represent Socrates through a hymn, praising his virtuous qualities as they really are. In that case you are representing Virtue itself through its instance Socrates, and in that case Plato thinks your poem is true and acceptable, and probably even useful in society. But if you think you can allow yourself the liberty of representing Socrates on stage, with a beard and with individual idiosyncrasies, then Plato considers your art to be at two removes from Reality, since in that case you are representing Socrates in an inessential way, namely in his lowest appearance and only insofar as he is not an instance of Virtue. Thus, your art does not represent the eternal Form ‘Virtue’; it is merely a poor imitation of one of the many instances of Virtue.

To recapitulate: all poetry is mimetic, but some poetic products are more mimetic than others. So-called ‘mimetic poetry’ is at two removes from True Reality and is therefore categorically forbidden in Plato’s ideal state. In practice, mimetic poetry is identified by Plato mainly with drama and (parts of) epic.

This seems understandable enough. However, to make things more complicated, even if artists happen to produce the very best of art works, art works that are direct and faithful copies of True Reality, even then these works must be strictly censored in Plato’s ideal state (mind: not categorically forbidden, but still put under severe restrictions). For example, even if Hesiod’s story about what Cronos did to his father Uranos – namely that Cronos castrated him

¹⁸ For reasons that are too complicated to explain here Plato sees epic poetry as a mixed genre, both in form and in content. Epic is not altogether bad. However, because it is not altogether good either, Homer too is categorized as ‘mimetic’ and banned from the ideal city, unless he can prove that the city needs his poetry (*Rep.* X 607c). The banishment of Homer is not at variance with Plato’s many positive references to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*: being a philosopher who has seen the light Plato is of course capable of discerning between ‘good’ epic verse lines and ‘bad’ ones. The thing is that on the whole Homer does not give an accurate picture of eternal Truth.

¹⁹ Of course, there are more mimetic arts than just mimetic poetry, but in this paper we confine ourselves to poetry. By and large, Plato treats all the arts in the same, logical way. For Plato’s attitude towards music, see Kardaun 2000, pp. 149-150.

²⁰ This example is constructed by analogy to *Soph.* 267 a5-e2, where Plato treats the difference between the true philosopher (ὁ σοφός) and the would-be philosopher (ὁ σοφιστής). To appear wise, the latter performs an act: he misleadingly imitates the external behaviour of the former.

– were true, this would be something to keep concealed from the public.²¹ For what reason?

The answer is best illustrated by a famous passage from the *Laws*. In this dialogue the Athenian philosopher, who leads the discussion and who is generally regarded to act as Plato's mouthpiece, informs us

“that when a poet takes his seat on the Muse's tripod, his judgement takes leave of him; like a fountain he allows to flow out freely whatever comes in, and his art being mimesis, he must often contradict his own utterances when representing men of opposite dispositions, without knowing whether these or the other things of what he has said are true. But this is not what the legislator should do with regard to the law, giving two accounts of one thing; he must always give one account of one thing.” (*Laws* 719 c3-d3, translation taken from A. E. Taylor, with some adaptations by MK.)

It has often been suggested that Plato simply had something against artists and that he is just being unpleasant to them again here, accusing them of inconsistency for no particular reason; but if you read this short passage in its context and keep in mind that ‘mimesis’ means ‘representation’, it makes perfect sense. The major part of the *Laws* is – unsurprisingly – about law-giving. Plato is explaining here what kind of laws the philosopher-legislator should issue. Well, the legislator should not issue laws in the way in which a poet produces poems: laws should be plain and unambiguous, so that they cannot be misunderstood, whereas literary products apparently possess puzzling qualities which according to Plato makes them unfit for uncensored distribution.

At first sight this may seem somewhat surprising, since it is obvious from the context of the *Laws* that we are dealing here with the very best kind of poetry, namely poetry that is at only one remove from True Reality and a faithful copy of the Forms. According to Plato gods and goddesses are without deceit, so we can be positive that the Muse reveals nothing but the Truth. Also we have here an artist who does not attempt to think all by himself, but who “like a fountain allows to flow out freely whatever comes in” – meaning: who does not spoil the divine gift of the Muse with uncalled-for changes or speculative additions of his own. In other words, the artist in question definitely passes the divine message on to society unaltered; his art being mimesis, he simply represents Truth as revealed to him by the Muse, and does not make selections or adjustments of any kind.²²

Nonetheless, this kind of divine Truth-revealing has to be checked by a philosophical censor. This is not because the artistic product in the passage

²¹ *Rep.* II 378.

²² That (real) poetry originates directly from the Muse is an often recurring theme in Plato's work; see *Apology* 22 b-c, *Io* 534 b-c, *Meno* 99, *Phaedrus* 244-5. Of course it is also a perfectly common view in Antiquity.

cited above is at two removes from (or otherwise a misrepresentation of) Reality, since this is not the case, but because of a lack of proper receptiveness on the part of the public, of you and me, so to speak. In Plato's opinion society cannot cope with Truth. The one thing Plato is afraid of is that the divine Truth will be profaned by vulgarization and misunderstanding.

In Plato's eyes artists are unable to determine what should and what should not be made public. Even insofar as they might be willing to check themselves, their lack of knowledge makes them unfit for this responsible task. Their job is to be inspired by the Muse and to deliver what they are told as purely as possible. Thus they are often compelled to contradict themselves when they depict various answers to one and the same question. This is because, as Plato points out a few lines further down, to depict a particular line of conduct means recommending it, for example a poet might depict a prodigal funeral at one time, and a miserly one at another, thus giving us contradictory advice about what we should spend on such occasions.²³ As for the poet, he has no idea which one of his contradictory suggestions is the right one. Though at times, when he is under divine inspiration, he receives rays of insight directly from above, these insights are not integrated in any comprehensive vision of Truth. Therefore they remain fragmentary and unreliable, both to the poet himself – who apart from his isolated gift is as ignorant as anyone else²⁴ – and to the average audience. It is important to notice that the contradictions connected with inspired poetry exist only on the concrete level; on the part of the Muse there can be no inconsistency at all. The prodigal and the miserly funeral may both be correct in their respective contexts – in fact they must be, if they are the Muse's work –, but it requires knowledge to recognise the higher Truth behind the superficially contradictory details of poetic compositions.²⁵

To the average, non-philosophical public all this is confusing, misleading and at times alarming, because they lack the means to see what is behind the superficial details of literary works. They tend to draw false conclusions from

²³ *Laws* IV 719 d-e.

²⁴ See *Apol.* 22 a-c. This is not to say that Plato demands that artists should possess knowledge or even right beliefs. (This is a widespread misapprehension: e.g. Guthrie 61989 [1975], pp. 547 f.; Else 1986, pp. 44-6.) Plato draws a clear line between the inspiration of the poet and of the philosopher (*Phdr.* 244a – 252c). Poets should produce poetry, and philosophers philosophy, and neither should try to overstep the line between them (*Phdr.* 245a combined with *Phd.* 61b and *Rep.* II 378 e – 379a). It would not only be useless, but also superfluous to demand a philosophical attitude from poets: precisely to make clear that poetry is independent from any form of τέχνη, god (i.e. the particular god involved) made the very worst of all poets compose perhaps the most beautiful paean ever (*Ion* 534 d-e). Doubtless Plato opines that – good, non-mimetic – poets should be given the opportunity to follow their inspiration, since otherwise the ideal city will have no poetry of value at all. Only, in case they create something that is not suitable for everybody's ears, it is the philosopher's responsibility to see to it that it is not made public (*Rep.* II 377 b-c; *Laws* IX 858 d – 859a).

²⁵ Cf. *Plt.* 269b ff. where it is stated that many different poetical stories about our mythological past contain fragments of Truth. However, it takes a philosopher to reconstruct their fundamental unity.

literature, as a result of which they are at risk to behave inappropriately. Therefore, it is Plato's conviction, the philosopher should intervene and act as literary censor, instruct the citizens about what to read and hear, and save them from any possible harmful, misleading, unbearable, and premature insights they might gain from reading the 'wrong' literary works.

III – Some Jungian Observations

So far, so good. We have here an art theory that – at least in its abstract form – is interesting and coherent.

That is to say: to my mind the Platonic answer to the question as to what art essentially is, is satisfactory enough. I think, for instance, that it is a characteristic of (real) art that it reveals a kind of higher truth, as Plato suggests (a truth that can hardly be grasped intellectually, however).²⁶ Instead of 'higher truth' we could perhaps say that art represents not concrete, everyday reality as such, but a collective psychic reality behind the concrete that is somehow meaningful to us. In this respect I find persuasive the Platonic image of the artist sitting on the tripod of the Muse: art is only to a small extent created by the conscious personality of the artist. In order to produce something artistically worthwhile, the artist has to be inspired by 'the Muse'. In a manner of speaking one could say that 'the Muse' is the real creator of works of art, or, in depth-psychological terminology, that art is basically rooted in and derived from the collective unconscious. And undeniably, insofar as artistic products happen to be only trivial imitations of outward reality, their *raison d'être* is questionable. (In practice it may not always be easy to judge, though, whether a certain work of art is artistically worthwhile or just something trivial, especially since art works tend to show their depth only after some time.)

We have already mentioned certain rules of Platonic art censorship. However offensive, they certainly make sense as an indispensable means to control Plato's utopian society: in view of Plato's overall system it is clear that in his society art should be put under severe restrictions.

We have only to recall how the Platonic system is built up. High up in the Platonic hierarchy of being we find True Reality, namely the transcendent domain of the Forms. The Forms are beautiful, perfect, immaterial, unchanging, eternal entities. In the *Timaeus* they are said to belong to the masculine gender, though this may be no more than a metaphor. According to Plato, achieving an intellectual vision of the eternal Forms is the highest goal of human life. Only very few philosophers may hope to attain this happy state of mystical experience. Next comes reasoning or the use of logos; reasoning is highly esteemed

²⁶ The insights conveyed through art works are, I think, not primarily of an intellectual nature, as this type of insight is for the most part neither empirically nor logically testable and therefore not an object of the sciences. Instead of 'higher truth' it is perhaps better to speak of 'meaningfulness'.

by Plato, but takes second rank, since it is a reflective and therefore an indirect way of recognizing Truth, though eventually it may lead to direct vision. Then, in the third place, we find the emotions. These are to be avoided. Needless to say that they are regarded as feminine.²⁷ And finally, in the lowest of all places, sense perception is located. Sense perception is even more base than the emotions: it is animal-like.

The object of both the emotions and the senses is defined by Plato as non-being, namely as the absence of Reality, whereas – as you may remember – the object of intellectual vision and reasoning is True Reality or Being with a capital B.

To cut the story short: what Platonism is directed at – something which is especially manifest in the *Republic* –, is establishing a kind of intellectual fascism, both politically (in the state) and psychologically (in the psyche of the individual). Very briefly summarized: logos should reign at all costs, and emotions should be repressed whenever they are likely to come into conflict with reason.

It may be helpful to illustrate this with some examples of Platonic practice. The Socrates figure, who plays a major role in the Platonic dialogues, is always very proud of his (real or supposed?) independence from emotion. In the *Phaedo* we read that a few hours before his death Socrates is visited by his wife, the notorious Xanthippe, who has come to the prison to take leave of him. She has brought their little son with her (their youngest; according to some sources two older sons have died previously) and she is weeping, and so on. Instead of saying goodbye to her, Socrates treats her like an object, ordering over her head that she be taken home. From the Platonic perspective the cold and imperturbable attitude with which Socrates always meets his wife's emotional claims, whether they are justified or not, is highly satisfactory. We find a similar lack of normal human feeling in the unconfirmed story of Socrates's response to the death of his son Sophroniscos. When Socrates is told that his son has died, he does not see any reason to interrupt his teaching. Only after his teaching is done, he declares with calm discipline that the time has come "to do justice to Sophroniscos as the law demands."²⁸ And lastly a telling story about Plato himself may be mentioned, namely that he apparently once decided not to punish a slave, however deserved the punishment was, merely because he detected a feeling of anger in himself: apparently he did not want to run the risk of letting emotion have the slightest influence on his behaviour.²⁹

²⁷ Cf. *Phaedo* 117 d-e, where Socrates reproves one of his young admirers for his womanish emotions: weeping at someone's death, Socrates's own in this case, is to be regarded as a feminine, immature and unhelpful response.

²⁸ These and other examples of Socrates's attitude towards his own and other people's emotions are discussed more extensively by M.-L. von Franz in the context of her analysis of two reported dreams of Socrates (von Franz 1985).

²⁹ Antiquity offers us several different sources for this story: see Zeller 1859, p. 318 n. 2.

In view of all this, it is not surprising that Plato should be suspicious of free artistic expression. The normal compensatory quality of art in the Platonic context automatically becomes a subversive one. Platonism is repressive to such a degree that it cannot afford to allow for any alternative views of life.

Plato's ambition to eliminate any compensatory influences goes astonishingly far: not only does Plato recommend that artistic expression be strictly controlled, he even wants to regulate the dream life of the citizens in his ideal state. Plato believes that by concentrating on worthy and beautiful thoughts before going to sleep one is able to avoid "dream visions that are unlawful".³⁰ It is imperative to make this effort, since otherwise something terrible may happen: as you fall asleep, the beast in you awakens. It shakes its filthy head and will do its utmost to gratify its instincts. Since it knows no shame, Plato warns, it will do anything, for example sleep with the mother.³¹ Plato seems to hint here at the Oedipus motif, possibly more specifically at Sophocles's *Oedipus rex*, a stage play that must have been well known to him. In *Rep.* III he tells us the same kind of things about actors: they know no shame, stop at nothing and will represent literally anything on stage.

This brings us to our last point: at the beginning of this paper the question was raised why it is that Platonic philosophy turns so vehemently against dramatic poetry.

Officially, having to do with direct speech, dramatic poetry is supposed to be at two removes from True Reality. It is Plato's conviction that drama must be rejected categorically because it is mere imitation: its twice mimetic character makes it fundamentally trivial and untrue.

We have to ask ourselves, however, why Plato should develop a literary theory that is specifically targeted against drama and disqualifies it *a priori* as trivial and untrue. An answer in terms of 'direct speech' or 'acting' will not do, since there is no reason why it should be impossible to represent Truth in direct speech or on stage.³² On the contrary, from any viewpoint except Plato's,

³⁰ *Rep.* IX 572 a8.

³¹ Considering how it is treated, it is not surprising that Plato's poor beast is somewhat out of control. Using the same metaphor Jung remarks: "Too much of the animal distorts the civilized man, too much civilization makes sick animals" (Jung 1953, p. 28).

³² Of course, the fact that in drama the plots of mythical stories are not simply narrated but represented on stage makes it particularly difficult for the audience to resist being influenced. Any audience will be much more involved in what happens before their eyes than when the same story is told in indirect speech. However, Plato's disapproval of drama cannot originate exclusively from its directness. Cf. what Plato decrees about music. Like drama, music influences its audience in an irrational and very direct manner. Therefore music without words (*ἄνευ λόγου ῥυθμός τε καὶ ἁρμονία*) is not allowed in Plato's city, since one never knows what it will arouse in its listeners. However, music that harmoniously accompanies a valuable text is particularly esteemed. In other words, its direct influence, once it is controlled and recognized as positive, makes music an even more valuable element in the Platonic education system than if it were less direct (*Rep.* III 398-403 and IV 424; *Laws* II 653-654 and 669-670). The same goes for Plato's use of the dramatic form in his own dialogues. As he is convinced of conveying Truth with a capital T his own use of direct speech is of course no problem to him at all. In

drama is very instructive: it shows us important aspects of the *condition humaine* from an artistic perspective, thus compensating our normal, everyday view of things. But as we have seen it is an intrinsic feature of Platonism that it is allergic to alternative points of view. Plato has no use for compensatory activities in his ideal state. He regards them as dangerously subversive. And indeed, within the Platonic system this subversiveness applies especially to drama. Dramatic insights cannot be accepted as true by Plato since they fundamentally undermine his philosophy. Drama offers exactly those insights into human life in general and Greek culture in particular which Plato wants to repress.

This may be illustrated by some examples from Greek tragedy. In Aeschylus's famous play *Agamemnon* from the year 458 BCE a certain form of rationalistic decision-making which seems to have been gaining popularity in fifth-century Greece and which Platonic philosophy strongly favours, is unmistakably depicted as morally and practically wrong. King Agamemnon is forced by powers beyond his control to choose between either forsaking his duty as the leader of a military expedition or killing his own daughter. He decides to pursue his military duties and sacrifices his daughter. In Platonism predicaments such as Agamemnon's do not present specific moral problems. Genuine conflicts of duty cannot exist, since rationally speaking there is always a best solution: in a situation where one line of conduct appears to be more reasonable than another one should make sure to choose the most reasonable one, and in those cases where two or more solutions are equally good (or bad), one may choose any of these and still be morally perfect, because logically speaking one could not have done better. Reasonable agents will always recognize what is the best thing for them to do. Once they have rationally decided what is best, they will automatically act accordingly, and lead a life free of moral guilt. Thus, virtue is a matter of knowledge, moral problems are to be solved through reason, and guilt can always be avoided. As long as agents do their best to reason properly, they cannot possibly sin. At the very most they may be mistaken about something, but of course that is not something for which they can be blamed.

As Martha C. Nussbaum has pointed out,³³ Aeschylus's tragedy *Agamemnon* shows us exactly the opposite: sometimes an unavoidable choice between two morally bad possibilities may impose itself. Even if agents are wise enough to choose the lesser evil, they remain responsible for the wrong that they commit through their neglect of the competing ethical claim. If they fail to accept this responsibility, they will be punished. According to the implicit logic of the play, the tragic protagonist Agamemnon is to blame not so much for the choice

fact, the dramatic presentation helps him to be even more persuasive than he would have been without this extra tool.

³³ Nussbaum 1986, pp. 25-50. For a different view on this subject, see Williams 1993, pp. 132-136.

that he makes – rationally speaking the death of just one person is of course less bad than the possible destruction of a whole army –, but for the strange lack of anguish with which he performs his horrible sacrifice. He does not feel guilt in a situation where he apparently should. He seems not to experience the agonizing conflict imposed on him. In order not to suffer he successfully represses his former affection. He is even overcome by a kind of eagerness to collaborate with evil: once he has decided to kill his daughter, he treats her more harshly than the situation requires. It is this neurotic lack of feeling that makes him arrogant and insensitive to later dangers, as the course of events in the play show us. From the moment Agamemnon gives in to the cold frenzy that creeps up on him while sacrificing his own child he slowly dehumanizes, and this leads in a subtle way to his eventual destruction. It is obvious that Plato would not like such a play.

My second example is *Medea* by Euripides (431 BCE). Euripides was notorious – later became famous – for his realistic female figures. Indeed, *Medea* is a play about feminine psychology, but as I see it, it depicts not the psychological structure of Greek women but of the Greek *anima*. When Jason declares about Medea’s killing her (and his) own children that “no Greek woman would ever do such a thing” (1339-40), he is certainly right. Medea is not a woman. She is the granddaughter of Helios and a supernatural being: she is the exotic, hot-tempered and dangerous *anima* of the Greek male, represented by the Jason figure. From Euripides’s artistic point of view, Jason has a very narrow-minded, cold, plain, and greedy personality. He uses Medea to achieve things through witchcraft, and rejects her quite logically – he thinks – once he can no longer profit from her. It is well known how the story ends: eventually the ambitious Greek hero is destroyed by his foreign *anima* and her witchcraft. Obviously this is not a representation of reality that Plato would embrace either.

Finally Sophocles’s play *Oedipus rex* is worth mentioning (written in the 420s BCE). Plato refers to this play, and to the Oedipus motif in general, more than once. Its theme can be summarized as follows: the irrational cannot be controlled, and it is dangerous to try too hard to free oneself from numinous constraints, since this can easily lead to opposite results. Oedipus’s problem is that he has a bad relationship with the unconscious. He is always impatient, irritated, refuses to listen to his fellow human beings or to the gods. When the oracle at Delphi tells him that he will kill his father and wed his mother he simply ‘decides’ to do otherwise. He pedantically calls himself the child of the goddess Tyche: he makes his own fate, he thinks.

Oedipus rex offers the distressing insight that seemingly rational, valiant and independent men are no less vulnerable than others to the traps and dangers of unconscious complexes. Superficially, Oedipus seems to live a life according to his own conscious plans, but actually he behaves according to extremely primitive archetypal patterns. The Oedipus motif contains a warning. Oedipus is the prototype of modern man who more than is actually justified thinks that

he has freed himself of tradition, the gods and the irrational in general. His unjustified trust in his own paternal, rational powers makes him regress into a state of extreme dependence on the mother complex. Just as the oracle predicted, he kills his father and lives with his mother. Thus he tragically achieves the opposite of that at which his rationalistic ambition was driving. In the world depicted by Sophocles in his *Oedipus rex* the traditional, capricious gods of Greek mythology and the irrational have the last word. That must be a gloomy picture to Plato, who set himself the task of establishing a utopian state based on rationality alone.³⁴³⁵

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³⁴ I am grateful to Prof. Dr. J.W. McAllister and to Dr. Joke Spruyt for their advice about the English.

³⁵ An earlier version of this article has been published in 1997: Why Plato Banished the Artist. Some Jungian Observations. In Frederico Pereira (ed.), *Literature and Psychoanalysis. Proceedings of the Thirteenth International Conference on Literature and Psychoanalysis*. Lisbon: Instituto Superior de Psicologia Aplicada, pp. 197-204.

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