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The unacknowledged legacy: Plato, the *Republic* and cultural policy*

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INTRODUCTION - WHY PLATO?

The Greek philosopher Plato (427-347 BC) was born in Athens and grew up during the Peloponnesian war (431-404) that concluded with the victory of Athens' long-time rival Sparta. Towards the end of the IV century, Plato joined the circle of Socrates' disciples. Socrates proved a most powerful influence on the young Plato, who went on to re-elaborate some of the central ideas of Socratic thought into what can be arguably described as the most influential philosophical system in Western civilization¹. Although the influence of Plato's teachings has been undisputedly far-reaching and persistent over time, his ideas have never, to my knowledge, been discussed with a view of assessing the extent to which recent and old discourses of cultural policy are indebted to the Athenian philosopher. The present paper, therefore, aims at filling this gap and to showing that, as a matter of fact, many of the ideas and beliefs that can be seen at work in European cultural policy from its very inception are profoundly indebted to Plato's ideas on art and poetry, and to his elaboration of the role of the arts in education and political life.

In particular, the present discussion will demonstrate that Plato's infamous attack on poetry and his banning of the poets from his ideal city - and the philosophical

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¹ Plato's profound scepticism for the democratic form of political organization is also linked to his admiration for Socrates. Socrates was condemned to death in 399 by the newly restored democratic regime, following the oligarchic reign of the Thirty that seized power after Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian war in 404.

justifications for such a rejection of the arts – have given birth to a very lively and articulated intellectual tradition purporting that the arts, because of their corrupting potential, are dangerous to the individual and society as a whole, and must therefore be regulated and censored by the State. Naddaff (2002, xi), indeed, contends that “Plato is the founding father of Western literary censorship”. And yet, at the same time, the opposite (but only apparently contradictory) notion of the educational and formative function of the arts has equally found in Plato an ardent proponent.

Indeed, precisely in this respect, this paper advances an interpretation of the Platonic legacy that counters the prevalent accepted interpretation that sees the Platonic view of poetry and art as mainly negative and diametrically opposed to the more positive and optimistic Aristotelian conception of art. Aristotle was one of Plato’s own disciples and, according to a very commonly held view, in his *Poetics* he is credited with having “rescued the theory of poetry as mimetic form from the Platonic consequences, whilst in principle accepting all the major distinctions Plato had made” (Schaper 1968, 55). Aristotle indeed developed his aesthetic theory around the same central issues that were first introduced by Plato. With regards to poetry and drama in particular², Aristotle agrees with Plato that art is mimetic and that it has a deep emotional impact. However, whereas – as we will see - Plato felt that the passions and human dilemmas witnessed by an audience at a tragic performance could have seriously damaging effects on their character - Aristotle believed that the ‘pity and fear’ experienced through the stage could have a cathartic (and therefore beneficial) effect on the spectator. In other words, “Aristotle takes the view that the emotionality of poetry cleanses instead of corrupts” (Asmis 1992, 357). Hence, as Nettleship (1962, 343) maintains, Plato’s treatment of art “presents us with the reverse side of the picture of art given by Aristotle in the *Poetics*”.

However, this paper will attempt to show that Plato’s theory of poetry and its effects on the individual and society is by far more complex than this

² Poetry in classical Greece was transmitted orally, mainly via the performances of the rhapsodes. The distinction that we make between poetry and drama would therefore not have made sense to the Greek sensibility.

interpretation would lead to believe. Therefore, I will attempt to show that the traditional contraposition between Platonic and Aristotelian views, and thus, between a view of the arts and poetry as corrupting or purifying, is rather less clear-cut than such a simplistic juxtaposition would lead to assume.

In order to achieve this, the paper will trace the influence of Platonic thought over time. In particular, it will attempt to show how - through a Greek-Roman mediation (represented by personalities such as Tertullian and Augustine) - Platonic ideas have been exerting a clear influence over Western civilization. More specifically, they have instigated, at certain particular historical times, very clear and focussed strategies of cultural polemic aiming at introducing changes in cultural policy. The discussion will ultimately demonstrate that what is effectively behind a number of instances of ‘negative cultural policy’ – culminating, for instance, in the Puritan attack on the stage and the consequent ban of theatre in England in 1642 - can essentially be brought back to the fundamental criticisms moved by Plato against the arts, albeit in the new and modified guises that they assumed in the course of time.

I will also argue that, far from being limited to what I refer here as ‘negative cultural policy’³, and to the justification of state censorship of the arts, Plato’s influence on the cultural policy discourse is much more penetrating and subtle than is currently given credit for. As this paper will show, the more ‘positive’ Platonic ideas and values - especially the belief in the educational, formative and, in fact, transformative power of poetry and the stage - can be seen as operational in today’s cultural policy-making, and in particular in the recent trend towards what has been described as “instrumental cultural policy”. This is a label that refers to the growing popularity of policies for the cultural sector that conceive the arts not as the end of policy, but rather as a means towards the fulfilment of other, not artistic, policy-objectives (Vestheim 1994; Belfiore 2002).

³ The expression ‘negative cultural policy’ as used here does not imply a negative value judgement, but rather, it refers to non-proactive cultural policies. I use this label to indicate policies that, rather than promote certain types of artistic form or cultural activity, aim to discourage or forbid them. Bennett (1995, 202) in his review of cultural policy rationales identifies what we are calling ‘negative cultural policy’ as a typical example of governments’ first intervention in the cultural policy arena, whereby the aim was “to censor rather than support”.

PLATO THE PROPHET?

Having referred above to the broad-ranging influence of Plato's thought over Western civilization, it is useful to begin the present discussion with a brief review of the Platonic legacy, which will provide the background for the more specific discussion of Plato's criticism of the arts that will follow. Unsurprisingly, Plato has been accredited with being the very 'inventor' of philosophy, so much so that A. N. Whitehead once remarked that the entire European philosophical tradition could be characterised as "a series of footnotes to Plato" (quoted in Murray 1997, 1). As Nightingale (1995, 10) explains, Plato shared in a culture that had witnessed the flourishing of various kinds of abstract and analytical thinking, at the hands of pre-Socratic thinkers, mathematicians (and, more generally, scientists), and the sophists. However, before Plato came onto the Athenian intellectual scene, these various types of intellectuals, as well as poets, lawgivers and wise men in general, all belonged to a broad and un-specified category of 'sophoi' and 'sophistai'⁴. Nightingale (*Ibid.* and 60) indeed shows that the word φιλοσοφῆν (which could be translated as 'to philosophise') and the other terms deriving from the same root-word, only occur rarely before the V century BC, and even then, they were used to indicate intellectual cultivation in the broadest sense. The term only took the specialized and technical meaning that we attribute to it today once Plato appropriated it to describe his own intellectual enterprise, and the ethical model of the good life that follows from it.

Much of Plato's work can indeed be described as the attempt to propose a narrower and more specific definition of the term φιλοσοφῆν, an exercise that, as Richard Kraut (1992, 1) argues, eventually resulted in the creation of the discipline of philosophy as we know it. As we will see, this is just one of the numerous and diverse claims landed at Plato's door. It has been argued, indeed,

⁴ At this stage, the label of 'sophist' still had not acquired the pejorative sense that it eventually did as a result of Socrates and Plato's contempt for the group of intellectuals who began to provide, for money, philosophical and rhetorical tutoring to the Greek youth in the V and IV centuries BC.

that many aspects of Platonic thought anticipated much later theoretical positions and developments in a number of different spheres (Cohn 2000, 34).

Murray (1997, 2-3), for instance, argues that “Plato has been hailed as the originator of the Renaissance conception of the divinity of poetry, and of the romantic myth of the artist”. Indeed, ever since Plato formulated his theory of poetical inspiration, the figure of the ‘mad poet’, possessed by the creative ‘demon’, has entered the Western imagination, having a remarkable and long-lasting impact on the Western understanding of poetry (Weineck 1998, 19). One might also argue that the modern practice of subsidising artists and artistic production through public resources is built upon the acknowledgement of the ‘special nature’ of the artist, and the recognition of the contribution that his talent (or, indeed, ‘gift’) brings to the public sphere.

It is precisely on the basis of the vivid descriptions of poetic inspiration that can be found scattered in numerous Platonic writings (namely *Ion*, *Phaedrus*, *Apology*, and *Laws*) - which is of a nature clearly different from the kind of inspiration that Homer and Hesiod traditionally ascribed to the Muses - that commentators have found the evidence to claim that, in many ways, Plato prefigures psychoanalytical theories of poetical inspiration. According to Konstan (2004, 1) “it is a *commonplace* that the account of the soul that Plato develops in the *Phaedrus* and *Republic* is in certain respects analogous to the model or models elaborated by Freud and other theorists of modern psychoanalysis” (emphasis added). Micaela Janan (1994, 7), for instance, claims that Plato’s theory of the tripartite soul prefigures the tripartite psyche as mapped by both Freud and Lacan, and adds that all three thinkers “explicitly theorize a connection between desire and creative art”.

Plato’s alleged preludes of future theoretical developments do not end here. None other than Nietzsche, in his *The Birth of Tragedy* (2000, 78) attributes to Plato the invention of the modern literary genre *par excellence*, the novel, which he sees as the modern articulation of the Platonic dialogue. Cohn (2000, 39) goes one step further, and - on the premise that Plato’s writing on literature places great emphasis on “solitude as a state that presents a particular attraction for literature”

- suggests the possibility that Plato might have prophetically adumbrated the development of the realist and stream-of-consciousness novel of the nineteenth- and twentieth century.

Whether we accept this possibility as realistic or too far-fetched, the fact remains that very few personalities in Western civilization have exercised the same degree of fascination over later generations, or have enjoyed equal levels of interest and engagement with their thought as Plato has. Indeed, this brief review of the reflections engendered by the Platonic *opus*, whilst by no means exhaustive, is nevertheless representative of the enduring enthrallment of Western scholars with the Athenian philosopher.

The extent of Plato's influence, spanning over two and a half millennia is all the more remarkable in consideration of the fact that, unlike Aristotle (the other great philosopher of classical Greece), Plato never wrote anything especially devoted to the discussion of the arts and literature. His aesthetic ideas, thus, can only be reconstructed from references and digressions that are scattered throughout the *corpus* of Plato's writings (Murray 1997, 2). An obvious consequence of this is that Plato's discussions of the arts always take place in the broader context of discussions of matters ethical, metaphysical and political. The reason behind this state of affairs is that, in ancient Greece, art was not something that could be conceived of as independent from the ethical (and hence the political) dimension. Plato does not accord an autonomous value to the aesthetic sphere. In his view, it is only the rational faculties of man that can, via the means provided by philosophical reasoning, capture and comprehend the metaphysical and ethical order of the world. For any positive value to be ascribed to the arts, they must faithfully represent this order or incite us towards the necessary process of philosophical enquiry; otherwise, they must be altogether rejected. In Plato's (1993, 361, 607a) own words:

You should concede that Homer is a supreme poet and the original tragedian, but you should also recognise that the only poems we can admit into our community are hymns to the gods and eulogies of virtuous men. If you admit the entertaining Muse of lyric and epic poetry, then instead of law and the shared acceptance of reason as the best guide, the kings of your community will be pleasure and pain.

As Iris Murdoch (1977, 6-7) explains, “the Greek lacked what Bosanquet calls the ‘distinctively aesthetic standpoint’, as presumably everyone did with apparent impunity until 1750, and this being so their attitude to art tended to be rather more moralistic than formalistic, and this is also true of Aristotle”. Hence she concludes (*Ibid.*, 12) that for Plato “the aesthetic is the moral since it is of interest only in so far as it can provide therapy for the soul”. The watershed that Murdoch hints to here is the publication, in 1750, of Alexander Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica*, which first introduced the term, as well as the concept, of aesthetics (now intended as an independent sphere of enquiry) in the philosophical debate. As Tolstoy (1930, 91) put it in his *What is Art?*, “the ancients had not that conception of beauty separated from goodness which forms the basis and aim of aesthetics in our time”. The close inter-relation of the aesthetic and the moral is indeed something that we must take into account when considering the articulations of Platonic aesthetic thought.

Of all the Platonic dialogues, the *Republic* is arguably the most accomplished one (Abbagnano and Fornero 1986, 133), and the one that the present discussion will mainly focus on. The justification for this decision lies in the fact that this is the dialogue where Plato’s evaluation of art appears clearest and his rejection of poetry and drama sharpest. Furthermore, since the aim of the *Republic* is to answer the question “what is justice?” through the depiction of an ideally just city, this is the dialogue from which we can best reconstruct the role of the arts in society as envisaged by Plato. The *Republic* is indeed the dialogue that expresses Plato’s ideal cultural and educational policies, and it thus is the most relevant text for our discussion of the influence of Platonic philosophy over cultural policy.

PLATO’S ATTACK ON POETRY

As we have seen, Platonic thought has attracted, over time, sustained interest and response. However, there is little doubt that one of the most controversial aspects of Plato’s thought is the fierce and relentless criticism that he moves against the

arts⁵ (painting and dramatic poetry in particular) in Book 2 and 3, and culminating in the outright ostracism of poetry in Book 10. It is precisely the discussion of Platonic aesthetics in the *Republic* that prompted Nietzsche to refer to Plato as “the greatest enemy of art Europe has yet produced” (from *Genealogy of Morals*, quoted in Janaway 1995, 190). More recently, Arthur C. Danto (1986, 1-13) has argued that the entire history of the philosophical understanding of art (through aesthetics) is the history of the attempt to suppress it, which he sees as being rooted in Plato’s thought and resulting in what he calls the “philosophical disenfranchisement of art”.

As noted above, the attack upon the arts, however, is by no means the central topic of the discussion presented in the dialogue, for the *Republic* deals with the issue of justice. The philosophical discussion here takes the shape of a dialogue between Socrates, his friend Glaucon and a number of other characters that they encounter during a visit to a friend’s house. Here Glaucon and Adeimantus ask Socrates to answer the question “what is justice?” and to clarify how to distinguish what really *is* just from what merely appears to be so. Socrates provides an answer in the form of the discussion of an ideal just city, inhabited by equally just citizens. In the course of his discussion of the ideals that guide the just person and the just city, Plato, through the dramatic character of Socrates⁶, discusses epistemological, ethical and political issues (as well as what we would call ‘aesthetic’ questions).

The *Republic* thus presents Plato’s theory of knowledge and of education as well as Plato’s metaphysics and his political ideals, which culminate in the suggestion that the ideal state should be run by the ‘Philosopher-kings’ - the only people within the city who possess the means to attain true knowledge of the eternal

⁵ There is no word, in the ancient Greek language, whose meaning corresponds to our ‘art’ or ‘arts’. The closest approximation is represented by the word *techne* which covers, however, a much broader array of meanings, ranging from poetry, painting and sculpture (that is, our notion of ‘art’) to shipbuilding, carpentry and other activities based on craftsmanship. This is because the distinction (both linguistic and conceptual) between the ‘fine arts’ and crafts, which is at the very basis of our modern understanding of art, simply did not exist in antiquity (Murray 1997, 1).

⁶ Plato’s writings are all in dialogue form: his philosophical concepts are proposed, discussed and criticised in the imaginative framework of a conversation involving two or more participants. Socrates appears as main character in many of them (including the *Republic*) and it is generally understood that his point of view coincides with Plato’s. See Cohn (2001) for an account of the rejection of the so-called ‘mouthpiece theory’.

Forms. These are, according to Plato, perfect and immutable entities that exist independently of our world and constitute a sphere of being distinguished and separated from the human one (Abbagnano and Fornero 1986, 123-4). This ‘theory of Forms (or Ideas)’ is at the very heart of Plato’s philosophy. As we will see, ultimately, his conception of knowledge, psychology, his ethical theory, his ideal city as well as his condemnation of art are all dependant on the notion of Forms.

The arguments on which Plato builds his attack of poetry evolve around the concept of artistic *mimesis* (‘imitation’). Although Plato’s discussion of the theory of imitation builds upon the example of the painter, and despite the fact that it is evident from his reasoning that painting is also a case of *mimesis*, it soon becomes clear that the true target of Plato’s uncompromising condemnation is, as a matter of fact, poetry alone. Although admittedly a case of *mimesis*, Socrates never suggests that either the activity of painting or painters ought to be banned from the ideal city. This would seem to suggest that being imitative is not, in itself, reason enough to call for an outright ban (Nehamas 1982, 47). The reasons for the ban of poetry are therefore to be found beyond (but in relation to) its mimetic nature. Plato’s principal arguments against poetry can be grouped under three headings:

- Metaphysical argument: art is a flawed imitation of reality, which itself is but a poor imitation of the Forms. Artistic representation is therefore two times removed from the true essence of things.
- Epistemological argument: Poets describe things that they do not necessarily understand or know. Hence, we would be highly misguided if we were to follow their teachings.
- Psychological argument: The arts appeal to man’s emotional and irrational nature. They are therefore dangerous, in that they destroy the moral fibre of the audience.

THE METAPHYSICAL ARGUMENT

The metaphysical criticism to art contained in Book 10 is based on Plato's theory of the mimetic nature of art. Plato's theory of imitation has a metaphysical foundation, being based on the theory of Forms (or Ideas) and the related conception of a hierarchical structure of reality. According to Plato, the three levels reality is divided in are: ideal forms, visible objects, and images. This hierarchy, in turn, is reflected in Plato's distinction of three different grades of making (ποίησις), to which correspond three different makers. At the top of the hierarchy is God, who has full access to the Forms and creates all that which is in the order of nature. Objects that we use in everyday life, are products of the craftsman or artisan, who looks at the Forms for inspiration in his process of creation. Finally comes the artist, whose creation is limited to the production of images of reality, in a process that is akin to the holding up of a mirror before an object⁷. Artistic and poetic images are therefore two times removed from the truthful Form of the things represented. The postulate of such argument is crucial: the production of images on the part of the artist does not require any genuine knowledge of the real things of which he is making an image. Hence the rhetorical question posed by Plato (1993, 352; 600e):

So shall we classify all poets, from Homer onwards, as representers of images of goodness (and of everything else that occurs in their poetry), and claim that they don't have any contact with the truth?

Socrates' following remarks leave no doubt as to Plato's position on the topic:

An image-maker, a representer, understands only appearance, while reality is beyond him.

Crucially, this argument is also extended to the theatre (Plato 1993, 348; 597e):

⁷ Asmis (1992, 352) observes that "Plato's mirror simile has had an overwhelming influence on the interpretation of his aesthetics and on aesthetic theory in general".

The same goes for tragic playwrights, then, since they're representers: they're two generations away from the throne of truth, and so are all other representers.

Besides being twice removed from the truth, dramatic poetry is also dubious on the grounds that to enact a dramatic scene (by making oneself interpret the part of a character in a play) entails that one becomes, in real life, the same kind of person as the character impersonated:

The point is, my dear Adeimantus, that if the young men of our community hear this kind of thing [poetry depicting gods behaving untowardly] and take it seriously, rather than regarding it as despicable and absurd, they're hardly going to regard such behaviour as despicable in human beings like themselves and feel remorse when they also find themselves saying or doing these or similar things. Instead, they won't find it at all degrading to be constantly chanting laments and dirges for trivial incidents, and they won't resist doing so (Ibid., 82; 388d).

As a result, the Guardians (the leaders of the ideal city envisaged in the *Republic*) should limit their involvement in all forms of mimesis, and limit themselves to the enactment of wise and ethically sound characters, thus assimilating themselves with the sort of virtuous individual that ought to populate the ideal state:

Any representational roles they [the Guardians] do take on must, from childhood onwards, be appropriate ones. They should represent people who are courageous, self-disciplined, just, and generous and should play only those kinds of parts; but they should neither do nor be good at representing anything mean-spirited or otherwise contemptible, in case the harvest they reap from representation is reality. I mean, haven't you noticed how if repeated representation continues much past childhood, it becomes habitual and ingrained and has an effect on a person's body, voice, and mind? (Plato 1993, 91; 395c-d).

This leaves no doubt as to the fact that poetry does not represent, for Plato, a value in itself, but only in so far as its suggestive powers are employed for good ends (in this case, the construction of the just society). Moreover, in Plato's view, the simple enjoyment of the image of something enacted in a dramatic narrative produces in us an increased disposition to emulate that behaviour in real life. This might seem a somewhat bizarre claim; and yet, this would be one of the Platonic

themes that, in the Middle Ages, Christian philosophers enthusiastically borrowed from Plato. As the last section of the paper will show, we will see this theory reappear in Christian attacks upon the stage and become one of the foundations of what Jonas Barish (1981) famously called the ‘antitheatrical prejudice’.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The claims that poetic image-making is not based on genuine knowledge and therefore cannot be the source of truth and authentic understanding is of crucial importance in Plato’s thought. This is because he is aware that many people actually look up to literature as a source of enlightenment. This is what Socrates has to say about the followers of the ‘teachings’ of poetry:

I think the important thing to bear in mind about causes like this, Glaucon, is that when people tell us they’ve met someone who’s mastered every craft, and is the world’s leading expert in absolutely every branch of human knowledge, we should reply that they’re being rather silly. They seem to have met the kind of illusionist who’s expert at representation and, thank to their own inability to evaluate knowledge, ignorance, and representation, to have been so thoroughly taken in as to believe in his omniscience (Plato 1993, 349; 598d).

According to Plato (*Ibid.*; 598e), the root of this ‘silliness’ is a deep-seated one:

It is said that a good poet must understand the issues he writes about, if his writing is to be successful, and that if he didn’t understand them, he wouldn’t be able to write about them.

By re-defining poetry as mere image-making, Plato declares its compatibility with the poet’s ignorance about what is real and what is true (Janaway 2001, 6). Furthermore, mimetic poetry is dangerous to the intelligence of those of its hearers who do not have the privilege of being aware of the illusive nature of poetry (that is, to the non-philosophers). Philosophers are safe from the intellectual corruption of mimetic poetry, for they can see how poetry is twice removed from the true nature of things. But other men, and especially young ones, have no protection from the deception of poetry, and this is why, in the best interest of the citizens, poets and their art must be banned from the state or, at best, the object of careful state censorship:

We'll implore Homer and the rest of the poets not to get cross if we strike these and similar lines [misleading depictions of the gods and Hades] from their works. We'll explain that it's not because the lines are not good poetry and don't give pleasure to most people; on the contrary, the better poetry they are, the more they are to be kept from the ears of children and men who are to be autonomous and to be more afraid of losing this freedom than of death (Plato 1993, 80-1; 387b).

In order to fully understand the import of Plato's criticism of the arts we must remember that classical Greece conceived poetry as a medium for the communication of ethical values and teachings. Poets were often cited as authorities on ethical matters, since as Nausbaum (1986, 123) explains, "before Plato's time there was no distinction between 'philosophical' and 'literary' discussion of human practical problems. The whole idea of distinguishing between texts that seriously pursue a search for truth and another group of text that exist primarily for entertainment would be foreign in this culture". The radical nature of Plato's aesthetic thought cannot be fully grasped without understanding the authority of poetry in the civic discourse of Athens.

Like written laws that guaranteed constitutional rights for all citizens, the poetry of Homer and tragedy was the shared intellectual and moral patrimony of the entire *dēmos*, and provided standards against which behaviour could be assessed (Dué 2003, 4). Besides, the Greeks also regarded poets as reliable sources of all sorts of practical information; they would isolate from their context quotations from their most loved works of poetry and then turn them into general maxims and fragments of wisdom (Verdenius 1971, 262). In this sense, one could argue the Plato's rejection of the status of poetry as a source of true knowledge and understanding equated, in fact, to the wholesale rejection of one the principles of Athenian democracy itself⁸.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

⁸ Plato's misgivings for Athenian democracy are very well documented (see, for instance Stone, 1989, 162).

In Plato's (1993, 359; 605c) own view, "the most serious allegation against representational poetry" was still to be made. For poetry "has a terrifying capacity for deforming even good people. Only a very few escape". The means by which poetry has the power to corrupt even a decent person is its capacity to affect the emotional and irrational part of the human soul. The nobler part of the soul is guided by rational thinking, and concerns itself with the achievement of the overall good, but the images of mimetic poetry appeal to a distinct 'inferior' part, which is childish, wild and emotional. Under the influence of his irrational side, man reacts in an unmeasured manner to events in real life and in fiction. The artistic context in which we encounter the material of dramatic poetry has a distancing effect that allows us to respond a-critically, if not even favourably, to actions and feelings that we would not normally condone in real life. In other words, the lure of poetry and the stage leads the irrational component of our soul to over-rule and take over our rational selves.

What makes poetry dangerous is precisely the fact that, as a result of the powerful hold it has over its audiences, poetry surges to the role of competitor to the truly moral (and, thus, just) way of life (Annas 1982, 11). In Plato's (1993, 360; 606d) own words:

And the same goes for sex, anger, and all the desires and feelings of pleasure and distress which we're saying, accompany everything we do: poetic representation has the same effect in all these cases too. It irrigates and tends to these things when they should be left to wither, and it makes them our rulers when they should be our subjects, because otherwise we won't live better and happier lives, but quite the opposite.

The attack that Plato builds on the accusations discussed above points towards the necessary conclusion that, whilst alluring the audience with its promises of cognitive gain, poetry in fact only delivers serious psychological and ethical damage (Janaway 2001, 5). It is on the basis of these charges that Socrates logically reaches the conclusion that the poets are best banned from the ideal city:

[...] given its nature, we had good grounds for banishing [poetry] earlier from our community. No rational person could have done any different (Plato 1993, 361; 607b).

As the following section of this paper will show, Plato's psychological discussion of the emotional impacts of poetry and drama, will give rise to two very different yet equally influential notions that have dominated cultural debate and cultural policy discourse ever since their development in Plato's thought: the idea that the arts have a crucial role to play in the education of just and mature citizens, and the seemingly opposite belief in the corrupting and dangerous effects of the arts upon the individual, and thus society as a whole.

In the light of the arguments presented so far, the following sections section of the paper will explore the legacy of Platonic thought, and the ways it filtered through into the modern and contemporary cultural policy discourse. In particular the discussion will focus on what are, arguably, the two Platonic themes which, though apparently contradictory, have proven most influential in the sphere of cultural policy: the belief in the educational potential of the arts on the one hand, and, on the other, the notion of the negative impacts (and consequently, the dangerous nature) of the arts.

It would probably be over-ambitious and ultimately impossible to ascribe a Platonic origin to any specific policy programme. However, I will attempt to show that many arguments on a number of themes that recur time and time again in past and present cultural policy debates have a distinctively Platonic flavour, as further confirmed by those cases in which Plato's thought has been explicitly acknowledged as a source of inspiration. As John Gingell (2000, 71) argues, "if we take Plato's implied message, that is, that art is to be judged on its contributions to our moral and intellectual life, then the history of thought about the arts abounds with thinkers and institutions who pay covert tribute to Plato".

PLATO'S LEGACY: THE DIDACTIC FUNCTION OF THE ARTS

Despite the defence of the decision to ban the poets from the ideal state, Plato (1993, 71; 377b-c) in the *Republic* still proposes to maintain, within the ideal state, some forms of poetry of a strongly didactic nature:

So our first job, apparently, is to oversee the work of the story-writers, and to accept any good story they write, but reject the others. We'll let nurses and mothers tell their children the acceptable ones, and we'll have them devote themselves far more to using these stories to form their children's minds than they do to using their hands to form their bodies⁹.

As Plato's words make clear, the one redeeming feature of poetry is represented by the educational potential that comes with poetry's hold over the human soul:

'Now, Glaucon', I said, 'isn't the prime importance of cultural education due to the fact that rhythm and harmony sink more deeply into the mind than anything else and affect it more powerfully than anything else and bring grace in their train? For someone who is given a correct education, their product is grace...

The role of the arts and poetry in the 'correct education' of the youth in the ideal city is expounded in detail by Plato in Book 2 and 3 of the *Republic*. Commentators have pointed out that Plato's attitude to poetry in this initial treatment seems very different from the stern attack that will follow in Book 10. Some (such as, for instance, Annas 1982) have even suggested an inconsistency between these earlier discussions of poetry and the stern attack of book 10. However, I would rather suggest that the educational powers of poetry and the theatre are but the flipside of the transformative powers of the arts that make Plato ultimately suspicious of them.

When discussing the place of poetry and the theatre in the education of the young generations in the ideal polity, Plato argues for the need for the rulers of the ideal city to supervise epic and dramatic poetry by censoring both their form and content:

The point is that a young person can't tell when something is allegorical and when it isn't, and any idea admitted by a person of that [young] age tends to become almost ineradicable and permanent. All things considered, then, that is why a great deal of importance should be placed upon ensuring that the first stories they hear are best adapted for their moral improvement (Plato 1993, 73; 378d).

⁹ Plato refers here to the Greek custom of massaging young children to strengthen and shape their bodies.

It is not hard to see how such a view of the potential of the arts to forge the ideal citizens to live in the just state could arguably be said to be the harbinger (or even the legitimisation) of the promotion of an official state culture as put in place in ex-soviet states. Stalin once defined writers as “engineers of the soul” (quoted in Debreczeny 1997), and it is hard to imagine that Plato would have found much to contend with such a statement.

Annas (1982, 15 ff.), indeed, puts forward a fascinating parallel between Plato and the literary critic Chernyvshevsky, whom she credits as the actual, if largely unacknowledged, source of the principles of social realism. Like Plato, Chernyvshevsky believed that art is not intrinsically valuable. Rather, in his view, the only point of the arts - and literature above all of them – is to reproduce and explain reality in a way “encouraging the good progressive elements in life, and bringing about improvement of character in the reader”.

The ideal state that Plato constructs in the Republic is obviously not a democracy, and, in that respect, the parallel with ideological views of the role of literature in society propounded by soviet totalitarianism might not necessarily appear as a shocking surprise. However, I think one could argue that the Platonic notion of the equation of the value of the arts with their educational and formative power can be seen as operational in current cultural policy discourses in a much more subtle way. I will try to show, indeed, how the rhetoric that accompanies today’s so-called ‘instrumental cultural policies’ (Belfiore 2002 and 2004) is in many ways resonant of the Platonic perspective. The suggestion that Plato’s faith in the arts as *paideia* presupposes “art as sheer instrumentality” has been already put forward by Janaway (1995, 185), who writes:

Art, we might say, has its place because it is socially useful, politically powerful, it trains us as good citizens or as correctly class-conscious opponents of the society we inhabit. Of course art has always had such uses, but if its very *value* is going to be of this order, then we flow once again into a Platonic stream. Nobody much likes Plato’s political ends, but if we say that art’s value is as a political or social means, we shall not be disagreeing with him fundamentally *about art*.

Janeway only concerns himself with the theoretical aspects of such instrumentality, so that the cultural policy implications of his observations are left unexplored. However, if we look at certain recent key cultural policy developments, we can rightfully conclude that an instrumentality of the nature described by Janeway is presently operational in the British context (and, arguably, other countries' too).

This is one of the main objectives of the Arts Council England (ACE) as stated in the organisation's latest manifesto, entitled *Ambitions for the Arts*, published in February 2003:

We will argue that being involved with the arts can have a lasting and transforming effect on many aspects of people's lives. This is true not just for individuals, but also for neighbourhoods, communities, regions and entire generations, whose sense of identity and purpose can be changed through art.

The persistence, thus, in the Western world, of the Platonic idea that the worth of culture lies in its capacity to educate the citizen and therefore bring about all sorts of beneficial social and political impacts is proved by the fact that, the social impacts of the arts (as well as the arts' alleged potential to foster local economic development) have become an increasingly important rationales for public investment in the cultural sector over the last two decades. Even more significant is the fact that the growing trend towards instrumentality has not been slowed down by the obvious lack of evidence of the existence of such impacts (Selwood 2002). Despite the lack of evidence, the rhetoric of instrumentalism is still popular, though recently many attempts have been made, on the part of arts organisations, politicians, and policy-makers to find alternative (and possibly non-instrumental ways) to articulate the value of the arts to society.

The current debate seems to be, therefore, caught in a deadlock. The recent paper by the present Secretary of State Tessa Jowell (2004) entitled *Government and the Value of Culture* is a typical example of the *impasse* of the present cultural policy discourse in this country. Despite having been hailed as a welcome and overdue

appeal for the reinstatement of ‘arts for arts’ sake’ arguments in the current debate, the essay is in fact fraught with internal contradictions, and it is, in truth, far from being a repudiation of instrumentalism in cultural funding and policy. For example, Jowell argues for a change of language amongst all parties involved in cultural policy-making and arts administration, in order to find ways to express the intrinsic value of the arts. Yet, Jowell herself cannot seem to avoid the reliance on many of the usual ‘instrumental’ arguments for arts advocacy. On the one hand, she (2004, 8) openly admits:

We lack convincing language and political arguments for how culture lies at the heart of a healthy society. [...] Too often politicians have been forced to debate culture only in terms of its instrumental benefits to other agendas - education, the reduction of crime, improvements in well-being - explaining - or in some instances almost apologising for -our investment in culture only in terms of something else. In political and public discourse in this country we have avoided the more difficult approach of investigating, questioning and celebrating what culture actually does in and of itself.

On the other hand, however, Jowell (*Ibid.*, 3) also claims that one of the main tasks of government in today’s society is to eliminate “the poverty of aspiration which compromises all our attempts to lift people out of physical poverty. Engagement with culture can help alleviate this poverty of aspiration”. On page 15 she adds: “Addressing poverty of aspiration is also necessary to build a society of fairness and opportunities”. I would suggest that this final statement brings us back full circle, for, if the arts can and should address poverty of aspiration (as ostensibly Jowell is arguing), and addressing poverty of aspiration can bring about a just society, then the arts are entrusted with the task of bringing about the conditions for such a “society of fairness ad opportunities” to exist. Not only are we back to valuing the arts for the benefits they accrue to society, but we are also in front of a political programme very much alike that of Plato’s *Republic*, whereby the transformative powers of the arts can and *should* be harnessed towards the achievement of a ‘just’ polity.

PLATO'S LEGACY: THE CORRUPTING EFFECTS OF THE THEATRE AND THE NEED FOR CENSORSHIP

Plato's legacy, however, can also be traced in the eclectic and diverse intellectual tradition that sees the arts as dangerous and potentially corrupting. This is a view of the arts that spans millennia and that has been applied to the most diverse array of cultural activities and products. I will therefore, of necessity, only cover the most illustrious examples, and look in particular, at how Platonic ideas have fuelled, over time, the so-called 'antitheatrical prejudice' (Barish 1981). The interesting thing is that this 'negative' tradition can be traced back to the very same discussion of the role of dramatic poetry in education that appears in the *Republic* as the foundation of the opposite view of the arts as promoter of beneficial social change that we have just discussed.

In the *Republic*, as we have seen, Plato expresses his belief that the enjoyment of theatrical performances brings with it a heightened disposition to imitate in real life what happens on the stage. This belief was embraced by Christian philosophers of greater and less significant intellectual standing, starting with Tatian (c. 60 AD), through Tertullian and St. Cyprian of Carthage (II-III century AD) to St. Augustin (IV century) - to name but a few - and the other Middle Ages writers of Patristic philosophy¹⁰. Despite the different levels of sophistication displayed by the various thinkers involved in the Christian attack on the stage, the arguments they put forward tend to be always the same, and often the influence of Plato's writing is explicitly acknowledged (Barish 1981). I will therefore quote from Tatian (I century AD), who is the author of the earliest example of Christian antitheatrical writing, but already displays the signature vehemence and the stock accusations of the genre.

The target of Tatian's rage is the actor who "outwardly counterfeits what he is not", and whom he accuses of being "the epitome of superstition, a vituperator of heroic deeds, and actor of murders, a chronicler of adultery, a storehouse of madness" (in Barish 1981, 44). It is however Tertullian, who, in his *De*

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the arguments put forward by each of these authors against the theatre, see Barish 1981, Bruch 2004, and Spingarn 1908.

Spectaculis first gives a Christian spin to many of Plato's arguments against theatre (especially the epistemological and the psychological arguments) reaching a conclusion that was to become a deep-rooted conviction throughout the Middle Ages: that creative literature excites the emotions *more* than actual life, and it is therefore extremely dangerous - to the extent that reading about or watching a crime take place on the stage soon becomes equated with committing the crime itself! (Barish 1981, chapter 2).

The polemical and highly aggressive tone of Tatian was adopted by the Puritan writers in Elizabethan England, who - on the basis of now well-worn yet still popular arguments - also strived to have the stage outlawed. Indeed, on this account, they proved more successful than their predecessors. Thus, the proclamation of 16 May 1559 forbids the handling of religious and political themes on the stage; and the statute of 1572 imposed heavy penalties for all those actors who were not formally employed by a nobleman (Ward and Waller 1932, 380). Fuelled by the work of the Puritan pamphleteers, the antitheatrical polemic progressively grew more intense, culminating in the closing of the theatres in 1642 (Barish 1981, 88). It might be wrong, however, to assume that suspicion around the corrupting power of theatre was only rife at times where religious belief played a crucial role in the public sphere. After all, Britain had a system of strict theatrical censorship in place until 1969! Moreover, scepticism over the civilising and humanising powers of the arts is far from eradicated even in our more tolerant present postmodern culture. Nor can such scepticism be imputed to philistinism when it comes from personalities of the intellectual standing of George Steiner who - in his *Language and Silence* (1967, p. 86) wrote:

We do not know whether the study of the humanities, of the noblest that has been said and thought, can do very much to humanize. We do not know; and surely there is something rather terrible in our doubt whether the study and delight a man takes in Shakespeare makes him any less capable of organizing a concentration camp.

Furthermore, the Platonic belief that fictional events might well lead to emulation has indeed proved a resilient one in Western civilization and can be seen, for instance, at the root of the so-called 'Werther effect' (Phillips 1985). This label

derives from the name of the main character in Goethe's novel, published in 1774, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which concludes with the suicide of Werther over a case of 'impossible' love for the young Lotte, already engaged to his close friend Albert. This became soon an extremely popular novel, generating, in fact, what has been referred to as a 'cult following' (Bokey and Walter 2002, 397). Following an alleged spate of suicides among young readers of the book, however, the novel was banned in many European countries, on account of being a negative influence on young and impressionable minds. Interestingly, the idea behind the notion of 'Werther effect' has been gaining an increasing amount of attention on the part of clinicians and media scholars preoccupied with the 'copycat effect' that might be engendered by depictions of suicide and violence in the popular media - pornography being a case in point¹¹.

What are we to make, then, of the fact that such apparently contradictory views of the arts - as a formative and educational experience central to the creation of the just citizen on the one hand, and as a dangerous poison of the mind on the other - have been developed from the thought of a single influential thinker?

I would suggest that the complexity of Plato's theories of the transformative powers of the arts merely reflect the complexity of some questions that are central to the cultural - and, hence, the cultural policy - discourses. Such questions concern the nature of art, the cognitive and psychological mechanisms of artistic reception, and the role of the arts in society and their relationship to the state just to mention a few. Eva Schaper (1968, 40) has put forward a similar point:

Whenever the art of emotional infection is attacked as detrimental to the moral life or defended as beneficial in some vaguely religious respect, Plato's problem appears in new guises. Whenever moral Puritans join forces to accuse the artist of undermining the serious business of living by emotional appeal, and whenever they are countered by defenders of the deeper sources of our humanity on equally moral grounds, Plato's dilemma is not far away.

Herein lies, I would argue, the enduring relevance of Platonic thought and its continuing influence over subsequent cultural policy debates.

¹¹ See, for instance, Bokey and Walter 2002, Adams 2000; Seto *et al.* 2000; Shope 2004.

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