

For the (Philosophical) Love of Poetic Beauty: Plato's hope in *Republic*

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Abstract: It is a well-worn trope to view Plato's banishment of the poets in *Republic* as a crude form of philistinism. In this paper I defend Plato against this charge. I argue that *Republic* does not present a final view of poetry, for it leaves room for a philosophical love of poetic beauty. First I analyse the political nature of Plato's critique of poetry. I suggest that Plato does not reject the political order of change and decay, but opens space for a new kind of political project. I then suggest that Plato's discussion of tragic poetry in Book X supports this claim, for it contains the hope for a reconfigured love of poetic beauty. I conclude that Plato does not limit aesthetic experience to artistic solace or metaphysical escapism, but opens a way to see aesthetic experience as a vital part of building a world in which it makes sense to live.

Keywords: Plato, *Republic*, poetry, Nietzsche, Kaufmann, *mimesis*

In *Philosophy and Tragedy* Walter Kaufmann claims that Plato's infamous attack on the poets in *Republic* represents a desperate attempt to overcome life's disappointments. While the disappointment Plato felt begins with politics – with the failure of politicians to avoid the fall of Athens during the Peloponnesian war, and with the trial and execution of his teacher, Socrates – Kaufmann argues Plato generalises from politics to the entire order of time and space. While the world promises us happiness, justice, and beauty, says Kaufmann's Plato, it 'does not keep its promises'.¹ Even our experiences that seem to live up to our expectations turn out to be something else after a lapse of time. Kaufmann suggests that Plato identifies two enduring responses to the disparity between our expectations and our experience. The first is to accept the world as finite and imperfect and to seek comfort in art. This is the way of the poets. The second is to repudiate this world and to raise our thoughts to

another realm, one void of time and change.² For Kaufmann, Plato advocates the latter view, denigrating the poets as idolaters in order to construct a world devoid of change and decay that *does* deliver on its promises.

Kaufmann's interpretation of *Republic* bears close resemblance to Nietzsche's characterisation of Plato as 'the enemy' of poetry in *The Birth of Tragedy*. For Nietzsche, Plato's rejection of poetry marks an epochal moment; it is 'the one turning point and vortex of so-called world history' that led the ignorant herd away from the dangerous, thrilling truth of finitude to the safe, comforting, but ultimately false doctrine of transcendence.³ Plato's banishment of the poets is an 'escape' from the hard facts of reality that the poets take as their building material. Prioritising the material over the ideal, Nietzsche does not present the destruction of Greece in terms of wars, decisions, and misjudgements, but in terms of philosophical justice meted on Plato's metaphysical conservatism.

What Kaufmann and Nietzsche share in common is that they both view Plato's attack on poetry as a rejection of politics. In their reading of *Republic*, Plato rejects the city as the site of change and instead presents an otherworldly city so that the citizens might be educated to fit their predetermined place within it. Thus we must choose between one of two options: join Plato's rejection of poetry for a higher, otherworldly reality, or limit our hopes to the fleeting moments of beauty we find in the arts.

Several commentators have criticised this dichotomy by suggesting that Plato does not force us to choose between poetry and philosophy, for Plato's aim is ultimately to bring them into closer proximity.⁴ Some do so by pointing out that Plato was clearly aware of the attack made centuries later by Nietzsche, for he notes that his contemporaries will find his argument 'harsh' and 'boorish' (607b). In response to such opponents who would reject his conception of philosophy to poetry, Plato claims that the quarrel between poetry and philosophy is 'ancient'; that *he* is not responsible for the tensions between poetry and philosophy, for philosophers and poets have *always* been squabbling over the primacy of their arts. What is new about Plato's approach, according to this view, is that instead of perpetuating the atrophy of poetry and philosophy, Plato works toward their convergence. In particular, he proposes a philosophical kind of poetry that might form the guardians as men of justice.

While this view helpfully shows that Plato's banishment of the poets is not his final word on the matter, it does not repudiate the attack made by Nietzsche and

Kaufmann on Plato's so-called otherworldly agenda. The convergence of poetry and philosophy in Plato's philosophical kind of poetry is far from egalitarian, for poetry must answer to philosophy's demands if it is to be admitted into the just city. Some scholars have noted the asymmetry of Plato's view of poetry and philosophy, and yet argue Plato still holds poetry *qua* poetry in some esteem.⁵ Such scholars point to Plato's self-confessed 'love and reverence' (596c) for Homer and the tragedians, and suggest that Plato does, despite himself, retain a desire that non-philosophical poetry might find a place in the just city. The upshot of this is that Plato does not force us to *reject* poetry for philosophy; rather, we might simply *prioritise* the one over the other. Again, this view does not refute the attack made by Nietzsche and Kaufmann, for despite Plato's confessed love and reverence for Homer, poetry must still submit to the strictures of philosophy. Nietzsche's *political* critique of Plato – that Plato's rejection of poetry entails a rejection of the political sphere for the comfort of a *polis* that is not of this world – remains undefended.

In this paper I aim to defend Plato against the critique of Nietzsche and Kaufmann by arguing that Plato *does* suggest an alternative to the dichotomy of poetry/philosophy in *Republic*, and not simply in the form of philosophical poetry. This alternative is not fully formed; rather, it is anticipated by the fact that Plato leaves room for a reconfigured *eros* of poetic beauty.⁶ The phrase 'leaves room for' is important: Plato banishes the poets in Book III, he decries the ontological status of poetry in comparison to philosophy, and he searches for a cure for the sickness with which poetry can infect the mind. However, by paying attention to Plato's intentions in attacking the poets, and by noting his complex engagement with poetry in Book X, we find that Plato stops short of attacking poetry itself. I will suggest that Plato's hesitancy can be explained through his concessions in Book X, which suggest he maintains a hope that our problematic love for poetry might be reconfigured *through* philosophy in such a way that is compatible with his project of reform. It is my aim to show that Plato's hope is not without ground.

By arguing that Plato leaves room for a reconfigured love of poetic beauty, I intend to show that Kaufmann and Nietzsche's suggestion that Plato aims to escape from the disappointment of life does not do justice to Plato's ambitions in *Republic*. Instead, I argue that Plato's critique of poetry attempts to open space for a new kind of political project: the creation of a world in which it makes sense to live. In such a world it might be possible to love poetic beauty. This love, however, would be vastly

different from the kind of love held by Plato's contemporaries for the poetry of their day.

To make this case I begin by examining the reason that Socrates and Glaucon decided that it would be beneficial to banish the poets in Books II and III of *Republic*. I claim that their proposal to banish the poets turns on the rejection of fate and the conviction that the citizens are the locus of civic change. I then turn to Plato's direct critique of poetry in Book X, where I show that Plato's argument is not directed against the poets, but against *those who claim* that the poets are wise in all matters. Bearing these first two points in mind – that Plato holds the citizens as the locus of change, and that he aims to undermine those who hold the poets as all-wise – I explore Plato's provocative image of the 'antidote' to poetry's seductive powers. When understood in light of these claims, Plato's discussion of the antidote reveals his hope for a reconfigured love of poetic beauty that does not distort the soul but remains open to what is beyond the given. This reading of *Republic* navigates a path between the two options opened by Kaufmann's reading of Plato; one that does not limit aesthetic experience to either artistic solace or metaphysical escapism, but that is part of the project of building a world in which it makes sense to live.

1. Imitation and education

There are two main ways that Plato's story of education (*mousike*) in *Republic* can be taken, and both turn on how one understands the relation between poetry and politics. The first way, and the way put forward by Nietzsche, views Plato's conception of politics as a form of escapism: Plato proposes to educate the citizens so that they might fit their predetermined place in the city.⁷ In this view, those who are most suited to education (the philosophers) concern themselves not with the city in itself, but that which is other than the city: the good and the just. Poetry must represent the triumph of the good so that the philosophers are not distracted by this world but are formed according to otherworldly matters. The second way is that Plato's view of education is 'political' in the modern sense of the word: Plato's view of education entails that civic cultivation can remake this present world (i.e. the city) in a better way, and that a properly philosophical love of poetry can play a role in this cultivation.⁸

In this section I focus on the role of poetry in Plato's view of civic education in order to argue that the second reading of *Republic* does greater justice to Plato's argument than the first. Socrates does not direct his attention in Books II and III to poetry itself, but – as Kaufmann rightly notes – to the demise of the Athenian public sphere. Yet rather than following Kaufmann by concluding that Socrates responds to this demise by seeking comfort in a world beyond decay, I suggest that Plato's critique of Athenian education is based on the conviction that it is neither fate nor the gods that shape civic life, but the *citizens*. The emphasis Plato places on the agency of the citizens, I suggest, entails that his view of education, and thus poetry, is concerned with matters of *this* world rather than one that lies beyond it.

To begin, the context in which Plato writes *Republic* gives us reason to consider his examination of the poets as an outworking of his conviction that it is the citizens who shape the city. As Danielle Allen notes, Plato's motivation for writing must be understood in the context of his own formation.⁹ We do well to remember that Plato was educated during the tumultuous years of the Peloponnesian war that saw the so-called Golden Age of Athens come to a dramatic end. During the Golden Age, the city's economic, military, and political life flourished as Homer and the tragedians were held as rich sources of public wisdom. Yet this period of Athenian history lasted less than a century; the final years of the Peloponnesian war saw Athens brought to its knees: the Athenian naval fleets were defeated, the city became subject to Sparta, and Athens lost its standing as the preeminent Greek city-state. Yet despite the demise of Athens, it seems that many citizens continued to honour the heroes of the Golden Age – such as Aeschylus, Pericles, Cleon, and Sophocles – for their wisdom in matters of civic life.¹⁰ Yet for Plato, the so-called wisdom of these heroes informed decisions that led to the decline of Athens. In the *Gorgias* he argues that if the heroes were as just and intelligent as people claim, then they would have raised their own sons in a corresponding fashion.¹¹ The corruption of Athens, he suggests, gives testament to the inability of the past generation to educate their youth in such a way that would empower them to make decisions that would ensure the flourishing of the city. For this reason he argues that those 'who praise Homer and claim that this poet has educated Greece', who believe that Homer 'deserves to be taken up and studied both for the conduct of human affairs and for education (*mousike*)', must be called into question (606e).

Plato's critique of Athenian education shares one assumption with the politicians of the Golden Age: like Pericles and Cleon, Plato attributes a primary role to the citizens in historical change. By attacking the poverty of Athenian education, Plato implies that the demise of Athens was not fated by unknowable forces beyond human control, and neither does it express the deep disappointment that permeates all human life under the sun. Rather, Plato presents the demise of Athens as the result of ignorance in matters of education. From this conviction he begins his story of the ideal city with a reassessment of *mousike*, that is, of the strategies that the Athenians employed in the education of its citizens.¹² Education is the fundamental place to begin civic reform, for 'the beliefs [that the young] absorb at that age are difficult to erase and tend to become unalterable' (378d-e). Due to the indelible nature of education, Plato states to Glaucon that we must 'take the utmost care to ensure that the first stories they hear about virtue are the best ones for them to hear'.

Plato clearly thinks that those who depend on Homer's poetry for the basic formative stories are misguided. He argues that to assume that poets have knowledge of things they represent, and are thus helpful for the process of education, is to mistake the kind of craft that poets possess. To make this case, he introduces the concept of *mimesis*, or imitation, in order to problematise the idea that poets are skilled in the crafts they represent. Rather than being skilled in such crafts, Plato aims to show that the poets are skilled in a second-order craft: the craft of *imitating*. In Plato's view, the writing of poetry occurs in a sequence of transitions: in representing a particular character the poet imagines himself being the character he imitates, transmitting this psychological condition to the performers and onto the audience. For example, Plato describes Homer's speaking 'as if he were' Chryses as *mimesis*, for it is a kind of 'likening oneself to someone else, either in voice or shape' (393c). Homer's activity is intentionally like another activity, namely, Chryses' speech. Plato's charge is that Homer tries as much as possible to make it seem to us that it is not he who speaks, 'but that it is the old priest' (393a-b). He does not describe Homer's intentions as 'deceiving', as if his intentions were malicious, but as 'seeming'; Homer makes it *seem* as if he were Chryses despite the fact that the audience know that he is not. What else would a poet try to do? While this process of seeming is not harmful in itself, when the audience accept this seeming for reality, harm can occur. One might say that Plato was aware of the wilful suspension of disbelief a few millennia before Coleridge: he recognises that while the audience are

aware that Homer is not Chryses, they (willingly) forget this, for they allow themselves to be carried away by Homer's skill of imitation. This, for Plato, is precisely how people come to believe that Homer deserves to be studied both for the conduct of human affairs and for education; they mistake his skill in *imitating* human affairs with the skill of *doing* them.

Having established that the skill of the poets is the skill of imitation (to represent the likeness of a character or human affairs), Socrates asks Glaucon whether 'we want our guardians to be good at imitation' (394e). It is not clear how this question stems from his prior critique of poetic *mimesis* unless we recognise that he introduces a second kind of *mimesis* that is not limited to the production of art, but concerns the *performance* of the art by a poet's student. Plato seeks to establish that the guardians should never imitate a disgraceful part on the stage for fear of catching 'the infection' in real life:

For have you not noticed how dramatic and similar representations, if indulgence in them is prolonged into adult life, establish habits of physical poise, intonation and thought which become second nature? (395c-d)

The kind of imitation Plato discusses here involves the impersonation of the activity of another person: a 'dramatic' representation. Opposed to Homer's productive *mimesis*, this is a non-productive kind of *mimesis*, for the end result is not the creation of a piece of poetry but the likening of oneself to another through embodied mime. Yet according to Plato, non-productive *mimesis* does not only affect the body and practices of speech; it also affects the mind. Because acting and embodiment were central components of traditional *mousike*, Socrates makes it clear that the guardians are not to imitate Homeric tragedy, for it does not shape their characters in terms of virtue.¹³ They must be able to 'recognize madness and wickedness', Plato states, but must not 'do these things or imitate them' (396a). Thus Plato does not argue that the guardians ought to be protected from disgraceful characters, but that they ought not imitate them.

Plato does not introduce the concept of *mimesis* to make attack the medium of poetry, but to examine the maker of poetry: the one who imitates all crafts (*mimetikoi*). It is in this context that Plato uses the infamous language of 'banishment'. Yet it is not poetry that is banished, but

the one who can take on every kind of shape. He, not god, is the one who would use his powers of enchantment to make us think that he has become all sorts of persons – human and divine. (398a)

Socrates' tone in this passage is highly satirical. At first he seems quite positive toward the poets. If such a poet arrived in the city who by 'showing off' his poems could convince us that he is 'all things', Socrates suggests that we (Socrates, Glaucon, and 'we' the reader) ought to anoint his head with myrrh and crown him with wool. However, once we have crowned the poet in a fitting way, Socrates states that we ought not keep him but politely banish or, to use R. E. Allen's translation, 'send him on', to another city.¹⁴ While such a poet is certainly impressive, he would not interest *us*, says Socrates: 'we would employ for our benefit more austere and less charming poets' (389b). Such poets would 'imitate for us the diction of people of good character', for such models would contribute toward the proper education of the guardians.

Socrates' conversation with Glaucon regarding the itinerant poet is playful, and requires careful consideration if we are to infer from it 'Plato's view of poetry'. However, it is not difficult to infer the major claim that Plato is driving home in this episode: that itinerant poets tend to deceive their audience into believing that they are skilled in all that they represent. Socrates does not show any anger or impatience with the poets. He simply suggests that the citizens of a just city would recognise the poet's skill without being overwhelmed, enjoy his work, crown him with wool, and then move him along, for they would not be interested in someone who is skilled only in imitation.

Clearly Socrates is not criticising the medium of poetry but a particular manifestation of its maker. Imitation can play a properly educative role – indeed, it must – but poetry, as a form of imitation, does not *currently* play that role, because it is not conscious of its status as imitation. Poets need not be expelled, Socrates notes, if they were to 'imitate the style of the good man and in their works abide by the principles we laid down for them when we started out on this attempt to educate the guardians' (398b). Thus his banishment of the poets is not a final verdict on poetry (at least in Book III), for the poetic style could very well be put to good use. Yet given the present ignorance of the citizens, Socrates proposes to banish *mimetikoi* so that this ignorance can be addressed through a properly educative form of *mousike*. Once civic education has been remedied and the people come to recognise the ignorance of

the poets in the matters they represent, it seems that Socrates is open to reconsider the merit of those who are skilled in imitation once more (see 607e-608b).

Before I move to Plato's concession to reconsider poetry, it is important to return to the context of *Republic* in order to note that Socrates' scrutiny of the poets is part of Plato's larger search for reform. Here it is particularly evident that Kaufmann's existential interpretation of Plato is misleading. In Plato's understanding, the demise of Athenian society does not entail that the world is determined by fate; that we live under the rule of an unpredictable tyrant-god who distributes a random assortment of good and evil. Plato is critical of the view of fate presented by Homer in the *Iliad*, which entails that 'Zeus has two jars standing on the floor of his palace, full of fates, good in one and evil in the other' (379d). For Plato, to 'seek comfort in art and poetry', as he does in Kaufmann's reading, would be to accept Homeric fate and concede that, despite our inner conviction that things are not what they could be, what *is* is divinely given. In other words, Homer's view of fate undermines the ability of the citizens to shape what is held in common. Nietzsche accepts this view of fate in *Birth of Tragedy*, and argues that it is necessary if we are to cope with life's disappointments through aesthetic solace.¹⁵ For Plato, the kind of poetry that represents the way the world appears to us now can tell us nothing of how it *could* be or how we *should* act. Thus, while the skilful representation of the world might be pleasurable, it cannot direct us beyond the given order. Such a task requires another kind of representation that does not imitate appearances but opens us to what might lie beyond them.

When we recognise Plato's attempt to reform the city, it is clear that *mimesis* itself is not to be banned. Indeed, he never ceases to think that *mimesis* is the first step in a child's habituation into a particular character-type (see 403c, 410a, 424b-d, 429e-430b, 522a). Yet Socrates is quick to assert that the guardians must only imitate characters suitable to their craft: men of courage, self-control, piety, freedom of spirit, and similar qualities (395d). Here we find a call for the reformed kind of poetry that will serve the city; a *philosophical* kind of poetry that imitates the truth.

2. Imitation and poetry

While Plato argues in Books II and III of *Republic* that one 'who can take on every kind of shape' should be banished, he identifies a way that poetry could assist

in the formation of the guardians. Yet in Book X Socrates and Glaucon turn their gaze to poetry itself in order to refute the claim that the poets are all-knowing. For Kaufmann, Plato's attack on poetry in Book X does not only reiterate the banishment he declared in Book III; more seriously, it extends his critique of the corruption from the effects of poetry to poetry's essence.¹⁶ According to Kaufmann, in Book X Plato argues that poets and artists 'lure us to move in the wrong direction – not from what seems to what really is, but from treacherous semblances ... to the images of the deceitful, ever-changing, fickle world'. Kaufmann implies that Plato's banishment of *mimetikoi* in Book III is paradigmatic for the makers of *all* the arts, which Plato makes clear in Book X through his final critique of poetry.

In the following section I will argue that in the midst of his critique of poetry in Book X, Plato leaves room for tragic poetry despite the fact that he struggles to formulate an argument for tragic poetry's continued existence in the city. Yet before making this claim it is important to clear the ground by showing that Plato's critique in Book X is not primarily directed at poetry, as Kaufmann claims, but at the *reception* of poetry. Plato's intention is not to banish tragic poetry once and for all, but to show that it is wrongheaded to consider the poets wise in such matters of education, government, generalship, or any other human activity. Plato's argument does not conclude that poetry is useless, but that, in the context of Athenian decline, its use remains to be seen.

From the outset of Book X, Plato's opponent is no longer the poets but those who hold the poets to be knowledgeable:

We hear from some people that the tragic poets know all arts, all things human relative to virtue and vice, and divine things too; because the good poet necessarily, if he is going to deal well with the subjects with which he deals, must therefore have knowledge or he couldn't do it. (598e-599a)¹⁷

For Plato, the view held by 'those who say that tragic poets know all arts' is based on the following argument:

- P1. If the poets 'deal well' with X then they have knowledge of X
- P2. The poets deal well with X
- C. Therefore the poets have knowledge of X

Plato's aim is to show that this argument holds only for those who have been 'deceived' by these 'imitators' (599a). Yet he does not suggest that the responsibility

for this deception lies in the hands of the imitators; that *poetry* is to be blamed for the ignorance of the people. Rather, the one who is deceived is deceived because of ‘his own inability to distinguish between knowledge, lack of knowledge, and imitation’ (598d). Plato attacks this argument in order to show that the responsibility for the disordered state of Athens lies in the people.

To establish that those who hold the above argument are deceived, Plato responds through a *reductio*, beginning from the assumption that it is absurd to conclude that a poet has knowledge of a craft, such as shipbuilding, when he or she has never built a ship or been trained in the art of shipbuilding. If the poets *do not* have knowledge, that is, if C is false, then it follows that either P1 or P2 must be false: either the poets do not deal well with X (P2), or the conditional (P1) is flawed. Plato is the first to admit that P2 is true; the poets deal well with their objects of representation, for they are masters of *mimesis*. Thus P1 must be false; Plato’s argument ultimately serves to break the if-then connection between dealing well and knowing.

Socrates provides two arguments against the poets in order to establish that while they might deal well with the things they represent, they do not necessarily have knowledge of them. First, he argues that the knowledge that the poets would have to possess in order to be competent in all the matters they speak about is simply too vast, for it comprises numerous arts about which other people only have limited knowledge (598c-d). Socrates gives little evidence to support this argument; he simply assumes that one can be proficient in only one art, for proficiency takes singular dedication. Second, Socrates presents an argument *ad hominum*: while Homer and other poets *speak* of matters related to these various arts, they have not proved their competence by *doing* them. Homer has never cured anyone, so his narration of Hekamede’s preparing of an antidote to heal the wounds of Machaon cannot be considered authoritative (598c-d). Moreover, Homer was never asked to be involved in statesmanship and neither has he proved himself as a general, so we cannot confer that he had any knowledge of such arts (600a). These two arguments attack the conditional in P1 to show that knowledge is not a necessary condition of dealing well with what is represented. In contrast, Socrates formulates an alternative conditional: if one can deal well with a particular craft, then one possesses the skill of imitation.

Having challenged the connection between dealing well and knowing through these two arguments, Socrates then gives account of why so many people seem to find it convincing. The error made by those who hold P1, Socrates states, is to ‘judge only

from words'. Judging only from words is wrongheaded, for a poet uses the right words from a certain craft

without understanding anything except how to imitate, so that he seems to speak very well to others of the same sort, who judge only from his words, whether he is talking about shoemaking or generalship or anything else whatever. So great is the charm that metre, mode and rhythm naturally possess. (601a-601b)

The charm of poetry's stylistic elements hides the fact that the poet knows nothing of the craft they represent. By employing poetic techniques – by speaking well – the poets appear to possess knowledge of the crafts they represent *only* to those who judge by words alone. Socrates clearly believes that *he* can discern this difference, for *he* knows that speaking well only entails the skill of imitation rather than the skill itself. In other words, Socrates looks beyond the spoken words of the poets for evidence of their competence, and yet finds nothing.

Plato develops the notion of *mimesis* in Book X beyond that which we saw in Books II and III in order to give the reader a deeper grasp of how art is deceptive. He no longer considers the non-productive notion of *mimesis* (enactment), but focuses entirely on the productive form that occurs when a poet produces a representation of a person or human affairs. Yet productive *mimesis* does not only characterise the poets; Plato extends his analysis of productive *mimesis* to the representative arts in general in order to show that one can represent a craft well without having knowledge of that craft. Indeed, Socrates seems less concerned with the poets than he is with *mimetikoi*. Here he describes a *mimetikoi* as 'a craftsman of images' (599d), a person who walks around with a mirror, passively reflecting the surfaces of the world as they appear, but 'surely not in truth' (596d-e). While the image of the mirror-holder seems to relate more to painting than to poetry, Plato is convinced that the nature of poetry is analogous to painting; in the same way that painting gives an image of, say, a landscape, poetry imitates what characters and human affairs *look* like. This analogy between poetry and painting leads to Plato's tripartite ontology: (1) God makes the idea, such as the ideal table, (2) the craftsman 'looks to the idea' (596b), bringing the table into being in the world of appearance, and (3) the artist copies what the craftsman has made, wither through producing an image (painting), through verse (poetry), or through some other medium. The painter and poet are ontologically the same: both make a copy of a copy, and know nothing of the idea itself. Thus

The practice of *mimesis* is then far from what is true and, as it seems, fabricates everything because of this: because it captures something little of each thing, and this is an image. (598b)

While the craftsman practices a kind of *mimesis*, for he fabricates by copying an idea, he is different from a poet for his *craft* cannot be defined in terms of imitation. Rather, his craft operates in a fashion that constructs with the ideal in view; he produces through *knowledge*.¹⁸ The one who possess only the craft of imitation, however, knows ‘little or nothing about the subjects he imitates’ (603b). Thus ‘the art of *mimesis* is something that has no serious value; and ... this applies above all to all tragic poetry, epic or dramatic’. In comparison to the art of the craftsman, the art of imitation has no serious value, for while both are a form of imitation, the craftsman imitates something substantial. From this metaphysical framework he can argue that ‘when someone reports to us that he has met a man who has knowledge of all the arts and everything else’, we do not need to test his claim empirically; we can assume that he has ‘been deceived by an imitator’ (598e). However, while Plato depicts the hold of the poetic arts over the people as ‘deception’ and ‘sorcery’ (598d), it is clear that he does not think that the *responsibility* for the ensnarement lies with the imitator. Instead, responsibility lies with the one who was deceived/charmed, for such a person is responsible for his or her own ignorance. Ensnarement is only possible if one is unable to ‘discriminate between knowledge, ignorance, and imitation’.

Plato does not think that poetry is neutral, for its poetic elements have the enticing ability to charm and ensnare us. However, he does not object to poetry on this ground. Rather, he objects to the situation in which the spectators are misled because they remain ignorant of the poets’ true skill, and thus become deceived that the poets have knowledge in matters of life. This distinction is important for Plato’s argument, for, at least in Book X, he is not attacking the poets as much as those who hold that Homer is the all-wise educator. He even defends Homer’s poetry by acknowledging that Homer never claimed to possess any knowledge about the things he represented.¹⁹ Such an error was made only by his followers who believed him to be all-wise (599e-600a). The charm that metre, mode, and rhythm naturally possess, the enchanting way that the audience is fooled into judging only his words and not his actions, and the poet’s profound skill in reproducing images, all serve to fool the spectators into believing that the poet has knowledge of what he represents. The

spectators who are unable to discern the difference between knowledge and imitation lack an ‘antidote’ (595b), Plato states, that is able to protect them from the danger of poetry. They lack a counter-spell that could allow them to experience poetic beauty without being corrupted. Precisely what this antidote might entail, and what it shows about Plato’s view of art, remains to be seen.

3. The antidote

Plato’s argument aims to show that those who consider the poets to have knowledge of the things they represent are deceived. Yet he does not suggest that the poets are wholly responsible for the ignorance of the people, for his argument is ultimately directed at the people who hold this view. Yet if the people are responsible for their own deception, and yet remain in the state of deception, how can they escape this vicious cycle? Presumably Plato’s alternative kind of poetry – poetry that is used *with* knowledge – is part of his solution. The presentation of *Kallipolis* through Plato’s writing might constitute one such form of *mimesis*. For Nietzsche, of course, this kind of art is deeply problematic, for it embodies philosophy’s preoccupation with the otherworldly. Yet it is also problematic on the terms of Plato’s project, as I have outlined it, for Plato’s idea of philosophical poetry only provides a solution for the guardians, that is, those who have been taken from their families at birth, subjected to rigorous mathematical training, and shaped through philosophical *mousike*. These guardians exist only in the presentation of *Kallipolis* in *Republic*, and it is not to them that Plato writes. If Plato desires to alter the *present* conditions of Athens – including those like himself who were formed by Homer and the tragic poets – how might poetry play a role?

In this section I aim to show that while Nietzsche’s concern for Plato’s philosophical poetry might be valid, Plato does not only admit philosophical poetry into the city, but also leaves room for a reconfigured love of poetic beauty; what I will call a *philosophical love* of poetry. I am not suggesting that Plato’s view of poetry is actually in line with Nietzsche’s project. Rather, I aim to show that Nietzsche’s caricature of Plato’s political project as escapist is ultimately flawed. Despite Plato’s weaknesses, I claim that his approach to political reform seeks to embrace this world *more fully* than Nietzsche’s aestheticism, for it problematises the given in a way that does not seek ecstatic moments of aesthetic reprieve, but invites the Athenian people

to take hold of the trajectory of their city. Plato's discussion of poetry in Book X reveals that he maintains hope that tragic poetry could be a valuable part of a city that does not accept the given but aspires to what is ungiven.

From the very outset of Book X Plato explores our relation to poetry in terms of love. In the opening lines, Socrates announces that he is returning to his refusal in Book III to admit poetry that is 'merely imitative' (595a). He does not refer to his earlier argument as a refusal of imitative poetry as such, but a refusal of poetry that is *merely* imitative; poetry that imitates in abstraction from the idea. He then utters a provocative summary of his reasons for refusing such poetry: 'Everything of this sort seems to be a corruption of understanding for hearers *who do not have, as an antidote, knowledge of what things happen to be in themselves*' (595b, my emphasis).

To explain what he means an antidote, Socrates draws it into an analogy with the youthful experience of falling in love. First, he examines the seductive call of his own first romance, and identifies two opposed desires in this experience that structure his treatment of poetry. The first desire comes from memory; when Socrates recalls his first love, he is enticed to return to its pleasures that still lay claim to his aging affections. The second desire comes from reason; many who fall in love recognise, despite their passion, that the object of their love may not actually be beneficial. Against their emotions, such people must wilfully stay away from the object of their love in order to prioritise a desire they deem to be more significant. In other words, they must transform their relation to the object of their love through *another* love.

Socrates clearly has in mind his own love of poetry, which, like a youthful lover who refuses to be forgotten, continues to beckon his attention. He acknowledges his youthful love of poetry, yet recognises that there came a time that he had to cleave from the allure of poetic beauty in order to learn of higher things. This decision, however, was not based on the knowledge that poetry *is* useless, just as the man who rejects his lover does not know that she is ultimately bad for him. Rather, it is based on the fact that its use remains to be established; his enraptured state quells all rational consideration. It is Socrates' desire to *know* that he is investing in something useful that turns him to a medium that is able to defend itself, namely, philosophy. Yet despite turning away from the youthful romance and toward philosophy, Socrates admits that he would *like* poetry to be proven to be an object worthy of his love, just as any man would like his love to be proved beneficial to his life. Yet to listen to poetry without discerning whether it is truly worthy of his affections would prove too

strong; the allure of metre and verse would surely conquer his heart while its worthiness remains to be seen.

While this settlement seems to be self-defeating – Socrates precludes the audition of poetry on the grounds that its worth is unknown, yet without auditing poetry one cannot make an assessment of poetry's worth – he then concedes that he will, despite his better judgment, listen to poetry once more. This audition will not be unmediated, however, for he will be sure to 'chant' to himself a 'counter-charm' in order to prevent himself 'from slipping back into the childish passion that the masses have' (608a). This counter-charm is none other than the argument of Book X: the case that poetry is not 'a serious undertaking that grasps truth', but a form of *mimesis*. By describing his argument as a counter-charm (presumably another way of talking about the antidote), Socrates shows again that his main concern is for those who accept the conditional in P1, that is, those who are not able to discern the kind of knowledge possessed by the poets. As I argued in section one, Plato wants to exclude poetry that is not philosophical in order to guarantee that the guardians of *Kallipolis* are formed according to the good. Here, however, it seems that Plato is no longer exploring the appropriate formation of the guardians, but how the *present* citizens of Athens, including himself, might relate to poetry. If the Athenian citizens could become equipped with knowledge – if they could learn what poetry amounts to – then they would be armed with a kind of protection from the corruptive influence of 'merely imitative' poetry. Then they could enjoy the pleasures of poetic beauty whilst recognising that what the mirror beholds is not all that there is.

While Plato's antidote to poetry's sway might at first appear to be in tension with his earlier banishment of the poets, it is not inconsistent with his overall argument. While he loves the beauty he encounters in Homer's representation of the tragic world, Plato remains concerned for those who are unable to discern that Homer's presentation does not amount to knowledge. He concedes that, like Nietzsche, he enjoys the lamentations of tragic poetry and the pleasure of giving himself over to it (605d).²⁰ Yet unlike Nietzsche, he refuses to accept that lamentation plumbs deeper into reality than knowledge; one would first have to consider which medium is more proficient at presenting the truth if one was to make such a claim. In other words, one would first have to practice *philosophy*. Plato's idea of a philosophical love of poetry is consistent with his overall argument if we accept that the philosophical nature of the love – the knowledge that what is presented through poetry is not *necessarily* true

– provides an antidote to the dangerous elements of the allure of poetic beauty. Plato’s pharmacological imagery implies that he figures tragic poetry as a kind of beautiful poison, pleasurable in its depiction of the world of appearances but deathly in its potential to occlude our insight into the good. Thus he argues that a philosophical love of poetry (not simply a love of philosophical poetry) might afford enough protection so that we might experience poetic beauty without being overcome by its spell.

4. A philosophical love of poetry

While Plato’s position seems to oscillate between expelling and conceding, calling for philosophical poetry and advocating an antidote that could allow us to continue enjoying tragic poetry, it presses toward a single end: elucidating the nature of *mimesis*. If we are to challenge the fatedness of the apparent order of things, if we are to cleave open the possibility of something more than what is, then we require other modes of *mimesis* that are able to open a space in which to discover the efficacy of human action in altering the given world. *Republic* must be seen as one such attempt; Socrates’ discussion of *Kallipolis* imitates the just city in order to transform the reader’s relation to the present city. It is certainly a flawed attempt, for by limiting *mimesis* to a passive kind of mirroring, Plato restricts poetic presentation from extending beyond what is given. Indeed, Plato’s *Republic* itself is creative in a non-mimetic sense, for it breaks with previous modes of presentation in the attempt to open a world that lies beyond the present.

Understanding *Republic* as an attempt to alter the relation of the citizens to the city entails that Nietzsche and Kaufmann’s portrayal of Plato’s view on poetry as the desire to escape the fragmented world of appearances for a perfect order of harmony is problematic on two fronts. First, it fails to call into question those who Plato aims to critique in *Republic*: those who hold that Homer is all-knowing. Neither Nietzsche nor Kaufmann would have much time for those who turn to art for knowledge in matters of education. Second, it fails to properly understand the political dimension of Plato’s project: Plato aims to alter the relation of the people to the poetic arts through philosophy in order to open what lies beyond the given. In this sense, while Plato, Nietzsche, and Kaufmann all attempt to challenge their readers to take *this* world more seriously, Plato’s attempt to reform civic education takes us further than the proposal put forward by Nietzsche and Kaufmann. Artistic solace is not an end, for

Plato, and neither can its value be found until one thinks philosophically. To accept the pleasures of art as the highest reality is to accept the given order as fate.

Alternatively, Socrates argues that the pleasures of art must be subsidiary to a greater task of building a political order in which it makes sense to live. Only a *philosophical* love of poetic beauty would allow the Athenian people to experience the pleasures of poetry without accepting the given world as final.

¹ Walter Kaufmann, *Philosophy and Tragedy* (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1968), 18.

² In Kaufmann's words, 'Plato aims to show us that in real life tragedy is not necessary if people will only listen to him.' *ibid.* 29

³ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. W. Kaufmann (Vintage Books, New York, 1967), 86, 96.

⁴ Julius Elias, *Plato's Defence of Poetry* (SUNY, USA, 1984); Avi Kujman, *Poetry and Philosophy: Plato's Spirit and Literary Criticism* (Charleston, SC, 2009); Mairead Costigan, 'Plato's *Republic* and Censorship in Philosophy and Poetry', in *Literature and Aesthetics*, 19, 1 (2009): 114-137.

⁵ Allan Gilbert, 'Did Plato Banish the Poets or the Critics?', in *Studies in Philology*, 36, 1 (1939): 1-19; Stephen Halliwell, 'Antidotes and Incantations: Is There a Cure for Poetry in Plato's *Republic*?', in *Plato and the Poets* (Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 2011), 241-266.

⁶ This argument is indebted to Halliwell, who concludes his analysis of Plato's cure for poetry by suggesting that Plato 'hopes, when all is said and done, not for a "cure" from a sickness but for a justification to nurture a reconfigured *eros* toward poetic beauty'. Halliwell leaves this suggestion undeveloped, and it is my hope to make some sense of it here. Halliwell, 'Antidotes and Incantations', p. 265.

⁷ See also Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 1945).

⁸ See Peter Euben, *Corrupting Youth: Political Education, Democratic Culture, and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Christina Tarnopolsky, *Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants: Plato's Gorgias and the Politics of Shame* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Danielle Allen, *Why Plato Wrote* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010).

⁹ Allen, *Why Plato Wrote*, p. 95.

¹⁰ See *Symposium* 215ef., 221df.; *Phaedrus* 2693f.; *Alcibiades* 218dff.; *Protagoras* 319ef.; *Gorgias* 315dff, 419a; *Meno* 94b.

¹¹ Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. T. Irwin (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979), 515dff. Plato particularly attacks Pericles, saying that if he were a good leader then the citizens would have been better by the end of his rule than when he started. They did not become better, but worse, Plato argues, exposing Pericles as a poor leader and a base character.

¹² *Mousike* covers the secondary or literary education referred to in Book III of *Republic*. According to Shorey it covers 'playing the lyre, music, poetry, letters, culture, philosophy according to the context.' Shorey, in Plato, *Republic*, trans. D. Lee (Penguin Books, England, 1974), 130

¹³ Desmond Lee, in Plato, *Republic*, trans. D. Lee (Penguin Books, England, 1974), 129

¹⁴ See Plato, *Republic*, trans. R. E. Allen (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2006).

¹⁵ For Nietzsche, taking solace in art turns on our participation in the creative and destructive activity of the 'reckless and amoral artist-god who wants to experience, whether he is building or bullying, ... his own joy and glory'. In such an experience, the suffering of the characters on stage – and the suffering of people in our own world – cease to be ethically demanding. Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, p. 22.

¹⁶ Kaufmann, *Tragedy and Philosophy*, p. 17-18.

¹⁷ Plato's argument here is similar to the one he built in the *Ion* where he attacks Ion's claim that Homer possessed the knowledge of the characters he represents. According to Ion, a Homeric rhapsode, Homer knows what is 'appropriate' for his characters to say, entailing that he has a knowledge of their craft (540b). Plato, *Early Socratic Dialogues*, ed. T. Saunders (Penguin Books, England, 1987).

¹⁸ Here it seems that Plato's argument has shifted slightly from the earlier chapters of *Republic*, where he contrasts the ignorance of the craftsman with the guardians who contemplate the ideal. In Book IV, for example, Plato suggests that craftsman become distracted and corrupted by material changes in the city while the guardians are able to maintain a balanced view (see 420a-c). A clue to the link between Book IV and X can be found in 401b-d, when Socrates says to Glaucon that we must search for craftsman who are able to 'search out the nature of what is beautiful and graceful' in their craft. This implies that while craftsman might often be absorbed in appearances, they *can* be trained to go beyond them. The similarity between the craftsman and the guardian Plato draws in Book X lies in their shared ability to give attention to the ideal. In contrast to the *imitator of the ideal*, the 'imitator' or 'the craftsman of images' possesses only the *craft of imitation* and not the craft itself (598e).

¹⁹ Elsewhere Plato can be found to praise Homer, yet it is often difficult to discern whether his praise serves a genuine or ironic use. See *Phaedo* 94dff., *Laws* III 676aff., *Gorgias* 523a and 526c, *Apology* 41a, and *Symposium* 209d. It seems evident that at least some respect for Homer lies within the irony in passages like *Symposium* 209d, *Phaedo* 95a, and *Laws* III 682a.

²⁰ He does, however, recognise the dangers in doing so: by revelling in tragic art one gives oneself over to the lower part of one's soul that is 'hungry for tears and the satisfaction of sufficient lamentation' (606a).