Plato's Banishment of Poetry

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Plato’s Banishment of Poetry

Like the medieval “Pearl” and Hamlet, the aesthetics of Plato provides ample ground on which the critic may exercise any particular hobbyhorse he chooses to ride. While poet-baiters have used some parts of the dialogues to scandalize poetry-lovers, Plato’s theories of love and beauty have inspired generations of poets. To those who would cite him to damn poetry, Plato offers such strictures as found in the Republic II, 377–383, III, 386–404, the Sophist 234–237, and the Laws II, 658–668, VII, 800–812, and VIII, 829. To those who would defend poetry, he gives his theory of inspiration, his analysis of the ethical uses of poetry, and the example of the magnificent poetry in his dialogues. But the present inquiry has only one purpose: to consider Plato’s most representative thought regarding poetry. His theory of divine inspiration, his frequent citation of poetry, and his use of ethical myths are historically important in the study of Plato’s attitude toward poets and poetry. But while this partial sanction of imaginative literature has some relevance to Plato’s aesthetics, a critic must not ignore Plato’s continual attacks on poetry, especially the final and complete exclusion of poets in the Republic X. With the twentieth century’s acceptance of metaphysical and formalist criticism, Plato’s stern moral judgment of poetry has fallen into increasing disfavor. Thus, Plato’s defenders are tempted to make him the friend of poets, his attacks on Hesiod and Homer being irrelevant footnotes to his real devotion to poetry.

Plato’s consistent mistrust of art in his explicit consideration of art must take precedence over his tacit enjoyment and his use of poetry in the dialogues. In practice, Plato not only quotes poetry with obvious approval but he also creates dramatic scenes which rival those of even the greatest of poets. Nevertheless, in the Republic X, his most thorough discussion of art, Plato strongly condemns poetry, both for its confusing of the intellect and for its corrupting of the emotions. His extreme position in the last book of the greatest repository of his thought represents his boldest conclusions. His insistence throughout the greater part of the dialogues on the importance of Forms should warn the reader against dismissing the Republic as presenting an impossible ideal. To Plato, the Republic was more “real” than any state actually in existence. In this book Plato states that he has banished all imaginative poetry—dramatic, epic, lyric. He does admit straightforward didactic poetry later in the discussion, but significantly he does not consider at this point the possibility that this verse could be beautiful in its own right. Judging poetry solely in terms of its effects, Plato feels that artful language, the tool of the sophists, tends to seduce the unwary to embrace the transient beauty of pleasure instead of to lift the soul to contemplate the true beauty of virtue. His sincerity and finality cannot be questioned; only the semi-humorous request to hear a defense of poetry in the Republic X, 607b–8 tempers the passionate conviction of his reasoning in X, 595–607a.

The philosophical authority of his extended reasoning in the Republic far out-
weighs his offhanded and ironic praise of poetic inspiration in such dialogues as the Ion and the Phaedrus. Plato's unyielding refusal to accept anything less than absolute knowledge precludes any admission that beautiful language could lead man to virtue. Accordingly, Plato applies the same strictures to poetry that he places on language throughout his dialogues. Rhetoric, poetry, reasoned discourse, all must primarily contain the truth. Plato would and does condemn even his own dialogues should anyone regard them as repositories of beauty and meaning in themselves. The dialogues, and indeed all acceptable uses of language, must be taken as guides for thought; only under this ideal condition will literature and poetry of any sort be welcome in the well-run state. We must not cut Plato's soaring thought down to an ill-considered and inconsistent espousal of poetry. Plato's reluctance to sacrifice Homer and Hesiod to the demands of the intellect makes further tribute to poetry in his name unnecessary.

Plato's theory of poetry is far more abstract and less applicable to the analysis of poetry than that of Aristotle. Plato's overwhelming bias towards ethics has tempted scholars to stress his linking of ethics with poetry rather than to consider what he says about poetry itself. But the issues Plato raises are important for aesthetics as well as for ethics or literary criticism. Because of the unstated basis of his aesthetics, few critics have pursued the course of his reasoning. The most vociferous attacker of poetry in the Elizabethan Age, Stephen Gosson, cites Plato's aesthetics as superficially as the great bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine, does. Plato's manner of presentation allows a wide latitude for the interpretation of his aesthetics. Since Plato was not a system-builder, a critic takes a firm stand at his own peril. In addition, the mask of the dialogue form increases the ambiguity introduced by the changing thought of Plato's long and productive life. His thought may indeed represent a unity as Paul Shorey has so eloquently argued, but this unity is a many-faceted jewel. To compound the problem, Plato never considers poetry by itself. He is always pressing toward some other conclusion, usually the ignorance of rhapsodes or the education of the youth. The scattered sayings about inspiration, the uses of poetry, and the nature of poetry itself only grudgingly, if at all, give up the heart of Plato's aesthetics.

Scholars today usually avoid the issues in the Republic X in their attempt to rescue Plato from charges of philistinism. One approach would directly question the purpose of the Republic, the only dialogue which seems to condemn poetry totally. Another line of thought suggests that Plato throughout the dialogues never seriously attacks poetry. A third, more easily supported, position would admit that Plato has some reservations about art, but would limit Plato's attack to the abuse of art and, in particular, realistic art. This third theory will be examined here later; the first two positions must be carefully considered. First, the most facile and tempting argument holds that the Republic is an ideal state, a kind of utopia. This interpretation stresses that poetry deals with the emotions of real and fallible men. Thus, Plato dismisses art lest the portrayal of reality shatter the ideal like a grubby finger destroys a soap bubble. In a perfect state no imperfection can exist. Darnell Rucker, a recent advocate of this position, persuasively reasons that "Neither the legislator nor the philosopher nor the poet has the same role in the Republic as he has in an actual state; and these differences in role are consequent upon the difference between an ideal and an actuality." G. M. A. Grube likewise agrees that Plato is legislating for an ideal republic, a pattern laid up in heaven. "In such a state no one has ever claimed a place for Pericles, Themistocles, or Solon, or indeed for any statesman that has ever lived. Why should an exception be made for the poets?" But one might argue that Plato does provide for enlightened rulers—the philosopher-kings; he specifically excludes all poets. And Plato would violently object to his Republic's being considered less real than the decaying political organization of Athens in its decline. Great though Athenian statesmen had been, Plato, like Machiavelli, saw the degeneration of past grandeur all around him. Clearly, radical proposals were needed.

The argument stressing the Republic as
visionary, but impractical, likewise reasons that, like the state, the ruler of the Republic needs protection from the real world of heat and dust. The philosopher-king must be isolated by almost physical barriers, as in More's *Utopia*, to guard him from the rigors of a real state. Rucker states, “The philosopher in our world, as Plato says in the *Apology* and Socrates exemplifies, must exist in a private station. Short of the institutionalization of the education process of the Republic, the philosopher-king could not hope for the necessary support from the institutions and the citizens of his city.”

Indeed Plato is always mindful that philosophers were often ill-treated in the city state, and often alludes to their otherworldliness. But the philosopher’s present ills and seeming dreaminess are only the appearances that the ignorant can see.

The argument that the Republic is an ideal state has by no means found universal acceptance. Eric A. Havelock explicitly attacks this view as a present-day fallacy: “On the over-all issue, Plato is accommodated to modern taste by arguing that the programme of the *Republic* is utopian and that the exclusion of poetry applies only to an ideal condition not realisable in the recognizable future or in earthly societies. One might reply that even in that case why should the Muse of all people be selected for exclusion from Utopia?” Plato's seriousness can be seen in his consistent demand that poetry and all discourse be subordinate to reason and thought in the proper education of youth. From the *Ion* to the *Laws*, Plato insists that poetry be judged in terms of its knowledge and its usefulness. The great political figures in Athens' past offer the same danger to the Republic that poetry does: the weight of authority may detract from the force of active reasoning. Besides, most good statesmen act only through “right opinion.”

The greatest danger in making the Republic an ideal is that the interpretation denies Plato's carefully considered analysis of knowledge. Our distinction between ideal and real is not Plato's. “The assertion that theory comes closer than practice to truth or reality is characteristically Platonic. The ideal state or man is the true state or man; for if men, who are in fact always imperfect, could reach perfection, they would only be realizing all that their nature aims at being and might conceivably be.” Plato intends the *Republic* to describe a system better than that of any actual or foreseeable state. But his attack on poetry is from the standpoint not of politics but rather of ethics. The dialogue deals as much with education as with the state. “Were it not for the title, it might be read for what it is, rather than as an essay in utopian political theory. It is a fact that only about a third of the work concerns itself with statecraft as such.” If Plato says emphatically that poetry should be banished from the ideal state, then his criticism applies even more strongly to any less-than-perfect state. If poetry is a necessary evil in a real state, poetry must be excluded from a more perfect commonwealth. A necessary evil is still an evil.

The philosopher to Plato is a realist in the widest sense of the word. As opposed to the benighted politicians who must compromise their convictions, a true philosopher works both in the world of appearances and in the world of higher realities. Plato himself went to Syracuse in order to advise Dionysius. And one must agree with Plato that Socrates lived and died more triumphantly than did the tyrants who were superficially successful in this world of shadows. Otherwise, Plato would insist that the *Phaedo* be rejected from a proper state because of its description of an unjust punishment.

Moreover, in Plato's thought itself, the philosopher is constantly engaged with the world. The vision of absolute virtue and beauty makes the philosopher effective: “Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be enabled to bring forth, not images of beauty, but realities (for he has hold not of an image but of a reality), and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may” (*Symposium* 212). Even at the moment of greatest remove from the physical world, Plato makes the philosopher bring forth the realities of true virtue.
The poet, on the other hand, is likely to produce only "images of beauty."

Admittedly, the Republic is not to be found among actual states, but then, the true philosopher does not live on the same plane with ordinary men. In his search for justice, Socrates states:

When we set out to discover the essential nature of justice and injustice and what a perfectly just and a perfectly unjust man would be like, supposing them to exist, our purpose was to use them as ideal patterns; we were to observe the degree of happiness or unhappiness that each exhibited, and to draw the necessary inference that our own destiny would be like that of the one we most resembled. We did not set out to show that these ideals could exist in fact. (Republic V, 472)

He recognizes that theory can never be completely realized in practice, for action always comes less close to truth than thought. He asks, "Is our theory any the worse, if we cannot prove it possible that a state so organized should be actually founded?" (ibid). The Republic, then, is an honest and courageous attempt to cut through the confusion inherent in any society already realized.

Later, Socrates proposes that the philosopher-king may be effective even in an actual state. The philosopher, in companionship with the divine order, will first reproduce that order in his own soul:

Suppose, then, he should find himself compelled to mould other characters besides his own and to shape the pattern of public and private life into conformity with his vision of the ideal, he will not lack the skill to produce such counterparts of temperance, justice, and all the virtues as can exist in the ordinary man. And the public, when they see that we have described him truly, will be reconciled to the philosopher and no longer disbelieve our assertion that happiness can only come to a state when its lineaments are traced by an artist working after a divine pattern. (Republic VI, 500)

The philosopher's role is to create a humanity true to its highest possibilities, not to pander to the confused emotions of ignorant men. The guide of the philosopher, the true artist, should be the ideal model of virtue. He is a lover of truth and reality. The institutions described in the Republic will certainly be the best if they can be realized. And Plato rather sanguinely states that "to realize them, though hard, is not impossible" (VI, 502). A true utopia, a "nowhere" such as Sir Thomas More's, may be a social satire, a skeptical attack on existing institutions. The Republic, however, is no flight of the imagination; the dialogue represents Plato's attempt to suggest the Form of the state.

Therefore, one cannot dismiss the attack on poetry in the Republic merely on the basis of its presenting an ideal state. If a critic is justified in dismissing any part with which he happens to disagree, there is no limit to the material he can ignore. The Republic is neither an impossible ideal nor a blueprint for a possible state; its contribution is both to politics and to ethics. Like Aristotle, Plato identifies the good of the individual with that of the state. A. E. Taylor comments on the purpose of this dialogue: "It has sometimes been asked whether the Republic is to be regarded as a contribution to ethics or to politics. Is its subject 'righteousness', or is it the 'ideal state'? The answer is that from the point of view of Socrates and Plato there is no distinction, except one of convenience, between morals and politics. The laws of right are the same for classes and cities as for individual men. But one must add that these laws are primarily laws of personal morality; politics is founded on ethics, not ethics on politics." Plato proposes a guide for man to order his life, not a utopian scheme for intellectual amusement. He intends his precepts concerning ethics to be universally applicable no less than does Kant. Few men may follow the categorical imperative; but men's failing does not render the principle less true. So while any thoughtful discussion of the Republic's applicability to our humdrum existence is valuable, one must still consider whether Plato seriously and consistently attacks poetry in this dialogue and elsewhere.

The second method of making Plato a patron of the arts does not attack the purpose of the Republic but the seriousness of Plato in banishing poets. Following Sir Philip Sidney's example, these apologists claim that Plato condemns only the abuse of poetry. The Laws thus represents Plato's awakening to the necessity of poetry in human life; the Ion becomes an exposé of
Plato's Banishment of Poetry

contemporary Greek criticism. Stressing the Ion, Allan Gilbert argues that “Plato attempted to banish the bad critics that the poets might appear as they truly were and are, even if only to the fit audience who can discern their nature as artists.” This line of reasoning is attractive, for Plato's main thrust in the Ion certainly appears to be against the stupidity of the rhapsodes. Then, too, Plato's constraints on poetry are, for the most part, overshadowed by his frequent citations of poetry. Finally, the Republic II and III as well as the Laws II and VII censure primarily immoral poetry. If some poetry is moral, Plato would have to admit its presence in the well-run state.

Unfortunately, grave difficulties beset each of these arguments. Nowhere in the Ion does Plato accept poetry as a guide to proper conduct. Instead, we have only an ambiguous praise of the source of poetry, the Muse. This divine source of inspiration plays no integral role in Plato's discussion of knowledge or virtue. Surprisingly enough, Plato never mentions poetic inspiration in the context of his examination of poetry. He quotes poetry often, but seldom pauses to consider the poetic worth, the beauty of any passage. The quotations usually illustrate some point about conduct. Next, the dialogue form may not express Plato's final position. Again, if we dismiss whatever we please in the dialogues simply because of the tentative nature of Plato's thought, we have little hope of understanding any of his thought. Finally, if other dialogues accept the possibility of moral poetry, the Republic X certainly denies that any poetry which Plato knew would fulfill the requirement. Plato's final comment on poetry in the most complete exposition of his thought surely takes precedence over the trivial Ion and the important but pedestrian Laws.

To vitiate Plato's attack on art in the Republic X, critics often cite his famous praise of divine inspiration. Rucker emphasizes that Plato praises inspiration and condemns only art which unjustly pretends to knowledge. “Socrates does not attack Ion's ability as a rhapsode in the Ion; he attacks Ion's claim to knowledge of the topics of his recitations. So long as the poet makes no claim to knowledge of those things he is inspired to say (or make), Plato has no quarrel with him as a poet.” In light of Plato's careful qualification, however, one cannot accept his seriousness in praising inspiration. The Ion does indeed attack only the unlearned rhapsode. But the theory of poetic inspiration (Ion 533), far from praising the poet, only testifies to poetry's power. And Plato never questions the effects of poetry. His question is how dangerous are these effects to the intellect.

Although his theory of divine inspiration has been extremely influential on poets and literary critics, Plato does not develop his scattered comments into a philosophy. Indeed, this minor motif runs counter to Plato's serious investigation of poetry. The Phaedrus, which cites the poet favorably, mentions four kinds of madness. The subjects of the dialogue are love and rhetoric; only one short section (245) mentions poetry at all. Similarly, the Symposium 205 touches on the poet on its way to an exposition of Absolute Beauty. The passages are frequently attacks on the poet's knowledge, poetry being praised in a backhanded manner. The Phaedrus 245 would make the poet a “divine madman,” several degrees below the inspired philosopher. Here Plato does attribute the same sort of greatness to poet and to philosopher. But the philosopher more typically in Plato is one who knows rather than one who is “inspired.”

Two other dialogues are even less favorable in their citation of divine inspiration of the poet. The Apology 22 states that “there is hardly a person present who would not have talked better about their poetry than they did themselves. Then I knew that not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration; they are like diviners or soothsayers who also say many fine things, but do not understand the meaning of them.” This passage, dripping with Socratic irony, is hardly matter on which to build a significant praise of inspiration. The Laws shows little development or refinement of those concepts expressed early in Plato's thoughts on poetry. The Athenian states that

the poet, according to the tradition which has ever prevailed among us, and is accepted of all
men, when he sits down on the tripod of the muse, is not in his right mind; like a fountain, he allows to flow out freely whatever comes in, and his art being imitative, he is often compelled to represent men of opposite dispositions, and thus to contradict himself; neither can he tell whether there is more truth in one thing that he has said than in another. (Laws IV, 719)

The poet cannot, therefore, be a legislator, for a legislator must not give two rules about the same thing. These passages about inspiration say little about what poetry is. Plato stresses the poet's ignorance even while accepting his divine calling.

Plato admits that beauty in all its forms has a profound effect on the soul. He stresses, however, that only the beauty of virtue and of knowledge does not lead to the impure enjoyment of pleasure. Except for the early training and discipline of the soul through harmony, poetry does not lead directly to an understanding of proper conduct. The poet cannot possess knowledge of what he does unless he becomes a philosopher too. The poet himself is usually the passive agent of the Muse; the inexplicable beauty of poetry comes from its divine origin. But when Plato looks at the poet's own contribution to the process, he finds the poet only an unlearned imitator. Plato's doctrine of divine inspiration applies more to his theory of love than to his concept of poetry. The Phaedrus and the Symposium suggest an affinity between the soul and beauty with which the doctrine of the Forms does not completely agree. References to poetic inspiration, however, are almost a dead end; Plato does not attempt to integrate this inspiration with his main thought about poetry and language. In no place in the dialogues does Plato consider what poetry is together with its source in the Muse. Thus Plato's occasional references to poetic inspiration do not constitute a significant approval of poetry itself.

Besides considering the theory of poetic inspiration, critics may emphasize the dialogues which admit some ethical uses of poetry. Indeed, only the Republic X seems to deny even the possibility of good poetry. Plato's strictures in the few places where he directly considers poetry seem outweighed by his overall attitude toward the art of the ancients. Gilbert comments on the Laws:

Since the form of the dialogue is still employed and no speaker can be identified with the author, it is impossible to say that Plato's opinions are absolutely laid down. I find it impossible to think that the Athenian who takes the chief part, for Socrates no longer appears, is Plato himself, or at least represents more than aspects of Plato's mind. The comic picture of eminent generals and statesmen solemnly reciting bad verses is hardly to be explained as the serious opinion of a man who knew and loved Homer as Plato did.*

Yet Plato has already admitted in the Republic X that Homer is "the first and greatest of the tragic poets." But truth must not be sacrificed for personal satisfaction: "if the dramatic poetry whose end is to give pleasure can show good reason why it should exist in a well-governed society, we for our part should welcome it back, being ourselves conscious of its charm; only it would be a sin to betray what we believe to be the truth. You too, my friend, must have felt this charm, above all when poetry speaks through Homer's lips" (X, 606). Of course Plato is charmed. But he does not on this account accept disruptive poetry into a well-run state.

Rather than question the Laws, however, most critics agree that here Plato offers a serious theory of art. Warry states that "in the Laws, which, though it lacks the literary power of the Republic, offers us a far saner and more practical version of an ideal State, no automatic criterion of poetry and art is offered. Instead, tragedy and comedy are cautiously admitted, subject to reservation." Grube agrees that "by far the most mature, as well as the most complete, discussion of art, is to be found in the Laws, where it should be noted we are no longer dealing with the ideal state." Just as a man at the north pole can move only south, any variation in the perfect Republic must be for the worse. The less visionary Laws, however, seems to allow as much poetry as needed to regulate the souls of imperfect men.

But Plato's treatment in the Laws is at heart almost exactly the same as in the Republic. Both admit only praises of noble men and of gods; neither dialogue allows evil in poetry. Both the Republic (III, 400) and the Laws (VII, 810) allow poetry to stimulate harmony in the young. And even the Republic X, 606 states that "we can
Plato's Banishment of Poetry

admit into our commonwealth only the poetry which celebrates the praises of the gods and of good men." The Laws would require the poet to "express, as he ought, by fair and noble words, in his rhythms, the figures, and in his melodies, the music of temperate and brave and in every way good men" (II, 660). The major difference between the dialogues is that the Republic defends this restriction philosophically while the Laws is more concerned with implementing the selection of such noble poetry. The art Plato seems to accept, however, is not actually poetry, but philosophical and didactic discourse.

The argument so far has been essentially negative. The Republic cannot be dismissed as an "ideal," nor do Plato's comments elsewhere constitute an endorsement of poetic inspiration or of ethical poetry. His mistrust of poetry obviously exists side by side with his love of poetry. The task remaining is to see whether Plato's reasons for banishing poetry are consistent and well thought out. If the Laws and the Republic do indeed contain the same attitude toward art, the discussion of poetry in the Republic should apply equally to both dialogues. The Republic, the source of most of the controversy over Plato's aesthetics, alone contains his explicit expulsion of poetry. In this book, he first considers poetry's misleading of the intellect, then its catering to the emotions. Poetry is guilty of both offenses. In 595-99 Plato argues that a carpenter follows a divine form in making a bed, and an artist copies that imitation. Plato then explicitly analyzes the analogy between the painter and the poet. At this point he seems to leave room for poetry which encourages virtue and restraint as he has suggested in the second and third books of the Republic. But Plato then extends his attack to all poetry in the Republic, 601-7. Poetry, by stimulating the emotions, confuses the intellect. Although he does not advance new arguments concerning poetry's effect on the emotions, the previous four books have introduced a theory of the soul which renders poetry, an appeal to the soul directly through beauty, largely unnecessary. The soul's perception of beauty is to be mediated through knowledge, not immediately grasped through the emotions. Nevertheless, Plato then seems to permit poetry to reenter the state precisely under the same conditions as in Books II and III. Since Plato feels that he has banished poetry, his admission of didactic verse must have little resemblance to what he deems to be poetry. The combination of his censure of poetry with his "poetic" style creates a problem of interpretation, but the confusion is ours, not Plato's.

The Republic is central to any discussion of Plato's aesthetics, both for its inherent philosophy and for its historical importance. Without this book, most critics would take little offense at Plato's insistence on the moral judgment of poetry. The earlier parts of the Republic and most of the Laws present a fairly acceptable attack on obviously immoral poetry and on foolish misinterpretations by the uneducated. His epistemological attacks on poetry and his ad hominem attack on Homer in Book X, however, have seldom appealed to readers. Critics are at loggerheads over the role of the tenth book in the dialogue as well as its content. Cornford states in his translation of the Republic that "the attack on poetry in this Part has the air of an appendix, only superficially linked with the preceding and following context. Possibly the strictures on dramatic poetry in Chapter IX had become known and provoked criticism to which Plato wished to reply." 21 Havelock, on the other hand, states that "an author possessing Plato's skill in composition is not likely to blunt the edge of what he is saying by allowing his thought to stray away from it at the end." 22 Both agree that the discussion of poetry is a break in the argument of Republic IX and the Myth of Er.

The first books of the Republic are tentative positions in Plato's study of man and the state. Plato's comments on poetry are not extreme here; his ideals obviously resemble those in the Laws. But scholars have often debated the exact relationships between these first thoughts on poetry and the final statement in the tenth book of the dialogue. One argument maintains that Plato was serious in the first part; in the last book he is stretching the point. Plato's argument may carry him further than he
would willingly go: “In X. there is an unmistakable trace of sophistry, a use of arguments which cannot have appealed to the better judgment of the writer; the reasoning in II. and III. is direct, serious, and convincing. . . . In the latter book he seems to be seeking strictly philosophical considerations to support the verdict of the earlier passage, to be trying to show that this almost a priori conclusion is in harmony with the great principles upon which the Republic rests.” 23 Superficially, Plato does seem to change his position.24 In Book II he attacks the content of contemporary poetry, in Book III the form. Some more useful and purified poetry would then be a possibility. But Plato progressively develops the description of the best state and of the ruler of that state. In the fourth book he discusses the nature of the soul. In the tenth book he shows the effects of the lesser beauty of poetry on the soul. The enlightened soul should contemplate the beauty of virtue directly. Knowledge, not the impure mixture of emotion and thought found in poetry, should guide man. Since the last part of the Republic was probably written much later than the earlier parts, we may conjecture that the tenth book answers some contemporary objections to his previous discussion of poetry.25 Plato states that “our commonwealth has many features which make me think it was based on very sound principles, especially our rule not on any account to admit the poetry of dramatic representation. Now that we have distinguished the several parts of the soul, it seems to me clearer than ever that such poetry must be firmly excluded” (X, 595). The reason for the exclusion is that poetry may injure minds which do not understand its true nature.

Critics not only disagree on the relationship of the tenth book to the rest of the dialogue but they question the relevance of his comments to any useful study of poetry. Havelock argues that the Republic does not launch a philosophical attack on the poets, but rather proposes a social criticism. He states that the political framework of the dialogue may be utopian, but Plato is serious about the role of poetry in education. “It is obvious that the poetry he is talking about is not the kind of thing we identify today as poetry. Or more properly that his poetry and our poetry may have a great deal in common, but that what must have changed is the environment in which poetry is practised. Somehow, Plato is talking about an over-all cultural condition which no longer exists.” 26 A. E. Taylor, however, would extend Plato’s attack to poetry for all times. “It is not the floridity of Timotheus or Agathon which is the object of attack, but the art of the Periclean age. We are only throwing dust in our own eyes if we suppose that Socrates wants merely to repress the cheap music-hall and the garish melodrama, or the equivalents of freak movements like Dada. He is seriously proposing to censure just what we consider the imperishable contributions of Athens to the art and literature of the world, because he holds that they have tendencies which are unfavourable to the highest development of moral personality.” 27 Plato saw too clearly to confuse the degenerate art of his own time with all possible art. If Plato’s aesthetics comments only on a vanished social situation, his thought has value only for the antiquarian.

The Republic does not attack simply a way of interpreting poetry. The position expressed in this dialogue goes beyond the reasoning in the Ion. Plato argues as if Homer himself were claiming authority, not just the ignorant rhapsode. Yet, Cornford denies that Plato is interested in aesthetics for its own sake in this book: “The main object of attack, however, is the claim, currently made by sophists and professional reciters of the Homeric poems, that Homer in particular, and in a less degree the tragedians, were masters of all technical knowledge, from wagon-building or chariot-driving to strategy, and also moral and religious guides to the conduct of life.” 28 In the Ion, Plato has suggested that everyone, not just the professionals, interpreted poetry incorrectly. So Plato attacks false literary criticism in the Ion, but he extends his reasoning in the Republic. Plato does not directly mention in the Republic that the sophists used poetry to bolster their effectiveness. In fact, he even cites the sophists as his allies against the poets; Homer’s authority chal-
Plato's Banishment of Poetry

pleges that of Protagoras of Abdera and Prodicus of Ceos (Republic X, 600).

The Republic X itself shows that there can be little doubt that Plato intended to banish at least all "realistic" poetry from the well-run state. Carried to the extreme by Zeuxis and Apollodorus, realism was particularly liable to misinterpretation. Basing his argument on his doctrine of Forms, Plato states that there are three realms of reality: the gods', the carpenters', and the painters'. For instance, the divine maker creates the form of a bed. Then the carpenter copies the form, and the painter imitates the copy of the bed. Thus, "the work of the artist is at the third remove from the essential nature of the thing" (X, 597). Such art is banished, not for its abuse of the emotions, but for its confusing of the intellect:

The art of representation, then, is a long way from reality; and apparently the reason why there is nothing it cannot reproduce is that it grasps only a small part of any object, and that only an image. Your painter, for example, will paint us a shoemaker, a carpenter, or other workman, without understanding any one of their crafts; and yet if he were a good painter, he might deceive a child or a simple-minded person into thinking his picture was a real carpenter, if he showed it them at some distance. (Republic X, 598)

Thus, anyone who claimed to be able to produce a copy of every trade must not be allowed in the state. Plato, of course, is thinking of poetry and its claims for knowledge it does not possess. It has been argued, reasonably enough, that a painter could not put knowledge of cobbling into a picture even if he were also an expert cobbler. To this Plato might reply that, according to his theory of the division of labor found in the Ion and the Republic, no man can be a good painter and a good cobbler at the same time. The painter, like the poet, has no specific trade: all humanity is their province. But only the possessor of wisdom, the philosopher, can understand what is right for man. Just as Sir Philip Sidney closely identifies artist with philosopher, Plato makes the philosopher the supreme craftsman. Sidney stresses the virtue of beauty, Plato the beauty of virtue.

Whereas an apologist of poetry such as Sidney will stress poetry's effectiveness, its ability to move man's hardened heart, Plato demands as a prerequisite that there be complete clarity of the goals for mankind. The effectiveness of language will follow directly from this vision of the absolute. Art is inherently amoral, and thus is a poor guide to virtue. Poetry is liable to the same misinterpretation that Jonathan Swift sees for satire. In the preface to Battle of the Books, Swift declares that satire is a kind of glass in which beholders generally discover everybody's face but their own. For this reason, satire receives a kind reception in this world, and very few are offended by it. Poetry may confirm, but it seldom converts. Plato could argue that the rational part of the soul receives little instruction from its contemplation of the static picture of a cobbler at his trade. The painting might incidentally be beautiful. But a man must have virtue and knowledge first; otherwise he receives not happiness but pleasure from beauty.

Nevertheless, Plato's condemnation of realistic art need not apply to all art. As Havelock notes, mimeis is "truly a protean word." Elsewhere in the dialogues, the good man "imitates" the Form of virtue. And as Sir Philip Sidney says in his Apologie for Poetrie, the poet "painteth not Lucretia whom he never saw, but painteth the outward beauty of such a virtue." The artist need not be limited to photographic copying, the "creating" the world with a mirror (X, 597). If a man can imitate the Form of virtue, the poet who copies his actions will be imitating that virtue. Plato himself seems to admit a second kind of imitation in the Republic V, 472: "Then suppose a painter had drawn an ideally beautiful figure complete to the last touch, would you think any the worse of him, if he could not show that a person as beautiful as that could exist?" Plato admits that art may be true and poetry may contain great truths, but only as a possibility. Nevertheless, he does not explicitly allow the artist this ability, and the Republic X seems to deny even the possibility. Plato does not reconcile ignorant imitation in art with true copying of the eternal forms. "Why should not works of art be imitations in the
same sense, expressing the Ideas in the physical world, without the intermediate model of that physical world itself? There is nothing in Plato's conception of the relationship between the two worlds which precludes such an escape out of the difficulty. There is, however, a very definite objection, namely that he himself never says a word to indicate anything of the kind.” 31 Similarly, a critic cannot argue for Plato's acceptance of good and ethical poetry on the basis of his admitting the divine origin of poetry. Plato never makes this connection. Likewise, Plato's thought on the nature of poetry does not directly relate to his discussion of the use of poetry in the education of the young. Critics may emphasize Plato's sanction of language which produces harmony, but they are liable to gloss over Plato's real objections to poetry itself.

Plato next attempts to prove that in fact no physical art or language can capture the eternal Forms. Art is seductive; only the intellect can distinguish its true beauty from mere pleasure, which art can powerfully suggest. After banishing imitative poetry for its liability of being misinterpreted, Plato discusses poetry which portrays men in action. Earlier in the Republic, Plato had admitted the possibility that poetry can stimulate harmony in the soul. If laments are prohibited because they encourage softness, perhaps descriptions of courage will arouse the nobler spirit. Nevertheless, Plato wishes to extend his argument that poetry is an imitation of an imitation. The conclusion toward which his discussion of realistic poetry has been leading is “that paintings and works of art in general are far removed from reality, and that the element in our nature which is accessible to art and responds to its advances is equally far from wisdom” (X, 603). Both visual art and poetry are condemned. Here Plato suggests an obvious fact: the appreciation of art is not exclusively a rational process. Few critics would disagree although they might enlarge the province of the rational.

The subject of both painting and poetry is man's action and his earthbound fortunes. Drama focuses on human beings rather than on the Forms. Thus, the glorification of humanity only indirectly, if at all, leads to a higher understanding:

Then, instead of trusting merely to the analogy from painting, let us directly consider that part of the mind to which the dramatic element in poetry appeals, and see how much claim it has to serious worth. We can put the question in this way. Drama, we say, represents the acts and fortunes of human beings. It is wholly concerned with what they do, voluntarily or against their will, and how they fare, with the consequences which they regard as happy or otherwise, and with their feelings of joy and sorrow in all these experiences. (Republic X, 603)

These emotions are unsuitable for the stage, since displays of passion reveal a divided soul. Plato has previously argued that reason springs from within; “the impulses driving and dragging the soul are engendered by external influences and abnormal conditions” (Republic IV, 439).

So with the empiricism usually attributed only to Aristotle, Plato points out the difficulty in portraying a man of wisdom and moderation on the stage. Just as today when popular indifference to temperate characters calls for Amos to be superseded by Kingfish and Pogo by Albert, Plato could observe in his own time that only great emotions make characters interesting for the masses. “This fretful temper gives scope for a great diversity of dramatic representation; whereas the calm and wise character in its unvarying constancy is not easy to represent, nor when represented is it readily understood, especially by a promiscuous gathering in a theatre, since it is foreign to their own habit of mind” (X, 604). Dramatic poets appeal to the forces which undermine the reason and exalt the irrational. Plato makes no distinction between drama and epic; Homer is the greatest tragedian. Presented literally in either form, no human action is sufficient to inculcate virtue.

Plato ends the discussion of poetry in what seems at least to him to be a complete rejection of all except overtly didactic verse. One may dispute whether he has proven his point, but he himself is satisfied with his reasoning:

You must be quite sure that we can admit into our commonwealth only the poetry which cele-
brates the praises of the gods and of good men. If you go further and admit the honeyed muse in epic or in lyric verse, then pleasure and pain will usurp the sovereignty of law and of the principles always recognized by common consent as the best. (Republic X, 607)

As in the earlier books of the Republic and in the Laws, Plato here admits the poetry which praises gods and virtuous men. Epic and drama are too directly anthropocentric. Plato's theory of knowledge does not allow him to develop a system of literary criticism which would honor the presentation of strong emotions. But one might ask why he does not group lyric poetry with encomia, for a well wrought eulogy of virtue may give pleasure. Presumably these encomia need not resemble such lyric modes as the Mixed Lydian or Hyperlydian, which have already been censured. Indeed, pleasure and pain would not necessarily corrupt the principles of his state, for an effective tribute to "gods and good men" may cause both delight and agony. But Plato here is not concerned with the effectiveness of poetry. Earlier in the Republic he has discussed the usefulness of poetry in promoting harmony in the souls of its hearers; the last book simply states that the only safe poetry for this purpose is the obviously didactic.

Plato's admission of any poetry at this point would seem to convict him of inconsistency either in his reasoning or in the example which his dialogues present. His dialogues seldom confine themselves to straightforward praises of virtue; the description and dramatization of Socrates' encounters resemble the art Plato has condemned. The earlier dialogues—the Charmides, the Lysis, the Laches—show Socrates in deliberately inconclusive arguments. The Phaedrus contains a praise of selfish desire, and the Symposium presents conflicting speeches on love. Thus, his own dialogues, with all their artistic power, must prove themselves to be "praises of the gods and of good men." And conversely, these praises of virtue must prove themselves as something else than poetry.

An examination of Plato's view of the relationship of language and thought may clarify his attitude toward poetry. Plato clearly saw that art tends to be amoral; one's final response to beauty is emotional, a reaction either of pleasure or of pain. This emotional response should be condemned only when the "poetry" of language interferes with its truth. In reaction to the claims of the sophists and of the rhapsodes, Plato insists that style is largely irrelevant to meaning. Thus, his continual attention to style shows him in a quandary about the necessity of being effective, yet hating the false effectiveness of the sophists. Plato consistently admits encomia in every discussion of poetry only because he does not banish language from his commonwealth. Didactic poetry has the same role as his dialogues do; discourse which points toward the Good is an integral part of the perfect state. Yet all language, as it tends towards poetry, is liable to misinterpretation. Paul Friedländer argues that Plato intends his dialogues to be an example of the "art" allowed in the Republic. It is difficult to draw a stable character. "But did not Plato represent, always and everywhere, precisely this type of man in Socrates? In the Phaedo, when Socrates sends away the women dissolved in sorrow and admonishes and cheers the weeping friends? In the Symposium, when the Logos defeats the danger of comic disorder and humiliation? ... Thus it is even more clear than before that he claimed for himself the very place he asked the tragic poets to vacate." But one might object that Plato has specifically banned lamentations. The dialogues are more than sketches of Socrates; Plato may present contradictory opinions or even praises of immorality as shown by Callicles' speech in the Gorgias. Each dialogue falls under precisely the same judgment that literature does. Therefore, the Phaedo, moving as it is, must suggest the truth lying beyond the physical scene, or Plato would insist that this dialogue too must be banished.

While Plato certainly regarded his dialogues as more suitable for the Republic than most contemporary poetry could be, he would never wish to take the place of poets. The fault in Greek poetry was that the beauty of language tended to discourage thought. Indeed, Havelock stresses that
Plato’s fundamental objection to art is that poetry in Athens represented a social consciousness rather than the individual thought that Plato demanded. Rather than questioning the meaning behind poetry, the Greeks were overwhelmed by its beauty. Just as Socrates continually probed beyond the physical world, Plato would insist that the dialogues be points of departure for thought, not works of art in themselves.

To Plato, language is a living body of thought, philosophy being possible only in the dialectic. Poetry errs in seeming to fix knowledge in order to pass it down from age to age. Drama and epic, as written and established by the beloved ancients, interfere with the process of reasoning, for the beauty of language tends to obscure the beauty of thought. Precisely because of the dual role of language as the vehicle of thought and as the source of mere pleasure, the poet in Plato struggles constantly against the philosopher. “Again and again Plato’s written work is mimesis; but it struggles against being nothing but mimesis. And where it seems to represent most strongly a pure work of art, it must not ultimately be read as such, but as an ‘existential’ document, that is, with the constant reminder tua res agitur.” The gifted literary style of the dialogues shows that Plato, like the sophists, was aware that philosophy must be effective. But Plato will not compromise the truth in any way for the sake of mere effectiveness. Didactic verse is permitted in the Republic because such language is not poetry at all. Like the bad verse he seems to sanction in the Laws, literature in the Republic must never sacrifice truth on the altar of pleasure and emotional appeal.

As Havelock suggests, poetry and language had a different role in Athenian society from that which art has in our own. Rhetoricians such as Isocrates and Alkidasmas debated the proper uses of the written language. In Greece the written word did not have the authority which such established language now possesses. Our attention to static language derives in part from the Hebraic tradition of veneration of sacred writings. The Judeo-Christian emphasis on the fixed language of revelation redirects man to his own inadequacy. Plato’s focus on the transcendent suggests that language can be the vehicle for man to escape his earthbound existence. A modern man usually lacks this mingled respect and frustration with language. A literary critic or a linguist will focus on minute nuances of style or syntax rather than on the meaning lying beyond the words. The poetry of Greece, on the other hand, was essentially oral and for the most part intended for a wide audience. The Republic itself was probably composed as “a matter of oral teaching in the school.” The written word to Plato, therefore, follows from the heat of discourse. To use a phrase of Toynbee, the dialogues of Plato resemble a typescript, the basis for “winged words.”

Both the written word and the language of poetry have the property of fixing the logos, of establishing an idea rather than letting thought range freely. In illiterate societies, memory takes the place of writing, and words such as those of Homer can be transmitted with great accuracy for generations. Thus Plato questions the worth of any language, written or orally recited, not immediately involved with philosophical reasoning. This probing extends to his own dialogues. “There is no doubt that Plato, in his early and even in his later years, was conscious of the problematic nature of all writing and that he did not believe he had said the most serious things in his written work, that is, in what has come down to us and what we are often inclined to regard as his greatest creation, and perhaps the greatest achievement of Greek genius.” Plato, of course, took his dialogues seriously. But precisely because of his seriousness, he feels that language is a poor vehicle to describe his vision of the Good. This gulf between language and thought explains part of Plato’s great effectiveness: his use of myths to suggest meaning that words cannot reveal. Plato’s attack on poetry comments eloquently on the way he intends his dialogues to be interpreted. Superficially, the Republic seems to have all of the qualities which Plato condemns in poetry. Not only does the dialogue have allegories, myths, dramatic situations, and the presentation of
contrary opinions but immediately after Plato’s attack on imaginative literature comes the Myth of Er. This flight of fancy does not make Plato a poet, for myths in Plato never stop with their literal statement. The myths claim no more authority for themselves than does Socrates in his famous profession of ignorance. Praises of the gods and of noble men are allowed in the state because they are not poetry, poetry being language beautiful in itself. Plato accepts any language which teaches the soul to ascend the ladder of the dialectic. Platonic dialogues or encomia may serve this purpose. The Republic would be allowed in the well-run state until someone mistakenly turned to study the dialogue as a repository of beauty and knowledge rather than as the vehicle of winged words. Plato’s reluctance to claim undue authority for his dialogues extends even to his wry profession of willingness in the Republic X, 607-8 to hear a defense of poetry. His admission of the beauty of poetry does not constitute a sudden change of heart; his seeming impartiality here has overtones of further contempt for contemporary poetry. “Indeed, the terms in which he makes the concession to poetry, to plead her case if she chooses, are themselves damning. For he treats her in effect as a kind of prostitute, or as a Delilah who may seduce Plato’s Samson if he lets her, and so rob him of his strength.” Although he has strongly felt the charm of Homer, Plato insists that it would be a sin to betray the truth: “It is fair, then, that before returning from exile poetry should publish her defense in lyric or some other measure; and I suppose we should allow her champions who love poetry but are not poets to plead for her in prose, that she is no mere source of pleasure but a benefit to society and to human life” (Republic X, 607). Plato declares that he will be disposed to accept the worth of poetry, but the arguments already given may serve “as a counter-charm to save us from relapsing into a passion which most people have never outgrown.” Accordingly, his response to any defense will probably be that “such poetry has no serious claim to be valued as an apprehension of truth.” Yet he does indicate his interest in continuing the dialectic. The truth will emerge from the confrontation of Plato’s attack and the poet’s defense, not from an uncritical acceptance of the philosopher’s words.

In short, Plato’s condemnation of imaginative literature in the Republic X is consistent with his attack on empty rhetoric and misguided literary criticism. His statements about inspiration and the ethical uses of poetry, while historically important, do not contradict his insistence that language must at all times point the way to virtue. Plato’s frequent quotations from poetry and his own masterful style show a powerful response to the charm of language. But as he says, “We must take a lesson from the lover who renounces at any cost a passion which he finds is doing him no good” (X, 607). Certainly, Plato loved beauty, and especially the beauty of poetry. Nevertheless, poetry, as beautiful language, had to be banished from the well-run state for its ethical as well as for its intellectual dangers.

A few concluding generalizations may put the problem in perspective. One must admit that Plato’s aesthetics is not fully developed in the dialogues. While his thought reveals a surprising unity for such a varied approach to philosophy, Plato almost always considers art as incidental to some other study. By evaluating poetry only in terms of its immediate ethical and intellectual effects, Plato closes the door to any metaphysical or formalist criticism. His assumptions concerning the soul might be called into question; the treatment of poetry rests on his analysis of the tripartite soul. Plato largely denies the importance of the lesser elements, for the spirited and the appetitive elements must always be subordinate to the rational. Whereas the dialectic appeals primarily to the rational element, poetry appeals chiefly to the emotion, whether to the nobler passions or to the senses. Such dialogues as the Phaedrus and the Symposium have, of course, suggested that love and beauty can lift the soul in its contemplation of virtue. But Plato does not, in his final analysis, allow poetry to strengthen the rational element through
the direction of the well-disciplined spirited element. In the *Phaedrus* 253–4, the white horse, or the spirited part, does not guide the charioteer, the rational element. Similarly, in the *Republic* V, 434–42, the spirited element should help the rational to subdue the appetite. But Plato does not show how this partnership is to be formed and strengthened.

Plato might admit that poetry may ideally present its own golden world, but he would insist that poetry in the world of philosophic questioning gives us beauty rather than truth. The lover of wisdom seeks only the beauty of virtue and knowledge, not the lesser beauty of language. This vision, as Diotima describes it in the *Symposium* 210, is ineffable; she doubts that even Socrates can reach this height. But Plato must still wrestle with the almost insurmountable problem of what means one can use to describe this realm. Poetry is an important battleground for Plato’s divergent approaches to beauty and to knowledge, but his treatment of poetry is too personal, too fragmented to be fully resolved by us or even by Plato himself. The scraps scattered throughout the dialogues only whet the appetite. His aesthetics shows us not a banquet of thought, but a hunger.

5 Rucker, p. 167.
7 *Theaetetus* 174.
9 See *Meno* 99.
10 Francis MacDonald Cornford, *The Republic of Plato* (New York, 1966), pp. 175–76. All quotations of the *Republic* will be taken from this edition.
11 Havelock, p. 3.
12 *The Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Benjamin Jowett (New York, 1937). All references to dialogues other than the *Republic* will be taken from this translation.
14 “Did Plato Banish the Poets or the Critics?” *SP* 36 (1939): 19.
15 See A. E. Taylor, p. 38.
17 Rucker, p. 170.
20 Grube, p. 196.
21 Cornford, p. 321.
22 Havelock, p. 3.
26 Havelock, p. 10.
28 Cornford, p. 322.
29 Havelock, p. 30.
32 See *Republic III*, 398.
34 Friedländer, p. 124.
37 Friedländer, p. 118.
38 Havelock, p. 5.