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The Role of the Poets in the City

In book 10 of the *Republic*, Plato's Socrates plays prosecutor against the poets, banishing them from the city. Socrates cites, in part, the "old quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (607b), but tracing his arguments in book 10 and contextualizing them throughout the *Republic* reveals Socrates's layered view of the poets, especially with regard to their relationship to the city and the political community. Socrates's arguments present the powers of the poets as both danger and necessity.

A hint of the danger vested in the poets comes quickly in book 10—at the very outset of Socrates's argument, he ensures that the argument is "between us—and you won't denounce me to the tragic poets and all the other imitators" (595b), an immediate suggestion that the poets have some sort of sway which could get Socrates into trouble. In fact, Socrates is eventually prosecuted and put to death partially on behalf of the poets, as shown in the *Apology* (23e). But following Socrates's arguments deeper shows that the poets have a power to be especially wary of beyond the court, which might be why Socrates makes special note that this argument should remain between those present. It must be kept in mind that at the very beginning of *Republic*, Socrates and Glaucon are brought to the conversation he is in by force (unseriously, but notably) (327), which generally leads to a less frank manner of speaking by Socrates. Given the perceived danger Socrates faces by the poets and being forced into the conversation from the get go, Socrates's true beliefs are likely far from how they initially appear.

Socrates begins with the claim that tragic poetry and all the other types of imitation "seem to maim the thoughts of those who hear them and do not as a remedy have the knowledge of how they really are" (595b). He elaborates with two charges laid against the poets: first, that their art produces some kind of detriment to the thought of those who hear it, and second, with complicated wording, that the poets cannot correct this condition, since they lack the knowledge

of what things really are. Glaucon, Socrates's interlocutor through book 10, doesn't quite have a grasp on the issue either, and asks Socrates to continue his explanation.

The two consider the nature of imitation using the example of furniture. Socrates establishes that there exist three types of couches— “one that is in nature, which we would say, I suppose, a god produced,” then, “the one that the carpenter produced,” and finally, “one that the painter produced, isn't that so?” (597b). The god produced couch, as Socrates puts it, is a reference to forms or ideas. “There are surely many couches and tables,” says Socrates, “But as for the ideas for these furnishings, there are presumably two—one of couch, one of table” (596a-b). Most simply, Socrates is referring to whatever it is that makes a table a table, or a chair a chair. In book 6, he claims that these forms exist in another realm (509d). This, he says, is produced by god or nature. The carpenter looks to this form when he sets out to produce his chair. Socrates makes the best demonstration of this concept using the work of mathematicians. “They make the arguments for the sake of the square itself and the diagonal itself, not for the sake of the diagonal they draw, and likewise for the rest” (510d). The carpenter is producing a specific couch, *imitating* the one idea of couch from nature as a mathematician studies the idea of a square. Finally, there is the painter, who imitates one step further, painting what the carpenter produces. “Do you, then, call the man at the third generation from nature an imitator?” Socrates asks. “Most certainly,” Glaucon confirms (597e).

Socrates then turns back to poetry, and applies the same reasoning. But his wording hints at further meaning. “Therefore this will also apply to the maker of tragedy, if he is an imitator; he is naturally third from a king and the truth, as are all the other imitators” (597e). Previously, Socrates had described these imitators as third from nature, and showed in argument imitations to be third from god. Here, Socrates injects political wording—imitations are now third from a king, not a god as they were at earlier (597d). This important wording hints at Socrates's greater argument. The poet's distance from a king in truth, as we'll see, has dangerous political consequences.

After deciding the nature of imitation, Socrates turns to “tragedy and its leader, Homer” (598d), who “we hear from some that these men know all arts and all things human that have to

do with virtue and vice, and the divine things too” (598d-e). Socrates and Glaucon seek to answer whether Homer and the tragedians are “in possession of knowledge,” or whether they are simply imitators, “third from what is.” Socrates claims “if he were in truth a knower of these things that he also imitates, he would be far more serious about the deeds than the imitations” (599b). Homer is said to “attempt to speak” on wars and commanding of armies, governance of cities, and education of human beings,” but Glaucon finds no cities governed by Homer, nor wars won by his advice (599c-600a). Regarding education, Socrates notes that there was no evidence of Homer being an educator “for certain men who cherished him for his intercourse and handed down a certain Homeric way of life to those who came after,” and Glaucon compares him to the Sophists, noting he was nothing like them (600a-b). Socrates appears to ignore and Glaucon seems to have forgotten the very first thing mentioned of Homer in book 10: that Socrates holds “a certain friendship for Homer, and shame before him, which has possessed me since childhood, prevents me from speaking. For he seems to have been the first teacher and leader of all these fine tragic things” (595b-c).¹

Homer, then, is truly in possession of knowledge of education for human beings, since Socrates himself considers him a teacher. But education of human beings isn’t the only item on Socrates’s list which Homer has claimed possession of. Plato, ever deliberate, can note emphasis with the order of his terms; it’s thought-provoking, then, to see governance of cities as the central item on this list. In fact, large swaths of the *Republic* demonstrate the poet’s role in the political community.

And it’s a role of great importance: “The man who makes the finest mixture of gymnastic with music² and brings them to his soul in the most proper measure is the one of whom we would most correctly say that he is most perfectly musical and well harmonized, far more than so than of the man who tunes the strings of another?” Socrates asks Glaucon back in book 3, “That’s

¹ This claim Socrates makes at the outset of book 10 is amazingly intricate, and is an excellent example of Plato’s talented writing. It’s impossible to capture all of what it has to say in an essay’s linear fashion, and though it fits here in the paper to catch Socrates’s irony, it foreshadows a number of other points which haven’t yet been discussed and points beyond the scope of this paper. Hold on to what Socrates says here; very much can be derived from it.

² Bloom’s important endnote on the Greek: “‘Music’ means originally ‘any activity performed under the guidance of the Muses.’ This meant especially lyric poetry sung to music, which is not far from our sense.”

fitting, Socrates,” he replies. “Won’t we also always need some such man as overseer in the city, Glaucon, if the regime is to be saved?” (412a). The most perfectly musical man, argues Socrates, is needed to save the regime. Regime, here, the same word in the Greek as *Republic*, meaning those in power. To put what Socrates says here most simply: music (including poetry) is a necessary quality in the ruler of a city to keep the regime in place.

This isn’t the first instance Socrates considers the importance of music to the rulership of the city. In a passage which will demonstrate the great need of the poets, Socrates will subtly settle one of the charges of the poets far before he files suit with Glaucon in book 10. With Adeimantus, Glaucon’s (and Plato’s) brother, Socrates discusses the education of the “Guardian” class of their city, that is, the ruling class which at this point in the text is undifferentiated from the warrior class. Socrates begins: “What is the education? Isn’t it difficult to find a better one than that discovered over a great expanse of time? It is, of course, gymnastic for bodies and music for the soul.” Adeimantus affirms. “You include speeches in music, don’t you?” He does. “Do speeches have a double form, the one true, the other false?” Here, Adeimantus asks for clarity. “Don’t you understand,” Socrates clarifies, “that first we tell tales to children? And surely they are, as a whole, false, though there are true things in them too. We make use of tales with children before exercises” (376e-377a). A striking admission! To educate the future rulers of the city, as well as the warrior class, it is necessary to give children poetry distant from the truth. What seemed like a great concern and condemnation by Socrates in book 10, that poets are “concerned with something third from truth” (602c) appears to be his own command in book 2.

But Socrates goes further. It’s not just children to whom stories far from truth must be told. “I’ll attempt to persuade first the rulers and the soldiers, then the rest of the city, that the rearing and education we gave them were like dreams; they only thought they were undergoing all that was happening to them, while in truth they were under the earth within, being fashioned and reared themselves and their arms and other tools being crafted.” To repeat—Socrates wishes for the entire city to be under the spell of a lie.

But Socrates isn't happy with just any lie being told. Socrates describes it as a "noble lie," or a "nobly-born lie" to be more exact with the Greek term³. This can be compared to an example of what Socrates says *isn't* a fine lie: "The man who told the biggest lie about the biggest things didn't tell a fine lie—how Uranus did what Hesiod says he did, and how Cronos in his turn took revenge on him. And Cronos' deeds and his sufferings at the hands of his son, not even if they were true, would I suppose they should so easily be told to thoughtless young things" (377e-378a). And what is it exactly that makes this lie so far from fine? Adeimantus concedes that "these speeches are indeed harsh," but that's not exactly what Socrates is pointing at. True, it's harsh to hear that Cronos, "with his left hand, while with his right he swung the fiendishly long and jagged sickle, pruning the genitals of his own father with one swoop and tossing them" (*Theogony*, 180-183). But Socrates isn't likely concerned with the harshness of the story, but that "a young person that in doing the extremes of injustice, or that in punishing the unjust deeds of his father in every way, he would do nothing to be wondered at, but would be doing only what the first and greatest of the gods did" (378b). He's worried instead about the influence the poem might have upon the young—that every young person who thinks "I can't stand Father; he doesn't even deserve the name" (*Theogony*, 172) would rebel against him. The greater picture here is that the rule of the father is, in Plato, generally a metaphor for convention. This idea is explained clearly by Socrates in the *Crito*.

Seeing that his dear friend Crito is non-philosophic, Socrates believes that the laws would be fine guardrails of how his friend ought to act. So Socrates embodies the Laws in speech, to convince Crito that he should follow the law. In doing so, there's a well-put comparison between the rule of the father and the rule of Law. "Now with regard to your father, justice was not equal for you, so that you didn't also do in return whatever you suffered: you didn't contradict him when he spoke badly of you, nor did you beat him in return when you were beaten, or do any other such thing. So is it permitted to you to do so with regard to the fatherland and the laws, so that if we, believing it to be just, attempt to destroy you, then you too, to the extent that you can, will attempt to destroy us laws and the fatherland in return?" (*Crito*, 50e-51a). Socrates, here,

³ Which can also be translated as "fine lie."

attempts to have the *opposite* effect upon Crito as Hesiod's poem might have—he hopes that Crito might obey the laws as one would a father whereas Hesiod demonstrates a son rebelling against the father when he is unjust, and *perhaps rebelling against the laws when they are unjust*. When Cronos says Uranus doesn't deserve the name of father, this rebellion can be seen as laws not deserving their name, either. This is why Socrates suggests that the “most perfectly musical man” is required “if the regime is to be saved” (412a). The laws are upheld only if the stories, poems, music (all the things of the muses) and lies support the regime and its laws. “Music is the most sovereign,” says Socrates. (401d).

This is the fundamental necessity of the poets in the city. Their lyrics uphold the regime of the city. This, you might then think, grants the poets an extremely powerful tool. Socrates seems to recognize this, and we get a hint of the danger of the poets when he says “Adeimantus, you and I aren't poets right now but founders of a city. It's appropriate for founders to know the models according to which the poets must tell their tales. If what the poets produce goes counter to these models, founders themselves must not give way” (378d-379a). And give way they do not: “We should at last be justified in not admitting him into a city that is going to be under good laws” (605b), says Socrates.

Socrates's seriousness here is obviously suspicious. The necessity of the poet in the city has now been established, so it can't be entirely justified to not admit the poet into the city. But in forming the city in book 4, Socrates and Adeimantus provide a more realistic persecution of poets, which also further fleshes out Socrates's teaching: “There must be no innovation in gymnastic and music contrary to the established order,” says Socrates, noting that there must not be praise of new forms of music. “For never are the ways of music moved without the greatest political laws being moved” (424c). When music and poetry change, so do law. Adeimantus picks up on this, and in a rare moment of input he adds that new forms of music “flow gently beneath the surface into the dispositions and practices, and from there it emerges bigger in men's contracts with one another; and it's from the contracts, Socrates, that it attacks laws and regimes with much insolence until it finally subvert everything private and public” (424d-e). The word “ways” Adeimantus uses can also be used as “turning,” “direction,” “character,” or “the way of a

man.” Alan Bloom makes a footnote for this word, noting that this gives the phrase a kind of *moral* tint.

It’s not music and poetry, solely, which are to the detriment of the city, it’s *new poetry and new music*. These affect the laws of the city and the morals of the people the city forms. The poet or musician, with power over the laws and morals of a city, has the potential to modify it against convention, and is therefore a danger to the regime. As Socrates implied in book 10, “he is naturally third from a king” (597e), and therefore *far from the truth of that regime*—a truth which Socrates establishes, comically, is a lie. The nature of their politically disruptive power is called a “charm” at (601b), and Socrates says that man who encounters someone who seems to know all things (like of the gods) “has encountered some wizard and imitator” (598d), associating the poet with a kind of magical power.

Recall Socrates’s mention of Homer at the outset of book 10, that he “has possessed me since childhood” and “prevents me from speaking” things for which he can be denounced to the poets (595b). This is a very funny lie Socrates tells, since he immediately spends a large portion of the chapter speaking things for which he can be denounced to the poets. It does grant insight into Socrates’s character, though, since he attributes all these powers to poets which he is so easily able to jump over. This could have to do with the detrimental effects of poetry upon reason (605b with 602d), and the superior reasoning skills of Socrates.

Book 10 ends with a surprising addition—Socrates plays poet, telling the story “of a strong man, Er” (614a), which details Er’s journey into the afterlife and what happens to the soul after death. Socrates even uses a bit of iambic verse (621b), the kind of charm he wished to ban just a few moments earlier. The story is worthy of intense study on its own, but at its end, Socrates suggests that the story “could save us, if we were persuaded by it, and we shall make a good crossing of the river of Lethe and not defile our soul. But if we are persuaded by me, holding that the soul is immortal and capable of bearing all evils and all goods, we shall always keep to the upper road and practice justice with prudence in every way so that we shall be friends to ourselves and the gods” (621c-d). Socrates suggests that believing his story would result in the practice of justice with prudence. Given what we know, that the role of the poet is to uphold

some kind of moral regime in the city, Socrates's poem could be a playful and demonstrative attempt at establishing the kind of Justice held in the highest esteems in *Republic*. In Er's story, souls are reborn and have the opportunity to choose the kind of life they next wish to lead. Some choose tyrants, or animals, or artisans. First, Socrates introduces the choice these souls have by saying "to the neglect of other studies, above all see to it that he is a seeker and student of that study by which he might be able to learn and find out who will give him the capacity and the knowledge to distinguish the good from the bad life...from all this he will be able to draw a conclusion and choose between the worse and the better life" (618b-e), promoting a philosophic examination of life in order to do well in the mythological afterlife Socrates himself has constructed. But Socrates gives another option to those influenced by the myth—Odysseus, a Greek hero held in high esteem, "went around for a long time looking for the life of a private man who minds his own business" (620c). If Socrates's myth is to be believed, a man might arrive at a view Socrates and Glaucon arrive at in the middle of book 4 through dense philosophical reasoning. "This—the practice of minding one's own business—when it comes into being in a certain way, is probably justice" (433b). Socrates's poetry, the story of Er, is meant to guide "the way of a man," if it were to be believed.

There's another grand puzzle in book 10—it's written by Plato, a poet. Obviously, this points to the partial unseriousness of the mandate to ban poets. Plato may have a wider goal, but his lack of clarity, as is obvious from this essay, could produce a different effect when read more carefully than otherwise.