



# Plato's *Republic* and Censorship in Philosophy and Poetry<sup>1</sup>

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*Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter.*

—Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

*A poem should be palpable and mute  
As a globed fruit*

*Dumb  
As old medallions to the thumb*

*Silent as the sleeve-worn stone  
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—*

*A Poem should be wordless  
As the flight of birds.*  
—Archibald MacLeish, "Ars Poetica" 1-8

## I. Introduction

In this paper, I consider Plato's position about the censorship of poetry in the *Republic*. In the concluding discussion of censorship in Book X, Socrates calls for auditors to "listen benevolently" to any who might wish to "plead [poetry's] cause in prose without meter", attempting to show "that she is not only delightful but beneficial to orderly government and all the life of men" (*Rep* 607d).<sup>2</sup> I will argue that there are important respects in which





his interlocutors fail to meet the conditions of benevolent listeners, and in so doing fail to reach a genuine consensus about poetry. I contend that we must apprehend this failure and consider what bearing it has on the conclusions reached about poetry by the interlocutors. I suggest that by means of the dialogical structure of the *Republic* Plato himself provides the grounds for a defence of poetry, albeit one that is hidden within the terms of a quarrel. In arriving at this contention, I consider the question of who or what is censored in, and censored by, discussions of the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry.

## II. *Mimêsis* and the Effect of Poetry

Before turning directly to the drama of Plato's *Republic*, we would do well to remind ourselves of the phenomena of poetry we are dealing with. It is all too easy to forget that in the sixth, fifth and fourth centuries, Greek poetry was by and large experienced in public performances, presented orally to audiences, generally with music and/or choreography, and almost always with some form of impersonation, whether indirectly, by a narrator, or directly, by actors.

Eric Havelock argued that poetic forms of thought and discourse—rhythmic, formulaic, concrete and emotive—encouraged individuals to identify themselves with the situations and stories presented in poetic performances, with poet, actor and audience abandoning themselves to the “overall body of experience ... incorporated in a rhythmic narrative.”<sup>3</sup> “Only when the spell is fully effective,” says Havelock, is it psychologically possible for an auditor's mnemonic powers to be fully activated, enabling them to memorise and recall the lessons of history, technology, social organisation and morality embodied in such rhythmic narrative.<sup>4</sup> Auditors surrender themselves to the poetic experience, absorbing its teachings in an uncritical fashion. Havelock suggests that it was the more uncritical and unreflective forms of thinking associated with an oral-based culture that prompted Plato's hostility towards poetry. According to Havelock, Plato's concern with abstract intellectualism prompted him to object to a tradition that taught people to speak and listen and memorise without thought and reflection and evaluation.<sup>5</sup>



Havelock's account provides a basis for thinking that Plato's quarrel with poetry is directed at an oral culture, in which poetry is heard, rather than a literate culture in which poetry is read. This idea is borne out in the *Republic*. When Socrates speaks of the need to censor tales about warring gods, he says that such tales ought not to be "lightly told" to unthinking youth, and that "the best way would be to bury them in *silence*" (378a). Only a very small audience should, he thinks, be "admitted under pledge of secrecy and after sacrificing, not a pig, but some huge and unprocurable victim, to the end that as few as possible should have *heard* these tales" (378a). When Adimantus claims that tales about warring gods are "hard sayings" (378a), Socrates points to other tales that should not be "said in the *hearing* of a young man" (378b-c). No such tales should be admitted, and, Socrates says, "the first stories that (children) *hear* should be so composed as to bring the fairest lessons of virtue to *their ears*" (378e).<sup>6</sup>

Many objections have been raised against Havelock's general view of the transition between Greek oral and literate culture.<sup>7</sup> But if we follow only his point about the effect of the auditory experience, we can understand more clearly Plato's concern about poetry. Havelock gives detailed accounts of the internal physical and psychological processes involved in the act of memorising a rhythmic narrative passed on from mouth to ear, and considers the reason for Plato's concern with these processes. The physical and psychological energy required for rhythmic memorisation is compared to "lifting a weight and carrying it."<sup>8</sup> The motions and reflexes performed by the lungs, larynx, tongue and teeth when repeating, memorising and recalling the metrical patterns and verbal formulas of poetic speech are considered along with the parallel rhythmic bodily motions of the ears and limbs in responding to the music accompanying significant speech in poetic performance.<sup>9</sup> The entire nervous system is seen to be "geared to the task of memorisation ... forming a part of an unconscious design to preserve and transmit a tradition and way of life."<sup>10</sup>

It is easy to see the effect that such sensual and emotional experience may have on the individual soul. In keeping with Plato's image of the poetic Muse as a magnet and of those who come in contact with it—poet,



actor and auditor—as iron rings that are attracted and empowered by the magnet to form a chain of enthusiasm and inspiration,<sup>11</sup> we see how the poetic experience is basically the same for each member of the chain. Each individual identifies with “the doings and sayings of the characters portrayed in the rhythmic narrative.”<sup>12</sup> Yet from Plato’s perspective, the way actors and auditors in the theatre indulge emotions like fear and anger in response to the trials and tribulations of characters portrayed on the stage seems inappropriate as a response to popular entertainment, indicating a surrender to illusion. Mimetic indulgence strengthens the appetitive part of the soul at the expense of the rational faculty, with the consequence that spectators come to resemble the passion-stricken and driven characters portrayed on stage.<sup>13</sup> The majority of people mistake theatrical images for reality—a mistake caused by the power of mimetic representation to bypass the rational faculty of the soul and directly address the appetitive part. Poets, actors and auditors alike experience blind emotions stemming from the unreflective part of their souls.

### III. Censorship in and of Poetry

This account of the poetic experience involves the unspoken (and thus unheard) view that poetry itself already imposes a kind of tacit censorship upon the listener. With the exception of a “select few”—those who evade being corrupted by mimetic poetry by possessing “as an antidote a knowledge of its real nature”—individuals in the theatre are deceived through the tacitly concealing nature of *mimêsis*. In *Republic* Book III, Socrates singles out tragic and comic poetry as having the most harmful effect, since these forms require poet, actor and auditor to work wholly through imitation, concealing their own identities as far as possible in order to ape the identities of whatever subjects are portrayed. Unlike epic poetry, which involves both imitation and abstract narration (where the narrator presents merely as a narrator rather than, as in Plato’s dialogues, as some other imitated character) and unlike dithyrambic poetry, which involves narration and no imitation, tragic and comic poetry are imitative through and through.<sup>14</sup> As a purely imitative form of poetry, tragedy, in particular, is pin-pointed for its corrupting effect on the inner state and



constitution of the individual. The concealing nature of sensual response to tragedy mimics the concealing nature of the narrative being embodied.<sup>15</sup> The magnetic power of mimetic poetry is seen to inspire the appetitive part of the soul, blinding the rest of it from the overseeing gaze of reason.<sup>16</sup> On Plato's account of mimetic poetry, this concealment of and from reason may occur at every level of the artistic chain. Plato appears to respond to the concealment or censorship *within* poetry by proposing a counter-concealment through the censorship *of* poetry.

In the *Republic* Plato invites his readers to consider further the censorship of poetry within the individual soul. In Book X, Socrates draws a precise analogy between the constitutions of the soul and the state, and his listeners are invited to view the censorship as pertaining to both. This analogy, first introduced in Book II,<sup>17</sup> enables Plato to construe the parts of the city metaphorically. In referring to the "polity" within the soul,<sup>18</sup> it will be recalled that he construes the rational element as the proper ruler (the part represented by the class of Philosopher-Kings at the level of the state); the spirited part as the proper guardian (that represented by the class of Auxiliaries at the state-level); and the appetitive part as the proper labourer (that represented by the class of Workers at the state-level).

Within the framework of this analogy, Socrates affirms that "we shall at last say that we are justified in not admitting [the mimetic poet] into the well-ordered state, because he stimulates and fosters [the senseless] element in the soul, and by strengthening it tends to destroy the rational part, just as when in a state one puts bad men in power and turns the city over to them and ruins the better sort." "Precisely in the same manner", he continues, "we shall say that the mimetic poet sets up in each individual soul a vicious constitution by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality, and by currying favor with the senseless element" within it (*Rep* 605b-c).

Thus, censorship seems unavoidable, both within the state and the individual soul. Either the poet (or his counterpart in the soul) is censored for the sake of order, or else the poet, if abided, will censor the order and rule of reason. The necessity of censorship suggests the possibility of ambivalence about forms of communication and thought



in general. Indeed, the absence of any ambivalence in this regard might indicate a conscious or unconscious concealment. Yet, there is no mention of any ambivalence on the part of Socrates and his interlocutors in the *Republic*.

I maintain that ambivalence about the poetic experience is censored from the *Republic*, with there being evidence of a conscious cover-up on the part of Plato and his protagonist, Socrates, and of an unwitting one on the part of Socrates' two main interlocutors, Glaucon and Adimantus. I will argue that the lack of ambivalence displayed by Socrates' interlocutors signifies their lack of awareness of the real nature of poetry, and that this in turn signifies their inability to pronounce justice on matters concerning poetry. This inability will be indicated through outlining the respects in which these characters are tacitly censored by their own ignorance in their agreements with Socrates.

#### IV. Censorship and Ignorance: The Example of Glaucon and Adimantus

While differences in character can be detected between the three main interlocutors after *Republic I*,<sup>19</sup> there is a shift towards homogenisation—a shift that Mary Blundell interprets as conscious self-censorship in which Plato employs *mimêsis* that will not “fragment the characters of narrator, reader and listener, or encourage them to identify with dangerous models”, but, rather, will “guide them towards a single, consistent and virtuous *ethos*.”<sup>20</sup> This is consistent with the view I have expressed that at least some attitudes towards poetry are censored from the *Republic*. Yet even in the ‘homogenised’ characters we can detect subtle differences in awareness, ability, and motivation. I want to show that sometimes when Socrates and his two interlocutors appear to be in agreement, they have a different appreciation of what it is they are agreeing to. I will then draw some conclusions about what that means for the topic of censorship.

I begin with Glaucon. Understanding how far he appreciates the discussion is important because his agreements influence the outcome. Glaucon's influence, however, often incorporates ignorance. This can be seen, for example, in his discussion of the nature required of future



guardians (374-6). The passage is not directly related to the quarrel with poetry, but the incorporation of ignorance into the agreement there is characteristic of Glaucon, and I will argue that this feature has a bearing on issues of censorship in general.

The discussion at 374-6 begins with an analogy between the natures of well-bred men and well-bred hounds. Socrates and Glaucon agree that both natures require perception, quick apprehension, strength in the face of adversity, and bravery. Both also require high spiritedness (375a-b). Socrates, however, raises an apparent problem with these requirements: "How", he asks, "will [the guardians] escape being savage to one another and to the other citizens if this is to be their nature?" (375b). For, he continues, "there appears to be an opposition between the spirited type and the gentle nature." Glaucon readily agrees and adds that since the requirements "resemble impossibilities", they preclude *the very possibility* of there being a good guardian (375b).

Socrates then turns to Glaucon and says "We deserve to be at a loss, my friend, for we have lost sight of the comparison we set before ourselves" (375d). Surely the use of the first person plural here is merely courteous. Socrates hasn't lost sight of anything, or else he wouldn't be able to tell what he had lost sight of! His remark to Glaucon shows, then, that Glaucon has not really understood the analogy in the first place. To help him, Socrates points out that it is the nature of good hounds to be "friendly with their familiars and with those whom they recognize, but the opposite to those whom they do not know" (375e). Glaucon admits this point and concludes that the requirements of gentleness and harshness are not, after all, incompatible. He is then led to the admission that the required qualities are also possible in men.

Looking closely at this comparison allows us to see what is and is not understood by Socrates and Glaucon. Plainly, Glaucon is an avid supporter of Socrates. This support is evident in his immediate and unqualified agreements throughout the passage. Yet his ignorance of the possibility that gentleness and harshness can be combined in a single nature prompts us to question just how far he understands Socrates' analogy between well-bred hounds and well-bred men. For it was the possession of both



of these apparently contradictory qualities that prompted Socrates to compare the two natures in the first place, and it is this combination of qualities that Glaucon continued to believe was impossible, even after the comparison was introduced.

This example provides an illustration of Glaucon appearing to grasp an analogy that he really misapprehends. Socrates and Glaucon appear to agree to the same premises being considered, and to agree generally about what is being discussed. And yet, what the two actually perceive in each case is shown to be different. Attention to how they differ in their admissions reveals how they differ in their awareness of, and motivations for, what is admitted.

If two characters agree to a stated premise, while one of the two is tacitly censored, by his own ignorance, from a full apprehension of what is conceded, what bearing will this have on their joint investigation? Will it be a straightforward matter to establish what is and isn't agreed to in the investigation? And will it be clear-cut whether the two characters would reach the same overall conclusion to the investigation if each carried it out on their own? In the case of the inquiry concerning the admission of poets to the ideal state, it is necessary to consider these questions in relation to the roles played by Socrates and Glaucon. Do the two characters mean the same thing by censoring the poets, and by failing to admit them into the city?

*[Editor's note: There appears to be a lacuna here. One would expect at this point to have some discussion of how Glaucon misunderstands the issue of censorship, and how his misunderstanding influences the shape of things.]*

Adimantus, too, is censored by his own ignorance. This can be seen in his discussion with Socrates of tales about the gods. Socrates and Adimantus first classify tales as falling under two species—"the one true and the other false" (376e). Socrates goes on to explain, however, that in fact all tales are false, though they may contain truth within them (377a). A different distinction is then employed without any apparent notice. Stories must, it is agreed, be carefully monitored, so as to protect children from listening to "any chance stories fashioned by any chance teachers and so to take into their minds opinions for the most part *contrary to those*





*thought desirable* for them to hold when they are grown up" (377b). "We must", says Socrates, "begin, then, it seems, with a censorship over our story-makers, and what they do well we must pass and what not, reject" (377b-c). The original distinction between true and false tales, then, is misleading or at least unclear. As a result, there is subsequent conflation of "true" with "what is deemed desirable for children to hear" and "false" with "what is deemed contrary to the desirable", i.e. with what is socially *fault-worthy*.

This observation is relevant to the question whether Socrates and Adimantus possess the same awareness of what they agree to when the discussion turns to the "patterns or norms of right speech about the gods" (379a). There it is first agreed that the *true* qualities of God, whatever they actually are, must always be attributed to him, whether one composes in epic, melic or tragic verse (379a). On the basis of this agreement, Adimantus concludes that God, being good, cannot be the cause of any evil or harm.

There is an intriguing parallel between this exchange and the one between Socrates and Glaucon in 374-6. Just as Socrates led Glaucon to declare that it was impossible to combine gentleness and savagery in the guardians' nature, he leads Adimantus to the view that it is impossible to combine gentleness and savagery in divine nature. In both exchanges, Socrates' interlocutor fails to consider the possibility of a benevolent character being harsh. In the case of the guardians this conclusion was explicitly overturned. In light of that, it surely needs to be asked whether the view that the gods cannot be the cause of harm ought also to be overturned. Socrates, it seems, supplies inconsistent reasons for not overturning it. First, he tells Adimantus that "we must either forbid [the poets] to say that these woes are the work of God, *or* they must declare that what God did was righteous and good, and [the woeful] were benefited by their chastisement" (380a-b). Yet only a little later (380d-381c), when discussing the divine nature he says that God, "being the fairest and best possible, abides forever simply in his own form." The permission apparently granted to the poets to declare that God visits woes upon people who deserve them is inconsistent with the divine isolation



envisaged in 381c. “[Abiding] simply forever in his own form” would preclude God from acting harshly *or* beneficently towards men, whether from righteousness or any other motive. There is no indication that Adimantus notices this inconsistency, or that he has any understanding of the real nature of God.

In view of this, we must ask whether Adimantus understands the reasons for censoring the poets. It seems that Socrates does his best to confuse him, because he says, “neither would the saying of such things [sc. that God is the cause of evil to anyone], if they are said, be *holy*, nor would they be *profitable to us* or *concordant with themselves*” (380b-c). Here the claim that such sayings are not profitable to us makes them fault-worthy, whereas the claim that they are not concordant with themselves just means they are false (i.e. the term ‘god’ is not consistent with the term ‘evil’). The claim that such sayings are not holy could be based either on their fault-worthiness or their falsity or both. Thus, it appears that the telling of false and/or fault-worthy tales provides us with confused grounds for censoring poetry. And on these grounds Adimantus might think he is censoring poetry for being false, when in fact he is censoring it for being fault-worthy.

The difference between understanding the nature of God and seeing the social value of promoting a certain theology exposes the problem of confusing ‘false’ and ‘fault-worthy’. Socrates states that he and Adimantus must not:

*admit at all ... that gods war with gods and plot against one another and contend—for it is not true either—if we wish our future guardians to deem nothing more shameful than lightly to fall out with one another ... if there is any likelihood of our persuading them that no citizen ever quarrelled with his fellow citizen and that the very idea of it is an impiety, that is the sort of thing that ought rather to be said by their elders, men and women, to children from the beginning and as they grow older, and we must compel the poets to keep close to this in their compositions. (378c, roman mine)*

In this passage, Socrates’ driving concern is with the potential harm caused by the telling of certain tales about gods and men, not with the truth or falsity of the tales themselves. Indeed, he may believe the



tales to be false, but the reasons for their being false—which depend on understanding the real nature of God—are not presented as something people should be told instead. If people can be persuaded that tales of retributive, contentious gods are false, and if poets can be compelled to sing the praises of gods and heroes in all they compose, then Socrates will be satisfied.<sup>21</sup>

With respect to their role in this inquiry, Socrates refers to Adimantus and himself as “founders of a state” (379a). Given their agreement that leaders of a state may employ serviceable lies in protecting and benefiting its citizens, it could be asked whether any such falsehood (e.g. in what it is desirable to say about the gods) is being propagated here. If so, is it likely that both Socrates and Adimantus are cognisant of it? Adimantus approves of Socrates’ proposed censorship of “false” tales about gods and men, so it appears that they are in complete agreement. But Adimantus fails to notice the conflation of false and fault-worthy tales. And since we have reason to believe that he doesn’t understand the real nature of God (as was shown by his willingness to accept both divine isolation and divine beneficence), it is quite possible that Adimantus doesn’t have what it takes to be a real founder of a state. If there *were* a noble lie being told about the gods, Adimantus might not appreciate it.

It is now possible to compare Socrates’ earlier exchange with Glaucon and the one being considered here with Adimantus. It was suggested that ignorance acts as a kind of tacit censor in both interlocutors. In Glaucon’s case, his ignorance of the real nature of the guardians made him unable to appreciate the analogy between well-bred men and well-bred hounds. Socrates did not keep Glaucon in the dark, but exposed his ignorance to him. Adimantus was unable to appreciate the requirements of divine nature because he could not recognise the inconsistency of divine isolation and divine beneficence. In Adimantus’ case, however, it is apparent that Socrates keeps deliberately quiet about Adimantus’ misunderstanding of a crucial aspect of inquiry. Socrates does not resolve for Adimantus the truth about the nature of God.

Unlike his interlocutor, who expresses unhesitating (and inconsistently explained) belief in the *truth* of the claim that God can work no evil upon



men, Socrates merely repeats the truth claim, simultaneously emphasising that it must be upheld for the sake of its social consequences. In his presentations to Adimantus he always depicts the belief as true, but he never resolves the grounds of its truth; whether God works no evil, but only good upon men, or whether, alone by himself in isolation, he works neither. On this reading, the following scenario can be constructed: Socrates does not reveal to Adimantus the true nature of the gods, but allows him to conflate false and fault-worthy tales about them. He allows Adimantus to fault tales about vengeful, deceitful gods for their harmful effects on “unthinking young persons,” and to deem them false on that account. At the same time, he allows Adimantus to believe those tales that depict God as the cause of good things for men, on account of the beneficial effects they have, even though this belief might not be true. It is apparent that Adimantus is unaware of any pretence or equivocation, but agrees *unquestioningly* to the censorship of all “false” tales about God. His own ignorance is kept quiet from him, as it is to be kept quiet from all unthinking young persons. Only a select few are able to appreciate the true and false (as opposed to the socially desirable and undesirable) in tales about God.<sup>22</sup>

### V. Socrates as one of the “Select Few”

What evidence is there to align Socrates with the “select few” admitted to hear the censored tales of gods and heroes, and to align Glaucon and Adimantus with the majority who are refused admission? We have already seen that Socrates describes himself as a “founder of the state”, while we had reason to question whether Adimantus deserved that appellation. When Glaucon re-enters the inquiry and is presented with Socrates’ account of “true musicians” we can see how founders of a state must belong to the “select few.” The true musicians must possess the knowledge and wisdom required of true leaders and legislators:

*... (Is it not so that) we shall never be true musicians ... —neither we nor the guardians that we have undertaken to educate—until we are able to recognize the forms of soberness, courage, liberality, and high-mindedness, and all their kindred and their opposites, too, in all the combinations that*



*contain and convey them, and to apprehend them and their images wherever found, disregarding them neither in trifles nor in great things, but believing the knowledge of them to belong to the same art and discipline? (402c, roman mine)*

This passage provides evidence that the true statesman needs to hear the poets' "false" tales of gods and heroes. And this is all the more important given that the true leader is portrayed as naturally ignorant of vice, and as able to learn of it only through observation. In that case, it seems sensible to expose future guardians to vice through the telling of stories, rather than by risking their safety at the hands of non-fictional villains.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in order to gain knowledge not only of good and virtuous qualities, but of their *opposites too*, it is natural and necessary for future leaders to hear tales of evil and viciousness.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, these are the very things that Adimantus would need to hear and discriminate, were he able to understand the true nature of the gods.

It is significant that the good and virtuous character will require knowledge of evil and vice. Socrates raises this point at 408-9 in discussing the nature of good and evil souls. The good, he says, must acquire knowledge of every type of soul in order to become true leaders. This idea is discussed elsewhere in Plato's dialogues, for example in the *Phaedrus*. The true orator and dialectician is said to possess knowledge of every kind of nature, and to have discovered the type of speech appropriate to each. This "practitioner" of speech orders and arranges his discourse according to this knowledge, "addressing a variegated soul in a variegated style that ranges over the whole gamut of tones, and a simple soul in a simple style" (*Phr* 277c). Socrates appears to be such a practitioner of speech, or at least he is cast in that role. Not only is he the founder of the "city in speech" of the *Republic*, he is the one who must lead Glaucon and Adimantus in speech. Accordingly, he must possess knowledge of the true nature of human souls and of the sorts of discourse appropriate to these.

How could possession of this knowledge protect statesmen from the harmful effects of poetry? It is possible to answer this by turning to the



order and structure of the just person's soul. Having, in the middle books of the *Republic*, outlined the tripartite model of the soul, Socrates makes reference to it at the end of the dialogue in justifying the censorship of mimetic poetry. With Glaucon as his interlocutor, it is agreed that mimetic poetry involves a corruption of the soul, strengthening the inferior elements within it, and bypassing the superior rational faculty (605a). "[W]ith rare exceptions", this putrefaction is seen to blemish even the "better sort" of soul, a point which is agreed to be of primary concern (605c). It is interesting, however, that even at this point in the dialogue, when the strictest censorship of poetry is handed down, there is still mention of the rare few who stand beyond need of this measure.

The exemption of these select few—those possessing knowledge of the true nature of poetry—can be explained by pointing to a crucial difference in the way their souls respond to poetic mimesis. Given that the just soul is ordered in such a way that its two inferior parts are harmonised under the direction of the rational, it seems to follow that no "bypassing" of reason could occur within it. For the just person, then, no danger would arise in indulging the poetic muse. And, it is precisely this person whom Socrates pinpoints for the office of guardian (*Rep* 409–10).

This explanation provides a compelling reason for aligning true statesmen with the select few admitted to hear the whole gamut of poetic tones. By considering the tripartite image of the soul, an explanation has been given for how these select few escape harm from the poets. Now it needs to be seen what further evidence can be given for aligning Socrates' two interlocutors with the majority who fall prey to these sayings.

## VI. The Trial Imposed on Glaucon and Adimantus

In 378 Socrates first speaks of "a very small audience" entitled to hear the censored tales of the poets. So far I have suggested that Glaucon and Adimantus do not—or better, since they have actually already heard the tales, *should* not—belong to that audience. This interpretation coheres with the idea that Glaucon and Adimantus possess different motivations for, and different levels of appreciation of the agreements they make with Socrates. But this interpretation faces some obvious objections. First,



Glaucon and Adimantus are *not* censored from the tales of the poets in the *Republic*. In fact, they are the ones who introduce them, and Socrates shows no indication in the discussion that they should not be hearing these tales. Secondly, as we have noted, Socrates compares himself *and* his two interlocutors to “founders of a state”. I have suggested that this appellation is misleading in regard to Glaucon and Adimantus, but more explanation is now needed. I propose that we are meant to see Glaucon and Adimantus neither as belonging to the select few, nor indeed the motley horde. Rather, they are being tested in order to see what class they belong to, and how far they can be led. Let us examine this proposition and its implications more carefully.

In testing the mettle of future leaders, Socrates stresses the need to “observe them at every period of life”, to ensure that they never be brought, either by sorcery or by force, to “expel from their souls unawares [the] conviction that they must do what is best for the state” (412e). From this and the exchange that follows, we can see that Glaucon and Adimantus are being tested and observed in a like manner.

Glaucon asks what is meant by “expelling”, and Socrates replies that it seems to him that “the exit of a belief from the mind is either voluntary or involuntary. Voluntary is the departure of the false belief from one who learns better, involuntary that of every true belief” (412e–413a). Glaucon asks for clarification of the term “involuntary”, and Socrates rejoins: “don’t you agree with me in thinking that men are unwillingly deprived of good things but willingly of evil?” (413a).

Glaucon seems to understand, and he agrees that men are unwillingly deprived of true opinions. When, however, Socrates goes on to speak of how this happens by theft, by sorcery, or by force, Glaucon is once again dumbfounded. Socrates responds by saying that it must be because he is “talking in high tragic style,” and so he once again spells out his meaning in plainer fashion:

*By those who have their opinions stolen from them I mean those who are overpersuaded and those who forget, because in the one case time, and in the other argument strips them unawares of their beliefs ... by those who are constrained or forced I mean those whom some pain or suffering compels to*



*change their minds ... and the victims of sorcery I am sure you too would say are they who alter their opinions under the spell of pleasure or are terrified by some fear (413b–c).*

Again Glaucon is brought to apprehension. Socrates then reiterates his point about needing to test the “indwelling conviction” of future guardians to do what is best for the state. Those whose belief is “sure and who cannot be beguiled”, will be accepted, and all the rest will be “cross[ed] off” (413c).

There seems to be irony in Plato’s portrayal of Glaucon’s inability to follow Socrates’ “high tragic style.” Glaucon’s understanding of the notion of involuntary expulsion escapes him unawares, as if his true beliefs had been stolen from him, or taken by force or trickery, by Socrates’ poetic charm. As a kind of counter-spell, Socrates is made to spell out these true beliefs more plainly. In this way, we can see how Glaucon’s true beliefs are stolen through forgetfulness and over-persuasion. Does a similar thing occur with Adimantus? Is he tricked, perhaps, through fear, into relinquishing true beliefs about warring gods and heroes?

*[Editor’s note: There is another gap here. The evidence for Adimantus being similarly tricked is not presented.]*

The forms of involuntary expulsion describe well the floundering of Socrates’ two interlocutors. But is it fair to say that the beliefs lost by each pertain to the conviction to do what is best for the state? Are not Glaucon and Adimantus true founders of a state? Socrates speaks of the need to test potential statesmen, by “bring[ing] them into fears and again pass[ing] them into pleasures, testing them much more carefully than men do gold in the fire” (413d-e), to see if they remain “immune” to such sorcery and conserve their composure as guardians both of themselves and of the culture they have received. Those selected and appointed to office must maintain “the true rhythm and harmony of [their] being in all those conditions, and the character that would make [them] most useful to [themselves] and to the state” (413e). Would Glaucon and Adimantus pass this stringent test? Given the above account of their performances, it seems doubtful. Those designated as guardians of soul and state are





said to be “watchers against foemen without and friends within, so that the latter shall not wish and the former shall not be able to work harm” (414b). If Glaucon and Adimantus are robbed of the truth in the ways outlined above, they would surely have to be scratched from the list of contenders.

## VII. The Phoenician Tale and its Relevance to the Interlocutors

Socrates indicates the need at this point to contrive an “opportune falsehood” (414b-c). He will recount a “sort of Phoenician tale”—a tale of something that has happened in different parts of the world, but which is unlikely to have happened in their own day, and which “demands no little persuasion to make it believable”: “I hardly know”, he begins,

*how to find the audacity or the words to speak and undertake to persuade first the rulers themselves and the soldiers and then the rest of the city that in good sooth all our training and educating of them were things that they imagined and that happened to them as it were in a dream, but that in reality at that time they were down within the earth being moulded and fostered themselves while their weapons and the rest of their equipment were being fashioned. And when they were quite finished the earth as being their mother delivered them, and now as if their land were their mother and their nurse they ought to take thought for her and defend her against any attack and regard other citizens as their brothers and children of the selfsame earth. (414d-e)*

Glaucon acknowledges the inevitable difficulty in convincing the citizenry of this tale, but Socrates pushes on with it, turning next to the metaphor of gold, silver and bronze divisions within the state (415).

What is to be made of this whole “opportune falsehood”? Is it that, as with children’s tales, there is valuable truth to be extracted from the lie? And if so, what might be the appropriate method of extraction? One approach worth testing is that employed by Socrates in the very lead-up to this tale. In discussing the departure of true beliefs from the mind, Socrates’ “high tragic style” led him to speak of convictions, expulsions, theft, force, and sorcery. This high-handed manner of speaking, with its appeal to criminological terms, goes over Glaucon’s head, and robs him



of apprehension. Yet, when this meaning is extracted from the conceit, by being laid out in plain language, Glaucon is able to recognise its truth (as one whose prior convictions are reinstated). In this way, Socrates demonstrates how truth can be extracted from falsehood through isolating the content of speech from the manner of its presentation. A similar process of extraction seems to be called for with Socrates' "Phoenician tale."

In employing this method to extract truth from this tale, we should focus on the idea that all the training and educating of the rulers and soldiers "were really things imagined and that happened to them as it were in a dream, but that in reality at that time they were down within the earth being moulded and fostered themselves while their weapons and the rest of their equipment were being fashioned." One interpretation would be to see this "training and educating" as the guidance and instruction set out in the dialogue. On this view, the following gloss can be given of the passage: Socrates here presents a striking revelation, if only Glaucon and Adimantus can see it, concerning the true nature of the inquiry being held between him and his several companions. By analogy with the Phoenician tale told to the rulers and soldiers, he reveals to Glaucon and Adimantus that the laws or canons set down by them for establishing the best state are also, in fact, mere imaginings. Being constructed using the tools of the mimetic poet, these laws or canons are firmly cemented within the realm of imagination and ideas. They pertain to an *imaginary* state, and are contained within an *imaginary* constitution.

In founding this state, the weapons and equipment of its guardians are fashioned to nurture the development of beautiful ideas and to abort the growth of sinister phantoms. But these arms must be placed within the right hands in order to be effective. To ensure this, potential guardians are placed on trial and tested on their knowledge and understanding of this equipment. This trial is imposed on Glaucon and Adimantus, as co-founders of a state, and involves testing their familiarity with the proper use of various tools of argument and artifice. They are tested on their awareness of the proper limits of such devices, and on their ability to respect these limits in practice. When a certain device is abused—for example, an analogy extended beyond just limits—it comes to be fashioned



as a tool of injustice. Both the weapon and the arguments it assails come to be moulded after the patterns of injustice found within the soul of the false guardian. And, by fostering this element in their soul, the nobler part is weakened and destroyed. Through the whole process of training and education, these guardians are thus moulded, and in the end are delivered up from the earth their mother—the spiritual plain of the soul. The true guardians are also tested and moulded through training, but, in their case, it is the patterns of justice that are followed and fostered. In testing their mettle, the able warriors keep steadfast and true, possessing solid gold within their constitution. Knowing the true nature of mimetic armaments, he employs them in watching over friends and foes. And in this role, he guards over the three divisions of the ideal state—admitting what is akin to wisdom and learning, and banishing what is not.<sup>25</sup> It is in this way that the soil of blessed lands reaps a heavenly crop.

This interpretation of the Phoenician tale at 414d ff. counts on Socrates' analogy between the constitutions of the soul and the state. The true guardians may be construed as personifications of the ruling element, with this element being what enables just men to gain mastery over themselves.

How reasonable and plausible is it to take Socrates' analogy this far? Aside from the point in Book II where he first raises the comparison, there is explicit mention of it in a couple of significant passages in Book X. First, Socrates appeals to it at 605, when the final and most stringent censorship upon poetry is passed.<sup>26</sup> There he states:

*We may at last say that we are justified in not admitting the mimetic poet into a well-ordered state, because he stimulates and fosters this element in the soul, and by strengthening it tends to destroy the rational part, just as when in a state one puts bad men in power and turns the city over to them and ruins the better sort. Precisely in the same manner we shall say that the mimetic poet sets up in each individual soul a vicious constitution by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality, and by currying favor with the senseless element that cannot distinguish the greater from the less, but calls the same thing now one, now the other. (605b-c, italics mine)*

A precise analogy is here drawn between the constitutions of the soul



and state, and Socrates' listener is invited to view the censorship of poetry as pertaining to both. At this point Socrates goes on to speak of poetry's power to corrupt "with rare exceptions, even the better sort" (605c). By keeping sight of the analogy, this accusation can be understood to relate to both sorts of constitution. Only the well-tuned soul or state is exempt from risk—one harmonised under the rule of the rational. In these cases, the poetic Muse would be unable to consort freely with the "inferior" elements in the state (whether it be of the soul or city), while bypassing the rational sector. By remaining cognisant of the true nature of poetry, this sector would safeguard itself, and the state within its control, from conspiracy and tyranny.

### VIII. The Falseness of Poetry: Fact or Fiction?

The overt ground for the censorship of poetry is that it is false. Socrates suggested censoring the poets from telling *false* tales about gods and men. However, the conflation between banning the poets because of their false tales and banning them because of their harmful tales (whether true or false), has already been highlighted. We saw that due to the potential harm caused by certain tales, it was agreed that they ought to be construed as false. A tale was then *deemed* false (irrespective of its actual truth or falsity) if it contained sayings about gods or men harmful to the ears of thoughtless young persons. Thus, Socrates advocated censorship, not so much on the grounds of falseness, but in order to protect the masses. This reason for censorship was made more plain by the fact that Socrates was willing to invoke noble or serviceable lies, using the very same devices found in poetry, in order to convince the masses, and even the rulers and soldiers, of socially beneficial beliefs.

In the case of the Phoenician tale, which has demonstrable parallels with the relation between Socrates and his interlocutors, the very fact that Socrates *shows* himself to be invoking a noble lie is worth reflecting on. Socrates does not say that, at the broader level of the dialogue, he is lying to Glaucon and Adimantus, but clearly he does at times withhold information (as in the conversation with Glaucon about well-bred hounds and men), and in the Phoenician tale he lays out the parallels for anyone to



see. If Socrates' greatest concern with poetry relates to its harmful effects on the masses, it is tempting to infer that he might resort to falsehood in protecting any that might be among them from its influence. If, moreover, Socrates is testing the mettle of his interlocutors throughout the whole inquiry (to establish whether they are thoughtless young persons or potential guardians of a state), it is reasonable to infer that he would speak in hushed tones about the truth behind the falsehood.

If my guess is correct, the so-called quarrel between philosophy and poetry, depicted in dramatic form in the fictional dialogue *Republic*, is one of the serviceable lies, told to protect the masses who do not understand the real nature and necessity of poetry. A justification for this view emerges from the need, outside of the fiction of the *Republic*, for a just depiction of the dispute and a just defence of poetry. The *Republic*, after all, is written in a "high tragic style", and by analogy with 413, we need to interpret it in order to extract the truth.

It is interesting that Socrates himself calls for a just defence of poetry after banishing the poets in Book X. Having finally concluded the case against them, with the aid of his two key witnesses, Socrates reaffirms the importance of following the path of truth (607c). He then goes on to prescribe a remedy for countering the charm of poetry: one must chant over to oneself the reasons given as a "counter-charm to her spell" (608a). Following the truth bespoken in argument, he then reconfirms the need for him and his interlocutors to avoid the "childish loves of the multitude" (608a). This measure must, he maintains, be enforced, until the "mimetic and dulcet poetry", or one of her prose-writing advocates, provides "reason" to contradict it. Until, that is, a reason is provided for her role in a "well ordered state" (607d). It is precisely the need to find such a reason that I have tried to point to in this paper.

In further investigating this reason, I am convinced it will be seen that philosophy and poetry stand, or fall, together. Sharing the same tools and the same state-office (that of secret legislators), the poets and philosophers have a lot in common. The plots or divisions they control fall under the same state borders. Ought not the two unite, then, on account of shared purposes and pursuits? In my view, poetry and philosophy are admitted

to, or censored from the ideal state together. Support for this reading can be found by considering the descriptions of their individual exiles in the *Republic*. Both the poets and the philosophers are described as being shut off from the masses. The poets are portrayed as shut off from the insatiable horde in the theatre, and, in Book 6, the philosophers are portrayed as shut off from the infectious haughtiness of the multitude. This sort of exile is ambiguous. Exactly who or what is censoring, and being censored, is a slippery issue. But the same sort of thing seems to be going on whether it is the poets or the philosophers being considered. “[T]he present low estate” of philosophy (495d), as Socrates puts it, is on a par with that of poetry—both being in need of a nurturing parent. And the description of those out to defile the philosophical nature—those said to be “stuffed with empty pride and void of sense”—matches that of the motley horde insensible to poetic truth.

Starting from this hypothesis about the censorship of poetry and philosophy, the task of attacking or defending my interpretation can now begin. My interpretation is, I submit, intimated in the *Republic*, despite appearances to the contrary. It points to a way of resolving the quarrel between philosophy and poetry through active combat, and it points to a renewed call to arms in defending and attacking from all sides. As a defence of and attack on both poetry and philosophy, my interpretation might seem highly objectionable. But a ruthlessly critical onslaught is precisely what is called for. Given this requirement, the only remaining demand is, as Socrates says when inviting a defence of poetry, that one must “listen benevolently” (607d) to all that is said.

## Notes

- 1 *Editor's Note: this paper is edited from material that Mairead Costigan was preparing for submission to this volume. The work was in a very early state at the time of Mairead's passing. Inevitably I have had to do a lot just to present it here. Nevertheless, I have tried simply to make the lines of argument and their support clear and intelligible, without distorting Mairead's points. Regrettably, much of the argument remains incomplete. There is much to contend with as well. I only wish that Mairead were here to fill in what is missing.*
- 2 *Editor's note: Here and throughout the article it appears that Mairead has used the translation of Plato's Republic by Paul Shorey.*
- 3 See Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1963, p.198. See also K. Robb (ed.), *Language and Thought in Early Greek Philosophy*,

- La Salle, Illinois: Monist Library of Philosophy, 1983; Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Methuen, London & New York, 1988; and Harvey Yunis (ed.), *Written Texts and the Rise of Literate Culture in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- 4 Havelock, 198-9.
  - 5 *Ibid.*, 47.
  - 6 In her discussion of "alien" and "authentic" discourse in the *Phaedrus*, Andrea Nightingale notes that Plato uses the verb *akouein* and its cognates 55 times in the dialogue. She observes that the verb is used in reference both to external discourse and to the internal discourse within the soul (Nightingale, Andrea W. *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995. 136 ff.). She observes further that, in Isocrates, "*akousmata*" are presented as "precepts "heard" throughout a culture" that "fill" the soul with "serious ideas" (*ibid.*, 141). In Schenkeveld's study of the verb, it is revealed that, from as early as the fifth century, *akouein* and its cognates were used to signify "to read" in Greek literature. (See D. M. Schenkeveld, "Prose usages of *akouein* "to read"", *Classical Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 42, No. 1, 1992, 129-41.) Given that the Greeks of Plato's day read texts aloud, it is unsurprising that *akouein* carries this sense. In noting this connection, Grube affirms that it "helps to explain the emphasis in ancient criticism upon the sound of words and the importance attached to prose rhythm." In contrast to Havelock, he states that "the ancients rarely made a clear distinction between the written and the spoken word." See G. M. A. Grube, *Plato's Thought*, with new Introduction, Bibliographical Essay and Bibliography by Donald Zeyl, Hackett Publishing Co., Indianapolis, 1980, XXIX.
  - 7 See, for example, Charles Kahn, "Writing Philosophy: Prose and Poetry from Thales to Plato", *Written Texts and the Rise of Literate Culture in Ancient Greece*, Harvey Yunis (ed.), Cambridge University, 2003, 139-141. See also J. Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Cambridge University Press, 1977, 10; Arthur Adkins, "Orality and Philosophy", in Robb, K. (ed.), *Language and Thought in Early Greek Philosophy*, Monist Library of Philosophy, La Salle, Illinois, 1983, 207-227.
  - 8 Havelock (1963), *op. cit.*, 147.
  - 9 *Ibid.*, 148-151.
  - 10 *Ibid.*, 151.
  - 11 See, *Ion* 533d-36d.
  - 12 Ferrari, for one, criticises Havelock on this point, arguing that "the inference from immediacy of performance to immediacy of content is not evidently valid, and that it results in too thin an account of the content of the Homeric poems in particular" (Ferrari, G., "Orality and Literacy in the Origin of Philosophy," *Ancient Philosophy*, Fall 1984, Vol. 4, No. 2., 204). Penelope Murray notes that "in the field of rhetoric... it became commonplace that the speaker must feel the emotion he wishes to communicate in order to be convincing." (See Murray, Penelope (ed.), *Plato on Poetry: Ion, Republic 376e-398b9, Republic 595-608b10*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996, 27). Is such an awareness or identification called for in presenting philosophical arguments? In keeping with Netz's account of the role of emotion in philosophical argument, it follows that such an awareness or identification is called for. (See Netz, Reviel, *The Shaping of Deduction in Greek Mathematics: A Study in Cognitive History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1999.)
  - 13 See *Rep* 605a-606d.
  - 14 *Rep* 392d-394c.
  - 15 See the discussion at *Charm* 162.
  - 16 See the account of the tripartite soul at *Rep* 435-42. Shorey notes that Freud finds in Plato's account of the soul an early conception of the psychic censor. (*Editor's note: no reference is given here.*)

- 17 *Rep* 368c-369a.
- 18 *Rep* 608a.
- 19 See, for example, Brumbaugh, Robert, *Platonic Studies of Greek Philosophy: Form, Arts, Gadgets, and Hemlock*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1989, 19, 47-8.
- 20 Mary Blundell, 'Self-Censorship in Plato's *Republic*', *Apeiron*, Vol. 26, no. 3-4, Sept-Dec 1993, 17-36, 34.
- 21 For discussion of the need for poetry to serve the interests of truth and philosophy, see Iris Murdoch (*The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977) and P. Murray (*op. cit.*, 1996).
- 22 *Rep* 595b.
- 23 It is noteworthy that Maximus of Tyre remarks that "Homer was most eloquent and skilled in weaving both good and bad together in his narrative, so as to help us grasp the former and avoid the latter." See Maximus of Tyre, *The Philosophical Orations*, translated with an introduction and notes by M. B. Trapp, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, 166.
- 24 Christopher Rowe makes the point that "it is a condition of someone's being said to possess a given *technê* that he should be equally expert in both what is good and what is bad in the relevant sphere." He goes on to remark that "virtue differs from *technai* just in so far as the good man is not capable of producing bad results i.e. acting wrongly." See Christopher Rowe, *Plato*, Second Edition, London, Bristol Classical Press, 2003, Ch 6. With respect to Plato's appraisal of the poets, Murray observes that it marked a transformation in the conventional understanding of inspiration through its emphasis on "the peculiarity of the poet and the irrational nature of the poetic process." Plato's most significant departure from the traditional view was, says Murray, his suggestion that "inspiration is incompatible with *technê*." (Murray, 1996, 8). For the view that there can be a *technê* of poetry, see Susan Levin, *The Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry Revisited: Plato and the Greek Literary Tradition*, Oxford University Press, 2001, 143 ff.
- 25 376b-c.
- 26 The only poetry permitted into the city are "hymns to the gods and the praises of good men" (607a). This exemption is typically viewed as a very narrow one, but I agree with Levin in remaining open to a broad interpretation of such hymns and praises. See Levin (2001), 158-9.