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**Željko SENKOVIĆ**

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Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek  
Lorenza Jägera 9  
HR – 31 000 Osijek  
zsenkovic@ffos.hr

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## PLATO ON POETRY

### Abstract

The article discusses Plato's views on poetry and art. There is a certain historical background in which his great quarrel with poetry took place. The article follows several main theses from Plato's *Republic*, his most notable work, focusing specifically on the importance of the relationship between imitation and truth, emotions, and virtues. Furthermore, as suggested in the *Symposium* dialogue, love poetry serves as a proposed model for intellectual creativity in general. In the *Phaedrus* dialogue, new perspectives on the relationship between philosophy and poetry are considered. Unequivocally, Plato's philosophy strives for harmony and wholeness in everything it reflects.

**Keywords:** poetry, art, Plato, beauty, *Republic*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*

### Introduction

The disagreement between Plato and poetry stems from the traditional role of poets as instructors of humanity (Havelock 106). Poets, much like prophets, were believed to receive direct divine inspiration, providing insights into both human and divine realms. Their verses were recited or sung, often accompanied by musical instruments, at various gatherings, from intimate occasions to grand celebrations hosted by entire communities or regions, such as the vibrant festi-

vals honoring Dionysos. Many of these events were steeped in religious significance, with the performances themselves serving as acts of religious devotion.

Poets not only upheld societal norms but also questioned and sometimes subverted the conventions they inherited. Long before Plato's criticism of poetry, there were dissenting voices that condemned poets. The earliest documented critique of poetry came from the poet Xenophanes, who admonished these poets for "attributing to the gods all that is shameful and blameworthy among humans—theft, adultery, and deception of one another" (Diels 21 B 11).

Plato found the sophists to be a significant challenge, particularly on this subject. Their influence on moral and political attitudes was not primary. Instead, Plato argues that the opinions of the masses, shaped by prejudices, determine what is deemed acceptable, with the sophists merely echoing these prevailing biases (*Republic* 493a). This characterization particularly applies to Protagoras, whose epistemological stance suggests that what appears true to the majority is deemed true for them. Plato argues that, typically, sophists do not strive to establish their viewpoints on any rational basis beyond the uncritical convictions and prejudices of the majority.

The sophists positioned themselves as successors and competitors to the poets. In Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*, the sophist Protagoras emphasizes the critical examination of poetry as the paramount aspect of education (*Protagoras* 338e–339a). Utilizing prose and theories of language, the sophists demonstrated how language shapes beliefs and emotions, viewing it not as a tool for learning but for persuasion. In response, Plato aimed to transform language into a tool for inquiry and moral improvement, seeking to replace the rhetoric of poets with the rational discourse of philosophers. Poets, according to Plato, falsely believe themselves to be knowledgeable about subjects in which they are not truly wise.

### **The *Republic* on Art**

Plato himself exhibited an interest in Homer, mirroring the intellectual climate of his time. This was a prevailing sentiment not just in Athens but throughout Greece, where Homer was frequently recited, quoted, and regarded as an authoritative figure (Kirk 306). As early as the mid-sixth century, Homer's works were recited at the festival of the goddess Athena (the Panathenaia). Educated Greeks were expected to be well-versed in Homer, capable of recognizing

quotations and recalling relevant passages. The familiar characters and events depicted in Homer's poems served as influential templates for the actions and attitudes of many Greeks. The central figure of the *Iliad*, Achilles, epitomized traits of nobility, wealth, power, intense jealousy of his own standing, and a relative indifference to the concerns of his community members. Throughout Greek history, this portrayal of the self-absorbed, jealous hero evoked a complex mix of fear, resentment, suspicion, and admiration. This pattern echoed in the demeanor and conduct of figures like Alcibiades, as depicted by Thucydides, Aristophanes, and Plato. Plato, in particular, disapproved of this warrior tradition epitomized by Homer, endeavoring instead to promote new values and virtues (Klosko 57).

The criticisms articulated here with Adeimantus may appear somewhat limited in scope. Initially, it seems that the solution might be as simple as correcting or expurgating specific passages. However, the significance of art as an influential force suggests that certain forms of art could potentially have a positive impact, as Plato's culture had acknowledged, albeit incorrectly in its construction of the canon.

Plato addresses the assertion that artists hinder their audience's understanding due to their own limited cognitive abilities (*Republic* 595a–602c). It's crucial to emphasize that the issue here is not that artists cannot accurately depict specific factual details, such as who did what and when, nor is it about the accuracy of portraying emotions. Instead, the focus is on the cognitive limitation of an artist who, for example, depicts courageous actions without understanding courage. What if the artist lacks a true understanding of love?

The issue with artists lies in their typical lack of comprehensive understanding of real facts or ideas. We recognize similar considerations as potential areas of specialization, in the realm of zoology. It is plausible to affirm that individual animals exhibit distinct characteristics because they embody particular forms, and we can understand the behaviors of animals by referencing these forms. Nonetheless, poets generally lack the resources and expertise to delve into foundational research to enrich their artistic expressions, much like most visual artists lack expertise in zoology.

The relationship between imitation (*mimesis*) and truth is crucial and complex. When a poet speaks the words of a character in direct speech, they imitate that character. Conversely, when the poet reports in their own voice what **137**

a character is doing or saying, they are narrating. As a moral educator, the poet should only imitate morally good actions and narrate the rest. This is because the poet's imitations, if consistently encountered from childhood, can become ingrained in the listener as habits (*Republic* 395c–d).

The ideal form of poetry, according to Plato, should primarily consist of narration with minimal imitation, focusing on the imitation of what is morally good (*Republic* 396e). This requirement automatically excludes traditional forms of tragedy, comedy, and even the Homeric epic. Plato also prescribes specific melodies and rhythms that align with the content. Just as the language used must differentiate between good and bad, the melodies and rhythms should emphasize this contrast by reflecting the simplicity and restraint of moral rectitude.

In the *Republic*, following the purging of poetry, Plato proceeds to conduct a general cleansing of the city and a discussion on the theory of craftsmanship (*Republic* 401a–d). This marks the inception of aesthetic theory in the Western tradition. In essence, Plato demands from both poets and non-poets alike the ability to discern the “nature of the beautiful and seemly,” aiming to guide the young from childhood through exposure to “beautiful works” in sight and sound toward a state of “similarity, friendship, and harmony with the beauty of reason” (*Republic* 401c4–d3).

After that, Plato introduces a theory suggesting that beautifully crafted objects can directly influence the moral configuration of the soul through their impact on sight and hearing. This theory extends to the entire sensory environment, with sensory impressions having the power to shape the soul by evoking specific emotions and beliefs. What Plato emphasizes is the inherent connection between these sensory impressions and the moral character of the individual perceiving them (Bosanquet 49). This concept foreshadows the metaphysical framework Plato proposes later on, in the *Republic*, wherein the sensible world contains varying degrees of resemblance to the Form of the Good, and human craftsmen are tasked with creating sensory objects that mirror what is inherently good.

In Book III of the *Republic*, Plato constructs a new definition of *mimesis*, ultimately banishing all mimetic poets as mere imitators rather than genuine creators or craftsmen. He introduces his metaphysical concept of Forms, with God as the creator of these Forms, in order to diminish the significance of these mimetic poets to mere shadows of true creators (Cherniss 235). Mimetic poets,

according to Plato, tend to focus on uncontrolled emotions like pain and joy rather than their regulation by reason. Seeking fame among the masses, these poets fixate on portraying unbridled emotions (*Republic* 604e–605a). They end up distorting virtues, as they portray human conduct based on how it is perceived by the base aspects of the soul, rather than its virtuous essence. Thus, mimetic poets not only imitate human behavior as it is but also as it appears to the inferior aspects of their own and others' souls.

There are various ways to challenge Plato's assessment of the negative effects of poetry while still accepting much of his analysis of what poets do. Aristotle, for instance, argues that the emotional depth of poetry serves to cleanse rather than corrupt. While acknowledging the capacity of poetry to shape moral habits, one might find refuge in Plato's analogy of the painter. The painter, it could be argued, meticulously balances appearance with reality in creating illusions. When highlighting a particular aspect of a table or couch, for example, the painter considers its relationship to the whole and its perception by the viewer. This careful consideration is inherent to the essence of art. Similarly, the poet, despite emphasizing emotions, places them within the broader context of a moral framework. Oedipus's suffering, for instance, is heightened by his pursuit of wisdom, and the audience's empathy reflects an appreciation of his noble character. However, Plato's separation of emotional and rational elements of the soul closes off this line of defense, viewing poetry as inherently flawed.

While passages in the *Republic* discuss the potential harms of theater and poetry, they have been interpreted as a critique of the arts as a whole. Nevertheless, they also suggest reasons to give up certain forms of art while still allowing the possibility of using the power of the arts for good purposes.

### **Love poetry in the *Symposium***

In the *Symposium*, the poet is portrayed as a creator engaged in a deeply personal act of communication with an intimate friend. Divinity serves as both a source of inspiration and a lofty aspiration. Diotima, a central figure in the dialogue, initiates her discourse with a nuanced definition of love, *eros*, as a force that bridges the gap between gods and humans. *Eros*, she explains, manifests as a desire for the creation of something immortal and good through beauty. Diotima distinguishes between those who are creative in body and those who are creative in soul, citing poets, inventor craftsmen, and lawmakers as examples of

the latter (*Symposium* 208e–209e). These individuals, she argues, are creators of wisdom (*phronesis*) and other virtues (*arete*), and they exhibit divine qualities from an early age. The act of creation, according to Diotima, involves an abundance of words exchanged with the beloved, discussing the essence of goodness and the virtues a good individual should embody. Both the creator and the beloved actively participate in this endeavor, forming a close and enduring union to nurture the creation that emerges from their shared dialogue.

Diotima unfolds a progression of creativity, leading from love for individual beauty to a broader appreciation of beauty in all its forms, culminating in an ultimate vision of beauty itself. This ascent, she reveals, is driven by the power of love, guiding humans from mere reflections of goodness to the realization of genuine goodness. The poet, in this context, embarks on a journey of self-discovery inspired by the beauty of another, translating these insights into poetic creations through an ongoing dialogue with their beloved. Thus, poetic creation becomes a collaborative endeavor fueled by the love shared between the poet and their friend, aimed at pursuing moral goodness. Diotima blurs the lines between the creation of a poem and the creation of moral goodness, suggesting that they are intertwined, as a poem serves as a conduit for the transmission of goodness. However, Plato's conception of poetry hinges on the distinction between these two types of creation. A poem, he argues, is not merely a linguistic expression but also a reflection of the creator's psyche, which is then conveyed to others.

Diotima proposes love poetry as the archetypal form of poetry, serving as a foundation for the publicly disseminated works of renowned poets like Homer and Hesiod. By grounding public discourse in the theory of private communication inspired by love, Diotima suggests that the conversion from private to public discourse has led to the production of numerous beautiful deeds and acts of goodness among both Greeks and barbarians (*Symposium* 209d–e). This implies a need to reconsider the process of creation from its roots, beginning with intimate, erotic discourse, and extending outward to shape broader societal norms and values.

Now there is no illumination in the likenesses down here of justice and moderation and the other things that are value of souls, but through dim organs and with difficulty, only a few, approaching their likenesses, behold the original that is imaged in them. But beauty was radiant to see

then, when, with a happy chorus, they saw the blessed and divine sight, we following Zeus, others other gods, and were initiated into the mysteries that are rightly called most blessed ... concerning beauty, as we said, it was shining with those things, and now that we have come here, we grasp it through the clearest of our senses, glistening most clearly. For of all the sensations that come to us through the body, sight is the feelings of love in us if it allowed some such clear image of itself to approach sight, and so, too, with the other objects of love; but now beauty alone has its privilege, to be most evident and most loved (*Phaedrus* 250b1–e1).

When it comes to beauty and the soul, the dialogue *Symposium* intricately portrays various arguments. The exceptional nature of this work, namely the brilliance of Plato's dialogical expression, suggests that the presented opinions, their oppositions, and harmonies have become a template for literary and theoretical discourse, subtly indicating that the artistic and the philosophical can overlap. From the initial stance that *Eros* is beautiful and virtuous, and that anyone touched by love becomes a poet, we arrive at Socrates' theses (*Symposium* 201d–212c), which are based on the idea of relationship. Love and desire only exist in a relation, so love is always love toward someone. Therefore, *Eros* as a power and deity is not a simple polarity of beautiful or ugly, good or bad, but is rather rooted in a certain middle ground; it is akin to the state between knowledge and ignorance. It is a strive toward beauty, but because of this nature, it is insufficient or rather incomplete, as it is determined by its endeavor that keeps striving further. Poets (*poietes*) in this sense are those who give birth in beauty, which expands the familiar reference to Socrates pregnancy (Socrates is pregnant with truth), and for his truth to come into the world, others are needed, dialectics are needed, and a spark of the divine is needed, to remain in the atmosphere of the demonic nature of *Eros*, and the divine character of art and philosophy.

Spiritual pregnancy, as described by Socrates invoking the mystical Diotima, is a kind of creative state that causes excitement upon encountering beauty (*Symposium* 206d). The young man seeks beautiful bodies and souls because he is already pregnant in his own soul (*Symposium* 209b).

Although these analogies always include a bodily aspect as a starting reference, the focal point is in the thesis that the mortal yearns for the immortal, because beauty and creativity exist on several levels, depicting the life of beings

in proximity to existence. Therefore, *Eros* is the pursuit of the divine, and this dialogue prompts reflection on the relationship between true immortality and a surrogate immortality of our mortal part, which manifests itself in the desire for descendants. However, it is only through the pursuit of true immortality that virtue can be realized, and truth can be touched, as opposed to banal appearances and opinions. Following this notion, we can observe Plato's idea of beauty which is never contained simply in words or philosophy and art but rather it is always in relation to the primordial.

With the multitude of interpretive approaches to the *Symposium*, it seems that the most important idea is that of fulfillment and completeness. This concerns both the soul and Socrates himself. Socrates is, for Plato, the prototype of philosophical thought and human ideals, but here we see that his concept of philosophy is not limited to theoretical and purely intellectual pursuits. In the *Symposium*, Socrates appears more relaxed and artistically diverse, much like the *Eros* he speaks of. On certain levels, everything about Plato's considerations regarding art and philosophy, beauty and goodness, becomes enigmatic and difficult to express (Price 70). This is facilitated both by the stylistic elements of the text itself and the overall dramatic character of his philosophy. However, Plato's idea of philosophy and art is not just another literary discourse among others. Throughout all philosophical inquiries, he strives for meaning and questions the relationship between gods and humans, who may momentarily feel the illuminating power of the intellect (*nous*) but immediately retreat to the safety of the natural or mythical worldview. *Eros*, as the force that propels both art and philosophy, proves to be so awe-inspiring and demonic that people, both in ancient times and today, find themselves in disbelief and confusion, wondering how to live, which aspects of the soul to follow, do the gods speak through us, and what is the meaning. Because even after a glimpse of the idea of beauty and goodness, we suppress and dismiss them. What remains is only the "musical life," a life dedicated to the Muses, which soothes and reconciles the tremendous forces of our inner predispositions with the world.

### **The Art of Writing and Poetry in *Phaedrus***

Theuth said: "O King, here is something that, once learned, will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memory; I have discovered a potion for memory and for wisdom." ... Thamus, however replied, "... In fact, it will induce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not

practice using their memory because they will put their trust to writing ... You have not discovered a potion for remembering, but for reminding; you provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality. Your invention will enable them to hear many things without being properly taught, and they will imagine that they have come to know much while for the most part they will know nothing.” (*Phaedrus* 274e–275b)

Plato’s treatment of writing is puzzling, and each individual discussion within his works requires careful consideration, sometimes applying local insights to Plato’s own writing. It’s essential for readers to recognize the potential dangers of consuming written compositions while also preparing themselves to reap the benefits that are still attainable. While writing holds significant importance in Plato’s case and in art in general, there are also negative implications to consider. A poet’s written works, confined to language, may appear devoid of value on their own, but their true significance lies in the philosophical insights they offer. Thus, readers must approach written compositions with a discerning eye, recognizing the potential for both insight and pitfalls.

Plato’s stance on the written word was not an outright rejection; rather, he acknowledged its potential benefits when used correctly. In the *Phaedrus* (276d), Plato mentions that writing, when appropriately employed, can aid a memory weakened by age and can assist students in discussing philosophy. Additionally, his dialogues, collectively, serve as valuable models for engaging in philosophical conversations. The crucial point is that written works should serve as tools for philosophical examination rather than substitutes for it. *Phaedrus* underscores why Plato chose to commit his views to writing, highlighting his serious consideration of the written word and his use of literary talent to complement the philosophical aims of his dialogues.

In addition to addressing the role of writing, Plato’s *Phaedrus* explores the place of poetry in human life, signaling a departure from his views expressed in the *Republic*. Plato suggests in the *Phaedrus* that one cannot become a good poet without being inspired by divine madness (*Phaedrus* 245a). Similar to Diotima’s analysis of poetry in the *Symposium*, Plato explains that being possessed by the Muses captures the essence of a sensitive soul, educating future generations by celebrating the accomplishments of the past (*Phaedrus* 245a). Through the development of new ideas of the soul and discourse, Plato offers detailed guidelines on how poetry can be transformed into philosophy (Yunis 123).

In the *Phaedrus*, poetic inspiration is categorized as one of four types of divine madness, alongside prophecy, ritual, and love. Among these, love is esteemed as the most superior form of madness (*Phaedrus* 265b). While all forms of divine madness are said to yield beautiful works and contribute to the greatest good for humans, Socrates positions love as the highest form of divine madness, responsible for motivating the soul's ascent to the Forms. Contrary to what one might expect based on Diotima's perspective on poetry, Socrates explains the soul's ascent as primarily driven by love rather than poetic inspiration. In Socrates' hierarchy of lives, the poetic person is depicted as being of lower status, ranked below the musical person and even further below the philosopher and lover (*Phaedrus* 248d–e). The poet, characterized as an imitator, holds the lowest position among the four types of divinely inspired individuals. This portrayal suggests that divine inspiration, including poetic inspiration, does not guarantee enlightenment, as seen in other dialogues such as the *Apology* or *Ion*. Moreover, despite being elevated slightly above craftsmen, poets are still considered distant from the esteemed status of the musical person, philosopher, and lover in terms of their role in the soul's ascent.

Indeed, Plato's proposal in the *Phaedrus* represents a significant departure from conventional views on discourse, including poetry, rhetoric, and legal language. He suggests a transformative approach aimed at turning all forms of discourse into philosophical dialogue. By defining rhetoric as the "leading of the soul by words" (*Phaedrus* 261a), Plato redefines the traditional notion of *psychagogia*, which typically connotes conjuring or enchantment, to signify leading the soul toward truth through language. In Socrates' examination, rhetoric undergoes a profound shift, evolving into the art of dialectic dedicated to guiding others to truth. This transformation necessitates dialectical skill in correctly defining and dissecting subject matters, as well as an understanding of various linguistic forms to effectively communicate with the listener (*Phaedrus* 276e–277c). Through the use of different linguistic styles, including poetic embellishments such as mythic hymns, Socrates demonstrates how language can be wielded to facilitate comprehension and proper usage. Plato's conception of genuine rhetoric encompasses both prose speeches and poetry but ultimately emphasizes interpersonal communication aimed at leading individuals toward understanding. This philosophical perspective on discourse challenges conventional notions of rhetoric and highlights the importance of language as a tool for guiding souls toward truth and enlightenment.

Plato's theory of language in the *Phaedrus* is intricately intertwined with his new psychology, which incorporates the concept of love into the tripartite division previously developed in the *Republic*. According to Socrates, the lover, upon encountering the similarity or imitation of beauty in his or her beloved, is reminded of the genuine beauty the beloved once beheld as a disembodied soul above the heavens. The initial task for the lover is to overcome his or her physical erotic impulses. Once this hurdle is surmounted, the lover is prepared to mold one's beloved into the likeness of the deity one discovers within oneself. The ideal initiation involves shaping one's beloved as closely as possible to the nature of Zeus, in harmony with one's own inner essence (*Phaedrus* 252c–253a).

Interpreting Plato's evaluations of the status of written and spoken words is inherently challenging (*Phaedrus* 274b–274a). As in many other topics, Plato turns to myth, connecting ancient stories with dialectical analysis to give meaning to life. Thus, when the Egyptian god Theuth claimed that the invention of writing would improve human memory, King Thamus argued the opposite, suggesting that writing would weaken memory and provide illusion rather than reality. Those who rely on texts are foolish if they think they can be anything more than reminders to those who already know what they are about. The book remains silent when questioned, while the spoken word, of which writing is merely an image, provides knowledge. Therefore, one who knows what beauty, truth, and goodness are, will prefer the spoken word (*logoi*), and if one writes, it will only serve to refresh one's memory in old age, or for entertainment in general.

One who is close to the origin knows that the whole earthly life is about discerning true from apparent justice, truth, goodness, and beauty, so no speech in verse or prose carries serious weight. Therefore, the best speeches are those that refresh memory (*anamnesis*). Such ideas point to the primacy of the soul, because only what is directly placed in the soul has clarity and seriousness. Or, as the discussion shows, it is important what is the starting point and that which is primary, and for Plato, that is philosophy.

### **The Polis as a Religious and Poetic Foundation in Ancient Greece**

The *polis* was not merely a political entity but a religious institution, a sacred locus where the divine and the human met. From it emerged the entirety of classical creativity, particularly during the zenith of European antiquity, spanning from the 6th to the 4th century BC. The most potent expression of the *polis's*

ethos manifested itself in poetry. Ancient Greek poetry reveals a dynamic interplay between the communal and the individual, a profound vitality, a richness of experience, and a commitment to shared norms and social relations.

Plato's critique of Homer (*Republic* 606e) did little to diminish Homer's dominant role in the moral and educational upbringing of the entire Greek world. Yet this very critique posed a perennial question regarding the power and significance of poetry as such. Through Homer, the most profound and contemplative intellectual forces found voice. Though the Homeric world is steeped in warfare, it remains internally coherent; its chaos and violence are situated within an unmistakable order and logic of fate. It was precisely this paradigm that Plato sought to alter: replacing the image of the warrior with that of the contemplative man. Nonetheless, the transition from Homer to Plato is neither abrupt nor unmediated; it is shaped by numerous intermediaries and transformations.

Each successive generation of poets marks a progression in individualization and the unique integration of thought and emotion. In reconstructions of ancient Greek culture, the individual is invariably depicted as constrained, even when engaged in an act of creative emancipation. Perhaps this reflects the universal condition of human history. In classical Greek poetry, normativity was paramount, emphasizing the ideal of what ought to be—precisely at the moment when individual sensibility was beginning to assert itself.

The Spartan poet Tyrtaeus, through his elegiac verses, celebrated courage as the supreme virtue. In both language and form, he remained closest to Homeric tradition, embodying the ideals of the entire Laconic culture and way of life. Beyond elegy, the poetic landscape included the iambic poetry of the Ionians and the Aeolic lyric tradition. Among many notable names, Archilochus stands out for his caustic wit, audacity, and the freedom with which he rejected the prevailing prejudices of the *demos* concerning justice and injustice, honor and shame. His iambics were sharp, and many feared their intensity, particularly because satirical iambic poetry accompanied Dionysian festivities, where that which is normally hidden or obscured was openly revealed. Just as Homer was intrinsically linked to the collective consciousness of the *demos*, so too was Archilochus, as its foremost critic, admired for the profound resonance his poetry had with the needs of his era.

Yet Archilochus's verse also possesses a deeply reflective dimension: it re-  
**146** formulates the ancient doctrine of measure (*metron*) in a novel manner, setting

boundaries for valid human action and guiding individuals toward a harmonious rhythm of life through the elevated rhythm of poetry itself. In Greek poetry, one perceives that the discovery of rhythm in verse and dance is integrally tied to the transgression, and reconstitution, of harmony and measure within the broader human ethos. Each poet thus represents a step toward something new, for art is a miracle and a new beginning.

Hedonistic poetry held considerable influence in the development of Greek culture. It fostered the notion that *hedone* (pleasure) should take precedence over the *kalon* (the noble or the beautiful). Plato strongly opposed this tendency, which found its most explicit expression in sophistic thought. Nevertheless, the human desire for joy and sensual enjoyment, though it eroded the rigid structure of traditional society, found voice in poets who celebrated life, such as Semonides, Mimnermus, and Alcaeus. In their works, one encounters the emergence of an inner, individual life and the atmosphere characteristic of the *symposion*, the principal site of freedom for Greek men. Within this space of convivial dialogue, erotic longing was expressed, and the burdens of existence were softened by Dionysian pleasure.

Yet it was a woman poet, Sappho, who elevated this atmosphere to its highest poetic realization. Revered as the tenth Muse, Sappho remains singular among ancient Greek women poets, as hers are the only works that have endured through history. She captures the essence of female life within the circle of maidenhood, through dance, song, and playful erotic fantasy, illuminating the particularities of the feminine soul. No male poet of antiquity matches the emotional depth of her love poetry, for to the woman, love stands at the very center of life. Pure feeling, transmuted into a unique expression of individuality, becomes a crucial meandering path toward Plato's vision of the soul's ascent to the *idea*, through philosophical *eros*.

Plato, as the culminating figure of a cultural epoch, preserved in various ways the motifs of his poetic and philosophical predecessors. He synthesized the analysis of virtue and the sublimation of love, and elevated tragedy into a form of philosophical inquiry—transforming it into a grand, reflective poem.

The theological dimension of Plato's critique of poetry concerns all portrayals of divine and heroic action (*Republic* 379a), particularly those that attribute evil and suffering to the gods. Myths and tragedies that depict the eternal and perfect divine as deceptive or morally flawed are thus to be excluded. Regard-

ing depictions of Hades, Plato objected to fearmongering and the spread of dependency, as seen in Homer's terrifying descriptions of the underworld. These verses, Plato contends, ought to be either removed from educational contexts or appropriately revised.

Such poetic reworking was not unusual in the cultural context of the time, as unfamiliar as it may seem to us today. One might argue that the ancient Greeks lived and created with greater intensity, and the continuation or reinterpretation of a poet's work by another was a common and respected practice. This is a significant factor in understanding Plato's view of art. The principle of *re-minting the coin* was firmly rooted in Greek tradition, preserved precisely because it sustained the awareness that one author could respond to or build upon another's work, thereby keeping the culture vibrant and alive.

This historical context sheds light on Plato's assertion in *Laws* (*Nomoi* 660e) that the poetry of Tyrtaeus, which glorified Spartan ideals, should be reinterpreted to praise not courage, but justice. In this light, Plato's perspective must be situated within the broader framework of Greek culture, which, alongside its veneration of beauty, continually sought paths to truth and moral education. He further recommends the removal of laments for fallen heroes and the unchecked laughter of the Olympian gods from Homer's epics, as well as descriptions of their indulgence, greed, and susceptibility to bribery. Such portrayals, Plato argued, were inappropriate, and in their place, he proposed new poetic paradigms grounded in higher virtue.

Musical works primarily operate through form, not merely through content. Therefore, one must consider types of tones and harmonies, as well as rhythm (*Republic* 398). The principles Plato establishes for poetry equally apply to music (in the narrower sense). Harmony and rhythm must be subordinated to *logos*. Ionian and Lydian harmonies are not permitted, as they are suited to laments and drinking songs, which are inappropriate for the guardians (*Republic* 398E). These and other specifics are an excellent source for understanding music in Greek culture, where a change in musical harmony was perceived as a political revolution, since new musical harmonies altered the spirit of education. That is, harmony and rhythm may possess *ethos*, with only harmonies that express the character of a prudent and courageous individual being the desirable ones. In this, Plato refers to the renowned musicologist Damon (*Republic* 400B).

Many particularities of Plato's pedagogy, despite its strong emphasis on spirituality, are concretely situated: for education to exist, there must be a *polis*, and life within it resembles the slow growth of a plant, making gradualness and contextuality essential. There can be no quick solutions or revolutions. Every moment and activity in the educational process must be nurtured carefully and over time, in the spirit of nobility. He emphasizes that music is "the most important spiritual force" (*Republic* 401D), for it holds the most powerful psychic dynamism and represents a kind of totality. Someone who has been properly musically educated from a young age will rightly judge what is noble and good, what modern thought would consider pre-conscious or pre-understood. Hence, the great significance of Plato's approach to poetry lies in his insight that there exist immediate approaches to the world and the self which precede rational understanding. Orientation toward the idea of the Good grows only insofar as the formation of the soul has become receptive enough to welcome the highest and best that poetry, harmony, and rhythm can offer, elements which shape human *ethos*.

All of Plato's philosophy is found in connections and unities, in the striving for harmony and wholeness. It is in this synthetic nature that the key to his critique of art lies. Namely, he does not make a sharp distinction between truth, goodness, and beauty nor between science, ethics, and art. This classical discourse is diametrically opposed to modern notions of art's autonomy and its detachment from the political and ethical spheres. In the modern era, art is evaluated based on its inherent aesthetic criteria, not on whether it is good and true, or whether it benefits or harms education. To the contemporary critical mind, it is self-evident that an artwork can be expressive and of high quality even if it is not socially engaged. In fact, this is often discouraged today, being perceived as ideological and inappropriate to the essence of artistic work.

*Mimesis* in Plato opens connections between the questions of being, truth, and beauty. It is (also) *imitatio*, but not merely that. The Greek artist who is mimetic in their language/poetry asks about the nearness and farness of being, about the relation of truth and its reflection in this world, about gods and myth—foundations of the world of that time. Thus, for Plato, *mimesis* is not merely a relation between two beings, but a relation between being and essence. Philosophy and poetry, therefore, have both an ancient kinship and a fundamental opposition: "there is some ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (*Republic* 607B5–6). Both may potentially be close to being and truth, just

as they may fall away from the source. In thinking and in poetic expression of being, in science and all arts, it may be asked: what truly is?

For Plato, the *polis* is the meeting place of gods and humans, from which the concrete *poleis* of his time had already strayed, having lost their former radiance and virtues (*Philebus* 16C7–8). Apollo (god of distance) and Dionysus (god of proximity) have always existed together, in the same sanctuary and space of human life. The former is a radiant being of sunlight, the latter a dark, chthonic force—they establish the domain of the human, of the world and soul. For Plato, the tragic tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian is also present in the erotic nature of philosophy, its madness (*Symposium* 217D3–4). One might say that a kind of tragic deception and *mimesis* is present even in philosophy, regardless of its dialectical efforts and striving for truth. Poetry and philosophy make the gods present in the world, but in the only way possible, with their nearness being their distance at the same time. Here lies the tragedy of philosophy as much as the philosophical nature of tragedy. The idea that the gods are closer to being is decisive for Plato's attitude toward poetry and art in general: in time, they withdraw from the human domain, and with them art, politics, and ethics all deteriorate.

Plato strove for the political realization of the ideal of *ethos* (often, though questionably, referred to as the *ideal state*), and he found the world of ideas. And conversely, everything in Plato's metaphysics relates to the meaning of his pursuit of *great politics*. This applies to the sphere of art as well, ultimately reflecting his vision of poetry's place, not in the contemporary *polis* of Athens, but in the *polis* as an idea. Yet Plato's politics has little in common with how we use the term today; its experience of being and art is marked by a sense of departure from origins, already evident in Homer and similarly echoed by Greek lyricists. For Pindar (*Pythian* 4, 145), the Moirai are withdrawing, the iron race of men emerges, bearing witness to moral decay, and in the domain of the Muses, poetry is replaced by rhetoric—skillful speech-making, aligned with sophistic norms aimed at psychological effect or competition victory. The mind no longer responds to the call of origin and the divine, but becomes a new, this-worldly god. Or, as Protagoras put it: “Man is the measure of all things, of those that are, that they are, and of those that are not, that they are not” (Diels 74 B 1).

With sophistry, a Greek Enlightenment arises, undermining the origin-based foundation of *mimesis*. Plato strongly criticizes this, for instance, in depicting

the sophist who desires to say something entirely new, first rejecting the poets: “Let us dismiss the poets, and speak ourselves, trying truth and ourselves” (*Protagoras* 348A–6). Indeed, the often-discussed thesis of Martin Heidegger concerning the *forgetting of Being* could provide an apt interpretative framework here: the truth and beauty of poetry have withdrawn, and what emerges is mere culture. This is the key context of Plato’s critique of poetry and art—the fate of *poiesis* and *mimesis* becomes parallel to the fate of a world in which wholeness and virtue are lost, a world that becomes alienated, as Hegel might put it.

Fink has asserted (Fink 92) that the poets of classical Greece speak of an elemental struggle between light and darkness, whereas Plato speaks of the triumph of light over darkness, and triumph of order over chaos and appearance. In this sense, his critique of poetry in Book X of *The Republic* is understandable. Plato renounces that which is merely pleasing in art, striving instead for a divine grounding of being. Philosophy itself, he says, resembles fire (*Nomoi* 340B), and the dialogical form of his philosophy shows that he remains within the horizon of ancient tragedy, rejecting only its distortions.

This represents Plato’s resistance to timeless nihilism and to the taste of the masses—he offers a *pharmakon*, a remedy (*Republic* 595B6). The point is that, instead of establishing and evaluating the constellation of being through artistic work, bad art merely entertains and pleases the crowd. Instead of aligning the community, decadence descends into a space devoid of true being. If art is for Plato *thrice removed from truth*, this means the artistic act must distance itself from objectification, from the chains of this world, and anchor itself in the realm of truth. Thus, Plato does not reject pleasure out of aristocratic disdain, rather he cares for being.

The Greek word *mousikē* does not only denote tone and rhythm, but also *logos*. This is certainly evident in Plato’s pedagogical-linguistic imagination, where music and art (poetry) shape the soul from its earliest years. It is an awakening to something long present and significant. His philosophical pedagogy goes quite far, as it demands that in all stories (*mythos*) the same discourse be operative (*Republic* 377C), directing itself toward value-based depictions of divinity and virtue.

He sought to find a new *paideia* from within the totality of his philosophy, and in order to do so, he had to transform and reaffirm poetry and music, which at the time entailed religious and ethical education. This presents a significant **151**

dimension of our theme, one that could be termed the *unwritten law*, to which the Greeks referred as though it were codified in poetry (Homer said / Pindar said / Hesiod said)—similar to the authority the Bible and Church Fathers held in the Christian centuries. In that sense, Greek poetry effectively held the status of the essence and norm of *paideia*.

## Conclusion

Plato's perspectives on poetry, elucidated in his mid-period dialogues—the *Republic*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Symposium*—point toward the ultimate aim and fulfillment of philosophy, which leads us to the understanding of eternal, transcendent forms. He contends that a vital aspect of our self-comprehension is our close connection to the divine. Everything should serve this purpose, including poetry. Plato's dialogues blend philosophy and poetry, as the poet evolves into a philosopher, embodying a truly harmonious individual inspired by love in the pursuit of wisdom through discourse with others. Hence, his views on poetry are intrinsically linked to the levels and apprehensions of philosophy.

In this article, we explore several of Plato's approaches. In the *Republic*, we encounter a robust critique of art, though it does not necessarily apply to every artistic endeavor. Here, the movement toward the concepts of beauty, goodness, and truth is crucial, facilitating philosophical advancement. To this end, we delve into discussions on imitation (*mimesis*) and emotions. In the *Symposium*, we observe love poetry as a paradigm for intellectual creativity at large. Moreover, we contemplate the ascent to the realm of ideas, where *eros* and beauty serve as pivotal transformative models. Finally, we delve into Plato's profoundly enigmatic subject: the Art of Writing, which prompts reflection on language within the context of poetry and creativity.

Plato evaluates art based on the measure of cognitive truth—that is, ideas, and poetry and all arts have only conditional value. That is, as much as they can approach the origin—namely, the essence. Setting aside various historical criticisms of this well-known stance, it is necessary to note that here we have a tendency toward a comparative approach to the arts and philosophy, because if artistic truths are to compete with scientific truths, from Plato's perspective, the only important thing is reducing the visible world to unchanging and eternally valid forms. Therefore, the value of artistic work is assessed as the value of scientific research, according to the measure of theoretical knowledge. This is

the consistency that Plato had to maintain because the world of ideas cannot be depicted by an artist as an artist, but by a dialectician. However, even in Plato's work, we can observe views that suggest that art has the power of transformation and obtaining the supreme manifestation of beauty. In a puzzling and unusual place (*Republic* 472), he compared his ideal of the perfect political order, which in reality can never find its perfect counterpart, with the creation of a painter who, in the painting, gave a paradigm of the most beautiful man, and he should be considered a supreme artist precisely because he cannot prove the empirical possibility of such a perfect appearance. Therefore, only if the arts retain spirit—that is, internal vision, and orientation toward meaning—in sensory images, have they missed their calling. It is not just about Plato persecuting poets from his ideal state (*Republic*, Book X). When this is exclusively emphasized, the philosophy of this most significant philosopher in history is reduced to political, ideological, moral, pedagogical, or some other diminished criticism. The point is to consider the tensions and relationships between essence, time, and the world, what is revealed and what is hidden. Philosophy or any theory do not decide on the status of poetry and art in general. Every decision about what is truly essential arises from insight into the essence of being, into being and the time we are in.

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# PLATON O PJESNIŠTVU

## Sažetak

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**Željko SENKOVIĆ**

Filozofski fakultet

Sveučilišta Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku

Lorenza Jägera 9

HR – 31 000 Osijek

zsenkovic@ffos.hr

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U članku se razmatraju Platonova stajališta o pjesništvu i umjetnosti, na tragu povijesnih konstelacija u kojima su se događali njegovi prijepori s pjesništvom. U djelu *Politeia*, koje se smatra njegovim glavnim djelom, slijedimo nekoliko glavnih teza. Među ostalim, važan je odnos oponašanja i istine, emocija i vrlina. Nadalje, u dijalogu *Gozba*, ljubavna poezija shvaća se kao model za intelektualno stvaralaštvo uopće, a kroz dijalog *Fedar* razmatramo nove perspektive u odnosu filozofije i pjesništva. Platonova filozofija u svemu teži harmoniji i cjelovitosti.

**Ključne riječi:** poezija, umjetnost, Platon, ljepota, *Politeia*, *Gozba*, *Fedar*

