PUNE RESEARCH TIMES ISSN 2456-0960
AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY STUDIES VOL II, ISSUE 01

REVISITING THE 'BANISHMENT' - A REVISED LOOK AT THE BANISHMENT OF POETS FROM PLATO'S *REPUBLIC*

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Abstract

This paper re-examines Plato's famous banishment of poets from the Republic, challenging the established view that Plato is fundamentally hostile to poetry and artistic imagination. Situating Plato's critique within the ethical and educational framework of the dialogue, the paper argues that the exclusion of certain forms of poetry arises not from aesthetic prejudice but from a sustained concern with moral formation and the psychology of the soul. In classical Athens, poetry functioned as a primary educator, shaping emotional habits long before the development of rational judgment. Plato's anxiety, therefore, is directed at the formative power of mimetic poetry, particularly its tendency to cultivate emotional excess and habituate disorder within the soul. By tracing the argument across Books II, III, and X of the Republic, and clarifying its psychological and metaphysical foundations, the paper shows that the banishment is conditional, provisional, and ultimately ethical in intent. Plato emerges not as a censor of beauty, but as a philosopher attempting to safeguard the harmony and sovereignty of the soul.

Keywords *Plato; Republic; poetry; banishment of poets; mimesis; moral education; psychology of the soul; aesthetics and ethics*

INTRODUCTION:

Plato's exclusion of poets from the ideal city in Book X of the *Republic* has long occupied a prominent place in the history of aesthetic thought. Frequently cited as evidence of philosophical hostility toward poetry, imagination, and artistic freedom, the passage has contributed to a persistent image of Plato as an enemy of art. Such a reading, however widespread, risks oversimplifying a complex argument by isolating a single moment from a dialogue fundamentally concerned with justice, education, and the formation of character. In classical Athens, poetry was not a peripheral amusement but a central institution of moral and civic life, shaping attitudes toward the gods, heroism, suffering, and virtue. Plato's engagement with poetry must therefore be understood against this cultural backdrop.

The *Republic* is not an aesthetic treatise but an inquiry into the nature of justice and the conditions under which a human being may live well. Its discussions of poetry arise within a broader investigation of how the soul is shaped, ordered, and governed. When read in this context, Plato's critique of poetry appears not as an act of censorship but as an extension of his theory of moral education. The present paper seeks to restore this context and to show that Plato's concern is not whether poetry should exist, but how it acts upon the soul, particularly at its most formative stages.

Review of Literature

Modern interpretations of Plato's critique of poetry have oscillated between condemnation and rehabilitation. Early readings often portrayed Plato as a severe rationalist who subordinated imagination to reason and sacrificed artistic freedom to moral regulation. This tendency is visible in popular caricatures that treat the banishment of poets as an authoritarian gesture incompatible with later aesthetic values. More recent scholarship has sought to complicate this picture by situating Plato's remarks within the ethical architecture of the *Republic*.

Statement of the Argument:

Plato's exclusion of mimetic poetry from the ideal city is not a rejection of art as such, but a consequence of his theory of moral education and his understanding of the soul's formative vulnerability. Poetry is judged not by aesthetic criteria alone, but by its capacity either to harmonize the soul under the rule of reason or to habituate emotional disorder.

In classical Athens, poetry was not a marginal art but a central institution of moral and civic life. Epic poetry provided the Greeks with their earliest accounts of the gods, their understanding of heroism, and their shared memory of the past. Homer was treated not merely as a poet but as a teacher of Greece. Tragedy, performed in public festivals under civic patronage, offered communal reflection on suffering, justice, and fate. Through repeated exposure, citizens absorbed moral attitudes long before they acquired the capacity for philosophical reflection. Poetry thus functioned as an informal but powerful system of

education. Plato's banishment of the poets from his Republic is too well known to be quoted at length here.

The impression that Plato is an enemy of art, as a person who just sent poets out of the ideal Republic, is a kind of unjust oversimplification. When his remarks on poetry are read within the ethical and educational framework of the Republic, Plato appears not as a censor of beauty, but as a philosopher deeply concerned with the moral responsibilities of artistic power. His question is not whether poetry should exist, but how it should shape the soul. Perhaps this goes to the heart of the misunderstanding around Plato.

Plato's critique must be read against this background. To question poetry was to question the city's deepest sources of moral authority. This explains the seriousness and restraint of Plato's approach. He is not attacking a private taste, but confronting a cultural power that shapes the soul of the polis.

The *Republic* is Plato's attempt to answer a single, deeply human question. What does it mean to live a just life, and why should one choose justice over injustice? The dialogue does not begin in abstraction. It begins with ordinary voices. Old age, power, ambition, reputation, fear of punishment. Plato allows common sense to speak first, and then gently exposes its limits. Plato's dialogue turns to the construction of an ideal city, from the perspective that the city is a magnified image of the soul.

The city grows from simple needs. Food, shelter, clothing. From this arises division of labour. Each person does what they are naturally suited to do. Justice first appears here as *fitness and harmony*. Disorder begins when people try to be what they are not.

As the city becomes more complex, it requires protection. This leads to the guardian class. But here Plato introduces a radical insight. Those who wield force must also love wisdom. The guardians must be trained not only in strength but in character. This is where education becomes central. Music and poetry shape the soul. Gymnastics disciplines the body. The wrong stories (which come from poetry, sometimes) morally deform the citizen before laws can ever correct him.

Plato distinguishes three parts of the soul. Reason seeks truth. Spirit seeks honour. Appetite seeks pleasure. Justice in the individual occurs when reason rules, spirit supports it, and appetite obeys. Justice in the city ought to mirror this structure. The famous proposal of philosopher rulers follows naturally from this structure. Only those who love truth more than power are fit to rule. This is not elitism for its own sake. It is a safeguard against tyranny. Power without wisdom destroys cities.

Plato then turns to the nature of knowledge itself. Most people live among appearances, mistaking shadows for reality. This is illustrated through the image of the cave. Education is

not the filling of the mind but the turning of the soul. The philosopher is one who has seen the light and is compelled, not delighted, to return to the cave for the sake of others.

Only now does Plato return to poetry and art. Now the danger becomes clear. Mimetic art imitates appearances rather than truth. It appeals to emotion rather than reason. It encourages us to indulge in feelings we should learn to govern. This is why poetry must be either reformed or excluded.

The dialogue concludes by returning to the original question. Why be just? Plato's answer is quiet but firm. Justice is not a social contract or a strategy for safety. It is health of the soul. Injustice is inner civil war. Even if injustice brings wealth or praise, it fractures the person from within.

The *Republic* is therefore not a blueprint for an actual state. It is a moral anatomy. It uses the city to reveal the soul, and the soul to judge the city. Every argument about education, poetry, politics, or punishment serves this central aim.

The *Republic* has been Plato's most famous and widely read dialogue. As in most other Platonic dialogues the main character is Socrates. It is generally accepted that the *Republic* belongs to the dialogues of Plato's middle period.

Book I sets the moral ground of the dialogue by testing ordinary views of justice. **Book II** sets the tone for constructing the ideal city in order to examine justice clearly. **Book III** establishes the principles of education and character formation for the guardians. **Book IV** defines justice as inner harmony in both the soul and the city. **Book V** introduces the radical conditions required for the just city to be possible. **Book VI** clarifies the nature of the philosopher and the Idea of the Good. **Book VII** explains education as the turning of the soul toward truth through the cave image. **Book VIII** traces the moral and political decline of constitutions and souls. **Book IX** demonstrates why the just life is happier than the unjust life. **Book X** concludes by judging poetry and affirming the soul's moral destiny.

Plato's theories of poetry are directly concerned with the function that art performs in relation to the growth of the soul. For Plato, art is never a self contained activity, nor is it judged primarily by technical skill or aesthetic pleasure. Its value lies in what it does to the inner life of the human being. Poetry matters because it participates in the formation of character.

The discussion is situated within Plato's *Republic*, where a common misunderstanding is deliberately set aside. Plato's exclusion of certain forms of poetry is not to be treated as an expression of hostility toward art, but as a consequence of his sustained concern with moral formation. Poetry occupies a serious place in his philosophy precisely because it shapes the soul at a stage when reason has not yet acquired the strength to defend itself.

The argument unfolds through three interconnected considerations.

First, the soul, particularly in its early stages, is formative and receptive. What it repeatedly takes pleasure in gradually becomes habitual. Poetry, especially mimetic poetry, addresses the soul not through rational argument but through pleasure, rhythm, and emotional identification. This mode of address grants it extraordinary formative power.

Second, Plato's concern does not lie with imitation as such, but with the kind of order that is being imitated. Poetry that portrays the gods as inconsistent, unjust, or capricious implicitly teaches the young soul that disorder is natural and morally excusable. If instability characterizes the divine, human instability appears justified. Such impressions are absorbed without resistance because they are conveyed through delight rather than critical reflection.

Third, attention is drawn to the notion of poetry that delights in disorder. This kind of poetry trains the appetitive and emotional elements of the soul to enjoy excess, grief, rage, or moral confusion without measure. According to Plato, its danger lies not in a direct assault on reason, but in the gradual cultivation of emotional habits that impede reason's later efforts to establish order.

From this point, the inquiry is prepared to move into a deeper examination of the psychology of the soul, focusing on the tripartite structure, the internal hierarchy it presupposes, and the manner in which repeated aesthetic pleasure may either harmonize the soul or fracture its internal order.

Plato understands the soul as developing over time, not as a fully formed rational faculty present from the beginning. In its early stages, the soul is governed less by reason than by feeling, imagination, and imitation. It learns through exposure rather than argument. Long before a person can think critically, the soul absorbs patterns of response. It learns whom to admire, how to respond to pain, and what kinds of actions appear noble or shameful.

Poetry enters precisely at this vulnerable and formative stage. Through stories, rhythm, and emotional appeal, it shapes the soul's habits of feeling. The listener does not merely hear a story, but lives it imaginatively. Repeated exposure creates familiarity, and familiarity gradually becomes attachment. In this way, poetry contributes directly to the growth of the soul, either strengthening its inner order or weakening it.

Plato's concern arises when poetry cultivates emotions without discipline. When art encourages indulgence in grief, anger, fear, or desire, it trains the soul to dwell in and enjoy these states rather than to govern them or to take decisions about them. Such training does not destroy reason openly, but it undermines it quietly by making emotional excess feel natural and justified. The soul grows, but it grows in the wrong direction.

For Plato, the proper growth of the soul requires harmony. Reason must eventually rule, but it can do so only if the emotions have been trained to support it rather than resist it. Art, therefore, has a serious responsibility. It must prepare the soul for rational self-governance, not distract it from it. Poetry that aligns feeling with order, measure, and moral clarity contributes positively to the soul's development. Poetry that delights in disorder, even beautifully, threatens that development.

Plato is often remembered as a philosopher who distrusted poetry and opposed artistic freedom. His call to exclude poets from the ideal city in Book X of the Republic has frequently been read as evidence of hostility toward imagination, emotion, and aesthetic expression. In this common view, Plato appears as a severe rationalist who subordinates art to philosophy and replaces creative freedom with moral regulation. Such a reading, however widespread, does not do justice to the depth or intent of his argument.

This misunderstanding arises largely from reading Plato's remarks on poetry, in isolation. When removed from their context, the expulsion of the poets seems like an aesthetic judgment. Yet Plato's discussion of poetry occurs within a broader inquiry into justice, education, and the formation of character. The Republic is not concerned with art as an independent domain, but with how citizens are shaped from childhood and how their loves, fears, and loyalties are formed long before reason becomes active. Poetry enters this discussion because it educates the emotions at an early and powerful stage of life.

Plato's concern, therefore, is not that poetry is false or irrational, but that it is influential. Poetry moves the soul deeply and often without reflection. For this reason, it can form habits of feeling that later resist rational correction. When poetry presents unjust actions as admirable or uncontrolled emotion as natural and noble, it trains the soul in ways that conflict with moral order. Plato's critique is directed at this formative influence, not at beauty itself.

The banishment of poets in Book X of the *Republic* is often treated as the decisive moment in Plato's rejection of poetry. Read hastily, it appears as a sweeping and final condemnation. Read carefully, however, it reveals itself as a measured conclusion drawn from earlier arguments about education, psychology, and truth.

Plato's discussion of poetry is not confined to Book X, though that is where it reaches its sharpest edge. It begins much earlier, quietly, almost innocently, in Books II and III, at the moment when education becomes the central concern. This placement matters. Plato introduces poetry not as art, but as *paideia*, as the earliest shaper of the soul.

In the just city, the guardians are formed before they are trained. Long before reason is strong, the soul is porous. Stories enter first. Rhythm, harmony, imitation, emotional patterning. Poetry teaches without appearing to teach. This is precisely why Plato takes it seriously. He is not afraid of poetry's weakness, but of its power.

At this stage, Plato allows poetry to remain, but only under strict conditions. Gods must be represented as good, just, and consistent. Heroes must embody courage, self-control, and loyalty to reason. Excessive grief, fear of death, laughter without measure, and indulgence in passion are excluded. The aim is not moral sanitization, but psychic stability. A guardian who has learned to admire disorder in story will find it difficult to resist disorder in life.

Plato returns to poetry in Book X after having already outlined the structure of the soul and the nature of justice. By this stage of the dialogue, it has been established that the just soul is one in which reason governs spirit and appetite, maintaining harmony through measure and order. The question Plato now raises is whether mimetic poetry supports this internal order or undermines it.

His answer turns on the psychological effects of imitation. Tragic poetry, Plato argues, encourages the audience to identify with characters who give way to grief, anger, or excessive desire. In ordinary life, such emotions are restrained by reason and social norms. In the theatre, however, they are not only permitted but celebrated. The spectator takes pleasure in emotional surrender, and this pleasure trains the soul to relax its rational vigilance. Over time, the habits formed in aesthetic experience begin to shape moral behaviour, sometimes along the wrong lines.

Plato's concern is not that poetry depicts emotion, but that it invites the audience to indulge in emotions they would otherwise resist. The danger lies in repetition. What is practised repeatedly becomes natural. Poetry thus risks strengthening the very parts of the soul that justice requires reason to govern, that ought to be resisted.

This psychological argument is reinforced by the metaphysical account of mimesis. The poet imitates visible actions and appearances rather than intelligible realities. As a result, poetry appeals to perception and feeling rather than understanding. Plato does not claim that poets deliberately deceive, but that they operate at a level that is removed from truth. When such representations are joined to strong emotional appeal, they produce conviction without knowledge, emotional growth based on the wrong foundations.

It is at this point that Plato introduces the language of banishment. Mimetic poets must be excluded, he argues, because their influence is incompatible with the ethical aims of the just city Yet this exclusion is neither casual nor triumphant. Plato speaks of poetry as something he has loved since childhood, and he acknowledges its charm and beauty. The decision to exclude poets is presented as a painful necessity rather than a victory.

Most importantly, the banishment is explicitly conditional. Plato states that if poetry can defend itself by showing that it contributes to truth and virtue, it will be welcomed back with honour This condition is essential. It shows that Plato's objection is not to poetry as such, but to a form of poetry that educates emotion without moral direction.

The banishment of poets, then, is to be understood in the proper perspective, better understood in the context of ethics and best understood not as censorship, but as an extension of Plato's theory of moral education. Poetry is not something singled out for criticism, but is judged by the same standard applied to all formative practices in the city – the test being the ability to condition the soul, whether it helps to cultivate a just soul. When poetry, or for that matter any other discipline fails this test, it must be restrained. When it meets it, it belongs within the city's moral life.

It is also important to note that Plato does not reject poetry without qualification. He repeatedly acknowledges its power and speaks of it with a degree of rational judgement. In the Republic, he allows hymns to the gods and praise of virtuous individuals, and he explicitly states that poetry would be welcomed back into the city if it could show that it supports truth and virtue. This conditional openness is often overlooked, yet it is central to understanding Plato's position.

When Plato is called *philistine*, the charge assumes that he rejects poetry because he does not understand it, or because he values utility over beauty. This is false. Plato was formed by poetry. Homer is everywhere in his dialogues. His language is rhythmic, imagistic, dramatic. He writes myths when argument reaches its limit. One does not fear what one has not felt. Plato knows poetry from the inside.

Nor is his position *hostile*. Hostility seeks destruction. Plato does not seek to silence poetry out of resentment or anxiety. He stages a trial, not an execution. He repeatedly speaks of his affection for poetry and his reluctance to oppose it. This tone matters. It signals a pang rather than a hatred towards poetry.

This is why the position is *tragic*. In the classical sense, tragedy arises when two genuine goods come into conflict and cannot be reconciled without sacrifice. Poetry is a genuine good. It brings beauty, emotional depth, and shared meaning. But moral truth and the health of the soul are also genuine goods. When poetry, as it was practised, threatens the sovereignty of reason, Plato chooses the soul over its most seductive educator.

He recognizes the beauty of poetry, because it moves us, unifies communities, and gives voice to human suffering and longing. He recognizes its *power* because it forms character more deeply than law or argument ever could. And he recognizes its *danger* because that same power can train the soul to admire disorder, excess, and injustice without realizing it. It is this fascination for disorder that poetry may inculcate that prompts Plato to reject it.

The refusal, then, is not born of ignorance but of knowledge. Plato has followed poetry to its deepest effects. He has watched what it does to the soul over time. Having seen the stakes, he refuses to grant it unchecked authority. This is not censorship by fear, but restraint by understanding. The soul is not a single, unified instrument. It is internally divided. Reason

seeks truth and order. Spirit seeks honour and recognition. Appetite seeks pleasure and satisfaction. Mimetic poetry, especially tragedy and epic, addresses itself primarily to the lower parts of the soul. It intensifies grief, fear, rage, and indulgence. In doing so, it weakens the rule of reason. What is rehearsed emotionally becomes difficult to govern rationally.

This is the true danger Plato sees. Not corruption through false doctrine, but the slow erosion of inner sovereignty. A citizen who has learned to luxuriate in emotional excess on stage will find it harder to practice moderation in life. The city mirrors the soul. A disordered soul produces a disordered polis.

Plato is not waging war against poetry as such, nor against beauty, imagination, or artistic power. His concern is moral formation. Poetry, in Athens, was not entertainment at the margins but the primary educator of the soul. What shapes the young imagination shapes the city.

First, Plato's anxiety is directed at *mimetic poetry* which represents gods and heroes acting unjustly, intemperately, or incoherently. Second, imitation works not through argument but through habituation and emotional alignment. Third, that the soul, especially in its formative stages, absorbs patterns long before it can critically examine them. Poetry therefore becomes a pedagogical force that precedes reason.

From here, Plato's argument deepens rather than hardens. When he speaks of banishment, it is conditional and provisional. The poet is not expelled forever but challenged to justify poetry's place in the just city. If poetry can demonstrate that it contributes to truth, moral harmony, and the proper ordering of the soul, it may return with honour. Until then, philosophy must guard the gates. This is why Plato repeatedly speaks with evident admiration for Homer even as he resists him. The struggle is not hostile. It is intimate.

At this stage of the argument, Plato introduces a decisive psychological insight. The soul is not a single, unified instrument. It is internally divided. Reason seeks truth and order. Spirit seeks honour and recognition. Appetite seeks pleasure and satisfaction. Mimetic poetry, especially tragedy and epic, addresses itself primarily to the lower parts of the soul. It intensifies grief, fear, rage, and indulgence. In doing so, it weakens the rule of reason. What is rehearsed emotionally becomes difficult to govern rationally.

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From here, Plato's distinction between acceptable and unacceptable disciplines becomes intelligible. Mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and dialectic are accepted because they turn

the soul away from appearance toward structure, proportion, and intelligibility. Gymnastics is accepted when disciplined because it harmonizes body and spirit. Music and poetry are accepted only under strict supervision, because they enter directly into the affective core of the person.

So, the banishment of poets is not censorship in the modern sense. It is moral triage. He recognizes poetry's beauty, power, and danger all at once. Plato is asking a prior question that modern aesthetics often forgets to ask at all. What kind of human being does this art make?

Seen this way, the banishment of poets is no longer an isolated provocation. It is the final consequence of a sustained inquiry into how human beings become what they are. Where the banishment occurs, it is often misunderstood because it is read in isolation. Plato does not exile poetry because it is false, but because it forms attachments that compete with reason's rule. Tragedy trains us to indulge grief. Epic trains us to admire cunning and rage. Lyric trains us to linger in emotion. The danger is not expression, but habituation.

Plato acknowledges the ancient authority of poetry. In fact, he issues an invitation that, if poetry can show that it contributes to truth and the health of the soul, it may return. Philosophy is not hostile to beauty. It is protective of order.

This brings us to the crucial clarification that is often missed. Plato is not asking whether poetry is beautiful. He is asking whether it is *good*. Beauty, for him, cannot be severed from moral formation. Art is never neutral. It either strengthens the rule of reason or weakens it. Plato is to be put back to where he belongs: not at the margins of aesthetics, scolding from outside, but at the center of moral psychology, speaking from inside the life of the soul, trying with anxiety to keep at bay anything that jeopardizes the blossoming of the soul.

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