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## POETS AND THE CITY: LOCATING THE POLITICAL IN SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET RUSSIAN POETRY. INTRODUCTION

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### Abstract

This introductory essay summarizes the political and theoretical backgrounds of poetry of the twentieth century and provides an overview of the contributions to this special triple issue on Poetry and Politics. Taking the Platonic idiosyncrasy towards poetry and the State ('Republic') as its dialectical departure point, the substance and matter of the volume encompasses several characteristic case studies which appear to be highly relevant in this context. This special issue deals with the oeuvre of such iconic Russian poets as Velimir Khlebnikov, Vladimir Maiakovskii, Daniil Kharms, Dmitrii Prigov, Arkadii Dragomoschenko and many others. Special attention is paid to the general issue of ideology and the Russian Avant-Garde pragmatics of shocking action related to Futurism and early Soviet culture.

**Keywords:** *Russian Poetry; Politics and Poetry; Avant-Garde; Russian Modernism*

Plato's *Republic* (Plato 2006) is famously blatant in its banning the poets from the ideal state. In Book 10 the poets are banished from the city for the

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fear of leading citizens astray in their discernment of what is real and what is mere representation. Poetry, in the words of Socrates, deceives us into thinking that the appearances it produces are real.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, poets are *mimētai eidōlōn aretēs* (“imitators of images of excellence”; 600e5) who never know whether their imitations are good or bad. It takes a philosopher to distinguish one from the other, so in order to save the non-philosopher population of the city, the poets must leave. Only “hymns to the gods and praises of famous men” ought to be admitted to the city (607a4). Plato’s view regarding the role of poetry in society seems extremely dogmatic. He goes so far as to criticise Homer and his way of dealing with the political history of Greece. *The Iliad*, Plato agrees, needs to be put aside if one strives to create a better future for Greek society as a whole. Without a doubt, Plato’s critique of the poets’ societal status has much to do with his theory of art and aesthetics in general.<sup>2</sup> Plato’s theory of imitation (*mīmēsis*) corresponds to the demands of pragmatic realism that he articulates in a variety of texts.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, Book 10 of *The Republic* represents an extraordinary attack on the very need for poetry and poetics in general. The farther the remove of any “idea” from its corresponding thing, the more it represents that idea’s virtual degradation. Plato’s principal objection to poets and poetry (Homer included) is that they are too careless and ignorant. They do not put forward or sustain any veritable and worthy example of reality which might be compelling to follow. Poets imitate myths and are, ultimately, redundant, for their imagery is flawed and has no tangible grip on reality. They merely perpetuate useless myths and must be vigorously rebuffed and even punished for what they do. Philosophers, the ultimate rivals of poets, according to Plato ought to become the rulers of the ideal political universe. It is the philosophers who should rule the world. In *The Republic* (473cd) Plato’s Socrates characteristically observes: “[...] Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoner natures who pursue either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never have rest from their evils, – nor the human race, as I believe, – and then only will this our State have a possibility of life and behold the light of day” (473c). The Platonic “Philosopher King” will be forever the opposite of the “Poet King”.<sup>4</sup>

Poets, however, have taken a rather different view of their place and mission in society. In Russia, where poets were indeed mostly absent until the 18th century, their place has been articulated and claimed with particular passion. One of the characters of our volume, Velimir Khlebnikov, known as “The King of Time”,<sup>5</sup> and especially as *The Chairman of the Global Earth* (“Predsedatel’ Zemnogo Shara”) stands in stark contrast to Plato’s dismissive view of poets and poetry.

Our special issue tackles the uneasy relationship between poetry and politics in Russia over the last 100 years. Russian poetry and politics have

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