The picture of poets as *mimètai* dominates in the second discussion of poetry in the *Republic*, yet it at the same time appears puzzling both in itself and in relation to the discussion of *mimêsis* attributed to poets in Book III: it is neither obvious in what sense, for example, Homer’s poetry as a whole should be considered as *mimêsis*, nor, on the other hand, how this characterisation of it can be reconciled with the account in Book III, according to which Homer engages in *mimêsis* only when he impersonates one character or another about whom he narrates. The notion of the poets’ *mimêsis* in the two discussions, and the problems arising from it, are the main subjects of this chapter.

In order to outline these problems, it may for the moment be sufficient to define *mimêsis* as representation or imitation, *i.e.* doing something by imitating something else: later on, the notion of *mimêsis* will be considered in more detail. Now, as becomes immediately obvious, in different arguments in the *Republic*, even within Book III alone, it is not one and the same activity, but various activities of poets that are characterised as *mimêsis*. Here, as is often the case in the dialogues, the activity of performing (reciting, singing, playing an instrument, dancing) is not viewed as separate from that of composing, but instead as part of it. As first suggested in Book III, in that a poet speaks ‘as if he were’ (393a and c), *i.e.* impersonates, one individual or another about whom he narrates, a poet engages in a *mimêsis* of this individual, that is, he represents or imitates, him: for example, Homer engages in a *mimêsis* of Chryses soon after the beginning of the *Iliad*, when he impersonates Chryses imploring the Achaeans to release his daughter, whereas just before that, Homer narrates as Homer, that is without engaging in *mimêsis* of Chryses or of any other individual about whom he is narrating.

The other activity of poets that is characterised as *mimêsis* in Book III is musical composing. According to the account the interlocutors associate with the musicologist Damon, musical composing and performing are
viewed as *mimēsis* of various characters and modes of conduct (courageous, cowardly, orderly, frantic; 398d–e, 399a, 399e–400b). However, this *mimēsis* can be easily be distinguished from the *mimēsis* ‘through impersonation’ that has previously been attributed to poets. For while a poet engages in the former *mimēsis* through discourse, *i.e.* the verbal element of his activity (composing), he engages in the latter *mimēsis* through using harmony and rhythm, the two *musical* elements of his activity. For the same reason, the account of ‘musical’ mimesis does not interfere with the arguments about the poets’ *mimēsis* in Book X, for there again it is the poets’ verbal (and not musical) activity that is characterised as *mimēsis*. Given that the poets’ ‘musical’ *mimēsis* does not raise an interpretative problem of the kind addressed in this chapter, I shall leave it aside here.

By contrast, the characterisation of poets’ impersonating characters as *mimēsis* does interfere with arguments in Book X. For in the first, ‘epistemological’ argument of Republic X (595c–602b), by and large all poetry, viewed in its verbal aspect (*i.e.* as speaking or narrating), is characterised as *mimēsis*, and Homer’s poetry features as its most prominent example. Thus, for example, while according to Book III, Homer engages in *mimēsis* only occasionally (*i.e.* whenever he narrates ‘through’ impersonation), in the epistemological argument Homer’s entire activity of composing is characterised as *mimēsis*, evidently regardless of whether or not he composes through impersonation. Moreover, and importantly, while the *mimēsis* attributed to Homer in Book III was treated as such neutrally, now the characterisation of the activity by Homer and other poets as *mimēsis* is discrediting: for this characterisation, as we shall see, relies on the premise that poets lack knowledge of the matters they speak about. How, then, should this *mimēsis* by poets be understood, and how does it differ from the *mimēsis* consisting in impersonation, given that the two can occur, it seems, in the very same instance of a poet’s (verbal) composing, for example, in Homer’s narrating the story of the *Iliad*? The problem is in fact well known and widely studied. In what follows, I shall first aim to show in what way some prominent solutions to it are not satisfactory. I shall then attempt a different solution to the argument’s problems.

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1 Damon is mentioned at Rep. III, 400b and 400c and again at Rep. IV, 424c. In the Laws, an analogous account of music as *mimēsis* is presented as generally known and accepted (II, 668a, b–c); there, we also find a more precise account of harmony and rhythm, which Republic III lacks (II, 653d, 664e–665a). A technical definition of them is given at Philebus 17c–d.