

*ION*: Plato's defense of poetry

### *Critical Introduction*

We occasionally use a word as a position marker. For example, the word 'Plato' is most often used to mark an anti-poetic position in the "old quarrel" between philosophy and poetry. Occasionally that marker is shifted slightly, but even in those cases it does not shift much. So, W.K.C. Guthrie in his magisterial *History of Greek Philosophy*<sup>1</sup> can conclude

[Plato] never flinched from the thesis that poets, unlike philosophers, wrote without knowledge and without regard to the moral effect of their poems, and that therefore they must either be banned or censored (Vol IV, 211).

Generally, studies of individual dialogues take such markers as their interpretative horizon. So, Kenneth Dorter,<sup>2</sup> who sees the importance of the *Ion* as "the only dialogue which discusses art in its own terms at all" (65) begins his article with the statement

There is no question that Plato regarded art as a serious and dangerous rival to philosophy—this is a theme that remains constant from the very early *Ion* to the very late *Laws* (65).

Even in those very rare instances where the marker is itself brought into question, as Julius Elias' *Plato's Defence of Poetry*<sup>3</sup> attempts to do, the one dialogue in which Plato picks up poetry (rather than rhetoric) on its own account and not in an explicitly political or educational setting—the *Ion*—is overlooked entirely or given quite short shrift. Elias, after a two paragraph summary of the dialogue says "almost anybody could defend poetry better than Ion; we must look elsewhere for weightier arguments and worthier opponents" (6) and does not refer to the dialogue again in his book. Similarly, Guthrie concludes his discussion of *Ion* by saying "this light-hearted little piece[s] concern with poetry has

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probably led us to give it more serious attention than is good for the enjoyment that Plato intended it to afford" (211). As if there could be true enjoyment without knowledge of the good; as if Plato would write a piece whose purpose was enjoyment without engendering thought!

Now while it may be true that Ion is not a particularly bright opponent, it does not follow that the dialogue which shares his name must be an intellectual bauble. On the contrary, the fact that both of the positions which Ion takes in this dialogue—poetry teaches truths about the world and poetry is inspired—have reappeared among the schools in various historical guises might indicate that the dialogue itself maps out the terrain of a philosophical problem with all the precision of genius, much as *Phaedrus* marks out the question of the relation between speech and writing in such a way that even one who would be a trenchant critic of Plato must wonder if Plato himself has not seen the critic in the curved space of his pharmaceutical retort.

To think that *Ion* is a light-hearted piece with no philosophical weight, or Plato the enemy of poetry is to hold to one of the most mistaken ideas in the history of ideas. In the interest of both historical accuracy and philosophic truth the use of the word 'Plato' as such a marker must be stopped. That is, we would here be friends to both Plato and the truth, to poetry and philosophy. And while we think that poetry is as defensible as philosophy, and that Plato thought so as well and throughout his life, I will here examine only that first small dialogue, *Ion*, reading it as a poem should be read, for what it does not say, but engenders, as much as for what it does say, or in other words noting what it *does* as much as what it *says*.<sup>4</sup> If this reading succeeds it will a) explain several historical anomalies and factual inconsistencies of the dialogue, and it will show b) that the dilemma (*technē/mania*) of the dialogue is false, c) that the dilemma is intimately related to a view of language as names for a world which is everything that is the case, d) that the flaw which the dialogue exhibits in the rhapsode, Ion, is at least as much a moral flaw as

an intellectual one, e) that those moral and intellectual flaws are not transferable *simpliciter* to the poem or poet of the rhapsode's performance, or even *necessarily* to a rhapsode and f) that these same moral and intellectual flaws can be found in philosophers.

*What is the question and what is not the question*

Ion is a rhapsode, a reciter of Homer, who, in Plato's dialogue, has the additional distinction of speaking *about* Homer beautifully. This is indeed a distinction, for rhapsodes were, in Greece, performance artists, not expounders,<sup>5</sup> and that Plato has Ion make his unusual claim is a sign of what he himself is putting up for question in the dialogue. Let us not, however, move too quickly to draw the 'Platonic' line between poetry and thought or to make the standard rhetoric/philosophy distinction, though we may be tempted that way by Ion's explanation of his excellence, and his suggestion for his own reward: "It's really worth hearing how well I've got Homer *dressed up*. I think I'm worthy to be crowned by the sons of Homer with a *golden wreath*" (530e).<sup>6</sup>

Instead, let us begin with Socrates' praise of Ion's *techne*. Ion's art is an enviable one, for rhapsodes must dress well, keep company with fine poets, among them the divine Homer, and learn both their thought and verses (530b-c). It is particularly the last that is to be envied according to Socrates, though we should be willing to bet that many people in democratic Athens wanted to get in with the rhapsodes because they dressed well or because they rubbed shoulders with the famous and near divine. Reading *Ion* for what it figures as well as what it says we can find three quite different reasons for attraction to rhapsody and its practitioners: money, fame, wisdom. We know which one Socrates, in his poverty and social ineptitude considers worth pursuing.

Ion offers Socrates an early opportunity to make a rhetoric/philosophy distinction when he says "I speak more finely than anyone else about Homer," (λεγειν περι Ομηρου) and adds that no one "past or present could offer as many fine

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thoughts about Homer (διανοιᾶς περὶ Ομήρου) as I can" (530d). Now it could be that Ion is just repeating himself in these two phrases, but unlike Hippias, he does not exhibit this tendency in his speeches, so perhaps he has a distinction in mind between speaking finely (*legein*) and offering fine thoughts (*dianoia*), though he, in fact, does both. No matter, *Socrates does not take it up*. So while Ion claims the unusual (i.e., historically non-existent) combination of abilities of rhapsodic speaker plus expounder of thought, Socrates does not take the obvious bait of separating the two tasks. He seems intent, in fact, on keeping *logos* and *dianoia* together. That Socrates does not take this early opportunity to make the standard distinction is good evidence that that is not the distinction Plato thinks is important, or valid.<sup>7</sup> At least it is not the distinction Plato takes up when writing a dialogue about poetry itself.<sup>8</sup> Socrates hopes for a demonstration of Ion's fine speaking and fine thoughts, which for him, no doubt, means true speaking and true thoughts, but first asks a question about the extent of Ion's knowledge: "Are you so wonderfully clever about Homer alone—or also about Hesiod and Archilochus?" Ion responds with a mixture of humility and pride, that his expertise is "only Homer. That's adequate, I think" (531a).

Now so far a *simple rhapsode's* claims would make some kind of sense. We might accept the claim of someone who says he is expert in Shakespeare, but not Jonson (nor Beaumont, Fletcher, Ford or Kyd), particularly if his task was only performance from memory. What makes Ion's last humble claim questionable is that he claims as well to be able to explicate, dress up, and expound. Such an expert in Shakespeare we might expect to be able to compare the divine poet's lines with those of his less luminous contemporaries, and show how he is besting them in verse and thought, or show how the ancient rime will wear today's new fashion just as well as doublet and hose. That Ion's claim in this regard is no part of the ordinary rhapsode's work, but distinctive of Ion is indicated by the fact that he compares himself not to other rhapsodes, but to more

scholarly types: Stesimbrotus, Metrodorus and Glaucon. The Platonic Ion does not grudgingly accept the dual role Plato creates for him, he praises himself for his scholarship right from the start (530d). This purely Platonic in(ter)vention—and it would be recognized as such by Plato's audience—should alert us that here the philosopher is fishing. And what he is fishing for has something to do with his character Ion's conjunction of dispositions—recitation and exposition. Plato has created the character with these dispositions in order to get the dialogue to move where he wants: a Greek would recognize the character as a believable possibility even if actually non-existent. Let us note here that this conjunction of dispositions is closely related to, if not the same thing as, the conjunction a poet would have to have, for one cannot make the sound an echo to the sense without both capacities: hearing the music and knowing the thought.<sup>9</sup>

So, although Ion is not a pure rhapsode, his answer here is what we would expect from such a rhapsode—not from the rhapsode Plato has made him be—and on the basis of that contradiction (one which could not appear except for the strange fact that Ion expounds as well as recites) Socrates continues. He asks, since Ion can *expound*—but strangely only the singular Homer—whether he can *compare*: "Is there anything on which Homer and Hesiod say the same things" (531a)? To a similar question our *performance artist* in Shakespeare could legitimately respond: "I don't really know." A Shakespeare *scholar*, on the other hand would have to be off and running, as Ion is, with "a good many" (531a). The difference between the two answers indicates a difference in cast of mind. The pure rhapsode rubs shoulders with the person or persons who were Shakespeare, remembers what he says, repeats it to himself on all occasions;<sup>10</sup> the other, the expounder Ion claims to be as well, must compare, contrast, and judge of what he speaks, and so even though his finding is always for the poet, his position is, in a way, above him. The simpler rhapsode's is within, or under, or maybe next to. This is the position Socrates will put Ion in with his image of the rings. In doing so he will put Ion in the proper place for a reciter,

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but that place is not the place of the poet, or poetry, nor yet of the expounder. The Platonic addition to Ion's profession is what has got Ion into trouble, for in making the claim to expound and judge truly about the fineness of a thing, Socrates hears him claim a kind of knowledge, and the god requires him to seek out what it is that Ion knows.

It is from these two different casts of mind—the (historically accurate) rhapsode simple and the (Platonic creation) rhapsode explicative—that Socrates will develop the dilemma of the dialogue: is the rhapsode ecstatic, someone held by the poet's power, and so not judging, and, it seems, incapable of judgement or learned exposition? Or, rather, is rhapsody, as Ion practices it, a *techne*, a know-how that allows for explication and making judgement by its light? Ion finds it difficult to choose between these, and though he begins by sitting himself on the stool of scientific judgement (531b-532c), he admits the attractiveness of the inspired view (535a) as well. He finds, however that both of them are inadequate explanations of his activities (535e) or lack of them (532c). And we are left with the question of whether it is possible to have judgement without a *techne* and inspiration without loss of one's mind.

That is a very serious question, and the dialogue has this question as its very serious investigation.<sup>11</sup> The dilemma Socrates poses to Ion is a crux of aesthetics, and obvious to every student of poetry: Poems with formal perfection following all the rules of art fail to move; inspired poetry often breaks the rules.<sup>12</sup> So does garbage. That double fact about the object (poems)—that formal perfection is not necessarily artistic perfection and that formal imperfection sometimes is—is inseparable from the correlative dilemma about the poet—does he have a science reducible to rules (a *techne*) or is he inspired?—which hangs up Ion. Plato joins these two problemata in a single figure:

The best evidence for this account is Tynnichus from Chalcis, who never made a poem anyone would think worth mentioning, *except* for the praise-song everyone sings, almost the most beautiful lyric

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poem there is, and simply, as he says himself "an invention of the Muses." The god deliberately sang the most beautiful lyric poem through the most worthless poet (534d-535a).

Ion himself is figured here, for like Tynnichus he finds himself with a *techne*—a *productive art* (productive at least of money)—*which* he can use when and where he wills: *he is master of it*, while at the same time he must admit that there is something else operative in poetry as well, which even he cannot control—(his hair still raises on end when he recites some passages)—a kind of *inspiration to which he*, as well as his audience, *is obedient* and which, like the Socratic *daimon*, cannot be denied.<sup>13</sup> He, of course, seems not to notice the contradictory nature of his being, but bounces from pillar to post, from one horn of the dilemma to the other. In him, Hegel might say, this dialectical nature is mere contradiction, not a *coincidentia oppositorum*, not yet a *unity of diversity*.

Is it possible to find, for the combination of abilities Ion discovers in himself, a plausible explanation? Or, must we be shunted back and forth between inspiration (a fine word for "I know not what") and a *techne* all of the rules of which are *ex post facto*?

#### *The Ion's unexamined premise examined*

Socrates' gambit is in the question, "is there any thing on which Homer and Hesiod agree" (531a). This question can only be posed to someone who, besides performing, expounds. Someone who was pure rhapsode would simply plead ignorance to it. The question, legitimate to Ion, but not to an ordinary performance artist, hides a double premise: 1) Poetry is about "things" and 2) those "things" fit into general areas of study and knowledge. If the harmless looking question opening the gambit is accepted as legitimate—as it must be by the Platonic rhapsode, Ion—then the division which Socrates plays on immediately after this question—poem/subject—allows that comparison may be

made between poems that have all the same common denominator—are all about the same "thing." Socrates starts talking subjects, and all the subjects he picks are bona fide *technai* with well recognized practitioners, none of whom are poets. In all of these situations judgement of who speaks best about the *subject* is left in the hands of the practitioner of it, who is not, as such, a poet or rhapsode, and so Ion's claim to rightly judge of Homer's poetry washes out, unless he is also charioteer and doctor, general and diviner. In any case Ion's rhapsodic ability is washed out as a bona fide *techne*, and poetry is also insofar as that double premise is accepted.

But what if the gambit is not accepted because the double premise here is false? Perhaps, in other words, the opening question is illegitimate because poems are not "about things" in the sense that *technai* have things or activities which they are about.<sup>14</sup> Rather, if a poem is about some "thing," its subject is not one particular to a *techne*: "The real subject of the *Iliad* ... is might," Simone Weil writes.<sup>15</sup> It is a subject known as well by slaves as by generals. Or, a more difficult alternative for the Platonist (though not, perhaps, for Plato): "A poem does not mean, it is."<sup>16</sup> In it the division between being and meaning dissolves. Like the form of the Beautiful, a poem is what it is—as The Beautiful is beautiful—and means what it is—that is, it does not refer to something outside of itself for its meaning, as Alcibiades' beauty apparently does, having reference to the Beautiful itself. Like a Form, then, a poem's meaning is in itself, not some other as a referent. Is there a know-how of forms? Is that know-how a *techne*? Or is it subject to inspiration? Note that in these three questions 'form' can be replaced by 'poem'. I suspect that the answer is (for all six questions), in some way both, but simply, neither. Under the option illumined by Weil's remark Socrates's opening gambit to Ion can be accepted, but the implication which follows (subject → *techne*) rejected. Under MacLeish's option, the gambit, "do Homer and Hesiod speak of the same things (same subject)" need not be accepted at all. Each poem is itself; the question is not well-formed. In either case, the



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dilemma which follows—depending on the division poem/subject as it does—is a false one, and neither *techné* nor inspiration should be accepted as the full story about Ion or poetry. But that is looking far down the road.<sup>17</sup>

To remark the parallel between poem and (platonic) form let us point out that since Socrates argues that each *techné* has been granted the ability to know a certain function, not others, and *technai* are differentiated by subject (537c,d), we ought to be able to legitimately ask his dear student Plato what the *techné* of a philosopher is. These next questions, then, are not about poetry alone, but refer to philosophy as well: If the poem (form) is a particular—as it is—and the poet or rhapsode (philosopher) presents the particular in its glorious and meaning full particularity—as she does—what kind of discipline is there to becoming a poet or rhapsode (philosopher)? Whatever the answer might be, there is not a rule reducible *techné* in either of these two alternative cases: i.e., the poem (form) has no subject (in the referential and technical sense) or, a poem (form) does not mean, it is. Secondly, even though there is no productive *techné* of poems (forms), it does not follow that the poet's gift is necessarily but the gift of the gods, the muse speaking through his mouth. If the dilemma (either rule reducible *techné* or inspiration) were valid, philosophy would also be either precisely the same kind of itinerant musing or an entirely rule-reducible *techné*. I would like to suggest that a poet's discipline under the dispensation avoided by Ion (and voided, that is, made the unspoken other, *by the Ion*) is precisely the same discipline that a philosopher must practice; that that same discipline which allows a poet to see in bloody and senseless war an exhibition of might and its feel effects and so present the character of individuals and the fragility of all human good, allows a philosopher to see in earthly beauties the sign of our more divine life (*Phaedrus* 250).<sup>18</sup>

Socrates himself half opens the door to this question about philosophy late in the game. He says

All right, look. Suppose you were the one asking the questions, and you asked me, "Socrates, since you're finding out which passages belong to each of the professions Homer treats—which are the passages that each profession should judge—come tell me this: which are the passages that belong to \_\_\_\_\_ (538d).<sup>19</sup>

Socrates fills in the blank four times, with "diviner" (538e) "doctor," "fisherman," and finally, "rhapsode" (539e). If we put in "philosopher" would we not get Plato to respond very Ionically with "My answer, Socrates, is 'all of them'" (539e)? Or, to speak Greek, οντως ουσια. In fact, in later dialogues when Plato does ask this question, that is precisely the answer he gives: everything that is. Clearly *Republic* considers that all passages of all the poets are subject to the philosopher's professional judgement.<sup>20</sup>

But we don't have to examine what Socrates does in another dialogue to legitimate the generalization of his question in *Ion* to include philosophy. What happens in *Ion* itself makes us raise it. Consider the further strange development that follows Ion's acceptance of the Socratic gambit: Since every subject Socrates finds in Homer has bona fide practitioners, the poet's particular *techne* must, under Socrates's originating dispensation (poem/subject), all appear in the numerator. That is, the poem (and so poet) is not distinguished by its subject, as it includes all subjects, but is distinguished in its being a poem, or, the poem is distinguished by its poetic nature.<sup>21</sup> What that is is left very vague, but Socrates himself offers the further suggestion that each art grants the ability to know a certain function because it has the same discipline throughout, and mastery of the discipline (τροπος της σκευης)—one might say, knowing the tropes—allows every practitioner to be judge of the product of other practitioners. So sculptors judge sculpture, painters painting, etc. (532d-533c). But following this Socrates *does not* ask "what, then, is the discipline of poetry, or rhapsody, what is its nature?" rather, he "announces" (533d) to Ion what it is that moves him. He then plunges into one of two

(533d-535a and 535e-536d) thoroughly self-moving doxastic rhapsodies. (There is perhaps a third rhapsody in which he is possessed of Homer at 538e-539d.) *What has happened to Socrates?*

*What Socrates does*

This is highly unusual procedure for the philosophical Socrates, whose usual modus, one might say discipline, is to ask questions. At least, let us remember that this is what he confesses, since he knows nothing himself and so cannot teach.<sup>22</sup> In any case, this change to poetic (if not literally rhapsodic) speech on Socrates' part is significant for two reasons: what it *figures* about Socrates (namely, his likeness to Ion—which likeness must have, as well, its difference), and what it *prevents* in Ion (namely, an exhibition of his power without knowledge of its source). Socrates is exhibiting the creative, poetic nature of philosophy and, at the same time, disciplining Ion by not allowing him just to mouth things. And these two things are one in more ways than the simple fact that they are made to happen by means of a single act of poetic/rhapsodic speech. Socrates, it turns out, is giving an exhibition of Ion's art which also figures the source of that art's power. But that will come somewhat later. As I said, the question we should expect of Socrates at the moment of his rhapsodic announcement is "What then is your discipline about, Ion?" But it does not get asked. If we are not charmed out of our philosophical minds by Socrates's lovely rhapsody on inspiration, we should ask it.

Let us practice philosophy then, where Socrates becomes a poet: What is Ion's discipline? Words. Words. Words. What is the boundary of this discipline? What limit does this subject have? How does one practice the discipline? What does it *make* or *mar*? The limit and boundary of words is the limit and boundary of everything human. The infant does not have them, and as Augustine exhibits in *Confessions*, this lack means no human memory of that time. If Ion's special expertise is words, his subject is

humanity, for language is what makes us human. His discipline must be one that makes human, what we call one of the humanities. The sciences and humanities differ precisely in this: The sciences are pure *technai*—knowledges reduced to rules for the production of anything from trained asses to a universe. Like a carpenter, a scientist's attention and action is directed outward to the things, he pays no attention to what his hammer does to him, but to what it is doing to the roof. For the purposes of science, *technai*, carpentry, et al., attention is centrifugal, the centripetal moment—what hammering or the study of heaven does to oneself—is counted at naught. Words are a means of production and control over things. Adam names the animals and thereby takes dominion.

But that is not all there is to language—words are not just a means of production and dominion. Adam, a later scripture says, was himself made by the Word. Since words are not merely tools of production, the humanities are not like the sciences at all. For the time being let us say that their direction of attention is opposed, and note that language—what the humanities study par excellence—is the source of all the sciences: We have sciences because we are human; we are not human because we have science. So Ion's discipline *is* the master discipline he claims it is, for we teach—as Homer did the Greeks—all other arts by this one: words. His discipline is not the master discipline in the *in the way* he claims, however. His understanding of the way his art must be the master art already suffers from our modern heresy of assuming that *techne* is what knowledge really is. His is a strange art, for if *techne* requires a limited subject matter, reducible to and governed by known rules, the purpose of which is to master a thing (horses) or production of a thing (houses) or production of a state (health), what of this applies to language, which produces the very being which tries now to use it? And 'production' here is no doubt the wrong word to use, though we are all "produced by" language as truly as we "produce" it. *Techne* is an invalid paradigm for the discipline of words.

Since this is the sticking point, let me try from another direction: The limit of Ion's subject matter— words—is the limit of our world; and there is no outside, for outside, too, is but a word, and a word for which we who use words never have a reference, except inside—that is, within the world of words.<sup>23</sup> The rules for this "*techne*" are, if anything, grammar, but there are hundreds of living grammars, and more dead ones, and the living ones are— well—living: their rules are flexible, sometimes they ought not be obeyed lest by doing so we create false gods for ourselves, or ghosts in machines, and, on the other hand, sometimes the very breakdown of grammar exhibits a kind of divine power in a poem. (I am thinking of the Fool's speeches in *Lear*). The fact that language, though it is used to give the rules of the other arts, is in the first place what makes us—who have these other arts from carpentry to charioteering to medicine to divinity—indicates that, unlike those other arts, the art of wording cannot be viewed as one that is purely utilitarian, or ever mastered by a single user's power.<sup>24</sup> That Ion thinks he has such power (and over Homer, the *sine qua non* of rhapsodic art: his creator), is what leads him suitably to mockery. He reveals (in pride at his excellence) that at those times in which he has the most control over his audience, he has least control of himself—"my hair stands on end." That picture *proves* that words are not just used and useful to him, though he does not see it. As he confesses with regard to the words of others, he pays no attention (532c). The dialectical nature of wording means that Ion's efforts not only escape his complete control, but that *they move him*. Imagine a carpenter being built by his hammer. We don't; even though we know that using one occasionally gives us blisters; we pay no attention. But in the realm of words the question makes more sense and is more important: Who *is* in control here? Ion not only affects, he is affected in his using, and Homer must be in precisely the same position, unless his *techne* produces every word *ex nihilo*, himself the unmoved mover of his story.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike carpenters existing without hammers, we cannot imagine ourselves without words. Man is ξῶον λογὸν ἐχὼν. So, do words, then, give us our selves? This question seems to me to mark a grammatical boundary: what it asks is indeterminable precisely because the question is also a word. As an analogy, could a painter *in painting* call into question the existence of space? As the painter begins as a painter with space, so too we linguistic beings: Our limits exhibit what makes us, as the painter is made a painter by acceptance of the limitations of his art. Words: we are made here, we may not be master. (But also, as is true of the painter, we need not be slaves.) This is what it would mean to practice a discipline in the humanities: to work at not being a slave even though one is not the master.

Socrates does not give Ion a chance to answer that question, "What is the poet's discipline?" But even if asked, it is doubtful that Ion would say what I have said. Certainly Ion is more clever than a bad actor, for undoubtedly he can speak the speech trippingly on the tongue, and perhaps he is even better than all others of that "simple tribe" of rhapsodes, for he may know as well what the speech means and the reason for the double fold of fat—he may have all the footnotes; but even so he has not thought of what it means and does to one to speak (or write), and so what it means to be a human being, a linguistic being, much less a good human being, rather than the most clever of rhapsodes. He has not even stopped to consider what is indicated by the fact that he himself is moved by the words he speaks. Since he has not considered what it is, and what it does, and what it means to speak, he can only be both frivolous and dangerous. Socrates no doubt understands that Ion cannot be reeled out to speechlessness like Meno and Meno's slave boy, for he is a man of infinite tongue. So, in order to show him that in spite of his craft or sullen art he is still not completely human, he must be stunned in a different way.

Socrates takes away his livelihood. In the first place, by the *act* of his rhapsodies: If that unsociable barefoot renegade can speak so as to touch the soul of the practiced whore, then the whore may be replaced by the man who does it for free and *ad libitum*. Ion, the rhapsode, acknowledges Socrates's performance is fine on both occasions: "Somehow you touch my soul with your words, Socrates" (535a). "You're a good speaker, Socrates, but..." (536d). The first time he agrees wholeheartedly with the sentiment expressed in the speech, the second time he doubts it. And it is after Socrates' second rhapsody that he takes matters into his own hands and gives a short performance of his own—and from Homer, not extemporaneous, as Socrates' were. Perhaps he is beginning to *feel* the problem Socrates poses *in his being*, if not *understand* the problem he poses *by his words*. Poetry sometimes works on us that way. If he is feeling the problem, then Ion, as well as *Ion*—Plato's rhapsody—finds meaning and being so intertwined as to be absolutely inseparable.

Secondly, Socrates' *argument* is a threat to Ion, and to Ion's self-understanding: You *either* have one of these particular arts with their particular subjects and knowledge, but you confess you do not, *or* your skill must be a gift of the gods, and then you are out of your mind. In either case the result is that you do not have knowledge, and so you cannot teach. (Nor, by implication can poets.) Further, (542a) if you do have knowledge, you are unjust for not telling what it is of, for the teacher of a *techne* has the duty to communicate his knowledge to the questioner. Ion clearly does not know how he got into this (false) dilemma, but that intellectual flaw is the result of a moral flaw: he has not considered his own power—the power of language—and his use of it. Or, if Ion has considered language's power, he has only considered it under the analogy of a positive tool—he has only half-considered it. More Socratically, the problem with Ion is not that he is a poet, nor a rhapsode, nor any other kind of artist or technician, but that he lives his rhapsodic life unexaminedly, and such a life is not suitable for man, for a being who

makes himself in making sentences, who exhibits himself by his own words. When we speak, we are known, whether we know ourselves or not. In particular, Ion has not examined the source of his power and seen that it is not *his* power, rather he wields it carelessly:

Beneath the hot unasking sun,  
Past stronger beasts and fairer,  
He picks his way, a living gun,  
With gun and lens and Homer...<sup>26</sup>

The Socratic conclusion here—and we might well add his—and Sparta's—conclusion about Hippias, that such a speaker is *good* only for entertainment<sup>27</sup> (*Hippias Major* 286a)—is true not just of Ion (or Hippias), but of all poets and poetry and public performance of diverse subjects in general—*under Ion's dispensation*. A linguistic being who performs without thought of what it is to be a linguistic being, of what his musing makes of him or does to others is a mere mimic, a baboon; one who speaks without knowledge that his words make him *be* something is *at best* a fool—and not the kind of fool we have in *Lear*. If such a one has power as well,... Further, one who believes that language is merely a tool, like the tools of other *technai*, *must* conclude that poetry is merely titillation, for poetry makes nothing happen; *technai* move the world. Rhetoric on the other hand, may have something to be said for it. Rhetoric has a purposefully centrifugal motive and openly addressing function: it is an interested use of words—it aims to produce action or conviction. As such it makes a non-mimetic use even of imitation, as for example, the use Socrates makes of Homer in *Republic*. There Socrates is clearly reading the pieces of Homer referentially—as pieces of pure (and I might say rigid) designation, but the poem itself does not so refer. The poem does *not refer* to a world outside, or designate (particularly) any particulars there in the already existing world. Rather, the poem refers disseminatively, polyvalently, and so *constructs* a world:



the world of the poem. That world may be like our world or not, but such questions of reference and designation are further questions. Those who see, see.

Socrates's critique, then, applies to professional philosophers of the artificial language variety as well. It applies there with a vengeance because while a human listener to Ion may find something Ion knows not of revealed—in that way Ion *is* inspired, for a listener may hear something that can require her, the listener, to ponder about herself—a paper in an artificial language, on the other hand, is just that: artificial, *mere* tool, and so imponderable.  $P \rightarrow Q, P, QED$ . Artificial languages are *purely* instrumental, their use and construction is a *techne*. Logic is a science. Natural language is not. Natural language always has other moments than simple technical designation.<sup>28</sup> Science's dependence on humanity is figured by logic's dependence on natural language. I should say they are not really separable. It is not accidental, in this light, that at the close of the difficult metaphysical books of *Republic* Socrates gives his mathematical speech. It is entirely comic: that's technical language completely unattached from the real world. Language is carrying Socrates into foolery.<sup>29</sup> Please excuse my pedantry in explaining the joke.<sup>30</sup>

It is obvious then, that Ion might have performed a reversal in this *topos*, and precisely at that aforementioned point in the dialogue where Socrates supposes him to be asking the questions: What is the discipline of philosophy, what is its subject, its rules, its limits? And Plato, if not Socrates, would answer as I have to the question unasked of Ion: its subject is words, its limit, the human world. And then he would have to smile if a poet were to say that that art applies as well to an intelligent poet as to a non-artificial philosopher, though it does not apply to the musing mouth that is Ion, or to the artificially intelligent. Though on second thought, perhaps the art, I should say, *applies itself* even to Ion, and the worthless Tynnichus as well: "As he says himself: "an invention of the Muses"" (534e);—out of the mouths of babes the figures of truth sometime fall. Words can do things even through the worthless—though not through or to the wordless. The

Tynnichus example proves that we are formed by words, that they are not mere tools of some great *techne*, for Tynnichus admits that his best work *was not tooled by him*, and since he is so worthless we must believe that had he tried to tool it he would have diddled it into dawdledry. Greeks thank the gods he did not touch it every time they sing.

So are poetry and philosophy then just, and necessarily, a gift of the gods: no science, no discipline, no rules; arts of which there can be no teaching and no practicing? Pure inspiration, no perspiration? The case of Tynnichus is again instructive. At least he must have had the discipline not to diddle in this one case of his finest poem. He must have recognized something, and what he must have recognized was something true, beautiful, good. So he didn't diddle. There is a beginning to poetic and philosophic practice: Let be. I would like now to move to Keats, to the discipline of negative capability, but I will practice my discipline and stick to the task of understanding *Ion*.

#### *What Socrates says*

In his rhapsodies Socrates is, seemingly, pulled out of his own discipline. He no longer questions to find out how a person knows, or whether they do, but speaks whence he does not know of a *techne* he professes not to practice. —or does he? What is the discipline of a philosopher? And how does it differ from that of the poet? We might ask as well what possesses Plato, to whom this article is but another in a series of footnotes, to have Socrates practice rhapsody here, or poetic speech anywhere else? What a beautiful story he puts in the mouth of Socrates, rhapsode. It is in Plato's *dialogos* itself—which includes, but is not limited to the arguments, or collections and divisions, (as Homer includes, but is not limited to talk of several *technai*, and collections and divisions of ships and soldiers)—that the idea becomes visible.

Let us look at another detail in the dialogue, in order to see what I mean. The difference between Ion's reactions to Socrates' two acts of *poiesis* about the practice of

rhapsodes ("you touch my soul" 535a, "your're a good speaker, but...536d) cannot be explained by saying that the second speech "no longer flatters Ion as did the first,"<sup>31</sup> for in the first speech Socrates clearly says "the god takes their intellect away from them when he uses them as his servants" (534d), and in the second he merely adds that each poet (and so rhapsode) "is attached to one Muse" (536b). Ion himself admits, after the first speech, that a speaker such as he, who feels fear and is full of tears when he is not in Ithaca or Troy is "not at all, to tell the truth" (535d) in his right mind to be so. The difference between Ion's responses, if there is one, must depend on Ion considering that inspiration is not the whole story. He marks this issue himself when he says "I do not believe that you would think [I am possessed] if you heard me speaking on Homer" (536d). Now while that statement might be taken by a feisty and uncharitable interlocutor as an admission that he is not any good at all, Ion doesn't mean that. He is merely explaining how while he is performing he still has the presence of mind to count the gate receipts (535e), hardly an activity for the ecstatic. If Ion ever did believe in divine inspiration, and believed it was the most best whole true story, then, when Socrates asks after his first rhapsody, "is he in his right mind then [when he weeps and is frightened in performance though no one is doing him any harm]?" (535d), Ion should answer "Lord yes, I was in my right mind then, now I miss it, in answering your questions I am not now alive." A corybant would say so, and a de-magnetized ring,<sup>32</sup> but Ion says "Lord, no." With his second rhapsody Socrates tries to carry Ion off to this point, but fails. Ion does not desert the truth of the matter for the praise that would devolve upon him if he did. Something holds him back. He becomes adamant about this, and the failure of the second rhapsody *exhibits* that fact: Inspiration is not the whole true story—*even Ion can't buy it*, can't be carried away entirely by it.

Socrates wants to discover, or perhaps more precisely he wants Ion himself to discover, the anchor—what it is that holds him, Ion, even in the admittedly high seas of

rhapsody, so he says: But if you are not possessed, you must have a *techne*, you must be master of a profession and know that certain function which is granted to your profession by the gods (537c).<sup>33</sup> Thus back to the first horn of the dilemma, on which, this time, Ion impales himself, agreeing, and claiming first to know how to be a slave (540c) and then how to be a general (541a). These two arts—slave and general—are emblematic of the horns Ion, and poetry, and philosophy are between. We are *made by* words, and with words we *give orders to* all our other sciences, *technai*, purposes. The choice between slave and general metaphorically exhibits one side, and then another, of words: what we are subject to, and what we use to master (such as we do). Ion's answer here is true despite himself: in looking literally for the technical truth of his art he speaks the truth about it in figures. Call it inspiration. That would be true in one sense: he doesn't know what he is saying, though what he says is (figuratively) true. To see one side of language only at a time is Ion's dumbness. Others see one side only ever. Hope that such creatures never hold office, or try to teach humanities.

When Socrates points out that if the horn of *techne* is the truth then Ion is unjust for not explaining his knowledge to the seeker, Ion removes himself a final time to the horn of inspired stupidity. In that case his inability to teach is, at least, not a moral flaw; it is, rather, a positive sign of the god's election.<sup>34</sup> This dialogue, then, ends comically in a moral sense, for while Ion does not know what he is about, even in his ignorance he knows it is better to be powerlessly stupid than to have power and be unjust. His final choice exhibits that knowledge even though he does not ever say what I've just said. Just so, even the ignorant can feel the light of the sun upon their backs and turn to it, not knowing what they turn to. So even what a person does, but does not say, can reveal what he is. Just so, can Ion, like Tynnichus, say true and well without intending to. It is because we see this (albeit all unknowing) turn to the good—or at least avoidance of

evil—by Ion that our mood at the end of *Ion* is so different from our mood at the end of *Gorgias*, say, or at Anytus's exit in *Meno*.

Thus Ion ends up buying that romantic *furor poeticus* story of his power, a story apparently invented by Plato and spoken here for the first time in its long history by Socrates.<sup>35</sup> It is not surprising that he accepts it, it is in fact symbolically appropriate that he does so, since Ion does speak without knowing what he's saying quite often. What is surprising is how many philosophers join in the chorus of Ion's "Yes, Socrates, that's it!" (535a) and think that Plato himself is choregus. After seeing Ion's rather witless working in this dialogue we should be embarrassed to have to agree with him literally about anything, just as we ought to be embarrassed to be caught believing in recollection with the likes of *Meno*.<sup>36</sup> If we deny the opening gambit by saying either "poems do not have subjects as *technai* have them" or, "a poem does not mean, it is," the dilemma on which Ion repeatedly impales himself is avoided.

### *Poetry/Philosophy*

Like the poet, the philosopher's discipline is words. If we can recycle our garbage, it is not because we are philosophers that we can do so. If being a pilot or a carpenter, a plumber or a resources engineer were all there was to being human, poetry would be utterly without merit, and so would philosophy. And colleges *should* be trade schools. If we ask what a philosopher is good for I imagine we would be able to get "slavery" and "generalship" in just about as many breaths as it takes Ion.<sup>37</sup> And in fact these answers have more than a literal element of truth, for poet, rhapsode, and philosopher: nothing human is foreign to me, because my art is words. However, because my art is words and every human being uses them, it does not follow that every human being practices my art. But every human being should. So says Socrates when he says "the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being." Socrates' evaluation was based on the command to

"know thyself"—the command of an oracle, a word which means mouth. It was not a human mouth; or, it was and it wasn't. The kind of mouth which speaks the command is not only the very means by which it can be followed, but also that alone which makes such a command possible. This mouth is figured as divine because language is not (like everything we make under its aegis) mere tool—a utilitarian invention for the rationalization of production. For a human being to examine its life as a human being is to examine, and attend to, that voice; a voice which is within as much as without. It is to pay attention with and to our words.<sup>38</sup> So then, should we all, as well as philosophers, be poets if not rhapsodes? Should I give a straight-up purely technical and deductive argument in response to that question, or would such an argument be an illustration of missing the point? Well, Socrates himself practices rhapsody in *Ion*, and if *Phaedrus* is not comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral or poem unlimited, then Plato never wrote, nor no man ever loved. QED.

But to the issue: of these "subjects" (poetry and philosophy) which are modes of wording—are they all equivalent acts? That depends on the practitioner. If Ion were a rhapsode in the pure sense he would be among "the most stupid tribe of men," for he would only speak words well, not know whereof he spoke. It is imaginable that an opera singer—a pure rhapsode—might be able to pronounce her Doric without knowing what she sang. The *poet* clearly must do better: there must be, at least in ancient days, some sense within his soundings lest he be considered only mad, and a madness of a lower sort; call that false poetry. It is also possible that a poet might know what he is talking about. Such knowledge only takes place in the light of the good, and the *poiesis* will in that case also be an act of *phronesis*, of judgment. Let us call that true poetry. On the other hand, a "philosopher" might carry out any number of collections and divisions or logical entailments in sentential form without any awareness of what light makes it possible, or what his doing does to him, or to his world. Let us call that cleverness, not wisdom. It is

practiced by one of the characters in *Politicus*. The philosopher's task—again, according to Socrates, in *Republic*—is to see things as they are in the light of the good, and by making his collections and divisions and entailments in this light to lead others to see things truly too. Let us call that true philosophy. It is possible that such a one might, at times, turn to rhapsody—and not only "in a holiday mood by way of diversion" (*Phaedrus* 276b)—but—as Socrates does in *Ion*, and to poetic invention as he does in *Phaedrus* and *Republic*—on the condition that it helps the hearer, as well as the speaker himself, to see: see something in the light of the good. That experience might make even Ion's infinite tongue stop—and start again, differently, in a finer, and a more self-conscious rhapsody. Such rhapsodies and poetic acts on Socrates's part—or Plato's—might seem indistinguishable in both form and content from the art practiced by Ion and his company—until the rhapsody is over and the questioning begins, and the questioning is human life itself.

*Socratic Rhapsody:*

*There are interpreters and there are interpreters*

After the first rhapsody—which touches Ion's soul—Socrates suggests that rhapsodes *present what poets say* and so are interpreters of interpreters (or representatives of representatives) (535a). Ion agrees. But the Socratic rhapsody which precedes this interchange *is not like that at all*. It starts with discussion of a thing—the Heracleian stone—and makes it a metaphor for rhapsodes, and it seems to be *pure Socratic poiesis* (and is, within the dialogue). Socratic rhapsody is not interpretation of interpretation, except in the sense of making the world into words; Socrates's speech is the attempt to see one thing in and by means of another. And the question which follows ("Don't you think I'm right, Ion?") is to see if that seeing is true. It apparently is—of Ionic rhapsody, for *he is* unthinkingly taken up by words, and *just as apparently* isn't—of the Socratic. Ion at

first agrees to the story—the ring powerlessly attracted to stone—as being an accurate image of rhapsody, but the fact that it is a pure Socratic invention indicates that it *just as apparently* isn't true of what Socrates does: he isn't powerlessly attracted, he makes. And he makes his verbal construct in order to see. And we see two things: Ion's powerlessness, poetry's (or language's) power: Ion, ring; poem, stone. Socrates here is being a poet, for he has invented this image and story, right before our very eyes. Let us say, then, that there are some poets (and some philosophers) who are interpreters of interpreters—metal rings clinging to larger rings clinging to magnetic stones (e.g., my footnotes to footnotes to Plato throughout), and others who look to see what's going on. There are people who see in things—like war—ideas; or seeing an idea—like inspiration—make a story to express it; and then there are people who recite and provide footnotes. Language, in any case, is what makes it possible for us to see, to see differently, and to footnote.

After the second rhapsody Ion reconsiders and says that he does not think that the metaphor of the magnetic stone is completely right, and to prove that he is in his right mind ("I *do* remember," 537a) he says he will recite the part of Homer Socrates is thinking of, and he gives his one and only performance. First, let us admit that Ion's instinct is right here—neither he nor we are completely powerless under the spell of language. But if we are not so completely powerless as metal rings under a Heracleian stone, then we are responsible for what we do with language. Now let us examine Ion's speech. It is a performance of advice about a chariot race, and Ion cuts it from his poem as blithely and irresponsibly as many scholars cut phrases or arguments from Plato's dialogues. If we read the whole poem—the *Iliad*—two things are perfectly clear: The advice is good in the sense that it works; it is technically fine. That fact is exhibited in the poem by two things: First, Antilochus does better than his horses and equipment allow he should—by virtue of that advice. Second, Nestor's somewhat bitter explanation of his



own youthful defeat due to the sons of Aktor using the same strategy of getting tight to the post and then swinging wide in front of him in similar games shows that that technique has worked before. (Chariot driving as an empirical science founded on repeatable experience.) But *the poem* also makes perfectly clear that while the advice Nestor gave in Ion's snippet is unquestionably clever, it is quite a bit less unquestionably good. For the confrontation and near civil war that follows the chariot race (*Iliad* XXIII, 610-665) threaten to disintegrate the Greek forces just when it seems things are about to move on to a Greek victory. Only Achilles unremitting generosity saves the day. Ionic performance is no doubt just as *clever* as Nestor's advice. In this way Ion is figured in what he says *and* in what he fails to say. Just so the *Ion* is understandable by virtue of what it says—and what it does not say.

It should be clear then, that as Ion is not an historically accurate rhapsode—but rather an overblown version, so Ion does not represent poetry very well either—he is an underdone poet. But Ion is not rhapsody, nor yet Homer. Ion says he is Homer dressed up; really he is Homer according to the gilded letter—dead, with footnotes. The poem itself moves with spirit and power; it is the finest thing, and needs no gilded crown—such gilding<sup>39</sup> can but harm a thing that is ever green. *The rhapsode* may well recite "without knowledge and without regard to the moral effect"<sup>40</sup>—as Nestor spoke to Antilochus—but *the poem* clearly shows the moral effect, and *the poem* also shows that Nestor speaks not out of knowledge, but out of the pain of his own defeat. Any Greek would know that. In the same way, Ion may be a terrible defender of poetry, but the *Ion* shows what poetry can do, and by putting us in the position of needing to ask questions makes us *practice* philosophy, rather than learn *doxa*.

*Conclusion and postscript on the usefulness of this interpretation of Ion*

This interpretation makes sense of several historical facts: To the fact that there were no sophisticated rhapsodes, I say that Plato joins explanation to recitation in order to develop the dialogue's dilemma—*technē/mania*. This historically false conjunction of tasks points up that in ancient Greece both sides of the Ionic dilemma would have been seen as obviously false: No rhapsode treated Homer as universal scientist, and no ancient poet claimed divine inspiration. Not only was divine madness never claimed by a Greek poet, but it had never even been heard of in the West until Socrates invented it here.<sup>41</sup> Further, contrary to Socrates's story, the ancient poets were musically polygamous; they were not as a rule married to one muse only.<sup>42</sup> It is not even likely that Plato himself believed that story for *Symposium* closes with the remark that whoever can write tragedy can write comedy as well (223d). The compounding of all these actual falsities would have pointed out to any Greek reader that Plato does not mean that either side is literally or historically true. The dilemma is meant to be outrageous; you aren't supposed to believe either side. The task in ancient times would be to find out how a person gets stuck in this dilemma; then go your ways and sin no more (against poetry or philosophy) by finding the figured truth of both. This paper has tried to do just that.

Under this interpretation it is no surprise that Socrates' arguments are "full of paralogisms and sophisms." Nor that "the worst of them occurs at the end of the dialogue, when Socrates identifies Homer's poetry with its topics, and so forces Ion to confess his ignorance of one topic after another."<sup>43</sup> For if the opening gambit is not only based on false historical fact about rhapsodes but also hides false assumptions about poetry specifically and language in general, then the *only* way to defend it is by paralogism and sophism. That the dialogue goes logically downhill, ending with "the worst of them," exhibits the silliness of accepting that gambit. Indeed what Tigerstedt calls the last and worst argument can be seen to be implicit in the very asking of the question which starts Ion's downfall: "Is there any subject on which Homer and Hesiod

agree" (531a). A false dilemma is an outline for a *reductio ad absurdum* in two directions. *Ion* is the *reductio ad absurdum* of both poetry (language) as mere *techne* and poetry (language) as pure inspiration.

Further, we can now understand why Plato does not give Ion a chance to exhibit the explicative function which he has added to Ion's art.<sup>44</sup> Such an exhibition would, by its very presence give some approval to one silly view of poetry—that it is about things in the way that technical treatises are—and cloud the point which the *διαλογος* clearly exhibits in its *reductio ad absurdum* movement: the absurdity of that view of poetry and its implicit (non)understanding of language as a merely technical tool. Why does Plato add that explicative function to Ion if not to make use of it—in fact, making a point not to use it? As I have said, *that addition allows the Socratic gambit*. Further, by doing something strange like that Plato *makes us raise the question* about what *the dialogue* is *doing*, rather than drawing attention to what the *arguments* are *saying*. It is a perfect poetic technique, perfectly performed. It is also a maieutically perfect way of initiating a reader into the philosophical discipline of question and answer, or the poetic discipline of figure and figured, for the reader himself is brought to question and figure—or misses the point.

Third, the traditional and traditionally irresolvable disagreement between those who consider the "divine madness" view to be Plato's own, and those who say, with Goethe, that Plato's Socrates is here "nur ironisch"<sup>45</sup> is hereby overcome. It is overcome by showing that the disagreement arises only after and because of accepting an illegitimate view of poetry: that it is about things, things that fit into general areas of study and knowledge (*techne* or *episteme*). Acceptance of *that* allowed Socrates's dilemma: *Either* divine stupidity *or* Ion's stupid view of poetry: that the poem (or dialogue) can be explicated without remainder into its designating technical (or logical) content. Under

this interpretation, *Ion* exhibits the silliness of Ion's views about poetry without Ion even giving an exhibition of what it is he does.

The inability of Ion to see a way out of the dilemma, such as the way out Weil or MacLeish would suggest, indicates that he does not know (i.e., cognize in the light of the Good) what he is doing when he is rhapsodizing, reciting, or explaining. This intellectual flaw is no doubt caused by a moral flaw on Ion's part: he does not pay attention. He makes this perfectly clear when he finally claims the equivalence of invincible ignorance since he is inspired by the god, who of necessity takes his mind away.

The moral and intellectual flaws discovered in Ion are only transferrable to Homer's poem if the reader bounces to the other horn of the dilemma and treats elements like Nestor's speech as technical advice on charioteering, pulling them out of all relation to the poem in which they have their life and place. That view of language, and act of interpreting, completely lacks phronetic judgement, as any reader who remembers what happens next in the poem can show. These moral and intellectual flaws, then, do not apply *simpliciter* to the poem or poet, in fact, of the poem in question they are blatantly false. The moral and intellectual flaws do not even necessarily apply to rhapsodic performance, since for a paying audience Ion might have recited the nearly internecine argument that follows the chariot race—thereby *showing* the effect of such advice to any who have ears and can hear. Directors who cut scenes from Shakespeare should take note of this. Finally, these same moral and intellectual flaws can be discovered in any human being who uses words without knowing both what he is doing *and* what is being done to him (and other hearers) by those words.

So, finally, this interpretation of *Ion* legitimately overturns the marker, "Plato is against poetry" by showing that it is false in his primary text on the subject—his only dialogue directly on poetic art. And, by doing so in just the manner it does, this view of *Ion* takes a large step on the way to seeing that true philosophy is poetic, and true poetry

philosophical, for seeing Plato as poetry's best—because truest—defender, and for seeing the unity of the humanities in the study of language. Moreover, this interpretation of *Ion* allows all this without buying into

the prejudice anchored in the reader by centuries of humanism and of "human sciences" that there is "man," that there is "language," that the former makes use of the latter for his own ends, and that if he does not succeed in attaining these ends, it is for want of good control over language "by means" of a "better" language.<sup>46</sup>

In fact, precisely, I deny it: A better language is impossible.

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<sup>1</sup>W.K.C. Guthrie, *The History of Greek Philosophy*, Cambridge: University Press (1975).

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth Dorter "The *Ion*: Plato's characterization of Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XXXII (1973): 65-78. See also Nickolas Pappas, "Plato's *Ion*: The Problem of the Author," *Philosophy* 64 (1989): 381-389 who sets the *Ion* in a similar context.

<sup>3</sup>Julius Elias, *Plato's Defence of Poetry*, London: MacMillan (1984). Dirk Baltzly's recent article, "Plato and the New Rhapsody" [*Ancient Philosophy* XII: 1 (1992): 29-52] treats the *Ion* a bit more fairly, but when he builds up what he calls "the new rhapsody" (38-50), he turns away from the *Ion* to *Republic*, *Phaedrus* and *Protagoras*. This move is, as we shall see, entirely unnecessary.

<sup>4</sup>It is not necessary that I claim the larger heretical project as a setting. For the purposes of this paper all that needs to be granted is what E.N. Tigerstedt sets out as prolegomena to his study, *Plato's Idea of Poetical Inspiration* (Helsinki, 1969):

The point of departure for any study of Plato's philosophy must be the commonplace truth that Plato did not write systematical treatises but dialogues, each of which is a self-contained whole, though some of them look backwards and others forwards to later dialogues. This means that our first task must be to understand each dialogue and each idea and utterance in it in its context, without, at this first stage, appealing to other dialogues. Only after having done so, we may try to compare the ideas and utterances in one dialogue with those in another, and, if possible, to harmonize them. ...

But the admission of the independent individuality of the Platonic dialogues has consequences which are by no means generally accepted. For, this individuality consists not only, not even mainly, in an artistic unity but in a dialectical one. Each dialogue is a true *διαλογος*. The dialectical way of proceeding ... is never, not even in the last dialogues ... a mere external form, which Plato inherited from his master Socrates and, unfortunately, could not get rid of, but the only way in which, according to Plato, truth can be found (6-7).

That Plato's writing is not merely philosophical matter poured into dialogical form echoes Alexander Pope's view that poetry is not merely words poured into formulaic "numbers." See his "Essay on Criticism" II: 336-383. Besides the notion of self-

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contained individual, not mere matter poured into form, the by no means heretical Tigerstedt makes another implicit comparison between Plato's dialogues and poetry later:

[I]f each dialogue contains, nay, consists of one continuous dialectical process, how can we detach any single moment from the whole. Would not this imply a vain attempt to stop the living λογος in its flow, to extract a wave out of the stream? If it is always problematical to isolate a single idea in a philosopher's thought, it seems to be fairly impossible in the case of Plato. Each of his dialogues seems to be a self-centered organism, *without any apparent appeal to the reader* (7, my italics).

Compare Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton: University Press (1957); "Poetry is a *disinterested* use of words: *it does not address a reader directly*" (4, first italics Frye's, second mine). It is in precisely this regard that poetry differs from prose according to Frye. That Frye's and Pope's descriptions of poetry echo Tigerstedt's description of a Platonic dialogue so perfectly is a further indication of the questionability of the distinction between philosophy as Plato practices it and poetry. The distinction between Platonic dialogue and poetry also would not have been granted by Aristotle according to *Poetics* 1, where Socratic conversation is contrasted with verses of Empedocles, the former being a mimetic art, the latter being a physical science; Socratic conversation thereby falls under the investigation of *Poetics*.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Paul Woodruff, *Two Comic Dialogues: Ion and Hippias Major*, Indianapolis: Hackett (1983): 6. See also Guthrie, 201. Tigerstedt, *Plato's Idea*, 24: "There is not a shred of evidence of the existence of any 'sophistic' rhapsodes at all." That Xenophon calls rhapsodes reciters (ακριβουντας) in *Memorabilia* IV.ii.10 and says that what they give can be heard clearly (ακροωμενον) in *Symposium* III.6, rather than using variants of interpret [*hermeneus*] as Plato does, gives additional support to the performance artist only view of the rhapsode. Plato's choice of words begins the blending of concepts—speak, explain. The two texts in Xenophon, if they were together, would go so far as to hint strongly that a good listener can hear more than a clear speaking rhapsode might know he is saying, thereby keeping the two concepts separate. A good listener hearing more than what is spoken is clearly what can happen to Ion (as I will show later), and also with *Ion* (as I hope this paper shows). I would like to thank my former colleague, Dean Vasil, for talking about these Greek passages with me.

<sup>6</sup>I am assuming that the usual award was something greener, as Alcibiades indicates by his crowning of Agathon in Plato's *Symposium*. It is entirely in keeping with Ion's personality to want something fancier, and perhaps less meaningful: the reduction of living poetry to incipient technical science, for profit.

<sup>7</sup>Baltzly seems to want Socrates to make that distinction:

Ion accepts Socrates's claim that the branches of scientific knowledge are individuated by

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their subject matters. Unfortunately, no allowances are made for what is done with the subject matter. In his examination of Ion, Socrates fails to distinguish between *knowing* some subject matter...and *knowing* how to judge whether a poet speaks well about that subject (31, my italics; see also 34).

This is exactly the distinction Plato consciously avoids. He gives Ion the dual tasks, he marks the division Baltzly wants in Ion's words and then he passes over it in silence. This is a sign it is not the problem Plato wants to deal with—or not the way he sees the problem of poetry. Plato, the maker of the dialogue, assumes the poet both knows and speaks well; the question is whether or not that is true of the particular rhapsode, Ion.

<sup>8</sup>To speak Greek, *περι ποετικῆς αὐτοῦ* (about poetry itself)—which is the incipit of Aristotle's *Poetics*, which book is often taken as an answer to the problems Socrates raises to poetry in *Republic*. But Aristotle, who takes pains to point out that the course an investigation takes changes depending on the context within which the investigation is carried out, might have learned that by noting the differences among Platonic dialogues.

<sup>9</sup>On this same matter, see, for example, Alexander Pope's "Essay on Criticism" I:100-117, II:297-304, 315-319, 337-355, 362-375.

<sup>10</sup>It is perhaps the historical rhapsode's lack of judgement in regard to propriety of occasion which leads to Xenophon's remark "Do you know of any tribe more simple than the rhapsodes?" (*Symposium* III,6).

<sup>11</sup>*Contra* Guthrie, Elias, et al. The problem the *Ion* broaches, and investigates such as it can under the condition of talking with Ion, is, then, the same one Kant deals with in the first half of the third *Critique*. That the dilemma broached here—language as tool, speaker as user, or speaker as organ, language as active power—is still operative in contemporary thought might be indicated in many ways. Here is a quote from Bataille which indicates his subjection to the dilemma:

I use language in a classical way. *Language is an organ of will* (action comes from it), and expressing myself is a function of the will, which continues on this path till the end. What would it mean to speak of relinquishing will in an act of speech if not—*romanticism, lies, unconsciousness, and poetic messiness?* (*Guilty*, translated by Bruce Boone, Venice, CA: The Lapis Press (1988), p. 111, italics mine)

Meanwhile, Ion's hair stands on end, and Bataille sings himself into ecstasies. (Romanticism, lies, unconsciousness, poetic messiness!: the modern view of inspiration).

<sup>12</sup>Or, as Kant says, genius makes the rules follow *it*. Cf. *Critique of Judgement* §46 seq. "Genius ... [is that] through which nature gives the rule to art." See *The Critique of Judgement*, translated by James Creed Meredith (Oxford, 1952): 307.



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<sup>13</sup>A *techne* is a productive art of which the technician is master and which he can choose to exercise or not. Inspiration is an act to which the inspired one is obedient, not master of. If we use Socrates' daimon as an example of inspiration, it would seem to be something one can follow or refuse to obey, but which one *cannot oneself call up* (*Phaedrus* 242c-243a); further, disobedience has its costs. This element of personal choice and responsibility about the exercise of his craft, or obedience to his god, Ion never admits.

<sup>14</sup>It should be noted that no Greek word for what poetry is about at 531 is even so definite as "subject," though there can be no doubt that Socrates and Ion are turning the indefinite stuff of poetry's aboutness that way. It is also plausible to think that knowledge is not only about things, but that is too large an issue to take up here.

<sup>15</sup>*Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks*, (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1987): 24. This is a translation from *La Source Grecque*, (Librairie Gallimard, 1952): 9.

<sup>16</sup>I believe this phrase was made famous (among poets anyway) by Archibald MacLeish in his *Ars Poetica*. His precise formulation was "A poem should not mean/But be." I am quoting him out of context, for the line is from a poem.

<sup>17</sup>Much further down the road from Plato we find Harold Bloom repeating the figures of *Ion*: "All criticisms that call themselves primary vacillate between tautology—in which the poem is and means itself—and reduction—in which the poem means something that is not itself. See *The Anxiety of Influence*, Oxford: University Press (1973), p. 70.

<sup>18</sup>Baltzly gets to the opposite of my point: "if we read the dialogue without irony, then Socrates embraces principles which rob him of any craft as surely as they rob Ion" (35). My point is that *neither* Socrates nor Ion have *either* a rule reducible craft or are simply inspired. Ion does not know this, but *Ion* shows it, so Plato knows it. Or, I agree with Elias that almost anybody could defend poetry better than Ion, but I do not agree that that implies we must stop digging into *Ion*, or that we need to look to other dialogues to develop our own (or Plato's) arguments for that defense.

<sup>19</sup>At this point *Ion* touches the topic of the pseudo-Platonic *Erastai*. An outline of that dialogue is given in an appendix to Rosamond Kent Sprague's *Plato's Philosopher King*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press (1976), p. 119f.

<sup>20</sup>If we would ask whether this professional judgement is a *techne* or a matter of inspiration, the answer would be "neither," or some version of both together. Suppose the art of dialectic has to do with collection and division: Which things are collected together? Where are they divided? Is that decision rule reducible or inspired? Some of the stranger's divisions in *Politicus* look rather comical (264-268). How important, for instance, are horns—or their lack—among social animals? Shall we ask Shakespeare?

<sup>21</sup>Here we may be tempted to see a version of the matter/form distinction. We would then have this (false) dilemma: If the poem does not have a special matter different from the other *technai*, it must be the form which distinguishes Homer from the more prosaic "Workbook for Charioteers," for example. But this distinction, if Ion would make that distinction here (and he doesn't), still comes *after* the acceptance of that very questionable (poetically) and historically illegitimate (based on Ion's nonexistent combination of skills) opening gambit—the one which assumes poems have subjects.

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Perhaps we see here an indication of why Plato never made this rather simple distinction (form/matter) in his writing about poetry: It seems that this distinction only arises as a possible solution after being trapped into a wrong view of poetry and language by something like Socrates's opening gambit. Neither Ion nor Socrates ever suggest that a poem is just a regular *doxa* put into rhythm and rhyme, or something else that gives it "poetic form"—the view criticized by Pope, among others, centuries later. We should note that Aristotle never accepted this simple definition either: Empedocles' physical verses are not poetry (*Poetics* 1447b1720). Socrates changes the theme to talk about the discipline of each art after it turns out that their content isn't able to separate them well enough from poetry (532d). That turn from subject to discipline is more adequate than the temptation here avoided by Socrates, but commended, taken, and commented upon by legion since.

Cleanth Brooks notes the continued working of this false dilemma in *The Well Wrought Urn*, New York: Harcourt, Brace (1947); see especially "The heresy of paraphrase" 196f, 201f.

<sup>22</sup>Of course it is true that in every extant dialogue Socrates does engage in just the sort of rhapsodic, poetic-mythic mode of speech which he allows himself here in *Ion*. But that kind of speech is precisely what is at issue in this dialogue. I suppose that one thing this kind of speech does is give the dialectic a place to start or restart from: a possibility about which we may begin the questioning and answering. We could read all such examples of poetic-mythic speech generally as implying the question which in fact Socrates asks Ion at the end of his story about inspiration: "Don't you think I'm right Ion?" (535a) And question and answer begin again—about Socrates' poem. (As this paper is a question and answer about Plato's poem—*Ion*.) This is one way poetry and philosophy are similar: we set out a verbal construct and ask "does that work do you think?" Philosophy and poetry are both constructions of reason, and as Plato says all the arts of the muses are εικαστικὴν and μιμητικὴν (*Laws* 668a). That does not mean that they are, either one, only constructions of reason.

<sup>23</sup>That Plato himself can be read as understanding things this way seems to me to be the point of the closing image of Derrida's "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson, Chicago: University Press (1981): 169-171]. I am not sure myself of everything else Derrida says or implies, but his reading of *Phaedrus* is exemplary. And it is exemplary particularly in this: It makes use of the fact that language has what Frye calls both centrifugal and centripetal moments (Frye 73). Derrida exploits and explores both motives. Because language has both, it never either escapes itself into pure reference or escapes the world into a private language: a Grecian urn of tautological self-reference. Note that I am not saying that everything is just words; language refers, what it refers to is *also* a word.

<sup>24</sup>A true *techne* is purely utilitarian—it is used to produce something: houses, horses, health—and has or it is thinkable that it have human masters: persons whose knowledge is complete and whose practice is perfectly in their control, without remainder or reciprocating backwash. In the case of language such a being would be inhuman: It could only be God.

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<sup>25</sup>Awareness of the fact that *we are not* such beings, such totally free subjects, such transcendental egos as Ion considers himself to be, which awareness is exhibited here in *Ion* (and in Ion's words, though he himself misses the point!) should be enough to put to rest forever the thought that Plato is the patriarch of Patriarchy, the founder of humanism, if one means by that phrase the originator of the mistake of anthropomorphism in the study of the human being (cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, translated by Georges van den Abbeele, Minneapolis: University Press (1988): xiii, § 91).

<sup>26</sup>W.H. Auden "As He Is," slightly changed, in *Collected Poems* (New York, 1976): 142.

<sup>27</sup>And *bad* for everything else; and should never be allowed to speak on matters political or moral, since their very speaking indicates they know not of what they speak. When they do so speak, their political debates must be regarded as a joke by all intelligent humans. In a democracy such free speakers become demagogic leaders (540e8-541e), Sparta requires more (and only) technical training for their generals. *Ion* leaves a curse on both their houses: Neither free and unexamining speakers (talk show hosts) nor technocrats (policy wonks) are worthily human, this means they are not worthy of participating in the polis, and the reason is that they don't know what it means to be political, for politics is a work of words.

<sup>28</sup>The *invention* of an artificial language is an *act* in which hides all the desires of the inventors, who wish for a language of pure reference. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain! For a longer discussion of this problem see my essay on intentionality and mimesis in *Sub/stance* 75

<sup>29</sup>I assume Socrates knows it in *Republic*, though he does not seem to feel the comedy of it in *Politicus*, where the Stranger accuses him of misdividing, then, through the principle of peripatetic diagonality, separates the king out as belonging to the class of tame, hornless herds incapable of interbreeding, and having peripatetic potential. "What a funny situation the king is in," says the Stranger (226d). Indeed.

<sup>30</sup>A previous reader considered this paragraph gratuitous and offensive. Is it not fascinating what language does besides refer? —Along with referring, and at the same time as referring: My hair stands on end. Language is gratuitous, it exceeds reference, it can be offensive, or frightening: "My hair stands on end." Gratuitous is an interesting word in this regard. Perhaps language itself is the original act of gratuity. There is a story that says so. Does it refer?

<sup>31</sup>Allan Bloom, "An Interpretation of Plato's *Ion*," *The Roots of Political Philosophy*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle, Cornell: University Press (1987): 384.

<sup>32</sup>And Socrates himself answers as a true corybant in *Phaedrus*, when he says of the works of sanity that "their place is nowhere" (245a).

<sup>33</sup>In an age when students readily confess that they come to schools to learn a skill, this Socratic dilemma should be more evidently false, not less: either what you do has a technique which can be taught and is productive of something (and from which I can make money), or else you don't know what you're doing. Like Ion, the students allow that there is *techne* and that there is inspired (i.e., unscientific, unconceptual, unteachable) *poiesis*, but not that a person can be made into something, not that *their selves* rather than their productive skills and future incomes are at stake. To put it

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another way, they do not allow that the *technai* they would train themselves to have may be or not be phronetic activities; that is, as Ion, they do not allow that knowledge of *any* truth is subject to the idea of the Good. For Plato, and I think for Socrates, it is only by the light of the good that either *techne* or inspired *poiesis* would be possible (though neither alone is what poetry is). Ion exhibits his own lack of *phronesis* when he calls his performance of the advice of Nestor the *techne* for chariot driving. As is clear in Homer, and will be seen below, the advice is clever, but that's not the same as being good; never has been, never will be.

<sup>34</sup>It is not necessary to see Ion as "oblivious to anything but honorifics" [Baltzly 33]. He is not completely stupid nor completely immoral, he is just normally so. And the choice he makes here is thoroughly like what we ordinarily try to do: he chooses the explanation of what he does which allows him to keep his idea of his own innocence—the explanation has it that he does not know what he is doing, so he cannot be accused of being unjust. In fact at this point Ion can be seen grasping at an argument for his own invincible ignorance: the god takes his mind away, so it is not *possible* for him to know what he is doing, so he can never be held responsible. Oh happy thought if all of us had jobs that so insured our innocence!

<sup>35</sup>Tigerstedt, *Plato's Idea*, 74-76. See also his "Furor Poeticus: Poetic Inspiration in Greek Literature before Democritus and Plato," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, XXI (1970): 163-178.

<sup>36</sup>Particularly, in the case of the *Meno*, since Socrates himself "does not insist that the story is true" (86b).

<sup>37</sup>Even history, less philosophical than poetry though it is, proves it: There is Epictetus, and there is Marcus Aurelius.

<sup>38</sup>Pay attention to what? you ask. Exactly, I respond: pay attention to whatever is, *ontos ousia*. Poetry and philosophy are both this practice of paying attention. Iris Murdoch's "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts," in *The Sovereignty of Good*, London (1985): 77-104, is unsurpassed at drawing attention to this aspect of philosophy.

<sup>39</sup>So metaphorically, transforming poetry into a productive, i.e., useful, i.e., money-making *techne*.

<sup>40</sup>See the opening quote from Guthrie, on the first page of this paper.

<sup>41</sup>That Socrates leaves Ion thinking this extremely strange thing about himself (divinely insane) is still doing him a favor, for it takes him from believing a story about his activity that sounds plausible—that he teaches—and which, perhaps, few people besides Socrates could systematically explode, to believing one that will be universally found fantastic and ridiculed—that he is inspired by God. Ion, not liking ridicule, will be easily cured of believing it, and then he may start to look for the real explanation of what he is about. Compare what happens to Meno. As that dialogue begins Meno probably believes virtue is taught or that you're born with it; he is left with the idea that it's a gift of the gods. In the first case the obvious candidate for virtue is Himself, well-born and well-schooled (as he shows, regularly quoting the required texts); in the second case, why, even his slave boy might have been given the gift. If he goes forth and *lives* according to his new—but arguably false—conception he is already a more virtuous person than he was before, for he has to treat everyone honorably, for all are equally plausible candidates

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for virtue. He may not be *believing the truth*, but he is *better* off, and it is not likely that anyone Meno hung out with was going to try to convince him that his first conception of virtue was wrong—and that conception would have allowed him to grow up to be Anytus.

<sup>42</sup>See Tigerstedt, *Plato's Idea*: 24-28.

<sup>43</sup>Tigerstedt, *Plato's Idea*: 19.

<sup>44</sup>See Tigerstedt, *Plato's Idea*: 22 who raises the question why Plato would give Ion a historically false function and then not use it, but does not answer.

<sup>45</sup>Tigerstedt, *Plato's Idea*: 26f, 66.

<sup>46</sup>Lyotard: xiii.

*ION*: Plato's defense of poetry

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*Abstract*

This paper is a reading of *Ion* which shows that the philosophic action mimed and engendered by the dialogue thoroughly reverses its often supposed philosophical point, revealing that poetry is just as defensible as philosophy, and only in the same way. It is by Plato's indirections we find true directions out: the war between philosophy and poetry is a hoax on Plato's part, and a mistake on the part of his literalist readers. The dilemma around which the dialogue moves is false, and would have been recognized as such by Plato's contemporaries. Further, it is intrinsically related to a false, but popular, view of language. So the way out of the false dilemma of the dialogue is the way out of the war between philosophy and poetry, and also makes one see what is false about the view of language which makes them plausible.