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Poetics Before Plato: Interpretation And Authority In Early Greek Theories Of Poetry

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Introduction

Poetry, Knowledge, and Interpretation

TWO QUESTIONS, or sets of questions, motivate this study. The first concerns the views of poetry advanced in the Socratic dialogues *Apology*, *Ion*, and *Protagoras*. Plato's famous critique of poetry in the *Republic* looms so provocatively and so demanding that scholars have continued to assume that the reflections on poetry in the early Socratic dialogues can only anticipate or supplement Plato's mature, systematic treatment of poetry. This assumption survives despite the wealth of current scholarship that proceeds from Vlastos's systematic division of Platonic from Socratic thought throughout a wide range of ethical, metaphysical, and epistemological issues.¹ The *Republic's* notorious banishment of the poets relies on Plato's mature doctrines in metaphysics and psychology. Might a case be made for understanding the discussions of poetry in the *Ion* and other early dialogues as distinctively Socratic and independent of the Platonic treatment of poetry?

The second question explores the intersection of theoretical reflections on poetry in the literary and philosophical traditions. The precursors of the Platonic philosophy of poetry familiar from Book 10 of the *Republic* include contributions in Plato's earlier Socratic dialogues and in the Presocratic philosophical traditions of Heraclitus and Xenophanes. They also include, I shall suggest, the substantial theories of poetry within the poetic tradition of Homer, Hesiod, and Pindar. Commentators have recognized the existence of a theoretical dimension within this literary tradition, but the relations among the three poets' theories as well as the influence each of the three exerted on the philosophical tradition remain largely uncharted. There is no doubt that Socrates, no less than Plato, responded to the poetry of Homer, Hesiod, and Pindar. But what influence did the poets' *theories* of poetry have on Socratic thought?

¹ Vlastos is usually credited with initiating the now widely accepted view that the philosophy of the early Socratic dialogues is independent of Plato's mature philosophy. (See G. Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* [Ithaca, 1991], pp. 45–131; T. Penner, "Socrates and the Early Dialogues," in R. Kraut, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* [Cambridge, 1992], pp. 121–169.) Contrast the arguments for a unitarian reading of the dialogues in C. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogues: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge, 1996), and in J. Annas, *Platonic Ethics Old and New* (Ithaca and London, 1999). On some of the difficulties facing unitarian readings, see A. A. Long, "A Critical Notice of Julia Annas, *Platonic Ethics Old and New*," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 19 (2000), pp. 344–349.

The answers to these two questions turn out to be connected. The Socratic dialogues, I shall argue, do indeed advance a distinctively Socratic theory of poetry, and this theory can only be accurately understood when framed as an implicit response to theories of poetry advanced within the literary tradition. Socratic poetics takes a position at arm's length from the *Republic's* alarming conclusions that banish the poets from the state. Plato's conclusions in *Republic* Book 10 include these:

[The poet] arouses, nourishes, and strengthens this [irrational] part of the soul and so destroys the rational one, in just the same way that someone destroys the better sort of citizens when he strengthens the vicious ones and surrenders the city to them. (605b2–5)

Imitation . . . with a few rare exceptions, is able to corrupt even decent people, for that's surely an altogether terrible thing. (605 c5–6)

Socratic poetics, I shall show, contrasts starkly with the *Republic* by endorsing the traditional view that poetry harbors wisdom; by rejecting the view (common to Plato and to the tradition that emerges in fifth-century Athens) that credits the author with responsibility for his verses' moral content; and by claiming for the Socratic inquirer authority over the interpretation of poetry. For Plato, poetry does its audience direct and unavoidable psychological damage by fueling nonrational parts of the soul, and its status as mimesis prevents it from providing knowledge. For Socrates, by contrast, the possibility—indeed the requirement—that poetry submit to interpretation, ensures that poetry can serve its audience as a genuine source of knowledge, although not, as we shall see, the knowledge that poets traditionally purported to supply. The Socratic theory begins by engaging Homer and the Homeric theory of poetry.

Homer's, Hesiod's, and Pindar's theories of poetry should not be assimilated into a single "early Greek view of poetry,"² yet their variety is united, I shall suggest, by a common aim. Each of the three theories aims to minimize interpretation by poetry's audiences in an effort to maintain the poet's authority over his work. The poets' three theories nevertheless contrast strikingly, not least in their diverse methods for, and contrasting aims in, discouraging interpretation. To anticipate the Homeric theory's discouragement of interpretation, it may be helpful to consider a contemporary discussion that bears on the topic.

In her influential revisionist essay "Against Interpretation," Susan Sontag attempts to subvert the practice of interpretation, which she understands straightforwardly as the attempt to disclose meaning or content that is implicit in a work of art.³ According to Sontag, interpretation rests on

² Contrast P. Murray, "Poetic Inspiration in Early Greece," *JHS* 101 (1981), pp. 87–100.

³ S. Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in her *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York, 1961), pp. 3–14.

misguided presuppositions; there is, in fact, no such thing as the content or meaning of a work of art. The critic's proper task is to articulate those formal elements of the work of art that shape the experience of encountering it in its sensuous immediacy. Sontag charges that practicing interpretation tends to corrupt abilities to experience the work of art truly, on a sensuous level. Her proposal would not reduce encounters with art to simple thrills or appreciative cries. She suggests, rather, that there are intricate responses to a work's form and the experience it induces in its audience. Sontag closes her essay with a dictum that has become famous: "in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."⁴

There are some striking connections between Sontag's view and Homeric poetics.⁵ The approach to art Sontag prefers, the experiencing of its sensual immediacy unalloyed by interpretation, happens to coincide exactly with the core of the account of an audience's poetic experience that Homer's theory of poetry promotes. This Homeric theory identifies the "erotics" of poetry—that is, the relation that poet and audience enter into with the poem—with the sensually immediate experience of apprehending the poem. This immediacy, like the immediacy of sense experience, does not call for interpretation or evaluation that would seek to uncover the implicit meaning or content of the poem. Speaking, as Sontag does, of an erotics of art is precisely relevant, since, as we shall see, Homeric poetics literally eroticizes the audience's experience of poetry by depicting it as the erotic attraction experienced by Odysseus in his encounter with the Sirens.

Homer's theory, however, conceives of this sensually immediate poetic experience as acquiring *knowledge*, and in this important respect declines Sontag's call for an erotics of art. In describing the immediate experience of art as sensual or erotic, Sontag means to oppose it to any exertion of intellectual or rational faculties. The Homeric tradition is striking because, unlike Sontag's view, it imposes no opposition between the sensual and the intellectual experience of poetry: on the Homeric theory, the immediate, erotic experience of poetry simply *is* a kind of knowledge. This knowledge is not understanding or the derivation of general truths, but factual knowledge about the epic world. In the *Ion*, Socrates attacks the poetic tradition by denying that Homer's account of the experience of poetry is an account of knowledge. Socrates maintains instead that the experience is "inspiration," which he takes to contrast with any sort of intellectual activity and to offer, by itself, no grasp of the wisdom that poetry may have to offer.

Hesiod, we shall see, anticipates recent discussions of the unreliable narrator.⁶ The radically skeptical implication of Hesiodic poetics excludes hu-

⁴ Sontag 1961, p. 14.

⁵ Sontag herself (1961, pp. 12–13) cites Auerbach's reading of Homer, which I discuss in detail in chapter 1.

⁶ For a classic discussion see W. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1961), pp. 339–374.

man audiences from knowing whether the content of poetry is true. Even as Hesiod retains his Homeric precursor's opposition to hermeneutics, he produces a radically innovative poetics by inciting doubts about his poem's veracity. The aim is to frustrate the audience's efforts to interpret his verse's content, all in an effort to advance poetry's immediate, psychotherapeutic effects.

Pindar's poetics is an early expression of a central and lasting anxiety of political poetry that dreads the subversive power of unauthorized interpretations.⁷ Pindar claims for the poet himself sole prerogative to interpret his poetry, which he exercises to maintain and celebrate the values of an aristocratic establishment.

Plato's dialogues *Ion* and *Protagoras* together with the *Apology* advance a Socratic poetics that would claim for poetry's audiences authority over its interpretation. Socrates' theory thus opposes the primary common theme we shall find repeated in the poets' theories. By each in their different ways discouraging interpretation, these theories promote the poet as a definitive and unquestionable authority. By the fifth century, tradition had lent its weight to a generalized version of the poets' self-promoting theories. Pindar, we shall see, explicitly claims to fill the role of moral authority. As the earliest reactions to their poems' moral content testify,⁸ Homer and Hesiod too had long standing as legislators of traditional morality. The poet's role as enforcer of traditional morality was absorbed into fifth-century orthodoxy, as illustrated, for example, by the polemical opposition of Aristophanes' *Clouds* to sophistic education.⁹ In Aristophanes' comedy, the sophists' intellectualist methods turn children against their parents with the idea that expert instruction, rather than the gradual process of socialization and acculturation, provides moral education.¹⁰ The poet's success in legislating moral opinion is well illuminated in the *Apology's* depiction of the effect of Aristophanes' *Clouds* on Socrates' reputation, and eventually on his

⁷ For example, on the political ramifications of epic interpretation, see D. Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (Princeton, 1993).

⁸ Xenophanes DK 22 B 11, for example, famously criticizes Homer and Hesiod for portraying the gods as engaged in morally reprehensible behavior (theft, adultery, and deception).

⁹ On the poet's status as teacher in the fifth century, see B. Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature*, trans. T. G. Rosenmeyer (New York, 1982), ch. 6 (pp. 113–135); R. Harriott, *Poetry and Criticism Before Plato* (London, 1969), pp. 105–9; J. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad* (Chicago 1975), p. 42.

¹⁰ See M. Nussbaum, "Aristophanes and Socrates on Learning Practical Wisdom," *Yale Classical Studies* 26 (1980), pp. 43–97. As Dover, *Aristophanes Clouds* (Oxford, 1970), p. xxiv, puts it, the charge that the tradition (ὁ δίκαιος λόγος) makes against the sophist is, in effect, that "The authority of the family and the state is undermined by rootless individuals who stimulate intellectual curiosity and independence of thought in the young and so minister to an appetite which family and state have been unable to satisfy."

life. Socrates cites the comedian and his play as responsible for dramatizing and perpetuating much of the slander behind the accusations.¹¹ Even the allegorical tradition, which Theagenes of Rhegium had already initiated in the late sixth century B.C. and which formally introduced a notion of interpreting the great poets, ultimately aimed to maintain, not challenge, the poets' traditional authority. In order to reconcile this traditional authority with new standards of conceptual thought, the allegorists supplied accounts of what they claimed was the poet's true meaning by proposing that abstract concepts lurked behind poetry's surface.¹² We shall see that Socrates, by contrast, undermines the poet's moral authority by challenging the poets' understanding of the meaning of their own poetry.

The Socratic discussions of poetry in the *Apology*, *Ion*, and *Protagoras*, I shall suggest, all center on the issue of interpretation, and variously raise the question of who is qualified to understand poetry's meaning. Socrates' guiding interest in moral knowledge leads him to this focus. The popular acknowledgment that traditional poetry is a repository of moral knowledge invites Socrates to examine those with a reputation for being able to grasp poetry's wisdom through their allegedly authoritative qualifications as interpreters. Thus, in the *Apology*, Socrates examines the poet by asking him to explain the meaning of his poetry, as in the *Ion* he examines the Homeric rhapsode's claim to know the meaning of Homeric verse. We see in the *Protagoras* that the sophists, too, had a reputation for, and a characteristic virtuosity in, interpreting poetry. In finding all of these reputed experts incompetent as interpreters of poetry, Socrates reassigns the task of interpretation to the nonexpert, and democratizes access to poetry's wisdom and moral knowledge, which Socratic theory makes available to all practitioners of the examined life.

The Socratic theory thus aims not to dispute poetry's value, but rather to challenge the idea that the poet (or rhapsode) has authoritative knowledge of this value. In the *Ion* and *Apology*, in fact, Socrates maintains the tradition that traces poetry to an inspiring divine source. But he defends a revisionary, anti-Homeric account of inspiration as a *noncognitive* state of the poet. Socrates wields his noncognitive account of inspiration against the poets' views of inspiration and against the descent of poets' theories endorsed by traditionalism in fifth-century Athens. Socrates denies that inspiration grants knowledge and the authority knowledge carries, and maintains instead that extracting poetry's wisdom requires an act of interpretation. Interpretation reveals poetry's moral implications and exercises the same inquisitive resources that audiences apply and develop in leading

¹¹ *Apology* 18a–e.

¹² See G. Most, "The Poetics of Early Greek Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. A. A. Long, pp. 339–40.

an examined life. The Socratic account of inspiration thus loosens the poets' grip on poetry's moral implications and in doing so subverts the traditionalists whose views Aristophanes' comedy had dramatized.

The *Ion* and *Apology* together articulate the basic outlines of Socratic poetics. In the *Protagoras*, where Socrates interprets a poem by Simonides, Socrates further develops his view of interpretation. As we shall see, he there produces a parody of sophistic interpretation of the poem that has so far appeared merely tangential to his philosophical concerns in the dialogue. When read against the account of interpretation in Socrates' poetics, however, the passage can be seen to develop the dialogue's ongoing contrast between Socratic and sophistic methodology by offering a Socratic argument against the relativist assumptions that typically inform sophistic interpretations of poetry. In arguing against such assumptions, Socrates begins to show us what a Socratic interpretation of a poem would be.

We might note that the Socratic turn to interpretation, with its demotion of the author and its focus on the text and the act of interpretation, anticipates influential features of poststructuralist literary criticism such as Barthes's and Foucault's "death of the author" theses.¹³ Yet if these current trends are understood to undermine the very concept of meaning in the text,¹⁴ then Socrates' theory of interpretation will perhaps have more in common with New Criticism, since for him the text itself, in isolation from its author and historical factors, harbors encoded, determinate meaning. To complicate matters still further, the author in a certain way re-emerges on the Socratic view, or rather, is replaced, since Socrates holds that what gives poetry moral significance is the divine wisdom with which the gods have inspired it. The most important point to make in considering the Socratic theory of interpretation in relation to what we call literary theory, however, reveals a general point of contrast: for Socrates there is no specifically literary method to apply to the interpretation of poetry, but only the generally applicable practice of inquiry that Socrates would have humans apply to all claims to truth. Socratic interpretation turns out to be Socratic inquiry, and poetry takes its place as a source of knowledge, but not a privileged one. This leveling of poetry with other sources of human wisdom and democratization of the task of interpretation is one of the most characteristic, and most subversive, features of Socratic poetics.

Two striking conclusions emerge from examining the poets' theories of poetry and their relation to the Socratic view of poetry. The first is that the

¹³ R. Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, Essays Selected and Translated by S. Heath (New York, 1977); M. Foucault, "What is an Author?" in P. Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York, 1986).

¹⁴ A view defended by P. Lamarque, "The Death of the Author: An Analytical Autopsy," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 30 (1990), pp. 319–31.

shared aim of the poet's theories forms a tradition to which Socrates responds polemically. The second is that the distinctively Socratic poetics which results adds to the history of theories of poetry a chapter on Socratic poetics, separate from the familiar topic of Plato's treatment of poets and poetry.¹⁵

¹⁵ For current interpretations of Plato's position in the *Republic* see, for example, A. Nehamas, "Plato on Imitation and Poetry in *Republic X*" and "Plato and the Mass Media," in A. Nehamas, *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates* (Princeton, 1999), pp. 251–302; M. Burnyeat, "Culture and Society in Plato's *Republic*," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values 20* (Salt Lake City, 1999), pp. 217–324.