

## Plato and the New Rhapsody

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In Plato's dialogues we often find Socrates talking at length about poetry. Sometimes he proposes censorship of certain works because what they say is false or harmful. Other times we find him interpreting the poets or rejecting potential interpretations of them. This raises the question of whether there is any consistent account to be given of Socrates' practice as a literary critic. Does Plato's portrayal of Socrates reveal any kind of systematic Platonic theory of the interpretation of poetry? I shall argue for an affirmative answer to this question. But, before the outlines of a Platonic critical practice can be elaborated, a major obstacle must be removed. One might think that Plato himself in the *Ion* answers the question that I have raised. Rhapsody, at least in the *Ion*, is portrayed as the activity of interpreting and evaluating the works of the poets. At first glance at least, Plato seems to conclude that this activity cannot meet the standards of a τέχνη. Rhapsodes are divine madmen. Thus, there cannot be a systematic Platonic account of literary criticism because this activity is inherently irrational and, subsequently, not something that one could engage in in a systematic way, guided by a theory of any sort. In the first part of the paper I argue that the *Ion* does not simply consign the interpretation of poetry to the irrational and, as a result, does not pose an obstacle to the possibility of a Platonic literary criticism. In the second part of the paper I turn to the task of finding an account of the purpose of reading poetry and strategies for fulfilling this purpose that make systematic sense of Socrates' multifarious remarks about poetry.

### I

In the *Ion*, Plato uses principles familiar from the early dialogues. The relationship between craft-knowledge and its subject matter seems to show that the rhapsode performs his function not from knowledge but, rather, by means of divine inspiration. In what follows I shall argue that we must read the *Ion* as a bit of 'complex irony'.<sup>1</sup> The irony is complex because Socrates does not mean to imply

<sup>1</sup> Vlastos 1987, 86 makes this contrast of simple and complex irony: 'In "simple" irony what is said is simply not what is meant. In "complex" irony what is said both is and isn't what is meant. Thus when Socrates says that he is a "procurer" [in Xenophon, *Symp.* iv 56] he does not, and yet does,

the very opposite of what he literally says about divine possession. Rather, he means to liken the situation between the rhapsode and his audience to that of the oracle and the person who seeks guidance from her. Moreover, though Plato thinks that Ion and other rhapsodes have no craft, he does not think that there *could be* no genuine craft of rhapsody.

#### A. The Argument of the *Ion*

Socrates first gets Ion to admit that all of the poets speak of the same subjects. The totality of matters that the poets discuss is then likened to the province of a single *techne*, like mathematics. If Ion had knowledge analogous to that of the mathematician, he would be able to evaluate the accuracy of what any poet who wrote about these matters had to say. All through the dialogue Socrates is interested primarily in Ion's role as an interpreter and evaluator of the poets. He is less concerned to examine Ion's expertise in giving dramatic performances than in his ability to discern what the poets meant and whether they were right. Thus, Plato draws a portrait of rhapsodes in which they are not analogous only to actors or dramatic readers but also to literary critics. So at 530c2-7 he writes, 'No one can be a good rhapsode if he does not grasp the things written by the poet. For it is necessary that the rhapsode be an interpreter (ἐρμηνεῖα) of the poet's thought to his listeners and it is impossible to do this well if one does not know what the poet means.' Elsewhere Ion says that he embellishes (εὖ κεκόσμηκα, 530d) and expounds (ἐξηγήσατο, 531a) Homer. Socrates is concerned with Ion's ability to interpret, and not merely to recite or enact, the poets.<sup>2</sup> Since he claims only to be able to speak on the merits of Homer, his claim to a craft is suspect because it

mean what he says. He obviously does not in the common, vulgar sense of the word. But nonetheless he does in another sense in which he gives the word *ad hoc*, making "procurer" mean simply someone "who makes the procured attractive to those whose company he is to keep" (iv 57).'

As Vlastos points out, the rub is that Socrates is frequently rather obtuse in his irony and does not offer his interpreters many hints that they need to make finer discriminations in meaning. Vlastos' prime example is poor Alcibiades who learns the hard way that Socrates' love for him is not love in one sense, but in another sense is.

<sup>2</sup> Guthrie 1965, iv 218 cites also *Phaedrus* 252b and *Rep.* 599e as further evidence for the claim that the Homeridae were not merely admirers of Homer, but were actually those who could recite and interpret the works. Presumably his thought is that mere admirers would not plausibly be presented as having knowledge of 'unpublished' works: likewise for knowledge of how widespread Homer's influence was. Grote 1888, ii 125 argues that some of the rhapsodes who were less skilled in recitation gave lectures and taught. He cites as evidence the character of Niceratus in Xenophon *Symp.* iii 6, who has spent much time in learning from the rhapsodes. Grube 1965, 41 thinks that Plato's emphasis on the rhapsodes' interpretive role is entirely appropriate. A rhapsode really should be able to interpret the thought of the poet to the audience. In the context of the *Ion*, according to Grube, τέχνη ῥαψωδική might well be translated as simply 'good criticism'.

One might suspect that Plato intentionally over-emphasizes the rhapsode's role as interpreter. Ion is supposed to be a great rhapsode. After all, he has just won the first prize at Epidaurus and is regarded as a contender for the Panathenaea. Yet he is more keen to give Socrates a demonstration of his style of recitation than to talk about his role as an interpreter of Homer. If actual rhapsodes were far more like actors or dramatic readers than like critics, then the *Ion* might be a calculated misrepresentation to suggest to its readers that *someone* ought to fit the role of interpreter.

lacks the appropriate generality.

Thus far Socrates has contested Ion's claims to knowledge from an external point of view. If he really had knowledge, his expertise would extend farther than he himself claims. In the next section, Socrates shifts his attack, and tries to show that Ion really fails to have any expertise even within the province in which he claims to have it. Ion is forced to accept the conclusion that he lacks the kind of knowledge that a craftsman has because he fails to resist some of the very same assumptions by means of which Socrates attacks art in general. Ion accepts Socrates' claim that the branches of scientific knowledge are individuated by their subject matters (537c5-538a). 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 so *being* the relevant sort of craftsman) and knowing how to judge whether a poet speaks well about that subject. The strategy employed here is strongly reminiscent of the first argument against the artists in *Republic* x. There (esp. 596c-d and 598d-e) the mimetic artist is portrayed as the person who tries to dupe his audience into thinking that he is the master of all crafts since he can 'produce' all their objects. Naturally, as lovers of art, we want to stop this conversation and point out to Socrates that it is not a couch or a bridle that the painter wants to produce; it is the *image* of a couch or bridle. And the τέχνη of *depiction* is distinctly different from the τέχνη of the carpenter or the harness maker. The ambiguity of ποιεῖν masks the slide from 'making' *tout court* to 'making representations'; so too καλῶς λεγεῖν fails to distinguish between giving good instruction in chariot racing and depicting well the situation in which a father advises his son prior to a chariot race.<sup>3</sup> When we blur these distinctions then it does not seem so implausible to think that, insofar as an artist or a rhapsode deals with medicine, he ought to be able to function as a doctor. So, if Ion is not able to evaluate whether Homer speaks well concerning Hecamede's potion with the expertise of a physician, then this shows that this part of the poem cannot be included in Ion's craft.

Perhaps Ion *might* still have a τέχνη even if his knowledge of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* was incomplete with respect to certain technical points. However, Socrates now argues that these works cannot form the subject matter appropriate to Ion's craft since they are constituted by remarks concerning the various other crafts. In particular, two of the five passages considered in the *Ion* present indirect discourse by individuals (Nestor and Theoclymenus) speaking in their capacities as experts. These parts must be, properly speaking, the province of the charioteer and the seer.<sup>4</sup> Others are best evaluated by the fisherman and so on.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Rep.* 596c2, "Ὅς πάντα ποιεῖ, ὅσαπερ εἰς ἕκαστος τῶν χειροτεχνῶν with *Ion* 536e ὃν Ὀμηρος λέγει περὶ τίνος εὖ λέγεις; 537c ταῦτα δὴ, ὦ Ἴων, τὰ ἔπη εἴτε ὀρθῶς λέγει Ὀμηρος εἴτε μὴ, 538b3 εἴτε καλῶς λέγει Ὀμηρος εἴτε μὴ and elsewhere.

<sup>4</sup> The 'imitation' of craftsmen through direct speech, of course, comes in for special criticism at *Rep.* 396b. There Plato's thought seems to be that, for the persons acting out such roles, this is a violation of the one person-one job principle. In the *Ion*, however, the concern seems to be that the poet might be thought to be an authority on these matters when he is really not. This would be espe-

Thus, the subject matter for Ion's craft is parceled out to other craftspersons. Ion tries to stake out some ground for himself by appealing to general truths about people. He knows 'what it befits a man to say and what a woman or a slave or a freeman should say, as well as what it befits ruler and ruled to say' (549b3-5). This is the sort of response that we, as readers who value criticism, want to make. Perhaps the critic is not well equipped to discern whether what is said in the *Iliad* about medicine is correct. Yet we like to think that he (and the author as well) are in a position to say something meaningful about the social roles and relationships to others which determine so much of the character of our lives. Knowledge of 'what it befits a man or a ruler to say' is, I take it, one way of getting at what it really is to be a man or a ruler. It is knowledge of the station and its duties.<sup>5</sup>

Socrates, however, refuses to take the suggestion in the spirit in which we would intend it. This is not to say that Ion intends it in this spirit, for he makes no effort to resist the interpretation which Socrates places upon his words. Infuriatingly, Socrates reduces the question of 'what befits' to the question of what a craftsperson would say, *qua* craftsperson, in a context where she is called upon to exercise her expertise. Rather than resisting the reduction of knowledge of 'what befits' to knowledge about some particular exercise of a specific craft, Ion finally identifies his expertise with that of the general.<sup>6</sup> Because he claims to know, among other things, what it befits a general to say in order to inspire his troops, Ion accepts the inclusion of the military craft within rhapsody. In response to this suggestion, Socrates simply points out that, were rhapsodes really competent as generals, some cities would employ them in this capacity. On the basis of this dubious counterfactual, Socrates presents Ion with the following dilemma: either he is an unjust man who has a craft or he is a divinely inspired man who has done

cially true in the case of direct discourse. Cf. *Rep.* 393c 'But whenever he makes a certain speech as if he were someone else, shall we not say that he makes his language as like as possible to that of whomever he has told us he is about to speak?'

<sup>5</sup> One might object that this includes questions about what a craftsperson would do in a very specific situation in which he is called upon to exercise his craft (e.g., what it befits the doctor to do when the patient is pale and feverish, etc.). Yet it seems to me that we can distinguish these questions from those like, 'What ought the doctor to do when the patient is terminally ill and wishes to end his life without further suffering?' The issue of 'what befits' here is not obviously one that falls *only* within the province of the craft of medicine. So too with the general. He may not derive any knowledge about how to deploy his forces from reading *Antigone*, but he might gain some insight into what sorts of actions and attitudes are appropriate when dealing with a courageous subordinate who disagrees with your plan of action.

<sup>6</sup> Norman Mooradian has suggested to me that this choice is by no means arbitrary. The descriptions of the generals of the Trojan War constituted a sort of paradigm concerning the stations of society and the allocation of what is due to each. This seems to me an interesting way of filling out the claim that Homer was the 'educator of Hellas' (*Rep.* 606e). One might legitimately wonder, however, whether the conceptions of 'what is due' that one might draw from Homer would be suited to life in a cosmopolitan city like Athens. This in itself, I think, would not be a sufficient reason to discourage people from looking to Homer for an understanding of what it is to be a 'real man'. Reflection on some of our own society's thoroughly inappropriate archetypes should convince us of this quite readily. On the question of whether Homer really was regarded as a source of moral wisdom, see below n12.

no wrong, but who lacks a craft. The charge of injustice, of course, springs from his 'refusal' to display to Socrates the craft that he claims to have. Ion, seemingly oblivious to anything but honorifics, opts for divinity.

#### B. The Motives for an Ironic Reading

We must, I believe, suppose that the *Ion* is intended ironically at one or more levels. If we take a 'straight reading' of the dialogue, then there are a variety of vexing problems.<sup>7</sup> First, there is no reason to think that Homer was *recommending* Hecamede's potion for the healing of wounds. Were someone to criticize the *Iliad* on the ground that it contains unsound medical advice, we would surely say that he missed the point.<sup>8</sup> Since Plato was clearly no fool, charity requires that we not attribute to him the view that rhapsodes do, or should, so mistreat poetry.

Second, it seems likely that Ion spent many years learning to recite and speak about Homer. Moreover, it seems likely that he could teach someone else to do the same—if, of course, that person had the capacity to learn. If his ability to do this is a matter of divine inspiration, then how on earth can we explain the fact that the ability is had only by those who have been apprenticed to rhapsodes? Socrates' explanation really explains very little. Accordingly, we ought to suspect that it is not intended to.<sup>9</sup> Of course, Plato does not think that the necessity

<sup>7</sup> The puzzles that I go on to list are not, of course, the only ones. They are simply the ones that I have not seen pointed out already in the considerable secondary literature on the *Ion*. In addition to my puzzles, one must consider the following:

First, Ion's ability to gauge his profit margin in the midst of the performances seems incompatible with his being divinely possessed and utterly ἐκφρων (Tigerstedt 1969, 21; Wilamowitz 1920, 41; Friedländer 1965, ii 123, and Flashar 1958, 70 and 90). Moreover, if Ion is not possessed, what becomes of the magnetic chain by means of which the audience is enthused? Tigerstedt 1969, 27 suggests that the absence of any good answer to this question ought to make us suspect that Plato is being ironic.

Socrates claims that each poet is able to compose only what his particular Muse moves him to compose, either dithyrambs or odes or epic or iambic verse, and so on (534c). This ought to set off the alarm bells of irony, for poets did in fact cross these genre lines. Tigerstedt cites Pindar as an example.

<sup>8</sup> The only other writer of the period who even suggests that Homer provides good advice on such technical topics is Xenophon (*Symp.* iv 6) Since *Symposium* is arguably the work that was most influenced by Plato, it seems entirely possible that here Xenophon is aping the *Ion* itself. So, Guthrie 1965, 208 and Flashar 1958, 25.

It is difficult to know what to make of Aristophanes' *Frogs* 1032. One wonders whether the humor is supposed to depend only upon Pantacles' ineptitude in matters military or whether the suggestion that Homer, Hesiod and others are sources of wisdom is itself supposed to be a laughing matter. Grote 1888, ii 135 takes Aristophanes' Aeschylus at his word and remarks that Homer and the poets were 'supposed to be a mine of varied instruction, and were taught as such to youth'.

<sup>9</sup> It has been claimed that Plato is echoing the common wisdom of antiquity by citing divine possession as the source of the artist's creative power. Horace attributes such a view to Democritus:

Because Democritus believes that native talent is a greater boon than wretched art, and shuts out from Helicon poets in their senses...*Ars Poetica* 295 (Fairclough trans.)

and he himself praises Pindar in imagery reminiscent of *Laws* 719c,

Like a river from the mountain rushing down, which the rains have swollen

of instruction is *sufficient* for an area of study to be a craft. After all, cookery and the other sham crafts of the *Gorgias* involve apprenticeship too. But there the abilities of these practitioners are explained by their possession of experience. That, at least, can be increased and analyzed in apprenticeship, even if it still falls short of constituting a craft. The 'explanation' of the rhapsode's ability by appeal to divine inspiration, however, makes the necessity of instruction a complete mystery.

Most importantly, it is not clear that anyone who accepts the premises that Socrates uses in his argument against Ion could consistently claim the ability to determine whether Ion has a craft. According to Socrates, the person who has a craft is the one in a position 'to know well the words or works of that art' (538a9). Unless we are simply to beg the question against rhapsody from the outset, then we must suppose that the rhapsode is in a better position than Socrates to know whether Ion 'speaks well' about Homer. Now, either it is possible for Ion to speak well while lacking a craft or it is not. This is a question that might fall into the province of philosophy. The philosopher might be the one who marks off those pursuits which accomplish their ends by means of craft-knowledge and those that do so by some other means, e.g., divine inspiration or ἐμπειρία. The philosopher speaks well about the relation between the objects of these pursuits and the epistemic states of those who produce them. He knows that the carpenter and the doctor produce bedsteads and health by means of their art. He can argue that when the poet writes about bedsteads or health, he brings about the poem by divine inspiration and that the rhapsode speaks well about it in virtue of the same thing. We would not want to say that the philosopher knows all of these arts, in the sense that he *is* a carpenter and a poet and a rhapsode. Yet this distinction between being able to say *something* concerning beds or health and knowing carpentry or medicine is exactly the distinction that Socrates denies to both the poet and the rhapsode! The argument that Socrates uses against Ion leaves him craftless because it takes Ion's subject matter and parcels it out to the

above its allotted banks, so does Pindar seethe... *Odes* iv 2 (Bennett trans.)

Horace goes on to sing Pindar's praises in this fashion for five more stanzas. Fraenkel 1966, 435 observes that 'neither the artistic devices shaped in the course of a long tradition nor Pindar's own craftsmanship and painstaking care are considered'. Pindar, however, seems to fancy himself as caught up with the divine in quite another manner: *μαντεύω, Μοῖσα, προφητεύσω δ' ἐγώ* (Snell 1963, fr. 150).

Tigerstedt 1970, 166-167 cites Sikes, Vicaire, Bowra, and Kranz as the modern inheritors of the view that Plato's belief in the divine inspiration of poets was an ancient commonplace. Were this so, Plato's account of Ion's ability might well have been accepted by his contemporaries as merely an extension of a successful explanatory strategy. However, Tigerstedt effectively pours cold water over the notion that it was a common Greek belief that poetry was the product of a complete *μανία*. As I understand Tigerstedt's view, Isocrates, not Plato, would be closer to popular opinion about the relationship between artistic creativity and the divine when he writes in the *Helen* that,

Helen appeared to Homer by night and commanded him to compose a poem...and they say that while it is partly because of Homer's art (καὶ μέρος μὲν τι καὶ διὰ τὴν Ὁμήρου τέχνην,) yet it is chiefly through her (μάλιστα δὲ διὰ αὐτήν) that his poem has such charm...(trans. Van Hook)

other crafts. Socrates himself *may* lack a craft too, but we are *not* led to think that this is so because he lacks a subject matter that is all his own.<sup>10</sup> In short, if we read the dialogue without irony, then Socrates embraces principles which rob him of any craft as surely as they rob Ion.<sup>11</sup>

Here, as elsewhere in the dialogues, Plato expects his reader to pick up where the inept interlocutor leaves off. We can distinguish among crafts by reference to something other than subject matter. Plato himself does so in other dialogues. For this reason, I believe, we are not supposed to think that Plato wholeheartedly endorses the argument of the second half of the *Ion*. This, together with the other peculiarities of Socrates' non-explanation of Ion's ability, should make us look for some interpretation of *mania* other than the literal one.

### C. An Ironic Reading

If we suppose that Plato is portraying an ironic Socrates, how should we read the work? Here are the pieces that I propose to put together to answer this question. First, Socrates does *not* claim that Ion works by ἐμπειρία, as he might if he had simply wanted to explain away his abilities without granting that he had a genuine τέχνη. Since the end of ἐμπειρία is always gratification and not some good, this suggests that Plato thinks that there is some good that rhapsody can produce. Second, in the *Meno*, Themistocles and other good men are compared with practitioners of the mantic arts on account of their consistent success in doing what is best for the state even though they have no knowledge of virtue. Roughly, the pieces fit together in something like the following manner: Plato thinks it likely that ordinary rhapsodes of the time, whenever they accomplish the

<sup>10</sup> At *Apol.* 21b5, of course, Socrates is made to say that he is 'conscious that he is not wise either much or little'. This might be thought to preclude his having any craft, but we ought to note that χειροτέχναι of 22d have crafts though their wisdom is obscured by folly. Thus, possession of a craft is compatible with *some sort* of deficiency with respect to wisdom. Whether possession of a craft is consistent with the kind of epistemic state that Socrates claims for himself is a difficult question. My only point here is that the question of whether or not Socrates has a craft is an open one. Of course we get conflicting messages in *Theaetetus* 149a-151e where Socrates claims for himself the art of midwifery and in *Symposium* 177e Socrates says that the only thing that he claims to understand (ἐπιστάσθαι) is τὰ ἐρωτικά. See also *Lysis* 204c and 206a.

<sup>11</sup> Some interpreters rather like this consequence and attempt to resolve the paradox of the *Apol.* by claiming that Socrates' disavowal of *knowledge* amounts to a disavowal of any craft. This would, of course, be compatible with Socrates' knowing that, for instance, this man is just or courageous. The view that most explicitly solves the paradox by denying that Socrates has craft-knowledge is Reeve 1989, 37-62. Other interpreters who suppose that Socrates merely has something like justified belief but who fail to oppose this doxastic state to the condition of the craftsman as regards his subject matter include Irwin 1977, 40-42; Woodruff 1982, 140 and Santas 1979, 119. For criticism of this kind of view and an alternative, see Vlastos 1985 and 1991.

We need not enter the debate about Socrates' knowledge or lack thereof directly. All we need to see is that if we accept the arguments that Socrates uses against Ion, they seem to rule out not only his possession of a craft, but the very possibility of a craft of philosophy. However, at least in the later dialogues, Plato wants to leave room for a science (ἐπιστήμη) of philosophy, cf. *Sophist* 253c5. Since ἐπιστήμη can bear the sense of skill or mastery of a subject matter, this strongly suggests that Plato thinks that there can be a τέχνη of philosophy.

real end of rhapsody, do so by means no less mysterious than divine inspiration. It is not that he really thinks that either poets or rhapsodes are literally possessed in the very same way that the oracle at Delphi is. Rather, he wants to point up certain similarities between the way that the oracle helps us to discover the will and wisdom of the gods and the ways that poets and rhapsodes accomplish what Plato takes to be their proper ends. Rhapsody, however, does not essentially involve *μανία*. When Socrates engages in what I shall call the new rhapsody, he does not produce his interpretations by virtue of divine possession but by knowing the subject matter with which the poem deals. In what follows, I propose to clarify this view by trying to answer the following questions: (a) why is Ion portrayed as such a dunce? (b) what point might there be in drawing a distinction between genuine craft and divine inspiration? and (c) why does Plato have Socrates himself quote and interpret poets so often in the dialogues?

It seems clear that Plato was concerned with the profound role that art, and poetry in particular, *can* play in the formation of moral character (cf. *Rep.* 400d-401e). The pursuit of a virtuous character is no small matter. In fact, for Plato, it is the most important thing in one's life—to be pursued at all costs and purchased at any price. One of the reasons that Ion is portrayed as such an idiotic popinjay is that he does not realize the power that he has to influence the moral character of his listeners.<sup>12</sup> He wants only to make them cry or to make them feel fear in order to take their money! What better device could Plato use to get his readers to reflect on the potential benefits and, of course, the dangers of poetry than to place it in the hands of someone who utterly fails to appreciate this fact? It is as if a dramatist were to portray a President of the United States who was enamoured of the nuclear 'football' just because of the prestige that attaches to the person whose finger is 'on the button'.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> It is frequently claimed that the poets (and presumably, by association, the rhapsodes who performed their works) were 'the educators of Hellas'. (See *Rep.* 606e where Plato seems to acknowledge that Homer has been such a teacher.) Guthrie 1965, iv cites Havelock 1963, 125 and A. Taylor 1956, 38 in connection with this thesis, and it seems to me that Grube 1980, 179 also falls into this camp. If this were so, then presumably Ion (insofar as he was a good rhapsode) would have been well aware of the pedagogical value of poetry. However, the main source that is quoted in support of the idea that poetry was actually used in the teaching of virtue and preparation for life is Plato himself! See, for instance, *Prot.* 316d, 326a, and 339a.

Paul Woodruff has suggested to me the following sort of view: Plato thinks that the potential that poetry has to be used in the formation of moral character is not fully appreciated. When he has Protagoras characterize poetry as a valuable part of a young man's education he is being ironic. In actuality, the poets are not so regarded. By putting this view in the mouth of a wise man like Protagoras (and at least in this dialogue, Protagoras is depicted as very shrewd), he chides the Athenians for failing to appreciate poetry's potential. As such, these remarks are of a piece with the extensive treatment of this topic in the *Republic* and the *Laws*. If this were Plato's view, then it would be natural for him to portray Ion as being in a state of ignorance about the value and purpose of the recitation and interpretation of poetry. See above n2.

<sup>13</sup> Of course, one might argue that Plato's portrayal of Ion only mirrors the current stereotype. Xenophon seems to support such a view. See *Symp.* iii 6, 'Well, do you know of any tribe more stupid than the rhapsodes?' and *Mem.* iv 2, 10, 'The rhapsodes render the poems accurately, yet they them-

Let us suppose that Plato intends that we recognize what Ion so clearly misses: the power that poetry has for influencing moral character. Since it has this power, the proper end of rhapsody is the inculcation of virtue in the souls of the audience. The Platonic identification of virtue with knowledge is, of course, problematic. This much at least seems clear, however: The virtuous person accomplishes the end of acting virtuously *consistently*.<sup>14</sup> It is not a hit and miss affair like cookery or rhetoric. Presumably, if such a person were capable of teaching virtue, his students would likewise be consistently virtuous insofar as they understood and adhered to the teacher's instructions. Now undoubtedly *sometimes* the rhapsode's recitation of the poets is capable of showing what a virtuous person is like. As a result, some art and some criticism *might* lead someone to engage in the right sorts of actions or acquire the right kind of character because, for instance, it seems to him that this is what a good man like Priam would do. Such an action would not be a result of knowledge of the good, but, rather, right opinion. Those who consistently succeed in acting from right opinion, with no further account, are likened to people who are divinely inspired (*Meno* 99c-d). Part of the point of this, I take it, has to do with the relation of right opinion to successful action. One can opine rightly about a matter in one context and yet be very wrong in another apparently similar situation which is actually quite different. 'Becausal reasoning' (*αίτιας λογισμός*, *Meno* 98a) gives rise to knowledge precisely because it tells you how to recognize the differences that are relevant to drawing the correct conclusion in *any* circumstance. As a result, one comes to have a consistently correct view about the things that one knows and, consequently, one will succeed in endeavors which call for this sort of knowledge.<sup>15</sup> When a person who does not know is consistently correct, it seems miraculous, or a divine thing, precisely because we cannot explain how he does this. However, it is not the mechanism by means of which such a person is right that Plato is interested in when he says that these people are divinely inspired.<sup>16</sup> Rather, he is calling attention to the nature of the relation that we, as people who want to learn, have to them. The oracle (a paradigm case of divine possession) is of limited helpfulness to us. She

selves are utter fools.' On the other hand, Xenophon may be echoing the *Ion* itself. See above n8.

<sup>14</sup> See *Grg.* 501a and Irwin 1979, 211. Because the person who works his sham craft by means of mere *ἐμπειρία* has no understanding of the nature of his subject, he proceeds simply by rote and formula. Such a methodology has no guarantee of success under abnormal conditions. The person who has a genuine knowledge of a craft escapes this difficulty.

<sup>15</sup> As I understand it, the point of saying that opinions which are transformed into knowledge are *μόιμοι* is not simply that people cannot easily talk you out of those opinions by using fine rhetoric. Rather, it means that the correctness of your views and the appropriateness of your actions remain consistent. You do not change from being right to being wrong.

<sup>16</sup> Various scholars, among them Flashar 1958, 115, have taken Plato to be speaking the literal truth here: he really supposes that Themistocles and the rest are divinely inspired. Largely because of the remarks made about the politicians elsewhere, others suppose him to be ironic. Among the latter is Tigerstedt 1970, 43. I myself do not think that the point of Plato's remarks has to do with how these people manage to be consistently right (if, in fact, he thought they were). Suffice it to say, we can imagine people who lack knowledge but who nonetheless manage to act and judge correctly a good bit of the time. Plato's point concerns our relation to them as learners.

speaks only when the god moves her and what she says is useless unless it is interpreted properly.<sup>17</sup> As a result, she cannot quite be said to *teach* her listeners at all. Rather, she says things which *may* allow her listeners to act in a way that is appropriate to their circumstances. The point that Plato wants to make by claiming that poets and rhapsodes are divinely inspired is that our relation to them as learners is subject to the same vagaries.

Here the image of the magnetized rings is relevant. Suppose that Theaetetus holds his place in the phalanx, (when it is appropriate to do so) not because he knows that there is nothing to be feared (cf. *Laches* 198c-d, *Prot.* 360d7). Rather, he stands because, when he last heard Ion, the rhapsode praised Diomedes for his bravery and it seems to Theaetetus that being like Diomedes requires standing right here and not running. Diomedes' bravery really was motivated by knowledge—he knew he had nothing to fear (*Iliad* v, 525 ff). But unless Ion explained this, or somehow emphasized it, and praised Diomedes because he acted from knowledge of what was to be feared, and unless Theaetetus knows that his situation is likewise one in which there is no reasonable cause for fear, then there is only a chain of right opinion which links together Ion and Theaetetus.<sup>18</sup> We can easily see how tenuous this connection is, for if this really were a situation that called for retreat, Theaetetus would not have right opinion at all.<sup>19</sup> Evidently Ion is unable to bring about a certain end (teaching his listeners to be brave) with any regularity. As a result, his skill is not a craft by Plato's standards but rather more like divine possession.

## II

If the argument of the previous sections is correct then the *Ion* does not present an argument against the very possibility of a craft of rhapsody. Rather, it represents a critique of the manner in which rhapsody was practiced by Plato's contemporaries. With these criticisms of the *status quo* in mind, I want to turn now to the question of what sort of reformed 'new rhapsody' Plato might have had in mind. In order to answer this question I shall consider the ways in which Plato portrays Socrates interpreting the works of poets.

### A. Socratic Interpretive Practice

One of the ways in which Socrates most frequently interacts with poetic texts is by extracting from them hypotheses about philosophical issues. His most

<sup>17</sup> The task of interpreting the utterances of the *πρόμαντις* fell to a priest, called a *προφήτης*. It was he who bore the responsibility 'to reduce to intelligible form the flood of words poured forth by divine inspiration'. Park and Wormell 1956, vol. ii, xxxiii.

<sup>18</sup> In fact, it is not even clear that we should call Theaetetus' action brave, strictly speaking. See *Rep.* 430b where Socrates claims that mere right opinion about what is to be feared, which is not the product of education, is something other than courage. Even the courage of the auxiliaries seems to be a grade lower than the courage of the philosopher. See *Phdo.* 68c.

<sup>19</sup> Plato, of course, thinks that there can be situations in which courage requires more than simply standing one's ground. Hence his *Laches* 191c counterexample concerning the Spartans at Plataea.

extended treatment of any one poetic work occurs in the *Protagoras*. As Socrates interprets the work, central to the poem is an opposition between being and becoming good. In opposition to Pittacus, Simonides supposedly claims that *being* good is not difficult. Rather, it is impossible because of the role that bad fortune can play in making a person, who was at one time good, bad. What is genuinely difficult, but not impossible, is to *become* good. Within Simonides' poem Socrates purports to find acknowledgement of the claim that no one does evil willingly. With respect to the role of irresistible misfortune (*ἀμήχανος συμφορά*) in the life of the good man, Socrates plays upon the active and passive senses of *ἀμήχανος*. The only person who can become bad is one who is already good and this goodness is equated with being wise and *εὐμήχανος* (344e). This, in turn, leads to the claim that there is only one sort of ill faring or doing (*κακὴ πράξις*, 345b)—the deprivation of knowledge. These issues are explored in the following discussion with Protagoras. Socrates endorses and argues for the first thesis (*Prt.* 357d). A particular kind of *κακὴ πράξις*—that of doing wrong when one apparently knows better—is revealed as a failure of knowledge. Thus, Simonides' ode provides a source of views about virtue which Socrates can explore in the ensuing elenctic examination.<sup>20</sup>

In other contexts, Socrates will extract some thesis about virtue as a possible interpretation of a passage. When the thesis is shown to be unacceptable on philosophical grounds, Socrates rejects it as an interpretation of the passage in question. For instance, in *Republic* i, Socrates considers an interpretation of Simonides' claim that justice is to give to each what is due according to which what the poet means is that justice consists in helping friends and harming enemies. When it is shown that this implies that the exercise of the virtue of justice makes the object upon which it is directed worse, Socrates firmly rejects this interpretation. This cannot be what Simonides meant.

The other prominent thing that Socrates does with particular pieces of poetry is to advocate their censorship. Thus, in *Republic* ii and iii he bans certain passages in Homer because they say false things about the gods or because they encourage bad habits.

Taken together, these three ways of treating the poets are odd. In the first two cases, Socrates extends the principle of charity in interpretation to great lengths. With the Simonides ode in *Protagoras* he works hard to show that Simonides has

<sup>20</sup> Other instances in which Socrates extracts a thesis from a poet for elenctic examination include *Lysis* 214a, where he investigates the possibility that like is friend to like on the advice of *Od.* xvii 218; *Hippias Minor* 365a where the depiction of Achilles and Odysseus provides the starting point for a discussion of voluntary wrongdoing, and *Alcibiades* II 147b, where lines from the *Margites* are invoked in support of the conclusion that knowledge of other things without knowledge of the good is an evil. There are questions about the authenticity of these latter two works, but, even if both dialogues are spurious, they do seem accurately to reflect Plato's use of the poets in the elenchus. The case of the *Margites* passage in *Alcibiades* involves a sort of hyperbaton at least as forced as that of *Prot.* 345d. Socrates reads 'Though many works he knew, badly, said he, he knew them all' (*ἀρα πολλὰ μὲν ἠπίστατο ἔργα, κακῶς δέ, φησίν, ἠπίστατο πάντα*) as 'Though many works he knew, it was bad for him to know them all' (*κακὸν δὲ ἦν ἐπίστασθαι αὐτῷ πάντα ταῦτα*).

philosophically interesting views about virtue and knowledge lurking in his poetry. In the *Republic* passage, Socrates uses the principle of charity to insulate the Simonides fragment from falsehood by, first, rejecting an interpretation of the poet's words that seems quite plausible and, second, by leaving the whole question of what is meant open. The same sort of charity is not shown to Homer in books 2 and 3 of the *Republic*. It is taken to be clear that he says, for instance, false things about Zeus. No attempt is made to show how he might be taken to mean something other than what he seems to mean, and his work is slated for censorship.

One way to try to reconcile these apparently disparate treatments of poetry would be to claim that the first two of these three activities are just playful forms of the third. Socrates' treatment of the poets is ironic and is intended to trivialize their work and authority on matters philosophical. When Plato has Socrates interpret Simonides in the *Protagoras*, this is for comic relief or, perhaps, to parody the practices of sophists such as Hippias or Protagoras.<sup>21</sup> One might think that Socrates' treatment of Simonides' view about justice in the *Republic* is especially ironic. When he says that he is ready to 'take up arms' against anyone who imputes such a view to Simonides or the other sages, this is surely high camp. It is calculated to give the sophisticated reader a laugh. It might also serve the practical end of discouraging anyone who might be swayed by the moral authority of such writers to reject the view that justice only requires harming one's enemies and helping one's friends.

It must be admitted that there are elements of humor in Socrates' treatment of the poet Simonides in the *Protagoras*. Certainly his hair splitting about the use of μέν in the first line and his tale of secret Lacadaemian wisdom are calculated to amuse. But, on the other hand, at least some of his interpretation of Simonides seems to be defensible.<sup>22</sup> Thus, we cannot safely conclude that Plato attributes philosophically interesting views to Simonides in spite of the fact that his poem obviously does not concern such matters in order to poke fun at him. It is not at

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, Shorey 1933, 128; Guthrie 1965, iv 227 and A. Taylor 1956, 251. C. Taylor 1976, 146 thinks that, in addition, it is supposed to show the pointlessness of this kind of activity in general: 'It is to be assumed that Plato intends the interpretation which Socrates has just given to show in an exemplary fashion what he regards as the cardinal fault in literary interpretation, viz., the impossibility of establishing the writer's meaning, with its constant licence to factitious "interpretations".'

<sup>22</sup> This claim is by no means uncontroversial, but it is not one that I can defend in this context. Though Bowra 1961, 327 claims that in Socrates' interpretation of the poem 'the main purport of the poem is distorted', his own view is that Simonides is attempting to recast moral goodness in terms of the inner character and motives of a man—not in terms of his possession of the traditional Homeric virtues since many of them, like good looks, are gifts of fortune. Socrates' reading simply stresses a particular inner condition, viz., the possession of knowledge, as sole determinant of virtue. Included among those who take Simonides to be remarking on the distinction between a 'modern' moral notion which focuses upon what is within the individual's power and an older tradition of excellence in which the determinants of goodness are beyond the agent's influence are Wilamowitz 1913, Woodbury 1953, and Donlan 1969.

all obvious that Socrates' interpretation is beyond the pale. More importantly, perhaps, Plato explores the philosophical theses that he extracts from Simonides in the remainder of the dialogue. The fact that some claim is extracted playfully from an interlocutor who may not intend the claim in the way that Socrates takes it does not prevent its examination from being valuable. Finding hypotheses about virtue to examine within Simonides is no less a waste of one's time than talking with someone like Hippias. As Plato portrays him, Socrates is willing to find grist for his mill in quite unusual places. Moreover, Socrates' use of the principle of charity with respect to the sages in *Republic* i cannot be motivated by a desire to discourage people from accepting on Simonides' authority the idea that justice is helping one's friends. After all, he will go on in book 2 to deny the authority of Homer and Hesiod concerning the quarrels among the gods. If he does not feel the need to defuse the influence that these writers might have on people by virtue of their authority by handling them with the kid gloves of sham charity, why should he bother to do so with Simonides, Bias, or Pittacus?

There is, I believe, a unified account of the interpretation of poetry that binds together Socrates' treatment of the poets. Plato does envision something that we might call the new rhapsody, and he uses Socrates to illustrate it. The nature of this new rhapsody is complicated by this very fact, however. Just as Socrates appears in Plato's dialogues in two very different guises, so too there are two quite distinct strands of thought on the interpretation of texts. On the one hand, we are presented with a portrait of Socrates in the dialogues of search as a man who claims not to know the answers to the questions that he asks. On the other, the Socrates of the *Republic* (save book 1), the *Phaedrus*, and the *Phaedo* has lots of answers. There are correspondingly different interpretive stances that Socrates takes toward texts in these different dialogues. These different stances do not represent different theories of interpretation. Rather, given Plato's theory of textual interpretation, the way in which we should deal with a text depends upon our own epistemic situation.

### B. Expert Knowledge and Interpretation

Given the role that experts and expert knowledge play in Plato's work in general, it should come as no surprise if we find that he regards experts of a certain sort as having the final word on what a text means. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates claims that no written work can do anything more than remind someone who has knowledge already concerning the things that have been written.<sup>23</sup> Clearly he cannot mean someone who knows what the work means, for this would entail an infinite regress. So, he must mean that a written work can do nothing more than remind the reader of what he knows about the subject discussed in the work. This seems to be plainly false, even if Plato means that a written work can do nothing

<sup>23</sup> *Phdr.* 275c-d, οὐκοῦν ὁ τέχνην οἰόμενος ἐν γράμμασι καταλιπεῖν, καὶ αὐτὸ παραδεχόμενος ὡς τι σαφές καὶ βέβαιον ἐκ γραμμάτων ἐσόμενος, πολλῆς ἂν εὐθείας γέμοι καὶ τῷ ὄντι τὴν Ἀμμωνος μαντεῖαν ἀγνοοί, πλεόν τι οἰόμενος εἶναι λόγους γεγραμμένους τοῦ τὸν εἰδῶτα ὑπομηῆσαι περὶ ὧν ἂν ἢ τὰ γεγραμμένα.

*more important* than remind the person who knows its subject matter of what that person already knows. We commonsensically think that we can learn new things from a text. The context, however, suggests that what is at stake here is not whether we, as readers, can discover anything new by reading. Rather, what is at issue is whether we, as writers, can be sure of communicating a τέχνη by means of writing in a way that is σαφές καὶ βέβαιον. Plato's point, I believe, is that the real truth concerning some subject matter which is set down in writing is not necessarily discernible to anyone save the person who already knows this subject matter. With respect to this subject, the text 'always signifies only one and the same thing'. However, what has been written is 'bandied about' (κυλιυδεῖται) by everyone: those who understand as well as those who do not attend to it.<sup>24</sup> It must not be the case that what it signifies is obvious to those who do not attend to it, but only to the one who understands the subject matter with which it deals. Otherwise, no one could rightly be said to *ill-treat* it or *unjustly revile* it. The point of this is that, if it seems *obvious to us* that a passage from Homer does or does not mean something or other, this consensus may count for nothing unless we know the subject matter with which the passage deals. In this respect the new rhapsode is quite like the genuine rhetorician of the *Phaedrus*. The latter has expert knowledge concerning the things that he is talking about; the former, likewise, has expert knowledge concerning the things that the poets write about. In virtue of this expert knowledge, the meanings of their texts will be clear to this rhapsode.<sup>25</sup>

Above I argued that Plato is critical of the actual practice of rhapsodes because they fail to appreciate the role that the recitation and interpretation of poetry can play in the formation of moral character. If this is so, then it makes sense to suppose that the new rhapsode not only interprets the works of the poets but also, on occasion, censors them. In virtue of his expertise, he is in a position to know which works are capable of helping him to inculcate virtue in his listener and which are not. It is this other side of the new rhapsody that Socrates exhibits in *Republic* ii and iii. It is instructive to look at the reasons for which he rejects certain poets and poems. The first rejected are those that say false things about the gods. Consider,

Zeus is dispenser alike of good and of evil to mortals (*Rep.* 379e).<sup>26</sup>

We have an argument at 379b-c about the relationship of what is beneficial to

<sup>24</sup> LSJ s.v. προσέχω (without νοῦν).

<sup>25</sup> The second *Alcibiades* may well be spurious. But the remarks about the riddling nature of the poets and the claim that not everyone can interpret it (147c, ἐστὶ τε γὰρ φύσει ποιητικὴ ἢ σύμψαα αἰνυγματώδης καὶ οὐ τοῦ προστυχόντος ἀνδρὸς γνωρίσαι) represent what I think are genuinely Platonic themes. Cf. *Rep.* i 332b. The reason that not everyone can interpret these riddling poets is because it requires a kind of expert knowledge.

<sup>26</sup> As Shorey notes, there is no such line in Homer, but Plato may be referring to *Iliad* xxiv 527. For two urns are set upon the floor of Zeus of gifts that he giveth, the one of ills, the other of blessings.

In fact, Murray uses the passage in Plato to resolve the ambiguity in the line about whether there are two urns or three.

the nature of god. Since we understand the subject matter with which this line deals, it will speak to us 'always one and the same thing' (cf. *Phdr.* 275d). When we hear what it says, we can reject it, since we know that what it speaks is false.

Other works are rejected, not because they are false, but because of the psychological damage they might cause. It is not clear that even a new rhapsode could extract from

Forth from his limbs unwilling his spirit flitted to Hades  
Wailing its doom and its lustihood lost and the May of its man-  
hood<sup>27</sup>

anything which would not make us regard death as a terrible evil to be feared and avoided, perhaps even at the price of one's honor. From *Rep.* 386c on, Socrates rejects works because they portray death as bad, condone excessive mourning (especially on the part of the gods), and depict or encourage immoderate behavior. Though he says that these poems are neither true nor beneficial (386c), he offers no arguments here against the idea that, for instance, death is a terrible evil. Indeed, throughout this section the emphasis is on psychological harm rather than falsehood. So, in the rhapsode's capacity as censor, he must know the effects that poetry is likely to have on his audience. To do so, he presumably must know a great deal about the souls of men. Ion, however, knows only enough (or at least has sufficient ἐμπειρία) about his audience to get them to feel fear or sorrow, sometimes at least. The knowledge that the new rhapsode must have is far more advanced. This is the other respect in which he is like the true rhetorician of the *Phaedrus* (271a and ff.) Both have been thoroughly schooled in the art of 'soul leading'.

### C. The Perspective of the Non-Expert

If Plato really held a view according to which the meaning of a text is clear only to the person who has expert knowledge of the subject that the text concerns, this might explain why Socrates is willing to accept some interpretations which are fairly unobvious (at least to us) as correct. On these occasions, Plato deviates from the portrait of Socrates as the man who knows nothing and depicts him as having a great deal of insight. Consider his claim in the *Theaetetus* that when Homer identifies Oceanus with the source of the gods he means that 'all things are the offspring of a flowing stream of change' (*Th.* 152e).<sup>28</sup> Though Socrates claims in the *Theaetetus* only to have the craft of midwifery, he is also remarkably knowledgeable about the philosophy of Heraclitus and Protagoras and the doctrine of flux.

The expert knowledge account of interpretation would not explain why sometimes Socrates is unwilling to provide any interpretation at all if he cannot find one which is true and important. Here too the *Phaedrus* passage provides a clue.

<sup>27</sup> Shorey's lovely rendering of *Iliad* xvi 856 in his translation of the *Republic*. Criticized on these grounds at 386d.

<sup>28</sup> *Il.* xiv 201, Ἰσκαεόν τε, θεῶν γένεσιν, ... and 302.



One of the differences between persons with whom you can carry on a conversation and texts that can only be read is that the former, but not the latter, can defend what they say. Since Simonides' or Homer's text cannot resist uncharitable interpretation by protesting and saying, 'That is not what I mean', we ought not take any view about what it means unless that view is one that the text would approve. Presumably, texts would approve of readings according to which what they say is true. When Plato has Socrates or another of his characters criticize a piece of writing, there is usually someone there to take its part. Moreover, this person is presented as someone who knows enough about the subject matter to speak on the text's behalf.<sup>29</sup> Ion should have such an advocate, for Socrates repeatedly takes his replies in a most uncharitable way. We, as readers sympathetic to poetry and criticism, want him to resist the interpretations placed upon his words, but he does not. The message, I think, is clear. Ion's rhapsody is capable of perpetrating the same unkindnesses upon poetry. If we place an interpretation upon a work according to which what it says is false, then, if it is knowledge that we seek, we have no further reason to look at that text.<sup>30</sup> Yet, unless we know the subject matter with which the work deals, our interpretation may well have been wrong. It is no accident that it is in the *first* book of the *Republic* that Socrates rejects interpretations of Simonides and Homer according to which what they say is false and leaves the question of what they do mean open. It is in the first book that Socrates is presented as the person who is still seeking answers to the question, 'What is justice?' His charity vanishes in the later books where he is guiding the discussion toward an answer. In this context he more closely approximates the new rhapsode's ideal of expert knowledge with respect to the good.

We can thus distinguish two strands in Platonic interpretive practice. Our interpretive stance toward a work ought to depend upon the state of our knowledge with respect to the matters with which the work deals. Suppose that we begin in the sort of state that Socrates professes in the dialogues of search: we are people who do not know how to answer the question 'what is virtue?' and we are faced with a text which concerns being virtuous. Call this the Socratic perspec-

<sup>29</sup> In the examination of the doctrine that 'man is the measure' in the *Theaetetus*, the duty falls to an unwilling Theodorus, Protagoras' student. In the *Sophist*, it is an Eleatic stranger who lays hands on Father Parmenides (237a). The *Hippias Minor* is especially interesting in this regard. Socrates charges Hippias to take up the argument on Homer's behalf since he himself cannot be questioned. Since Hippias has a view about what Homer meant and agrees with it, the examination is to be of the two of them in common. Cf. 365d, τὸν μὲν Ὅμηρον τοίνυν ἔδωκεν, ἐπειδὴ καὶ ἀδύνατον ἐπανερέσθαι τί ποτε νοῶν ταῦτα ἐποίησε τὰ ἔπη· σὺ δ' ἐπειδὴ φαίνοι ἀναδεχόμενος τὴν αἰτίαν, καὶ σοὶ συνδοκεῖ ταῦτα ἄπειρ φῆς Ὅμηρον λέγειν, ἀπόκριναί κοινῇ ὑπὲρ Ὁμήρου τε καὶ σαυτοῦ.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Woodruff has suggested to me that this position may well be an extension of a view that Socrates seems to hold about the contents of a person's beliefs. He seems unwilling to credit people with holding beliefs that he is confident he could talk them out of in the elenchus. Moreover, he treats texts as 'occasions for an elenchus of the author', or at least the promise of such an examination. Accordingly, since he is confident that he could convince Homer, or anyone else, that thievery is not a virtue, Socrates is unwilling to say that the passage means what it seems to mean at face value.

tive. Since we do not know the subject matter, the text will not simply remind us of what we know and signify to us 'always one and the same thing'. As a result, the text provides an occasion for a peculiarly one-sided elenchus. We make some hypothesis about what the text means and then subject this hypothesis to elenctic examination. If this hypothesis fails to survive such an examination, then, rather than dismissing the text, we formulate a different hypothesis. What is important in the construction of these hypotheses is not faithfulness to what the author intended. Rather, it is arriving at some view about virtue, or some other matter of importance, that survives all the tests that we can contrive. Thus, our extreme charity toward the author is justified by our need to know, and not by any inflated view of his or her wisdom in these matters. This, then, is the private side of the new rhapsody. In the privacy of our own homes, we should treat our books as occasions for self-examination.

But Plato's interpretive theory has its public side too. Imagine that our epistemic state is quite different and that we have genuine understanding of the subject with which a work deals: the sort of understanding that the philosopher kings are supposed to have as a result of their training in dialectic. Call this the expert's perspective. What our interpretive eye reveals is what the work really means. Having grasped its content, we may now decide how or if it can be used to teach, condition, or inspire others or ourselves. This public function is most strongly suggested in the program of μουσική outlined in *Republic* ii and iii. There are indications that there must be someone in the state who understands the role that poetry can play in the formation of moral character and who, unlike the lawgivers themselves, is prepared to deal with all the details of particular poems. Socrates admits that his survey of poetry will not be complete. He proposes to take up only the greater examples so as to show how one might proceed with the lesser (377c). It seems to me that there is a job here that, by the principle of division, ought to fall to some one person. I think that this person must have precisely the qualifications that we have been attributing to the new rhapsode. There is even an appeal to a particular individual, Damon, who is alleged to be an expert on meter (400b). Socrates wants him to correlate the various meters with the variety of desirable and undesirable character traits. This would be a tall order for someone who did not have a rich understanding of psychology. Accordingly, I do not think that the appeal is to Damon so much as it is to someone who has Damon's technical knowledge and a great deal more as well.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> The society described in the *Laws* has a place for such an individual too. The criteria for judging representations given at 668c require someone with the sorts of skills that the new rhapsode has. Such a judge must know the being of the thing which poetry attempts to imitate, its quality and its quantity. The case of the real rhetorician is exactly parallel. He knows the nature of the things that he talks about by virtue of being skilled in dialectic. The members of the choir of Dionysus have the additional training, beyond that of poets and ordinary people, to make judgments about whether poetry is good or bad (670e, 812c). Within the description of the laws themselves, there is provision for judges of music and a director of education who examine the composition of all poetry. They clearly are given the powers of censorship in order to make it the case that all poetry promotes its proper social function (801d).

#### D. The Adequacy of Plato's Account

Plato's views about interpretation and the use of poetry from the expert's perspective should hardly come as a surprise to us. His ideal city-state is run by experts who utilize their vast knowledge to engineer the lives of non-experts for the good of the whole, and they do so unfettered by any concerns about the individual rights of the populace.<sup>32</sup> If Plato thinks that the real meanings of literary works would be transparently clear to such experts and that it would be permissible for them to utilize or censor such works as contribute to the good of the whole, what should surprise us in that? But even if we find it characteristically Platonic, we might still think it naive in the extreme to believe that a work of any serious complexity would 'signify one and the same thing' to any two people—even if they both have a thorough understanding of the subject matter of the work. After all, we can surely imagine two critics who have extensive knowledge of the tradition of Christian eschatology disagreeing about the meaning of a passage in *Paradise Lost*.

Such a criticism may be unfair to Plato in two ways. First, the sort of knowledge that such critics have concerning Christian eschatology may not be the kind of knowledge that Plato has in mind. If the new rhapsode is to be analogous to the real rhetorician described in the *Phaedrus*, then his or her knowledge is a result of skill in dialectic (*Phdr.* 265d ff.). It would thus represent the highest level of knowledge in the *Republic's* figure of the doubly divided line. It is difficult to know what such knowledge would be like. This much, however, is clear: It enjoys all the accuracy and exactness of mathematical knowledge but without any of the hypothetical character of mathematical knowledge.<sup>33</sup> Second, I think Plato would say that the subject matter with respect to which one needs to have νόησις in order for *Paradise Lost* to signify to you the one thing that it really says is not merely the tradition of Christian eschatology or any other matters that had a bearing on Milton's composition of the work. Rather, one would need a thorough understanding of the actual nature of death, vice, and the afterlife. The poem is about these things and if what it says about them is true, it can serve as a reminder, to someone who already understands these things, of what he or she knows. Needless to say, νόησις regarding these matters is probably not readily

<sup>32</sup> Annas does a nice job of separating out what is most disturbing about the relationship of state and individual in the *Republic*. It is not merely the possibility of unjustified repression. 'Even if we believed, with Plato, that there is no need to worry about what the Guardians will do to the others, still it is disturbing that in the state there are no rights which antecedently limit what may be done to people in the interests of producing either efficiency or morality' (Annas 1981, 178). One might well have the same sort of concern about what may be done to poetry.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. the criticism of the practices of the mathematicians in *Rep.* 510c. What is lacking is a demonstration of the axioms and definitions of mathematics and geometry from some unhypothetical starting point. Such a starting point is, I believe, provided by the derivation of the numbers from Being, One, and Different in *Parm.* 143a. See Turnbull 1988, 5. If this is so, then νόησις ought to be something like what we grasp when we grasp the reasoning behind the second version of the 'if one is' supposition.

had. This suggests that the expert perspective, like the city-state that such an expert would serve, is an ideal which we may never achieve. As an ideal it seems no more or less repugnant than Plato's vision of the best sort of human community. Since the *Republic* provokes such a wide range of reactions, it is hardly likely that we shall settle the matter of the appropriateness of Plato's ideal rhapsody here.

Since we seldom, if ever, achieve the level of understanding required for the expert rhapsode, the Socratic perspective is far more interesting in many ways. The kind of interpretation that we engage in from this perspective is frequently 'ethical criticism'—at least in the sense that we are looking to these works for answers to ethical questions.<sup>34</sup> We want to know what it is to be just, or whether it is difficult or easy to be good. Yet, it is ethical criticism that is carried on in a manner that seems positively unethical in certain respects. When Socrates approaches a text from the point of view of the inquirer, he is willing to utilize the principle of charity to such a degree as to distort what, to our eyes, clearly seems to be the author's intention. Socrates assumes from the beginning that the author has something true and important to say about his subject matter. The objective in the interpretive exercise is to find some hypothesis about what the poem says about its subject that will stand up to critical examination. This hypothesis may be, from an ordinary hermeneutic standpoint, pretty loosely connected to the text. What matters is that we now have a new hypothesis about what virtue is, or whether it is learnable, or some other important subject to test. The text that we are examining functions only to provide the occasion for framing a new answer to a Socratic question.

There are a number of criticisms that one might make of such an interpretive strategy. A critic of the phenomenological stripe might object that such a detached attitude toward the text is incompatible with the kind of experience of engagement that is essential to good reading.<sup>35</sup> But, we know that Plato is posi-

<sup>34</sup> The term 'ethical criticism' has gained a new acceptability since the publication of Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep*. (Though if Booth is right, it is only the term, and not the practice, that has been regarded as suspect in recent years.) Given Booth's criterion, Plato's criticism will be ethical in a rather narrow sense. If we take 'ethos' and 'virtue' in something like their original senses, then, according to Booth, 'ethical criticism will be any effort to show how the virtues of narratives relate to the virtues of selves or societies, or how the ethos of any story affects or is affected by the ethos—the collection of virtues—of any reader' (Booth 1988, 11). The public function of the expert interpreter will be more concerned with the after-effects, as Booth puts it, and not the ethical quality of the narrative itself. Plato's criticism, in either of its guises, is not interested in 'describing the encounter of the story teller's ethos with that of the reader or listener' (Booth 1988, 8) but with examining the story teller's narrative with an eye toward either truth or utility. Thus, Plato's 'ethical criticism' stands rather closer to Gardner's than to Booth's. According to the former, 'television—or any other artistic medium—is good (as opposed to pernicious or vacuous) only when it has a clear positive moral effect, presenting valid models for imitation, eternal verities worth keeping in mind, and a benevolent vision of the possible which can inspire and incite human beings toward virtue' (Gardner 1978, 12).

<sup>35</sup> For perhaps the strongest statement of such a view, see Poulet 1972. Booth agrees in part, though for quite different reasons. On his view, a reader has not 'behaved responsibly' toward a nar-

tively opposed to such experiences of absorption and their attendant 'loss of identity'.<sup>36</sup> To exhibit the systematicity of Plato's view is not to defend it *per se*. But it does show the necessity of arguing for the value of the experience that the phenomenological critic makes the heart of the activity of reading.

An intentionalist critic could take Plato to task for quite different reasons. The use of the principle of charity in interpretation is all well and good, such a critic might say, but Plato's critic uses it in the wrong way. We ought to use it to find some meaning which is both more valuable (in terms of truth or aesthetic value) and which could be plausibly be thought to be something that the writer could have intended by his choice of words. The problem with Plato's new rhapsody is that it passes too lightly over this second conjunct. Plato's critic is willing to use the author's words as mere heuristic in his pursuit of moral knowledge without being overly concerned with what the author really meant. This is to use texts, and their authors, as mere means and not as ends in themselves. One famous proponent of intentionalist interpretation puts the point this way:

When we simply use an author's words for our own purposes without respecting his intention we transgress what Charles Stevenson in another context called 'the ethics of language,' just as we transgress ethical norms when we use another person merely for our own ends.... This [Kantian] imperative is transferable to the words of men because speech is an extension and expression of men in the social domain, and also because when we fail to conjoin a man's intentions to his words we lose the soul of speech, which is to convey meaning and to understand what is intended to be conveyed. (Hirsch 1976, 90)

It is difficult to know what to make of such a criticism for here, I think, we have two competing, foundational moral principles which are at odds with one another. Plato seems to think (and perhaps the historical Socrates would have agreed) that it is exceedingly difficult, and perhaps impossible, for most persons to develop fully the potential that they have for virtuous living in the absence of the right kind of social context. Such a context is envisioned in the *Republic*. In the absence of the right social setting, it is up to each of us to attempt to establish within ourselves the right ordering of the soul that is constitutive of virtue. If we lack the educational advantages available to the aspiring philosopher kings which

rative when his or her thought-stream is not, in a large part, taken over by the story for the duration of its telling, (Booth 1988, 141).

<sup>36</sup> The experience of absorption in a character other than one's own provides the basis for the condemnation of dramatic imitation in *Rep.* iii. Minimally it is incompatible with the one person, one job principle. But one also suspects that Plato thinks that our internal lives are sufficiently fractured already because of the presence in us of the spirited and appetitive parts. It would be all to the better if we did not make matters worse by immersing ourselves in the stream of thoughts that fill our minds because of what we read. In such an experience, we give ourselves over to the text in much the same way that the actor gives him or herself over to his or her character. See 397e, οὐκ ἔστι διπλοῦς ἀνὴρ παρ' ἡμῖν οὐδὲ πολλαπλοῦς. The experience of tragedy in particular is condemned in book 10, 603c ff. because it encourages this inner personal factionalism by indulging the inferior parts of the soul.

will eventually lead them to knowledge of the good, perhaps we can best approximate their epistemic state by testing our own beliefs continually in the elenchus. Socrates flatly states that it is for the sake of his own advantage that he engages in his discussions with people.<sup>37</sup> I take him to be perfectly serious when he tells Callicles of his positive delight in finding a 'touchstone for his soul' (*Grg.* 486d). So, if we find that Plato treats poets and their works as mere instruments, either for the improvement and instruction of others or ourselves, this is not to be wondered at. Unless we have the great good fortune to find ourselves in the right social setting, we ought to treat *everyone* as a means for testing our own souls.<sup>38</sup> The only difference between 'live' interlocutors and literary works is that, in the latter case, we must provide both halves of the conversation ourselves, as Socrates does when Callicles refuses to participate any further in the elenchus (*Grg.* 506c-9c). In order to test ourselves most thoroughly, we ought to prefer talking to someone else, instead of what is essentially talking to ourselves with the aid of a piece of literature.<sup>39</sup>

The intentionalist's objection to Plato's use of poetry is difficult to evaluate because it originates in a conception of human goodness that is essentially 'agent centered'. But, Plato justifies his treatment of literary works from the standpoint of an 'agent centered' view of moral excellence. The intentionalist derives her 'imperative of reading' from something like Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative. While the ultimate source of value for Kant is an internal condition of the agent—having the good will—one only has such a condition when she wills to *act* in a certain way, both in relation to herself and to others. Thus, even if it is not the *results* of our actions that determine the moral value of the agent (as in consequentialist accounts) it is still our *motives* or *reasons* for acting that determine our moral worth as agents on the Kantian picture. On the Platonic view, our actions are no more than symptoms or indications of our moral condition and it is difficult to establish their moral value apart from an evaluation of the kind of character from which they proceed. Though there are, perhaps,

<sup>37</sup> *Prot.* 348c, 'Do not fancy, Protagoras, that I have any other desire in conversing with you than to examine those things which puzzle me.' In a context where he is somewhat less hostile to his interlocutor, *Charm.* 165d and 166c-d. I agree with Vlastos 1971, 9 that these self-revelations are quite sincere.

<sup>38</sup> The moral objection that the intentionalist raises to the elenchus of the poets is related to but distinct from the 'failure of love' that Vlastos finds in Socrates' method of examination (1972, 16). Vlastos finds nothing wrong in Socrates' use of his interlocutors as instruments to aid in his self-examination, since he thinks that, in his own way, Socrates is trying to help the people that he refutes. The problem, according to Vlastos, lies with the nature of his help. He wants the individual to see for himself what the correct answer is. Socrates does not teach the answers; only the method for arriving at them. Because he insists that his partners come to the answer on their own, he fails to help them as much as he could. Such a 'failure of love' obviously does not extend to the works of the poets. The texts themselves are not going to realize anything or come to the correct view on their own!

<sup>39</sup> Hence Socrates' preference for returning to the discussion of Protagoras' views in *Prot.* 347b-348a. He would prefer to 'make trial of the truth and of ourselves' (τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ ἡμῶν αὐτῶν πείραν λαμβάνοντας). But, of course, they do not thereby abandon the discussion of themes that Socrates' interpretation found in Simonides.

actions in which a virtuous person could not engage under any circumstances at all (cf. *Rep.* 443b), his possession of virtue is quite compatible with a very wide range of activity in relation to others. So, from the fact that an agent treats another person or a poem as a 'mere means' it does not follow that the agent's action fails to be virtuous. If he desires to achieve the internal state that constitutes virtue and if he engages in an activity that reliably leads to that condition, then his action is an expression of virtue. Even though the learner's action is not a product of the condition of soul that constitutes virtue, it exhibits similarities with the kinds of actions that do result from the proper condition of soul. It demonstrates desire for the good and knowledge of what it is and how to go about getting it.<sup>40</sup>

The foregoing is not intended as a defense of Plato's position on the interpretation and use of poetry. I have only attempted to point out some of the issues that must be addressed in order to evaluate what I take to be a fairly powerful objection against it. It remains to be seen whether we should welcome the new rhapsode, in either of his roles, into our *polis* or whether we should cast him out until such time as he makes an adequate defense of himself, not in verse, but in terms commensurable with our conception of moral value.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Plato might well find fault with Hirsch's assertion that written speech in particular is 'an extension and expression of men in the social domain'. Thus far I have had nothing to say about the relationship between the intentions of the author and the meaning of a literary work. My only claim has been that, whatever that meaning may be, it is clear to the person who has expert knowledge of the subject matter. The question of what it is that is clear to him, the author's intention or something quite distinct from it, is another matter entirely. Usually, this thorny issue is raised in connection with *Phaedrus* 274b. The imagery alone is suggestive. Plants enjoy a separate and independent existence from the planter, who determines only their placement and not their further growth and development. Even if we leave aside this problematic text, the *Protagoras* raises some fairly serious doubts about intentionalism. Socrates complains that one cannot question the poets concerning what they say. When people argue over this matter, they argue over what it is impossible to determine (περὶ πράγματος διαλεγόμενοι ὁ ἀδυνατοῦσιν ἐξελέγξαι, 347e). Yet, if the meaning of a work is clear to the person who understands the material, then we are left with two possibilities: (a) Plato agrees that the meaning of a work is the author's intention, but thinks that the οἱ πολλοί are incapable of the kind of expert knowledge that would reveal this meaning to them or (b) the meaning of a work is not identical to what the author intended. The former can be known (by the person with expert knowledge) but the latter cannot. Since my task has been to describe the practice of Plato's reformed literary critic with minimal commitment to the theory that underlies his practice, I shall not attempt to resolve this dispute here. Suffice it to say that there are difficulties.

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## Callicles' Hedonism

George Rudebusch

Callicles claims that the man who is truly 'fine and just'—as opposed to the conventionally fine and just—is he who 'shall live the right life' (*Grg.* 491e6-8). Such a man 'must allow his own appetites to get as big as possible' (*Grg.* 491e8-9). Rather than 'restrain' (κολλάζειν) them, he must 'be endowed by means of manliness and mindfulness (ἀνδρείαν καὶ φρόνησιν) so as to propel (ὑπηρετεῖν)<sup>1</sup> them at their biggest, always to fill up the appetite with its object' (*Grg.* 491e9-492a3).

Callicles shocks conventional wisdom by the rational and ethical egoism implicit in this passage. *Rational egoism* is a theory of the grounds of reason for action: Callicles believes, evidently, that one has reason to do something just insofar as it promotes one's self-interest. *Ethical egoism* is a theory of moral obligation: he believes that one has a moral obligation to do something just insofar as it promotes one's self-interest. Both kinds of egoism depend on his theory of self-interest, that is, his answer to the question, What makes one's life go best? His answer is a version of *hedonism*: one's life goes well just insofar as it is filled with pleasure, which he identifies with the satisfaction of appetite.<sup>2</sup>

So far the interpreters would agree. But there has been no consensus as to what version of hedonism he is, because there are grave difficulties with the versions which have been suggested. These versions may be classified as prudential, indiscriminate, and sybaritic versions of hedonism. In contrast to these, I shall argue that Callicles is best understood as holding a satisfaction hedonism of felt desire with respect to the intrinsically desirable. In what follows, I shall briefly indicate some of the difficulties with the previously suggested alternatives. Then I shall draw the distinctions needed to understand the hedonism I attribute to Callicles, and argue for its adequacy.

<sup>1</sup> The verb presents the image of the appetite as a trireme, the one possessing the appetite having the role of a pilot in relation to it.

<sup>2</sup> I follow Parfit 1984, 493 and Brink 1989, 67 in these distinctions between theories of self-interest, rationality, and ethics.