

**PROPHETS, POETS, AND PHILOSOPHERS: UNRAVELING THE PROBLEM OF  
POETRY IN PLATO – A *DAIMONIC* SOLUTION**

By ©Elizabeth A. Hill A Dissertation submitted  
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## Abstract

**Keywords:** Plato, poetry, *daimonic*, Greek religion, mystery cults, *Symposium*, *Republic*, *Ion*, *Cratylus*, *Phaedrus*, language, mystagogy, initiation, inspiration.

This study addresses the problem of poetry in Plato by arguing that one can read poetry in the dialogues as *daimonic*. “*Daimonic*,” in this context, refers to an experience, activity, or practice that aims to mediate the gap between human existence and divine understanding. The “problem of poetry” refers to the apparent contradiction in Plato’s corpus regarding the value of poetry for the philosophical life. In the *Republic*, Socrates famously banishes the poets from the *Kallipolis*, supporting the view that the vast majority of the classical canon of poetry is psychologically damaging to the development of the city’s would-be philosopher-kings and queens. However, in other texts, such as the *Ion* and *Phaedrus*, Plato’s Socrates explicitly calls poetry divinely inspired, a form of divine *mania*. Since Plato’s work also consistently argues that the gods can only cause good things, attributing divine inspiration to poetry indicates that poetry is good for the philosopher’s soul, *contra* the *Republic*. Hence, a question arises as to whether poetry is good or bad for the philosopher’s ascent toward knowledge. This study answers that poetry is edifying for the soul’s ascent, provided that the philosopher treats poetry as *daimonic*. This dissertation argues that Plato’s treatment of poetry, especially in the *Ion*, parallels the description of the *daimonic* given by Diotima in the *Symposium*. By understanding poetry as *daimonic*, the philosopher can engage with it as she does other *daimonic* elements, such as the mystagogic, oracular, and erotic. However, to establish the *daimonic* nature of poetry as a solution to the problem of poetry, this study must first address recent readings of Plato that take his praise of reason to the exclusion of extra-rational elements such as the erotic, poetic, prophetic, and so on. Accordingly, this study first argues that reason in the Platonic corpus is compatible with certain extra-rational activities, practices, and experiences that are *daimonic*. Even when the *daimonic* exceeds the grasp of an individual’s discursive reasoning, it is nonetheless still rooted in a divine, cosmic order that is fundamentally rational. Hence, this study first establishes the value of the *daimonic* itself in the ascent of the soul before addressing poetry itself as *daimonic*. The study then examines the comments made in the *Republic* regarding poetry. It concludes that Socrates’ target lies in popular methods of approaching and interpreting the poets rather than in poetry itself. Specifically, Socrates aims at popular practices of *allegoresis*, on the one hand, and, on the other, at the trend of treating the poets as purveyors of practical wisdom and *techne*. Hence, there is room in Plato’s corpus to find value in poetry when one approaches it in alternative ways. The *daimonic* reading is one such alternative interpretive approach to poetry. The study concludes by looking at least one way poetry can operate *daimonically*, taking the *Cratylus* as its model. In the *Cratylus*, Socrates treats poetry in a manner parallel to its mystagogic use in the Orphic Derveni Papyrus. The mystagogic use of poetry in the *Cratylus* reveals poetry’s *daimonic* ability to reveal a gap between human understanding articulated through speech and discursive thought and the divine knowledge of a comprehensive, stable, and unified reality. Poetic language also serves an initiatory function by keeping the dialectic alive, supplying it with new ways to investigate reality. Hence, the *daimonic* reading of poetry counters interpretations of an anti-poetry position in the Platonic dialogues and works to significantly reduce the textual tensions resulting in the famed problem of poetry in Plato.

## General Summary

Some scholars argue that Plato's dialogues are anti-poetry. The reason for this claim rests mainly on Socrates' banishment of the poets from the ideal city imagined in the *Republic*. Yet, Plato's texts still consistently maintain that the poets are divinely inspired. Since the dialogues are also consistent in arguing that the divine can only be good and cause good things, there seems to be a contradiction in Plato's body of work regarding the status of poetry. Is poetry good because it comes from divine inspiration, or is it bad for all the reasons Socrates banishes it in the *Republic*? This study takes up this question. Looking at the comments on poetry made in the *Republic*, it concludes that Socrates does not banish the poets based on a criticism of poetry itself but rather on methods of approaching and interpreting poetry that were common in his time. Consequently, other ways of approaching poetry may allow the philosopher to still engage it as something edifying for the philosophical life. Accordingly, looking at poetic inspiration in the *Ion* alongside the description of the *daimonic* in the *Symposium*, the present study argues that one can read poetry in the dialogues as *daimonic*. Poetry mediates the gap between human thought and divine understanding. While some scholars argue that Plato was too rationalistic to seriously value the *daimonic* in the religious or poetic, this study looks more closely at his treatment of it and argues that these are key elements to his vision for philosophical life. In the *Cratylus*, Socrates actually employs poetry in ways that mimics initiatory uses of it in mystery cults of the time. This initiatory use is related to poetry's *daimonic* ability to reveal a gap. This gap exists between the human's grasp on truth, which is articulated through speech and temporal thought, and divine truth itself, which comprises a comprehensive, stable, and unified reality. Poetic language further serves an initiatory function by supplying temporal human thought with new ways to investigate reality. Hence, the *daimonic* reading of poetry counters the claim that Plato's works are anti-poetry.

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Any definitions of Greek words in this study come from Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon. All Greek text is from the Oxford Classical Text: *Platonis Opera*. Statistics on the frequency of word appearances in the Platonic corpus have been obtained through the use of *Perseus Digital Library*.

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## Introduction

### The Problem of Poetry

Words are our trade  
we speak them soft  
we speak them hard  
we do not push the hand  
that writes, the times do that.  
We are our age's mouthpiece.

There is no need for words  
to fester in our minds  
they germinate in the open  
mouth of the barefoot child,  
in the midst of restive crowds.  
They wither in ivory towers  
and are dissected in college classes.

Words. Some come trippingly  
on the palate. Some come laboriously.  
Some are quickened by friends,  
some prompted by passersby.

Critics label the speakers: male, female.  
They assign genitals to our words  
but we're not just penises or vaginas  
nor are our words easy to classify

Some of us are still hung  
up  
on the art-for-art trip

and feel that the poet  
is forever alone.  
Separate.  
More sensitive.  
An outcast.

That suffering is a way of life,  
that suffering is a virtue  
that suffering is the price  
we pay for seeing the future.

Some of us are still hung up  
substituting words for relationships  
substituting writing for living.

But what we want  
– what we presume to want—  
Is to see our words engraved  
On people's faces,  
feel our words catalyze  
emotions in their lives.  
What we want is to become  
part of the common consumption  
like coffee with morning paper.

We don't want to be  
Stars but parts  
of constellations.

– Gloria Anzaldúa, “The New Speakers”<sup>1</sup>

## I. Introduction

This dissertation is about words. More specifically, it is about the power of poetry to move the human *psyche*. Here, the term “poetry” applies broadly; it is a creative composition of words used in surprising, non-literal, and particularly evocative ways, and it is often, but not

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<sup>1</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, “The New Speakers,” in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 24-25.



always, metrical. Words, especially when wielded poetically, can make and remake the world of human thought, meaning, and action by structuring how the individual encounters and experiences that world. In the language of Chicana poet Gloria Anzaldúa (quoted above), the words of poetry are “engraved [o]n people's faces” and “catalyze emotions in their lives.”<sup>2</sup> The poet’s words move the soul, but do they move it into to a better, worse, or simply different state? The answer depends on whether the human being has any relationship to knowledge and truth. If she has no such relationship, then it matters not which words become “engraved on her face” and “catalyzed in her emotions.” The hearer can move from one state to another through a constellation of poetic worlds, not one of which is better than another. Yet, if the human being can obtain knowledge and access truth, then the manner in which a particular poem or poetic work makes and remakes the world often becomes a matter of incredible importance. Some of these new worlds take the reader further from the truth, while others bring her closer. Poetry thereby presents the reader or hearer with the potential for both benefit and harm. How can one engage words so that they carry her to the right place? The present study will hazard an answer – in particular, a Platonic answer – to this question.

However, the answer that this study gives draws from one Plato in particular. There are many Platos, a multiplicity that naturally results from the work of an author who obscures his own presence in his texts, writing dialogues in which he does not speak. Accordingly, there is a multiverse of Platos, as is evidenced by the secondary literature. Scholars, nevertheless, largely agree that the historical Plato saw humans as ideally engaging in the task of assimilating themselves to reality, the zenith of which is the realm of Forms and the Good. This assimilation entails that the human being strives for accurate knowledge of reality and actively orients herself

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<sup>2</sup> Anzaldúa, “The New Speakers,” 5.

toward everything according to this knowledge. Thus, it is relatively uncontroversial to say that, for Plato, the philosophical life involves one “ascending” upwards from an existence consumed with sensible reality to one that both aims at and continually understands all things in relation to the Forms and the Good. Pauliina Remes describes the general philosophical outlook of a Platonist, saying she is one who

concentrates on revealing the order of the universe, working on the assumption that although this order is not directly perceivable, a correct combination of gathering information through perception and theorizing about it will reveal its basic nature to human reason.<sup>3</sup>

The present study will take this much for granted, but what role do words, and words in poetry specifically, play in achieving this goal of understanding the order of the cosmos? In reference to this question, the Plato that this study takes up will step into focus. Scholars will probably debate which Plato is the true one until the end of time. Still, to move forward with a particular set of philosophical questions, one must commit to a Plato. This project is devoted to examining how the Platonist can reap the benefits of poetic language while avoiding its dangers, and as such, it will take up what Catherine Pickstock calls “the other Plato,” one who

involves an interlinked attention to... the literary idioms of the dialogues: the dialogue form, the patterns of imagery and metaphor, and the deployment of myth and reference to ritual... to the religious background that is constantly invoked... [and to] a more positive view of... the material realm than is often ascribed to him... [For] it is material pictures and practices that are seen to play a vital mediating role in terms of ascent to the forms.<sup>4</sup>

Pickstock’s “other Plato” contrasts with one who holds that humans *only* obtain knowledge of reality through dispassionate, disembodied reasoning about reality.<sup>5</sup> Instead, this “other Plato”

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<sup>3</sup> Pauliina Remes, *Neoplatonism* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008), viii.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Pickstock, “The Late Arrival of Language: Word, Nature and the Divine in Plato’s *Cratylus*,” *Modern Theology* 27, no. 2 (2011): 239.

<sup>5</sup> Chapter One will explain this version of Plato in more detail. However, John Cocking gives a particularly strong and succinct articulation of this Plato in stating that, “the ideal state [for Plato] would be one in which citizens of high intelligence would freely reason their way towards the good.” This free reasoning is meant to be a mental process relying on human intellect alone to get it to the finish line. See John Cocking, “The Greek Rationalists,” in *Imagination: A Study in the History of Ideas*, ed. Penelope Murray, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 10.

understands the seemingly magical ability of words, creatively expressed in poetic form, to remake our world in new, better, or worse ways. It is this Plato – the one who gives attention to imagery, metaphor, myth, and ritual – that this study invokes when referencing the great philosopher.

An accomplished author, Plato took words very seriously indeed. His preference for the dialogue form speaks to the importance of speech, poetic or otherwise, for the philosophical outlook that emerges from his texts. In the hands of Plato, the dialogue form displays characters engaged in active, contextualized, and often unfinished conversations. Plato's Socrates is an individual who questions his own nature, wondering aloud to his interlocutor whether he is "a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or... a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature."<sup>6</sup> While Socrates no doubt hopes to be the latter, divine sort of creature, his persona in much of Plato's work speaks to a man of multiplicity. Danielle Layne writes, "Socrates appears Protean, always shifting and changing his tactics, continuously looking for a new way to approach a problem, unpack a mystery."<sup>7</sup> In support of Layne's assessment, Plato's Socrates speaks in many voices, forms, and registers. His renowned method of the *elenchus* contrasts with his monologuing mythopoesis at the end of the *Phaedo*<sup>8</sup> and throughout the *Republic*. Sometimes, he takes on the speech-making style of contemporaries such as Lysias, as in the *Phaedrus*.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes, he speaks in verse himself, as in the *Phaedrus* again, when his first Lysianic speech shifts unexpectedly to epic verse.<sup>10</sup> The *Phaedo* depicts him composing poetry,

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<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 230a. All English translations of Plato's dialogues are taken from those in Cooper (1997) except where noted otherwise. All Greek text is taken from Plato, *Platonis opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903).

<sup>7</sup> Danielle Layne, "Torch-bearing Plato: Why Reason Without the Divine is not Philosophy After All," in *Divination and Knowledge in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, ed. Crystal Addey (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 57.

<sup>8</sup> *Phaedo* 108c-114d.

<sup>9</sup> *Phaedrus* 237b-241e.

<sup>10</sup> *Phaedrus* 241e.

explicitly shifting his focus in order to make sure he has honored the promptings of prophetic dreams.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Socrates even speaks in oracular registers, as the stylometric work of Harold Tarrant has shown he does in the *Phaedrus* and *Cratylus*.<sup>12</sup> Considering Plato's characterization of Socrates in the dialogues, Layne's comparison of him to the sea god, known for his shapeshifting nature, rings profoundly true. Therefore, Plato's protean depictions of Socrates and choice to write dialogues show that one must perpetually engage in making and remaking one's understanding to better accord with the truth of reality. In other words, the philosophical project embodied by Socrates in Plato's work is one of process and doubling back to begin again, of hypothesis, trial, and error, and of a continual remodeling of what one thinks she knows. This constant philosophical movement is achieved through the mechanisms of various forms of dialectic *as well as* through the erotic,<sup>13</sup> mythical,<sup>14</sup> spiritual or religious experience or practice,<sup>15</sup> and, as I will argue, poetic language.

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<sup>11</sup> *Phaedrus* 60d-61b.

<sup>12</sup> Harold Tarrant, "Socrates' Other Voices: 'Euthyphro' in the 'Cratylus,'" *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, no. 4 (2013): 507-523.

<sup>13</sup> This is clearly displayed in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*.

<sup>14</sup> There are numerous examples, but consider *Symposium* 203b-204a where Diotima gives a retelling of the birth of Eros to elucidate the nature of desire and its relationship to human nature. Recall, as well, how Socrates uses the myth of the swan's song at *Phaedo* 84e-85b to challenge Simmias and Cebes' concern that he will be unwilling to discuss the nature of the soul and the afterlife on his deathbed.

<sup>15</sup> Socrates is described as enthused by divine powers at *Phaedrus* 238c-d and 241e as well as at *Cratylus* 386c-e. Socrates also takes the Pythia's declaration that he is the wisest of all humans very seriously, engaging it as a message from Apollo and allowing it to guide his inquiry of other people (see *Apology* 21a-23b). Furthermore, there are the many instances where Socrates experiences the promptings of his *daimonion*, or "divine sign" (see *Apology* 31c-32a; *Theaetetus* 151a; *Phaedrus* 242b-c; *Euthydemus* 272a; *Alcibiades I* 100a). The *daimonion* is discussed in greater detail later on in this study, especially in Chapter One, section five. Again, Socrates is also depicted composing poetry in the *Phaedo* because of prophetic dreams he has experienced (see 60d-61b). It should also be noted here that, although there is a history of disputing the authenticity of the *Alcibiades I* going back to Friederich Schliermacher, I am in agreement with the assessments of Julia Annas, "Self-Knowledge in Early Plato," in *Platonic Investigations*, ed. Dominic J. O'Meara (Washington, D.C: Catholic University Press, 1985), 111-138 and Jakub Jirsa, "Authenticity of the 'Alcibiades' I: Some Reflections." *Listy Filologické / Folia Philologica* 132, no. 3/4 (2009): 225-44. Consequently, this study treats the dialogue as an authentic Platonic composition and thereby derives textual evidence from it alongside other texts from the recognized Platonic corpus. For additional information on both the dialogue and its dating or authorship, see Nicholas D. Smith, "Did Plato Write the *Alcibiades I*?" *Apeiron* 37, no. 2 (2004): 93-108; E.J. Baynham and Harold Tarrant, "Fourth Century Politics and the Date of the *Alcibiades I*," in *Alcibiades and the Socratic Lover-Educator*, edited by Marguerite Johnson and Harold Tarrant (Bristol, UK: Bristol Classical Press, 2012), 215-222; François Renaud and Harold Tarrant, *The Platonic 'Alcibiades I': The Dialogue and Its Ancient Reception* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

However, as noted above, the power of poetic language to remodel our understanding and, in Anzaldúa's words, to become "engraved [o]n people's faces" and "catalyze[d] emotions in their lives,"<sup>16</sup> can be both positively and negatively construed. The duality of poetry's power to remake is particularly salient from the view of Plato's dialogues. On the one hand, this remaking can allow the philosopher to reconcile the particularity of her individual experience with what is absolutely and universally real, seeing that the former relates to and is rooted in the latter. Poetry can do this by creatively communicating new ideas and experiences to the reader or auditor. Its non-literal or symbolic form enables it to get ideas and perspectives across to an audience in a way that ordinary language often fails to do. On the other hand, this very same power can compellingly present claims about reality that are untrue in some vital way. Taken by poetry's beauty and its creative mode of communication, a hearer might assent to a shift in their vision of reality for the worse. For example, Mary Devereaux communicates concern regarding the simultaneous presence of beauty and evil in Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*.<sup>17</sup> Devereaux's worries, she explains, lie in the ability of "art to render evil beautiful" and thereby attractive."<sup>18</sup> Devereaux's anxiety can be extrapolated to the duality of poetry, meaning its ability to move the soul toward or away from truth. Yet, within the Platonic dialogues, the answer to whether poetry (which itself relates to the Greek word "to make or create [ποιέω]") cultivates a

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<sup>16</sup> Anzaldúa, "The New Speakers," 5.

<sup>17</sup> See Mary Devereaux, "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's 'Triumph of the Will,'" in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 227-256. Note that Devereaux specifically relates the question of beauty and goodness or evil to its origins in the Platonic tradition, stating: "One explanation of our enduring reservations about the film is that many of us have certain intuitions about the relation of beauty and goodness. One place those intuitions get articulated is in Plato. Even those of us who are not Platonists are heirs to a Platonic tradition that identifies beauty and goodness, a tradition that conceives of the beautiful as consisting not only in giving pleasure to the senses but also in engaging and satisfying the mind and spirit... It is this ancient, strongly entrenched strand of thinking which... accounts for the sense that there is something paradoxical about a work of art that so tightly weaves the beautiful and the morally evil. Indeed, one of the most shocking things about *Triumph of the Will* is that it so clearly demonstrates that beauty and goodness can come apart, not just in the relatively simple sense that moral and aesthetic evaluation may diverge, but in the more frightening sense that it is possible for art to render evil beautiful" (50).

<sup>18</sup> Devereaux, "Beauty and Evil," 50.

positive or negative orientation toward reality is that, quite simply, it depends. Importantly, it depends less on the goodness or evilness of the poetry itself, but rather on poetry's consumer, the auditor or reader.

Accordingly, this study is concerned with establishing an overarching claim: a Platonic perspective on our knowledge of and place within the cosmos ought to properly account for the power of poetic language to remake our world for the better. Fundamentally, this power is related to the Forms of the Beautiful and the Good as the terminal objects of the soul's desire. After all, in *Republic* 403c, Socrates states that education in music and poetry ought to result in us a desire for the beautiful (τοῦ καλοῦ ἐρωτικά). And, as we are told in *Philebus* 64e, "the force of the good has taken refuge in an alliance with the nature of the beautiful (καταπέφευγεν... ἢ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ δύναμις εἰς τὴν τοῦ καλοῦ φύσιν)." Accordingly, that which fosters a love of the Beautiful must likewise nurture a desire for the Good, for the force of the Good is revealed to us in the Beautiful.<sup>19</sup> Poetry, then, can bring the human *psyche* into better alignment with the Forms of the Beautiful and the Good, which are the ultimate objects of desire for the human soul when it realizes its true nature and lives the philosophical life.

Nevertheless, the claim that a Platonic approach to philosophy should account for and employ the power of poetry is considerably challenged by "the problem of poetry" in Platonic

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<sup>19</sup> The precise nature of the Beautiful and the Good has been vigorously debated. As Rachel Barney, "Notes on Plato on the Kalon and the Good," *Classical Philology* 105, no. 4 (2010): 363-77, indicates, some passages clearly endorse the identification of beauty and goodness with one another. However, as examined by Dominic O'Meara, "The Beauty of the World in Plato's *Timaeus*," *Scholia* 8, no. 1 (2014): 25-33, other passages in the corpus, such as *Timaeus* 28c-29a, appear to distinguish the two forms as separate. In either case the Beautiful and the Good share a special relationship, for the Good is frequently described as the most beautiful and as the source of beauty. See, for example, *Republic* 508e-509a: "Both knowledge and truth are beautiful things, but the good is other and more beautiful than they... This is an inconceivably beautiful thing you're talking about, if it provides both knowledge and truth and is superior to them in beauty." See also *Republic* 517b: "the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything." The two are also often named together as if they form a pair (see, for example, *Republic* 531c; *Phaedo*, 76d and 77a; and *Cratylus*, 416e and 440b). For a further discussion on the relationship between the Beautiful and the Good in Plato, see Aryeh Kosman, "Beauty and the Good: Situating the Kalon," *Classical Philology* 105, no. 4 (2010): 341-62.

studies more broadly. This problem refers to the presence of apparently contradictory comments on the philosophical value of poetry within Plato's body of work. Some of these comments, which will be considered below, seem to hold poetry in high esteem as the product of divine inspiration, while others seem to reject its value entirely. Therefore, this study argues that the disparate remarks on poetry throughout the dialogues, which render it valuable and dangerous in turn, can be understood and brought into considerably more harmony by reading poetry as *daimonic*.<sup>20</sup> The *daimonic* interpretation of poetry accounts for the power of poetic language to remake human understanding for the better. It also explains why something with such a potential benefit for the soul can also be dangerous without being problematic or harmful in and of itself. In sum, the *daimonic* reading of poetry allows the Platonist to retain a belief in and use for the value of poetic language as edifying for the ascent of the soul without requiring her to ignore Plato's clear warnings about the misuse of such language. The Platonist can heed these warnings as legitimate without having to ignore or explain away more positive passages in which poetry is praised as divinely inspired. The *daimonic* reading thereby enables the Platonist to take a more holistic and comprehensive approach to the full range of comments made about poetry throughout the dialogues.

## II. The Problem of Poetry and a *Daimonic* Solution

The problem of poetry is difficult to resolve because Plato's works are not particularly clear on the value of poetry. Responding to the difficulty presented by the primary texts, the secondary literature is likewise widely varied. Still, a considerable body of scholarship agrees

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<sup>20</sup> A detailed examination of the nature of the *daimonic* in Plato is undertaken in Chapter One, section five. For now, it suffices to summarize the *daimonic* as inclusive of revelatory activities and experiences that form a mediating link between human thought and divine understanding. Examples include religious rituals, the oracular, and the erotic for Plato.

that Plato's opinion on poetry is decidedly negative.<sup>21</sup> This consensus is initially puzzling, given that Socrates clearly regards some forms of poetry as essential for education in the *Kallipolis*.<sup>22</sup> However, in banishing mimetic works, Plato's Socrates appears to reject those works in which poetry is most itself—that is, works in which poetry is not reduced to its instrumental value according to its didactic propositional content, but is instead valued as for its own sake, for what it is uniquely able to accomplish. This claim will be elaborated upon later in the project, but part of the argument is that what makes poetry *poetry* is that it is not only a useful vehicle or an ornamental garb that can be shed once the message has been delivered; rather, the poetic *form* matters just as much as the *content*. However, Socrates appears only to see a value for those poetic works that can be scrubbed of any danger by their being reduced to overtly pedagogical use alone. The reduction of poetry to the purely didactic may be why many scholars view Plato as anti-poetry. Still, the truth of the situation is not clear-cut. We must first examine what Plato says about poetry, especially in the *Republic*, and why he seems to dismiss any value inherent in poetry itself as a specific mode of speaking or writing. Then, we can look at the secondary scholarship before examining how the dialogues themselves problematize the anti-poetry view. Plato's own use of poetry alongside his particular compositional style complicates his supposed view of poetry. Accordingly, a new reading of poetry in Plato is needed to alleviate the appearance of glaring inconsistencies in his views. This study proposes one such new reading.

Fundamentally, there seem to be two conflicting stances on poetry in the dialogues themselves. While Plato's Socrates repeatedly claims that the poets are divinely inspired,<sup>23</sup> other passages indicate that the philosopher should reject poetry entirely. Famously, in Book X of

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<sup>21</sup> Pages 13-16 of this study examine some particular examples below. See notes 42-49.

<sup>22</sup> See *Republic* 607a.

<sup>23</sup> *Apology* 22c and 23c, *Laws* 682a, *Phaedrus* 265b, *Meno* 99d, and throughout the *Ion*.



Plato's *Republic*, Socrates speaks of an "an ancient quarrel" between poetry and philosophy.<sup>24</sup> He cites what are thought to be fragments from lyric poetry attacking philosophy,<sup>25</sup> which call it "the [bitch] yelping and shrieking at its master,"<sup>26</sup> "great in the empty eloquence of fools,"<sup>27</sup> and the craft of "the subtle thinkers, beggars all."<sup>28</sup> The precise origin of these expressions is unknown, but their sentiment is clear: poetry and philosophy are not friends.<sup>29</sup> While in Book X Socrates sticks to quoting the attacks of poetry against philosophy, philosophy seems to have "got back its own"<sup>30</sup> earlier in the *Republic*. Books II and III discuss the use of poetry in education, and the conclusion is that much, if not most, of the traditional Greek canon of poetry

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<sup>24</sup> *Republic* 607b: παλαιὰ μὲν τις διαφορὰ φιλοσοφία τε καὶ ποιητικῆ. Whether or not such a quarrel actually had any legitimate basis in history is a matter of debate. Glenn Most argues, compellingly, that "the evidence for a tradition of philosophers quarreling with poets is, if not quite non-existent, at best very scanty," and that "it is even harder to find evidence for any other pre-Socratic Greek poets quarreling with philosophers than it is for pre-Socratic philosophers quarreling with poets." See Glenn Most, "What Ancient Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry?" in *Plato and the Poets*, ed. Pierre Destrée and Fritz-Gregor Hermann (Boston: Brill, 2011), 5-6 and throughout. Nevertheless, as discussed in Chapter Two, there are passages among the Presocratic fragments that point to such a quarrel.

<sup>25</sup> As Most points out, we actually have no record of the origins of these sayings; The "authors of the passages are identified... neither by the scholia to this passage nor by any Neoplatonic commentary, and they do not seem ever to have been cited by any other Greek author, either independently or even from this very passage." See Most, "What Ancient Quarrel," 6. Yet, Most asserts that these fragments cannot be inventions of Plato's either, "for their language is genuinely poetic, their meters seem authentic, and it would be very damaging for Socrates' argument if he had to resort to counterfeit citations" (11).

<sup>26</sup> *Republic* 607b. This particularly vicious, but not inaccurate, amendment to Grube's translation is bought out by Robert Lloyd Mitchell, "That Yelping Bitch: On Poetry in Plato's *Republic*," *Arion* 24, No. 2 (2016): 69-90. As Most notes, "[t]he dog barking at its master suggests a combination of insubordination and stupidity: a properly trained and intelligent dog barks at strangers and enemies, not at its own master, and for this very reason such a dog is taken as the model for the philosophical guardian at *Rep.* II, 376b" (See Most, "What Ancient Quarrel," 7).

<sup>27</sup> *Republic* 607b.

<sup>28</sup> *Republic*, 607c.

<sup>29</sup> I say that their sentiment is clear, but, as Most astutely ponders: "for us, Plato's four citations are certainly fragments, inasmuch as they are surviving remnants of what were once whole texts but have not been transmitted as such and are probably lost forever. But what were they for Socrates' fictional interlocutors and above all for the very real ancient Greek readers whom the author Plato had in mind? Were they fragments for these too, in the sense that these quotations bore their meaning independently of the knowledge of their original textual context, or were they parts of wholes that could be brought to mind and that needed to be brought to mind if they were to be entirely understandable? To point the question: were Plato's readers supposed to recognize the quotations and identify them as coming from one or more specific texts, or did these phrases circulate as proverbial expressions devoid of any determinate context?" (See Most, "What Ancient Quarrel," 12). Unfortunately, at this time, there seems to be no concrete answer to many of these questions raised by Most.

<sup>30</sup> Most, "What Ancient Quarrel," 6. Socrates is notably only quoting the poets against philosophers rather than also quoting philosophers against the poets. Glenn Most points out "[T]he fact that he cites only this kind of text, and not ones in which philosophers attack poets, is no doubt due... to the fact that at the moment he is speaking as a philosopher attacking poets, so he wants especially to cite poets attacking philosophers in order to create the impression of a kind of rough justice—philosophy, as it were, is getting back its own" (6).

must be banished from the *Kallipolis*. As Socrates puts it, “hymns to the gods and eulogies to good people are the only poetry we can admit into our city.”<sup>31</sup> Consequently, Socrates largely rejects the works of the comic poets and tragedians.<sup>32</sup> He dismembers the works of Homer and Hesiod, and he casts large portions of their *oeuvres* out of his utopia.<sup>33</sup> By Book X, Plato has already substantially “clipped” the wings of poetry in the *Kallipolis*;<sup>34</sup> all that remains of the ancient Greek literary corpus are those texts deemed sufficiently safe and morally edifying, the hymns and eulogies that Socrates references. Still, with these remaining, Plato does admit *some* poetry into the city.

Nevertheless, as noted above, many scholars still assert that there is an overall negative vision of poetry in Plato, and the reason for this common assertion may be that he seems to reject poetic works that capture the nature of poetry most particularly. In other words, it seems that eulogies and hymns to the gods can remain in the city because they are “safe” options, and their safety allows the rulers to mitigate against the true nature of poetry sufficiently. Hence, poetry is not valued for its own sake; it is only tolerated when one can render it pedagogically useful. In other words, there is a tacit assumption that one can draw Plato's position on the value of poetry as a whole from observing the *kinds of poetry* he banishes. The common scholarly conclusion that is drawn from Plato's banishment of the poets is that Plato is anti-poetry—despite the clear retention of *some* poetry in the *Kallipolis*—because he denies the fullest expression of what makes poetry *poetry*. In rejecting mimetic works,<sup>35</sup> works that are the productions of fantastic creations regarding gods and heroes<sup>36</sup> that appeal most powerfully to human experience and

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<sup>31</sup> *Republic* 607a: μόνον ὕμνους θεοῖς καὶ ἐγκώμια τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς ποιήσεως παραδεκτέον εἰς πόλιν

<sup>32</sup> *Republic* 394c-398b.

<sup>33</sup> For example, see *Republic* 387a-b.

<sup>34</sup> G.R.F. Ferrari, “Plato and poetry,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume 1*, ed. by George Alexander Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 110.

<sup>35</sup> *Republic* 595a.

<sup>36</sup> *Republic* and 377d-392a.

emotion,<sup>37</sup> Plato appears to reject the poetry that most distinguishes itself from the straightforwardly propositional content of didactic language. Mimetic poetry, fantastic poetry, emotionally charged poetry—these tap into experience and emotion by capitalizing on the limits of language’s ability to outline claims immediately and clearly evaluable by discursive reason. Instead, poetry often communicates viscerally through images, sounds, rhythms, and feelings. By contrast, while the works that Plato proposes to keep are well-composed and aesthetically pleasing, they also speak acceptably of the gods and great people because they reduce poetry to straightforward didactic content. Consequently, Plato appears to be “anti-poetry” because he effectively removes any love of poetry for its own sake (i.e., for its own unique, creative form) by reducing poetry to the purely and overtly pedagogical. What makes poetry stand out from other uses of language is largely ignored. He passes over poetry’s ability to say new things and to help us think new thoughts—that is, to remake the world—by circumventing the rules and limits of what we can already convey in regular language. Or, really, in rejecting mimetic works with more powerful emotional and imaginative appeal, he recasts poetry’s ability to remake the world as a negative trait. Instead, Plato appears to favor only didactic works that regurgitate clear and approved moral and epistemological claims. If poetry is nothing more than ornamented propositional thought and language, though, it has no power specific to it *as poetry*; it is merely propositional content “dressed up” in fancy clothes.

Concerning the scholarly positions on poetry in Plato, the situation is complicated. There is a significant body of work that sees Plato as essentially anti-poetry as well as work that interprets Plato’s attitude as more positive. Stephen Halliwell takes a somewhat moderate approach in arguing that “Plato deserves to be ranked not as an outright opponent of art but

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<sup>37</sup> *Republic* 605c-d.

rather as a ‘romantic puritan.’”<sup>38</sup> Similarly, while Susan Levin points out that “Plato’s insistence that poetry may have a role in his *polis* only if its benefit can be demonstrated might lead one to expect a strongly negative outcome to the *Republic*’s inquiry with respect to poetic praxis as a whole,”<sup>39</sup> she concludes that careful analysis reveals “that [Plato’s] conclusions are in crucial respects positive.”<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, Levin acknowledges that “Plato is often seen as the source in Western thought of a dichotomy between philosophy and literature that is highly pernicious.”<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, scholars like Catherine Collobert have argued that “the critique [of poetry in the *Republic*] is final: poetry is nothing but an illusion and a dangerous deceit.”<sup>42</sup> Glenn Most, too, asserts that the situation is so final, in fact, that “no one is likely to dispute the claim that Plato’s philosophy engaged synchronically in a systematic disagreement with poets and poetry and that this disagreement lasted diachronically throughout his whole career.”<sup>43</sup> Robert Lloyd Mitchell

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<sup>38</sup> Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 26. Halliwell’s section on the *Ion* in *Between Ecstasy and Truth: Interpretations of Greek Poetics From Homer to Longinus*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 155-179 is representative of such approaches.

<sup>39</sup> Susan B. Levin, *The Ancient Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry Revisited: Plato and the Greek Literary Tradition* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), 12.

<sup>40</sup> Levin, *The Ancient Quarrel*, 12. Although I agree with Levin that the overall picture for poetry is largely positive for Plato, her ultimate claim is that “Plato reserves an important role for a distinct practice of poetry both in the project of attitude formation that is the focus of early education and in the broader communal content, where poetic compositions will be integral to a range of civic occasions” (12). I don’t disagree with her here, but my own position will be substantially different in its approach, arguing that there is a predominantly “spiritual” (in the sense of personal and mystical) significance for poetry in Plato.

<sup>41</sup> Levin, *The Ancient Quarrel*, 12.

<sup>42</sup> Catherine Collobert, “Poetry as Flawed Reproduction: Possession and *Mimesis*,” in *Plato and the Poets*, ed. Pierre Destrée and Fritz-Gregor Hermann (Boston: Brill, 2011), 49. Collobert’s claim introduces the added question of whether and to what extent we ought to take the *Republic* as somehow more authoritative than other dialogues. Her analysis states that the *Republic*’s critique is “final,” but in virtue of what is the content of the *Republic* any more “final” than that of other middle dialogues such as the *Phaedrus*, not to mention that of later dialogues?

<sup>43</sup> Most, “What Ancient Quarrel,” 2. Many scholars have disputed this claim, though usually by arguing for a more complex ambivalence toward poetry than an outright support or acceptance of it by Plato. Most’s wording tacitly introduces a further nuance here regarding the distinction between disagreeing with poets and disagreeing with poetry. While Plato certainly does seem to disagree with the poets in many passages, what does it mean, really, to say that Plato disagreed with poetry itself? Most must mean that Plato disagreed with the content of *most* poetry, which is to say he disagreed with the poets in their choices of material. The alternative interpretation of Most’s statement would amount to saying that Plato was entirely against poetry as a genre or medium, which seems indefensible given Plato’s marginal acceptance of some forms of poetry (eulogies, for example) in the *Kallipolis*. although, as will be argued below in this introduction, there is a particular sense in which the *Republic*’s apparent

states that “it is hard to recall, or even imagine, a more brutal attack upon poetry than [that of] Socrates.”<sup>44</sup> Suzanne Stern-Gillet describes Plato’s view of poetry in the *Ion* as “anti-poetry,”<sup>45</sup> G.R.F. Ferrari claims that Plato “is uncompromisingly hostile towards [poetry],”<sup>46</sup> and Andrew Ford states that Plato offered “aberrant moral attacks” against poetry which subsequently burdened Aristotle with its redemption.<sup>47</sup> Hence, on one side, there is scholarship that holds Plato’s views on poetry as potentially positive, although challenging to ascertain due to nuance. On the other side, another body of scholarship has reached the consensus that Plato was, in fact, an opponent of poetry.

Of course, the schism between these two bodies of scholarship results from genuine difficulties in the texts. Morriss Henry Partee remarks on the monumental effort it takes to resolve the problem that this schism presents, stating:

The extreme diversity of interpretations of Plato’s aesthetics suggests that any one simple statement will be inadequate. Plato treats poetry’s effect on society throughout the bulk of the dialogues; his scattered and theoretical aesthetics can be brought together only with an effort.<sup>48</sup>

While Partee holds that one can elucidate Plato’s position, even if only with Herculean difficulty, Alexander Nehamas is less optimistic; in reviewing Partee’s work, he states that “Plato’s

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rejection of mimetic works does result in a sort of rejection of poetry itself as a formal medium for composing works.

<sup>44</sup> Mitchell, “That Yelping Bitch,” 69.

<sup>45</sup> Suzanne Stern-Gillet, “On (mis)interpreting Plato’s *Ion*,” *Phronesis* 49, no. 2 (2004): 190.

<sup>46</sup> G.R.F. Ferrari, “Plato and poetry,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume 1*, edited by George Alexander Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 92. Ferrari does take a different approach in which he is more accepting of the poetic in Plato in a later essay. See G.R.F. Ferrari, “The Philosopher’s Antidote,” in *Plato on Art and Beauty*, ed. A.E. Denham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 106-124.

<sup>47</sup> Andrew Laughlin Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 3. Ford’s claim here is especially interesting in light of the present study, which asserts that Plato has a deep respect for the spiritual significance of poetry. In contrast, Aristotle and those who followed his poetics were perhaps less reverent towards poetry as a whole. See Peter Struck’s remarks on literary criticism following Aristotle; he remarks that “[p]ure Aristotelians do not, in general, have such heady visions of poetry, nor do they expect to find in it such grand truths.” Peter T Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 5.

<sup>48</sup> Morriss Henry Partee, *Plato’s Poetics: The Authority of Beauty* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1981), 3.

disturbing attack on the art [of poetry] can neither be finally dismissed nor defused.”<sup>49</sup>

Supporting Nehamas’ pessimism regarding a solution, the problem of poetry is notably present among Plato’s ancient commentators. Hellenistic and later ancient thinkers also grappled with what to make of Plato’s treatments of poetry. According to Halliwell:

Plato’s critics... condemned him for hypocrisy, sometimes even for ‘plagiarism’, in making his own use of poetic features—of style, imagery, dramatization, and myth—in works which nonetheless allowed negative judgements to be expressed about the greatest of all Greek poets, Homer. Plato’s admirers, on the other hand... saw in his work a stance of creative emulation towards poetry.<sup>50</sup>

Just as today, some commentators came down on the side that Plato was anti-poetry, despite his appropriation of it, while others stood on the side of a Plato who favored poetry.<sup>51</sup>

Many scholars locate Plato’s issues with poetry within the broader themes of his supposed rejection of the body itself as the seat of sense perception. Art, including poetry, relies heavily on the sensual; therefore, some argue that Plato did not value it. For example, James Porter states that, for Plato:

The phenomenal and sensual aspects of art are like so many lures and distractions. Once these are stripped away, art uninformed by philosophy stands nakedly revealed and empty-handed. It has nothing to show, no beauty and no attractions: there is nothing left to see, or worth seeing. Philosophically informed art does not need the distractions of the sensual to reveal its beauties: they shine through for what they are. What is worse, the allurements of the sensual are intrinsically dangerous. For that reason, they are not only unnecessary, but also unwanted.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, the only art and poetry that Plato accepts are divorced as much as possible from sensual appeal and are valued only insofar as they can be reduced to discursive claims about the

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<sup>49</sup> Alexander Nehamas, "Review of *Plato's Poetics: The Authority of Beauty*," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 40, no. 3 (1982): 338.

<sup>50</sup> Halliwell, *Between Ecstasy and Truth*, 155-156.

<sup>51</sup> Halliwell, *Between Ecstasy and Truth*, 155-156. The “critics” are named by Halliwell as “the Epicurian Colotes, the rhetorician Dionysus of Halicarnassus, and ‘Heraclitus’ author of the allegorizing treatise *Homeric Question*.” The admirers are “Panaetius, Maximus of Tyre, and the author of the treatise *On the Sublime*.”

<sup>52</sup> James Porter, *The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece: Matter, Sensation, and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 86. Porter applies this comment to art in general, but includes poetry under its umbrella.

intellectual realm. For Porter, ideal acceptable art and poetry for Plato appeals only to the mind detached from the body. Plato seems to agree with Porter when he limits acceptable works to only the most baldly didactic, removing anything that could be up for interpretation and keeping only the instructive content, beautifully presented.<sup>53</sup> Iris Murdoch has similar concerns about the austere nature of some of Plato's comments, noting that

[a]rt and the artist are condemned by Plato to exhibit the lowest and most irrational kind of awareness, *eikasia*, a state of vague image-ridden illusion; in terms of the Cave myth this is the condition of the prisoners who face the back wall and see only shadows cast by the fire.<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps, however, since poetry is not visual, it does not fall prey to the issue raised by Murdoch concerning *eikasia*. But, Plato does indeed connect words to images. First, in Greek culture, poetry is predominately narrative and representational in depicting gods, heroes, people, etc. Second, the issue of the representational quality of poetry lies at the heart of Plato's concerns regarding *the kinds of stories* told in the *Kallipolis*. The ever-present danger is that if the young hear the wrong stories, they will mimic the wrong things.<sup>55</sup> Finally, Plato's Socrates indicates that words themselves are images that reflect originals to a greater or lesser degree depending on how well the name giver crafts them.<sup>56</sup> Thus, Murdoch's point extends to poetry.

Yet, Murdoch also recognizes that the situation is more nuanced, noting that Plato confers a special power onto art in general (including poetry). She argues that "the problem seems to be that art, no matter how dangerous and *potentially* trivial, seems to also contain

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<sup>53</sup> *Republic* 607a: μόνον ὕμνους θεοῖς καὶ ἐγκώμια τοῖς ἀγαθοῖς ποιήσεως παραδεκτέον εἰς πόλιν.

<sup>54</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 5.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, *Republic*, 395c-d wherein Socrates problematizes overly imitative poetry and says: "If [the guardians] do imitate, they must imitate from childhood what is appropriate for them, namely, people who are courageous, self-controlled, pious, and free, and their actions. They mustn't be clever at doing or imitating slavish or shameful actions, lest from enjoying the imitation, they come to enjoy the reality. Or haven't you noticed that imitations practiced from youth become part of nature and settle into habits of gesture, voice, and thought?"

<sup>56</sup> See *Cratylus* 432a-d.

within it the potential for revelation and for great influence on the human spirit.”<sup>57</sup> While Socrates fears the youthful imitation of immoral actions and thinking, he also argues that poetry plays a role in priming the young soul of the *Kallipolis* to love the beautiful.<sup>58</sup> Undoubtedly, poetry’s power to move the human *psyche* undergirds Socrates’ infamous injunction in the *Republic*. Poetry would only face banishment if it were efficacious.

However, Plato’s works indicate that he viewed the power of poetry as potentially good as well as dangerous, and hence this is why Socrates offers a palinode to Eros in the *Phaedrus*.<sup>59</sup> Having recognized the transformative pedagogical and protreptic power of speech to convert a misguided young man to philosophy, Socrates offers up a “poetical”<sup>60</sup> palinode to better effect this conversion and reverse the negative consequences of his prior “poetical” speech. Hence, poetry, while “dangerous and *potentially* trivial,” is also noted and explicitly used for its power to aid the soul in the dialogues.

The picture of poetry in the Platonic dialogues is complicated further when one regards how the dialogues demonstrate Plato’s broad and deep knowledge of Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Simonides, Aeschylus, Euripides, and Aristophanes. Liberally peppered with quotations from and references to the poets, the dialogues reveal a well-read Plato who must have seen at least some value in the relationship between the two competing media. Let us consider only Plato’s uncontested and completed dialogues. There is not a single one that does not have at least one quotation from or reference to at least one of the traditional poets, with Homer named most frequently. The poets are divinely inspired,<sup>61</sup> and, in a conversation including a look at poetic

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<sup>57</sup> Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun*, 1.

<sup>58</sup> *Republic* 403c.

<sup>59</sup> *Phaedrus* 243b.

<sup>60</sup> *Phaedrus* 257a.

<sup>61</sup> See n21.



madness, Socrates even states that “madness (*mania*) from a god is finer than self-control of human origin.”<sup>62</sup> Poets are said to be possessed by the Muses,<sup>63</sup> but does this claim serve to vindicate poetry? For Plato, any attribution of a divine source must have positive implications. In the *Laws*<sup>64</sup> and the *Republic*,<sup>65</sup> for example, Socrates insists that the divine can only be the source of good things. Ergo, divine possession cannot result in evil for humans. Moreover, and perhaps the most detrimental to the anti-poetry side of the debate, Plato’s own works are often poetic and frequently violate the “rules” assigned to poetry in the *Republic* itself;<sup>66</sup> the dialogue form is itself mimetic and involves speaking in many voices, not all of which are virtuous. This multivocality should be understood literally since writing of all types was usually read aloud. Overall, then, Plato’s comments on poetry are not clearly negative.

Accordingly, if one hopes to accomplish the Herculean task of solving the problem of poetry, she needs an interpretive strategy through which she can understand Plato’s seemingly incongruous remarks as consistent with one another. This study offers such a strategy, arguing that a four-fold approach can significantly resolve the problem of poetry. First, the project establishes that the dialogues praise activities and experiences beyond the individual exercise of rational thought. Or, to say it differently, “rational” activities for Plato encompass the mystical as well as the straightforwardly logical because “reason” is fundamentally rooted in a higher divine reality to which the human soul ascends. This first point establishes that the dialogues include

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<sup>62</sup> *Phaedrus* 244d: κάλλιον... μανίαν σωφροσύνης τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ τῆς παρ’ ἀνθρώπων γιγνομένης.

<sup>63</sup> *Phaedrus* 243a, and throughout the *Ion*.

<sup>64</sup> *Laws* 907a: “aren’t all the gods the most supreme guardians of all, and don’t they look after our supreme interests?”

<sup>65</sup> *Republic* 379c: “Therefore, since a god is good (ὁ θεός, ἐπειδὴ ἀγαθός), he is not—as most people claim—the cause of everything that happens to human beings but of only a few things, for good things are fewer than bad ones in our lives. He alone is responsible for the good things, but we must find some other cause for the bad ones, not a god (τῶν δὲ κακῶν ἄλλ’ ἅπαντα δεῖ ζητεῖν τὰ αἴτια, ἀλλ’ οὐ τὸν θεόν).”

<sup>66</sup> For more on the literary and poetic elements of Plato’s writing style, see Jill Gordon, *Turning Toward Philosophy: Literary Device and Dramatic Structure in Plato’s Dialogues* (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). Gordon compellingly argues that Plato’s work has more in common with the poets of his day than the philosophers (64-73).

elements such as the poetic, and views these elements as potentially beneficial to, rather than separate from, the goals of the philosophical life. Indebted to Pickstock's vision of "the other Plato" as it is, this study endeavors to shed further light on why Plato vigorously employs literary mechanisms and repeatedly appeals to myth, the mysteries, and the erotic. Second, the project argues that the seemingly negative remarks on poetry, predominately located in the *Republic*, should be contextualized regarding interpretive approaches common at the time. The second point establishes that Socrates does not necessarily direct these negative remarks at poetry itself, but at specific approaches to interpreting poetry and understanding its role in education. Thus, this study's first and second objectives are to remove barriers to a more positive reading of poetry in Plato. To begin with these objectives, then, we can set the stage for an approach to poetry consistent with the repeated claims to its status as divinely inspired.

However, it remains to say *what* this positive reading of poetry in Plato might look like. The project will, therefore, take up the third and fourth objectives. The purpose of the third objective is to establish the central claim of the study itself, which is that Plato depicts poetry as a *daimonic* activity akin to the erotic or prophetic. The term "*daimonic*" here means that which mediates between discursive human knowledge and divine understanding by forming a bridging link between the two. This employment of "*daimonic*" is grounded in Plato's *Symposium*, in which Diotima tells Socrates that the function of the *daimonic* is to bind the mortal and divine together.<sup>67</sup> *Daimonic* activities enable individuals to convey or channel divine truth for which they cannot give an immediate rational account.<sup>68</sup> Several dialogues repeatedly suggest that poetry is one such mediating activity. As *daimonic*, poetry emerges as a dynamic mediating space between human science (*episteme*) and divine intellect (*noesis*) that breaks through the

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<sup>67</sup> *Symposium* 202e.

<sup>68</sup> *Symposium* 202d-203a.

limitations of human reason and offers an inspired pathway toward the Beautiful and the Good. A *daimonic* approach to poetry solves some apparent tensions resulting from Plato's various comments on the poets, poetry, and even language more broadly. Under this *daimonic* reading, one can understand how poetry can be genuinely inspired by the divine and, therefore, good in itself, yet also potentially dangerous when used by fallible humans with deluded claims to knowledge. Finally, this project's fourth objective seeks to explain *how* poetry can function as a *daimonic* activity. The mysteries commonly used poetry, and Plato appropriates this mystagogic use in such a way that it serves as a mediating threshold between Being,<sup>69</sup> as the object of contemplation, and Becoming, as the space in which contemplation occurs. Plato never refers to poetry or poets as *daimonic*. However, his accounts of poetry, especially in the *Ion*, alongside his remarks on the nature of other activities that are explicitly deemed *daimonic*—namely, the activities of oracles, Eros, and religious rites and rituals such as those of Orphism or the Eleusinian mysteries—reveals that poetry plays a similar role in linking the human being to the divine.

Consequently, the poetic counts as a kind of knowledge beyond justification because it is beyond discursive reason, much like the oracular and erotic. However, just like the oracular and erotic, it is subject to investigation via philosophical examination. Poetry thereby connects us to *noetic* knowledge through the experience of something immediately sensory that also, simultaneously, transcends the sensory. Poetry links individuals to Being by bypassing the need for concrete language and providing a more immediate, though less clear, apprehension of the wisdom pursued more fully in philosophical contemplation as a whole. Through its creative

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<sup>69</sup> Here and throughout this project, "Becoming" denotes the spatial and temporal realm in which images of the Forms become manifest in particular, changing things. In other words, "Becoming" denotes the medium of sensible or material existence in time.

power to form, challenge, and reform our grasp of the Forms, poetry shows how discursive thought is far from static and fixed but is, instead, an ever-moving, living image of divine Being.

### III. Overview

The central claim of this study is that poetry can be read as *daimonic* in Plato's dialogues and that such a reading substantially resolves the problem of poetry; however, as noted above, making this claim requires some groundwork. While it is important to demonstrate that poetry is *daimonic*, it is first necessary to show that the dialogues present those things that fall under the category of the *daimonic* as valuable. Thus, this study makes a connection between Plato's treatment of poetry and his treatment of the *daimonic*. This connection is then applied to the problem of poetry in order to substantially resolve some of its tension. The claim is that Plato's dialogues depict some "non-rational," *daimonic* experiences as having a potential benefit for the ascent of the philosopher's soul, and that poetry, when it functions *daimonically*, can be one such experience. Consequently, Chapter One, "Plato and the Marriage of Reason, Mystagogy, and Mythopoesis," reviews interpretations that limit Plato to a strictly rationalistic approach and thereby imply a lack of genuine appreciation for the mythopoetic, mystic, and erotic in his work. Instead, the first chapter provides evidence that Plato's philosophy accommodates non-rational forms of pursuing knowledge, viewing them as beneficial, if not even required, for the philosophical life.<sup>70</sup> Hence, Chapter One includes an analysis of the relationship between reason and mythopoesis, mystery rites, and the erotic as demonstrated through a particular focus on the *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and *Republic*. Having established the compatibility between reason and the aforementioned activities, Chapter One then outlines the parameters of Platonic

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<sup>70</sup> By "non-rational," I simply mean activities and experiences which cannot be immediately and wholly explained by or reduced to the calculative operations of the individual rational subject.

demonology and its constituting features, clarifying that the *daimonic* in Plato's work is not a coherent or unified notion. Nevertheless, one consistent idea *does* emerge: the *daimonic* mediates between what is human and what is divine. Chapter One then argues that the mythopoetic, mystical, and erotic experiences and activities function *daimonically* when they ignite the urge in the human soul to pursue divine truth.

Chapter Two, "Re-examining Plato's Comments on Poetry," turns to the historical context in which Plato's Socrates makes his seemingly disparaging comments on poetry. Through this contextualization, Socrates' banishment of the poets is shown to operate as a critique of the interpretive methods of his time. These methods are literalism and *allegoresis*, both of which seek to extract knowledge from the poets by revering them as polymathic geniuses. Chapter Two then addresses enigma or "double speak," which was closely tied to oracular speech and connected to the tradition of *allegoresis*. While Plato rejects some modes of *allegoresis* common in his day, he may have a more positive attitude toward *allegoresis* with respect to enigma. Enigma, which was used by thinkers such as Heraclitus, employed non-literal, poetic language to communicate the disparity between human cognition and divine wisdom. Having addressed the literary culture and historical contexts in which Socrates made his remarks, Chapter Two then looks at his comments in Book X of the *Republic*, which reveal that Plato intends to draw our attention to what is occluded by traditional methods of approaching the poets, and to make us aware of how we need a new approach to enjoy poetry responsibly.

Chapter Three, "*Daimonic* Poetry," focuses on the possible nature of the new approach to poetry that is hinted at in Book X of the *Republic*. This chapter foregrounds the central argument that we can understand the poetic in Plato as akin to other *daimonic* activities such as the oracular, divinatory, ritual, and the erotic. This chapter first gives a reading of the *Ion*. Then, it

addresses the more standard (or less controversial) “ironic” reading of the *Ion*, according to which Socrates engages the rhapsode in an elaborate jest and is insincere in his claims regarding divine inspiration. I argue that there are good reasons to be suspicious of these ironic interpretations and that they are not necessary for elucidating a more nuanced meaning of the *Ion* that goes beyond viewing Socrates as insincere. Chapter Three then parallels the *Ion* with other texts concerned with the activity of the *daimonic*, focusing on the *Symposium* specifically. When read alongside these other texts, the *Ion* gives a concrete presentation of poetry itself as *daimonic*. Finally, this chapter looks at the *Phaedrus* to address whether the divine can give “bad inspiration,” or inspiration that leads the soul to incorrect and, therefore, damaging conclusions about reality. While Socrates’ first speech praising the non-lover and his sanity appears to be an instance of such bad inspiration, the dialogue ultimately points to the opposite conclusion: divine inspiration is always good, but the danger for all *daimonic* activities, including poetry, lies in the individual’s duty to discern and interpret the message. Accordingly, Chapter Three concludes by arguing that the danger of poetry is no different from that of other *daimonic* activities: they are always beneficial to the soul *qua* their origin in the divine, but they become dangerous when engaged by people who have not purged themselves of the ignorance of ignorance.

Lastly, Chapter Four, “Plato’s *Cratylus*: the Method of *Daimonic* Mediation in Poetic Language,” looks more closely at what I take to be a particular instance of Socrates using poetry in traditionally mystagogic ways. The chapter highlights one of possibilities of poetry’s *daimonic* function as initiatory. Socrates uses an etymological analysis of the poets, which is a technique rooted in allegorical readings used by mystery cults to “initiate” someone into philosophy. This chapter demonstrates one way poetry can function *daimonically* and argues that the *Cratylus* points to how poetic language functions within the larger context of the relationship between

language and Platonic metaphysics. The chapter begins with a look at the *Cratylus* and then examines the explicit parallels between this dialogue and the Orphic *Derveni Papyrus* to argue that Plato employs a ritual and initiatory treatment of poetry that is similar to mystagogic texts from the same period. However, Plato's Socrates uses these methods to initiate Hermogenes into philosophy rather than one of the mystery cults. In this way, Socrates' use of poetry is *daimonic* both because it engages in initiatory rites (which are inherently intermediary) and because it uses poetry's very form to mediate the soul's relationship to its search for divine truth. Chapter Four then argues that one way in which poetry operates *daimonically* is by making and remaking our understanding of divine Being so that we can continually improve it through philosophical dialectic. Suppose Plato's cosmos is a hierarchical one in which the highest levels exist outside of space and time while the middle and lower levels operate within space and time. In that case, it stands to reason that human thought, as a temporally conditioned project, is always grasping for, yet incompletely obtaining, an understanding of a stable, atemporal divine Being.

Consequently, human thought can only actualize its various potencies for understanding Being by being in continual motion. This perpetual motion ideally allows us to "think through" – i.e., the literal meaning of *dianoia*, the state below complete understanding, or *noesis* – Being. Thus, the human intellect is, ideally, continually thinking through Being in order to unceasingly make and remake her knowledge into a better, i.e., more complete, image of its source, the eternal Forms and, above them, the Good beyond Being. Poetry, therefore, fulfills its *daimonic* task through a mystagogic use—similar, but different in crucial ways, to the use of poetry in classical mystery cults—initiating and reinitiating the philosopher's *psyche* into the contemplation of Being by de-stabilizing its discursive understanding of the Forms. Hence, when understood

*daimonically*, poetry maintains the vital motion of human thought so that it can continually mold itself to the image of divine Being, thereby effecting a recurring poetic initiation into philosophy.

#### IV. Some Comments on Methodology

Since this study engages what Pickstock calls “the other Plato” as notably distinct from other approaches, it should say something about its own interpretative approach. It contrasts what Debra Nails has called “the orthodoxy of Anglo-American Platonic studies.”<sup>71</sup> Nails distills this interpretive position into two claims: (1) Plato’s thought develops in distinct and identifiable ways throughout his corpus (i.e., the position of developmentalism) and (2) the early dialogues, in the face of the “Socratic Problem,” can be understood as depicting the historical Socrates.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, Nails explains:

Adherents to developmentalism are committed to the interlocking premises that Plato's views evolved or developed over his productive lifetime, and that the chronological order of composition of the dialogues can be reconstructed with sufficient confidence to yield a mapping of doctrines to dialogues. [The] further premise [is] that the earliest dialogues depict the views of the historical Socrates.<sup>73</sup>

Gregory Vlastos’ landmark book, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, provides the most robust representation of this longstanding approach to Plato.<sup>74</sup> Vlastos spends two chapters of

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<sup>71</sup> Debra Nails, “Problems with Vlastos’s Platonic Developmentalism,” *Ancient Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (1993), 273.

<sup>72</sup> For a brief explanation of the “Socratic Problem,” see William Prior, “The Socratic Problem,” in *The Continuum Companion to Plato*, edited by Gerald A. Press et. al. (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), 29: “The Socratic dialogue form presumably reflects the dialectical activity of the historical Socrates. Beyond this, it is difficult to be certain what, if anything, Socrates believed or taught or what kind of person he was. The problem is that we have four early sources: Aristophanes, Aristotle, Plato and Xenophon, and they do not always agree... The discrepancies among our sources have produced the ‘Socratic Problem’, and its persistence in the literature may be a that it is insoluble. The problem arises from the fact that Socrates wrote nothing, so that all of our earliest accounts of his views come from the sources mentioned above.”

<sup>73</sup> Nails, “Problems with Vlastos’s Platonic Developmentalism,” 273.

<sup>74</sup> Nails notes that the original position finds its origins in the stylometric work of L. Campbell as far back as 1867. See Campbell, L. *The Sophistes and Politicus of Plato* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1867). Furthermore, Charles Kahn points out that this Anglo-American Orthodoxy is clearly operative in W.C.K. Guthrie’s 1975 work and in Terrence Irwin’s 1977 work, wherein Irwin remarks that this position is already the standard. (See Charles Kahn, “Did Plato Write Socratic Dialogues?” in *Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates*” ed. Hugh H. Benson (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 35-52. See also W.C.K. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy: Plato: The Man and His*



this work arguing for his own answer to the Socratic Problem by reinforcing the developmental interpretation.<sup>75</sup> However, despite its privileged status as “orthodox,” this position is not without critics.<sup>76</sup>

It is beyond this project’s scope to give a systematic rebuttal to the developmental reading of Plato and to the view that the early dialogues present the historical Socrates *contra* Plato’s own philosophy. Other scholars have already done this.<sup>77</sup> Still, it is necessary to address the developmental reading as the methodology employed in this project contrasts with that of the orthodox reading. The present project looks at a diverse collection of dialogues in conversation with one another. Whether addressed in detail or used as support, the *Republic*, *Ion*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, and *Cratylus* are of central focus in this project, with further support from other dialogues, including *Euthyphro*, *Timaeus*, *Apology*, and *Laws*. According to the orthodox approach, one ought not to read the *Ion* in concert with the *Symposium*, for the former contains the ethical philosophy of the historical Socrates, whereas the latter comprises the views of Plato as he trends toward a more robust metaphysical philosophy. In the so-called middle dialogues,

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*Dialogues – Earlier Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 67 and Terrence Irwin, *Plato’s Moral Theory: The Early and Middle Dialogues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 236. Thus, while Vlastos’ 1991 text marks a particularly important moment in the history of this position, it is by no means the origin of this “orthodoxy.” Sedley similarly comments on the, not unsurprising, level of consensus among contemporary scholarship in accepting the developmental model and its positing of a more historical Socrates in the so-called “early” dialogues. See David Sedley, *Plato’s Cratylus* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6-7.

<sup>75</sup> Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 45-106.

<sup>76</sup> See Nails, “Problems with Vlastos’s Platonic Developmentalism” and Kahn, “Did Plato Write Socratic Dialogues?”

<sup>77</sup> See Nails, “Problems with Vlastos’s Platonic Developmentalism.” See also Gordon, *Turning Toward Philosophy*, 1-13 and 117-134. Gordon addresses issues of developmentalism, irony, and the Socratic problem – especially with reference to the work of Vlastos – in several places throughout. Gordon’s take on the dramatic content of the dialogues – best seen, she argues, under a non-developmental reading – is particularly relevant to the concerns of this study. In Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, “Socrates’ ‘Daimonion’ and Rationality,” *Apeiron* 38, no. 2 (2005), the authors examine Vlastos’ comments on Socrates’ *daimonion* in the *Theaetetus*, and note that Vlastos may even fail “to maintain his developmentalist account of our sources in a consistent way” (46).

Socrates is an increasingly fictionalized mouthpiece for Plato's own ideas. In contrast, in the so-called early, “Socratic” dialogues, Plato espouses the historical Socrates’s views.

Importantly, and as Vlastos has acknowledged,<sup>78</sup> the evidence for the orthodox approach is not without reproach, ambiguity, or solid alternative options. Notably, the central issue facing both the developmental approach and attempts at answering the Socratic problem is insufficient evidence. As Gerd Van Riel reminds us, there were many other authors in the classical period writing “Socratic literature (the *'Sokratikoi logoi'*),” and this was “a literary genre that was quite successful in the early fourth century BCE, and of which Plato's Socratic dialogues are the best—but not the only—samples.”<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, “[t]his Socratic literature never provides a neutral account of Socrates as a historical figure. The various authors interpret Socrates' behaviour, and use his person to exemplify (or justify) their own views and theories, in the light of the ongoing philosophical debates.”<sup>80</sup> Aside from Socratic dialogues, various schools of thought, such as Cynicism and Academic Skepticism, took Socrates as an inspiring figurehead. Plato, Xenophon, Diogenes of Sinope, and Arcesilaus all took up the Socratic persona as symbolic of the spirit of philosophy. Still, they did so in various ways and reached notably distinct conclusions. This intentional lionization and fictionalization of the person of Socrates by so many varied thinkers and schools complicates the Socratic Problem significantly. The Socratic Problem thereby emerges as a multi-faceted conundrum in which teasing apart any historically accurate picture of Socrates results in trying to come up with objective criteria by which we can delineate him from the fictionalized versions given by authors who were writing to expound their own diverse views. Vlastos offered one possible solution to this problem, which

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<sup>78</sup> Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 53.

<sup>79</sup> Gerd Van Riel, “Socrates’ Daemon: Internalisation of the Divine and Knowledge of the Self,” *Apeiron* 38, no. 2 (2005): 31.

<sup>80</sup> Van Riel, “Socrates’ Daemon,” 31.

Alexander Nehamas, Vlastos' own student, referred to as both "extremely controversial and revisionary."<sup>81</sup> Vlastos himself stated that his answer to the Socratic Problem was "offered as a hypothesis, not dogma or reported fact."<sup>82</sup> In other words, Vlastos saw his work in 1991 as something of an experimental solution to a longstanding problem and recognized that it was not airtight.

Accordingly, Vlastos' claims and their subsequent legacy have faced robust scrutiny. Nails has written explicitly against Vlastos' claims, arguing that they fall victim to accusations of circularity and that "Vlastos' s principal doctrinal distinctions do not hold for the dialogues as he groups them chronologically, [and] that a host of *ad hoc* arguments, if not special pleading, is required to maintain his program."<sup>83</sup> Nails thereby concludes that "substantive inferences from some dialogue or others being thought 'early' or 'middle' should be drawn with cautious restraint, if at all."<sup>84</sup> As noted by William Prior and Van Riel, even our best candidates for a reliable depiction of Socrates, his former students, Plato and Xenophon, do not give us a unified picture of him; Vlastos understood this as well.<sup>85</sup> It remains to be seen how reliable any attempt to tease the historical Socrates apart from competing accounts can be. Such projects are

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<sup>81</sup> Alexander Nehamas, "Voices of Silence: On Gregory Vlastos' Socrates," in *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 85.

<sup>82</sup> Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 53.

<sup>83</sup> Nails, "Problems with Vlastos's Platonic Developmentalism," 274.

<sup>84</sup> Nails, "Problems with Vlastos's Platonic Developmentalism," 273.

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 38-40. Here, Vlastos draws distinctions between Socratic and Platonic *eros*, referring to Xenophon's depictions more than once as evidence of the former. Why this does not lead us to conclude there are differences between Xenophonic and Platonic *eros* is left entirely unaddressed, as is why we are to take discrepancies between Xenophon and Plato on this matter as discrepancies between fictional and historical accounts of Socrates when they could just as easily be differing, but equally fictionalized accounts regardless of whether or not they stand in for either student's own views. Strangely, elsewhere, Vlastos treats Xenophon's picture of the historical Socrates as incomplete without additions from Plato, such as when he argues that while we get a hint of the ironic Socrates in Xenophon, we only see him fully in Plato's early dialogues (30-33). It is hard to avoid the impression that Vlastos begins with his conclusion and then makes the historical depictions of Socrates fit it. Where Xenophon and Plato differ on *eros*, Xenophon is the authority (presumably because Plato discusses *eros* most robustly in his middle dialogues). Where they differ on irony, Plato is to be preferred. Why? We are never told. The reasoning seems to be none other than that we get a more robust picture of irony in relation to Socrates within Plato. Yet, why this has to mean that Plato is depicting the real, historical, ironic Socrates rather than that Plato himself was simply an adept writer of ironic dialogue is unclear.

experimental and potentially interesting and useful, but hardly vigorously falsifiable or verifiable according to concrete, objective standards. Further, while it is the case that Plato's so-called "early" dialogues have a greater focus on moral concerns, in the absence of evidence that they represent Socrates' views as opposed to Plato's own, it is worth asking if the strength of this claim relies on a certain level of question-begging. Many scholars assume that the early dialogues are Socratic because they (seem to) focus on the concerns of moral philosophy to the exclusion of any metaphysical claims, and on this basis, early dialogues are assumed to be devoid of metaphysical content because they are Socratic, and Socratic dialogues aren't metaphysical. Setting aside dating issues for a moment, it seems equally plausible that young Plato was more interested in questions of moral philosophy but that he had specific connections to his own metaphysical theory in mind as well. This view allows us to accommodate momentary references to topics outside of moral philosophy without simply having to scratch our heads.<sup>86</sup>

Most importantly for the present project, one should note, as Nails does,<sup>87</sup> that the *Ion* appears as a thorn in the flesh of Vlastos' claims. The first of Vlastos' ten theses regarding the historical Socrates in Plato's early dialogues holds that the historical Socrates, as depicted in the early dialogues, is an exclusively moral philosopher. Yet, it is unclear how the *Ion* fits this

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<sup>86</sup> Vlastos argues that the historical Socrates was "exclusively a moral philosopher" and that this is seen in the early Platonic dialogues (Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 53). Though, Vlastos also admits that Socrates' "arguments sometimes trench on other topics" (53). Still, Vlastos dismisses this latter observation by stating that "the only theses [Socrates] investigates elenctically are propositions in the moral domain" (53). Perhaps, however, Plato simply wanted to explore moral topics in some dialogues and not in others. Why are we to assume that the situation indicates inconsistent philosophical concerns or views among early, middle, and late dialogues? A different focus in some dialogues does not automatically imply a different philosophical outlook in the writer. As Nails puts it: "the dialogues considered individually have philosophical and aesthetic unities that Plato appears to have valued... beyond a completeness that would necessarily have brought repetition with it." See Nails, "Problems with Vlastos's Developmentalism," 279-280. In other words, Plato doesn't have to explicitly connect each individual theme or focus in each dialogue to the others in order to demonstrate that individual dialogues might still share some of the assumptions made in others. Otherwise, Plato would have to repeat his metaphysical and epistemological claims in every single text. Why not, then, start from the alternative assumption of unity rather than developmentalism? From this view, practical life and contemplative life are not separable for Plato, and individual topics may warrant specific attention without undermining this outlook.

<sup>87</sup> Nails, "Problems with Vlastos's Platonic Developmentalist," 277.

assertion. For Nails, the *Ion* violates Vlastos' thesis. She points out that Vlastos himself tacitly admits this. He explains that the *Ion* is an account of divine inspiration, and thus that it does make epistemological claims about religion.<sup>88</sup> Hence, even on Vlastos' own account of the dialogue, the *Ion*, unlike other early dialogues, is doing more than *just* moral philosophy.<sup>89</sup> Nails concludes that Vlastos' "treatment of the *Ion* is difficult to explain except as an oversight."<sup>90</sup> She further notes that Vlastos' approach to the *Ion* also conflicts with his tenth thesis, which holds that early, elenctic dialogues (of which the *Ion* is one) pursue an "adversative" model of philosophical investigation in which (the historical) Socrates "pursues moral truth by refuting theses defended by dissenting interlocutors."<sup>91</sup> This "adversative" model is supposed to conflict with the Socrates of the middle dialogues in which (Plato's) Socrates expounds "truth to consenting interlocutors."<sup>92</sup> Yet, the *Ion* involves both approaches, for not only does Socrates lead the rhapsode through an elenctic investigation, refuting his claims, but Socrates also clearly states his own positive views on the poets' divine inspiration and asks Ion to respond.<sup>93</sup> Ergo, the developmental method is not well-suited to a project that relies heavily on this dialogue.

Plato maintains that poetry is divinely inspired throughout the dialogues, including those recognized as early, middle, and late. The view of inspired poetry appears in texts as varied from

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<sup>88</sup> See Nails, "Problems with Vlastos's Platonic Developmentalism," 277 and Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 168-169.

<sup>89</sup> Nails, "Problems with Vlastos's Platonic Developmentalism," 277 and Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 168-169.

<sup>90</sup> Nails, "Problems with Vlastos's Platonic Developmentalist," 277.

<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Nails, "Problems with Vlastos's Platonic Developmentalism," 276.

<sup>92</sup> Quoted in Nails, "Problems with Vlastos's Platonic Developmentalism," 276. Stern-Gillet likewise notes the unusual quality of the *Ion* for an early dialogue, stating that "[u]nlike most other early dialogues, the *Ion* is not fully aporetic. Socrates is portrayed as being in an unusually loquacious mood; besides cross-examining his interlocutor and exposing his slow wit, he offers an alternative account of the genesis of poetry. This account, which is sandwiched between the two parts of the elenchus, is the pivot of the dialogue" ("On (Mis)Interpreting Plato's *Ion*," 177).

<sup>93</sup> See Nails, "Problems with Vlastos's Platonic Developmentalism," 277 and Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 49.

one another as the *Apology*, *Ion*, *Phaedrus*, and *Laws*.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, this position on the inspiration of poetry appears alongside apparent critiques of the poets themselves in early, middle, and late dialogues. In these same dialogues, ranging from early to late, the poets are devoid of proper knowledge but brimming with divine inspiration. In the *Apology*, Socrates is disappointed in the poets precisely because they only hit on the truth via inspiration, not knowledge.<sup>95</sup> A similar theme repeats throughout the *Ion*. The *Phaedrus* is quite clear that poets are mad and know nothing on their own.<sup>96</sup> The *Laws* indicates that “poets as a class are divinely gifted and are inspired when they sing, so that with the help of Graces and Muses they frequently hit on how things really happen.”<sup>97</sup> Yet, one book earlier, the Athenian Stranger, takes up a discussion of poetry and music concerning education, which closely resembles the one undertaken by Socrates in the *Republic*. The result is that commentators often see a dilemma between the problems raised in the *Republic* and *Laws* regarding the educational dangers of poetry and the need to severely limit it to only the most didactic forms versus the clear, seemingly positive ascription of divine inspiration to “forbidden” poetry such as the work of Homer and Hesiod. Scholars must then choose which horn to abandon. Either inspiration is actually bad (and therefore presented ironically), or Plato’s concerns over the poet’s lack of *techné* should be re-interpreted as insincere in some way.

Hence, the reason that the problem of poetry persists despite the widespread orthodoxy of developmentalism lies in the reality that the problem persists across dialogues *even when granting developmentalism*. As noted above, even on a developmental account, the problem of poetry remains across the various periods of Plato’s work. Plato’s Socrates displays a concern

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<sup>94</sup> *Apology* 22c, throughout the *Ion* (see 533e and 534b), *Phaedrus* 533e, and *Laws* 719c.

<sup>95</sup> *Apology* 22e.

<sup>96</sup> *Phaedrus* 533e

<sup>97</sup> *Laws* 682a.

over the ignorance of the poets in the *Apology* and *Ion*, despite also affirming their inspiration in those very same dialogues, and this tension between ignorance and inspiration persists into late texts like the *Laws*. Hence, even if the orthodox approach is helpful for addressing some problems in Plato—such as the evolution of Forms across the body of his work—it appears to fail as an explanatory mechanism for the problem of poetry. One cannot point to it as a problem specific to early, middle, or late-period dialogues. Where poetry is concerned, one cannot say that Plato argues for inspiration in the early dialogues and the ignorance and danger of the poets in the late ones. Across all of Plato’s texts, the concern regarding ignorant poets and dangerous *mimesis* coincides with passages from each period attesting to divine intervention in the form of inspiration as the cause of poetic genius. Accordingly, this project aims to reveal that the dilemma between the divine inspiration of poetry and its danger is a false one. Taking the hypothesis that the poetic is *daimonic* as our starting point, this study applies it across the dialogues to see what emerges. With the *daimonic* reading, Plato can accept both the goodness of divine inspiration and the perils of ignorant poets and their interpreters, and this is why he repeatedly places both claims next to one another throughout his body of work.

There are good reasons for taking up the orthodox approach in other projects, but this study contends that an inter and intra-textual approach that seriously takes the potential for coherency bears explanatory fruit. There are many ways to read Plato, all of which reveal something different. Though there may be good reasons to assume a Vlastosian developmentalism to elucidate certain truths of the Platonic corpus, it also obstructs other possibilities for understanding the texts. Given the recent historical dominance of the orthodox position, it is useful to try something else and see what comes to light.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, even if

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<sup>98</sup> I say “recent historical dominance” because such a position was virtually unknown to most of the history of interpreting Plato, and has only emerged in the last 150 years or so, during which time it has become the dominant

Plato's corpus is not coherent regarding all topics – and really, how could it be? – it may still be coherent regarding some if only we attempt to read against the grain. When one reads Plato's texts with a view to this consistency regarding poetry, interesting and vital interpretations of Plato's thought emerge. Such an approach can help to resolve tensions that may arise when one takes developmental methods too far and is forced to focus too much on differences rather than parallels between texts of different periods.

#### V. Conclusion: The Relevance of this Study

Assuredly, Plato was aware that poetry was a vital part of everyday intellectual life in Classical Athens. "Poetry," for the Classical Greeks, encompassed epics, song, tragedy, comedy, and various religious works. It is helpful to think of the ancient context through a modern lens. Most contemporary adults think of Shakespeare, Tennyson, Dickinson, and so on when they think of poetry. Yet, most of us would not think of Byron or Goëthe, for example, as fundamentally framing much of our experience of the world. The word "poetry" in its contemporary use does not really get at the phenomenon that Plato was addressing because, for the Greeks, "poetry" denoted many forms of art that we would not think of as poetry today. They learned this broader form of "poetry" in school, they heard it on the streets and at the theatre, recited it to one another at parties, competed with each other at composing it, and it was indelibly present to their religious consciousness. In short, poetry, much more broadly construed than it is in today's consciousness, circumscribed ancient Greek life at every turn: the personal and the public, the secular and the religious, the highbrow and the low, the educational and the entertaining, and so on. Thus, the lived implications of Plato's philosophical convictions about

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view in some, but certainly not all, circles of Platonic scholarship. The Neoplatonists, for example, did not approach Plato's dialogues in the same manner as many contemporary scholars who adopt the so-called "orthodox" position.



poetry were of no minor importance to Classical Greeks, nor are they of minor importance for us, since they touch on more than just what we would think of as poetry today. Accordingly, determining Plato's position on poetry was a meaningful task for his Classical and Late Antique commentators, and it remains a meaningful task for lovers of poetry (including most fictional literature), music, and theatre today.

Yet, one might wonder, why write a Platonic “apology” of poetry today?<sup>99</sup> One could adjust their own philosophical views to accommodate poetry better, simply rejecting the elements of Plato that do not accord with its value. Such adaptation is possible, but doing so would amount to several missed philosophical opportunities that are opened through the following observations. First, the creative use of language is a significant part of the human experience and is nearly ubiquitous; it is difficult to name cultures that do not or did not employ it regardless of place, culture, era, and so on. Thus, denying it the fullness of its expression is an intolerable conclusion. Art imitates life, but it also *makes* life in many ways. Art, such as poetry, not only mimics reality but also puts reality before us in a way that demands we maintain the fullness of being human. In other words, poetry is more than pretty or pleasurable; it endlessly remakes our world and presents it to us anew, allowing us to interact with it, learn from it, and improve it.

The second observation is that Plato has had an immense, immeasurable influence on the history of ideas. One should recall A.N. Whitehead’s famous claim that the “safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”<sup>100</sup> Plato is one of the cornerstones of the so-called Western philosophical tradition, and

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<sup>99</sup> To use the term in its original, Greek sense.

<sup>100</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press: A Division of Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1978), 39.

his influence cannot be easily dismissed or written out of that legacy. Combined with the third observation, which is that ideas impact the concrete living conditions of human beings, the problem of poetry becomes more than a simple question of whether one should keep caring about Plato. Instead, one has little choice in the matter, practically or ethically. In the style of Nietzsche's madman, we ought to fully recognize the consequences resulting from the death of Platonism. Though long buried, the rotting corpse of Plato's philosophy has and will persist for centuries and, as such, warrants reexamination if only to confirm or deny his complicit role in lambasting a fundamental aspect of being human, i.e., the experience of beauty in poetry.

Finally, with respect to Pickstock's "other Plato," there is more than one "other Plato." While rejecting "Plato, the rationalist," recent feminist and anti-racist scholars have taken up a Plato who affords nothing to embodiment, particularity, emotion, ritual, and religion. If one hopes to maintain the importance of Plato for our current intellectual landscape, recovering a Platonism that values the embodied life of divinely inspired poetic, erotic, and religious madness may have beneficial consequences for our current economy of ideas. All of these reasons, in addition to a love of Plato's work for its own sake, inform the present project and speak to its place in the current body of scholarship on the problem of poetry in Plato.

## Chapter One

### Rational Mysticism: Plato and the Marriage of Reason, Religion, and Mytho-Poesis

#### I. Introduction

In *On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books*, Porphyry of Tyre recounts the following tale:

An Egyptian priest once came to Rome and met [Plotinus] through a mutual friend. Wanting to give a demonstration of his wisdom, he invited Plotinus to come and see him summon his guardian daemon. Plotinus readily agreed, and the invocation took place in the temple of Isis, since the Egyptian said that this was the only pure place he could find in Rome. When he called upon Plotinus' daemon to appear, it was a god that came, rather than a member of the genus of daemons. As the Egyptian said: 'You are blessed, since you have a god as your daemon, and are not accompanied by a member of the lower genus.' They were not able to ask or learn more while it was there, since one of their friends, who was watching with them, strangled the birds he was holding as protection – whether deliberately, through envy, or in a moment of panic. In any case, the fact that Plotinus was accompanied by a daemon of superior divinity led him to raise his god-like vision towards it.<sup>101</sup>

Let us briefly consider the details of this account. Plotinus was a person of such a character that a visiting priest – who had only just met him – was eager to engage him in a summoning ritual, and Plotinus readily agreed to the request. We also gather that Plotinus had friends who were familiar enough with the invocation ritual in which they could participate. In this case, a friend was tasked with holding the birds for protection while Plotinus and the priest undertook the invocation. Further, those who knew him personally believed literally, not symbolically, that Plotinus not only had his own guardian *daimon*, who could be made to appear through ritual, but also that it was a superior divinity and that it was the cause of Plotinus' philosophical success by leading him “to raise his god-like vision towards it.” In sum, Porphyry's account paints a picture of Plotinus as not only philosophically but also spiritually adept.

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<sup>101</sup> Porphyry of Tyre, *On the Life of Plotinus and the Order of His Books*, in *Plotinus: The Enneads*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson, trans. George Boys-Stones et. al (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), §10.

One might find this passage from Porphyry's biographical account of Plotinus puzzling. Plotinus eschewed the entrapments of the sensible, material world in favor of a contemplative ascent toward the soul's true home in the Intellect, containing all of the Forms.<sup>102</sup> The truly blessed were promised further ascent to the One itself as the first principal of all.<sup>103</sup> Hence, as one who rejected the material world in favor of a contemplative flight from the sensible to the intellectual and beyond, Plotinus would seemingly scoff at rituals like the one in which he apparently readily participated. Given that his view of ascent involved reasoned contemplation of the Intellect, surely he would regard the summoning of supernatural entities while birds squawked in the background as superstitious nonsense below the rational workings of logical thinking. Yet, this great metaphysician saw no incompatibility between rational contemplation and ritual practices such as the one recounted by Porphyry.

Perhaps at least one reason for Plotinus' engagement in ritual lies in the limitations of Intellect itself in its position below the One. For Plotinus, the soul's ascent ends not in the hypostatic Intellect, but rather in mystical union with the One itself,<sup>104</sup> which is absolutely beyond the differentiation found among the Forms contained in Intellect.<sup>105</sup> Thought belongs to the lower *hypostases* (Intellect and Soul), while the One itself lies beyond thought, superior to it as its very source.<sup>106</sup> For Plotinus, then, the rational serves something beyond itself. Indeed, ritual as well as activities and experiences which centralize the erotic, mytho-poetic, mystagogic,

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<sup>102</sup> See *Plotinus, The Enneads*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson, trans. George Boys-Stones et. al (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 4.4.2. See also 2.4.16 where matter is described as "exceedingly evil." Note in 2.9.4 that the soul sees the Forms in the intellect. All subsequent quotations from the *Enneads* are taken from this edition.

<sup>103</sup> See *Ennead* 6.9.11: Plotinus writes that "the way of life of gods, and divine, happy human Beings" consists in "the release from everything here, a way of life that takes no pleasure in things here, the refuge of a solitary in the solitary."

<sup>104</sup> See *Ennead* 6.9.10

<sup>105</sup> See *Ennead* 6.9.6: the One contains no differentiation.

<sup>106</sup> See *Ennead* 1.2.3: "the soul thinks in one way, but, among the things in the intelligible world, one sort [Intellect] thinks in a different way, and the other [the One] does not think at all."

prophetic, and divinatory were widely acknowledged and embraced as a necessary part of Platonic philosophy by many in antiquity. In fact, the reverence that later Neoplatonists, such as Iamblichus and Proclus, had for the Chaldean Oracles and theurgical practices essentially created a syncretic philosopher's religion wherein religious rites and philosophical contemplation were interdependent methods for the ascent of the Philosopher's soul toward the Good.<sup>107</sup>

The importance of these activities and experiences for so many Platonic thinkers sets a challenge before stereotypical notions of the philosophical life as the purview of reason alone. "Reason" here means, broadly, the operations of deductive thought, thought that aligns with the parameters of logic, the movement of thought in discursive reasoning, the practice of producing definitions from the logical investigation of things, and the various approaches to dialectic. In short, "reason" typically refers to any kind of methodical means of thinking by which one can reach a logically verifiable conclusion about a given matter. In contrast, the activities and experiences listed above (magic, the erotic, mythopoetic, mystagogic, prophetic, and divinatory) do not solely arise out of the rational operations of thought, and they often cannot be reduced to them either. Hence, there is a non-rational element to the paradigm of the philosophical life, embraced by many Platonists in antiquity, in which spiritual life and philosophical life became one and the same, and the lines between philosopher and mystic were virtually erased.

Importantly, the Neoplatonists viewed themselves as inheritors of Plato's thought, and they treated his texts with something nearing the authority of scriptures.<sup>108</sup> Accordingly, they located a similar spirituality within Plato's corpus itself. To be sure, there were significant

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<sup>107</sup> See Radek Chlup, *Proclus: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 30-32.

<sup>108</sup> For example, counting direct references only, Plotinus quotes Plato in order to justify the authority of his claims over two dozen times throughout the *Enneads*, including, notably, when discussing the *daimonic* (see *Ennead* 2.3.9, 3.4.5, 6.7.6) and Proclus opens his work on evil by stating that the appropriate starting point for philosophical inquiry is with "the divine Plato" (Proclus, *On the Existence of Evils*, trans. Jan Opsomer and Carlos Steel, ed. Richard Sorabji (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), 1.5-10.

cultural factors encouraging the religious or spiritual element of their philosophical practice. The cultural milieu of ancient Greece and Rome offered fertile soil for the flourishing of philosopher-mystics. Religion permeated nearly every aspect of the ancients' lives such that there was little division between the secular and the sacred. Yet, while their culture already primed the Platonists to view the life of the philosopher-mystic as their goal, they *also* saw strong evidence for it in the works of Plato, which depicted Socrates as a philosopher-mystic and a sage. As Crystal Addey notes, for the Neoplatonists, there was no internal tension in this image of Socrates:

[The] view of Socrates as sage and mystic does not contradict or conflict in any way with the view of Socrates as a rationalist or as the philosopher par excellence. Both roles are attributed to Socrates by Neoplatonists and are seen as vital to the role of philosophy as a way of life leading toward self-knowledge and, consequently, toward knowledge of the cosmos... Within Neoplatonism, the dialectician must be a mystic, and the mystic must be a dialectician. In this sense, Socrates exemplifies the culmination of the philosophical life – the enlightened mystic who lives and acts in assimilation to the divine.<sup>109</sup>

In other words, the later Platonists – such as Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus – embraced elements of the philosophical life that seemingly lie outside of rational thought alone, and this was at least in part because they saw these elements in the texts of Plato.<sup>110</sup> Or, to put it more accurately, the Neoplatonists saw no tension between rational thought and things that, today, seem non-rational, such as the poetic, mystical, and erotic. For these thinkers, the rational included these things, and, conversely, these things were rational.

Other scholars have noted the importance of elements beyond discursive reasoning in Plato's thought. For example, Halliwell states that there is a tension in Plato that is

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<sup>109</sup> Crystal Addey, "The *Daimonion* of Socrates: *Daimones* and Divination in Neoplatonism," in *The Neoplatonic Socrates*, eds. Danielle A. Layne and Harold Tarrant (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc., 2014), 52.

<sup>110</sup> See, for one example, Proclus, *Alcibiades I: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. by William O'Neill (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1965), 60-85. Though Plato only spends about one sentence on the *daimonion* at 103A, where Socrates states that he was held back from engaging erotically with the youth by some *daimonion* (τι δαιμόνιον), Proclus takes the time to give a lengthy commentary on the nature of *daimones* within Plato's philosophy as a whole. Proclus clearly thinks that, in order to fully grasp the dialogue, one must not only take this reference to the *daimonion* seriously, but she also cannot neglect to grasp it within the larger context of a Platonic demonology as a whole. Furthermore, Proclus takes the erotic component of this exchange seriously.

connected at root to the competing demands of, on the one hand, discursive reason... and, on the other, certain kinds of intensely heightened and transformed consciousness (*erôs* and responsiveness to beauty being paradigms of this) which are not wholly amenable to rational analysis... [T]hose competing demands, together with the aspiration to find a way of unifying them, run through Plato's conception of philosophy as a whole, producing and shaping the distinctive combinations of rationality and imagination, the analytical and the visionary, which characterize his own extraordinary writing.<sup>111</sup>

According to Halliwell, the attempt to unify reason and "transformed consciousness" (via religious and poetic experience) is a theme present throughout Plato's entire philosophical project. Yet, Halliwell begins with the assumption that Plato saw these two things as "competing demands." Is this assumption justified? According to Addey above, the two were not thought to be in competition for the Neoplatonists. Remes, furthermore, situates Plato as the origin of this tradition that saw the two as inextricably connected rather than competing:

One may wonder... whether opposing the argumentative or dialectical to the literary and nondiscursive is necessary, fruitful or even possible. Socrates, Plato, as well as their late ancient interpreters were all lovers of argument, and just as an analytic-argumentative reading cannot yield a fair picture of what goes on in Plato, so the literary approach cannot stand alone: within Plato, the performative relies and strives for values and ideals that are elsewhere argued for. And of course the erotic activity in the Platonic context is the activity of dialectic... Just as there is no dialectic without a motivation and desire for goodness and knowledge, there is no Platonic erotic without an intellectual or rational

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<sup>111</sup> Halliwell, *Between Ecstasy and Truth*, 159.

content.<sup>112</sup> In here, I find Addey close to the target: *rational is not opposed to irrational, divinational, or even to suprarational, but in subtle ways related to them.*<sup>113</sup>

Addey further elucidates how this “mutual inclusivity” between the rational and these other elements works for the Platonist, stating that it “derives from [the] metaphysical system and epistemology [of the Platonists], whereby rationality is not in opposition to religious states of inspiration but operates on a continuum with suprarationality and divine inspiration.”<sup>114</sup> This state of affairs described by Addey, Halliwell, and Remes highlights the compatibility and interwoven significance of the rational and these other elements of the philosophical life.

Accordingly, for historical Platonism, beginning with Plato himself, the understanding of “reason” or the “rational” derives from the higher ontology of divine Being or Intellect. Thus, as Addey points out above, the resulting view of human “rationality” does not lie “in opposition to religious states of inspiration.” Instead, the human task of reaching above oneself toward divine Being is accomplished *through* such states of inspiration working in tandem with more stereotypically “rational” methods of thought, including the various methods of dialectic. In other words, reason is the practice of trying to assimilate one’s thought to divine thought, and

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<sup>112</sup> Building on Remes’ point in this quote, it should be mentioned that the erotic specifically has fallen victim to the rationalizing trend with problematic results for the ethical dimensions of Plato’s thought. Famously, Martha Nussbaum and Gregory Vlastos render the criticism that Platonic *eros* is nothing but a rational reduction of love for the person to philosophical utility in the search for knowledge (see Gregory Vlastos, “The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato,” in *Platonic Studies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 3-37 and Martha C. Nussbaum, “Love and the Individual: Romantic Rightness and Platonic Aspiration,” in *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990) 314-334). Here, however, Remes points out that the erotic is not *just* intellectual for Plato. Or, to put it better, the manner in which it is intellectual is not the manner in which Vlastos and Nussbaum take it to be. For Plato, the intellectual content of *eros* includes the irreducible and visceral experience of the particularity and irrevocable value of the beloved. For more on the particular issue of reducing to *eros* to a narrow conception of intellectual or rational content, see Elizabeth Hill, “Alcibiades, the Bad Lover: A Defense of the Ethics of Plato’s Erotic Philosophy,” in *Platonic Interpretations: Selected Papers from the Sixteenth Annual Conference of the International Society for Neoplatonic Studies*, edited by John F. Finamore and Eric D. Perl (Gloucestershire: Prometheus Trust, 2019): 1-22. For other pieces which have argued against the stance of Vlastos on this question, see also Frisbee Sheffield, “The *Symposium* and Platonic Ethics: Plato, Vlastos, and a Misguided Debate,” *Phronesis* 57, no. 2 (2012): 117-41 and A.W. Price, “Loving Persons Platonically,” *Phronesis* 26, no. 1 (1981): 25-34.

<sup>113</sup> Paullina Remes, “Book Review: *The Neoplatonic Socrates*,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Review*, University of Notre Dame, 2015, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-neoplatonic-socrates/>. Emphasis mine.

<sup>114</sup> Addey, “The *Daimonion* of Socrates,” 52.



thereby involves inspired experiences, states, and activities that go beyond the limits of human “reason,” but, in so doing, connect the individual to a higher, divine reason. Ultimate reason, from the human perspective, thereby includes non-rational elements. From the divine perspective, these elements are simply beyond the limited grasp of human abilities, and thereby serve a mediating function enabling the human to “get beyond” the narrow parameters of her own thinking.

However, some contemporary Platonic scholarship has challenged the historically Platonic inclusion of poetic, erotic, and religious elements in the philosophical life. This body of scholarship relies on a modern concept of “reason” that limits it to the operations of logically verifiable thought (meaning the various forms of dialectic, the process of deductive logic, the practice of giving definitions, and so on). For the purposes of this chapter, the position taken up by this body of scholarship is referred to as the “rationalist” reading. Cocking succinctly summarizes the rationalist reading in its particular significance to the present study. He states that “when [Plato] asserts that poets achieve their results through inspiration rather than *techne*, professional skill, and that their works are most poetic when they are most frenzied, such admission of other-worldliness carry with them no respect for the poet’s message.”<sup>115</sup> Scholars, like Cocking, who defend the rationalist position argue that the dialogues are largely consistent in upholding the operations of rational thought, and they see no real reverence for the complimentary activities and experiences that the Platonists of antiquity saw as key to Platonic thought. The general claim is that one in possession of logical, dialectical reasoning does not need inspiration to get to the truth.

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<sup>115</sup> Cocking, “The Greek Rationalists,” 11.

Accordingly, this chapter examines the claims made by various scholars who argue that the dialogues exclude “inspired” activities and experiences from playing a role in the philosopher’s ascent toward the Good. For the purposes of this study, “inspired activities and experiences” comprise the four-fold list of divine *mania* given in the *Phaedrus*: erotic, poetic, mystagogic, and prophetic *mania*.<sup>116</sup> Fundamentally, the inquiry of this chapter will proceed by examining the dialogues themselves to determine whether they support a rationalist reading that excludes inspiration. First, the chapter examines the *Euthyphro* as an example of Plato’s criticism of the hubristic ignorance of various “experts” in subjects such as poetry and religion. It is shown that Socrates’ criticism of claimed expertise does not amount to a rejection of religious activities or poetry. Second, in vindication of the later Neoplatonists, many dialogues reveal that Plato repeatedly *does* take up ritual, divinatory, mantic, mythopoetic, and erotic themes and depicts them as key to the philosophical life. Hence, as an example, the chapter will look at the *Phaedo* and highlight the marriage of logical argumentation with mythopoesis and mystic rites present therein. Then, by way of offering more examples, the chapter turns to an analysis of images of the soul’s ascent in the *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and *Republic* and argues that they all include elements that go beyond logical or deductive reasoning. Finally, the chapter outlines a brief survey of Plato’s notion of the *daimonic* as it appears throughout his corpus. Though there is little consistency in Plato’s demonology, one reliable thread does appear: the *daimonic* always serves to mediate divine truth to human life. The chapter concludes by arguing that the reading that embraces a wider understanding of “reason” to include erotic, poetic, and religious elements more accurately accommodates the content of the dialogues examined in this chapter when compared to the “rationalist” position.

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<sup>116</sup> See *Phaedrus* 265b where Socrates summarizes the four forms of *mania* and ascribes a patron deity to each one.

## II. The Criticism of “Experts”

The present study affirms the view held by scholars such as Addey that “rationality” in the Platonic dialogues “is not in opposition to religious states of inspiration.”<sup>117</sup> However, the reader may wonder what to make of dialogues in which Socrates examines those who claim expertise in religious and poetic matters and finds them wanting. The *Euthyphro* and *Ion* are the most salient examples, for, in the former, Socrates reveals the ignorance of a seer and religious expert and, in the latter, he does the same to a Homeric rhapsode. The *Euthyphro* and the *Ion* corroborate what Socrates proclaims in the *Apology*: “poets do not compose their poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers and prophets who also say many fine things without any understanding.”<sup>118</sup> Seers and poets are, therefore, similarly disposed toward knowledge insofar as they do not have any. Conversely, the philosopher, the lover of wisdom, values whatever brings her closer to the object of her desire: knowledge. Thus, Socrates’ account of poets and seers in the *Apology* and his elenctic take-downs of Euthyphro and Ion could lead a reader to conclude that there is nothing of value for the philosopher in poetry or prophecy. Poets and prophets do not compose or prophesize through knowledge. Hence, since the products of the *mantis* and the bard come from ignorance, it is unlikely that they could be of use to one who pursues wisdom above all else.

However, it does not follow that a subject, such as religion or poetry, is useless just because those who claim to be experts in it fall short. It is important to note that, in the passage from the *Apology* quoted above, Socrates limits himself to the claim that poets and seers do not compose or speak through their own knowledge. Ergo, the poet or prophet cannot instruct others

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<sup>117</sup> Addey, “The *Daimonion* of Socrates,” 52.

<sup>118</sup> *Apology* 22c.

in wisdom. Yet, their poems or prophecies may still be true when interpreted correctly, and they may thereby play an edifying role in the philosopher's pursuit of truth. Socrates even says that, while the poets and prophets do not compose with knowledge, they do have "inborn talent and inspiration (φύσει τινὶ καὶ ἐνθουσιάζοντες)." <sup>119</sup> Accordingly, the seers and poets, despite their ignorance, are nonetheless able to "say many fine things (λέγουσι μὲν πολλὰ καὶ καλά)." <sup>120</sup> But they "know nothing about which they speak" (ἴσασιν δὲ οὐδὲν ὧν λέγουσι).<sup>121</sup> In other words, in the *Apology*, Socrates brings awareness to the poet's and the prophet's lack of knowledge, but he does not thereby criticize poetry or prophecy themselves. The inspired poet can write something fine and worthy of the philosopher's attention, just as the prophet can utter a true pronouncement. The point is that neither of them is the proper person to *instruct* one on what she should glean from the poem or vatic utterance. Of course, the seer or poet can *also* be a philosopher capable of investigating in what way her work gets to the truth. Still, the point is that the poet *qua* poet or *mantis qua mantis* functions as a channel, not a teacher. The ability to philosophically investigate utterances is not required for the oracle to render accurate declarations.

Accordingly, this chapter now looks at the *Euthyphro* as an example of how Socrates' criticism of so-called "experts" is not tantamount to rejecting the subject of that expertise itself. On the contrary, while Socrates does not explicitly espouse his own religious views, his questioning of Euthyphro brings out possible alternative religious views as opposed to antireligious ones. Thus, the treatment of religion in the *Euthyphro* aligns with Addey's claim that reason, for Plato, is not opposed to "states of inspiration." Instead, like the other Platonic

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<sup>119</sup> *Apology* 22c.

<sup>120</sup> *Apology* 22c.

<sup>121</sup> *Apology* 22c.

dialogues examined below,<sup>122</sup> *Euthyphro* depicts Socrates as attempting to bring religion and philosophy into better accord by exposing inconsistencies in Euthyphro's theology. One can apply these conclusions from our analysis of the *Euthyphro* to Plato's *Ion*, wherein a criticism of poets and rhapsodes need not indicate a rejection of the philosophical value poetry itself.

However, we will wait for Chapter III to undertake a detailed analysis of that dialogue.

An overview of the *Euthyphro* reveals some important observations right away.

Euthyphro meets Socrates outside the court of the king-archon. Euthyphro is there because he is prosecuting his father for the murder of a hired laborer. Socrates is there because Meletus has indicted him on the famed charges of impiety and corrupting the youth. Euthyphro is a seer<sup>123</sup> and takes himself to be a great expert in religious matters.<sup>124</sup> Socrates begins by taking Euthyphro at his word regarding his expertise and suggests he become Euthyphro's pupil.<sup>125</sup> With an expert in piety as his instructor, Socrates will gain the requisite understanding to defend himself against Meletus' indictments.<sup>126</sup> Euthyphro is all too happy to oblige, and he accepts the invitation to teach Socrates about piety. Yet, when asked what should be the most straightforward question of all, "what is piety?" Euthyphro ends up floundering. The logical conclusions of Euthyphro's so-called definitions result in various inconsistencies regarding the nature of the pious and the nature of the divine, revealing that the prophet's estimation of his own knowledge needs to be revised. When Socrates proposes they begin again and keep

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<sup>122</sup> See Sections III-IV.

<sup>123</sup> *Euthyphro* 3c. Euthyphro states that he accurately "foretells (προεἶπον) the future" in the assembly.

<sup>124</sup> Specifically, Euthyphro states that he "would not be superior to the majority of men, if [he] did not have accurate knowledge of all such things" (4e-5a). "Such things" refers back to Socrates' mention of the pious and the impious in the last comment at 4e. At 6b, Euthyphro also states that he has knowledge of the gods in the form of various accounts "of which the majority has no knowledge."

<sup>125</sup> *Euthyphro* 5a: It is indeed most important, my admirable Euthyphro, that I should become your pupil, and as regards this indictment."

<sup>126</sup> *Euthyphro* 5a-b.

searching for the nature of the pious,<sup>127</sup> Euthyphro takes his leave, and the dialogue ends in *aporia*.<sup>128</sup> One would think that Euthyphro would be just the right person to continue the discussion and hunt for the true nature of the pious. Yet, once thoroughly embarrassed by the revelation that his claim to knowledge is groundless, he turns tail and leaves.

Plato's Socrates draws the reader's attention to Euthyphro's confidence, an essential observation given the cultural context of the seer's actions. Euthyphro's decision to prosecute his own father would have been unconscionably scandalous to a fourth-century Athenian. Euthyphro himself acknowledges that others think him to be "crazy (μαίνεσθαι)" for doing this.<sup>129</sup> Dorothea Frede remarks on the cultural taboo behind the shock at Euthyphro's actions, noting that "special respect [was] due to one's father,"<sup>130</sup> observing that even Aristotle, who is "usually quite matter-of-fact... compares [the honor due to one's father] with the honour due to a king or even to the gods."<sup>131</sup> The taboo against disrespecting one's father illuminates Socrates' response to hearing of Euthyphro's decision to prosecute his father. Grube's translation evokes a pearl-clutching image of the elderly Socrates, who exclaims, "My dear sir! Your own father?"<sup>132</sup> Grube's rendering captures the shocked tone of Socrates' subsequent comments. At 4a-b, Socrates exclaims, "Good heavens! (Ἡράκλεις) Most men would not know how they could do this and be right. It is not the part of anyone to do this, but of one who is far advanced in wisdom."<sup>133</sup> Socrates persists in his shock by asserting that the victim must have been a relative, for Euthyphro would never prosecute his own father "for the murder of a stranger."<sup>134</sup> Euthyphro

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<sup>127</sup> *Euthyphro* 15c-d.

<sup>128</sup> *Euthyphro* 15e-16a.

<sup>129</sup> *Euthyphro* 4a.

<sup>130</sup> Dorothea Frede, "The Holy and the God-Loved: The Dilemma in Plato's *Euthyphro*," *The Monist* 105, no. 3 (2022): 305n2.

<sup>131</sup> Frede, "The Holy and the God-Loved," 305n2.

<sup>132</sup> *Euthyphro* 4a.

<sup>133</sup> *Euthyphro* 4a-b.

<sup>134</sup> *Euthyphro* 4b.

responds, however, that it makes no difference whether his father's "victim is a stranger or a relative," and that the victim was merely a hired laborer.<sup>135</sup> Socrates' bewilderment is palpable in his reply: "by Zeus (πρὸς Διός), Euthyphro, you think that your knowledge of the divine, and of piety and impiety, is so accurate that, when those things happened as you say, you have no fear of having acted impiously in bringing your father to trial?"<sup>136</sup> This exchange leads to Socrates' request to learn from Euthyphro, and it reveals that it is not religion, *per se*, that Socrates wishes to examine. Instead, it is the magnificent knowledge that Euthyphro ought to have to undertake the actions he is currently pursuing with confidence. After all, "most men would not know how they could do this and be right."<sup>137</sup> Indeed, one would likely not undertake such a socially repugnant act if he or she did not have concrete knowledge that it was unquestionably correct to do so.

Euthyphro believes that he is just such a "one who is far advanced in wisdom" regarding the matters at hand. He practically laughs off the astonishment at his actions by estimating his own knowledge of such matters to be far above that of the ordinary person. Euthyphro states: "[I] would not be superior to the majority of men, if I did not have accurate knowledge of all such things."<sup>138</sup> Hence, Frede's assessment rings true insofar as it is "[b]ecause Euthyphro, a self-appointed, somewhat naïve, and at the same time pompous, seer and religious expert, lays claim to superior insights concerning all such questions " that "Socrates takes him to task."<sup>139</sup> As far as Euthyphro is concerned, he can rest assured in the knowledge that he is doing the right thing despite the hair-raising outrage of others.<sup>140</sup> His knowledge of piety is so immeasurably beyond

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<sup>135</sup> *Euthyphro* 4b-c.

<sup>136</sup> *Euthyphro* 4e

<sup>137</sup> *Euthyphro* 4a-b.

<sup>138</sup> *Euthyphro* 4e-5a.

<sup>139</sup> Frede, "The Holy and the God-Loved," 293.

<sup>140</sup> Euthyphro further states: "Both my father and my other relatives are angry that I am prosecuting my father for murder on behalf of a murderer when he hadn't even killed him, they say, and even if he had, the dead man does not

theirs that the fools cannot even comprehend his actions, which, he is sure, are pleasing to the gods.

One might wonder why Euthyphro is so confident in his actions regarding a legal matter when his purported expertise is religious. Importantly, Euthyphro's language reveals that he understands his father's offense in terms of pollution (τὸ μίᾱσμα) and purification (ἀφοσιῶ), telling Socrates that it "is ridiculous... to think that it makes any difference whether the victim is a stranger or a relative... The pollution is the same if you knowingly keep company with such a man and do not cleanse yourself and him by bringing him to justice."<sup>141</sup> The word Euthyphro uses here – ἀφοσιῶ, meaning "to cleanse" – has ritual connotations and often refers explicitly to making atonement, averting a curse, or condemning something on religious grounds.<sup>142</sup> Accordingly, in couching his father's crime and prosecution in these terms, Euthyphro places the court case within the purview of his own religious knowledge regarding ritual pollution and purification. Therefore, Euthyphro sees himself as qualified to speak on the present case *as a religious expert*. In framing the issue in this way, Euthyphro extends his expertise in religious matters to legal ones. The problem, for him, involves ridding the city of pollution through ritual cleansing. This implies that the justice system of Athens itself is within the scope of Euthyphro's particular religious authority.

Notably, while Euthyphro does not have knowledge of piety — he fails even to define it — he does possess true opinion regarding it. I use "true opinion (ἡ ὀρθὴ δόξα)" in the sense given in the *Symposium* at 202a, where Diotima describes it as "judging things correctly without

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deserve a thought, since he was a killer. For, they say, it is impious for a son to prosecute his father for murder" (4d-e).

<sup>141</sup> *Euthyphro* 4c.

<sup>142</sup> See Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, revised by Sir Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1940). Hereafter referred to simply as the "LSJ."



being able to give a reason.” True opinion is an apt description of what underlies Euthyphro’s first definition of piety. He tells Socrates that he is taking his father to court because it is pious “to prosecute the wrongdoer, be it about murder or temple robbery or anything else, whether the wrongdoer is your father or your mother or anyone else; not to prosecute is impious.”<sup>143</sup> This statement aligns with the claim, repeated throughout the dialogues, that what the gods endorse and do not endorse cannot be inconsistent, relative, or dependent upon their individual personalities. The gods are always the source of good and not evil.<sup>144</sup> Accordingly, Euthyphro’s understanding of piety hits on something true according to the dialogues: the gods unchangingly and unerringly are good and do good in all things. Therefore, if someone commits injustice, it is pleasing to the gods to enact justice with no personal biases or caprice, just as the gods do themselves. If murder is wrong and it is right to prosecute a murderer according to divine justice, then the pious thing to do *is to prosecute the murderer* regardless of one’s relationship to him.

Crucially, Socrates does not say that Euthyphro’s understanding of piety is *wrong*; he says it fails as a definition. If they were argued from the right angle, perhaps Socrates would affirm the claims made in the first definition. However, the problem is not with Euthyphro’s ability to intuit something fundamentally true; it is with his conceit to wisdom. Euthyphro has an intuition or true opinion of piety that, in this particular instance, is correctly leading him to do the right thing. Still, he thinks that this intuition or opinion is actually expert knowledge. Given other circumstances, Euthyphro’s failure to know the limits of his own knowledge could have disastrous consequences, especially in light of his willingness to step into legal matters. Herein lies the basis for his humiliation via the *elenchus*. The kind of self-awareness that Euthyphro lacks has nothing necessarily to do with religious belief and practice itself, for, as Van Riel

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<sup>143</sup> *Euthyphro* 5d-e.

<sup>144</sup> See Laws 907a, *Republic* 379c, *Phaedrus* 242e.

points out, Socrates' general concerns are "more a matter of examining non-reflected religious convictions, whereby reflection in no way endangers religion itself."<sup>145</sup> Van Riel further states that Socrates' questioning is not about "undermining piety itself, but on the contrary, of forcing Euthyphro to reflect upon what he takes to be pious."<sup>146</sup> Socrates' aim is to undermine the unreflective manner in which Euthyphro arrogantly claims expertise based on such unexamined (even if partly correct) opinions. One should acknowledge, however, that none of the above speaks to a "pro-religious" stance in the *Euthyphro*. Thus far, the point is that there is not enough evidence to grant the opposite, anti-religious stance either.

Yet, in crucial respects, Euthyphro's theological beliefs are opposed to those found in Plato's work more broadly, and Socrates' questioning of the seer reveals alternative, rather than antireligious, claims. As Nightingale puts it, "Plato utterly opposed the idea that one could gain divine aid by supplicating the gods or offering gifts and sacrifices."<sup>147</sup> This exchange mentality is exposed and dismantled in *Euthyphro* when the eponymous character tries to define piety as "the care of the gods" (12e) and then as "trading" between gods and humans (14e).<sup>148</sup> In contrast to this theology, Plato was no atheist but instead saw the human task as that of assimilating oneself to the divine and thereby becoming like the gods in virtue and wisdom. Nightingale comments that, for Plato, "the proper mode of worship is to imitate the gods' goodness and wisdom, and to pray to them for aid in one's philosophical practice. This activity is not transactional but aspirational."<sup>149</sup> The problem with Euthyphro is not his spiritual practices nor his intuitions about piety, both of which could very well still be fruitful and correct if he wielded them more humbly.

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<sup>145</sup> Van Riel, "Socrates' Daemon: Internalisation of the Divine and Knowledge of the Self," 32.

<sup>146</sup> Van Riel, "Socrates' Daemon: Internalisation of the Divine and Knowledge of the Self," 32.

<sup>147</sup> Andrea Wilson Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 12.

<sup>148</sup> See *Euthyphro* 12e-15a.

<sup>149</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion*, 12.

The problem is that he still needs to examine his beliefs about the gods and realize how some are incompatible with others. In other words, the problem with Euthyphro is not that he is religious instead of philosophical; it is that, in failing to examine his religious beliefs philosophically, he maintains a bad theology.

In asking “is the pious being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?,”<sup>150</sup> Socrates unmasks a deep philosophical problem at the heart of Euthyphro’s thinking. If the gods make something pious by loving it, then there is no objective quality that determines something as pious. The pious and the god-loved become the same, but the gods love many things and do not always love the same things. There is, therefore, no objective set of pious-making qualities. Piety happens to something when the gods love it, and it ceases to be in a thing or action when the gods no longer favor it. Contrarily, if the gods love something because it is pious, then the pious has an identity apart from the gods, and the gods act as cosmic recognizers or upholders of something that stands apart from their own existences. This dichotomy extends to the nature of truth — not only the truth of piety, but of truth in general. Is something true because the gods agree on it, or do they agree on it because it is true? If the latter, then the philosopher's task is to assimilate herself to the status of a god, which does not mean becoming an *arbiter* but rather a *knower* of truth. The second horn is shown to be preferable to the first in other passages in Plato, which depict the gods as the caretakers of the cosmos and as beholding the Forms themselves.<sup>151</sup>

Accordingly, in revealing Euthyphro’s inability to define piety, Socrates reveals a much more significant issue. Euthyphro’s theology prevents him from grounding any correct intuitions about piety in an accurate account of the gods because he clings to the view that the gods only

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<sup>150</sup> *Euthyphro* 10a.

<sup>151</sup> See *Phaedrus* 246e-247e.

agree on some things while they disagree and even war with one another with respect to other things. Also, because he thinks he has advanced knowledge of piety, Euthyphro does not see the need to investigate it further, which prevents him from discovering the internal inconsistencies in his views. Euthyphro could remedy this situation by admitting his ignorance and examining his assumptions on the nature of the gods and reality, but, unfortunately, he does not do this. In not knowing that he does not know, Euthyphro prevents himself from deepening his religious knowledge and adequately using his true but unaccounted-for opinions regarding the pious course of action. Euthyphro's situation then reveals Socrates' approach to be a criticism of improperly assigning expertise when it is not there rather than as a criticism of religion itself.

Accordingly, Euthyphro bifurcates his theology into two mutually exclusive beliefs. In addition to claiming that the gods are not arbitrary in delivering justice, Euthyphro also believes in the traditional, anthropomorphic understanding of the gods as beings who war with one another. He affirms this view of quarrelsome gods early on in the dialogue at 6b-c when he agrees that the gods do indeed get into violent disputes. He maintains this view, for in his second definition — that the pious is what the gods love<sup>152</sup> — he agrees with Socrates' rebuttal that the gods disagree on many things,<sup>153</sup> and this leads the seer to claim that, on matters of piety, at least, the gods agree.<sup>154</sup>

Thus, Euthyphro wants it both ways; he wants gods who do not judge him arbitrarily and who all agree that his present actions are pious, but he also wants to maintain the view that they are at war with one another because of disagreements. Euthyphro could have responded to Socrates' point by arguing that the gods are all infallibly wise and, therefore, do not disagree with

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<sup>152</sup> *Euthyphro* 7a.

<sup>153</sup> He maintains this throughout the passage from 7a-9d, only arguing that they must agree on certain things.

<sup>154</sup> *Euthyphro* 9e.

one another. However, he likely does not take up this response because he does not believe it. In the end, then, Euthyphro's first definition says something true. It is correct to pursue justice regardless of the persons involved. However, Euthyphro flounders when he has to make this position compatible with his view of warring gods, who somehow judge us—but not one another—infallibly. But if the gods are at war with one another over some things, this implies that they disagree among themselves in their judgements of at least some things. Thus, the gods do not have a perfect grasp on the reality of things. How, then, can their approval of an act mark it out as correct or not? Euthyphro's version of the gods as warring leaves him incapable of answering this question. He simultaneously holds two conflicting theological perspectives. He asserts that we can trust the gods in their judgments of human action to such an extent that one can consistently determine the piety of one's actions. Yet, he also believes that the gods can be at war with one another, indicating that they do not have equal access to what is objectively true at all times.

The manner in which Socrates' questions reveal inconsistencies in Euthyphro's theology subtly suggests a more internally consistent set of beliefs. If Euthyphro were to see that his first definition contained the view of the gods worth maintaining and jettisoned his other view of the gods at war, he would probably be in a better position to understand and define piety.

Accordingly, while Socrates does not explicitly espouse a pro-religious stance in the *Euthyphro*, the dialogue aims to correct bad theology rather than call religion into question.

In conclusion, it is easy to see a critique of religion and religious authority in the *Euthyphro*. After all, the dialogue portrays a religious man humbled by a philosopher through the rational method of the *elenchus*. Therefore, this text's message could be that reason triumphs over religion. Accordingly, in remarking that “[t]he theme of the *Euthyphro*, or at least its theme

in counterpoint, is religion,”<sup>155</sup> Reginald Allen indicates that the dialogue refutes religion itself. And it is certainly the case that Socrates reveals Euthyphro’s ignorance of religious matters. Not only does Euthyphro fail to demonstrate an expert understanding of piety, but his failures to define piety reveal his further ignorance of the gods themselves. Socrates could then marshal the exposure of Euthyphro’s false knowledge to undermine religious beliefs, practices, or experiences in general; however, this is not what Socrates does. The dialogue appears content to do the first thing (expose the lack of knowledge in the so-called expert) without attempting the second thing (calling religion itself into question). To be sure, the *Euthyphro* does not engage in unqualified praise of religion either. The *Euthyphro* is not primarily concerned with whether the philosopher should accept or reject religious activities and experiences but instead focuses on problematizing claims to expertise. These kinds of claims are especially salient in high-stakes scenarios like the one Euthyphro is in. To obey the Delphic inscription, one ought to know herself and be aware of the limits of her own understanding. This is what Euthyphro fails to do.

Nevertheless, the theological concerns foregrounded in the Euthyphro dilemma do imply some alternative religious views. The approach of critiquing expertise while not necessarily critiquing the subject of that expertise lies at the heart of Socrates’ remarks in the *Apology* regarding poets and prophets who, according to him, compose or prophesy via talent and inspiration and not through knowledge. As I will argue in Chapter IV, the practice of critiquing experts without rejecting their subject matter also informs the treatment of rhapsodes and poets in the *Ion*. Despite their lack of wisdom, the poets and prophets say fine things, even if they do not have the understanding needed to instruct others. As Chapter III will argue, however, the

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<sup>155</sup> Reginald E. Allen, *Plato’s “Euthyphro” and the Earlier Theory of Forms* (London: Routledge, 2013), 9.

philosopher, personified and idealized through the character of Socrates, is uniquely equipped to use poetry and religious activities and experiences—such as oracles—to improve the soul.

### III. Mythopoesis and Mystic Rites in the *Phaedo*

When used to describe Plato's corpus, the terms "rationalist" or "rationalism" denote the view that logical or deductive reasoning is the only source of truth for the human being.<sup>156</sup> According to the *Republic*, the philosophical life ideally culminates in the soul's ascent to a vision of the Form of the Good.<sup>157</sup> According to a rationalist account, this ascent is accomplished through the operations of rational thought alone—viz., the various forms of dialectic, the process of deductive logic, the practice of giving definitions, and so on. For example, consider the words of E.R. Dodds, who calls Plato "a child of the Enlightenment," stating that he "grew up in a social circle which... took pride in settling all questions before the bar of reason."<sup>158</sup> According to Dodds, Plato's thought certainly evolved over time and even appropriated some of the "shamanistic"<sup>159</sup> elements of his day. However, Dodds maintains, "the framework of his thought never ceased to be rationalist" in its fundamental goals and quality.<sup>160</sup> Admitting that Plato

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<sup>156</sup> The terms "reason" or "rational" have no single, clear Greek analogue. Following standard translation practices, λόγος and many of its cognates provide the best, but not the only, Greek analogues to "reason." Λόγος and its cognates have the sense of "computation, reckoning, account, explanation, argument, discourse, thesis," and so on. For example, Grube translates λόγος as "reason" (*Phaedo* 62b), λογίζομαι and λογισμός as "reasoning" (*Phaedo* 65c and 66a), ἀλόγιστος and ἄλογος as "unreasonable" (*Apology* 37c, *Phaedo* 62b), τῆς διανοίας λογισμῶ as "reasoning power of the mind" (*Phaedo* 79a), and τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον as "correct reasoning" (*Phaedo* 94a). Reeve translates εὐλογον as "reasonable," (*Cratylus* 396b), and ἀναλογίζομαι as "to reason." The issue, however, is that "reason" tends to have a specific meaning in English, denoting the use of logical thought processes to arrive at or verify claims. Λόγος has this meaning depending on context, but it also includes meanings which go beyond the English term. Additionally, λόγος is not the only Greek word that is translated to mean "reason" in English. For example, Rowe translates φρόνιμος as "rational," as does Reeve in his translation of *Statesman* 263d and *Republic* 381a. Nehamas and Woodruff translate σοφροσύνη as "reason" at *Phaedrus* 241a.

<sup>157</sup> See *Republic* 517b-c.

<sup>158</sup> E.R. Dodds, "Plato and the Irrational Soul," in *Plato II: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Gregory Vlastos (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1978), 207.

<sup>159</sup> Dodds, "Plato and the Irrational Soul," 217.

<sup>160</sup> Dodds, "Plato and the Irrational Soul," 207.

peppered his works with references to mystery rites and purification rituals, Dodds nevertheless submits that the true philosophical life does not need rites or rituals at all. He writes that “[f]or Plato... the only truly effective catharsis was no doubt the practice of mental withdrawal and concentration which is described in the *Phaedo*: the trained philosopher could cleanse his own soul without the help of ritual.”<sup>161</sup> In other words, according to this view, Plato conceived knowledge as attainable through the logical processes of thought alone and eschewed anything outside the purview of reasoned argumentation or dialectic.

And yet, while Dodds refers to the *Phaedo* in support of his claims, this dialogue depicts Socrates’ ending his discourse on the soul not with an argument but with a myth, saying:

No sensible man would insist that these things are as I have described them, but I think it is fitting for a man to risk the belief—for the risk is a noble one—that this [τοῦτο], or something like this, is true about our souls and their dwelling places, since the soul is evidently immortal, and a man should repeat such things to himself as if it were an incantation (ἐπάδειν), which is why I have been prolonging my tale [τὸν μῦθον].<sup>162</sup>

Socrates tells his disciples to sing this myth over themselves as an incantation or magical charm. Additionally, despite Dodds’ claim that, in the *Phaedo*, the philosopher does not need ritual, the dialogue is notably filled with references to both Pythagoreanism and Orphism, two important mystery cults of the time. In keeping with Orphic themes, one can read the closing myth as a ritual incantation meant to aid the cleansing of the soul in preparation for death. Thus, while Dodds uses the *Phaedo* as an example of Plato’s “rationalism,” in which the philosopher does not need ritual or the mythopoetic, the *Phaedo* itself rebuts Dodds by effectively marrying rational argumentation with rites and myth. This marriage corroborates the claims made by

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<sup>161</sup> Dodds, “Plato and the Irrational Soul,” 227.

<sup>162</sup> *Phaedo* 114d: τὸ μὲν οὖν ταῦτα δυσχούρισασθαι οὕτως ἔχειν ὡς ἐγὼ διελήλυθα, οὐ πρέπει νοῦν ἔχοντι ἀνδρὶ: ὅτι μέντοι ἢ ταῦτ’ ἐστὶν ἢ τοιαῦτ’ ἄλλα περὶ τὰς ψυχὰς ἡμῶν καὶ τὰς οἰκίσεις, ἐπεὶ περ ἀθάνατόν γε ἡ ψυχή φαίνεται οὔσα, τοῦτο καὶ πρέπει μοι δοκεῖ καὶ ἄξιον κινδυνεῦσαι οἰομένῳ οὕτως ἔχειν—καλὸς γὰρ ὁ κίνδυνος—καὶ χρὴ τὰ τοιαῦτα ὡς περ ἐπάδειν ἑαυτῷ, διὸ δὴ ἔγωγε καὶ πάλαι μηκύνω τὸν μῦθον. This translation has been slightly emended from Grube.



Addey and other scholars mentioned above that “reason” in the dialogues is not opposed to spiritually enthused activities or states. Instead, Plato’s texts present the two as interrelated.

The term “incantation” (ἐπιφθέ) in the final myth of the *Phaedo* certainly evokes spiritual or magical connotations; however, one must note that such spiritual themes show up much earlier in the dialogue. Therefore, the incantatory myth does not introduce something new but instead ties off a thread that Plato has woven into the text from the beginning. The *Phaedo*, like many of Plato’s works, employs significant references to Greek religion, especially in the form of various mystery cults. Several scholars have already explored the relationship between ancient Greek religion and Plato’s dialogues in depth.<sup>163</sup> Yet, as Andrea Nightingale remarks, a preponderance of “[m]odern scholars have focused almost exclusively on the rationalist aspects of Plato’s philosophy.”<sup>164</sup> The focus on “rationalism” in the dialogues has led many to ignore the religious—specifically cultic or mystical—elements found in Plato’s work. Such neglect of these themes impoverishes our understanding of the text. As Nightingale argues:

[To] elide the religious discourse in his dialogues... does not do justice to [Plato’s] philosophical program. Plato regularly refers to religious rituals, festivals, and mystery cults in his discussions of the soul and the Forms. To understand his philosophy, we need to locate his ideas in the context of Greek religious discourses and practices... If we ignore this aspect of his philosophy, we lose an essential part of his thinking.<sup>165</sup>

According to Nightingale, the religious content of Plato’s dialogues is not window dressing but rather a key element to the meaning of the dialogues and this is no less true for the *Phaedo*. As we will see, Plato framed this dialogue through at least two religious traditions—Pythagoreanism and Orphism. Plato’s religious framing is not merely accidental. Instead, he weaves religious

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<sup>163</sup> See Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato’s Dialogues*; Vishwa Aduluri, “Initiation Into The Mysteries: The Experience of the Irrational in Plato,” *Museion*, III, Vol. 6 (2006), 407-423. See also Michael L. Morgan, *Platonic Piety: Philosophy and Ritual in Fourth-Century Athens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Ellisif Wasmuth, “The Corybantic Rites in Plato’s Dialogues,” *Classical Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (2015): 69–84.

<sup>164</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato’s Dialogues*, 7.

<sup>165</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato’s Dialogues*, 7-8.

content into the fabric of the dramatic text, centralizing comparisons between philosophy and cultic objectives, symbolism, and ritual. Consequently, understanding this framing is central to understanding the dialogue.

The *Phaedo* opens with Echeocrates asking Phaedo to recount the events of Socrates' death. Echeocrates is a Pythagorean, and, notably, he mentions that he and Phaedo are currently in Phlius at the time of the discussion,<sup>166</sup> a location described by Debra Nails as something of a "Pythagorean refuge."<sup>167</sup> Additionally, Socrates' two primary interlocutors during the arguments on the soul are Simmias and Cebes, both of whom, Socrates notes, were associates of the famed Pythagorean, Philolaus of Croton.<sup>168</sup> It is hardly a coincidence that Plato draws the reader's attention to Pythagoreanism in a text examining the soul's immortality and its purification of the body. In addition to being a philosophical school of thought, the Pythagoreans were a religious cult. They believed that proper philosophical contemplation and ritual would release the soul from its tomb, the body.<sup>169</sup> Hence, an inversion of the life–death dichotomy emerges, in which physical death, for the initiated, is a kind of birth into a purified and better life. Embodied, physical life, on the other hand, is a sort of death, especially since one is said to be living in the body as if in a tomb. This inverted thinking on life and death mirrors what Socrates says throughout the *Phaedo*. For example, Socrates states that "every pleasure or pain provides... another nail to rivet the soul to the body and to weld them together" and that this "makes the soul corporeal," preventing it from reaching "Hades in a pure state."<sup>170</sup> In other words, failing to accept that the embodied life is "polluted" prevents one from engaging in purification practices,

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<sup>166</sup> See *Phaedo* 57a.

<sup>167</sup> Debra Nails, *The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics* (Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.: 2002), 138.

<sup>168</sup> See *Phaedo* 61d.

<sup>169</sup> See *Cratylus* 400b-c. The Orphics are subsequently mentioned here as well.

<sup>170</sup> *Phaedo* 83d.

such as philosophy, and thereby keeps her from awakening to her true “life” in the afterlife. As in Pythagoreanism, philosophy is the mechanism by which the soul is purified of the body and enters into a more divine state, for “[n]o one may join the company of the gods who has not practiced philosophy and is not completely pure when he departs from life, no one but the lover of learning.”<sup>171</sup> Therefore, Plato draws the reader’s attention to the Pythagorean tradition in his choice of interlocutors and the initial set-up of the dialogue. Accordingly, it is unlikely that the compatibility between the claims regarding the soul made by the Pythagoreans and by Socrates in the *Phaedo* is a mere coincidence. The references to Pythagoreanism and the nature of the soul are intentionally employed to present the philosopher as one engaged in a life-long ritual to attain a higher level of reality than those who cling to the pleasures of the body.

However, the specific focus on death and the afterlife invokes another mystery cult, Orphism. Chief among Orphic doctrines was the belief in a kind of original sin incurred by the Titans of which humans must purify themselves to be free of the punishments of the body, but with a particular emphasis on the moment of death itself as a kind of ritual passage. As Nightingale points out,

[t]he Orphics placed great emphasis on the moment of death for the initiate: at this time, the soul left the body and entered its true life with the gods. The death of the initiated human being marks a key moment in the life of the soul. The Orphics focused in particular on the soul’s movement across the threshold of death. The entire initiation ceremony prepared them for this transition. Indeed... they probably went through a ritual enactment of death during the initiation ceremony. Like Plato’s philosophers, they were “practicing death.”<sup>172</sup>

In this quotation, Nightingale explicitly connects Orphic death rituals to the *Phaedo*’s notion of practicing for death. However, the wording of the above excerpt implies that the Orphics were doing something like Plato’s philosopher in the *Phaedo*. Instead, it is the other way around.

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<sup>171</sup> *Phaedo* 82b-c.

<sup>172</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato’s Dialogues*,” 137.

There is a distinctly Orphic dimension to Plato's depiction of his mentor's final moments. It is vital to recall that Plato tells the reader that he was not present at the events described in the *Phaedo*, thus indicating that the dialogue is a fictionalized account.<sup>173</sup> Hence, the *Phaedo* reads as a mythologized account of the ideal philosopher, personified in the character of Socrates, facing death and making this passage from a kind of living death into his true life.

Nightingale summarizes further parallels between Orphism and the *Phaedo*. For example, she notes that

the Orphics believed that the soul had a divine beginning but fell from the gods due to an original crime. The soul enters bodies as a mode of punishment, and will continue to reincarnate unless it gets initiated into the mysteries during a human life. The soul of the initiate has a different afterlife than other people: it leaves the cycle of reincarnation and goes to dwell everlastingly with the gods in Hades.<sup>174</sup>

Compare what Nightingale brings out in this quotation to Socrates' claim in the *Phaedo* that a soul that has purified itself by practicing philosophy

makes its way to the invisible, which is like itself, the divine and immortal and wise, and arriving there it can be happy, having rid itself of confusion, ignorance, fear, violent desires and the other human ills and, *as is said of the initiates*, truly spend the rest of time with the gods.<sup>175</sup>

In this passage, Socrates espouses the view that the philosopher, likened to an initiate, is the one who can free herself of the body, which prevents the soul from achieving its more divine state, attaining a happy afterlife among the gods. Here, the body's relationship to the soul and the need for purification are strikingly similar to the Orphic view.<sup>176</sup> The body acts as a pollutant, preventing the soul from obtaining its proper end. The good afterlife requires the labor of purification rituals. For the Orphic, this ritual is kept secret but relates to coming to terms with

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<sup>173</sup> *Phaedo* 59b.

<sup>174</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato's Dialogues*, 137.

<sup>175</sup> *Phaedo* 81a.

<sup>176</sup> For more on the connections between Orphism and the *Phaedo*, specifically, and Plato's work more generally, see Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato's Dialogues*, 135-155.

the truth of our current state as the product of some original sin. Understanding this origin enables us to commit to the reality of a different afterlife in which we return to our true state. Similarly, for the philosopher, the ritual involves recognizing the tension between our embodied state and our ideal, divine state. The philosopher must, through inquiry, come to terms with the truth that wisdom belongs among the Forms where the body cannot follow. The philosopher can purify her soul through philosophical inquiry with others and thereby assimilate herself to her final divine state even while still embodied. Thus, upon departure from this life, the philosopher has already obtained some level of purification and is ready to move to her final state. Socrates explicitly uses the language of purification and initiation, through which he indicates that the initiate of philosophy, just like the initiate of Orphism, will have “a different afterlife than other people.”<sup>177</sup>

The themes of purification and return to proper order are substantial in the *Phaedo*. The human finds herself between two existences: the embodied and the psychic. The psychic is where the human connects to the most divine and eternal elements of her existence, and the life dedicated to fostering this connection is the best and “purifies” the soul from those embodied elements that draw it away from the concerns of the best life. Accordingly, the philosophical life is the life that contemplates the divine, nurtures the best parts of the human, and, therefore, results in the good life. Upon death, then, the philosopher is equipped to transition to a disembodied life that consists entirely in communion with what is absolutely true. The language and ideas of Pythagoreanism and Orphism are so readily used in the *Phaedo* because these traditions agree that the nature of the soul—its origin, present state, and final goal—is grounded in something “more divine” than the nature of the body. They agree that the soul needs

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<sup>177</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato's Dialogues*,” 137.

purification to reach its best state. In the dialogue, the philosopher, like the Orphic or Pythagorean initiate, is the one who will be able to purify her soul and return it to a divine state. Like many of Plato's works, this purification amounts to methods that reveal "true causes" to the human (i.e., the Forms), enabling her to understand herself accurately with respect to both the soul and the body and to cultivate a life that abides by this accurate understanding. Thus, the philosopher overcomes the ancient offense of substituting bodily pleasures for divine ones.

However, purification through philosophy could simply be a rationalist metaphor intended to substitute logic as the purifying force instead of religious or poetic activities and experiences; but why, then, would Socrates end with an incantatory myth instead of a logical argument? The answer to this question resides in a further examination of the role of mythopoesis in cultic rituals. Specifically, a brief look at the discovery location, physical state, and content of the enigmatic *Derveni Papyrus* sheds light on the role of Socrates' choice to conclude by crafting a myth.<sup>178</sup> Dirk Obbink observes that "one use of mythology belongs precisely in the sphere of the magical practitioner... This is a well-attested, often overlooked use to which mythographic poetry was put in private circles, as well as in cities."<sup>179</sup> The function of ritual uses of myth was corrective or purificatory. The ritual telling of myth cleansed offenses and reestablished proper order.<sup>180</sup> The ritual function of mythopoesis in Orphism is attested to by the *Derveni Papyrus*, a work by an unnamed author who engages in an allegorical reading of a poem attributed to Orpheus. The author treats Orpheus' poem as a hidden repository for

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<sup>178</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the history of the papyrus and the development of scholarship regarding it, see Maria Serena Funghi, "The Derveni Papyrus," in *Studies on the Derveni Papyrus*, eds. André Laks and Glenn Most (Oxford University Press: 1997), 26-37. An examination of the *Derveni Papyrus* will return in Chapters II and IV. All quotations taken from the papyrus itself are from All quotations from the papyrus are from Gábor Betegh, *The Derveni Papyrus: Cosmology, Theology and Interpretation* (Cambridge, U.K.; Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>179</sup> Dirk Obbink, "Cosmology as Initiation vs. the Critique of Orphic Mysteries," in *Studies on the Derveni Papyrus*, eds. André Laks and Glenn Most (Oxford University Press: 1997), 50.

<sup>180</sup> Obbink, "Cosmology as Initiation vs. the Critique of Orphic Mysteries," 50.

cosmological and cosmogonical knowledge. Moreover, the poem seems to be related to Orphic death rituals. The papyrus was discovered in a tomb and appears to have been burned on a funeral pyre along with its co-occupant in the burial chamber. Its appearance in a burial context suggests its importance for the deceased. Considered alongside Obbink's observations, the papyrus appears to have played a ritual role in the death of its co-occupant, either in preparing him for death in the copying of it or as a form of the ritual re-telling of myth to guide his soul toward its proper place in the afterlife through its burning. Perhaps the papyrus was meant to aid the soul in both ways.

One might, at this juncture, recall that Socrates is engaged in mythopoesis as he awaits his execution; he has been versifying Aesop's Fables.<sup>181</sup> Moreover, when asked about this undertaking, Socrates relates it explicitly to preparing his soul for death. He has been trying "to find out the meaning of certain dreams," and worries he has misinterpreted them.<sup>182</sup> These dreams exhorted Socrates to "practice and cultivate the arts,"<sup>183</sup> and they have a notably oracular quality in that Socrates treats them as subjects for interpretation. Their meaning is true but not given at the surface level because, as Socrates states, he "imagined that [the dreams] were instructing and advising me to do what I was doing... namely, to practice the art of philosophy."<sup>184</sup> However, since the festival of Apollo has delayed Socrates' execution, Plato's teacher returns to the interpretation of his dreams and decides to compose poetry "in case [his] dream was bidding [him] to practice this popular art."<sup>185</sup> Socrates notes that he "thought it safer not to leave here [i.e., die] until I had satisfied my conscience by writing poems in obedience to

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<sup>181</sup> *Phaedo* 60d-61c.

<sup>182</sup> *Phaedo* 60e.

<sup>183</sup> *Phaedo* 60e.

<sup>184</sup> *Phaedo* 60e-61a.

<sup>185</sup> *Phaedo* 61a.

the dream.”<sup>186</sup> In other words, Socrates sees his oracular dreams as prescribing the right way to live in preparation for death since he does not think it wise to die without doing what the dreams have ordered. Furthermore, he takes up writing poetry specifically in preparation for his death because he has already been practicing philosophy in the form of dialectic. Consequently, Socrates reapproaches poetry in his final moments to prepare himself for death because he is concerned that he has neglected it in his philosophical life. He sees the delay in his execution as a message from Apollo to complete his philosophical life by engaging myth and poetry in his final moments.

However, there is still more to the connection between Orphic mythopoesis and the *Phaedo* than Socrates’ composing poetry on his deathbed. His final myth serves a ritual function similar to mythopoesis in cultic contexts. As it was for the Orphics, Socrates’ death is a transitional moment in which he confirms his status as an initiate and ascends to a better “life.” Accordingly, one can read the final myth as a ritual incantation in the form of myth-telling, which serves to affirm his commitment to his cult (philosophy) and offers a final purification by reestablishing the proper order of relations, told in allegorical form between the human soul, the body, and the divine. Socrates not only uses mythopoesis to express his claims on the immortality of the soul. If that were his goal, the arguments alone would suffice. Instead, Plato’s choice to depict Socrates as closing with an incantatory myth models the *actual use* of mythopoetic “charms” in the philosophical life. Socrates is not an Orphic or Pythagorean, but Plato nonetheless depicts his final moments as containing ritual mythopoesis via the incantation of his concluding story. In a manner similar to what Obbink notes regarding myth telling and *PDerveni*, Socrates tells a myth to reaffirm what he has said. The story has the effect of

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<sup>186</sup> *Phaedo* 61b.



finalizing the philosopher's death ritual. It is a ritual re-statement of the basic tenets of Socrates' philosophical life through a myth. It functions by reaffirming commitments through reestablishing or reminding one of her place in the cosmic order and her hope of achieving a better state through the methods of her chosen cult. In this case, the cult is philosophy itself. This depiction of Socrates' final moments indicates that the philosopher, too, needs ritual myth-telling in her own practice. Furthermore, the use of myth as a closing ritual has parallels in other dialogues. Both the *Republic* and *Gorgias* also conclude an extended rational discourse with a myth. Importantly for the present study, one must note that ritual mythopoesis operates through the creative use of language and not through argumentation or logic.

Hence, Socrates' choice to sing a myth over himself and the others after his arguments indicates a sealing effect whereby argumentation and mythopoesis work together to initiate and confirm those present. Notably, for most of the *Phaedo*, Socrates makes logical arguments for the soul's immortality. Students learning the text for the first time will no doubt memorize the names and structure of these arguments: the argument from opposites, from recollection, the affinity argument, the final argument. Each one is placed in front of the reader and then carefully and logically explored and even rejected on the grounds of its ability or inability to stand up to rational investigation. The *Phaedo* demonstrates the serious importance of logical argumentation and rational thought for the philosophical life. The intricacies of its logical structure have even led scholars, such as John Palmer, to argue that the dialogue is not primarily about the soul's immortality but rather the method of hypothesis itself.<sup>187</sup> In Palmer's reading, the text centers around the method of inquiry and argumentation employed throughout the bulk of the dialogue, deducing logical conclusions from hypothetical beginnings. Nothing I argue above should speak

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<sup>187</sup> See John Palmer, *The Method of Hypothesis and the Nature of Soul in Plato's Phaedo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

against the role that reason, in the form of logical argumentation, plays in the dialogue. What is interesting, however, is that a dialogue so clearly in support of reason *also* includes repeated ritual symbolism, language, and practice. Why, if “mental withdrawal and concentration”<sup>188</sup> are all that the philosopher needs, does Plato choose to overlay the logic of the dialogue with mythopoetic ritual? It should be neither necessary nor desirable, and yet, its presence, while more subtle to a modern reader than the argumentation, is hardly hidden. Ergo, the *Phaedo* depicts a philosophical death ritual, borrowing from mystery traditions, in which the philosopher readies herself to approach the afterlife in a purified state similar to that of a highly initiated cult member. In the *Phaedo*, ritualized philosophical death involves the practice of systematic argumentation with other initiates followed by a sealing myth as a final charm against doubt that one has lived the best life—that of the philosopher.

Thus, *pace* Dodds’ claim, Plato’s *Phaedo* does not represent the purification of the soul as *merely* the product of “mental withdrawal and concentration.” Instead, Plato’s Socrates views the mythological story as a charm (ἐπαείδω) with a significant power to aid him in his philosophical purification, and this power is important enough to serve as the capstone to the discourse on the soul. Though “these things” told in the myth are not literally true, they are true in some other, non-literal way that renders them efficacious for the soul’s ascent. Therefore, the *Phaedo* presents the philosophical life as the marriage of rational discourse, mythopoesis, and ritual. The philosopher, if we are to take Socrates in the *Phaedo* as a model, is therefore in need of the power that comes from activities and experiences such as making myths and singing incantations. If the philosopher did not need this power, why does Plato depict his teacher and philosophical model as sealing his most beautiful “swan song” with the magical charm of a

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<sup>188</sup> Dodds, “Plato and the Irrational Soul,” 227.

poetic myth?<sup>189</sup> The inclusion of myth within the *Phaedo* also speaks to the success of the dialogue form as a vehicle for Plato's philosophical goals. As Jon Moline poignantly states, Plato's "conception of philosophy demanded that his philosophical writing employ a genre rich enough to speak to us in all of our complexity, a form that allowed for *mythos* as well as *logos*. This demand is satisfied better perhaps by the dialogue form than by any other."<sup>190</sup> Moline's point suggests that both *mythos* and *logos* can work together to purify the philosopher's soul. Mythopoesis, especially regarded under its religious functions, is not, as Dodds argues, relegated to the unintellectual pursuits of the "common man" and, therefore, beneath the needs of the philosopher.<sup>191</sup> Instead, the philosopher seems to stand in the best position regarding religious and poetic activities and experiences. It is the philosopher who can connect them under divine understanding and situate these activities and experiences within the context of the soul's upward gaze toward the Forms and the Good. For, as Addey reminds us, "Socrates exemplifies the culmination of the philosophical life—the enlightened mystic who lives and acts in assimilation to the divine."<sup>192</sup> Thus, contrary to Dodds' division between the ritual or mystical and the dialectic, the *Phaedo* corroborates Addey's statement that, for the Platonist, "the dialectician must be a mystic, and the mystic must be a dialectician."<sup>193</sup> The two, the mystical and the dialectic, come together in the philosopher's life and serve the same end: the soul's vision of and assimilation to divine Being.

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<sup>189</sup> *Phaedo* 84e-85b.

<sup>190</sup> Jon Moline, "Recollection, Dialectic, and Ontology: Kenneth M. Sayre on the Solution to a Platonic Riddle" in *Platonic Writings, Platonic Readings*, ed. Charles L. Griswold Jr (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2022), 239.

<sup>191</sup> Dodds argues that Plato is appealing to the common man, and not the true philosopher, in speaking of rituals and rites for purification.

<sup>192</sup> Addey, "The *Daimonion* of Socrates," 52.

<sup>193</sup> Addey, "The *Daimonion* of Socrates," 52.

#### IV. Reason alone? Images of Ascent in the *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and *Republic*

John Cocking is among those scholars who apply a rationalist reading to Plato's body of work. By way of example, consider his assessment that Plato does not see the imagination (in art or otherwise) as a way to the truth.<sup>194</sup> Cocking argues that "contemplation of perfection – the 'form' of good that is also beauty and truth – is to be achieved, according to Plato, through philosophy, not through art; through intellect under the discipline of the 'dialectic' rather than through any kind of 'inspiration'."<sup>195</sup> As noted above, Cocking contends that "when [Plato] asserts that poets achieve their results through inspiration rather than *techne*... such admissions of other-worldliness carry with them no respect for the poet's message."<sup>196</sup> Instead, Cocking views "the ideal state [for Plato as] one in which citizens of high intelligence... freely reason their way towards the [G]ood."<sup>197</sup> However, since "the power of reasoning develops slowly and is unevenly distributed among mankind... conditioning is an essential part of education."<sup>198</sup> According to Cocking, rigidly controlled poetry plays a role in indoctrinating less intelligent citizens. This control ought to be exercised by philosophers, of course, who do not need inspiration themselves. Instead, the philosopher only needs the operations of logical, dialectical thinking to get to the truth. Hence, Cocking does not allow for the mature philosopher's journey toward knowledge to include inspired activities and experiences; for him, it is reducible only to a narrow notion of reason as the purely logical, dialectical processes of thought.

Cocking's phrasing evokes images of the soul's ascent, in which the philosopher reasons upward toward the Good. Yet, one should ask whether and to what extent Plato's depictions of

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<sup>194</sup> Cocking, "The Greek Rationalists," 1.

<sup>195</sup> Cocking, "The Greek Rationalists," 1.

<sup>196</sup> Cocking, "The Greek Rationalists," 11.

<sup>197</sup> Cocking, "The Greek Rationalists," 10.

<sup>198</sup> Cocking, "The Greek Rationalists," 10.

the soul's journey toward knowledge affirm Cocking's picture of the philosopher's rational life. Should the "reason" employed in the ascent be identified with Cocking's austere and uninspired version or rather with Addey's mystical version in which inspiration is rational and reason is inspired? This chapter will argue the latter. Thus, the chapter turns to examine three images of ascent in Plato's dialogues, beginning with those of *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* and ending with the Allegory of the Cave in the *Republic*. This examination reveals that Plato's depictions of the ascent of the soul, in which the philosopher reasons her way toward the Good, do not exclude inspired activities and experiences. Instead, Plato frequently depicts the logical, dialectical reason employed by the philosopher in the ascent as aided—to borrow Cocking's own terminology—by the inspiration of "other-worldliness."<sup>199</sup> Most often, this inspiration takes the form of the erotic, which Plato further connects to mystagogic imagery in several passages by depicting lovers as lower initiates moving toward the higher mysteries. Moreover, the use of images to explain the ascent continues to corroborate the use of mythopoesis and, therefore, some measure of poetic inspiration in the philosophical life.

First, let us examine the passage at *Phaedrus* 245c-249c. In this excerpt, Socrates mythologizes the soul's journey to a vision of the Forms via a particularly beautiful passage in which he describes the gods as traveling outside the vault of heaven to view the Forms. This passage is markedly poetic, and Socrates refers to it as a palinode.<sup>200</sup> Socrates states that, due to the "poetical" (ποιητικός) nature of the first speech he is now recanting, such a poetic purification is needed.<sup>201</sup> The implication is that a poetic speech needs a similarly poetic

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<sup>199</sup> Cocking, "The Greek Rationalists," 11.

<sup>200</sup> *Phaedrus* 243b and 257a.

<sup>201</sup> *Phaedrus* 257a. Socrates concludes his second speech thus: "So now, dear Love, this is the best and most beautiful palinode we could offer as payment for our debt, especially in view of the rather poetical [ποιητικός] choice of words Phaedrus made me use."

purification. The purpose of the palinode is to retract the prior speech's reproach of Eros and to replace it with praise for Eros as one type of divine *mania* that aids the human soul in the ascent. This passage points to at least four components of the soul's ascent that are not reducible to rational thought: the inspiration of beauty, the value of otherness or externality in that inspiration, philosophical achievement as divine epiphany via mystagogy, and the need for the mythopoetic in communicating higher realities.

In this myth of ascent, the human soul is likened to a winged chariot pulled by both a "good horse"<sup>202</sup> and a "bad horse,"<sup>203</sup> and piloted by a charioteer.<sup>204</sup> Socrates tells Phaedrus that "every soul is immortal,"<sup>205</sup> and that all "soul looks after all that lacks a soul, and patrols all of heaven, taking different shapes at different times."<sup>206</sup> For the human soul, as "long as its wings are in perfect condition it flies high, and the entire universe is its dominion; but a soul that sheds its wings wanders until it lights on something solid, where it settles and takes on an earthly body."<sup>207</sup> All soul makes a regular journey upward, following the gods. The gods "move outward and take their stand on the high ridge of heaven, where [the] circular motion [of the heavens] carries them around as they stand while they gaze upon what is outside heaven."<sup>208</sup> In this position, the gods see a perfect vision of reality, which Socrates describes thus:

What is in this place is without color and without shape and without solidity, a being that really is what it is, the subject of all true knowledge, visible only to intelligence, the soul's steersman. Now a god's mind is nourished by intelligence (*διάνοια*) and pure knowledge (*ἐπιστήμη ἀκήρατος*), as is the mind of any soul that is concerned to take in what is appropriate to it, and so it is delighted at last to be seeing what is real and watching what is true, feeding on all this and feeling wonderful, until the circular motion brings it around to where it started.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> *Phaedrus* 253d

<sup>203</sup> *Phaedrus* 254e.

<sup>204</sup> *Phaedrus* 246a-b.

<sup>205</sup> *Phaedrus* 245c.

<sup>206</sup> *Phaedrus* 246b-c.

<sup>207</sup> *Phaedrus* 246c.

<sup>208</sup> *Phaedrus* 247b-c.

<sup>209</sup> *Phaedrus* 247c-d.

However, Socrates demarcates this experience from that of human souls, noting that this unbroken vision is “the life of the gods.” In contrast, Socrates describes the life of the human soul thus:

One that follows a god most closely, making itself most like that god, raises the head of its charioteer up to the place outside and is carried around in the circular motion with the others. Although distracted by the horses, this soul does have a view of Reality, just barely. Another soul rises at one time and falls at another, and because its horses pull it violently in different directions, it sees some real things and misses others. The remaining souls are all eagerly straining to keep up, but are unable to rise; they are carried around below the surface, trampling and striking one another as each tries to get ahead of the others... After so much trouble, they all leave without having seen reality, uninitiated, and when they have gone they will depend on what they think is nourishment—their own opinions.<sup>210</sup>

In this passage, we see three options for the human soul. First, the one who strives to be most like a god, following her deity “most closely,” will manage to poke her head above the boundary of heaven and see reality. However, because she is human, this state is a struggle for her, and she only “barely” sees the Forms. She must continue to strive upward to “see” reality in this way. Even though her head is above the vault of heaven, her attention is split between the vision of truth and the chaos below. Thus, while she sees what the gods see, her vision is tenuous, and unlike the gods who maintain their sight effortlessly, this soul can only preserve her vision with great effort. Next, there is the soul who catches glimpses of reality in momentary, piecemeal fashion only, bobbing up and down above the boundary of heaven. This soul is distracted one moment and able to ascend the next. The third soul is the most unfortunate. Unable to manage her chariot well and goad the bad horse into submission, she fails to rise above the vault at all and leaves without attaining any vision of the Forms. This unfortunate soul becomes “weighed down, sheds its wings and falls to earth.”<sup>211</sup> At this point, the reader should recognize that

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<sup>210</sup> *Phaedrus* 248a-b.

<sup>211</sup> *Phaedrus* 248c-d.

everyone partaking of this tale—Socrates, Phaedrus, and any future reader or auditor of this dialogue—is one such fallen soul. Embodied humans, then, are revealed to all be wingless and to need re-initiation into the ascent.

At 250b-251c, Socrates explicitly employs the language of initiation and epiphany in the Eleusinian mysteries. He calls those who have gained a vision of the Forms ἐπόπτης, or those who have reached the initiatory zenith. This reference is obscured by Nehamas and Woodruff's translation, but highlighted in Nightingale's, who renders 250b-c thus: "as the highest initiates (μυούμενοί τε καὶ ἐποπτεύοντες) we viewed in a pure light perfect and simple and calm and happy visions (φάσματα)." <sup>212</sup> What's more, ἐν αὐγῇ καθαροῦ, which Nightingale translates as "in a pure light," can be translated as "in the pure light of the sun" since αὐγή commonly refers directly to sunlight. Hence, the use of αὐγή here may be a nod to the Good of the *Republic*, of which the sun is said to be its analogue in the sensible world. <sup>213</sup> Furthermore, as Kevin Clinton notes, the light revealed in the mystery at Eleusis was also frequently compared to that of the sun. <sup>214</sup> Consequently, the vision held by the non-incarnate ἐπόπτης in the *Phaedrus* is a vision of the Forms illuminated or made visible by the Good itself. While human souls enjoy the status of ἐπόπτης when they succeed in their journey, those who have fallen into a body but have enjoyed this vision in a previous cycle are called ἀρτιτελής ("newly initiated") if the vision was recent or μὴ νεοτελής ("not newly initiated") if it was many cycles ago. <sup>215</sup>

What is central for present purposes is that these ἀρτιτελής and μὴ νεοτελής require a re-initiation into the status of ἐπόπτης through the madness of Eros, which demonstrates, *contra* Cocking, that inspiration plays a vital role in the ascent for these souls. The ἀρτιτελής is more

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<sup>212</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato's Dialogues*, 203.

<sup>213</sup> *Republic* 508b.

<sup>214</sup> Kevin Clinton, "Epiphany in the Eleusinian Mysteries," *Illinois Classical Studies* Vol. 29 (2004): 93.

<sup>215</sup> *Phaedrus* 251a.



likely to be successfully reinitiated because she has more recently seen the Form of the Beautiful itself. On account of her more recent vision of Beauty, the ἀρτιτελής is more susceptible to the power of its appearance in the sensible. Cocking argues that “Plato’s scattered comments about poetry, music and painting” all display the “tendency to move... from crude emotion to feelings of moral or aesthetic satisfaction underwritten by values which he believes to be in the last issue intelligible and not simply intuitive.”<sup>216</sup> Yet, Socrates describes the re-initiation of the ἀρτιτελής in terms of “crude emotion,” passionate sexual tension, and painful yearning. For, when the initiate

sees a godlike face or bodily form that has captured Beauty well, first he shudders and a fear comes over him like those he felt at the earlier time [when seeing the Forms]; then he gazes at [the beloved] with the reverence due a god, and if he weren’t afraid people would think him completely mad, he’d even sacrifice to his boy as if he were the image of a god... Once he has looked at him, his chill gives way to sweating and a high fever, because the stream of beauty that pours into him through his eyes warms him up and waters the growth of his wings. Meanwhile, the heat warms him and melts the places where the wings once grew, places that were long ago closed off with hard scabs to keep the sprouts from coming back; but as nourishment flows in, the feather shafts swell and rush to grow from their roots beneath every part of the soul (long ago, you see, the entire soul had wings). Now the whole soul seethes and throbs in this condition. Like a child whose teeth are just starting to grow in, and its gums are all aching and itching—that is exactly how the soul feels when it begins to grow wings.<sup>217</sup>

Accordingly, the fallen soul is reinitiated into the ascent—hopefully achieving the status of an ἐπόπτης again—*through the inspiration of beauty via erotic mania*.<sup>218</sup> While Cocking is correct in that the philosopher-lovers turn this passion into a mutual pursuit of truth, it is incorrect to say that the philosopher does not need inspiration or that reason displaces the philosophical value of

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<sup>216</sup> Cocking, “The Greek Rationalists,” 9.

<sup>217</sup> *Phaedrus* 251a-c.

<sup>218</sup> This inspiration places a high value on otherness or externality, for it is in beholding the beauty that is external to her, other to her, that the initiate becomes inspired and drawn upward. Gordon makes a similar claim regarding the speeches of Alcibiades, Aristophanes, and Socrates in the *Symposium*, stating: “What these several speeches have in common, despite their differences, is the idea that through erotic desire humans reach beyond their own finitude toward what lies beyond them” (Jill Gordon, *Plato’s Erotic World: From Cosmic Origins to Human Death* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 64).

“crude emotion” found in inspired experiences. Instead, the “crude emotion” produced by erotic inspiration is what ignites the philosopher’s ability to ascend again in the first place. Moreover, the visceral passion displayed by the ἀρτιτελής is rational, and the rational provokes passion. It is the previous vision of intelligible Beauty that renders the lovers mad for one another and for a vision of the Beautiful to be theirs again. The lovers’ “crude emotion” is rooted in a pre-dialectical recollection of the intelligible and is, therefore, not opposed to the rational but fundamentally caused by and directed toward it.

Furthermore, as noted by Nightingale, both the language used to describe the lover’s vision of the beloved and the vision of reality itself are described in terms of mystagogy, or initiation into the mysteries, as leading to divine epiphany. Here, divine epiphany refers to an experience in ancient Greek religious life wherein the gods quite literally appeared in the form of a physical vision. Nightingale argues that Plato employs the language of epiphany to depict the experience of “seeing” the divine Forms and the Good.<sup>219</sup> In the *Phaedrus*, Nightingale points out that “epiphanies occur in two different phases of the life of the human soul: one when the soul is preincarnate and the other when it lives on earth.”<sup>220</sup> Plato is most likely appropriating the language of the Eleusinian Mysteries in particular, for, according to Nightingale, these “featured a ritually induced divine epiphany at the climax of the ceremonies,” which, as Kevin Clinton notes, involved the illumination of a “great light” (μέγα φῶς).<sup>221</sup> The preincarnate epiphany is the vision enjoyed by the ἐπόπτης, who see the forms by the great light of the Good, and Nightingale

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<sup>219</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato’s Dialogues*, 32-33.

<sup>220</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato’s Dialogues*, 203.

<sup>221</sup> See Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato’s Dialogues*, 19 and Clinton, “Epiphany in the Eleusinian Mysteries,” 95.

points out that “Plato uses the same language of light, radiance, and beauty in both narratives of epiphany” that is used by his contemporaries to describe epiphany in the mysteries.<sup>222</sup>

The lover’s vision of the beloved comprises the second, incarnate epiphany. Still, the situation is the same in that Socrates uses language familiar to “poetic narratives of divine epiphany” to illustrate that the “beautiful boy’s hyper-radiant face makes the philosopher’s soul recollect and behold the divine Form of Beauty.”<sup>223</sup> Upon first sight of the boy, the lover first reacts with fear as “he shudders and a fear comes over him like those he felt at the earlier time [when seeing the Forms]; then he gazes at [the beloved] with the reverence due a god.”<sup>224</sup> The language ties the incarnate epiphany to the preincarnate one, for the fear is like that felt when seeing the Forms. Plato’s depiction of the philosopher’s epiphany of the Forms follows the pattern of poetic narratives in which the supplicant first experiences terror and then reverent awe at seeing the god. Nightingale compares this to the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, further deepening the tie to Eleusis, remarking that “when Demeter throws off her disguise and fully reveals her divinity, Metaneira... reacts with fear and astonishment.”<sup>225</sup> Furthermore, the language of the vision repeats themes of light and illuminated sacred objects. When the charioteer and his horses approach the beloved, “they are struck by the boy’s face as if by a bolt of lightning. When the charioteer sees that face, his memory is carried back to the real nature of Beauty, and he sees it again where it stands on the sacred pedestal next to Self-control.”<sup>226</sup> Nightingale further relates this passage to the *Hymn to Demeter*: “the beloved boy’s face flashes like a lightning bolt just as Demeter fills the house like a bolt of lightning when she reveals herself to the people of Eleusis

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<sup>222</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato’s Dialogues*, 207.

<sup>223</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato’s Dialogues*, 209.

<sup>224</sup> *Phaedrus* 251a.

<sup>225</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato’s Dialogues*, 207.

<sup>226</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato’s Dialogues*, 209.

in the Hymn... The beautiful boy's hyper-radiant face makes the philosopher's soul recollect and behold the divine Form of Beauty."<sup>227</sup> Socrates likens the face of the beloved to a sacred image and describes it explicitly in the language of epiphany, in which the gods appear to us in the sensible.

Hence, the *Phaedrus* depicts the philosopher's ascent toward contemplation of the Forms and the Good as divine epiphany via initiatory rites in the Eleusinian mysteries. Epiphany is a moment wherein the holy breaks through and presents itself to mortals in the material realm. The divine takes on a material form that points beyond itself to the true, intelligible presence of the divine. Similarly, the philosopher sees the divine, the Form of the Beautiful itself, in the face of the beloved. The intelligible form is made incarnate in the beloved's god-like visage, which the lover views with the fear and trembling appropriate to a deity, not a human. The sensible is seized by a divine presence and made to point the soul upward toward the intelligible. It is noteworthy that Socrates describes the experience in physical terms. This physical description is not meant to indicate that the physical awe and raw emotion of the incarnate epiphany is the terminus of the mortal's journey; rather, it is because it signals, and indeed actually constitutes, the beginning of the ascent itself. Erotic inspiration, depicted as a kind of mystagogy—viz., initiation into the mysteries—is what brings the philosopher into philosophy. The incarnate epiphany of the lover is what makes the philosopher aware of the preincarnate epiphany of the disembodied soul as the true end of her journey.

Finally, one should take note of both the form and content of the *Phaedrus*' image of ascent. From the above, at least two purposes motivate Socrates' use of mythopoesis in this text. First, poetic language allows Socrates to more directly appropriate mystagogic language and

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<sup>227</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato's Dialogues*, 209.

symbolism by employing obvious parallels to poetic narratives of epiphany, such as those seen in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. In ancient Greek literature, the language of epiphany was poetic, and his choice to use that language requires its accompanying medium of “poetical” composition. Second, he indicates that speaking of such divine realities requires a mythopoetic image. While their subject requires a description of the nature of the soul and its need for erotic madness, Socrates states that “to describe what the soul actually is would require a very long account, altogether a task for a god in every way; but to say *what it is like* is humanly possible and takes less time.”<sup>228</sup> Thus, in the *Phaedrus*, the choice to spin a mythic and poetic *image* rather than offer logical arguments appears to be grounded in one’s acknowledgment of the human’s imperfect state. In this dialogue, the human is actually not able to freely reason her way to the Good. Consequently, mythopoesis is the appropriate medium through which incarnate humans can examine things beyond our complete grasp. Argumentation is undoubtedly necessary, but in the *Phaedrus*, it is not sufficient.

The fundamental function of “divine *mania*” in the *Phaedrus* is to awaken the soul to its true nature. The *mania* of divine inspiration—erotic, poetic, mystical, prophetic, or all four—thereby awakens the soul to the knowledge of an existence and desire beyond its temporal, sensible concerns. Reason is needed to sate this desire and reconnect with this existence. However, the exercise of reason by embodied—and, therefore, imperfect—humans will always be insufficient to capture the perfection of Being. Thus, the mortal use of logical, dialectical thought without inspired intervention carries the threat of locking us into our own myopic viewpoints. We might then make the mistake of identifying our love of wisdom for the possession of it and think that our embodied understanding of reality is final and complete. Yet,

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<sup>228</sup> *Phaedrus* 246a. Emphasis mine.

Socrates tells Phaedrus that “the best things we have come from madness, when it is given as a gift of the god,”<sup>229</sup> and “madness... from a god is finer than self-control (σωφροσύνη) of human origin.”<sup>230</sup> How can he say this? It seems that the state of the sober-minded reasoner would be better than that of the manic mystic, yet Socrates states the opposite. The reason for the better state of the mystic is that the sober-minded direct their gaze around them, but the divinely inspired sends her gaze upward. Ergo, Socrates tells Phaedrus that even the failed erotic initiation leaves the soul in a better state than the state resulting from no initiation at all. If “the victory goes to the better elements in both [the lovers’] minds,” they will “follow the assigned regimen of philosophy,” and “their life here below is one of bliss and shared understanding,” while the one after death will be winged and weightless.<sup>231</sup> Yet, even if “they adopt a lower way of living” and consummate their love, they will still “live in mutual friendship (though weaker than that of the philosophical pair),” and when death comes, they will be “wingless...but their wings are bursting to sprout.”<sup>232</sup> And so,

the prize they have won from the madness of love is considerable because those who have begun the sacred journey in lower heaven may not by law be sent into darkness for the journey under the earth; their lives are bright and happy as they travel together, and thanks to their love they will grow wings together when the time comes.<sup>233</sup>

Socrates claims that even those who are taken with divine madness but do not fully turn toward philosophy are better off than their rational, self-controlled counterparts who have no taste of divine madness. The lovers have tasted divine madness and, in so doing, have at least partially turned their souls toward divine things. Their taste of heavenly truth has oriented them toward it, even if they do not yet fully engage in the subsequent philosophical task of searching it out more

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<sup>229</sup> *Phaedrus* 244a.

<sup>230</sup> *Phaedrus* 244d.

<sup>231</sup> *Phaedrus* 256a-b.

<sup>232</sup> *Phaedrus* 256b-d.

<sup>233</sup> *Phaedrus* 256d-e.

thoroughly. Divinely inspired activities and experiences are occasions when the soul can attend to the disparity between its embodied thought and its divine object—complete and unchanging wisdom. Inspiration thereby provides the soul with an intuitive, even crudely emotional, perception of what its true object is and where it lies, not in the world around it but in the divine and intelligible causes above it. Thus, the account of the soul’s ascent in the *Phaedrus* counters Cocking’s rationalist reading of Plato. While Cocking argues that the philosopher does not need inspired states, the *Phaedrus* depicts the philosopher’s ascent toward the Good as explicitly beginning in, and even requiring, the presence of divine inspiration.

Let us now turn to the image of ascent in the passage at *Symposium* 201d-211d. The *Symposium* repeats similar themes to those of the *Phaedrus*. The dialogue portrays philosophical achievement as divine epiphany via mystagogy and also foregrounds the inspiration of beauty. The dialogue also employs mythopoesis to communicate the nature of Eros and its role in the soul’s ascent. Moreover, the *Symposium* emphasizes the value of otherness or externality in the inspiration of the Beautiful, which comes to us first and foremost in the beauty of the other. The role of otherness in the ascent according to the *Symposium* implies that we require more than our individual, autonomous reason to ascend to knowledge of Forms and the Good. We first require initiation into this pursuit through externally caused inspiration.

As in the *Phaedrus*, the soul’s ascent is discussed in terms of mystery rites in the *Symposium*, as Diotima tells young Socrates:

Even you, Socrates, could probably come to be initiated [μυηθείς] into these rites of love. But as for the purpose of these rites when they are done correctly—that is the final and highest mystery [τὰ δὲ τέλεια καὶ ἐποπτικά], and I don’t know if you are capable of it. I myself will tell you,” she said, “and I won’t stint any effort. And you must try to follow if you can.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> *Symposium* 210a.

The Greek terminology in this passage emphasizes the ritual connotations of Diotima’s language. Μυέω means, literally, “to initiate into the mysteries.” The term used for the “highest mystery” is ἐποπτικά, the adjectival form of ἐπόπτης. Here, just as in the *Phaedrus*, ἐποπτικά refers to the divine epiphany found in a vision of the Forms themselves. Nevertheless, again, the path to becoming an ἐπόπτης begins, first, with a beautiful person as the object of one’s desires. At first, the initiate devotes “himself to beautiful bodies.”<sup>235</sup> Then, the lover realizes “that the beauty of any one body is brother to the beauty of any other and that if he is to pursue beauty of form he’d be very foolish not to think that the beauty of all bodies is one and the same.”<sup>236</sup> The lover therefore realizes that the beauty of bodies is inferior to the beauty in the soul “so that if someone is decent in his soul, even though he is scarcely blooming in his body, our lover must be content to love and care for him and to seek to give birth to such ideas as will make young men better.”<sup>237</sup> The lover is then “forced to gaze at the beauty of activities and laws,” and he then “must move on to various kinds of knowledge.”<sup>238</sup> The result of this ascent upward, using the beauty of particular things, souls, and ideas as stepping stones, is that “the lover is turned to the great sea of beauty, and, gazing upon this, he gives birth to many gloriously beautiful ideas and theories, in unstinting love of wisdom.”<sup>239</sup> Finally, the initiate reaches the zenith of this mystagogic ladder of love, and, “all of a sudden,” he catches “sight of something wonderfully beautiful in its nature,” which “always is and neither comes to be nor passes away, neither waxes nor wanes.”<sup>240</sup> This “all of sudden” moment is epiphanic, a moment in which the divine appears and leaves the initiate awe-struck. The lover thus has a vision of the Form of the Beautiful itself,

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<sup>235</sup> *Symposium* 210a.

<sup>236</sup> *Symposium* 210a-b.

<sup>237</sup> *Symposium* 210b-c.

<sup>238</sup> *Symposium* 210c-d.

<sup>239</sup> *Symposium* 210d.

<sup>240</sup> *Symposium* 210e-211a.



which “is not beautiful this way and ugly that way, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in relation to one thing and ugly in relation to another; nor is it beautiful here but ugly there... but [is beautiful] itself by itself with itself” and “always one in form.”<sup>241</sup> As in the *Phaedrus*, Plato again portrays philosophical achievement as divine epiphany via mystagogy. In other words, the dialogue portrays philosophy as something that begins through external initiation and proceeds in initiatory degrees through states of hierarchical knowledge, brought out through ritual progression, and culminating in a final stage that comprises a vision of the divine itself. Again, the “rite” of philosophical initiation is the inspiration of beauty encountered in what is other to the lover (a beautiful body, then soul, then ideas and laws, and so on). The common person becomes a μύσσης through the external inspiration of another, who brings her into the fold. Then, the μύσσης becomes a higher initiate, an ἐπόπτης, when she achieves the sight of the divine through an arduous ritual meant to place her in the right frame of mind to truly “see” and receive this divine epiphany.

In contrast to straightforward treatise-writing or technical prose, Plato chooses the form of mythopoesis to depict the soul’s ascent in the *Phaedrus*, and the *Symposium* employs mythopoesis similarly to explain the very nature of Eros. Diotima tells Socrates a new myth concerning the origins of Eros. In her story, Eros is the offspring of Poverty and Plenty, conceived during the celebration of Aphrodite’s birthday. Diotima uses Eros’ parentage to explain his unique intermediary nature. He is neither mortal nor immortal, beautiful nor ugly, wise nor ignorant. He is between all such divisions that characterize the gap between mortals and gods. Again, one should ponder why Plato made Diotima communicate this point via a myth. She could have easily explained this in plain language. Or could she? As in the *Phaedrus*, the

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<sup>241</sup> *Symposium* 211a-b.

task at hand is to explain the situation of the human soul concerning knowledge and the role that Eros plays in mediating this relationship. The human relationship to knowledge is constituted by imperfection, as in the *Phaedrus*. Diotima prefaces her exposition of the erotic mysteries by telling Socrates that she does not know if he is capable of becoming an ἐπόπτης.<sup>242</sup> Gordon remarks that, at one point when Diotima speaks about the “full achievement of eros’s objects,” she “speaks in counterfactuals, conjecturing about what would happen to someone if he had the fortune to see the beautiful itself, and she ends her speech claiming that if he were to succeed, such a one would be immortal, that is, not a human being at all.”<sup>243</sup> Hence, Gordon argues, “[n]o matter how active the eros, humans will thus always be in a state of desiring, of need. Eros seems to reside in this process of coming to know, if not in the knowing” itself.<sup>244</sup> Thus, mythopoesis, which allows us to imagine something without presuming to capture it completely, is an appropriate format for discussing the soul’s perpetual motion toward wisdom. At least while the soul is embodied, this goal is never fully obtained, which means the philosopher, as a lover of wisdom and not wise herself, must explain her terminal object mythopoetically rather than literally. Further, in contrast to the *Phaedrus*, the depiction of ascent in the *Symposium* does not assume the soul’s immortality. Diotima instead seems to see the erotic mysteries as uniquely necessary for humans *because* of our mortality, stating that, unlike the gods, we do not remain in the same state forever but must continually renew ourselves and our knowledge.<sup>245</sup> Thus, the vision of Eros in the myth explains the human need for mediation with the divine. We are unable to cross this gap alone. Diotima, therefore, spins a myth that explains our need for an intermediary force that partakes of both sides. A mythopoetic account enables Diotima to explain

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<sup>242</sup> *Symposium* 210a.

<sup>243</sup> Gordon, *Plato’s Erotic World*, 63. See also *Symposium* 211b-212b.

<sup>244</sup> Gordon, *Plato’s Erotic World*, 63.

<sup>245</sup> See *Symposium* 208a-b.

a truth about us and Eros rooted in what is beyond our grasp. Therefore, the use of the mythopoetic speaks to the neediness of human reason and highlights the importance of initiatory components in the soul's ascent, which point the soul beyond its own limitations.

Of course, the image of ascent in the *Symposium* still demonstrates the use of reason to move from the truth of a beautiful person to the truth of the Beautiful itself; the question is not whether reason is necessary for the ascent but whether it is sufficient. One must ask *why* Plato depicts this ascent in terms and images that are not strictly rational—viz., explicitly logical or dialectical in form—but rather appeal to embodied, emotional, and spiritual experiences if not to indicate that these, too, are part of the ascent. The images of ascent so far indicate that there is something in the *experience* of the erotic and initiatory that speaks to what the philosopher is trying to do, which is to “see” the Forms and the Good—objects that exceed the total grasp of an individual's rational faculties. Again, the *Symposium*, like the *Phaedrus*, draws our attention to the imperfection of human intellect as it tries to ascend. Though the two texts diverge on the question of the soul's immortality, the images of ascent in both the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* indicate that the incarnate human is trying to jump across an immeasurable gap between knowledge in the particular sensible world and knowledge as the gods have it. While rational thinking is necessary, it is, again, insufficient according to the accounts of these two passages, for the imperfect human soul needs some external source of inspiration to regrow her wings or step onto the ladder leading to the vision of the Forms.

We have thus far looked at two images of ascent, both of which incorporate mythopoetic and mystagogic content. What is left is to examine is the Allegory of the Cave and to assess whether or not it depicts the ascent similarly. Recall that Cocking indicated that Plato's ideal involves an ascent to the Good via reason alone. One can add to Cocking's picture Hannah

Arendt's indictment that the ascent, as depicted in the Allegory of the Cave, is accomplished not only by reason alone but also, simply, alone. Arendt states that in the "Cave parable... the philosopher, having liberated himself from the fetters that bound him to his fellow men, leaves the cave in perfect 'singularity,' as it were, neither accompanied nor followed by others."<sup>246</sup>

Similarly, Nightingale says that

[Plato] represents the philosopher... outside of the cave as looking at a Form all by himself... To be sure, there may be a guide in the early parts of the philosopher's intellectual journey to the Forms, but this individual sees the Forms entirely on his own. This experience is autoptic. Plato could have represented a collective philosophical ascent (cf. Augustine in *Confessions* 9, where he and Monica collectively and interactively ascend to God), *but he resisted this idea.*<sup>247</sup>

If Arendt and Nightingale are correct, then the Allegory of the Cave affirms Cocking's point and stands apart from the two other images of ascent discussed above. Upon examination, however, the Allegory of the Cave shares many points of contact with the two previous passages. While the allegory does not foreground the inspiration of beauty in the way the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* do, it does highlight the value of otherness or externality in bringing the soul into the ascent. Further, it also depicts philosophical achievement as divine epiphany via mystagogy. It uses *mythopoesis* to communicate the human's relationship to higher realities, just as the above sections of the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* did.

*Pace* Arendt, the prisoner has not "liberated himself" from his shackles, nor does he journey out of the cave "in perfect 'singularity'." Plato's Greek indicates the precise opposite of Arendt's interpretation. Socrates describes the prisoner's release and upward journey using the passive voice, as the prisoner must be "freed and suddenly compelled to stand up [λυθείη και ἀναγκάζοιτο ἐξαίφνης ἀνίστασθαι.]" *by another.*<sup>248</sup> Then, far from leaving his den alone or even

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<sup>246</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 20.

<sup>247</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato's Dialogues*, 48. Emphasis mine.

<sup>248</sup> *Republic* 515c.

by choice, someone drags the prisoner “away from there by force, up the rough, steep path [ἐντεῦθεν ἔλκοι τις αὐτὸν βία διὰ τραχείας τῆς ἀναβάσεως καὶ ἀνάντους].”<sup>249</sup> This someone (τις) will not “let [the prisoner] go until he had dragged him into the sunlight [τις αὐτὸν... μὴ ἀνεῖη πρὶν ἐξελεύσειεν εἰς τὸ τοῦ ἡλίου φῶς].”<sup>250</sup> Arendt’s language implies that the allegorical journey resembles something like Descartes’s *Meditations*, wherein the autonomous subject methodically reasons his own way to truth. However, the passage’s language actually depicts the prisoner as someone who does not even *want* to leave. Instead, the journey out of the cave is a rather violent affair in which the prisoner is explicitly *forced* to leave the comfort of his pit, as Socrates’ rhetorical question demonstrates: “wouldn’t [the prisoner] be pained and irritated at being treated that way [ἄρα οὐχὶ ὀδυῖσθαί τε ἂν καὶ ἀγανακτεῖν ἐλκόμενον]?”<sup>251</sup> Moreover, *pace* Nightingale, there are good reasons to think the prisoner is not alone in his vision of the sun. While Nightingale interprets the prisoner as “neither accompanied nor followed by others,” Socrates explicitly tells us that the prisoner is accompanied. Our mysterious and benevolent kidnapper does not leave the prisoner’s side “until he had dragged him into the sunlight [τις αὐτὸν... μὴ ἀνεῖη πρὶν ἐξελεύσειεν εἰς τὸ τοῦ ἡλίου φῶς].”<sup>252</sup> As his eyes begin to adjust to the light, the prisoner starts actively studying this world outside of the cave;<sup>253</sup> perhaps he does this alone, but we actually have no reason to assume this is the case. Given that Socrates does not tell us if this adjustment period and following vision of the sun itself is undertaken alone, and given that everything prior to it involved the participation of another, it is just as reasonable to think that the prisoner’s rescuer remains beside him. If one is bold enough to read the *Phaedrus* into

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<sup>249</sup> *Republic* 515e.

<sup>250</sup> *Republic* 515e.

<sup>251</sup> *Republic* 515e.

<sup>252</sup> *Republic* 515e.

<sup>253</sup> *Republic* 516a.

this portrayal of ascent in the *Republic*, the likelihood of a joint vision is made even more plausible. The passage at 256a-e indicates that the lovers share the same fate in the ascent, indicating that one's ascent to the divine epiphany of the Forms and the Good is shared by the other. In any case, even if the epiphanic vision itself is "autoptic," as Nightingale puts it, each moment leading up to it requires the externality of something, or in this case, someone, outside or other to the prisoner himself. The allegory is clear and corroborates what our examination of the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* has already shown us: we cannot initiate ourselves into the path toward knowledge. Something or someone from outside of us must first shock us out of our ignorant stupor and make us aware of the sun's light.

Nevertheless, the allegory could still point to an ascent accomplished by rational thought alone, though not by a single person alone. The story certainly evokes Socrates' own pedagogical methods. The elenctic dialogues poignantly depict the unpleasant process by which a caring pedagogue "drags" a cave-dweller into the light. This unknowingly fortunate prisoner is pulled, kicking and screaming, into "the light" of a realization of his own ignorance and made to confront the poverty of his prior vision of reality. Hence, perhaps Plato only means for the allegory to demonstrate the effect of reason-based education on the soul. One could read the image of the cave as an affirmation of the ability to reason one's way to the Good via dialogue *with others*. In other words, the Allegory of the Cave does not, as yet, preclude an ascent requiring only a willing teacher and the judicious application of logical thinking via elenctic and dialectical methods.

However, there are other elements present in the allegory that should inform our reading. Primarily, the theme of initiation remains a palpable motif in this, our third image of ascent. The allegory itself depicts the returning philosopher as undertaking a *katabasis* (the hero's journey to

the underworld). The teacher-hero—personified, surely, as Socrates—descends into the underworld/*cave/polis* to bring others out as initiates of philosophy. Plato presents the initiation itself as an *anabasis* (the hero’s return from the descent, now possessing salvific knowledge),<sup>254</sup> wherein the new initiate stumbles with their guide (perhaps a philosophical lover according to the *Phaedrus*) up the steep incline toward a vision of truth. Both words, *katabasis* and *anabasis*, repeatedly appear in the original Greek. *Anabasis* shows up at 515e where the prisoner is “dragged by force through,” literally, “a steep and jagged *anabasis* (τῆς ἀναβάσεως καὶ ἀνάντους).” It appears again at 519c when the philosophers who have made the ascent and have seen the good (ιδεῖν τε τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ ἀναβῆναι ἐκείνην τὴν ἀνάβασιν) are required to return to the cave. *Katabasis* appears in the allegory at 516e, where Socrates states that if “this man went down [καταβὰς] into the cave again,” his eyes would have to adjust to darkness this time instead of light. Socrates further makes *katabasis* a requirement for philosophers, for after *anabasis*, the philosophers must not be allowed to “stay there [above] and refuse to go down again [πάλιν καταβαίνειν] to the prisoners in the cave.”<sup>255</sup> The use of these two terms invokes ritual symbolism. *Katabasis* and *anabasis* were central themes in the Orphic mysteries. The connection between *katabasis* and Orphism is evident in the mythology of Orpheus, who was said to have descended into Hades to rescue Eurydice and return (ascend) with her. As Nightingale notes, the

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<sup>254</sup> It is a “self-conscious” depiction because the theme of *katabasis* is something of a leitmotif throughout the *Republic*. The opening lines are “I went down to the Piraeus yesterday [κατέβην χθές εἰς Πειραιᾶ]” (See *Republic* 359c-360d). Gyges’ descent into the chasm (he “went down [καταβῆναι] into it”) and reascent with the ring operates as a kind of anti-katabatic account wherein the unjust life is praised, creating a twisted or inverted image of the Allegory of the Cave (See *Republic* 359c-360d). The divided line points directly to the *katabasis* of the philosopher, for Socrates states that, “[h]aving grasped this principle [the Good],” reason itself (αὐτὸς ὁ λόγος) “reverses itself and, keeping hold of what follows from it, comes down to a conclusion [ἐπὶ τελευτὴν καταβαίνει] without making use of anything visible at all, but only of forms themselves, moving on from forms to forms, and ending in forms” (*Republic* 511b-c). Finally, *Katabasis* is reference in the Myth of Er, occurring in the final book of the *Republic*. Here, Er arrives at the place of judgement and witnesses souls “from the door in the heavens” come down (καταβαίνειν) “pure (καθαράς).” The term καθαράς has religious significance and typically refers to one who has been cleansed and made pure from pollution via ritual practice. Further, as Nightingale notes, Plato quotes “the ghost of Homer’s Achilles when he is in Hades” (*Philosophy and Religion in Plato’s Dialogues*, 17).

<sup>255</sup> *Republic* 519d.

*Descent to Hades (Katabasis)* was one of the “main poetic texts in the Orphic cult” alongside Hesiod’s *Theogony*.<sup>256</sup> Hence, the allegory of the cave represents philosophical accomplishment (both the teacher’s and the student’s) through the image of ritual Orphic ascent and descent.

Nevertheless, Plato also embeds symbolism from the mysteries at Eleusis in the Allegory of the Cave. References to light, blindness, and the sight of sacred images foreground some striking parallels between the prisoner’s journey and the cult of Demeter and Persephone. As Nightingale remarks, “[p]oetic narratives of divine epiphany often feature radiant and supernatural light.”<sup>257</sup> Furthermore, the zenith of the mysteries at Eleusis involved the vision of a μέγα φῶς, and according to Kevin Clinton, “the light at Eleusis was sometimes likened to the sun.”<sup>258</sup> Clinton points to the words of an initiate engraved on a statue, stating “that she will never forget the ‘nights shining with the beauty of the sun.’”<sup>259</sup> According to Clinton’s rather masterful reconstruction of the events at Eleusis from the extant literature discussing them,<sup>260</sup> the themes of sight and blindness played vital roles in the rites. First, the mysteries began at night and opened with a drama in which Kore and Demeter “walked together in the dark from the precinct [of the mirthless rock] up the processional path to the *Telesterion*” where “the reunited goddesses could be seen by *epoptai*... but not by the *mystai*... until their blindfolds were removed.”<sup>261</sup> Hence, the highest initiates are demarcated from the lowest by their ability to see the divine (Kore and Demeter). Nonetheless, the initiation works to bring the μύσστης into the

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<sup>256</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato’s Dialogues*, 141. Note that the *Cratylus* has a strong focus on the *Theogony*, and, in Chapter IV I will argue that, in that dialogue, Plato is self-consciously giving an *allegoresis* of Hesiod in order to appropriate Orphic uses of the poets in mystagogic ritual, especially as these rites are demonstrated in the Orphic text of the *Derveni Papyrus*.

<sup>257</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato’s Dialogues*, 68.

<sup>258</sup> Clinton, “Epiphany in the Eleusinian Mysteries,” 93.

<sup>259</sup> Clinton, “Epiphany in the Eleusinian Mysteries,” 93.

<sup>260</sup> One must acknowledge that our contemporary understanding of what went on during rites, and, indeed, of the precise details of the mysteries as a whole, is reconstructed from fragments and later accounts. Thus, there is, necessarily, a speculative element to such reconstructions. In other words, there is a tremendous amount of mystery surrounding the mysteries.

<sup>261</sup> Clinton, “Epiphany in the Eleusinian Mysteries,” 88.



fold of the ἐπόπται. This transition takes place when the μύσται quite literally behold divine images illuminated by the μέγα φῶς in the *Anakton*, a light like the sun itself. One might think of removing the prisoners' shackles as similar to removing the blindfolds on the μύσται, which is done not by the μύσται themselves but rather by the ἐπόπται, who essentially bring them into the light. According to Clinton, within the *Telesterion*, there was a "plurality of torchbearers" producing the fire at Eleusis,<sup>262</sup> and he argues that "the fire came from special devices held by [torchbearers who] lined the interior walls of the *Telesterion*."<sup>263</sup> Clinton suggests that these torches, or "special devices," were something like hollowed-out lamps that allowed the projection of images to appear in the great light of the Eleusinian fire. Hence, according to Clinton, "[i]t seems virtually certain that such extraordinary illuminated images were a feature of the rite [at Eleusis]."<sup>264</sup> Importantly, as Clinton remarks, "[v]iewing the illuminated image would... occur at the culmination of a sacred drama."<sup>265</sup> The climax of the ritual, the vision of divine images, further echoes what the examination of the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* demonstrated. Based on the uncanny resemblances between the allegory and Clinton's recreation, Plato is likening the ascent of the philosopher's soul to a vision of the sun/Good to the sight beheld by the highest initiates in the mysteries at Eleusis. Accordingly, the final image of the philosopher gazing at the sun represents the "Good [making] an epiphanic appearance to the philosophic contemplator."<sup>266</sup> Consequently, the Allegory of the Cave likens philosophical accomplishment to mystic rituals. The philosopher's vision of the Forms and the Good parallels the final vision of the ἐπόπται in the Eleusinian mysteries.

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<sup>262</sup> Clinton, "Epiphany in the Eleusinian Mysteries," 96

<sup>263</sup> Clinton, "Epiphany in the Eleusinian Mysteries," 97

<sup>264</sup> Clinton, "Epiphany in the Eleusinian Mysteries," 98.

<sup>265</sup> Clinton, "Epiphany in the Eleusinian Mysteries," 100.

<sup>266</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato's Dialogues*, 34.

In the case of the *Republic*, the mythic image of the cave can be read as an image of the rational, dialectical journey to *noesis*. The depiction of the cave is less explicitly inclusive of extra-rational activities or experiences than the previous two images of ascent. The *Phaedrus* displays initiation as, quite literally, the product of divine madness, thereby confirming a component of the ascent that lies outside of reason alone. The *Symposium*, with its depiction of a discursive ascent from the inspiration of beautiful bodies to the Beautiful itself, rests more on the side of reason. Still, the dialogue's treatment of the externally located inspiration of beauty as the origin of ascent belies a value for more than the rational in initiating the ascent. Finally, consider the *Republic* more generally. It is essential to note the mythopoetic form of the allegory itself. Allegory, after all, is a poetic or literary device meant to elucidate the truth of something through a non-literal parallel. The account is meant to serve its purpose without being literally true, for, as Socrates tells Glaucon, "[w]hether it's true or not, only the god knows."<sup>267</sup> Still, while the Allegory of the Cave does employ explicit references to mystery rites and externally initiated ascension, it is, perhaps, still primarily concerned with the ascent as a rational endeavor. Yet, this does not mean that the Allegory of the Cave is an image of ascent opposed to the images of the *Phaedrus* or *Symposium*. If we take these three images of ascent together without biases regarding the separation of reason from religious experience, we do not arrive at a Plato who values reason alone in the soul's ascent. Instead, we arrive at precisely what scholars like Addey have already indicated. There is no need to clearly delineate rational thought from mystagogic, erotic, oracular, and mythopoetic experiences because these passages simply do not begin with the assumption that such things are incompatible. In other words, the "rational" ascent of the *Republic*'s Allegory of the Cave bears no incongruities with the *Phaedrus*' manic ascent. *Mania*,

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<sup>267</sup> *Republic* 517b.

the erotic, the mystagogic, the mythopoetic, and the rational are all employed in the soul's ascent in Plato's imagery, demonstrating no contradiction among them.

Hence, the allegorical or mythopoetic accounts in which Plato portrays philosophical achievement occurring through ritual initiation are not only compatible with the use of reason in the soul's ascent, they are actually other facets of the same thing. In other words, the "non-rational" elements of ascent are the inspired elements that allow us to glimpse the truth of divine reality before we can even begin to reason our way there. Our reason, properly guided, will result in a vision of the Forms and the Good. Nevertheless, this proper guidance of our reason is found in inspiration, which ineffably gives us a glimpse of our desired vision so that we have a target at which to aim perpetually. Since this target lies outside and "above" us, we require the initiation into the ascent via inspired experiences and states. In the end, though, reason reaches toward the divine, and the divine reaches back down through inspiration. From a god's eye view, both comprise the perfect order of the cosmos coherently organized under the auspices of the Good.

Thus, repeating the words of Addey quoted above,

[T]he view of Socrates as sage and mystic does not contradict or conflict in any way with the view of Socrates as a rationalist or as the philosopher par excellence. Both roles... are seen as vital to the role of philosophy as a way of life leading toward self-knowledge and, consequently, toward knowledge of the cosmos... the dialectician must be a mystic, and the mystic must be a dialectician. In this sense, Socrates exemplifies the culmination of the philosophical life – the enlightened mystic who lives and acts in assimilation to the divine.<sup>268</sup>

This final goal of assimilating oneself to the divine does not abolish reason, nor does it abolish ritual, prophecy, mythopoesis, divination, and so on. Instead, the goal of divine assimilation marries all of them to the same endeavor. Reason divorced from its divine *telos* is not genuinely rational, and the ritual, prophetic, poetic, and so on are not genuinely inspiring if they are

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<sup>268</sup> Addey, "The *Daimonion* of Socrates," 52.

divorced from the desire to “see” the truth. There is no inconsistency between such extra-rational or “mystic” content and reason itself, for when they do what they ought to, they share the same origin and goal. Reason and the mystical come from the divine and aid us in becoming more like the divine ourselves.

To conclude, then, all three accounts of ascent, each different in some ways but also crucially similar, depict the *start*, the *initiation* into the life of philosophy, through mythopoetic images of erotic or otherwise external experiences, and treat the philosopher’s achievement, knowledge of the Forms, as the product of a mystagogic ritual ending in divine epiphany. While they include rational thought as a central component, given what I have outlined above, it is not the *only* component. Indeed, all three dialogues depict an external catalyst as bringing the initiate into the ascent. Therefore, the rational capacity of the individual, at least in these three images of ascent, appears to be insufficient on its own to initiate the soul’s ascent toward an understanding (*noesis*) of the Forms and the Good.

## V. The *Daimonic* in Plato’s Dialogues and How to Engage It

The preceding sections of this chapter discussed activities and experiences such as prophecy, mystagogy, and the erotic with respect to their role in the ascent of the philosopher’s soul. Diotima includes all of these activities or experiences under the category of the *daimonic* in Plato’s *Symposium*.<sup>269</sup> As the previous sections have argued, these *daimonic* elements have a role to play in the ascent of the soul. The central claim of this study as a whole is that the poetic likewise falls under the purview of the *daimonic* and, therefore, can also play a positive role in the ascent of the soul. However, before this dissertation can make that claim, more should be

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<sup>269</sup> *Symposium* 203a.

said about the nature of the *daimonic* in Plato. Thus, having established the presence of *daimonic* activities in Plato’s work, the present section now examines the nature of the *daimonic* in more detail, including a look at Socrates’ *daimonion*. Though there is little overarching consistency in Plato’s treatment of the *daimonic*, one quality does persist across all examples: the *daimonic* always functions as a mediator between what is human and what is divine.

Unlike many of his Neoplatonic successors, Plato does not have a systematic demonology. Concerning the identity of *daimones*, Plato is inconsistent, describing them as gods,<sup>270</sup> the children of the gods,<sup>271</sup> the spirits of great people who help the living after death,<sup>272</sup> or the rational element within our own *psyche*.<sup>273</sup> The first option appears to be a living debate in Socrates’ time, as he is aware of it in the *Apology* when he asks the court: “Do we not believe spirits [δαίμονας] to be either gods or the children of gods?”<sup>274</sup> The *Symposium* comes down on the side of the *daimones* being the children of the gods, depicting *Eros* as the bastard child of *Poros* and *Penia* (Resource and Poverty).<sup>275</sup> Other dialogues, such as the *Timaeus*, affirm this position.<sup>276</sup> The *Phaedrus* comes down on the other side, with Socrates rhetorically asking Phaedrus, “[d]on’t you believe that Love is the son of Aphrodite? Isn’t he one of the gods?”<sup>277</sup> From early dialogues to late ones, Plato never achieves any consistency regarding the identity or origins of *daimones*.

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<sup>270</sup> *Apology* 27d.

<sup>271</sup> *Apology* 27d.

<sup>272</sup> *Republic* 469a, *Cratylus* 398b-c.

<sup>273</sup> *Timaeus* 90a: “now we ought to think of the most sovereign part of our soul as god’s gift to us, given to be our [*daimon*]” (τὸ δὲ δὴ περὶ τοῦ κυριωτάτου παρ’ ἡμῖν ψυχῆς εἶδους διανοεῖσθαι δεῖ τῆδε, ὡς ἄρα αὐτὸ δαίμονα θεὸς ἐκάστω δέδωκεν).

<sup>274</sup> *Apology* 27d: τοὺς δὲ δαίμονας οὐχὶ ἦτοι θεοὺς γε ἠγούμεθα ἢ θεῶν παῖδας.

<sup>275</sup> *Symposium* 203b-d.

<sup>276</sup> *Timaeus* 40d: “As for the other spiritual beings [περὶ δὲ τῶν ἄλλων δαιμόνων], it is beyond our task to know and speak of how they came to be. We should accept on faith the assertions of those figures of the past who claimed to be the offspring of gods” (περὶ δὲ τῶν ἄλλων δαιμόνων εἰπεῖν καὶ γινῶναι τὴν γένεσιν μείζον ἢ καθ’ ἡμᾶς, πειστέον δὲ τοῖς εἰρηκόσιν ἔμπροσθεν, ἐκγόνοις μὲν θεῶν οὖσιν, ὡς ἔφρασαν, σαφῶς δὲ πού τοὺς γε αὐτῶν προγόνους εἰδόσιν).

<sup>277</sup> *Phaedrus* 242d: τὸν ἔρωτα οὐκ Ἀφροδίτης καὶ θεῶν τινα ἠγῆ.

However, Plato does demonstrate consistency regarding the function of the *daimonic*; he always depicts *daimones* as intermediaries bridging the gap between divine and mortal existences. Thus, it appears that Plato’s use of the term correlates to its early use in which, according to Burkert, “[d]aimon does not designate a specific class of divine beings, but a peculiar mode of activity.”<sup>278</sup> While the dialogues depict various *daimonic* tasks—the guardians of individual souls,<sup>279</sup> of particular activities such as desire,<sup>280</sup> or of whole cities or land areas<sup>281</sup>— they consistently depict the *daimonic* as playing a mediating role. This task of mediation is perhaps most famously articulated in the *Symposium*:

Everything spiritual [πᾶν τὸ δαιμόνιον]... is between god and mortal... [*daimones*] are messengers who shuttle back and forth between the two, conveying prayer and sacrifice from men to gods, while to men they command from the gods and gifts in return for sacrifices. Being in the middle of the two, they round out the whole and bind fast the all to all.<sup>282</sup>

No matter what else Plato indicates about *daimones*, they always play the role of a go-between connecting two otherwise separate modes of existence. This mediating role is essential to the human journey toward divine understanding, for, we are told, “gods do not mix with men; they mingle and converse with us through spirits instead, whether we are awake or asleep.”<sup>283</sup> The *daimonic*, therefore, functions as a lifeline, allowing human beings to bridge an otherwise untraversable gap.

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<sup>278</sup> Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 180.

<sup>279</sup> *Republic* 617c

<sup>280</sup> *Symposium* 203a.

<sup>281</sup> *Laws* 747e.

<sup>282</sup> *Symposium* 202e: ἐρμηνεῦον καὶ διαπορθμεῦον θεοῖς τὰ παρ’ ἀνθρώπων καὶ ἀνθρώποις τὰ παρὰ θεῶν, τῶν μὲν τὰς δεήσεις καὶ θυσίας, τῶν δὲ τὰς ἐπιτάξεις τε καὶ ἀμοιβὰς τῶν θυσιῶν, ἐν μέσῳ δὲ ὄν ἀμφοτέρων συμπληροῖ, ὥστε τὸ πᾶν αὐτὸ αὐτῷ συνδέδεσθαι.

<sup>283</sup> *Symposium* 203a: θεὸς δὲ ἀνθρώπῳ οὐ μίγνυται, ἀλλὰ διὰ τούτου [δαίμωνων] πᾶσά ἐστιν ἡ ὁμιλία καὶ ἡ διάλεκτος θεοῖς πρὸς ἀνθρώπους, καὶ ἐγρηγορόσι καὶ καθεύδουσι.

For example, Diotima explains that the *daimon* Eros succeeds in driving us toward divine truth because “he is in between wisdom and ignorance.”<sup>284</sup> According to Diotima’s description, this in-between status is the nature of the *daimonic* in general and explains its ability to initiate us into the pursuit of knowledge without actually bestowing knowledge upon us. The mediation is explained with particular clarity in the case of Eros, who is said to be “a lover of wisdom” and thus between wisdom and ignorance.<sup>285</sup> By the intervention of Eros, we are made aware of both what we lack and what we desire, a crucial role because “no one...who is wise already [desires] wisdom,” and “no one who is ignorant will [desire] wisdom either,” because no one will want what they do not think they need.<sup>286</sup> Here, we may think of Euthyphro, who is undoubtedly between knowledge and ignorance. The seer has an intuitive grasp of piety but lacks a concrete comprehension of its complete nature and cannot give an account of it. He has been granted some understanding, but he must still work to raise it to the level of knowledge. Hence, the task of the *daimonic* is to alert us to what we are missing by giving it to us in such a way that we both have it and do not have it so that we begin pursuing it. The pursuit, however, is our responsibility. In essence, the human *psyche* is starved of its essential nutrient, a true vision of the Forms and the Good,<sup>287</sup> and the *daimonic* presents us with just enough of it to remind us of our voracious hunger. This hunger can only be satisfied through our pursuit of divine truth, so we start our journey thanks to this *daimonic* mediation.

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<sup>284</sup> *Symposium* 203a: σοφίας τε αὐτὴ καὶ ἀμαθίας ἐν μέσῳ ἐστίν.

<sup>285</sup> *Symposium* 204b.

<sup>286</sup> *Symposium* 204a: θεῶν οὐδεὶς φιλοσοφεῖ οὐδ’ ἐπιθυμεῖ σοφὸς γενέσθαι—ἔστι γάρ—οὐδ’ εἴ τις ἄλλος σοφός, οὐ φιλοσοφεῖ. οὐδ’ αὐτὸι ἀμαθεῖς φιλοσοφοῦσιν οὐδ’ ἐπιθυμοῦσι σοφοὶ γενέσθαι... οὐκ οὐκ ἐπιθυμεῖ ὁ μὴ οἰόμενος ἐνδεής εἶναι οὐδ’ ἂν μὴ οἴηται ἐπιδεῖσθαι.

<sup>287</sup> *Phaedrus* 248b-c: “The reason there is so much eagerness to see the plain where truth stands is that this pasture has the grass that is the right food for the best part of the soul, and it is the nature of the wings that lift up the soul to be nourished by it” (οὐδ’ ἔνεχ’ ἡ πολλὴ σπουδὴ τὸ ἀληθείας ἰδεῖν πεδίον οὗ ἐστίν, ἢ τε δὴ προσήκουσα ψυχῆς τῷ ἀρίστῳ νομῇ ἐκ τοῦ ἐκεῖ λειμῶνος τυγχάνει οὕσα, ἢ τε τοῦ πτεροῦ φύσις, ἧ ψυχὴ κουφίζεται, τούτῳ τρέφεται).

The *daimonic* in Plato extends beyond the scope of Eros alone. Diotima tells us that “through [*daimones*] all divination passes, through them the art of priests in sacrifice and ritual, in enchantment, prophecy, and sorcery.”<sup>288</sup> The references to these religious concepts, especially ritual, mark the cultic initiate as a “*daimonic*” person. These are also all activities that follow the same pattern as the erotic. They begin with the divine reaching down to convey a truth we could not ascertain by our own power, and they demand a response from us to bring our understanding of this truth to any kind of fruition. Socrates models this response to the *daimonic* each time his divine sign makes itself known. In all cases, it gives Socrates an impression, a hint at knowledge beyond the scope of Socrates’ understanding, and a warning that he should amend his course of action accordingly.<sup>289</sup> However, Socrates is still responsible for deciding on the correct action in response to this *daimonic* prompt. Socrates similarly models the interpretation of oracles to us in the *Apology* when he recounts the Pythia’s statement that no one is wiser than he. While he treats the oracle as necessarily true, having come from Apollo, he still recognizes that determining the way in which it is true is his responsibility. Appropriately, Socrates ultimately interprets the words as a call to recognize the futility of human reason in the face of divine knowledge.<sup>290</sup>

A discussion of the *daimonic* in Plato would be incomplete without a look at Plato’s repeated references to Socrates’ *daimonion*—his “divine sign.” There is a significant amount of scholarly debate regarding how to interpret the presence of the *daimonion* in the dialogues, as well as how to translated the term into English. Questions arise as to whether the *daimonion* is a personal guardian entity for Socrates, a kind of symbol for his own rational intuitions, or an experience he receives from the gods. For example, the *daimonion* is sometimes referred to as τὸ

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<sup>288</sup> *Symposium* 202e-203a: διὰ τούτου καὶ ἡ μαντικὴ πᾶσα χωρεῖ καὶ ἡ τῶν ἱερέων τέχνη τῶν τε περὶ τὰς θυσίας καὶ τελετὰς καὶ τὰς ἐπιδὰς καὶ τὴν μαντείαν πᾶσαν καὶ γοητείαν.

<sup>289</sup> For examples, see *Phaedrus* 242b-c, *Euthydemus* 272e, *Apology* 40b and 41d, *Theaetetus* 151a.

<sup>290</sup> *Apology* 21a-23b.



τοῦ θεοῦ σημεῖον,<sup>291</sup> or “divine sign,” and Luc Brisson argues against translating *to daimonion* as a substantivized adjective, even when the article is present. He argues, instead, that *to daimonion* should be read as “an ellipse for *to daimonion semeion*” or “the daimonic sign,” and that it, therefore, denotes “a phenomenon and not a person.”<sup>292</sup> However, the *daimonion* has been read rationalistically by other scholars. This study considers Socrates’ *daimonion* as genuinely divine for Plato and not as a shorthand for rational intuition. Whether or not the *daimonion* is an actual entity experienced by Socrates or a particular divinatory phenomenon is unclear. Nevertheless, the *daimonion* operates in revelatory ways to guide Socrates in his role as seer and philosopher. Thus, the *daimonion* has a *daimonic* function, whatever else we may say about it.

Plato depicts the divine sign as a vital component of Socrates’ philosophical life, and it is strongly connected to Socrates’ description of himself as a mantic or seer.<sup>293</sup> Indeed, at Apology 40a, Socrates refers to his *daimonion* as his “familiar prophetic (ἡ...εἰωθυῖά μοι μαντική) power.” His *daimonion* provides Socrates with revelatory prohibitions (*Alcibiades I, Apology*),<sup>294</sup> rebukes to mistaken actions (*Phaedrus*),<sup>295</sup> and even guides his pedagogical practices (*Theaetetus*).<sup>296</sup> It is worth noting that all of these examples involve the *daimonion* providing Socrates with negative content only, meaning that, instead of providing him with positive information, it merely stops him from doing something, usually with no indication of why. Socrates discerns the “why” of the prohibition himself through the work of interpretation. Thus,

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<sup>291</sup> Apology 40b.

<sup>292</sup> Luc Brisson, “Socrates and the Divine Signal According to Plato’s Testimony: Philosophical Practice as Rooted in Religious Tradition,” *Apeiron (Clayton)* 38, no. 2 (2005): 2-3.

<sup>293</sup> *Phaedrus* 242c: “In effect, you see, I am a seer, and though I am not particularly good at it... I am good enough for my own purposes” (εἰμι δὴ οὖν μάντις μὲν, οὐ πάνυ δὲ σπουδαῖος, ἀλλ’ ὥσπερ οἱ τὰ γράμματα φαῦλοι, ὅσον μὲν ἑμαυτῷ μόνον ἱκανός). Socrates says this immediately after noting that his *daimonion* stopped him from leaving, indicating that there is some connection between the *daimonion*’s prohibitions and Socrates’ abilities as a seer. This relationship is discussed further in Chapter III.

<sup>294</sup> *Alcibiades I* 103a and *Apology* 40a.

<sup>295</sup> *Phaedrus* 242b-c.

<sup>296</sup> *Theaetetus* 151a.

similar to the *Apology*, wherein Socrates seriously ponders the utterances of the Delphic Oracle<sup>297</sup> and models the proper approach, Socrates' engagement with his *daimonion* provides the reader with a model for engaging divine signs.

However, as Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith have noted, there have been “varieties of... ‘rationalizing’ interpretations of Socrates’ *daimonion*, which [attempt] to defend Socrates against the charge of irrationalism.”<sup>298</sup> Yet, as Brickhouse and Smith note, “none of the rationalizing interpretations of the *daimonion* provides an adequate understanding of what Socrates says about it.”<sup>299</sup> These rationalizing accounts seek to reduce “Socrates' references to his 'sign' [to] either...the 'voice' of Socratic reason itself, or as nothing more uncanny than moments of intuitive insight which come upon us before we are able to explain the phenomenon that has caught our interest.”<sup>300</sup> However, as Brickhouse and Smith counter, intuitive insight often provides one with positive rational content. Socrates’ *daimonion*, on the other hand, only works to provide him with negative information (i.e., stopping him from doing something).<sup>301</sup> Thus, “if Socrates’ so-called ‘*daimonion*’ were nothing other than rational intuition at work, it is incomprehensible why he would insist that the experience was *always* and *only* negative in this way.”<sup>302</sup> Furthermore, the *daimonion*’s admonitions can appear without any explanation of rational content. In other words, they often do stand as a simple prohibition with no other information. For example, Brickhouse and Smith note that the *Theaetetus* provides “no

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<sup>297</sup> *Apology* 21b-23b.

<sup>298</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, “Socrates’ ‘*Daimonion*’ and Rationality,” 43. Brickhouse and Smith specifically reference the accounts of Socrates’ *daimonion* offered by Gregory Vlastos (see Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 283-285) and Martha Nussbaum (See Martha Nussbaum, “Comment on Edmunds,” in *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, J. Cleary, ed., Vol. 1. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 234).

<sup>299</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, “Socrates’ ‘*Daimonion*’ and Rationality,” 44.

<sup>300</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, “Socrates’ ‘*Daimonion*’ and Rationality,” 44.

<sup>301</sup> See Brickhouse and Smith, “Socrates’ ‘*Daimonion*’ and Rationality,” 44-45.

<sup>302</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, “Socrates’ ‘*Daimonion*’ and Rationality,” 45.

explanation at all for why the *daimonion* prevents Socrates from not permitting further association with [some students and not others].”<sup>303</sup> While there may be a rational account behind the *daimonion*’s restrictions, there is “nothing in the passage itself that suggests (much less requires) this reductive reading” to rationalization.<sup>304</sup> Moreover, sometimes the *daimonion*’s prohibition appears to be justified by what comes in the future. However, this would require Socrates’ “rational intuition” to be clairvoyant, a quality that the reductive rationalist reading does not want to accommodate. For example, the *Euthydemus* “in no way indicates that Socrates had any evidence of any kind of supposing that a lively and interesting conversation was on the horizon should he remain in the Palaestra dressing room.”<sup>305</sup> Yet, he stays because his *daimonion* warns him against leaving. In sum, the appearance of Socrates’ *daimonion* within the dialogues flouts a simple reduction to rational intuition.

Nevertheless, Brickhouse and Smith do not commit themselves to the contrary view that Socrates’ treatment of his *daimonion* is thereby *irrational*. Their position, much like that of this study, is that “Socrates thinks of his *daimonion*” as being “in accord with his complete and unwavering devotion to the life of reason.” It is just that this “life of reason” for Socrates includes “rational grounds for trusting... ‘extra-rational phenomen[a].”<sup>306</sup> One might recall, here, Addey’s remark, quoted earlier in the introduction to this chapter, that *daimonic* elements, such as the *daimonion* itself, “[derive] from [the] metaphysical system and epistemology... whereby rationality is not in opposition to religious states of inspiration but operates on a continuum with suprarationality and divine inspiration.”<sup>307</sup> Brickhouse and Smith argue that Socrates’ trust in the

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<sup>303</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, “Socrates’ *Daimonion*’ and Rationality,” 47.

<sup>304</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, “Socrates’ *Daimonion*’ and Rationality,” 47.

<sup>305</sup> See Brickhouse and Smith, “Socrates’ *Daimonion*’ and Rationality,” 47-48.

<sup>306</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, “Socrates’ *Daimonion*’ and Rationality,” 58.

<sup>307</sup> Addey, “The *Daimonion* of Socrates,” 52.

*daimonion* is rational because it has stood the test of practical results: “For Socrates, a long life in which experiences of his *daimonion* have been frequent – together with his own observations of the results of accepting the *daimonion*’s warnings – have provided substantial suitable corroboration for Socrates’ trust in his *daimonion*.”<sup>308</sup> Still, Addey’s point brings out a deeper reason why Plato might depict a rational Socrates as trustful of his *daimonion*: there is, for Plato, a straight line connecting divine things to human reason. Human reason is a product of cosmic order, thereby rendering rational in the supreme sense whatever comes from the divine. Even if a divine sign is transcendent of the limits of an individual’s rational abilities for demonstration, it nonetheless conveys something in line with the cosmic order. It is thus not in contradiction to the powers of discursive reason. Thus, Socrates not only has reason enough to trust his *daimonion* based on past testing, but he also has reason to trust it because, even if the divine reveals something that exceeds the limited range of his discursive reason, the revelation will nonetheless still be in agreement with the cosmic order. Therefore, we can understand Plato’s choice to depict Socrates’ repeated experiences with the *daimonion* as being in accordance with the dialogues’ depictions of the use of mediatory methods for philosophical ascent to what is beyond the limits of discursive reasoning but not against that reasoning.

Significantly, the trustworthiness of the *daimonion* further fits with Plato’s general claims throughout the dialogues that the divine can only ever be good and the source of goodness. As Mark McPherran notes, Socrates displays a “full confidence that the *daimonion* is always sent by a divinity who would never purposefully mislead him; that is, the divinity would never warn Socrates away from an action that was not harmful.”<sup>309</sup> Yet, the goodness of the *daimonic* does

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<sup>308</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, “Socrates’ *Daimonion*’ and Rationality,” 60.

<sup>309</sup> Mark L. McPherran, “Introducing a New God: Socrates and His *Daimonion*,” *Apeiron (Clayton)* 38, no. 2 (2005): 20.

not necessitate its safety. Good things are often very difficult to get right, or, as Glaucon puts it, *χαλεπὰ τὰ καλὰ*, “fine things are difficult.”<sup>310</sup> One must approach the divine, in all its forms, humbly and cautiously, lest one become like Euthyphro and assume knowledge one does not have in interpreting divine signs. Plato offers Socrates as a model for how to engage with the *daimonic* again in the *Phaedo* when Cebes asks him: “what induced you to write poetry after you came to prison, you who had never composed any poetry before, putting the fables of Aesop into verse and composing the hymn to Apollo?”<sup>311</sup> Socrates replies:

I tried to find out the meaning of certain dreams and to satisfy my conscience in case it was this kind of art they were frequently bidding me to practice... [T]he same dream often came to me in the past, now in one shape now in another, but saying the same thing: “Socrates,” it said, “practice and cultivate the arts.” In the past I imagined that it was instructing and advising me to do what I was doing...namely, to practice the art of philosophy, this being the highest kind of art... But now, after my trial took place, and the festival of the god was preventing my execution, I thought that, in case my dream was bidding me to practice this popular art, I should not disobey it but compose poetry. I thought it safer not to leave here until I had satisfied my conscience by writing poems in obedience to the dream.<sup>312</sup>

This passage demonstrates Socrates’ commitment to the humble interpretation of divine signs as an ongoing project. Socrates received these dreams and interpreted them, first, as an instruction to practice philosophy and then, when he kept getting them, as an encouragement to persist in his philosophical endeavors. However, when Apollo’s festival stalls his execution, Socrates takes it as a sign that he might have missed something, so he writes poetry out of “obedience” to his dream. Since the *Phaedo* focuses on establishing that the philosopher is in the best position with respect to death and the afterlife, it is safe to conclude that Socrates does not think he was totally wrong about the dreams as he interpreted them before. He still affirms the philosophical life. However, his willingness to revisit the meaning of the dream and retain part of his interpretation

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<sup>310</sup> *Republic* 435c, trans. mine.

<sup>311</sup> *Phaedo*, 60d.

<sup>312</sup> *Phaedo*, 60d-61b.

whilst adding another component demonstrates that the philosopher–diviner must be open to entertaining new missed possibilities within divine signs. Socrates’ approach to oneiromancy is not once and for all; it is, instead, a living *practice* by which the human lover of wisdom continually engages that which transcends her. In this way, Socrates, as philosopher–oneiromancer, models the examined life as a living, breathing one in which the human attends to her limitations through continual engagement with divine revelation as something that she can never finally exhaust.

Furthermore, Socrates’ approach to dream divination in the *Phaedo* foregrounds the critical distinction between the passive moment at which one receives a divine sign and the subsequent *activity* of interpretation. We see this distinction highlighted in the *Timaeus*, wherein Timaeus actually ascribes separate titles to the one who takes up each task:

[O]ur creators...set the center of divination here [in the liver], so that it might have some grasp of truth. The claim that god gave divination as a gift to human folly has good support: while he is in his right mind no one engages in divination, however divinely inspired and true it may be... [I]t takes a man who has his wits about him to recall and ponder the pronouncements produced by this state of divination or possession... It takes such a man to thoroughly analyze any and all visions that are seen... But as long as the fit remains on him, the man is incompetent to render judgment on his own visions and voices... This is the reason why it is customary practice to appoint interpreters to render judgment on an inspired divination. These persons are called “diviners” by some who are entirely ignorant of the fact that they are expositors of utterances or visions communicated through riddles. Instead of “diviners,” the correct thing to call them is, “interpreters of things divined.”<sup>313</sup>

There are three essential points to note regarding this passage. First, the presence of divination denotes “some grasp on truth.” The implication is clearly that divination provides a direct, though incomplete, link between the human being and divine wisdom. Second, and most crucially, the divine gift of this madness or possession is only the first part of a two-part process. The second step is a thorough analysis by one of sound mind. Third, reading this passage

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<sup>313</sup> *Timaeus*, 71d-72b.

alongside the other passages above in which Socrates models proper engagement with the divine to us, we can see that the philosopher can act both as a passive recipient of divine inspiration and sound interpreter. This passage employs two separate words to denote a “seer” (μάντις) and a “prophet” (προφήτης). We can see that Socrates, by both receiving divine signs and interpreting them, functions as the seer (and even describes himself as one), while his active work to interpret the divine is an ongoing project in which he acts as prophet. Both steps of the process appear in the passage above from the *Phaedo* and occur elsewhere, such as in the *Phaedrus* wherein Socrates undergoes divine inspiration,<sup>314</sup> acts as a mantic,<sup>315</sup> receives the rebuke of his *daimonion*,<sup>316</sup> and then turns all of these divine signs into a discourse on love and madness. Accordingly, if Socrates is any model in the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*, the philosopher either operates as both seer and prophet, or, at the very least, as prophet to the inspired material of others. When both sides of this process—reception and interpretation—are present, the *daimonic* is edifying for the philosopher.

Taking Socrates as our model, we can see a call-and-answer structure to *daimonic* inspiration. This two-step process is particularly key to the compatibility between *daimonic* experiences and the workings of reason. States of divine *mania* possess danger in the hands of one who does not understand the division between passive reception and active interpretation and who does not see the latter as a necessary part of the experience. Plato, however, gives the reader ample examples, through Socrates, of how to engage both sides of the *daimonic* coin. As Danielle Layne points out:

[T]hroughout the dialogues Socrates’ prophecies, oracles and the like are not mantras to be taken at face value or immediately accepted, they are... enigmas to be clarified and continuously reinterpreted. Moments of divine inspiration, even the Delphic oracle, have

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<sup>314</sup> *Phaedrus* 238d.

<sup>315</sup> *Phaedrus* 242c-d.

<sup>316</sup> *Phaedrus* 242c.

to be tested and scrutinized. For Socrates, his main duty in the face of such ‘divine’ wisdom is a testing and examining. Even his daemon, while offering him divine wisdom, only offers a ‘sign’ that Socrates must interpret in order to understand. In this, Socrates demonstrates how testing and examining is his human work in gracious response to such divine gifts.<sup>317</sup>

Following Layne’s words, the reader may remember Heraclitus’ famous pronouncement: “The Lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither speaks nor conceals, but gives a sign.”<sup>318</sup> The divine does not communicate to humans in the mode of human thought. If it did, it would not provide anything new to our contemplative endeavors. The giving of signs is a mode of communication that avoids the concretization of propositional language and thus forces the human recipient to search for a meaning that is not immediately present to her rational thought processes. Giving a sign, instead of speaking clearly or simply concealing, is what gives rise to the two-step process of reception and interpretation. If the gods only concealed, interpretation would not be possible. If the gods only spoke clearly, interpretation would not be necessary, nor would the divine speech contain a revelation of something outside of ourselves. In giving us signs, the divine provides us with something with which we can make contact, but in such a way that the contact is never complete. Hence, Socrates is still engaging with his dreams even on his deathbed. The sign cannot be exhausted so easily as the proposition, and, in its fertility, it also thwarts the human compulsion to think one knows when one does not. Instead, the sign provides a call to active engagement through the constant practice of interpretation. This interpretation requires a sound mind, but it can only occur after one admits that she has received something greater than, or beyond, her human reason alone. The call to active interpretation undoubtedly carries the grave risk of *mis*interpretation. Still, Socrates’ repeated modeling of the appropriate response

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<sup>317</sup> Danielle Layne, “From Irony to Enigma: Discovering Double Ignorance in Plato’s Dialogues,” *Méthexis* 23, No. 1 (2010): 84.

<sup>318</sup> Patricia Curd and Richard D. McKirahan, *A Presocratics Reader* (Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett Pub. Co, 1996), DK 22B93. All quotations from the Presocratics are taken from the translations present in Curd and McKirahan.



indicates that Plato thinks *daimonic* activities are worthwhile. Since Plato seems to present Socrates as his model philosopher, Socrates' repeated engagement with *daimonic* inspiration signals to the reader that such engagement is not merely a permissible element of the philosophical life but probably a necessary one.

In conclusion, as noted above, all the activities discussed in this and in preceding sections of this chapter (mantic abilities, mystagogy, divination, and the erotic) are included under the category of the *daimonic* in Plato's *Symposium*.<sup>319</sup> Socrates engages all of them at some point or another in the texts discussed in this chapter (*Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, *Republic*). An examination of the descriptions of the *daimonic* reveals that, though there is little overarching consistency in Plato's treatment of the *daimonic*, the *daimonic* always mediates between what is human and what is divine. Additionally, the presence of Socrates' *daimonion* within the Platonic corpus further corroborates the need for such mediation in the philosopher's life. Plato treats the *daimonion* as a divine sign that provides Socrates with an external prohibition that is open to the philosopher's active interpretation but still is not reducible to Socrates' own intuitive reason. The sign is still "other" to Socrates himself, and is rooted in the divine as it helps him pursue wisdom. Furthermore, Socrates' engagement with divination as a seer (*Phaedrus*) and oneiromancer (*Phaedo*), coupled with the distinction made in the *Timaeus* between mantics and prophets, further establishes the philosopher's approach to *daimonic* inspiration as comprising a two-step process beginning with passive reception, but ending with active interpretation. Therefore, in corroboration with the previous sections, *daimonic* elements have a role to play in the ascent of the soul. What this role is, specifically, is highlighted in Plato's more direct treatment of the *daimonic* in the *Symposium*; the *daimonic* elements link the human being to divine wisdom in

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<sup>319</sup> *Symposium* 203a.

order to aid the human soul in pursuing knowledge. The *daimonic*, “being in the middle of the two,”<sup>320</sup> the human and the divine, operates in such a way as to “initiate” the human *psyche* into some level of contemplation regarding divine truth. The *daimonic* accomplishes this neither by clearly proposing rational knowledge nor by concealing, but rather by giving “signs” which transcend the limits of plain language but are nevertheless capable of being interpreted, though not in any exhaustive manner.

## VI. Conclusion

Much scholarship claims that Plato’s body of work reduces the philosophical life to the life of reason; however, many make this claim without adequately considering the compatibility Plato saw between (human) reason and the *daimonic*. Because Plato rooted all good things in the divine order of the cosmos governed by the Form of the Good, there can be no contradiction between the *daimonic* and the logical or “purely” rational as humans experience it. The *daimonic* and the dialectical or logical are perfectly compatible; both are entirely rational. Humans only perceive the two as separate because we operate on a level of motion and change, which prevents us from perceiving the cosmic order as the gods perceive it. Hence, what is revealed to the human in revelation through the *daimonic* is a *greater connection* to divine wisdom, not something counter to it. Nevertheless, the approach of many scholars is to see the revelation of the *daimonic* as superfluous to the philosopher’s independent use of reason. For example, Dodds writes that

while [Plato] thus accepted (with whatever ironical reservations) the poet, the prophet, and the ‘Corybantic’ as being in some sense channels of divine or daemonic grace, he nevertheless rated their activities far below those of the rational self, and held that they must be subject to the control and criticism of reason, since reason was for him no

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<sup>320</sup> *Symposium* 202e.

passive plaything of hidden forces, but an active manifestation of deity in man, a daemon in its own right.<sup>321</sup>

However, Dodds makes three errors here that illustrate the false dichotomy this chapter has worked toward dispelling. First, while he is correct to say that Plato viewed reason as the manifestation of the divine in humanity, his framing misses that this is the case because it is the part of us that most closely reflects the divine, from which the poet, the prophet, and the Corybantic draw their inspiration as well. Rather than proving the dichotomy between these activities and reason, Dodds here assumes it. However, as this chapter has extensively argued, Plato's works do not operate from such an assumption.

Second, Dodds implies that this “daemoniac grace” is untrustworthy by making it parallel to individual reason, which is “no passive plaything of hidden forces.” The indication is that the one who receives *daimonic* inspiration is such a “passive plaything.” Nevertheless, while we can certainly misinterpret things, we are told in the *Republic* that “the daemoniac and the divine are in every way free from falsehood.”<sup>322</sup> The idea of untrustworthy *daimones* contradicts the very point of the Euthyphro dilemma: the divine is utterly benevolent and is only the cause of good for human beings. The goodness of the gods and their gifts is made especially clear in the *Laws* and the *Republic*, which portray the gods as the caretakers of our souls.<sup>323</sup> If the gods use oracles and diviners, they cannot use them as playthings, the puppets of capricious entities with no care for our well-being. They must, instead, use them as channels for divine truth. Even if the channel herself fails to engage in active interpretation, this is not because the gods played some trick on

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<sup>321</sup> Cocking, “The Greek Rationalists,” 288.

<sup>322</sup> *Republic* 382e.

<sup>323</sup> *Laws* 907a: “aren't all the gods the most supreme guardians of all, and don't they look after our supreme interests?”

<sup>323</sup> *Republic* 379c: “Therefore, since [the] god is good (ὁ θεός, ἐπειδὴ ἀγαθός), he is not—as most people claim—the cause of everything that happens to human beings but of only a few things, for good things are fewer than bad ones in our lives. He alone is responsible for the good things, but we must find some other cause for the bad ones, not a god (τῶν δὲ κακῶν ἄλλ' ἅττα δεῖ ζητεῖν τὰ αἴτια, ἀλλ' οὐ τὸν θεόν).”

her; it is because she has failed to respond appropriately to the gods by actively engaging them in return.

Finally, in claiming that these “activities” are “far below those of the rational self,” Dodds appears to conflate the reliability of the knowledge gained with the esteem (the “rating”) appropriate to its medium. While *daimonic* experiences require a great deal of responsible interpretation and, therefore, hold a degree of uncertainty, they nonetheless reveal what we should hold in the highest esteem: a divine glimpse at our goal. Accordingly, the *daimonic* is not “far below” the individual’s reason but rather just enough “above it” to draw it upwards. The uncertainty coming from *daimonic* inspiration does not result from any inferiority on the part of the *daimonic* itself but actually from the inferiority of “the rational self” to fully comprehend its revelation. So, while it is correct to say that the knowledge we gain through the logical and dialectical work of the rational self is more certain than what *daimonic* inspiration reveals, it is not correct to see this as an indication that Plato held the latter, the *daimonic*, in lower esteem overall.

The goal of the philosophical life is to achieve a “vision” of the Good and the Beautiful themselves. As Aryeh Kosman articulates, “for Plato, philosophy...is...still a love of spectacle. So although a philosophical life may in its more workaday moments be importantly informed by a love of wisdom, it both begins with and culminates in a love of clearly seen splendor, a love of beauty.”<sup>324</sup> Kosman’s point is good to remember, as this goal, repeatedly couched in terms of a “vision,” is a mystic state in and of itself; according to Nightingale’s thesis, it is the state of divine epiphany. Therefore, this chapter has directed itself at demonstrating that there is no incompatibility in Plato between the rational and the inspired, that the *daimonic* (which

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<sup>324</sup> Aryeh Kosman, “Beauty and the Good: Situating the Kalon,” 56-57.

encompasses the inspired) is a key element in the soul's exercise of reason toward its goal, and that Socrates models the *daimonic* as appropriately engaged through a two-step process of reception and interpretation. One can see why Addey explains that "rationality and reason are themselves seen as *ultimately* gifts of the gods, which, when used appropriately, can lead to mystic states of being, thought, and action."<sup>325</sup> *Daimonic*, inspired activities and the working of the discursive, rational self are both meant to work together as gifts from above to aid the soul in achieving its breath-taking "vision" of the Good. In the philosophical life, the two share both an origin and an end. Plato's metaphysical and subsequent epistemological schema reveres the perfection of a divine, cosmic order at the root of everything. His views render the prioritization of reason entirely compatible with the inclusion of *daimonic* experiences, which, as Chapter Three will argue, include the poetic.

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<sup>325</sup> Addey, "The *Daimonion* of Socrates," 52.

## Chapter II

### Re-examining Plato's Comments on Poetry: Literalism, Allegory, and Mystagogy

#### I. Introduction

Chapter I argued that Plato's dialogues employ a notion of reason that does not exclude *daimonic* activities and experiences. Furthermore, the dialogues portray the *daimonic* as an edifying component of the soul's ascent toward a divine understanding of the Good and the Forms. Hence, if poetry falls into the category of the *daimonic*, then poetry can serve as an edifying part of the philosophical life that leads us toward contemplation of the Forms and the Good via its intermediary function. However, Socrates' remarks on poetry and poets and his banishment of the poets from the *Kallipolis* in the *Republic* remain a substantial barrier to any argument for the positive value of poetry in Plato's corpus. Accordingly, this study must establish that Socrates' infamous remarks on poetry and the poets in the *Republic* do not render poetry *qua* poetry in a strictly negative light. Thus, this chapter aims to contextualize Plato's seemingly negative remarks on poetry famously found in the *Republic* within the contexts of the interpretive approaches of his day and Plato's corpus in general.<sup>326</sup> The central claim of this chapter is that one can contextually understand these apparently negative remarks in ways alternative to the anti-poetry stance many ascribe to Plato.<sup>327</sup> When contextualized historically, it becomes apparent that Socrates aims his comments at particular literalist and allegorical methods of reading the poets, which were familiar to many during his time. Consequently, this contextualization of Socrates' remarks, coupled with his suggestion in Book X that poetry might

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<sup>326</sup> Typically, when one thinks of ancient approaches to literary interpretation, analysis, and criticism, Aristotle's *Poetics* come to mind. This association appears to have led to the assumption that there wasn't much outside of or prior to Aristotle in the way of interpretive theory. As Struck puts it, "the field of study of ancient literary criticism in general tend to begin from the premise that the parameters of literary criticism as an ancient discipline are defined by Aristotle's *Poetics*" (*Birth of the Symbol*, 7). Struck argues, however, that this is not the case, and a tradition of literary interpretation and criticism antedated the *Poetics*.

<sup>327</sup> See notes 42-49.

find its defenders, leaves open the possibility that the philosopher can enjoy and value poetry when read in other ways.<sup>328</sup> More specifically, the philosopher can approach poetry as enigmatic. She can thereby treat it as a vehicle for multiple meanings while avoiding the dangers implicit in the approaches Socrates targets throughout his discussion of poetry in the *Republic*. These dangers emerge from attributing conscious, polymathic knowledge to the poets.

Accordingly, this chapter first establishes the foundation needed by surveying Socrates' seemingly negative remarks about poetry in the *Republic* and summarizing the four arguments against poetry that typically derive from them. Then, the chapter outlines two different interpretive methods that were common in Plato's day – literalism and allegory, respectively – and argues that Socrates' comments constitute a substantive critique of specific ways of understanding poetry and its value and do not amount to a necessary rejection of poetry itself and in all cases. In particular, Socrates' remarks serve as a *reductio* argument that begins from the assumption that those in the *Kallipolis* will read the poets in the standard ways and then leads the reader to see that the logical conclusion of this approach results in the removal of nearly all poetry from the city. Socrates' point is not to endorse the removal of poetry from the city but to highlight the consequences of maintaining the kinds of approaches to the poets that his interlocutors themselves employ to define justice. Next, this study looks at another way those in Plato's day conceived of allegory: allegory as enigma, or “double speak.” “Double speak,” a term I have borrowed from Jessica E. Decker, refers to the use of “ambiguous semantics or syntax” employed in such a way that “the phrase uttered may have multiple meanings at once.”<sup>329</sup> Decker remarks that this particular linguistic device was commonly employed in

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<sup>328</sup> *Republic* 607d-e.

<sup>329</sup> Jessica Elbert Decker, “I Will Tell A Double Tale: Double Speak in the Ancient Greek Poetic Tradition,” *Epoché* 25, no. 2 (2021): 238.

ancient Greek poetic, religious, and Presocratic philosophical contexts wherein it was “strategically implemented to subvert dualistic habits of mortal thinking and introduce a different kind of awareness, an awareness of multiplicity and paradox.”<sup>330</sup> In the dialogues, Plato’s treatment of enigma, or “double speak,” is demonstrably linked to the effort of articulating the relationship between the multiplicity of Becoming and the unity of Being. Thus, enigma can make the philosopher aware of this relationship in new ways, which means it functions as an intermediary between human thought and the contemplation of divine, unified reality precisely by illuminating the gap between the two. Importantly, enigma does not require that the poets themselves possess conscious, polymathic knowledge of what is revealed in their words through enigmatic interpretation. Finally, Chapter II takes a closer look at Book X of the *Republic*, contending that it signals to the reader that another approach to poetry is both possible and desirable. This conclusion points toward Chapter III, which will argue that the enigmatic, *daimonic* approach is the alternative method through which we can understand the role of poetry in philosophical life.

## II. Banishing the Poets: The Arguments Against Poetry

Plato’s *Republic* typically serves as the primary text from which scholars derive their views on poetry in the dialogues. For example, Catherine Collobert states that the *Republic*’s critique is “final,”<sup>331</sup> and Mitchell says that “it is hard to recall, or even imagine, a more brutal attack upon poetry than [that of] Socrates [in the *Republic*].”<sup>332</sup> It is worth asking why one should regard the content of the *Republic* as any more “final” than other middle, and especially

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<sup>330</sup> Decker, “Double Speak in the Ancient Greek Poetic Tradition,” 238.

<sup>331</sup> Collobert, “Poetry as Flawed Reproduction: Possession and *Mimesis*,” 49.

<sup>332</sup> Mitchell, “That Yelping Bitch,” 69.



late, dialogues. Still, scholars such as Collobert and Mitchel rightly point out that the *Republic* contains what appears to be a rather vehement criticism of poetry. In Books II-III and X, Plato's Socrates engages in an extended discussion of the role of music and poetry in the ideal city, during which he determines they must banish most poetic works (and poets) from the ideal city entirely. One can distill four arguments against poetry from Socrates' remarks. The first two arguments are interrelated, with one being theological and the other moral. The theological objection argues that poetry is often impious because it depicts the gods acting wrongly and deceptively, whereas the true divine nature only works according to the Good. The moral argument holds that the vicious depictions of the gods, heroes, and humans acting unjustly and yet being rewarded that are common in poetry teach the young that an unjust life is desirable. The third objection relates to the second and is psychological in character, arguing that imitative poetry (especially tragedy) draws our sympathies toward various characters and causes us to take up the voices of people who may not be virtuous, an affront to our soul's task of maintaining a unified character directed at the Good. The Fourth argument is epistemological; it claims that poetry is epistemically superfluous because it is imitative and, therefore, thrice removed from reality. Below, this study examines each of these arguments in more detail as they appear in and relate to the text of the *Republic*.

Socrates first articulates his concerns with poetry while sketching out the proper education of the guardians. Fundamentally, the content of much poetry conflicts with the *Republic's* aim to show that justice is always superior to injustice.<sup>333</sup> Socrates indicates this concern when saying that the "poets and prose-writers... say that many unjust people are happy and many just ones wretched, that injustice is profitable if it escapes detection, and that justice is

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<sup>333</sup> *Republic* 367b-e. See also *Crito* 48b: "the good life, the beautiful life, and the just life are the same."

another's good but one's own loss."<sup>334</sup> If the guardians are taught such things, they will acquire poor moral character, for they will believe that injustice contributes to a good life more than justice. Yet, Socrates' arguments also serve to highlight the critical role that poetry ought to have in forming the human soul. He argues that the first stories that the guardians are told will lay the foundation for what kind of citizens they will become. These stories will shape and inform their beliefs about the types of actions and the kind of life that will produce happiness. Hence, the first stories one hears determine whether one is primed to see the just life as beneficial and the unjust life as harmful.

Nevertheless, Socrates also emphasizes the importance of telling the *correct* stories as well. Therefore, he indicates that poetry is a vital necessity for forming good character as well as a potential hindrance to it. He argues that the first task in educating the guardians is to tell them stories, which must foster civic virtues such as care for one's fellow citizens. The fundamental assumption is that the young will become like the stories they are told: "If we're to persuade our people that no citizen has ever hated another and that it's impious to do so, then that's what should be told to children from the beginning by old men and women; and as these children grow older, poets should be compelled to tell them the same sort of thing."<sup>335</sup> Centrally, the virtues such as bravery and temperance are transmitted into the young guardians' souls to prevent them from fearing death and being cowardly. Socrates argues: "[W]e must supervise such stories and those who tell them, and ask them not to disparage the life in Hades in this unconditional way, but rather to praise it, since what they now say is neither true nor beneficial to future warriors."<sup>336</sup> This passage is reminiscent of Socrates' treatment of death in the *Phaedo*, in which

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<sup>334</sup> *Republic*, 392a-b.

<sup>335</sup> *Republic*, 378c.

<sup>336</sup> *Republic*, 386b-c.

Hades is repeatedly treated not as a place to be feared but as the resting place of purified *eudaimonic* souls.<sup>337</sup> Hence, for the citizens to be correctly oriented toward the good life, they must be oriented appropriately toward death and dying, and telling the right stories plays a crucial role in doing this. The right stories propagate an appropriate understanding of what is to truly be feared, not death but the ignorance that prevents one from leading a good life. Therefore, the moral argument is not an argument for rejecting poetry itself. On the contrary, this first argument actually endorses the use of the right kinds of poetry as essential to the proper education of the guardians. Furthermore, Socrates only criticizes problematic stories with specific reference to the education of young people. Whether mature individuals can still engage in the tales of Homer or Hesiod without risk remains an open question.

Thus far, the first argument only points out a consideration to make in educating the young and not something inherently wrong with certain poems in themselves. Concerning the moral concerns about poetry, Socrates is clearly worried that people become what they read/hear. In this way, Socrates' injunction to remove certain poems from public circulation is hardly puritanical or draconian. It is not much different from what is done today regarding movie ratings and parental guards. Parents, just like Socrates, fear that their children will learn to become violent, misogynistic, sexually deviant, or criminal from playing video games, watching movies, and reading comic books. In both examples, Plato's Socrates and modern parents believe that young people cannot distinguish between media and reality. When framed through this modern lens, the removal of specific works from the *Kallipolis* is not so troubling concerning the picture of poetry as a whole, especially considering the central role given to poetry in preparing the soul to believe that the just life is best. Furthermore, Socrates seems only to remove such

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<sup>337</sup> See *Phaedo* 68a, 80d, 81c, 83d.

poems from general circulation, remarking that “if, for some reason, [these stories have] to be told, only a very few people—pledged to secrecy and after sacrificing not just a pig but something great and scarce—should hear it, so that their number is kept as small as possible.”<sup>338</sup> In this passage, which contains a notable reference to mystery rites, Socrates implies there will still be those initiated few with the proper discernment to consume these otherwise forbidden compositions. There may be a glimmer of hope for poetry yet.

Or, perhaps not. The theological argument damningly critiques specific stories as impious, indicating that they are inherently problematic and not merely situationally so. Socrates gives numerous examples of the kind of stories that ought not to be told. Objectionable stories involve heroes and gods who demonstrate lack of moderation (389d-390d), greed, impious hubris, and generally improper behavior (390d-392a). The fundamental worry linking the moral and theological arguments is that the guardians will take these stories as acceptable models for their own behavior. Indeed, evoking what precisely occurs in the *Euthyphro*, Socrates remarks that “a young person” should not “hear it said that in committing the worst crimes he’s doing nothing out of the ordinary, or that if he inflicts every kind of punishment on an unjust father, he’s only doing the same as the first and greatest of the gods.”<sup>339</sup> Recall that Euthyphro reads the poets with an astonishing level of literalism, which leads him to do just what Socrates is worried about: inflicting punishment on an unjust father and justifying the act as pious because it is what Zeus, “the best and most just of the gods,” did.<sup>340</sup> Therefore, Euthyphro offers up the actions of Zeus, as described by the poets, as moral support for his own actions. Such treatment of the poets as a source of practical wisdom and a model for conduct was not uncommon in Plato’s time, as

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<sup>338</sup> *Republic* 378a.

<sup>339</sup> *Republic*, 378b.

<sup>340</sup> *Euthyphro*, 5d-6a

will be discussed in more detail below, and it highlights that Socrates' concerns find practical purchase in the cultural milieu of his time. However, the theological argument is not reducible to the moral one, for it contains the additional complaint against the poets of impiety.

At 379a, Socrates clearly states that pious, acceptable poetry, “whether in epic, lyric, or tragedy,” must always represent the god “as he is.” He investigates what this entails and proposes two “laws” regarding what the poets should not say about the gods. Firstly, the poets ought not to say that the gods are the source of all things but only of good things. The argument is simple: a god is always good, and what is good cannot produce what is bad. Therefore, “since a god is good, he is not... the cause of everything that happens to human beings but of only [good things]. He alone is responsible for the good things, but we must find some other cause for the bad ones, not a god.”<sup>341</sup> With this argument, Socrates takes aim at Homer, listing several quotations in which the poet claims the gods are the source of both good and bad fates. If the gods do bring apparently bad things to humans, the poets must explain they are punishments and not truly evil.<sup>342</sup> Second, Socrates concludes that the gods cannot be depicted as deceptive in any

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<sup>341</sup> *Republic*, 379c.

<sup>342</sup> It should be acknowledged there probably is no such thing as “true evil” in Plato to begin with. The claim that the gods cannot be or produce evil is not a superstitious claim made for the sake of religious piety, but relates to Plato's metaphysical schema itself. The nature of evil, for Plato, is a matter of privation or ignorance. Famously, the claim is made throughout the dialogues that no one is willingly ignorant or does wrong willingly (see, for examples, *Sophist* 228c, *Protagoras* 358d-e, *Gorgias* 468b and 509e, *Laws* 840d). Furthermore, if evil is the product of ignorance, it could never exist among the gods who have a perfect vision of the forms and the Good (*Phaedrus* 246e-247e). Harold Cherniss explains the nature of evil for Plato when he states that “Soul is good or bad according to its knowledge or ignorance, for soul is self-motion the mode or direction of which is determined by its knowledge, exact or erroneous, of the ideas and their relations to one another and which sets phenomena in motion in accordance with this knowledge or ignorance... [Ideas] are not of themselves causes of evil in the phenomenal world. They are manifested as evil here only by soul which in ignorance mistakes their true nature and their relation to the Good, just as desire, pleasure, and pain have evil manifestations in this world only when the mode and direction of the psychical motion is determined by error concerning their nature” (see Harold Cherniss, “The Sources of Evil According to Plato,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 98, no. 1 (1954): 26-27). Moreover, since the Good is the source of Being (*Republic* 509b), there can be no form of Evil in Plato's cosmos, as James Wood convincingly argues (see James Wood, “Is There an *Archê Kakou* in Plato?” *The Review of Metaphysics* 63, no. 2 (2009): 349-84). See also Danielle A. Layne, “Involuntary Evil and the Socratic Problem of Double Ignorance in Proclus,” *International Journal of the Platonic Tradition* 9, no. 1 (2015): 27-53. Layne examines the role of “double ignorance” (the ignorance of ignorance) as the source of evil in the Platonic tradition, particularly Proclus.

way, including shape-shifting: “They are not sorcerers who change themselves, nor do they mislead us by falsehoods in words or deeds.”<sup>343</sup> It is inconceivable that the gods would ever alter themselves, “since they are the most beautiful and best possible, it seems that each always and unconditionally retains his own shape.”<sup>344</sup> Again, the concern is also related to the moral development of the young: “Nor must mothers, believing bad stories about the gods wandering at night in the shapes of strangers from foreign lands, terrify their children with them. Such stories blaspheme the gods and, at the same time, make children more cowardly.”<sup>345</sup> Yet, the stories are concerning not only because mothers believe the stories and transmit them to children who cannot discern fact from fiction but also because the stories are blasphemous in and of themselves. The stories depict the gods in ways that contradict their nature. Gods, after all, have no ignorance but rather perfectly know the most important things. Therefore, they are never false in word or deed, for they have no need of falsehood.<sup>346</sup> Accordingly, the theological argument problematizes certain poems in a way that does not leave the door open for their enjoyment by mature citizens. These works are impious and, therefore, inherently bad. Or, so it seems thus far.

Having covered the content of poetry, Socrates moves on to discuss different forms of poetry. For example, there is purely narrative poetry, and then there is imitative poetry in which the writer or reader takes on the various voices of different characters. It is with the discussion of form that psychological and epistemological concerns arise, and criticism is levelled at the structure of most poetry and not merely the morality or piety of its content. First, Socrates raises the issue of imitative narrative, pointing out that “everything said by poets and storytellers [is] a

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<sup>343</sup> *Republic* 383a.

<sup>344</sup> *Republic* 382c.

<sup>345</sup> *Republic* 381d-e.

<sup>346</sup> *Republic* 382c-e.

narrative about past, present, or future events...<sup>347</sup> And... these narratives [are] either narrative alone, or narrative through imitation, or both.”<sup>348</sup> As he is wont to do, Socrates appeals to an example from Homer to illustrate this point, recalling that Homer spends much of the *Iliad* speaking in the voice of the various characters. When Homer “makes a speech,” he does so “as if he were someone else,” and he “makes his own style as much like that of the indicated speaker as possible.”<sup>349</sup> The problem is that “to make oneself like someone else in voice or appearance is to imitate the person one makes oneself like.”<sup>350</sup> Recall that the moral argument establishes the concern that one will become what one imitates. Hence, to imitate the wrong thing is no small mistake, and it seems that this danger lurks in the very composition of the poem in addition to its content. From this, Socrates outlines three forms of poetry:

One kind of poetry and story-telling employs only imitation—tragedy and comedy, as you say. Another kind employs only narration by the poet himself—you find this most of all in dithyrambs. A third kind uses both—as in epic poetry and many other places, if you follow me.<sup>351</sup>

In essence, tragedy, comedy, and at least parts of the epics are on the possible chopping block because their multivocal character entices people to imitate both good and bad personas.

The psychological implications of multivocal poetry relate to Socrates claim that “a single individual can’t imitate many things as well as he can imitate one.”<sup>352</sup> Hence, “he’ll hardly be able to pursue any worthwhile way of life while at the same time imitating many things and being an imitator.”<sup>353</sup> Imitative poetry provides the hearer with numerous characters to imitate, making it unclear which ones one should mimic. Therefore, Socrates and his

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<sup>347</sup> Perhaps a reference to Hesiod’s *Theogony*, lines 37-39.

<sup>348</sup> *Republic*, 392d.

<sup>349</sup> *Republic* 393b-c.

<sup>350</sup> *Republic* 393c.

<sup>351</sup> *Republic* 394c.

<sup>352</sup> *Republic* 394e.

<sup>353</sup> *Republic* 394e-395a.

interlocutors decide that they will only allow the narrator who is a “pure imitator of the decent person,” into the city.<sup>354</sup> They thereby exclude most of the narrative content of Homer, Hesiod, the tragedians (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides), and comics (Aristophanes). Notably, one must understand this discussion in the context of the preceding one, in which Socrates and his interlocutors concluded that the citizenry must learn to “do one’s own.”<sup>355</sup> In other words, justice in the city (and the soul) depends upon each person doing his or her own task in harmony with others. Each person must have a unified character directed at excellently performing his or her own task. Multivocal literary works, then, appear to tempt the soul into fracturing itself into various personalities, not all of whom are good or appropriate to their unified task as citizens:

Then we won’t allow those... who must grow into good men... to imitate either a young woman or an older one, or one abusing her husband, quarreling with the gods, or bragging because she thinks herself happy, or one suffering misfortune and possessed by sorrows and lamentations, and even less one who is ill, in love, or in labor.<sup>356</sup>

Experiences of such poetry invite a disruption in the harmony of one’s soul. Poetry tempts the soul to play the roles of not only the virtuous person but also the licentious person, the cowardly person, or the intemperate person. Consequently, the person who loves multifarious, imitative poetry practices being different people, and therefore, she never entirely takes on and masters one single role. There ought to be only one model of behavior: the virtuous person. And so, Socrates concludes by stating that the mixed kind of poetry (wherein the poet both narrates and imitates characters) doesn’t seem to “[harmonize] with our constitution, because no one in our city is two or more people simultaneously, since each does only one job.”<sup>357</sup> Thus, the third argument, the psychological argument, concludes that we must turn the poets who are clever at

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<sup>354</sup> *Republic* 397d.

<sup>355</sup> *Republic* 400d-e.

<sup>356</sup> *Republic* 395d-e.

<sup>357</sup> *Republic* 397d-e.



imitating all kinds of persons away from the ideal city and bid farewell to many of the greatest poets of the classical tradition.

Nevertheless, Socrates displays a kind of respect and awe for his banished poets despite turning them away, stating that “if a man, who through clever training can become anything and imitate anything, should arrive in our city, wanting to give a performance of his poems, we should bow down before him as someone holy [ἱερόν], wonderful [θαυμαστόν], and pleasing [ἡδύν].”<sup>358</sup> However, Socrates continues, “we should tell him that there is no one like him in our city and that it isn’t lawful for there to be. We should pour myrrh on his head [μύρον κατὰ τῆς κεφαλῆς καταχέαντες], crown him with wreaths [ἐρίω στέφαντες], and send him away to another city.”<sup>359</sup> Socrates describes the brilliant, imitative poet as “holy,” ἱερός, a term of unmistakable spiritual quality. The *Ion* mirrors this phrasing in calling the poet “winged and holy [πτηνὸν καὶ ἱερόν].”<sup>360</sup> He is also “wonderful” and is to be anointed and wreathed like someone divine. Nevertheless, this awe-inspiring poet cannot stay. Socrates follows this up by stating, “But, for our own good, we ourselves should employ a more austere and less pleasure-giving poet and storyteller [αὐτοὶ δ’ ἂν τῷ ἀσθηροτέρῳ καὶ ἀηδεστέρῳ ποιητῇ χρῶμεθα καὶ μυθολόγῳ ὠφελίας ἔνεκα].”<sup>361</sup> Grube’s translation, revised by Reeve, renders ἀσθηροτέρῳ καὶ ἀηδεστέρῳ as “austere and less pleasure-giving.” However, one can also translate this passage to bring out a more negative meaning. Αἰδήζ, which can literally mean “distasteful, nauseous,” or “odious,” appears in the comparative, denoting “more unpleasant” or even “more odious” or “more distasteful.” In the case of either translation, Socrates still admits that the banishment of such holy and wonderful poets results in less enjoyment of poetry. One might compare Socrates to a

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<sup>358</sup> *Republic* 397e-398a.

<sup>359</sup> *Republic* 397e-398a.

<sup>360</sup> *Ion* 534b.

<sup>361</sup> *Republic* 398a-b.

parent endorsing the consumption of boiled spinach to a picky child who would rather eat French fries. The parent promises “Popeye arms” upon the child’s consumption of the detested leaf, knowing that the verdant sludge cannot be rendered more palatable in its own right. Similarly, Socrates acknowledges the loss of enjoyment in banishing Homer and Hesiod, but he promises that it’s “for our [own] good” nonetheless. Thus, Plato’s Socrates dismisses the aesthetically, if not morally, best poetry from the city. He leaves behind in its stead didactic works that only imitate those of good character or contain solely non-imitative content. These works are, on Socrates’ own admission, substantially less appealing than the poetry he has banished but are, nevertheless, the only morally edifying options remaining.

In essence, Plato suggests something akin to demanding that people today stop reading most novels and watching almost all TV shows and films and instead find their sole entertainment in documentaries and the non-fictional biographies of morally righteous people. Socrates reads like the equivalent of a 17th-century Puritan demanding everyone read nothing but *Pilgrim’s Progress* and slog through massive books of sermons. Of course, such works might contain aesthetically pleasing uses of language, but to reduce one’s literary world to them alone would be nothing short of a tragedy. And, yet, in the conclusion of the discussion, Socrates states: “Does it seem to you that we’ve now completed our account of education in music and poetry? Anyway, it has ended where it ought to end, for it ought to end in the [erotic desire for the beautiful].”<sup>362</sup> This passage is interesting for two reasons. First, it connects the erotic attraction to beauty to education in music and poetry, indicating that music and poetry contain images of the Beautiful in a manner similar to the human beloved in the erotic dialogues. It

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<sup>362</sup> *Republic* 403c. Brackets contain my slight emendations to the translation offered by Grube and Reeve in Cooper: ἄρ’ οὖν, ἣν δ’ ἐγώ, καὶ σοὶ φαίνεται τέλος ἡμῖν ἔχειν ὁ περὶ μουσικῆς λόγος; οἷ γοῦν δεῖ τελευτᾶν, τετελεύτηκεν: δεῖ δέ που τελευτᾶν τὰ μουσικὰ εἰς τὰ τοῦ καλοῦ ἐρωτικά.

seems that experiencing beauty in music and poetry nurtures our desire for the Beautiful itself in a manner that brings Diotima's ladder of love to mind. In engaging with and learning to recognize beauty in music and poetry, one's soul becomes oriented toward a love of Beauty itself. Second, it deepens the frustration over rejecting the most moving works from the city. If poetry "ought" to foster a love of the beautiful, leaving the most aesthetically compelling works out seems like a poor action plan.

The reason for weakening the power of poetry in the city by limiting what the poets can compose appears to reside in Socrates' very awareness of this power to move the soul to imitation, either of what is right or wrong. One of the reasons that he finds certain works to be so concerning is that the experience of them is so compelling. He states that, "[w]e'll ask Homer and the other poets not to be angry if we delete these [objectionable] passages and all similar ones," but, he continues, "[i]t isn't that [these passages] aren't poetic and pleasing to the majority of hearers but that, the more poetic they are, the less they should be heard by children or by men who are supposed to be free and to fear slavery more than death."<sup>363</sup> Socrates reveals that he is acquainted with the experience of poetry's power. He even compares giving up these works to holding oneself back from a lover, stating that they may have to "behave like people who have fallen in love with someone but who force themselves to stay away from him, because they realize that their passion isn't beneficial."<sup>364</sup> In short, Socrates knows precisely how wonderful poetry is but seems to ask us to give it up anyway. He knows that the more compelling the poetry, the more influence it has over the soul, so he concludes that we must neuter poetry to limit its harm. However, the benefit of poetry is consequently limited as well. Perhaps, for Plato's Socrates, this is simply a price worth paying.

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<sup>363</sup> *Republic* 387a-b.

<sup>364</sup> *Republic* 607e.

The *Republic*'s fourth argument against poetry certainly gives the impression that Socrates thinks that abandoning the more aesthetically moving poetry is worth the price, considering its danger to the pursuit of knowledge. The fourth argument is the epistemological argument, and it appears in Book X; it further takes up the issue of poetry's power to inspire mimesis but with an epistemological focus in mind. Socrates argues that the mimetic quality of some poetry renders it epistemically vapid. Given the *Republic*'s theme of reality vs. appearance, and given Plato's comments on *mimesis* in aesthetic creation in that text, it is reasonable to wonder if Socrates thinks that art has no real epistemic or moral truth value because it is less real; it focuses on images of images rather than on the truth of the Forms themselves. Collobert takes up this line of thought when she argues that, "since poetry is not only viewed as reproducing the Muses' words, but also as reproducing life... Plato has to challenge this view... to make it plain that poetic *mimesis* is not in fact an adequate way to reach the truth."<sup>365</sup> Collobert's take on Plato's take on *mimesis* is understandable. The *Republic* establishes three levels of reality in order from most to least real: Forms/Being, sensible reality/Becoming, and images of sensible reality.<sup>366</sup> The final category appears to be where Plato places art (including poetry and visual art), and it is also the category that is the furthest removed from the stability of the ultimately real Forms. Also, epistemologically speaking, images are not objects of knowledge. True knowledge only obtains at the level of the Forms.

Indeed, several damning passages in the *Republic* corroborate the notion that poetry has no truth or value in aiding the soul's ascent. Socrates claims that "imitation is far removed from the truth, for it touches only a small part of each thing and a part that is itself only an image."<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> Collobert, "Poetry as Flawed Reproduction," 47.

<sup>366</sup> According to the divided line in the *Republic* at 509d-511e.

<sup>367</sup> *Republic* 598b.

The removal of imitation from truth is clearly related to poetry, since Socrates claims that “all poetic imitators, beginning with Homer, imitate images of virtue and all the other things they write about and have no grasp of the truth.”<sup>368</sup> Furthermore, Socrates problematizes the imitation of the poets by casting it as a kind of counterfeit polymathy, pointing out that

a poetic imitator uses words and phrases to paint colored pictures of each of the crafts. He himself knows nothing about them, but he imitates them in such a way that others, as ignorant as he, who judge by words, will think he speaks extremely well about cobblery or generalship or anything else whatever.<sup>369</sup>

Socrates also makes a connection to the soul when he asserts that “an imitative poet isn’t by nature related to the part of the soul that rules... and, if he’s to attain a good reputation with the majority of people, his cleverness isn’t directed to pleasing it.”<sup>370</sup> The conclusion, then, seems to be that “imitation is an inferior thing that consorts with another inferior thing to produce an inferior offspring.”<sup>371</sup> Accordingly, compelling, imitative, multivocal poetry seems unlikely to be saved from the chopping block.<sup>372</sup> Given Plato’s comments in Book X on *mimesis*, it does appear to be the case that Plato cannot place any real value on poetry, for it is but an image of an image of true being.

Where do these four arguments leave the reader in terms of assessing the possible value of poetry for aiding in the soul’s ascent toward knowledge of the Forms and the Good? So far, the picture is not so rosy. Plato’s Socrates appears to deny any value to poetry in itself. The introduction to this study defined poetry as “a creative composition of words used in surprising,

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<sup>368</sup> *Republic* 600e.

<sup>369</sup> *Republic* 601a.

<sup>370</sup> *Republic* 605a.

<sup>371</sup> *Republic* 603b.

<sup>372</sup> It should be noted, as Nicholas Pappas does, that an acknowledgement of poetry as mimetic does not seem, to Plato, incompatible with its status as divinely inspired. As Pappas observes, at *Laws* 719c, Plato seems to collapse both depictions of the poets (as mimetic and as inspired and divinely mad). This demonstrates that divine inspiration produces mimetic works, and calls into question any rejection of poetry solely on the basis of *mimesis*, since *mimesis* can be the product of divine *mania*. See Nickolas Pappas, “Plato on Poetry: Imitation or Inspiration?”, *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 10 (2012): 669–78.

non-literal, and particularly evocative ways, [that] is often, but not always, metrical.”<sup>373</sup> Under this definition, epic poetry and narrative in tragedy seem more “poetic” than “eulogies to good people.”<sup>374</sup> At the core of the neutering of poetry, the attempt to retain it in its least potent – and, therefore, least dangerous but also least moving – form, there is a rejection of what makes poetry most what it is. As noted above, though, Plato’s Socrates is deeply aware of the true power of aesthetic experience to inspire the soul to model what it “sees,” yet this awareness offers no comfort for poetry’s devoted lovers. Given his understanding and love of poetry, we cannot dismiss Socrates’ remarks as those of a puritanical philistine who just doesn’t understand what it means to be really inspired by a beautiful work of verse, including those that are mimetic. On the contrary, if we are to take the above comments from the *Republic* as many scholars have taken them, then we are required to acknowledge a Plato who knows what poetry can mean to us and *asks us to abandon it anyway*. The Platonist seems doomed to abandon poetry, and if she does so, she will have to “behave like people who have fallen in love with someone but who force themselves to stay away from him,”<sup>375</sup> which is to say, she will find herself heartbroken.

The result is that, if Plato truly wants us to abandon beloved poetry, his proposed vision of the philosophical life seems unlivable. I find Alexis Shotwell’s thoughts on the role of “sensuous embodiment” for queer political movements to articulate this point well, even if it speaks from a position far outside of the Platonic world. Shotwell recounts how<sup>376</sup>

Robin Kelley, asking how social movements “actually reshape the dreams and desires of the participants,” describes attending a conference on the future of socialism during which “a bunch of us got into a fight with an older generation of white leftists who proposed replacing retrograde ‘pop’ music with the revolutionary ‘working-class’ music of Phil Ochs, Woody Guthrie, preelectric Bob Dylan, and songs from the Spanish Civil

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<sup>373</sup> See Introduction, page 1.

<sup>374</sup> *Republic* 607a.

<sup>375</sup> *Republic* 607e.

<sup>376</sup> “Odd” only because Shotwell’s essay, quoted here, is not about poetry and certainly not about Plato, but she expresses something that I think gets to the heart why it is so disappointing to affirm a Plato who requests us to abandon poetry.

War. And there I was, comically screaming at the top of my lungs, ‘No way! After the revolution, we STILL want Bootsy! That’s right, we want Bootsy! We need the funk!’” (Kelley 2002, 10–11). On the one hand, the fact that we’ll still need the funk after the revolution is about recognizing the importance of imagining current pleasure as part of a longed-for future (you can dance to it). On the other, I take Kelley to make the deeper point that in thinking about social justice movements intellectuals do ill to minimize explorations of freedom and love. Sensuousness is one part of an experience of a radically transformed future that includes experiences of embodied, thus contingent, freedom and love.<sup>377</sup>

The point of this quotation (and of quoting it) is to highlight an assumption that seems intuitively false regarding the imagination of an ideal future. One might think that, post-revolution, when things are as they should be, we can abandon the things that arose out of and addressed needs we had in the previous regime. Or, as Shotwell puts it, we assume that we need not imagine “current pleasure as part of a longed-for future.” I am certainly not suggesting that we read Plato as a parallel character to the old leftists in Shotwell’s story. I am not examining the political implications of Plato’s thought in this study. Still, Plato is a thinker who encourages the reader to strive toward an ideal future in living the examined, philosophical life, and this future obtains whether we seriously take the *Republic* as suggesting an actual political utopia or a kind of psychological one. The takeaway from Shotwell’s point is that our road to that longed-for future involves the liberatory potential of current pleasures on our ability to think new possibilities. It is, therefore, troublesome to imagine that those pleasures have no place in the future they seem to help us envision.

In sum, the four arguments we can distill from the *Republic*’s remarks on poetry seem increasingly more damning as one examines them. While banning specific works from being used to educate the young, the moral argument is not particularly concerning for the poetry-lover. We can bar children from stories otherwise open to mature, adult interpretation. The

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<sup>377</sup> Alexis Shotwell, “A Knowing That Resided in My Bones: Sensuous Embodiment and Trans Social Movement,” in *Embodiment and Agency*, eds Sue Campbell *et al.* (University Park, USA: Penn State University Press, 2021), 72.

theological argument, however, indicates that the stories we should refrain from telling the young are inherently problematic because they are impious or blasphemous. Furthermore, as the psychological argument holds, even if admitted among adults, polyvocal, imitative works are corrupting in their very composition, for they invite the imitation of a multiplicity of characters rather than a singular focus on the virtuous person. Finally, the epistemological argument paints mimetic poetry as antithetical to the philosophical life itself. The philosopher dedicates her life to achieving knowledge of the truth, and mimetic poetry is thrice-removed from this goal. Furthermore, all of these arguments strike at the heart of what makes poetry poetry; they reject the more imaginative, imitative, and dramatically moving works that most robustly employ linguistic modes that escape bare propositional language. Or, put differently, symbolism, metaphor, allegory, and immersive narrative in epic, tragedy, and poetry are cast out, leaving behind a hollowed-out notion of poetic language as a unique mode of communicating what is otherwise uncommunicable. Moreover, once one has fulfilled her education requirements, she presumably replaces didactic poetry with the pursuit of knowledge itself through philosophical dialectic. The conclusion is that the philosopher-queen or king of the *Kallipolis* has no need for poetry past her youth and that, while Socrates acknowledges the compelling nature of mimetic poetry, it is too dangerous to retain in the ideal city. However, in the following sections, this chapter will demonstrate that these conclusions drawn from the four arguments do not necessarily pertain to poetry in every case but instead to poetry when interpreted and understood in particular ways.

### III. Popular Interpretive Methods: The Not-So-Practical Wisdom of Literalism

Yet, perhaps something has been missed thus far, and Plato does leave the door open for poetry to remain as a current pleasure that also plays a part in realizing the goal of ascent. One



way to reopen this question is to examine whether and to what extent Plato's Socrates levels the arguments against poetry in the *Republic* against particular approaches to interpreting poetry as opposed to against poetry in all cases. It is not sufficient to approach Plato's dialogues without examining the broader scope of literary hermeneutics during Plato's time. We cannot assume that Socrates is making theoretical claims that apply universally to everyone and at every time. The timelessness of the *Republic* lies, somewhat paradoxically, in its deeply situated content, which renders the specific concerns of a particular time and place understandable and relevant to readers millennia later. Plato wrote about specific characters and with particular readers in mind, and Plato's contemporary readers saw things in his works that a modern reader must work much harder to recognize. Accordingly, one cannot assess whether or not Plato, through Socrates in the *Republic*, actually derides poetry across the board without seeking first to contextualize his content accurately.

Consequently, both this section and the one following it argue that the *Republic* specifically targets poetry in instances where it is understood, either literally or allegorically, as a vehicle for conscious polymathy on the part of the poets. In other words, Plato's Socrates does not criticize poetry in all cases but only in specific instances wherein people interpret it through problematic methods. Namely, interpreting poetry literally or as a consciously composed allegory that contains educationally viable and accurate knowledge of crafts, natural sciences, and religion results in dangerous consequences. Hence, Socrates does not mean for his remarks on poetry in the *Republic* to deride poetry in every case, but only in specific ones. The present section of this chapter will consider the literalist approach to interpreting the poets, while the subsequent section examines *allegoresis*. First, I explain epistemological concerns associated with the literalist approach in relation to Plato's depictions of Socratic philosophical aims. While

the literalist approach traps people in their own ignorance of ignorance, Socrates invites a different approach based on thinking of the poets' words as enigmatic. In contrast to the literalist orientation toward poetry, Socrates' enigmatic method requires philosophical investigation and the recognition of one's ignorance. Next, I turn to the philosophical reasons behind Socrates' accusations against the poets of impiety. These accusations assume a literal approach to the interpretation of poetry and have precedence in several Presocratic thinkers.

Regarding the historical context of Plato's comments, William Jacob Verdenius observes that "[t]he Greeks were inclined to regard their great poets as reliable sources and infallible authorities for all kinds of practical wisdom."<sup>378</sup> Recall that Socrates critiques the poets on just such a basis:

a poetic imitator uses words and phrases to paint colored pictures of each of the crafts. He himself knows nothing about them, but he imitates them in such a way that others, as ignorant as he, who judge by words, will think he speaks extremely well about cobblery or generalship or anything else whatever.<sup>379</sup>

In this passage, Socrates is not worried about the moral content. Instead, he fears that an ignorant audience will actually take the poet for a polymathic expert on everything from shoe-making to statesmanship. Crucially, literalism doesn't just take the poet as having one *techne*, but all of them. Socrates' concern is hardly misguided, for, as Verdenius points out, many Greeks tended to isolate "the words and deeds of the epic and tragic characters from their contexts and used them as general maxims."<sup>380</sup> Other thinkers acknowledged the ascription of polymathy to the poets long before Plato's time, as Heraclitus remarks that most "men's teacher is Hesiod. They are sure he knew most things."<sup>381</sup> Hence, the good poet faithfully produces reliable knowledge of

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<sup>378</sup> Willem Jacob Verdenius, "*Mimesis: Plato's Doctrine of Artistic Imitation and Its Meaning to Us*" (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), 6.

<sup>379</sup> *Republic*, 601a.

<sup>380</sup> Verdenius, "*Mimesis: Plato's Doctrine of Artistic Imitation and Its Meaning to Us*" 6.

<sup>381</sup> DK 22B57

history, theology, leadership, politics, craftsmanship, seafaring, and so on. The audience thinks the poet knows these matters to such an extent that what Homer says about Achilles' ruling of the Myrmidons, Odysseus' seafaring and diplomatic prowess, and Telemachus' burgeoning skills at family headship are accurate. Accordingly, and most concerning for Plato's Socrates, the audience thinks that the poet's representations provide model examples for human behavior and character.

Verdenius cautions the reader of Plato in light of these observations, arguing that "we can understand Plato's stressing the contradictory character of poetical variety"<sup>382</sup> when we contextualize them historically. Under literalism, the poets' words are taken at face value and seen as practical, political, moral, and religious knowledge. The result, of course, is exactly what Plato fears in the *Republic*. The poets depict vindictive gods at war with one another, committing rape, and performing acts of deception, jealousy, and lust. They also portray heroes and humans engaged in wanton violence, poor leadership, impiety, and civic unrest. Classical Greeks weren't just mining the poets for historical facts and moral maxims, though. Verdenius further points out, "Mythological examples were also adduced to excuse actual wrongdoing."<sup>383</sup> People applied a literal reading even to mythological texts, and they thereby took the actions of the gods as having actually happened and providing acceptable models for human behavior. Verdenius suspects that "this practice must have been rather common, because it is parodied by Aristophanes [in the *Clouds*]."<sup>384</sup> In the passage Verdenius references, the Unjust Argument states that "if you're caught in adulterous acts, you can tell the woman's husband/You haven't committed a crime at all! You can even refer him to Zeus,/Pointing out that even he succumbs to sexual passion for

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<sup>382</sup> Verdenius, "Mimesis: Plato's Doctrine of Artistic Imitation and Its Meaning to Us," 6.

<sup>383</sup> Verdenius, "Mimesis: Plato's Doctrine of Artistic Imitation and Its Meaning to Us," 6.

<sup>384</sup> Verdenius, "Mimesis: Plato's Doctrine of Artistic Imitation and Its Meaning to Us," 6.

women,/So how can a mortal like you be expected to do what a god cannot do?”<sup>385</sup> If a person thinks that a literal reading of the poet reveals a fount of practical wisdom, she is likely to take up the objectionable behaviors depicted. “If it’s good for enough Zeus,” she thinks, “it must be good enough for me,” which, as previously addressed, is what Plato depicts Euthyphro doing. Therefore, according to Verdenius, Plato “opposes the Greek inclination towards a pragmatismal interpretation of literature by exposing the poet’s lack of well-founded knowledge.”<sup>386</sup> Hence, at least some of Socrates’ remarks that seem to criticize poetry, such as the passage quoted above in this paragraph, are not intended to diminish the value of poetry in every case. Instead, Socrates is re-framing the content of poetic works to demonstrate the problems that emerge from a pragmatismal, literal method of reading these works. The possibility, however, for other methods of interpretation that do not result in the same problems remains open.

Evidence shows that many people interacted with the literary tradition in this literal manner. Verdenius offers a few examples, pointing out that, in Herodotus, “the Athenians claimed the high command of an expedition against the Persians by referring to the *Iliad*.”<sup>387</sup> In this passage from *The Histories*, the Athenian envoy tells the Spartans, “Hellas sends us to you to ask not for a leader but for an army,” and he justifies this request by pointing out that “[O]f our stock... was the man of whom the poet Homer says that of all who came to Ilion, he was the best man in ordering and marshalling armies. We accordingly cannot be reproached for what we now say.”<sup>388</sup> The envoy refers to *Iliad* 2, 552, where Homer says: “the youths of the Athenians... had as leader Menestheus, son of Peteos. Like unto him was none other man upon the face of the

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<sup>385</sup> Aristophanes, *Clouds*, in Aristophanes: *Clouds, Women at the Thesmophoria, Frogs*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1079-1082.

<sup>386</sup> Verdenius, “*Mimesis*: Plato’s Doctrine of Artistic Imitation and Its Meaning to Us,” 6.

<sup>387</sup> Verdenius, “*Mimesis*: Plato’s Doctrine of Artistic Imitation and Its Meaning to Us,” 6.

<sup>388</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. Alfred Denis Godley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 7.161.3.

earth for the marshalling of chariots and of warriors that bear the shield.”<sup>389</sup> In other words, Homer said that the Athenian Menestheus was unmatched in marshaling troops. Therefore, the Spartans should not be offended by the Athenians’ request that an Athenian general lead the Spartan forces. The claim is that the Spartans should consent to this request as justifiably made because Homer said the Athenians had the best general hundreds of years ago. It is essential to note from this example that the Athenian envoy treats Homer not only as a literal historian but also as giving an authoritatively normative account of how things were and how they should be.

Importantly, literalism is the interpretive method employed in the first reference to poetry in Book I of the *Republic*, illustrating that this approach was the target of at least some of Socrates’ remarks on poetry. In Book I, Polemarchus invokes Simonides as the authority behind the claim that justice is “speaking the truth and repaying what one has borrowed.”<sup>390</sup> Polemarchus, therefore, treats a face-value reading of Simonides as an authoritative justification for his own stance on justice. Yet, Socrates’ response illustrates that the problem lies not with Simonides’ work in and of itself but in Polemarchus’ approach to reading him. Socrates says that

it isn’t easy to doubt Simonides, for he’s a wise and godlike man [σοφὸς γὰρ καὶ θεῖος ἄνθρωπος]. But what exactly does he mean? Perhaps you know, Polemarchus, but I don’t understand him. Clearly, he doesn’t mean what we said a moment ago, that it is just to give back whatever a person has lent to you, even if he’s out of his mind when he asks for it.<sup>391</sup>

Here, Socrates calls into question the use of this literal reading, pointing out that determining “what exactly” the poet actually means is an interpretive act. The meaning of the poet’s words is not readily apparent at the surface level, *pace* Polemarchus’ appeal to poetic authority as if it clearly supported his position without the need for further argument or analysis. Socrates, in

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<sup>389</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, trans. A.T. Murray (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), 2.552.

<sup>390</sup> *Republic*, 331d: ἀληθῆ τε λέγειν καὶ ἂ ἂν λάβῃ τις ἀποδιδόναι.

<sup>391</sup> *Republic* 331e.

contrast, displays respect for the poet, referring to Simonides as wise and godly (σοφὸς καὶ θεῖος), but this respect is realized in terms of an earnest search for a meaning that requires effort on the part of the reader. Moments later, Socrates says, “[i]t seems then that Simonides was speaking in riddles [αἰνίσσομαι]—just like a poet!”<sup>392</sup> Perhaps value lies in Simonides’ words when they are read enigmatically rather than as straightforward pragmatic advice. The problem with the literal approach is that Polemarchus, an educated young man just doing what he was taught to do, cannot substitute an appeal to poetic authority for genuine philosophical investigation. However, an enigmatic reading of the poet lends itself to such an investigation by inviting the reader to grapple with the meaning and explore different options. Thus, the literal approach is representative of what many Athenians think of as the mark of education and knowledge, which is being able to rattle off snippets of poetry to persuade an audience which accepts the authority of the poets. On the other hand, Socrates does not condemn poetry here but instead demonstrates that one cannot escape the responsibility for genuine inquiry, even when considering the words of wise and divine wordsmiths. The issue at hand is not poetry in every case; it is how Polemarchus and his peers use poetry to justify otherwise unexamined claims because they assume that the poets, read literally, are polymathic experts.

Thus, the enigmatic approach that Socrates gestures toward emerges as an alternative to the literal interpretation of the poets. The enigmatic approach falls neatly in line with Socratic thinking in general, for with enigma, the interpreter is required to let go of any conceit to knowledge and inspect the words with fresh eyes that allow her to see how an unexpected truth may hide beneath the surface of an easily accessible, but typically less rich or even purely false, surface meaning. Polemarchus, using the literal approach, thinks he understands perfectly what

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<sup>392</sup> *Republic* 332b.

the poet is getting at and uses the words as proof of his position. Upon cross-examination by Socrates, though, Polemarchus is shown to know nothing; he cannot justify his interpretation of the poet as an argument because Polemarchus does not think he is interpreting so much as merely quoting. Yet, in offering the quotation as support for a claim, Polemarchus is committing an act of interpretation that asserts knowledge of the poet's meaning. Since Polemarchus thinks that the meaning of the poet's words is clear at face value, he does not immediately grasp the need to defend his use of them. In contrast, the enigmatic approach requires an interpreter who *knows that they do not know* the meaning of the poet's words but tries to grasp it through examination. Approaching the poet's words as a kind of enigma requiring cautious and humble interpretation encourages the interpreter to set aside his or her assumptions about the meaning and open himself or herself up to new ideas that might challenge previous assumptions. Literal approaches to poetry thereby entail a kind of hubris on the part of interpreters. One need only assume that the poem means what one already thinks it means; moreover, one can take it for granted that everyone else thinks it means that, too. Therefore, the literal interpreter, like Polemarchus, can confidently level this knowledge against others in order to justify themselves by an appeal to authority without critical investigation. Hence, literalism leads one to absorb a body of popular knowledge available to and assumed by the *hoi polloi* but which is not testable under scrutiny. In contrast, treating poetry like enigma allows the reader to ascertain moments of multivocality, ambiguity, and non-literal devices like metaphor, all of which invite one to examine and test the ideas or claims drawn from the text.

Of course, aside from the issue of intellectual laziness, the treatment of the poets as polymaths whose wisdom is available to all produces a general reliance on an imaginary world of *pseudo-techne*. The literal approach supplies its adherents with a counterfeit education that

prevents them from coming to terms with their own ignorance. As such, the literalist method stands diametrically opposed to the Socratic philosophical endeavor, which begins with recognizing one's lack of proper understanding. In view of this counterfeit education, one can make sense of Socrates' comments on the poets making images of images. According to the account of thrice removed poetic images, the poet produces an image of the general, and this poetic image is the furthest removed from generalship itself. Then, the general himself is an image of the Form of generalship, much closer to the Form than the poetic image, but still only a particular example of the real thing. Finally, there is the real thing, the Form of generalship itself. Accordingly, the poet's image of the general is an image of an image, but this is only a problem if one assumes that the value of poetry lies in the accurate representation of its literal content. In other words, the derivative image content of the general is only a problem if one is looking to the poem to accurately acquire knowledge of generals and generalship. On an enigmatic reading, the correspondence between the general depicted in the poem and the Form of the general is simply not what is at stake. In the case of enigmatic interpretation, one does not read the images in the poem as genuine reproductions but rather as images that point beyond themselves to some greater truth or some new idea. Thus, the critique of the thrice-removed image is not about image-making in poetry in every case but about the kinds of images that one gleans from poetry when reading it literally. Suppose one thinks that these images are actually based on true knowledge of the things to which they correspond on a literal interpretation. In that case, one builds a whole false world based on such naïve, inaccurate, or at least unverifiable "knowledge;" this is the world in which some of Socrates' interlocutors live.

One should note that a narrative regarding the relationship between philosophy and poetry was in play before and during Plato's time. The epistemological issues named above,



according to which people gleaned *pseudo-techné* from the poets, concerned Presocratics such as Heraclitus. Heraclitus says that Homer “was wiser than all the Greeks”<sup>393</sup> but continues by stating that “Homer deserved to be expelled from the contests and flogged.”<sup>394</sup> Here, Heraclitus’ disdain for Homer is epistemological, for he is unimpressed by the fact that “Most men’s teacher is Hesiod” with the result that they “are sure he knew most things – a man who could not recognize day and night; for they are one.”<sup>395</sup> In other words, Heraclitus somewhat ironically ascribes superior wisdom to Homer compared to all the Greeks, for it is to Homer that “most men” look for knowledge. Yet, Homer himself is ignorant. For Heraclitus, Homer’s preeminent wisdom among the Greeks is a sham in which the ignorant lead the ignorant toward more ignorance. Though Presocratic thinkers shared the *Republic*’s epistemological concerns regarding literalist interpretations of poetry, another common complaint also existed. Several Presocratic philosophers argued that the poets’ depictions of divine nature, life, and behavior were impious. Xenophanes and Heraclitus, for example, both appear to lambast the poets on this basis.

As the *Republic* also points out, the poets present the gods as behaving shamefully rather than as sources of goodness. In passages remarkably similar to Socrates’ own comments in the *Republic*, Xenophanes reportedly said that “Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all deeds which among men are a reproach and a disgrace: thieving, adultery, and deceiving one another,”<sup>396</sup> and “Give us no fights with Titans, no, nor Giants nor Centaurs – the forgeries of our fathers – nor civil brawls, in which no advantage is. But always to be mindful of the gods is

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<sup>393</sup> DK 22B56

<sup>394</sup> DK 22B42

<sup>395</sup> DK 22B57

<sup>396</sup> DK 21B11

good.”<sup>397</sup> Mikolae Domaradzki points out that “Diogenes Laertius informs us that Pythagoras... Heraclitus... and Xenophanes... repudiated vehemently the gods of the poets.”<sup>398</sup> The passages to which Domaradzki is referring are often scathing. For example, Diogenes Laertius reports that: “Hieronymus... says that, when [Pythagoras] had descended into Hades, he saw the soul of Hesiod bound fast to a brazen pillar and gibbering, and the soul of Homer hung on a tree with serpents writhing about it, this being their punishment for what they had said about the gods.”<sup>399</sup> Concerning Heraclitus, Diogenes simply quotes Heraclitus’ refrains against the poets directly. Of Xenophanes, he says, “His writings are in epic metre, as well as elegiacs and iambics attacking Hesiod and Homer and denouncing what they said about the gods.”<sup>400</sup> Diogenes also quotes the praise of Timon, who says of Xenophanes: “Xenophanes, not over-proud, perverter of Homer, castigator.”<sup>401</sup> Interestingly, Diogenes says nothing of the sort regarding Plato’s views of the poets.<sup>402</sup> The comments on the poets quoted above pertain to a literal reading of the poets that take the accounts of the gods at face value because, if one takes Homer’s works non-literally, one would not understand them as representing the gods doing impious things. One would not interpret the acts that Homer depicts as literal history or theology but as symbolic myth, allegory, and so on. Only if one reads the stories told by Homer or Hesiod literally do these charges of impiety obtain.

Piety was not the only concern; perhaps more importantly, the literal interpretation also created serious philosophical problems for the Presocratics and Plato. Plato and Presocratic

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<sup>397</sup> DK 21B1.21-24

<sup>398</sup> Mikolae Domaradzki, “The Beginnings of Greek *Allegoresis*,” *The Classical World* 110, no. 3 (2017): 309.

<sup>399</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks (Cambridge, Harvard University Press: 1972), 8.1.21.

<sup>400</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 9.2.18.

<sup>401</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 9.2.18.

<sup>402</sup> See Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 3.1.5, 3.1.9, 3.1.37, and 3.1.48. Diogenes praises Plato’s literary accomplishments and remarks on his background as a would-be poet and tragedian

thinkers such as Xenophanes were part of a contingent of thinkers moving away from anthropomorphic accounts of the gods and the logical problems that resulted from them. Since the gods have a superior relationship to the Forms, according to the reading of the *Phaedrus* examined in Chapter One, they have perfect knowledge. In having perfect knowledge, they know what is good for them and in general. It is, therefore, logically incoherent to attribute badness to the gods. Many Presocratics attempted to ground first causes and principles in divine nature. Think, for example, of Anaxagoras' *nous* standing outside of all mixture, Heraclitus' divine *logos*, Parmenides' divine path of *aletheia*, and Xenophanes' distinction between divine knowledge and mortal opinion. The philosophical foundations of these thinkers' work require a divine nature that is free from falsehood, evil, and ignorance. Otherwise, the gods fail as first principles or causes. Yet, on the literal reading, poetry presents an anthropomorphic conception of divine nature in which the gods wage wars and commit various heinous acts and demonstrate that their divine nature is not in a much better position with respect to truth than is mortal nature.

Thus, in conclusion, one must keep in mind that the remarks in the *Republic* regarding theology and poetry would have been contextualized through an existing understanding of certain philosophical concerns regarding a specific method of reading the poets. These concerns were already present in the thought of the Pythagoreans, Heraclitus, and Xenophanes. More specifically, from the consideration of these Presocratic positions, we can see that Plato's comments on poetry would have called to mind a particular stance regarding the use of Homer and Hesiod as educators of "most men." Thus, one must contextualize some of the remarks on poetry in the *Republic* through an understanding of particular philosophical concerns. These concerns were tied to the literal approach to reading poetry, and were already present in the thought of the Pythagoreans, Heraclitus, and Xenophanes. More specifically, from considering

these Presocratic positions, we can see that Plato's comments on poetry would have called to mind a particular stance regarding using Homer and Hesiod to educate "most men." Socrates' remarks are conditioned by those to whom he is speaking, what they already assume to be true, and what kind of content they already have in mind when hearing him. Therefore, one can understand many of the comments against poetry in the *Republic* as targeting the epistemological, theological, and metaphysical consequences of a literalist approach. However, there are other approaches to poetry aside from the literal one. Under a different interpretive approach, such as the enigmatic one, one can imagine that Socrates would have different things to say about poetry and the poets. Accordingly, one should not necessarily interpret these negative comments as a criticism of poetry itself and in all cases.

#### IV. Popular Interpretive Methods: *Allegoresis*

The literalist approach was not the only one criticized by Socrates in the *Republic*. There were other common ways of thinking about poetry, and *allegoresis* enjoyed some popularity during Plato's time. Hence, one can read some of Socrates' apparently negative remarks against poetry as criticisms of *allegoresis*. However, the situation is not clear-cut. Enigmatic approaches to poetry shared a strong relationship with allegorical approaches, and, as this section argues further, Socrates does not outright reject enigma as a method of reading the poets; instead, he seems to embrace it. Thus, Plato's views on *allegoresis*, assuming he expresses them through the character of Socrates, are mixed. Both among the literati and cultic practitioners, there was an approach to allegory that treated it as an alternative to literalism. The poet still possessed a consciously held polymathic wealth of knowledge but hid it under layers of allegorical content that could only be accessed by those who knew how to interpret it. Plato's Socrates rejects this

view of *allegoresis*. However, Socrates does not reject all the ways that one can read poetry allegorically. Socrates rejects the idea that any given allegorical interpretation is due to conscious, polymathic expertise on the part of a poet who intentionally places it there for an initiated reader to discover. Yet, he does not reject the idea that a poetic work can be read allegorically despite a lack of knowledge or intent on the part of the poet. Hence, we should contextually read some of Socrates' seemingly negative comments on poetry as rejections of certain methods of *allegoresis*. Socrates is thereby not criticizing poetry in all cases.

Additionally, through his remarks on enigma, which was intertwined with ancient *allegoresis*, an alternative interpretive approach to poetry emerges that lends space to certain ways of thinking about allegorical interpretations of the poets. First, however, this study must establish some basic historical grounding for these subsequent claims.

First, we must examine the historical situation of allegorical approaches during Plato's time. The use of allegory in later antiquity is well-known, but far less of a record remains regarding the practice of *allegoresis* during the Classical era. Still, while, according to Obbink, "some broad treatments of literary criticism treat allegory as though it were an exotic overgrowth of later periods," it is nevertheless true that "[r]eaders of enigmas and undermeanings in [the Classical] period are not rare."<sup>403</sup> Domaradzki, weighing into the debate regarding the first extant example of *allegoresis*, notes that "scholars have been unable to reach consensus regarding the first instance of allegorical interpretation of Homer."<sup>404</sup> However, what is clear is that the prize goes to *either* Theagenes of Rhegium or Pherecydes of Syros, both of whom wrote in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>405</sup> Struck explains that "a few fragments remain of allegorical readings from pre-

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<sup>403</sup> Dirk Obbink, "Early Greek Allegory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, ed. by Copeland, Rita and Peter T Struck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>404</sup> Domaradzki, "The Beginnings of Greek *Allegoresis*," 305.

<sup>405</sup> Domaradzki, "The Beginnings of Greek *Allegoresis*," 305.

Aristotelian [and Pre-Platonic] literary commentators, including Pherecydes of Syros, Metrodorus of Lampsacus, Theagenes of Rhegium, Anaxagoras, and Stesimbrotus of Thasos.”<sup>406</sup> In any case, there is evidence that *allegoresis* of Homer goes back to at least the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Accordingly, the timeline allows for Plato’s Socrates to target allegorical approaches to interpretation since this method pre-existed Plato.

“Allegory,” in the broadest terms, is a literary device in which the text contains at least two layers of meaning: the literal reading and a “deeper” symbolic meaning interpreted as being “behind” the literal one. Modern readers might think of a text like John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, in which there is a one-to-one correspondence between the two levels of the text with very little nuance. The characters are *composed as personifications for the purpose of an allegorical reading with a didactic goal*. This one-to-one correspondence between surface content and symbolic meaning is the standard contemporary meaning of “allegory” in English. The ancient Greek conception of *allegoresis* did not necessarily require a developed symbolic shorthand for a poem in which there was always a one-to-one correspondence between content and symbolic meaning. What the allegorists posited, according to Struck, was “an approach that sees the defining characteristics of a poetic text as its surplus of meaning, its tendency to transmit these extra messages in a specifically enigmatic and symbolic fashion, and its need for a skilled reader who is attentive to poetry’s allusiveness and density of meaning.”<sup>407</sup> This “surplus of meaning” was occasionally referred to as the work’s “undermeanings,” or *huponoia* in the Classical period. Still, the term became much more common in later periods. In ancient Greece, these hidden meanings are often played out less systematically than in modern allegory. For

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<sup>406</sup> Peter Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 26.

<sup>407</sup> Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 16.

example, interpreters saw *huponoia* present in etymological analyses of the poet's word choice; this is evident in the Derveni Papyrus.<sup>408</sup> According to Obbink,

[I]t is clear that from early on in the Greek tradition there existed different types of allegory, and not only allegory but also etymology (the practice of finding meaning in the supposed derivations of words), metaphor, simile, polyonymy (multiple names for the same thing), and analogy. There is a desire for recourse to extended forms of metonymical explanation involving multiple correspondence as early as the early fifth century, that is to say *huponoia* and allegory in the specific and restricted sense of hidden meanings, rather than the later rhetorical sense of a trope among others.<sup>409</sup>

Domaradzki goes further, contending that one should actually regard etymology as a form of *allegoresis* in and of itself,<sup>410</sup> and both Plato's *Cratylus* and the text of *PDerveni*, both of which use etymology to allegorize various names according to their role in the cosmos, strengthen his claim. Importantly, Domaradzki points out that a text does not have to have been composed allegorically to lend itself to *allegoresis*.<sup>411</sup> A text can be read as an allegory even if the author intended no such layered meaning. Accordingly, this study uses the term *allegoresis* in the sense of *interpreting* a text allegorically *regardless* of whether it was composed with allegory in mind.<sup>412</sup>

Nevertheless, the common view that poetic works were repositories for polymathic knowledge was prevalent in allegorical models of interpretation. As Obbink remarks, allegorical readings typically "exhibit an approach to poetry that sees it primarily as a repository of hidden insight" that is either intentionally placed there by the poet herself, or is the product of divine inspiration and is therefore placed there by the inspiring Muse or god.<sup>413</sup> In other words, this approach to *allegoresis* still requires the reader to think of the poet as a vehicle for concrete truth

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<sup>408</sup> See Col. XIII.

<sup>409</sup> Obbink, "Early Greek Allegory," 16.

<sup>410</sup> Domaradzki, "The Beginnings of Greek *Allegoresis*," 318-19.

<sup>411</sup> Domaradzki, "The Beginnings of Greek *Allegoresis*," 300.

<sup>412</sup> Domaradzki, "The Beginnings of Greek *Allegoresis*," 301.

<sup>413</sup> Obbink, "Early Greek Allegory," 15.

on all kinds of things. Though this hidden knowledge could be the product of divine inspiration, many early Greek allegorists did view the poets as composing allegorically on purpose. As Struck explains, “the allegorists tend to see [the poet as] a master riddler and a savant who can lead the skilled reader to the most profound knowledge the world has to offer.”<sup>414</sup> One can see this approach in *PDerveni*, wherein the author takes Orpheus to have intentionally composed in such a way as to hide his truths from the masses.<sup>415</sup> Thus, on particular understandings of it, *allegoresis* will fall prey to the same criticisms that Socrates leveled against the literalist approach; many allegorists still treated the poets as polymaths. The goal of allegorically interpreting poetry was still often to grasp the wisdom placed there by a polymathic poet, but now the wisdom is hidden rather than lying in plain sight.

Sometimes allegorists looked for a synthesis between Greek religion and Presocratic physics and cosmology by seeing the latter as allegorically present in the former. Even some Presocratic thinkers took up this tactic. Heraclitus, Xenophanes, and Parmenides all wrote in verse that was notably opaque in meaning, and they also treated poetic depictions of the gods as allegorical, not literal. These allegorical readings attempted to rationalize poetry through a symbolic reading in order to assimilate it to Presocratic physics. For example, Xenophanes states: “She whom they call Iris, this thing too is cloud, purple and red and yellow to behold.”<sup>416</sup> This passage is from a Scholium on *Iliad* 11.27 and demonstrates the attempt to naturalize the symbolism of the poets to physical philosophy. Porphyry contributes some valuable historical evidence to this in his mention of Theagenes:

[Homer] says stories about the gods that are not seemly. In regard to such an accusation, some apply a solution from diction, believing that everything about the nature of the

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<sup>414</sup> Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 5.

<sup>415</sup> See Col. VII. See also Richard Janko, “The Derveni Papyrus (‘Diagoras of Melos, Apopyrgizontes Logoi?’): A New Translation,” *Classical Philology* 96, no. 1 (2001): 2.

<sup>416</sup> DK 21B32



elements has been said by allegory, as it were in the opposition of the gods. For indeed they say that the dry fights with the wet, the hot with the cold, and the light with the heavy; furthermore, that water extinguishes fire, but fire dries water... [They say] that he arranges battles by naming fire Apollo, Helios, and Hephaestus, the water Poseidon and Scamander, the moon Artemis, the air Hera etc... So this type of defense, being quite old and from Theagenes of Rhegium, who first wrote about Homer, is from diction.<sup>417</sup>

On this passage, Domaradzki notes that “the physical *allegoresis* of the battle of the gods appears to be echoing Milesian theories of the opposites... particularly relevant are the cosmological teachings of Anaximander and, possibly, Anaximenes.”<sup>418</sup> Furthermore, Porphyry’s account claims that this trend toward reading an allegory of Presocratic physics into the poets began as a way to preserve the poets from accusations of impiety. In other words, one can defend Homer on the basis of the claim that what Homer is *really* doing is treating the gods as symbols of physical or cosmic forces or ideas. The picture of the cosmos and nature that arises from Homer’s intended use of the gods results in something very much like what we see later in thinkers like Empedocles, Anaximander, or Anaximenes. Therefore, *allegoresis* was a tool used to render the traditional canon scientifically and morally appropriate for its role in society. Moreover, this particular approach more than exonerates the poets; it makes them educators of those who are elite and intelligent enough to “get” the hidden message. Hence, since only those who could decipher these obscure allegories had access to them, the poets were not only morally acceptable but also educationally sound for the “best” members of society.

Allegorical interpretation was also used in religious approaches to interpreting the poets. According to this use, the poets were seen as cultic initiators who concealed salvific wisdom in their works so that only initiates uncovered it. In this way, allegorical exegesis of the text is bound up with mystagogy and indeed is mystagogical in and of itself, as the initiation comes not

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<sup>417</sup> Porphyry of Tyre, *Homeric Questions on the Iliad*, trans. John A. MacPhail Jr. (New York: De Gruyter, 2011), 241.

<sup>418</sup> Domaradzki, “The Beginnings of Greek *Allegoresis*,” 310.

after the interpretive act but through it. Our best historical evidence of this comes from the *Derveni Papyrus*, discovered in 1962. *PDerveni* is a fragmentary collection of allegorical exegeses on a poem by Orpheus that interprets the work through the lens of Presocratic cosmology and Orphic theology.<sup>419</sup> The papyrus was discovered in Greece near Saloniki; its charred remains were found in a tomb, and over 200 fragments of text were recovered and reassembled, resulting in 24 columns of surviving text.<sup>420</sup> The physical papyrus itself must date back to 300 BC at the latest, for, as Funghi notes, the “archaeological data indicate that the site cannot be more recent than 300 BC.”<sup>421</sup> Thus, the physical papyrus cannot postdate Plato by more than 50 years. However, the text itself is dated earlier than 300. Funghi notes that Tsantsanogloiu and Parássoglou (1988) dated it to 340-320 BC, which would still put it very shortly after Plato.<sup>422</sup> Though Funghi asserts that this earlier date is “assigned with certainty,”<sup>423</sup> other scholars, such as Burkert and Janko, have placed the text firmly within Plato’s lifetime.<sup>424</sup> In any case, the existence of the text indicates that it is highly likely that work like it was being produced and discussed in religious contexts during Plato’s lifetime, regardless of whether or not Plato was familiar with *PDerveni* itself.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>419</sup> For a longer look at the presence of Orphism within the Platonic corpus more generally, see Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato’s Dialogues* 147-168. See also Adluri, “Initiation Into The Mysteries: The Experience of the Irrational in Plato,” 407-423. Adluri gives an illuminating look at the theme of initiation in Plato’s dialogues, and especially in the *Republic*.

<sup>420</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the history of the papyrus and the development of scholarship regarding it, see Funghi, “The Derveni Papyrus,” 26-37.

<sup>421</sup> Funghi, “The Derveni Papyrus,” 25.

<sup>422</sup> Funghi, “The Derveni Papyrus,” 26.

<sup>423</sup> Funghi, “The Derveni Papyrus,” 26.

<sup>424</sup> Burkert placed the text itself to around 420-400, making it contemporary with Plato. See Walter Burkert, *Star Wars or One Stable World? A Problem of Presocratic Cosmogony (PDerv. Col. XXV)*,” in *Studies on the Derveni Papyrus*, eds. André Laks and Glenn Most (Oxford University Press: 1997), 174n32. Janko agrees with this dating, arguing that “its style dates its composition to 400 B.C. or before.” See Richard Janko, “The Physicist as Hierophant: Aristophanes, Socrates and the Authorship of the Derveni Papyrus,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 1997, Vol. 118: 61.

<sup>425</sup> I.e., because even the latest dating of the text by Tsantsanogloiu and Parássoglou (1988) dated it to 340-320 BC. (See Funghi, “The Derveni Papyrus,” 26). Therefore, unless the Derveni Papyrus was quite literally the first of its kind in terms of a work of poetic *allegoresis* as mystagogy, it seems likely that similar material was floating around during Plato’s day. given that Plato was clearly aware of Orphic practices, if other texts like *PDerveni*, or simply the

While *PDerveni* does some work to rationalize the mythic elements of Orpheus's poem according to Presocratic physics, it also explicitly contains theological claims. As an Orphic work, its aim is to aid the human soul in escaping the material world. As Laks and Most put it, "religious initiation takes the form of a rationalizing exegesis of the episodes of an Orphic theogony"<sup>426</sup> instead of a pure physics. Thus, rather than re-orienting the divine toward the human, the Derveni Papyrus attempts to orient the human towards the divine. The type of "allegorical reader" likely to engage with a text like *PDerveni* "is uniquely attuned to the poem as a rich and powerful source of insight into the gods, the world, and the place of humans in it."<sup>427</sup> Unlike the rationalizing allegories like that of Boreas and Orithuia in the *Phaedrus*,<sup>428</sup> the allegorizing of cultic works like *PDerveni* seeks to bring the human soul into a more divine state of communion with spiritual, rather than physical, realities.

The papyrus illustrates that there were intellectual and religious frustrations with literal approaches to poetic and religious texts. As Richard Janko argues, the author of *PDerveni* "sets out to criticize most of his contemporaries on the ground that they believed too literally in the rites and holy texts of traditional religion,"<sup>429</sup> texts which include those of the poets. In fact, in a tone similar to Plato's in the *Euthyphro*, *Ion*, and *Republic*, Janko points out that the author of *PDerveni* held that "not even the priests can explain the rites and sacred texts to those whom they initiate (col. XX)... because they do not explain them as allegories."<sup>430</sup> The author of the

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practices it exemplifies, were in existence during Plato's lifetime, it is very plausible he was aware of them, especially given his references to allegory and his seeming awareness of *allegoresis* as part of the mysteries in texts like the *Euthyphro*, *Cratylus*, and *Republic*.

<sup>426</sup> Laks and Most, introduction to *Studies on the Derveni Papyrus*, in *Studies on the Derveni Papyrus*, eds. André Laks and Glenn Most (Oxford University Press: 1997), 5.

<sup>427</sup> Obbink, "Early Greek Allegory," 16.

<sup>428</sup> *Phaedrus* 229b-230a.

<sup>429</sup> Janko, "The Derveni Papyrus," 2.

<sup>430</sup> Janko, "The Derveni Papyrus," 2.

*Derveni Papyrus* has similar concerns to those of Xenophanes and Plato and thus sees impious depictions of the gods as requiring allegorical rather than literal interpretation.

It is at this point that we can turn to examine how Plato's Socrates interacts with *allegoresis*. While Socrates indicates that he is aware of the allegorical approach, he seems to reject it. For example, in the *Republic* he states:

We won't admit stories into our city—whether allegorical [containing *huponoia*] or not—about Hera being chained by her son, nor about Hephaestus being hurled from heaven by his father when he tried to help his mother, who was being beaten, nor about the battle of the gods in Homer. The young can't distinguish what is allegorical from what isn't, and the opinions they absorb at that age are hard to erase and apt to become unalterable.<sup>431</sup>

Socrates further seems to take aim at cultic *allegoresis*, though ambivalently, when he states that stories such as “Hesiod telling us about how Uranus behaved, how Cronus punished him for it, and how he was in turn punished by his own son” are not true and thus ought to be ejected from the city. However, he then adds:

even if it were true, it should be passed over in silence, not told to foolish young people. And if, for some reason, it has to be told, only a very few people—pledged to secrecy and after sacrificing not just a pig but something great and scarce—should hear it, so that their number is kept as small as possible.<sup>432</sup>

The takeaway from this is unclear. Socrates seems to be banishing such stories from the education of the youth entirely. Still, he perhaps leaves a loophole for their use in the initiatory practices of those who would read them a certain way and guard them carefully.

Nevertheless, Socrates does reject at least some iterations of allegorical interpretation. First, he rejects this rationalizing and physicalist approach to allegorizing. The most evident support that he does so appears in the *Phaedrus*, wherein allegorizing attempts to rationalize the

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<sup>431</sup> *Republic*, 378c-e.

<sup>432</sup> *Republic*, 377e-378a.

myth of Boreas and Orithuia are mentioned. Phaedrus asks Socrates if he believes such stories are true, Socrates responds:

Actually, it would not be out of place for me to reject it, as our intellectuals do. I could then tell a clever story: I could claim that a gust of the North Wind blew her over the rocks where she was playing with Pharmaceia; and once she was killed that way people said she had been carried off by Boreas... Now, Phaedrus, such explanations are amusing enough, but they are a job for a man I cannot envy at all. He'd have to be far too ingenious and work too hard—mainly because after that he will have to go on and give a rational account of the form of the Hippocentaurs, and then of the Chimera; and a whole flood of Gorgons and Pegasuses and other monsters, in large numbers and absurd forms, will overwhelm him. Anyone who does not believe in them, who wants to explain them away and make them plausible by means of some sort of rough ingenuity, will need a great deal of time.<sup>433</sup>

Socrates follows this above statement with a reference to the inscription of the Delphic Oracle as central to his reasons for not engaging in such allegorical practices:

I have no time for such things; and the reason, my friend, is this. I am still unable, as the Delphic inscription orders, to know myself; and it really seems to me ridiculous to look into other things before I have understood that. This is why I do not concern myself with them. I accept what is generally believed, and, as I was just saying, I look not into them but into my own self: Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature?<sup>434</sup>

The message is that Socrates rejects these rationalizing interpretations not because he rejects poetry (or allegory in every case) but because this particular approach keeps the allegorist focused on the material world, with the poets serving as natural philosophers via their allegories. Instead, Socrates is concerned with knowing himself, which means knowing the limits of his wisdom and coming to terms with his ignorance, but it also means investigating whether or not he has a share in the divine nature. Thus, he rejects a certain kind of *allegoresis* here because it leads to a focus away from true causes and orients the soul toward the sensible by appealing to the explanatory powers of natural sciences. As Socrates points out in the *Phaedo*, such accounts

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<sup>433</sup> *Phaedrus* 229c-e.

<sup>434</sup> *Phaedrus* 229e-230a.

do not answer the questions behind the philosophical life.<sup>435</sup> The rejection of allegorizing attempts to rationalize myth in the *Phaedrus* is, therefore, similar to Socrates' rejection of the natural philosophers in the first and second sailings of the *Phaedo*, who are ultimately unable to give an account of true causes.<sup>436</sup> It is not that understanding physical reality is a bad thing. Socrates himself demonstrates an impressive grasp of it.<sup>437</sup> But to dedicate one's investigative efforts to this kind of rationalizing *allegoresis* works to keep the soul from turning toward philosophy in order to locate first principles. It thereby prevents the would-be philosopher from understanding the limits of her knowledge and its share in the divine.

Further, Socrates' reference to "our intellectuals" in the above passage from the *Phaedrus* elucidates the social position of these rationalizing allegorists, highlighting another potential reason for his rejection of them. There is some evidence that the historical motivation behind *allegoresis* was a kind of elitist conceit to esoteric knowledge. One could use his or her supposed expertise in *allegoresis* to lend authority to his or her own claims, motivations, and even position in society. For example, as Domaradzki notes, Maria Rispoli "has cautiously suggested that Theagenes was a member of Rhegium's aristocracy, who might have sought to provide his community (the famous '1000') with an ideology that could strengthen its political supremacy."<sup>438</sup> One's ability to claim expert but hidden knowledge of the poets was also a monetarily beneficial commodity. Andrew Ford has argued that "allegorical readings of epic could be offered as an intellectual commodity."<sup>439</sup> Ford's point has robust historical evidence behind it. Notably, Plato's own works support the idea that one could peddle allegorical

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<sup>435</sup> *Phaedo* 98c-d.

<sup>436</sup> *Phaedo* 96a-100a.

<sup>437</sup> See *Phaedo* 98c-d.

<sup>438</sup> Domaradzki, "The Beginnings of Greek *Allegoresis*," 313.

<sup>439</sup> Ford, *The Origins of Criticism*, 73. See also pages 76-80 for more on the elitist underpinnings of allegorical approaches to the poets.

interpretations of the poets as part of their jobs as educators-for-hire. Obbink observes, for example, that the eponymous character of Plato's *Protagoras* "begins by claiming that the 'principal part of education' is to be expert in discussion of poetry."<sup>440</sup> The historical Protagoras was, of course, a famed Sophist who took funds in exchange for educating young Greek men. Obbink notes that Protagoras "gave similar explications of passages in Homer that demonstrate concern for grammar and other attempts to systematize human knowledge."<sup>441</sup> In the *Protagoras*, after an attempt to parse Simonides, Plato has Socrates say the following:

Discussing poetry strikes me as no different from the second-rate drinking parties of the *agora* crowd. These people, largely uneducated and unable to entertain themselves over their wine by using their own voices to generate conversation, pay premium prices for flute-girls and rely on the extraneous voice of the reed flute as background music for their parties. But [a gathering of] well-educated gentlemen... should require no extraneous voices, not even of poets, who cannot be questioned on what they say. When a poet is brought up in a discussion, almost everyone has a different opinion about what he means, and they wind up arguing about something they can never finally decide... We should put the poets aside and converse directly with each other, testing the truth and our own ideas.<sup>442</sup>

We can see in this passage a rejection of both the literalist approach, wherein people try to let the poets do their thinking for them, and a rejection of the allegorical approach as an elevated version of the same thing. Parsing out precisely what a poet "means" is an excuse to avoid doing one's own investigation. Despite the association of this approach with the educated elite, Socrates states that allegorical accounts that parse the poet for practical wisdom are no better than a pretentious version of what the *hoi polloi*, "uneducated and unable to entertain themselves," do. Furthermore, Socrates views the task as ultimately fruitless because what the poet "really means" can never be verifiably ascertained. The reader of Plato also knows that even if one could

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<sup>440</sup> Obbink, "Early Greek Allegory," 16.

<sup>441</sup> Obbink, "Early Greek Allegory," 16.

<sup>442</sup> *Protagoras* 347c-348a

ascertain the poet's exact meaning, the attempt would be fruitless nonetheless because the poets lack *techne*.

In sum, several problems with popular uses of the allegorical approach from a Platonic perspective lead one to conclude that Plato likely disapproved of it. Indeed, Struck claims that both “Aristotle and Plato [were] clear opponents of *allegoresis*.”<sup>443</sup> Charles Kahn argues that Plato's *Cratylus* involves a protracted rejection of the philosophical allegorizing undertaken by those such as the author of the *Derveni Papyrus* and the subsequent doctrines drawn from it.<sup>444</sup> Again, a fundamental flaw lies in the assumption that the poets had a specific meaning in mind when they wrote, continuing the assumption that the wisdom found in the works comes from the poets themselves. The ascription of hidden knowledge to the poet is apparent in the *Derveni Papyrus* itself, wherein the unknown author writes:

For it is not possible to state what way the words are used and at the same time the text itself. His poetry is something strange (ξένη) and riddling (αἰνιγματώδης) for people. But Orpheus did not intend to tell them captious riddles (αἰνίγματα), but momentous things in riddles (ἐν αἰνίγμασιν δὲ μάγала). Indeed, he is telling a holy discourse (ιερολογεῖται) from the first and up to his last word. As he also makes clear in the well-chosen verse: for having ordered them to put doors to their ears he says that he is [? not legislating] for the many . . . [? but only for] those pure in hearing... according... in the next verse....<sup>445</sup>

This passage makes several things clear. First, the author attributes intent to Orpheus in conveying “sound and lawful things.” Orpheus is not just a passive conduit for divine inspiration but actually possesses knowledge himself. As Janko explains, “[i]n the Orphic cosmogony, the allegory runs ‘from the first word to the last’; it was fully intended by the poet, as is proved by his opening verse, where he declared that he was writing only for the ‘pure in hearing’ (col.

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<sup>443</sup> Struck, *The Birth of the Symbol*, 17.

<sup>444</sup> Charles Kahn, “Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus,” in *Studies on the Derveni Papyrus*, eds. André Laks and Glenn Most (Oxford University Press: 1997), 55. In Chapter V, I will argue that Plato is actually intentionally engaging with the cultic content of *allegoresis* and does not reject it, but instead appropriates it philosophically.

<sup>445</sup> Column VII.



VII).<sup>446</sup> The author even asserts that Orpheus “arranged” some verses “in reverse order, because he did not wish that all should recognize (them),”<sup>447</sup> indicating that Orpheus not only intentionally wrote in allegory but did so with initiation and initiates in mind. Second, the reason for the poet’s enigmatic style is specifically to hide his knowledge from “the many.”

Ergo, the allegorical approach, at least as it pertains to the rationalizing and the religious approaches, continues to take the works of the poets as monuments to human intellect and as educationally necessary works on science and virtue, as well as religious salvation. Accordingly, mystagogical *allegoresis* still violates Plato's assertion that the poets could not have this knowledge. Hence, the allegorists referenced in the *Republic*, who seem to have specific interpretations in mind that they bestow on initiates following ritual sacrifices, still attributed conscious knowledge to the poets that one could uncover through the right allegorical key. Therefore, the criticism of allegory is the same in some ways as it was for literalism: Homer and Hesiod were not polymaths, so reading of them as if they were, whether allegorical or not, is fruitless.

Another negative observation that one can make against the allegorical methods outlined above is that they present the text as a static repository of fixed meaning. One need only learn the right allegorical formula for interpreting the work once and for all, and then apply that formula to uncover the meaning hidden therein. As noted above, the formulaic nature of this interpretive approach lends itself to monetary commodification in Greek education, which is problematic for several reasons. First, of course, is the issue of mindlessly adhering to a particular teacher’s

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<sup>446</sup> Janko, “The Derveni Papyrus,” 2. It should be noted, however, that this translation depends on the reconstruction of the text, which has a lacuna and reads “τοὺς τὴν ἀκοίην [ἀγνεύοντας].” Thus, the sense of purity is here restored into the participial construction, but is not in the original papyrus.

<sup>447</sup> Col. XXC. This translation is taken from Burkert, “Star Wars or One Stable World,” 168. Betegh’s translation reads “Those (words) which come after these he [Orpheus] puts before (as a screen) not wishing all men to understand.”

allegorical key and abdicating one's own role as a critical interpreter; this seems to be at least part of Socrates' issues with *allegoresis* in the *Protagoras*. The educated elite spend their time parsing the poets' and arguing about whose formula is right rather than spending that intellectual energy contemplating truth itself for themselves. Second, Socrates is concerned that this renders the poets' works, which are supposed to be divinely inspired, dead rather than living texts. Once one unlocks the right formula (Orphic, physical, moral, etc.) one reads the text with that one-to-one correspondence between its words and its hidden meaning. Plato's own mode of composition, the dialogue, counters this by presenting the reader with a living text which appears to be continually in motion with the thought of the reader. Jon Moline notes that "well-written dialogue does not permit one to forget that philosophical conversation involves complex human beings who interact not simply at a rational level but at other levels as well," and that "[d]ialogue depicting flesh-and-blood human beings can also teach that the obstacles to understanding are often not cognitive."<sup>448</sup> Furthermore, as Jill Gordon poignantly remarks, Plato "contrives the actions, speeches, settings, diction, jokes, images, poetic devices, contradictions, irony, and so on" by which "he erases himself [from the text] through these very devices."<sup>449</sup> In doing this, Plato "purposely removes his own voice as a philosophical authority through devices that destabilize univocal readings of the text."<sup>450</sup> Through the dialogue form, which Diogenes Laertius tells us Plato perfected,<sup>451</sup> Plato invites us to do what these other approaches to the poets prevent. He crafts a literary work that can move with the reader, be different each time she approaches it, and push her to think for herself rather than offload that responsibility onto Plato.

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<sup>448</sup> Moline, "Recollection, Dialectic, and Ontology," 238. Moline further states that Plato's "conception of philosophy demanded that his philosophical writing employ a genre rich enough to speak to us in all of our complexity, a form that allowed for mythos as well as *logos*. This demand is satisfied better perhaps by the dialogue form than by any other" (239).

<sup>449</sup> Gordon, *Turning Toward Philosophy*, 8.

<sup>450</sup> Gordon, *Turning Toward Philosophy*, 8.

<sup>451</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 3.1.38.

Therefore, Plato's concerns with standard approaches to allegory in his time could be related to an overarching concern regarding the ability of a text to dynamically move with its reader in such a way that it remains philosophically fruitful.

To conclude, the "elite" of Plato's society sometimes used poetry as a repository of knowledge that the educated could possess if they learned the right allegorical "key" to interpreting the works. This "key" could then be passed on to others, often for a price. Yet, given the poets' lack of conscious expertise, Plato's Socrates would have certainly found fault with the allegorists as false teachers who create and nurture the appearance of knowledge only. Importantly, these so-called "intellectuals" mined the poets for *huponoia* that they could use to prop up human knowledge of matters such as physical cosmologies. Efforts to produce allegorical readings of the poets often appeal solely to material explanations of the cosmos, assume conscious, but intentionally hidden, polymathy on the part of the poets, and are motivated by the commodification of knowledge among "elite" young men and not by a genuine desire to grasp divine truth so as to ascend to the Beautiful and the Good. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that Plato's Socrates doesn't appreciate this approach to interpreting the poets. As Domaradzki argues, "Theagenes made Homer 'enigmatic' so as to establish a select community, a secret fraternity of wise men, that could set their intellectual aristocracy against *oi πολλοί* by their arcane and recondite knowledge of the panhellenic song."<sup>452</sup> Given such motives for engaging in *allegoresis*, another dimension of Socrates' critique of allegory emerges: it legitimated the secret knowledge by which some individuals claimed the authority to teach for pay. Notably, many allegorists were also cultists, and, according to Domaradzki, "much like the Orphics and Pythagoreans, this elite brotherhood or sect would thus be employing esotericism to

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<sup>452</sup> Domaradzki, "The Beginnings of Greek *Allegoresis*," 314.

secure a position of a certain cultural leadership.”<sup>453</sup> The problem in both cases – that of the Sophist and the cultic initiator – is not the practice of *allegoresis* or the value of religious or spiritual practices in all cases. Instead, the problem lies in the profit-seeking motivations for presenting secret knowledge to those who want it by those who do not actually have it. These initiators-for-hire do not have the knowledge needed to educate one's soul truly but are nonetheless willing to pawn its counterfeit for a price.

#### V. A Possible Platonic *Allegoresis*

Though the popular approaches to allegorical interpretation discussed above are incompatible with the views expressed by Plato's Socrates, this does not mean that the dialogues reject *any* value to *allegoresis*. There is another manner in which one can understand allegory that may be acceptable to the Platonic view, pointing toward the *daimonic* nature of the poetic itself. This manner encompasses the use of enigma, or “double speak”; it applies to the words of poets, oracles, and some of the Presocratic philosophers. Heraclitus is famous for this kind of speech, saying things like:

The wise is one alone; it is unwilling and willing to be called by the name of Zeus.<sup>454</sup>

They do not understand how, though at variance with itself, it agrees with itself. It is a backwards-turning attunement like that of the bow and lyre.<sup>455</sup>

The name of the bow (*bios*) is life (*bios*), but its work is death.<sup>456</sup>

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<sup>453</sup> Domaradzki, “The Beginnings of Greek *Allegoresis*,” 314.

<sup>454</sup> DK 22B32. Compare this to Diogenes Laertius' account of the Stoic allegorizing of mythology: “They say that *Dia*... is the one ‘because of whom’ all things are; they call [god] *Zena*... in so far as he is cause of life or because he penetrates life; and Athena by reference to the fact that his leading part extends into the aither; Hera because he extends into the air; Hephaestus because he extends into craftsmanlike fire; Poseidon because he extends into the fluid; and Demeter because he extends into the earth. Similarly they also assign the other titles [to god] by fastening onto one [of his] peculiarities” (Diogenes Laertius, *Physics*, in *Hellenistic Philosophy* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, translated by Brad Inwood and L.P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 7.147).

<sup>455</sup> DK22B51

<sup>456</sup> DKB48

Thunderbolt steers all things.<sup>457</sup>

God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger, but changes the way <fire> when mingled with perfumes, is named according to the scent of each.<sup>458</sup>

The sun will not overstep his measures; otherwise, the Erinyes, ministers of justice, will find him out.<sup>459</sup>

These statements include the use of allegory, but in a plastic sense (wisdom both is and is not personified by Zeus, the bow both is and is not life, god both is and is not winter or summer, war or peace, and so on). Rather than producing a one-to-one formula for symbolism, Heraclitus' words aim at opening our eyes to multiple possibilities, all of which are true and also false at the same time, because any human utterance about divine things will be of a limited, and therefore mixed nature regarding truth and falsehood. *Any* attempt to grasp reality, once and for all, in words alone will require this kind of vacillation between truth and falsehood. The above quotations also rely on something other than the wisdom of the author who knows all the things the writing reveals ahead of time. Instead, the wisdom of Heraclitus' words aims to reveal the limits of his own and, indeed, all human knowledge. Our knowledge can only speak of divine things in this enigmatic, amorphous fashion, and this realization ought to point us upward toward the nature of the divine, which understands without discursive thought or language and their necessary limitations.

As Jessica Decker notes, the non-literal speech of Heraclitus has more in common with oracular and poetic speech, both of which aim at “double speak,”<sup>460</sup> which is a manner of speaking that “is strategically implemented to subvert dualistic habits of mortal thinking and

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<sup>457</sup> DK22B64

<sup>458</sup> DK22B67

<sup>459</sup> DK22B94

<sup>460</sup> See Decker, “Double Speak in the Ancient Greek Poetic Tradition,” 237-48.

introduce a different kind of awareness, and awareness of multiplicity and paradox.”<sup>461</sup> Decker argues that double speak is “used as a way of bridging the usually separate mortal and divine worlds through speech.”<sup>462</sup> In other words, this manner of speaking can have a *daimonic* function; its use enables the disruption of “human binary habits of thinking” and creates “a ‘quantum awareness’ where the subject is able to perceive the relationships and paradoxes that exist between the knower and the seeming objects of knowledge, as well as the habits of thinking and perceiving that nourish the repetition and growth of those patterns.”<sup>463</sup> In other words, this manner of enigmatic and allegorical speech can produce a mediating awareness in the human subject of the complexities, contradictions, and limits of human thought, which always must express an eternal plenitude in a temporal utterance and thus is always falling short of grasping divine Being. “Double speak” appears in oracular and poetic language, and it often employs allegory, thereby functioning *daimonically* as an intermediary between discursive human speech and divine understanding. It is a mode of speech that reaches toward an awareness of the very limits of speech itself in order to turn the speaker and listener toward an awareness of the unspeakable. Thus, instead of the gods functioning as representations of physical elements and causal forces, the gods serve as symbols for divine ideas put into personified terms, which can more easily bridge the gap between divine and human thought. Zeus is wisdom and demiurgic power, and the ambiguous nature of the double speak drives home that this relationship between Zeus and these ideas is only an image of what they all are, a particular way to better grasp at what is ultimately beyond any complete understanding in the human mode.

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<sup>461</sup> Decker, “Double Speak in the Ancient Greek Poetic Tradition,” 237-38.

<sup>462</sup> Decker, “Double Speak in the Ancient Greek Poetic Tradition,” 237-38.

<sup>463</sup> Decker, “Double Speak in the Ancient Greek Poetic Tradition,” 237.

However, the question remains as to the status of such double speak in Plato. I note above that Plato seems to reject *allegoresis* as a method for arriving at intentionally placed *huponoia* within a poetic work. However, as Domaradzki points out, “it has been well ascertained in research on allegorical interpretation that the word most frequently used by the early allegorists was neither ἀλληγορία (which is late) nor ὑπόνοια (which is rare), but rather αἰνίγμα.”<sup>464</sup> An examination of αἰνίγμα reveals more of the Platonic view of allegorical possibilities and their value. It appears in the *Republic*, Book V at 479c. Socrates states:

“I want to address a question to our friend who doesn’t believe in the beautiful itself or any form of the beautiful itself that remains always the same in all respects but who does believe in the many beautiful things – the lover of sights who wouldn’t allow anyone to say that the beautiful itself is one or that the just is one or any of the rest: ‘My dear fellow,’ we’ll say, ‘of all the many beautiful things, is there one that will not also appear ugly? Or is there one of those just things that will not also appear unjust? Or one of those pious things that will not also appear impious?’”<sup>465</sup>

The answer is “no.” Then Socrates asks, “Is there any one of the manys what we say it is... any more than it is not what he says it is?” To which Glaucon replies:

No, they are like the ambiguities one is entertained with at dinner parties or like the children’s riddle [παίδων αἰνίγματι] about the eunuch who threw something at a bat—the one about what he threw at it and what it was in, for they are ambiguous, and one cannot understand them as fixedly being or fixedly not being or as both or as neither.<sup>466</sup>

It is tempting to take this as an insult against allegory as enigma, but, actually, this passage reveals the *function* of enigma as a mode of speech that is uniquely equipped to capture the nature of Becoming. Glaucon is not saying “it has no truth” by saying it is like a “children’s riddle.” Instead, he is referring to a specific children’s riddle, which goes thus: “A man who is

<sup>464</sup> Domaradzki, “The Beginnings of Greek *Allegoresis*,” 303. See Also Obbink, “Early Greek Allegory,” 15: “We find readers using other terms [than allegory] to anchor their discussions of the nuggets of wisdom which they supposed great poets had tucked away in their poetry, including the terms *huponoia* (under-sense) *symbolon* (symbol), but with the central position occupied by the notion of the *ainigma* (enigma).”

<sup>465</sup> *Republic* 478e-479a.

<sup>466</sup> *Republic*, 479b-c: τοῖς ἐν ταῖς ἐστιάσεσιν, ἔφη, ἐπαμφοτερίζουσιν ἔοικεν, καὶ τῷ τῶν παίδων αἰνίγματι τῷ περὶ τοῦ εὐνούχου, τῆς βολῆς περὶ τῆς νυκτερίδος, ἧ καὶ ἐφ’ οὗ αὐτὸν αὐτὴν αἰνίττονται βαλεῖν: καὶ γὰρ ταῦτα ἐπαμφοτερίζειν, καὶ οὐτ’ εἶναι οὔτε μὴ εἶναι οὐδὲν αὐτῶν δυνατὸν παρὶς νοῆσαι, οὔτε ἀμφοτέρα οὔτε οὐδέτερον.

not a man saw and did not see a bird that was not a bird in a tree (lit., a piece of wood) that was not a tree; he hit (lit., threw at) and did not hit it with a stone that was not a stone.”<sup>467</sup> “The answer,” as C.D.C. Reeve tells us, “is that a eunuch with bad eyesight saw a bat on a rafter, threw a pumice stone at it, and missed.”<sup>468</sup> Thus, in saying this is “like the children’s riddle,” Glaucon is not indicating that it is nonsensical but that it speaks truth in an ambiguous manner that employs double meanings, according to which something both is and is not the case. The eunuch is a man in one sense and not in another, depending on perspective. When viewed from the standpoint of stable forms, this riddling can elucidate the multi-vocal ways in which Becoming can be spoken of as a moving image of Being.

Enigma appears again in the *Charmides*, wherein the eponymous character states, “I have just remembered having heard someone say that temperance is minding one’s own business.”<sup>469</sup> This saying is remarkably similar to the citation of Simonides in the *Republic*, wherein the poet is referenced as support for the claim that justice is giving to each what is owed.<sup>470</sup> Socrates says this is a statement from “Critias or some other wise man,” but Critias states that it was not him.<sup>471</sup> Socrates agrees that it does not matter who said it since “the question at issue is not who said it, but whether what he said is true or not,” and yet, he states, “if we succeed in finding out what it means, I should be surprised, because it seems to be a sort of riddle [αἰνίγματι γὰρ τινὶ ἔοικεν].”<sup>472</sup> Again, this bears a similarity to Socrates’s treatment of Simonides in the *Republic*, where he gives a similar response: “Well, now, it isn’t easy to doubt Simonides, for he’s a wise

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<sup>467</sup> C.D.C. Reeve, *Plato’s Republic*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 1106.

<sup>468</sup> Reeve, *Plato’s Republic*, 1106.

<sup>469</sup> *Charmides* 161b.

<sup>470</sup> *Republic* 331d-e.

<sup>471</sup> *Charmides* 161c.

<sup>472</sup> *Charmides* 161c.



and godlike man. But what exactly does he mean?”<sup>473</sup> In both examples, someone offers up a poetic maxim to support a claim in an argument but fails to see the diversity of meaning contained in the words. Therefore, they fail to do anything interesting or beneficial with the poetic content.

In both examples drawn from *Charmides* and *Republic*, we can think of interpretations that vindicate the poet. Justice is, in a certain sense, giving to each what is owed, *if* by that we mean caring for each function in the soul well and letting each part do its own task. Temperance, when we consider its definition in the *Republic*, is minding one’s own business and thus working to ensure one’s best part rules the others, allowing each part to do its own.<sup>474</sup> Temperance thereby emerges as “self-control” rather than control over others. Hence, the reference to an enigmatic saying refers to a method of speaking that captures the simultaneous truth and falsity of Becoming; it can articulate this dichotomy in which something is both true and false simultaneously but in different ways. The use of poetic maxims to get at this indicates that poetry may be especially suited to this kind of enigmatic speech, which captures the duality of human cognition as it attempts to grasp the nature of things Becoming as unstable and in motion.

Again, enigma appears in the *Apology*, where Socrates speaks of Meletus’ accusations of atheism and states:

You cannot be believed, Meletus, even, I think, by yourself. The man appears to me, men of Athens, highly insolent and uncontrolled. He seems to have made this deposition out of insolence, violence and youthful zeal. He is like one who composed a riddle [αἴνιγμα] and is trying it out: ‘Will the wise Socrates realize that I am jesting and contradicting myself, or shall I deceive him and others?’ I think he contradicts himself in the affidavit, as if he said: ‘Socrates is guilty of not believing in gods but believing in gods,’ and surely that is the part of a jester!<sup>475</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> *Republic* 331e.

<sup>474</sup> See *Republic* 430e-431b.

<sup>475</sup> *Apology* 26e-27a.

This reference is more ambivalent, for it associates ἀντιγμῶν with contradiction, with the “both true and false” nature of speech, but in a manner associated with deception. However, the presentation of an “either/or” scenario here is interesting. Meletus *is like* one who riddles, and when trying out a riddle, there are two possibilities: the hearer realizes the inherent contradiction and becomes aware of truth in a certain multivocal sense, which reveals the dimensions of meaning possible regarding the matter at hand, *or* the hearer is deceived and mistakes the riddle for truth pure and simple. Socrates’ own “irony” comes to mind, as it bears a close resemblance (if not straightforward identity) with enigma.<sup>476</sup> Socrates states that a strange or seemingly silly statement is correct, or he suggests that something seemingly absurd is actually a puzzle worthy of working at. The modern reader often takes these instances as “irony” in the sense of sarcasm or dishonesty. Instead, however, Socrates hopes that the interlocutor will come to perceive the multivocal truth, the particular ways something is true and the particular ways it is not. Ideally, examining the enigma will cause one to turn toward philosophy as the study of more stable truths. Still, it will also allow her to understand better the nature of Becoming as the place of Being and non-being. Therefore, in all three examples, enigma means a manner of speaking that articulates both what is and what is not at the same time. In other words, enigma has the unique potential to make human cognition aware of the parameters of its own knowledge. It can operate as a kind of charm against double ignorance. Under the right circumstances, it can serve a *daimonic* function by mediating divine knowledge to humans by using ambiguity in language to draw attention to the gap between the plenitude of Being and the poverty of human cognition and utterance. Thus, while Plato’s work rejects some uses of *allegoresis*, it also takes up others.

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<sup>476</sup> See Layne, “From Irony to Enigma,” 73-90.

However, Luc Brisson states that “[a]llegory was rejected by Plato, though he did not renounce myth.”<sup>477</sup> Yet, as Brisson also notes, Plato often employs allegories in his myths (such as the “Allegory of the Cave”).<sup>478</sup> Obbink remarks that

Plato portrays Socrates as familiar with such a view of allegory (e.g., *Phaedrus* 229C–30A on Boreas and Oreithyia; *Republic* 378B–E), and even as attracted by it in his youth; but later he abandons it as laborious and inefficient, in favor of a more general dismissal of the value of the interpretation of poetry (by poets or anyone else). One could further compare his view of inspiration as irrational, for example, in the *Ion* and in the *Phaedrus*.<sup>479</sup>

I certainly agree with Obbink, Brisson, Struck, Kahn, and others quoted above insofar as it is clear that Plato was critical of and rejected the popular method of *allegoresis* present among many of his contemporaries. If the *Protagoras* is our guide, this standard approach entailed pompous word-parsing over intended meaning rather than an open-ended use of enigmatic language as a bridge for contemplating the limits of human knowledge and our desire for divine understanding. It is still entirely possible that Plato embraced *allegoresis* under a different approach, and I find claims which assert a wholesale rejection of allegory by Plato to be drawing premature conclusions from evidence which only points toward a criticism of *certain kinds of allegoresis*.

Notably, the later Platonists vehemently argued that Plato did embrace allegory.<sup>480</sup> Though Plato clearly does criticize some manifestations of *allegoresis* among the educated elite of his day, he also takes it up himself at numerous points. The eschatological myth at the end of the *Phaedo*, a dialogue laced with Pythagorean and Orphic cult symbolism, is an allegorizing of the poets’ mythologies regarding the underworld and its relation to the cosmos. While it seems Plato

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<sup>477</sup> Luc Brisson, *How Philosophers Saved Myths: Allegorical Interpretation and Classical Mythology*, trans. By Catherine Tihanyi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>478</sup> Brisson, *How Philosophy Saved Myths*, 27

<sup>479</sup> Obbink, “Early Greek Allegorists,” 17.

<sup>480</sup> See, for example, Proclus’ 5<sup>th</sup> essay on Plato’s *Republic*, wherein Proclus discusses various modes of allegory and explicates Plato’s own views as accepting some, but rejecting others.

rejects the possibility that the poets know of and intentionally place hidden wisdom that an initiate can uncover through *allegoresis* in their works, his treatment of allegory in the dialogues is still closer to the cultic use than that of the rationalizing approach. The prevalence of Orphic reference in Plato's text has been noted recently in the work of Nightingale, who remarks that

[T]hroughout the *Phaedo* which has many references to the Orphics... Plato uses "purification" and "release" in terms of the Orphic belief that the soul gets released from ancestral sin through purification and initiation. The reader will miss the religious resonance of these terms if he or she has not studied Orphism. The matter is made worse because Plato rarely mentions the Orphics explicitly; rather, he alludes to a ritual or doctrine without saying "these are Orphic." Since the Athenians had a fairly good grasp of Orphism, they could easily comprehend these references. To cite one more example, Plato often refers to the Orphic claim that the body is a "prison for the soul." One can only understand this idea properly if one learns the rich Orphic myths about the human soul and its fall into the body.<sup>481</sup>

The allegory of the cave also borrows from the traditions of Orphic and Eleusinian mystery cults in telling an inverted tale of *Katabasis*.<sup>482</sup> The *Republic* as a whole is absolutely rife with references to the mystery cults, starting from the very first lines of Socrates, who has been praying to Bendis, a Chthonic goddess.<sup>483</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion*, 15.

<sup>482</sup> In "Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus," Charles Kahn seems to think that Plato was against Orphism. I think that this can only be true to a very limited point. While I take the *Republic* to be a clear inversion of the Orphic hymn of *Katabasis*, this does not amount to a rejection of allegory, or mystagogy, but rather a kind of co-opting of Greek mystery religion and a substitution of philosophy in its stead. However, this substitution introduces a level of syncretism between cultic practice and philosophy wherein Plato clearly still thinks of philosophy in religious terms (it is knowledge of the Forms catalyzed through erotic philosophy which brings salvation, as opposed to other mystagogic rituals in the cults) and still thinks that certain cultic practices have philosophical uses. See, for example, the relevance of erotic initiation in cultic practices, as well as mantic and poetic activities all of which are referenced by Plato in cultic terms, but re-appropriated as if philosophy were the mystery cult in question). In other words, Plato doesn't reject that which is associated with the mystery cults (the allegorical, oracular, mystagogic, erotic, etc.), instead, he posits philosophy as a separate, and perhaps even compatible mystery cult in its own right.

<sup>483</sup> The analogy between the mysteries at Eleusis and philosophy appears to have been made clearly by Plutarch, a Middle Platonic thinker, who parallels the singing of the Hierophant within the *Telesterion* and the crowd outside with philosophical initiation: "Just as initiands at first push against one another noisily and shout, but when the sacred matters are enacted and displayed, pay attention, awestruck and in silence, so too at the very entrance to philosophy you will notice considerable noise and bold conversation, as some push rudely and forcefully toward repute, but once inside (i.e., once gaining mastery [of philosophy]) and beholding a great light, just as when the *Anaktoron* is opened, one adopts a different attitude, silence and awe, and with humility and control follows the argument as if a god." (*De prof. Virt.* 81D-E translated by Kevin Clinton, quoted in Kevin Clinton, "Epiphany in the Eleusinian Mysteries," 91). While Plutarch is writing much later than Plato, that he made this connection indicates

Therefore, what Plato seems to reject about allegory in cultic use is the assumption that the poets intended the *huponoia* themselves, that the hidden wisdom comes from their own wisdom when, for Plato, it can only be divinely inspired. As Brisson points out:

poets were looked upon as initiates to whom a truth belonging to a different level of reality has been transmitted, which poets in turn transmit to those worthy of it. This mode of transmission involves the use of a coded discourse, a discourse with a double meaning, one inscribed into the action of secrecy, and in which everything is expressed through enigma and symbols. Poets were no longer philosophers in spite of themselves but theologians striving to cautiously transmit a truth to which philosophy provides a direct access.<sup>484</sup>

In essence, the allegorical approach that Plato criticizes is merely a kind of dressed-up practical wisdom wherein the poets “really meant” something beyond the literal meaning, but if one is good at parsing their intended meaning, she can uncover it and gain the wisdom hidden therein. Plato could not have been unaware of the initiatory underpinnings of such an approach, for, as Struck notes, “the allegorical approach shares conceptual tools with other well-attested fields of interpretive inquiry in the ancient world, including divination, magic, religious rite, and certain traditions of esoteric philosophy.”<sup>485</sup> Thus, instead of the popular approaches, Plato appropriates the initiatory power of poetic language to depict its use as a strategic tool to turn the soul of his interlocutors toward philosophy by highlighting the mediating function of such language to lay our ignorance bare and open us up to new possibilities in our thinking. Poetry lends itself to this approach without requiring one to attribute knowledge to the poets. This enigmatic use of *allegoresis* embraces the potential for several different meanings to be present in a poetic utterance all at once. In other words, the poetic form itself lends a kind of multi-vocal, enigmatic quality that is useful in and of itself regardless of authorial intent.

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that seeing philosophy as a practice involving parallels to cultic mystagogy has historical basis in the Platonic tradition.

<sup>484</sup> Brisson, “How Philosophers Saved Myths,” 2.

<sup>485</sup> Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 4.

Plato leans toward a mystagogical kind of allegorical reading in which the divinely inspired poetic text has a living quality that continually stirs up our intuitions of the divine. Unlike the cultic practitioner who attributes a static and conscious knowledge to the poet, Plato treats the initiatory power of the poet's words as something obtained in the moment, often as part of a living conversation wherein the interlocutors examine the poetic language in a new way. Thus, the initiatory power of the poetic content to elicit an awareness of the gap between human and divine realms and understandings is not dependent on authorial intent but on how poetic language itself stirs the soul to reconsider things in creative and non-literal ways. Brisson notes that myth is given this living quality through *allegoresis*: "Allegory enabled the constant adaptation and interpretation of myths to fit the context in which they were received. Because of this, allegory cannot be relegated to the level of a marginal, slightly ridiculous phenomenon. It made it possible for myths to survive."<sup>486</sup> Plato was aware of this possibility of maintaining a living meaning for poetic material through shifting allegorical interpretation; this interpretation relied less on the poet's intended meaning and more on the usefulness of the poetic content for the soul of a particular hearer and in a specific context. In this way, there is no need to determine the "intended meaning" of the poet herself, for the revelation might change from person to person and place to place.

Accordingly, Plato's Socrates picks up different poets and myths and transforms them into philosophical messages depending on who he speaks with. With Phaedrus, the lover of beautiful speeches and those who make them, he spins an erotic tale about the winged soul. With Glaucon, the politically motivated young man whom Socrates must lead into learning about metaphysics "the long way," he gives an analogy between the city and the soul, an allegorical tale of the soul

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<sup>486</sup> Brisson, "How Philosophers Saved Myth," 2-3.

coming to wisdom through education, and a chilling tale of eschatological judgement. For his beloved students on his deathbed, he sings a charming incantation about the beauty of a world above this one and encourages them to shun the fear of death. For each of these examples, the allegorical approach employs elements of standard mythology according to Homer, Hesiod, and more. Still, it uses them in tandem with a philosophical discussion meant to turn the soul toward divine truth. The allegorical content thereby functions as a kind of mystagogical charm, inviting the participants to deeper contemplation once the discussion is over.

However, the dialogues only take up *allegoresis* with some caveats. According to Struck, “allegorists, uniquely among classical readers, see in poetry the promise of conveying complete and fundamental truth.”<sup>487</sup> While I argue that Plato certainly sees poetry as conveying fundamental truth, what it conveys is never complete. Poetry alone can never give enough to get us all the way to the finish line on the road to truth and knowledge; its role is part of a more extensive journey for the philosopher and not an end in itself. When Struck states that “allegorism reveals the literary- critical impact of one of the best attested popular views of the poets, that the poet is a kind of prophet,”<sup>488</sup> I think Plato would agree with one crucial qualification: if by “prophet” we mean one who interprets the oracle’s words, the poet is not a prophet but an oracle or seer.<sup>489</sup> We can see that Plato would reject the notion that the poets intended to insert *huponoia* into their works. Yet, this rejection does not preclude the possibility that the works contain such, admittedly less fixed, *huponoia* nonetheless. In the *Cratylus*, the language of “name-giver” and “name-user” can arguably tie into the connection between oracle and prophet, poet and philosopher. As Kahn remarks:

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<sup>487</sup> Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 4.

<sup>488</sup> Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 4.

<sup>489</sup> See *Timaeus* 72a-b.

in the [Derveni] papyrus text Orpheus is said to have named things in virtue of his knowledge of the nature of mankind (col. XXII. 1-2). But the poet speaks in riddles, and our commentator is needed to interpret them (col. Iii. 5-6, and *passim*). As one author has recently remarked, ‘Orpheus is the wise namegiver, and the commentator is the equivalent of Socrates’.<sup>490</sup>

Since Socrates approaches his etymological survey with explicit references to Homer, Hesiod, and Orpheus, we can conclude that the name-givers are the poets. The name-user, he tells Hermogenes, is the dialectician/philosopher.<sup>491</sup> But given all this, Plato’s complaint with those like the author of the *PDerveni* and with the Orphic tradition of *allegoresis* in general is not their use of the poets as initiatory sources of divine truth, but rather their ascription of knowledge to the poet himself. Hence, Plato’s repeated acknowledgment and respect for the oracular, erotic, and divinely inspired as legitimate remains consistent with his claims regarding the lack of actual knowledge possessed by the poets and seers.

The fact that Socrates sets up the dialectician as the “purifier” of the name-giver/poet corroborates the fact that he does not reject poetry as divinely inspired; he rejects the idea that the poets are polymaths but does not reject their works as sources of oracular wisdom. Essentially, the poet is the oracle or seer, and the philosopher is the prophet or interpreter. The error lies in thinking that the oracle knows what precisely is hidden in her message and assuming that she can reduce the content to propositional claims rendered in plain language. If this were possible, then oracular or poetic language would not have a unique function in the first place. Suppose, however, that one grasps the danger and ambiguity that attends the oracular and poetic. In that case, the careful prophet/philosopher can engage in *allegoresis* and does so in a manner that keeps the text alive and philosophically fertile. The popular allegorist had to treat the text as a dead relic of a priestly wise person and hope to uncover what they really meant. In contrast, the

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<sup>490</sup> Kahn, “Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus?”, 61. The unnamed “author” is Baxter (1992).

<sup>491</sup> *Cratylus* 390c-e.



Platonic allegorist treats the text as a living, moving thing that always spills over and represents more than we can say in a given moment, but only because it is a different text each time we approach it. This life is due to the persistence of a divine presence in it, as opposed to the hidden teachings of a now-dead human.

To conclude, as evidenced by references to *huponoia* and Socrates' treatment of attempts to rationalize mythology or parse the poets' words to uncover the intended meaning by educated elites, Plato's Socrates expresses serious concerns regarding some uses of *allegoresis*. Nevertheless, he does not reject all approaches to it. Indeed, the enigmatic treatment of the poets' words is a good candidate for an alternative interpretive strategy to literalism and popular *allegoresis*, for it makes use of the very nature of poetry as multi-vocal, ambiguous, and non-literal to uncover a gap between our articulated understandings of appearances and the reality that underlies them. Enigmatic *allegoresis*, importantly, does this without attributing intentional, consciously held polymathy to the poets. Therefore, having rejected the notion that poetry contains practical wisdom as dangerous and untenable and having denied the idea that wise people sit around and try to figure out what the poets "really meant" as hidden wisdom, Socrates still points toward a third option wherein poetry can be allegorized, but must be done so with both the proper approach, attitude, and understanding of what it is and what it is not.

## VI. Conclusion: The Rebirth of Poetry in the *Republic*

Crucially for this study, the passages in the *Republic* wherein the poets are banished are not the end of poetry's story for Plato; he actually ends the conversation in Book X with the suggestion that "if the poetry that aims at pleasure and imitation has any argument to bring forward that proves it ought to have a place in a well-governed city, we at least would be glad to

admit it, for we are well aware of the charm it exercises.”<sup>492</sup> Therefore, Socrates and his interlocutors conclude that they will “allow [poetry’s] defenders, who aren’t poets themselves but lovers of poetry, to speak in prose on its behalf and to show that it not only gives pleasure but is beneficial both to constitutions and to human life.”<sup>493</sup> One may recall that Socrates seems to be a “lover of poetry” himself.

Socrates’ initial comments on poetry are importantly conditioned by his interlocutors’ own assumptions about poetry and default methods of reading it. As Jill Gordon notes, “in painting their picture of the advantages of living the unjust life, Glaucon and Adeimantus rely almost exclusively on the poets, citing them repeatedly.”<sup>494</sup> However, in using the poets to support their points, they assumed readings that mined poetry for concrete and intentional claims made by polymathic experts. Consequently, it stands to reason that Socrates directs what he has said thus far at how his interlocutors understand and use poetry for their purposes. In Book X, though, Socrates introduces the idea that their conclusions could change if they approach poetry from another angle.

This puzzling ending corroborates what has gone before by demonstrating that Plato may yet be disposed positively toward poetry, that he would like to see it redeemed, and that he acknowledges its power and appreciates it, describing it as a beloved who may or may not be good, but is desperately yearned for nonetheless. Again, Plato is hardly a puritan with no time for aesthetic experiences. He reveals himself to be a lover of them. The passage from Book X indicates that what has gone before in the *Republic* regarding poetry may be undone, that one may carve a new path between poetry and philosophy, and that poetry may aid the philosopher’s

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<sup>492</sup> *Republic*, 607c-d.

<sup>493</sup> *Republic*, 607d-e.

<sup>494</sup> Gordon, *Turning Toward Philosophy*, 74. Gordon offers ample textual support for this claim. See 361b, 363a-b, 363c, 364d, 364e, and 365c.

soul after all. The possibility of carving a new path demonstrates that the problem up until this point is not with poetry in every case but with the approach to poetry assumed by Socrates' interlocutors.

Hence, Socrates banished the previous *approaches* to poetry, literalists, and certain species of *allegoresis*, not poetry itself. A few things support this conclusion. First, if Plato is against multi-vocal, imitative works, then his own works would be ejected from the noble city as well (including the *Republic* itself), for, as a writer of dialogues, he frequently speaks in the voice of others, and not always in the voices of virtuous persons (Alcibiades, for example). Additionally, Harold Tarrant has done significant stylometric work to demonstrate that it was common (within the tragic tradition especially) that characters represented different personalities and spoke in different voices or registers depending on the dramatic content from moment to moment. For example, he states that "Choral odes, or lyric exchanges with other actors or chorus, will involve a vocabulary that is further from the everyday language of Athens and employs non-Attic forms, especially Doric."<sup>495</sup> Additionally, highly "emotional passages, such as a lament, or Cassandra's grotesque marriage-dance at Euripides *Troades* 308-41, will result in variation of metre and a corresponding variation in diction."<sup>496</sup> One might suggest that Plato's concerns were not only that poetry (to which tragedy belonged for the Greeks) presented a multiplicity of voices in terms of individual characters but even concerning varying emotional registers and dramatic contexts. However, Tarrant has also demonstrated that *Plato himself employs these changes of register*, modifying Socrates' "voices" based on the dramatic narrative of the dialogues themselves.<sup>497</sup>

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<sup>495</sup> Harold Tarrant, "Socrates' Other Voices," 509.

<sup>496</sup> Tarrant, "Socrates' Other Voices," 509.

<sup>497</sup> See Tarrant, "Socrates' Other Voices," 507-23.

Further, one should be skeptical of the argument against poetry based on *mimesis*.

Scholars like Catherine Collobert argue that Plato must reject poetry because it is mimetic, and mimetic productions are merely copies, not actual things. According to Collobert

[t]his assertion is justified regarding the Platonic hierarchy of reality which descends from the more real to the less real thing, namely from the Form through appearances (*phainomena*) to image (*eidōlon*). The Platonic ontological scale leads him to define *mimēsis* as a copy of appearances... The consequences are twofold: poetry is not a true discourse and is not even an imitation of the truth.<sup>498</sup>

Collobert's claims here operate under the assumption that mimetic works must be useless because they are not the real thing. While Collobert bases this argument on Plato's metaphysical schema, it is actually Plato's metaphysical schema that calls it into question. If Collobert were correct, Plato would be like the later Cratylus, who wagged his finger and said nothing. Instead, Plato puts numerous intentional poetic accounts meant to produce *images* of the truth into the mouth of his beloved teacher. The allegory of the Cave, the Myth of Er, the eschatological myth at the end of the *Phaedo*, the entirety of the *Timaeus*, the birth of Eros in the *Symposium*, and so on, all serve as *mimetic* accounts meant to convey the truth *through images*.

It is one thing to claim that Plato rejects certain forms of *mimesis*, such as the imitative but inaccurate *technē* attributed to the poets when read literally. However, the careful reader of Plato cannot say that Plato rejects *mimesis* entirely, for he employs it extensively. Collobert focuses on Plato's rejection of technical *mimesis* when asking: "[w]hat, then, does poetry imitate? Plato answers: past human deeds... [P]oetry is the song, namely the image of human and divine deeds, i.e., appearances... and the Forms are those of virtue... Unable to attain the Form of justice, Homer falls short of reproducing it through his heroes' deeds."<sup>499</sup> Yet, Collobert's point only stands if Plato's critique assumes that the only thing poetry could be good

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<sup>498</sup> Collobert, "Poetry as Flawed Reproduction," 52.

<sup>499</sup> Collobert, "Poetry as Flawed Reproduction," 52-53.

for is reproducing depictions of human history. Nevertheless, Plato's critique is actually directed at such an assumption and not at poetry in all cases. Plato criticizes those who think poetry is what Collobert presents it as, which is a reproduction of historical or mythical events that is presumed to be accurate in its presentation of various *technai*. There are, nevertheless, other ways to think of poetry that avoid the criticisms of mimetic *pseudo-techné* offered in the dialogues.

Crucially, Plato gives us much of his philosophical material through imitative images that function precisely to point beyond what they imitate. To be sure, *eikasiai* are problematic when valued for their own sake in the soul who craves constant sensory pleasures with no reference to the Good. However, they can also be treated as religious objects. When comparing the philosophers to the lovers of sights and sounds, Plato's Socrates uses the language of *theoria*, and in this context, sensible images take on a more positive identity. As Nightingale explains:

For the Greeks, "*theoria*" (noun) or "*theorein*" (verb) referred to a practice in which pilgrims (*theoroi*) made journeys to sanctuaries and religious festivals to see sacred objects and spectacles. When the Greeks attended these festivals, the objects and events they saw were sacralized by a series of rituals. This led them to engage in "ritualized visualization": they saw statues, temples, and events in the sanctuary as sacred and replete with divinity. In some cases, a god could manifest its divine presence in a statue.<sup>500</sup>

Furthermore, Nightingale notes that "Plato regularly claims that the philosopher 'theorizes' the Forms. The word *theorein* means 'to see or spectate,'" and Nightingale further notes that

in the *Republic*, Plato compares the philosophers to spectators at religious festivals. He likens 'the lovers of sights and sounds' to the 'lover of wisdom.' Socrates describes the lovers of sights and sounds as people who 'run around to all the Dionysian festivals, never leaving a single one out, either in the towns or in the cities' (475d). He identifies the lovers of sights and sounds, then, as pilgrims (*theoroi*) who journey to religious festivals of Dionysus to see (*theorein*) rituals and spectacles. Through ritualized visualization, the *theoros* sensed the presence of the god in his or her statue or in some

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<sup>500</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion*, 21.

other manifestation... By comparing the philosopher to spectators at Dionysian festivals, then, Plato identifies philosophy as a mode of sacred spectating.<sup>501</sup>

Given that poetry would have been a central feature of the “sights and sounds” of religious festivals, Nightingale’s analysis of *theoria* brings out a way in which the philosopher might engage with the previously banished, pleasure-giving, mimetic poetry differently and positively. To the philosopher, the image quality of poetry can function as a sacred object that is imbued with the divinity of its source (a Form, a god, and so on). In this way, poetic images have a profound ability to enable the philosopher to recollect and commune with Being, the realm of Forms, and, beyond it, the Good. Thus, we cannot reject poetry purely based on its imitative nature, for imitation can point us away from the actual objects of knowledge, but it can also point us toward them.

It is unlikely that if he really believed they were so worthless, he would persist in quoting them so consistently throughout his body of work. In sum, Plato breaks most of the rules he sets out for poetry in the *Republic*, an irony of which he was undoubtedly aware. In light of these difficulties in taking Plato at face value in the *Republic*, and in light of his hints in Book X of a way back to poetry, it is clear that Plato is inviting us to grapple with issues of poetic interpretation. Yet, he is not outright rejecting the value of poetry in all cases. Book X demonstrates that what has been said so far in the *Republic* is only the beginning of the problem and is hardly meant as an answer. Socrates’ remarks show that Plato has hope for another approach to poetry, but they also hint at the possibility that he already has another method in mind. Socrates’ remarks thereby invite the reader to play with what this alternative approach might be. If we take this invitation seriously, Book X of the *Republic* is not the end of the story of poetry. Instead, it is just the beginning.

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<sup>501</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion*, 21-22.

### Chapter III: *Daimonic Poetry*

#### I. Introduction

Let us pause to take stock of the picture painted by this study so far. Chapter One argued that Plato's dialogues portray both reason and *daimonic* activities as mutually inclusive and important parts of the philosophical life. Plato's Socrates relies on various dialectical methods to persuade his interlocutors and pursue the truth. Nonetheless, he also employs myth, prophecy, mystagogy, divination, and poetry to "charm" the souls around him, and his own soul, into the steadfast pursuit of divine wisdom. Chapter Two contextualized the seemingly negative remarks on poetry in Plato's work, focusing specifically on the *Republic*. When historically situated, Socrates' seemingly negative remarks on poetry amount to a critique of particular approaches to poetry and not of poetry in all cases. Furthermore, the discussion of poetry in Book X of the *Republic* indicates that there may be another way to understand poetry that allows it to remain in the *Kallipolis*. The treatment of enigma in the dialogues, a method popular with the allegorists, also pointed to a viable alternative method of interpreting poetry in contrast to the rejected literalist approach and some versions of *allegoresis*. Enigma, in particular, enables poetry to bridge a gap between the divine stability of the forms and the motion of the sensible world. Accordingly, the study has, so far, established the following: (1) Plato accepts *daimonic* experiences and activities as part of the philosophical life, and they can play an edifying role in that life; (2) Plato critiques popular approaches to the interpretation of poetry which involve either reading it at face value or reading it as a repository of hidden knowledge that the poets themselves possess; and (3) the argument of Plato's Socrates allows for the possibility that there are other ways of interacting with poetry, such as enigmatic or mystagogic approaches that reveal the human's place in the cosmos.

Accordingly, two questions remain. First, can poetry be included in the category of the *daimonic*, thus demonstrating it can also aid in the ascent of the philosophical soul? Second, if poetry is *daimonic*, what happens to the problem of poetry in Plato? Consequently, the present chapter endeavors to show that we can understand poetry as *daimonic* in the Platonic corpus and that this reading brings some resolution to the problem of poetry by enabling the reader to see in what way Plato can both value poetry and still be aware of its dangers. In short, understanding poetry as *daimonic* does much to resolve the apparent contradiction between Socrates' descriptions of poetry as divinely inspired and his apparently negative remarks about its dangers; both treatments of poetry are compatible with one another under the *daimonic* reading. To reach these conclusions, this chapter first examines Plato's early dialogue, the *Ion*, in which Socrates claims that the poets are inspired while also critiquing their presumed knowledge of *technai*. However, one can give an ironic reading of the *Ion*, and any other passage in Plato that references divine inspiration, that holds that Socrates' remarks concerning the divine inspiration of poetry are not serious. Instead, this chapter argues that such ironic readings are neither methodologically sound nor necessary. Instead, this chapter takes up an unironic reading of the *Ion* that interprets both Socrates' claims about the divine inspiration of poetry and his criticisms of rhapsodes and poets both seriously and as compatible with one another. Next, the chapter turns to read poetry in the *Ion* through the lens of the *daimonic* as described in the *Symposium*; this paralleling of texts supports the view that Plato presents poetry in the *Ion* as *daimonic*.

The *daimonic* understanding of poetry reveals how poetry can be divinely inspired and therefore edifying for the soul, but also dangerous. The danger, though, lies not in the inspired language itself, but rather in specific approaches to interpreting it that do not sufficiently respect the enigmatic nature of poetic speech. *Daimonic* poetry is either edifying or dangerous in the same



way as the utterances of the Delphic oracle, which is to say that the danger lies in whether or not the interpreter has sufficiently been humbled under the Delphic maxim, “know thyself.” The danger, though, is not an essential component stemming from the inspiration but is an accidental reality that emerges from human imperfection. Ergo, some of Socrates’ remarks, on the one hand, speak to the essential nature of whatever is divinely inspired; they validate poetry as beneficial for the soul’s ascent. On the other hand, some of Socrates’ remarks on poetry warn of the danger for humans who are not careful enough when they proclaim what they think the poets’ words *really mean*. Therefore, both sets of remarks from the Platonic corpus are commensurable with one another under a coherent approach to poetry as *daimonic*.

However, the *daimonic* nature of poetry only ameliorates the problem of poetry if the divine inspiration present in *daimonic* activities and experiences is always good. Otherwise, if divine inspiration can be harmful, then the problem of poetry collapses into the anti-poetry position because even Socrates’ apparently positive remarks on the inspiration of poetry need not be positive at all. Accordingly, Chapter Three also looks at Plato’s *Phaedrus*. Socrates’ first speech in that dialogue appears to be divinely inspired, and yet, upon the promptings of his divine sign, he tells Phaedrus that this supposedly inspired speech “was horrible... It was foolish, and close to being impious.”<sup>502</sup> If it is the case that the *Phaedrus* depicts an instance of “bad inspiration,” then the *daimonic* answer to the problem of poetry is in serious trouble. I argue, however, that a careful reading of the dialogue reveals that the inspiration of Socrates’ first speech in the *Phaedrus* is not bad. Instead, the inspiration actually corroborates the later promptings of Socrates’ *daimonion*.

Finally, Chapter Three concludes by revisiting the question of Plato’s negative comments on poetry and the problem of poetry itself with the *daimonic* interpretation of poetry in mind. The

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<sup>502</sup> *Phaedrus* 242d.

section argues that the dangers of *daimonic* poetry are similar to the risks present in the other *daimonic* activities that Plato names. All divine inspiration is good and edifying insofar as it comes from the divine, yet dangerous insofar as it requires the right kind of human reception and interpretation. Furthermore, Plato provides the reader with a model for participating in *daimonic* activities and experiences, including poetry, in his depictions of Socrates. Socrates is the true *daimonic* individual in that he can direct all forms of *daimonic* inspiration (poetry, *eros*, mystagogy, divination, and so on) toward their end: philosophy, which is a kind of *daimonic* activity in and of itself. The philosopher is fundamentally *daimonic* because she is always working to bridge the gap between the limits of human thought and the plenitude of divine wisdom. Socrates is the idealization of this *daimonic* philosopher because he shows us how all *daimonic* activities should ultimately point us toward philosophy.

## II. The *Ion*

When trying to resolve the problem of poetry, one needs to address Plato's *Ion*. The dialogue depicts Socrates in conversation with Ion, a famed Homeric rhapsode, who is returning from the festival of Asclepius, where he has just won first prize for his rhapsodizing.<sup>503</sup> The text investigates the rhapsode's, and by extension, the poet's, presumed expertise in terms of *techne*.<sup>504</sup> Ion espouses the view, discussed in Chapter Two, that Homer is an expert on everything included

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<sup>503</sup> *Ion* 530a-b.

<sup>504</sup> While I largely agree with Carlotta Capuccino's argument that the *Ion* is primarily focused on the character of the rhapsode over and above the poet (see Carlotta Capuccino, "Plato's *Ion* and the Ethics of Praise" in *Plato and the Poets*, edited by Pierre Destree and Fritz-Gregor Hermann (Boston: Brill, 2011), 63-92), I nevertheless submit that, via the transitive property which links both the poet and the rhapsode to the Muse's divine inspiration, and via the arguments which address Homer's own body of knowledge as a poet, claims in the dialogue regarding the knowledge, inspiration, and *techne* of the rhapsode also apply to the poet. If Ion is unqualified to speak on ship-building because he is a rhapsode and not a ship-builder, then Homer, too, lacks knowledge of ship-building via the same claim. Furthermore, poets and rhapsodes are not necessarily clearly delineated professions. The *Ion* primarily concerns the poetry of Homer because Ion is specifically a Homeric rhapsode. However, Plato calls what both Homer and Hesiod do wandering "around as rhapsodes" in *Republic* 600d, suggesting that there was not always a clear boundary between what the poets do and what rhapsodes do.

in his works. Ion believes, in turn, that he is also an expert in these subjects and that this polymathic knowledge enables him to speak beautifully and skillfully on Homer over and above any other poets. Uncharacteristic of his persona in the early dialogues, Socrates is forthcoming about his own views on the matter. His line of questioning demonstrates that he rejects the idea that the poets and rhapsodes have any genuine knowledge of the various *technai* depicted in poetic works. Nevertheless, he states that the poets and rhapsodes *are* moved by divine inspiration, even going as far as to say that poetry is a “divine gift” (θεία μοίρα)<sup>505</sup> and that the gods speak through the poets in order to communicate their presence to humankind.<sup>506</sup> Thus, the dialogue presents the reader with what is probably the most focused discussion in Plato’s work on poetry and its cultural presence – personified through rhapsodes – in ancient Greece.<sup>507</sup>

At least two things grant the *Ion* particular importance for this present study. First, as outlined in the Introduction, the problem of poetry centers around an apparent disparity between what appears to be the derision of poetry, often based on the poets’ ignorance, and what appears to be praises of its divine status. While other dialogues note the ignorance of poets in tandem with poetry’s divinely inspired status, they do so in passing.<sup>508</sup> Conversely, the whole of the *Ion* focuses on both claims; Socrates proclaims that poetry is a product of the gods and the product of poets who have no actual knowledge. Socrates appears to praise poetry as a godly gift from one side of his mouth while undermining its educational and epistemic legitimacy from the other. In consequence, it is unclear how Plato wants the reader to view poetry overall; is it a divine and, therefore, good thing? Or, is poetry the useless handiwork of ignorant poets? Thus, the *Ion* is a

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<sup>505</sup> *Ion* 534c.

<sup>506</sup> *Ion* 534d-535a.

<sup>507</sup> Though the *Republic* is not as narrow in its focus on poetry, the length of its examination of poetry might give the *Ion* a run for its money.

<sup>508</sup> See, for example, *Apology* 22a-c and *Laws* 719c.

core text for this study, for it presents the reader with a work focused on the very tension at the heart of the problem of poetry. The second reason that the *Ion* is particularly important is that the passages on divine inspiration hold many similarities to passages on the *daimonic* that occur elsewhere in Plato's corpus, especially in the *Symposium*. Accordingly, this section analyses Plato's *Ion* in order to elucidate its treatment of the tension between the ignorance of poets and Socrates' claim that poetry is divinely inspired. Upon examination, the dialogue reveals that Socrates actually offers the view that divine inspiration is *a solution* to the core problem of the *Ion*, which is thus: how can we explain the experience of poetry as psychologically *moving* while also granting the logically necessary conclusion that the poets compose with no understanding of the content of their poetry? In answer, and similarly to Book X of the *Republic* as discussed in Chapter Two, Socrates invites Ion and the reader to reevaluate what poetry communicates to us by re-establishing its origins in the divine instead of situating it among human *technai*. In so doing, Socrates destabilizes a common ancient Greek method of understanding poetry and its role in culture and education. At the same time, he points toward a different way that we can encounter poetry. In the end, then, Socrates sincerely puts forth *both* claims: poetry is the product of human ignorance when read for its expert (in terms of *techne*) content, but it is *also* a divine gift and the product of inspiration when understood as something like an oracular utterance or prophecy that points beyond its mundane surface.

One should note, however, that the tension between the two theses on poetry – poetry as inspired and poetry as the production of ignorant poets – has led some scholars to interpret the more positive claim regarding poetry's inspiration as essentially ironic and, therefore, insincerely made.<sup>509</sup> Accordingly, the section following this one briefly examines the nature of Socratic irony

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<sup>509</sup> See, for example, Stern-Gillet, "On (mis)interpreting Plato's *Ion*," 169-201.

before arguing that one need not apply it to the *Ion* to render a coherent, responsible, and interesting reading of the dialogue. Having established the sincerity of Socrates' tandem claims to both the ignorance of poets and the inspiration of poetry, the chapter will then move to establish the parallels between the *Ion*'s treatment of poetry as inspired and the *daimonic* in Plato, focusing primarily on Diotima's description of the *daimonic* in the *Symposium*. Reading poetry as *daimonic* lends further coherency to how Socrates can maintain the poets' ignorance alongside their works' inspiration.

The discussion in the *Ion* centers around a common problem frequently targeted in Plato's early dialogues: the people who are seen as "experts," both by themselves and by the many, actually know nothing. A grave cause for worry is that these so-called experts and those who look to them for knowledge *do not know that they do not know*. Socrates is famously aware of the limits of his own knowledge, according to his famous interpretation of the Pythia's proclamation.<sup>510</sup> So, in his conversations with proclaimed experts, he takes them to task so as to disabuse them of their conceit to wisdom. Accordingly, the *Ion* begins with Socrates expressing admiration for *Ion*'s profession and the expertise it produces. He says:

You know, *Ion*, many times I've envied (ἐζήλωσα) you rhapsodes your profession. Physically, it is always fitting for you in your profession to be dressed up to look as beautiful as you can (τὸ σῶμα κεκοσμηθῆσαι ἀεὶ πρέπον ὑμῶν εἶναι τῇ τέχνῃ καὶ ὡς καλλίστοις φαίνεσθαι); and at the same time it is necessary for you to be at work with poets—many good ones (πολλοῖς καὶ ἀγαθοῖς), and with Homer above all, who's the best poet and the most divine (καὶ μάλιστα ἐν Ὀμήρῳ, τῷ ἀρίστῳ καὶ θειοτάτῳ τῶν ποιητῶν)—and you have to learn his thought (τὴν τούτου διάνοιαν ἐκμανθάνειν), not just his verses! Now that is something to envy (ζηλωτόν ἐστιν)! I mean, no one would ever get to be a good rhapsode if he didn't understand what is meant by the poet (τὰ λεγόμενα ὑπὸ τοῦ ποιητοῦ). A rhapsode must become the interpreter of the poet's thought for his audience (τὸν γὰρ ῥαψωδὸν ἐρμηνεῖα δεῖ τοῦ ποιητοῦ τῆς διανοίας γίνεσθαι τοῖς ἀκούουσι); and he can't do that beautifully (καλῶς) unless he knows what the poet means (λέγει ὁ ποιητής). Therefore, all of these things are worthy to be envied (ταῦτα οὖν πάντα ἄξια ζηλοῦσθαι).<sup>511</sup>

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<sup>510</sup> See *Apology* 21a-23b.

<sup>511</sup> *Ion* 530b-c. Translation amended from Woodruff.

In this passage, Socrates lists three reasons for his “envy” or “jealousy” (ζηλώω). From what we know of Plato’s body of work, in which non-material beauty supersedes physical beauty,<sup>512</sup> the list of “enviable” (ζηλωτόν) elements possessed by the rhapsode appears in ascending order of value or importance. First, Socrates admires Ion’s appearance.<sup>513</sup> Next, he admires the subject matter of Ion’s profession.<sup>514</sup> Finally, Socrates envies the kind of knowledge Ion must have to succeed in his vocation.<sup>515</sup> In sum, Ion is dressed up to look beautiful; Ion gets to study good and divine things; and, finally, to be a rhapsode, he not only gets to look beautiful and learn divine things, but he understands those divine things. Or, at least, he claims to understand them, and judging by his popularity, others agree that he does.

It is significant that Socrates draws attention to physical beauty as one of the enviable qualities of the rhapsode. Taking the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* as a framework here, perhaps Socrates is gesturing toward a hope that the physically beautiful Ion will lead the philosopher toward beautiful and divine ideas and, ultimately, to an understanding of them rooted in the form of the Beautiful itself. Socrates hopes that Ion’s beautiful outside is congruent with his knowledge of beautiful and divine things, for, as Diotima tells us,

one goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs: from one body to two and from two to all beautiful bodies, then from beautiful bodies to beautiful customs, and from customs to learning beautiful things, and from these lessons he arrives in the end at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty, so that in the end he comes to know just what it is to be beautiful.<sup>516</sup>

*If Ion were truly wise*, Socrates would envy him because the rhapsode’s career embraces all levels of the soul’s ascent: the image of beauty relates to thinking about beautiful and good ideas,

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<sup>512</sup> See *Symposium* 210a-e.

<sup>513</sup> *Ion* 530b.

<sup>514</sup> *Ion* 530b-c.

<sup>515</sup> *Ion* 530b-c.

<sup>516</sup> *Symposium* 211c-d.

eventually resulting in true knowledge of the forms of the Beautiful and the Good themselves. *If* Ion really did possess the knowledge of good and divine things, then his physical beauty could serve as a bridge, drawing in the souls of his hearers and inviting them into the pursuit of a much greater beauty. However, skipping ahead a bit, Ion's subsequent conversation with Socrates reveals that the bard does not have the knowledge he claims. Like with other experts (such as Euthyphro), Socrates questions Ion, revealing that, while Ion has the right look and a compelling air of authority that leads people to ascribe wisdom to him, he actually knows nothing of what he claims. The rhapsode's beautiful physical shell houses nothing of substance, just as his claims to expertise are pomp and arrogance derived from a false understanding of how poetry comes to be and the kind of wisdom it contains. The superficial beauty of Ion's looks and so-called skills draws in his audience, but he cannot transmit something more to them.

We must go back to the beginning, though; the *Ion* centers around the eponymous character's claims that (1) he is the best of those who speak on Homer and that (2) he cannot speak so well on any of the other poets; these two claims prompt Socrates to delve into the nature and substance of the rhapsode's particular expertise. Ion states: "I think I speak more beautifully than anyone else about Homer; neither Metrodorus of Lampsacus nor Stesimbrotus of Thasos nor Glaucon nor anyone else past or present could offer as many beautiful thoughts about Homer as I can."<sup>517</sup> Socrates asks: "Are you so wonderfully clever about Homer alone—or also about Hesiod and Archilochus?"<sup>518</sup> Ion responds: "No, no. Only about Homer. That's good enough, I think."<sup>519</sup> Ion not only claims to be the best when it comes to speaking beautifully on Homer, but he goes as far as to say that his expertise extends *only* to Homer's poetry. Given that Ion presents rhapsody

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<sup>517</sup> *Ion* 530c-d.

<sup>518</sup> *Ion* 531a.

<sup>519</sup> *Ion* 531a.

as his “profession” (ἡ τέχνη)<sup>520</sup> and, therefore, a genuine skill or discrete body of knowledge, Socrates is understandably puzzled. What is it in Homer’s work that Ion is so “wonderfully clever about” such that Ion is an expert in that one poet but cannot extend that expertise to others?<sup>521</sup> Ion is laying claim to an odd sort of knowledge, and Socrates wants to understand what it consists of such that it is so narrowly circumscribed to Homer’s poetry alone. Painting with broad strokes, there are at least two basic claims Ion could make to explain his unique *techne* with respect to Homer. Ion could claim that he has expertise in the content of Homer’s work, or he could claim expertise in its form. In other words, the substance of Ion’s knowledge is either in what Homer says or in how Homer says it (or, of course, in both).

However, we should establish what Ion is *not* claiming to be the substance of his expertise. Ion claims to be able to offer “many beautiful thoughts about Homer”<sup>522</sup> and has “plenty to say” about the poet.<sup>523</sup> Similarly, Socrates says that it is Ion’s profession to “learn [Homer’s] thought, not just his verses,” to “understand what is meant by the poet,” and “to present the poet’s thought to his audience.”<sup>524</sup> From these points in the text, one might expect Ion’s skill to reside in the ability to render a sophisticated literary exegesis of Homer. In other words, it is tempting to think of Ion as doing what scholars of literature do today, which is to analyze and theorize about the author’s style and meaning beyond what lies at the surface of the text. Hence, we might think of a scholar examining a poet’s uses of metaphors, portrayals of certain tropes, or the potential for autobiographical self-insertion. What we do not do is think of the literature professor as an expert in various other subjects *because of* her expertise in a particular author, genre, or literary period.

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<sup>520</sup> See *Ion* 530c.

<sup>521</sup> *Ion* 531a.

<sup>522</sup> *Ion* 530d.

<sup>523</sup> *Ion* 532c.

<sup>524</sup> *Ion* 530c.



Instead, we might think of how the author symbolizes various things through descriptions of color, repeated phrases, the personification of a theme in a character, and so on. None of these things has to do with the accuracy of what the poet depicts in practical terms. In contrast, when Ion claims to have many thoughts on Homer, he is not talking about acting as a literary interpreter or theorist. He predominantly claims to have thoughts on the subject matter of Homer's work and its content. Ion makes his literal, practical understanding of Homer clear when he claims that he is not only the "best rhapsode in Greece" but also the best military general,<sup>525</sup> claiming that he learned this "too... from Homer's poetry."<sup>526</sup> Ion is not claiming to be a subtle and sophisticated literary exegete, parsing the complex symbolism and allegorical potential of Homer. Instead, he claims that his expertise lies in being an expert on all the *technai* that Homer writes about. Hence, in describing the rhapsode as knowing Homer's thought,<sup>527</sup> Socrates simply means that Ion can tell an audience what Homer says about things like generalship.<sup>528</sup>

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<sup>525</sup> *Ion* 541b.

<sup>526</sup> *Ion* 541b.

<sup>527</sup> *Ion* 530c.

<sup>528</sup> As to the question of whether or not the *Ion* argues that poetry is not a *techne at all*, the situation is complicated. Socrates clearly criticizes the idea that poetry and rhapsody are polymathic, but it may still be the case that he views them as still having a singular *techne* particular to themselves (presumably involving expertise in matters of meter, diction, performance, etc.). Hence, Ferrari argues that "Socrates does not actually deny that poetry and rhapsody are arts; he denies that what poets and rhapsodes say (as professionals) is said with art and understanding on their part" (Ferrari, "Plato and Poetry," 95). Halliwell, with reference to the *Apology* agrees, stating: [C]ontrary to many readings of the passage [on the poets in the *Apology*], Socrates does not deny poets *techne* or craft-knowledge altogether: he implies that they have a skill or craft of *poiësis* which is manifest in the verbal structures and textures of their works. What he questions is their possession of knowledge or wisdom of a more far-reaching kind, a kind which the poets' audiences might learn to bring to bear on their lives as a whole" (Halliwell, *Between Ecstasy and Truth*, 163). A similar approach is taken up in the *Phaedrus* wherein Socrates seems to grant a limited kind of technical knowledge to rhetoricians regarding the method of composing argumentative treatises, but he doesn't think this *techne* amounts to much in the big picture, and ultimately produces a kind of *pseudo-techne* with no real power. (*Phaedrus*, 266d-269c) Consequently, it seems that Ferrari and Halliwell are onto something. The *Ion* might accord some level of limited compositional or performative *techne* to poetry and rhapsody, but likely does not raise them to the level of a complete *techne*. A craft like medicine, which not only knows the basics of how to perform its tasks, but also how to aim all of them at a unifying good which draws the whole craft together stands in contrast to the *pseudo-techne* of poetry, rhapsody, and rhetoric. These latter activities might know how to compose or perform speech compellingly, but they have no unifying good under which their task is directed. Interestingly, Halliwell appears to think that the *Ion* does not say as much, claiming that "Socrates... seems to slip, without explanation, between different models of poetry as either a kind of secondary vehicle for other forms of expertise, or an art and expertise in its own right" (Halliwell, *Between Ecstasy and Truth*, 170-171). I diverge from Halliwell's reading of the *Ion* here, for Socrates has clearly delineated the two views. He first addresses and then rejects the idea that the

Let us look further at Ion's content-based claims to a *techné* concerning Homer. Early in the text, Plato demonstrates that Ion thinks of his expertise in terms of his grasp on the content of a polymathic Homer who accurately knew and depicted various *technai* in his poetry. Immediately after Ion claims to be an expert in Homer alone, the following exchange takes place:

SOCRATES: Is there any subject on which Homer and Hesiod both say the same things?

ION: Yes, I think so. A good many.

SOCRATES: Then, on those subjects, would you explain Homer's verse better and more beautifully than Hesiod's?

ION: Just the same Socrates, on those subjects, anyway, where they say the same things.

Socrates' first two questions and Ion's responses reveal that the bard sees his expertise on Homer as content-based, for when the content of Homer and another poet overlap, Ion's abilities as a rhapsode remain intact. The inverse claim is that when the content of Homer and another poet diverge, Ion can speak on Homer's work but not on the other poet's. Ergo, Ion attributes his skill at rhapsodizing on Homer to the literal content of the poet's work, for when another poet says the same things about the same things, Ion can still perform his skill. Consequently, for Ion to claim expert abilities regarding Homer but not any of the other poets, there must be a unique body of knowledge present in Homer's compositions that is not present in the work of other poets. Ion sees his expertise as circumscribed by the particular set of *technai* present in Homer. However, when this polymathy incidentally overlaps with that of other poets', such as Hesiod, his expertise only accidentally extends into their work.

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poet's *techné* is a kind of polymathy, and he then addresses the idea the poet's *techné* is something else related to the skill of composition itself. The second view is affirmed as a claim in itself, but it is rejected as an explanation for the original problem of the dialogue, which was the question of Ion's unique experience of Homer. The second view is left open as a possibility, but I argue that it should be read alongside the discussion of *techné* in the aforementioned passage of the *Phaedrus*. Compared with a true *techné*, like medicine, poetry and rhapsody are only partial *technai*.

Ion claims to have technical knowledge via his study of Homer. He then tries to locate the substance of his skill regarding Homer alone by claiming expertise in the *technai* Homer depicts. However, if the bard's knowledge is really of various *technai*, even if gained through studying Homer, then his skill regarding Homer's work would only be accidental. Ion's true *techne* would be in the particular subjects Homer portrays. Therefore, the rhapsode should be able to speak equally well on these topics as they appear in any other poet and to comment with authority in general on the crafts he purports to have mastered through learning Homer's verse. Until 532c, Ion agrees that the conclusions drawn from Socrates' questions about various *technai* follow logically. Since Socrates' line of questioning relies on understanding Ion's claims as assertions of technical wisdom, and since Ion does not push back against this assumption, one can conclude that the bard sees his ability to explain and understand Homer as an ability to explain and understand the practical content of Homer's works. Ion does not claim to be an excellent literary theorist of Homer, but rather, Ion claims to be a good educator of the people through his ability to explain Homer's portrayals of various *technai*. Thus, it is unsurprising that Ion professes to be the best general in Greece because of his expertise in Homer. When Socrates asks him, "since you know the business of a general, do you know this by being a general or by being a good rhapsode?"<sup>529</sup> Ion replies, "I don't think there's any difference."<sup>530</sup> Ion claims that he is "the best [general] in Greece" because he "learned from Homer's poetry."<sup>531</sup> Ion admits to believing he has a particular *techne* because he has studied its presence in Homer's work; this admission demonstrates that he sees Homer's works as a repository for practical wisdom and reads them literally. Thus, from the beginning to the end of the dialogue, Ion argues that his expertise concerns the various *technai*

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<sup>529</sup> *Ion* 540d-e.

<sup>530</sup> *Ion* 540e.

<sup>531</sup> *Ion* 541b

present in the poets' works, and that this expertise not only accounts for his skill as a Homeric rhapsode, but also for his profession as a general. Much like the literalists discussed in Chapter Two, Ion thinks he can mine Homer for an education on essentially everything and that his education in Homer makes him wiser than all others.

It is apparent that Socrates' line of questioning targets the view that Ion's expertise is in the various *technai* presented in Homer's work. Socrates thereby points out that if one locates Homer's greatness in his knowledge of these subjects, then actual craftspeople in those same areas would speak on Homer best as opposed to rhapsodists like Ion. As Socrates puts it, "Take all the places where those two poets speak of divination, both where they agree and where they don't: who would explain those better and more beautifully, you, or one of the diviners if he's good?"<sup>532</sup> Ion agrees that one of the diviners would be superior in this instance. Socrates' rebuttal only works if Ion's content-based expertise is directed at the technical content of Homer specifically. As Halliwell puts it:

Socrates... proceeds on the basis that a good interpreter of poetry would need to be expert in each and every domain of knowledge (such as arithmetic and medicine) which has an independent existence outside poetry but might be reflected within its images and narratives of life. This presupposes that poetic subject matter is nothing but a collection of things each of which belongs to a specific domain of knowledge or expertise. That supposition makes absurd, however, the idea of being an expert interpreter of poetry as such: the interpreter would need to be expert in everything, since Socrates himself suggests that poetry can range across the affairs of the entire cosmos (from Olympus to Hades, 531c) in what might be called its world-picturing scope. But the supposition also makes poetry itself extremely problematic: either the poet would need to be a polymathic expert (a current idea explicitly mocked by Socrates in the *Republic*) or his work will be purely parasitic on all the existing domains of knowledge, its significance fragmenting into ersatz bits of other activities and lacking any coherent identity of its own.<sup>533</sup>

Socrates indeed proceeds on the basis that the rhapsode must know all the various areas of knowledge presented in the poet's work. However, Socrates' own view does not appear to be what

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<sup>532</sup> *Ion* 531b.

<sup>533</sup> Halliwell, *Between Ecstasy and Truth*, 170.

Halliwell lays out above. Instead, Socrates, who is actually rather forthcoming about his views later in the text, is taking up Ion's view and subjecting it to the *elenchus*. Socrates wants Ion to demonstrate how he can have such a strangely circumscribed *techne* or finally admit that he has no *techne* at all. Ion acknowledges that it is not the poet or the rhapsode who can best judge what a poet says on divination or mathematics, but rather, the diviner or the mathematician. Socrates pointedly directs his questions at driving the bard to see how, unless he is literally a craftsman in every single *techne* represented in Homer, his assertion of a Homeric *techne* cannot stand. On the reasoning pursued so far, Ion has a lesser claim to knowledge concerning the technical content of Homer than do craftspeople, which demonstrates the superfluity of his profession according to the logic of his own views.

Furthermore, Socrates points out that the poets do not actually have discrete bodies of knowledge in their works. Instead, they write on the same things. Socrates asks:

Does Homer speak of any subjects that differ from those of all the other poets? Doesn't he mainly go through tales of war, and of how people deal with each other in society—good people and bad, ordinary folks and craftsmen? And of the gods, how they deal with each other and with men? And doesn't he recount what happens in heaven and in hell, and tell of the births of gods and heroes? Those are the subjects of Homer's poetry-making, aren't they?<sup>534</sup>

In other words, in the abstract, it may work to say that one only speaks well about one particular poet because his expertise is limited to the expertise of that poet, but the reality of Greek poetry renders this null. The poets do not actually possess their own sets of *technai* as depicted in their works. They often write, more or less, on similar things, and Ion agrees that this is the case.<sup>535</sup> Yet, if the poets all write on the same general collection of *technai*, Ion has failed to explain why he can speak on Homer but not on the others. Furthermore, even if they write on different areas of

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<sup>534</sup> *Ion* 531c-d.

<sup>535</sup> See *Ion* 531d.

expert knowledge, any ability Ion would have to adjudicate differences between the poets when they do agree would have to come from *techai* he possesses outside of any particular knowledge of Homer. To know a subject is to be able to apply that knowledge in differing contexts, so he would not be limited to speaking on Homer's treatment of a particular topic. Accordingly, Ion's claim to a *techne* concerning Homer turns out to be a claim to various *technai* covering what Homer happens to depict. Yet, if his claim is true, then his abilities should apply to any work that represents those *technai*. Since the poets largely write on the same topics, Ion cannot explain his claim to knowledge regarding Homer but not regarding other poets.

Interestingly, Struck sees Ion as some kind of allegorist, yet the text does not support this claim. As discussed above, Ion does not unpack Homeric symbolism for his audience or explain the finer points of the poet's meter, allegorical potential, and significance for further abstract contemplation. Still, Struck reads the *Ion* as a criticism of *allegoresis*, stating: "It is rarely remarked that the view of the poet that Plato assumes to be common, and on which he heaps ridicule, is one particularly characteristic of allegorical readers. Ion is locked into the view of Homer the savant."<sup>536</sup> Ion certainly considers Homer to be a genius, but this point alone does not make him an allegorist. As Struck himself points out, *allegoresis* involves the apprehension of hidden meanings in the text that communicate something separate from what is given in a literal account. Both the allegorist and the literalist can think that Homer is a polymathic genius, but that does not render their approaches to him identical. Ion takes a literalist approach; the bard transmits the surface-level content of Homer to the audience, and, in so doing, he thinks he is also an expert in this surface-level material.

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<sup>536</sup> Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 43.

At 531d, Ion seems to make the argument that it is the aesthetic quality of Homer that separates him from the other poets. The rhapsode asserts that, while the other poets did compose on the same subjects as did Homer, “they didn’t do it in the *way* Homer did”; Homer, he argues, does it *better* (ἄμεινον).<sup>537</sup> The other poets may have spoken of the same *techne*, but Homer did so in some superior manner. At first blush, poor Ion appears to try to dodge the blow by appealing to the distinction between form and content. He could argue that, regardless of his expertise in the content of Homer’s work, the form of Homer’s poetry is aesthetically superior to that of the other poets. However, Socrates’ subsequent questions and Ion’s answers demonstrate that technical knowledge is still Ion’s focus. Socrates questions how Ion can judge the content of Homer’s work to be “better” if the bard does not have expert knowledge in all of the *technai* to begin with. Socrates’ rebuttal only works if Ion’s meaning is that Homer is more accurate in his representations than are the other poets, not more aesthetically capable. Socrates asks,

Now *you* claim that Homer and the other poets (including Hesiod and Archilochus) speak on the same subjects, but not equally well. *He’s* good, and they’re inferior... Now if you really do know who’s speaking well, you’ll know that the inferior speakers are speaking worse... So if we say that Ion is equally clever about Homer and the other poets, we’ll make no mistake. Because you agree yourself that the same person will be an adequate judge of all who speak on the same subjects, and that almost all the poets do treat the same subjects.<sup>538</sup>

In this passage, Socrates argues that the appeal to Homer’s superior writing can only be made by one who can speak equally well regarding “all who speak on the same subjects.” In other words, Ion can only know that Homer “does it better” if he knows all the subjects that all the poets commonly depict, and therefore judges Homer to be best in representing those subjects via a skilled comparison to the others. Ion could respond by rightfully observing that this rebuttal only succeeds if by “better” he meant “more accurate” and not “more aesthetically skilled.” In other words, Ion

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<sup>537</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>538</sup> *Ion* 532a-b.

could claim that the accuracy of Homer’s work is not the substance of his expertise at all, but that by “better,” Ion means Homer’s verse is poetically superior to others through its aesthetic qualities. However, Ion does not catch on to this potential rebuttal, indicating that he does think Homer’s superiority lies in the quality of the poet’s depictions and not in the aesthetic elements of his writing.

It is actually Socrates who anticipates the aesthetic argument, asking: “there is an art of poetry as a whole, isn’t there?”<sup>539</sup> Ion agrees. Yet, even if the bard were to appeal to Homer’s aesthetic superiority via form and not content, he would still need to possess a *techne* in poetic aesthetics that would apply to all the poets equally, as Socrates demonstrates.<sup>540</sup> Socrates levels the critique that a comprehensive knowledge of a particular skill entails being able to pick out both good and bad examples of that skill:

Well now, Ion, dear heart, when a number of people are discussing arithmetic, and one of them speaks best, I suppose someone will know how to pick out the good speaker... Will [the one who can pick out the good speaker on math] be the same person who can pick out the bad speakers, or someone else?<sup>541</sup>

Ion agrees that it would be the same person. To say that Homer has “better” poetic skill, Ion must actually have the *techne* of poetry too. However, if Ion had poetic *techne*, his ability to rhapsodize on Homer would extend equally to any other poet. Thus, Ion cannot claim a special *techne* in Homeric content, for that would involve expertise in all the *technai* depicted in Homer’s work, enabling the rhapsode to speak equally well on any poet who portrays those same subjects. Nor can Ion claim a *techne* in the form of Homeric poetry, for though that would involve Ion having just one *techne*, that of poetry, his grasp on poetic skill would still have to extend to all the poets.

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<sup>539</sup> *Ion* 532c.

<sup>540</sup> *Ion* 532c-533c.

<sup>541</sup> *Ion* 531d-e: οὐκοῦν, ὃ φίλην κεφαλὴν ἴων, ὅταν περὶ ἀριθμοῦ πολλῶν λεγόντων εἷς τις ἄριστα λέγη, γινώσεται δῆπου τις τὸν εὖ λέγοντα;



Consequently, Ion utterly fails to justify his claim to expertise in Homer alone. Similar to Euthyphro, then, Ion is unmasked as one who claims expertise but is unable to explain even the most basic element of his knowledge.

Ion takes up the view of poetry that Socrates derides in the *Republic*. Socrates connects the danger of poetry to the view of it as an accurate and educational vehicle for transmitting practical wisdom. Socrates states that “people say that poets know all crafts, all human affairs concerned with virtue and vice, and all about the gods as well.”<sup>542</sup> Given peoples’ view of the poets, when “a poetic imitator uses words and phrases to paint colored pictures” of *technai*,<sup>543</sup> people assume that “he must have knowledge of the things he writes about, or else he wouldn’t be able to produce it at all.”<sup>544</sup> The result is that people “don’t realize that [the poet’s] works are at the third remove from that which is and are easily produced without knowledge of the truth (since they are only images, not things that are).”<sup>545</sup> Accordingly, Ion’s ignorance doesn’t just make him ridiculous; it makes him dangerous. The rhapsode transmits the beautiful verses of the poets and speaks with authority on their meaning. In so doing, he sets himself up as the educator of the masses on everything from sea-faring to theology. Yet, he is actually encouraging people who keep their eyes fixed on images of images. He is providing them with a *pseudo*-education that prevents them from caring for their souls properly and seeking true knowledge through philosophy. He thus perpetuates the attitude among his hearers that they can immerse themselves in a world of beautiful images with no reference to a divine source, the Beautiful itself. Much like his physical appearance, rather than pointing the souls of his hearers toward a higher reality, his speeches on Homer can

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<sup>542</sup> *Republic* 598d-c.

<sup>543</sup> *Republic* 601a.

<sup>544</sup> *Republic* 598e.

<sup>545</sup> *Republic* 598e-599a.

lead his audience astray, causing them to think they have what they seek when they only have a shadow of it.

Nonetheless, Socrates has not necessarily criticized poetry itself (or even rhapsody). This dire state of affairs obtains only under Ion's present understanding of poetry and his own rhapsodizing as vehicles for polymathic practical wisdom. If one wishes to avoid the dangers in Ion's approach, another understanding of poetry needs to be advanced, and this is what Socrates does. When it comes time for Socrates to state his own views on the matter at hand,<sup>546</sup> he does so under the assumption that Ion's *experience* of Homer's poetry is valid; there is a reason why Ion feels so moved by Homer in particular and is not similarly inspired to speak on other poets. Ion has followed Socrates' questions, reluctantly consenting to the logic that shows that he cannot explain his expertise in Homer with the answers he has given thus far. Accordingly, the bard then exclaims in frustration:

Then how in the world do you explain what I do, Socrates? When someone discusses another poet I pay no attention, and I have no power to contribute anything worthwhile: I simply doze off. But let someone mention Homer and right away I'm wide awake and I'm paying attention and I have plenty to say.<sup>547</sup>

Ion's point here is supremely relatable. Who among us does not have a favorite poet, musician, or novelist whose words instantly engender a response not replicated in us by any other? Socrates could reply by arguing that there is nothing of substance behind Ion's touted experiences of Homer's work as particularly moving. If, according to the arguments from *techne*, Homer is a superfluous addition to a life searching for knowledge, then perhaps Ion simply likes Homer for reasons entirely reducible to subjective, personal taste. Socrates could argue that Ion's experience

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<sup>546</sup> He does so most straightforwardly at *Ion* 533d-535a and 535e-536d.

<sup>547</sup> *Ion* 532b-c.

of Homer, compared with his experience of other poets, is no more important than my preference for cream and sugar in my coffee instead of drinking it black.

Yet, Socrates does not dismiss Ion's experience by chalking it up to personal taste. Instead, he recognizes Ion's experience as real and indicative of a divine presence in the poet's words. While Ion is "powerless to speak about Homer by means of technical skill or professional knowledge,"<sup>548</sup> the rhapsode is nonetheless experiencing something profound, for Socrates tells him, "a divine power (θεία...δύναμις) moves you (σε κινεῖ), as if you were in the presence of the stone that Euripides calls 'magnetic.'"<sup>549</sup> Socrates is quite upfront in expressing his views on the matter, explaining to Ion that,

[T]hat's not a subject you've mastered – speaking well about Homer; it's a divine power that moves you, as a 'Magnetic' stone moves iron rings... This stone not only pulls those rings, if they're iron, it also puts power in the rings, so that they in turn can do just what the stone does – pull other rings – so that there's sometimes a very long chain of iron pieces and rings hanging from one another. And the power in all of them depends on this stone. In the same way, the Muse makes some people inspired herself, and then through those who are inspired a chain of other enthusiasts is suspended. You know, none of the epic poets, if they're good, are masters of their subject; they are inspired, possessed, and that is how they utter all those beautiful poems. The same goes for lyric poets if they're good.<sup>550</sup>

Ion is so inexplicably drawn to Homer because he is connected to the great chain suspended from the Muse. Thus, while Socrates denies that the rhapsode has a *techne*, Socrates nonetheless affirms that Ion really does experience Homer differently than he does the other poets. The difference is rooted in a real relationship linking the Muse to Homer and Homer to Ion. At no point in the *Ion*

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<sup>548</sup> *Ion* 532c, translation mine: τέχνη καὶ ἐπιστήμη περὶ Ὀμήρου λέγειν ἀδύνατος εἶ.

<sup>549</sup> *Ion* 533d, translation mine: θεία δὲ δύναμις ἢ σε κινεῖ, ὥσπερ ἐν τῇ λίθῳ ἦν Εὐριπίδης μὲν Μαγνήτιν ὠνόμασεν.

<sup>550</sup> *Ion* 533c-534a: ἔρχομαί γέ σοι ἀποφανόμενος ὁ μοι δοκεῖ τοῦτο εἶναι. ἔστι γὰρ τοῦτο τέχνη μὲν οὐκ ὄν παρά σοι περὶ Ὀμήρου εὖ λέγειν, ὁ νυνδὴ ἔλεγον, θεία δὲ δύναμις ἢ σε κινεῖ, ὥσπερ ἐν τῇ λίθῳ ἦν Εὐριπίδης μὲν Μαγνήτιν ὠνόμασεν, οἱ δὲ πολλοὶ Ἡρακλείαν. καὶ γὰρ αὕτη ἡ λίθος οὐ μόνον αὐτοῦς τοὺς δακτυλίους ἄγει τοὺς σιδηροῦς, ἀλλὰ καὶ δύναμιν ἐντίθησι τοῖς δακτυλίοις ὥστ' αὐτὸ δύνασθαι ταῦτόν τοῦτο ποιεῖν ὅπερ ἡ λίθος, ἄλλους ἄγει δακτυλίους, ὥστ' ἐνίοτε ὄρμαθος μακρὸς πάνυ σιδηρίων καὶ δακτυλίων ἐξ ἀλλήλων ἤρτηται: πᾶσι δὲ τούτοις ἐξ ἐκείνης τῆς λίθου ἡ δύναμις ἀνήρτηται. οὕτω δὲ καὶ ἡ Μοῦσα ἐνθέους μὲν ποιεῖ αὐτή, διὰ δὲ τῶν ἐνθέων τούτων ἄλλων ἐνθουσιαζόντων ὄρμαθος ἐξαρτᾶται. πάντες γὰρ οἱ τε τῶν ἐπῶν ποιηταὶ οἱ ἀγαθοὶ οὐκ ἐκ τέχνης ἀλλ' ἐνθεοὶ ὄντες καὶ κατεχόμενοι πάντα ταῦτα τὰ καλὰ λέγουσι ποιήματα, καὶ οἱ μελοποιοὶ οἱ ἀγαθοὶ ὡσαύτως.

is it denied that the rhapsode is divinely inspired through the same godly power inspiring Homer. Socrates proceeds under the assumption that Ion really is moved to speak on Homer more than on any of the other poets. Because he is in the grip of inspiration transmitted from the poet, he really does have a genuinely powerful effect on his audience. However, the power is not his own; it belongs to the divinity moving through him. Socrates thereby draws our attention to the difference between experience vs. expertise. Ion's experience is validated as authentic and indicative of something true about the nature of Homer's poetry, while Socrates destabilizes his claim to possess knowledge at the same time.

While Ion's *pseudo-technē* tells his audience nothing of shipbuilding, generalship, or politics, his experience nevertheless still reveals a truth about the connection between the gods and humanity. Unlike Ion's false expertise, his experience has the potential to do something valuable for his pursuit of knowledge. Namely, it alerts him to the truth of a divine reality that ever escapes the limits of his paltry understanding; Socrates points this purpose out when he states:

That's why the god takes their intellect away from [the poets] when he uses them as his servants, as he does prophets and godly diviners, so that we who hear should know that they are not the ones who speak those verses that are of such high value, for their intellect is not in them: the god himself is the one who speaks, and he gives voice through them to us.<sup>551</sup>

Socrates claims that the purpose of divinely inspired poetry is for us to know that the gods speak to us, that they communicate their presence through poets, oracle-chanters (τοῖς χρησμοδοῖς), and “godly seers (τοῖς μάντεσι τοῖς θείοις).” The function of these activities (two of which, as we will see below, are explicitly named as *daimonic*) is not to convey practical knowledge of human affairs and concerns. Instead, the gods communicate to us through these things in order to remind us that they are there, that there is more to the cosmos than our human concerns would have us believe.

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<sup>551</sup> *Ion* 534d.

Later in this study, we will examine one mechanism by which poetry can make humans aware of the gap between mortal and divine knowledge, as well as one way that poetry can help us bridge this gap. However, here it is enough to highlight what the passage quoted above reveals: the divine inspiration of poetry is functionally similar to oracular utterances and prophecies in that it is a medium through which divine reality makes itself known to mortal experience. The recognition of divine inspiration in poetry (and oracles and prophecy) is thereby an occasion for us to humble ourselves and acknowledge the distinction between the paltry human knowledge of various *technai* and the plenitude of divine wisdom, i.e., true knowledge.

Regardless of the potential revelatory power present in the poetry he loves, though, Ion still has a problem. The cause of his experience is located outside of himself, and it in no way corresponds to the possession of any real expertise on his part. Therefore, Ion's problem is twofold. First, he locates the primary use-value of poetry in its literal, practical content, and second, he does not recognize that his experience originates in a source outside of him. Thus, he draws out and teaches unreliable material and credits himself with a power that does not belong to him. Therefore, while a divine power does move in and through Ion, his ability to recognize all that it reveals is severely curtailed by his faulty assumption that he is the source of this power. Accordingly, Ion struggles to derive any real benefit from being a conduit of this power himself because he does not use it to care for his own soul and direct it toward true knowledge. He is also not in a favorable position to provide a benefit to his audience in terms of caring for their souls. Ion can powerfully influence his audience, but he doesn't know what to do with this influence apart from garnering praise simply for having it. As long as Ion claims that this power is a product of his own expertise and sees this expertise in terms of polymathy, he will continue to be dangerous. Without recognizing the external source of his inspiration, he will persist in divorcing it from its divine

source and attribute it to his own abilities. He will, therefore, continue to assume that Homer's works convey knowledge they do not (i.e., of technical subjects), and he will continue to miss the truth they *do* reveal (i.e., a revelation of divine reality and an invitation to humble oneself and resist the claim to having knowledge). In other words, as long as Ion persists in his claims of having expertise, he also persists in his failure to see that his *experience* is a call to pursue a greater form of knowledge.

Socrates' treatment of Ion's experience reveals a tension between the truth conveyed through the inspired beauty and power of what the poet writes and the truth of what the poet *knows*. On the one hand, the poet says many true things, but on the other hand, this content comes from divine inspiration, and the poet cannot necessarily explain it after the fact. Perhaps the poet who is also a philosopher can interpret her own works effectively. Still, the poet *qua* poet is much like an oracle who might render a true utterance but is not likely to know its meaning for the particular hearer. As Lisa Maurizio notes regarding the discrepancy between the truth of an oracular utterance or poetic work and the knowledge of the utterer or poet,

Judging from what Socrates says in the *Apology* and *Ion*, it seems that Socrates believes that while a rhapsode may sing of ship-building, for example, he cannot necessarily build a ship, nor does he even necessarily know anything about sailing. We may conjecture that when Socrates claims that seers do not know anything, he means something similar. Although seers may offer advice and prophesy about war, for example, they cannot lead an army, nor do they necessarily know anything about military strategy. The notion of possession seems to explain why a rhapsode, such as Ion, or a poet or a seer, can speak at length on a number of topics about which, when he is not reciting poetry, he appears to know nothing.<sup>552</sup>

Maurizio indicates that the truth of the poet's or rhapsode's words could lie in their practical content, but she argues that the truth of these depictions results from the inspiration of the speaker and not from his or her own actual knowledge. While Socrates rejects the idea that poetic works

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<sup>552</sup> Lisa Maurizio, "Anthropology and Spirit Possession: A Reconsideration of the Pythia's Role at Delphi" *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 115 (1995): 77.

really contain much truth concerning technical bodies of knowledge, Maurizio's overall point stands. The poets can get at truth, even if it is not the truth that they or their hearers think it is, without having any knowledge of this truth themselves. The Delphic Oracle, for example, made an accurate pronouncement regarding Socrates' wisdom, but she herself did not supply the interpretation of her words, nor was their meaning what it appeared to be at surface level. Ascertaining the precise way in which the Pythia's words were accurate required careful investigation on the part of Socrates, and he could not have reached his ultimate conclusion if he had overestimated his own knowledge.

The relevant takeaway from Maurizio's point is that Plato might still see value in poetry or oracular speech as divinely inspired while rejecting the idea that the poets or rhapsodes are knowledgeable or that the truth contained in their works is clear at face value. The substance of Socrates' denial of Ion's knowledge lies along the lines of Maurizio's observations, with the result that the *Ion* can both reject the knowledge of poets and rhapsodes and genuinely assert that they are divinely inspired in their work. In other words, the poets, like seers or oracles, have a legitimate job to do; they are conduits transporting divine speech to our ears. However, if we look to them for wisdom or technical knowledge about their own works, we are barking up the wrong tree, as Socrates notes – also in connection to seers – in the *Apology*.<sup>553</sup> Simply put, poets (and oracles) should not interpret their own works. Unless, of course, they are also philosophers.

Still, Socrates describes Ion using the word “*hermeneus*,” or “interpreter,” and just as Ion is an interpreter of the poets, so too are the poets interpreters of the gods. Rhapsodes, then, are

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<sup>553</sup> *Apology* 22b-c: “I took up those poems with which [the poets] seemed to have taken most trouble and asked them what they meant, in order that I might at the same time learn some thing from them... Almost all the bystanders might have explained the poems better than their authors could. I soon realized that poets do not compose their poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers and prophets who also say many fine things without any understanding of what they say. The poets seemed to me to have had a similar experience. At the same time I saw that, because of their poetry, they thought themselves very wise men in other respects, which they were not.”

“interpreters of interpreters” (ἐρμηνέων ἐρμηνῆς).<sup>554</sup> Does Socrates’ use of “*hermeneus*” not imply that one should see the poets and rhapsodes as exegetes of divine speech? Scholars such as Collobert argue that “*hermêneus*” implies an analytic power for poetic exegesis, leading her to argue that the poet and the rhapsode cannot be both inspired and a *hermenēs*, because the former involves the absence of reason while the latter requires its presence for analysis.<sup>555</sup> Collobert’s argument ignores the possibility that a poet or rhapsode could be possessed at the moment of composition or recitation and then be in their right mind for *post hoc* analysis, as would be the case of the poet *cum* philosopher.

Moreover, the meaning of *hermêneus* applied in Collobert’s claim is something of an anachronism; as Carlotta Capuccino explains, the “standard interpretation of... the rhapsodic activity described... relies on the *modern* meaning of the term *hermêneus*, *i.e.* ‘interpreter of the text,’ ‘exegete’.”<sup>556</sup> Nonetheless, the term’s use in Plato does not clearly support this more contemporary meaning. Capuccino offers several arguments against applying the modern definition of “exegete” to Plato’s use of *hermeneus*, and two are particularly helpful for the present study. First, she offers an argument from what she calls “semantic coherence,” pointing out that, in the case of the poet,

it is...clear from the context – the so-called *Platonic theory of inspiration* – that these terms [*hermêneus* and *hermêneuo*] have here a passive sense: the *hermêneus* at issue is a mere physical medium or transmission channel... the *hermêneus* cannot be an exegete, but is a mouthpiece or a mediator, whose passive task consists in offering to the god’s mind a material support.<sup>557</sup>

For example, at 534e, Socrates seems to emphasize the passive quality of the poet as *hermeneus* when he says “these beautiful poems are not human, not even from human beings, but are divine

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<sup>554</sup> *Ion* 353a, translation mine.

<sup>555</sup> See Collobert, “Poetry as Flawed Reproduction,” 45-46.

<sup>556</sup> Capuccino, “Plato’s *Ion* and the Ethics of Praise,” 67-68.

<sup>557</sup> Capuccino, “Plato’s *Ion* and the Ethics of Praise,” 68.



and from gods; that “the poets are nothing but interpreters of the gods (οἱ δὲ ποιηταὶ οὐδὲν ἄλλ’ ἢ ἐρμηνῆς εἰσὶν τῶν θεῶν), possessed by whoever possesses them (κατεχόμενοι ἐξ ὅτου ἂν ἕκαστος κατέχεται).”<sup>558</sup> The “nothing but” qualifier combined with the clarification that they are totally possessed by the god indicates a passive meaning here for ἐρμηνῆς. Following this, Socrates points out that the logic thus far entails that Ion is merely an interpreter of an interpreter (ἐρμηνέων ἐρμηνῆς).<sup>559</sup> Capuccino’s argument holds that one cannot take the ἐρμηνῆς here to be an active, analytic exegete while simultaneously taking the ἐρμηνέων to be passive conduits for divine inspiration without causing Plato’s use of the term to “lose semantic coherence.”<sup>560</sup>

Against Capuccino, one might point out that Socrates says “it is necessary for the rhapsode to interpret the thought of the poet for his hearers (τὸν γὰρ ῥαψωδὸν ἐρμηνέα δεῖ τοῦ ποιητοῦ τῆς διανοίας γίγνεσθαι τοῖς ἀκούουσι).”<sup>561</sup> Capuccino’s response would seem to be that if we want to retain a coherent use of the term throughout the dialogue, we must understand that this passage is not implying that the rhapsode actually analyzes and expounds upon the poet’s meaning but rather transmits the content of the poet to the audience as a go-between. Her dismissal of 530a seems to stray too far from Socrates’ clear meaning; the rhapsode must understand the poet to act as a hermeneus, after all.<sup>562</sup> However, Capuccino’s second argument clarifies why she is likely correct that, in the final analysis, Plato understands *hermeneus* in the passive sense of a go-between or a conduit. Capuccino asserts that the modern understanding of “*hermêneus*” leads to a lack of coherence in the actual arguments that Socrates makes in the text:

The epistemic acquisition that allows the rhapsode to become a good mediator of Homer’s thought can not consist in the textual knowledge which derives from a correct exegesis of the Homeric verses, since the object of the Socratic examination which occupies two thirds

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<sup>558</sup> Translation slightly amended from Woodruff.

<sup>559</sup> *Ion* 535a.

<sup>560</sup> Capuccino, “Plato’s *Ion* and the Ethics of Praise,” 68.

<sup>561</sup> *Ion* 530c. Translation mine.

<sup>562</sup> *Ion* 530c: “A rhapsode must come to present the poet’s thought to his audience; and he can’t do that beautifully unless he knows what the poet means.”

of the dialogue is not this modern hermeneutical knowledge... Socrates asks Ion if he believes himself to be *skilled* (*deinos*) only about Homer... and this alleged skill consists in knowing the truth concerning the *subjects* of their works, and not the meaning of their verses: the point is not to establish what Homer really said, but in what way, for example, a general must act in war.<sup>563</sup>

Capuccino points out that Socrates and Ion are discussing the subjects of *techne* in Homer's work. In other words, as noted above, even if one describes the rhapsode as a *hermeneus* in an active sense, it is only because the rhapsode ideally understands the technical wisdom of the poet and can transmit and perhaps explain it to his audience. Thus, even understood actively, Ion can only convey Homer's knowledge of concrete *technai* and does not interpret Homer literarily to explain a "deeper" meaning in the text; this is a very thin notion of exegetical activity. Ion is a *hermeneus* in the sense that he literally acts as a messenger for Homer, transporting the poet's (technical) knowledge to the audience at face value.

Yet, even this mildly active sense of *hermeneus* falls away when considering the rest of the dialogue. Socrates reveals that Ion does not have a technical understanding of Homer's content, for, if he did, he could also act as an expounder of Hesiod, Orpheus, or Archilochus. Socrates then explains to Ion that his power as a rhapsode comes from the magnetic pull of Homer's own divine inspiration moving through Ion, rendering the bard a ἐρμηνέων ἐρμηνῆς. Thus, while Socrates' initial reference to Ion's function as a *hermeneus* at 530a implies the active transmission of the poetry's technical content, Socrates' remark at 535a reveals that the rhapsode is a *hermêneus* in just the same passive sense as is the poet, seer, or soothsayer. Once Socrates explains the divine source of both the poet's work and the rhapsode's power, he collapses the rhapsode's role as *hermeneus* into the same role of the poet as *hermeneus*. Both become go-betweens or conduits only. Accordingly, while Collobert argues that the poet or the rhapsode cannot be both inspired

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<sup>563</sup> Capuccino, "Plato's *Ion* and the Ethics of Praise," 69.

and *hermeneus* because the former requires one to be out of her wits while the latter requires analytical reason, the text actually points to the opposite conclusion. We must understand the *hermeneus* as a divinely inspired and passive conduit; otherwise, we cannot explain Ion's particular power regarding Homer. At the end of the dialogue, then, it is the inspiration thesis that remains standing. Thus, there is no tension between the assertion that the poets or rhapsodes lack *techne* and the claim that they are divinely inspired. Socrates makes the latter claim in order to explain the experience we may have of poetry's power while simultaneously accommodating the recognition that poets cannot reasonably be polymaths, despite their reputation for being so in Plato's time.

Accordingly, one should not take the critique of rhapsody in the *Ion* as a criticism of the literary merit of Homer or poetry in general. As Dorit Barchana-Lorand notes:

[Socrates] effectively proposes that Ion should refer to the 'common denominator' between Homer and other poets: the content of poetry, the subjects it deals with... But does agreement between Homer and Hesiod regarding any given subject render them 'the same' in literary terms?<sup>564</sup>

The answer is obviously "no." The idea that the merits of poetry are reducible to its literal, practical content reduces poetry to nothing more than an aesthetically pleasing vehicle for what could be said plainly. Many of us, however, read poetry because there is something about its very form that we enjoy for its own sake. In reducing poetry to its literal content, we miss what it could offer on a non-literal reading while simultaneously allowing it to fail at a task it should have never taken up. Yet, Socrates approaches poetry in this unimaginative manner because it is how Ion approaches it. Socrates' thesis that Ion's experience of Homer is grounded in inspiration and not knowledge undermines the bard's claims to having technical knowledge. Nevertheless, this undermining does

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<sup>564</sup> Dorit Barchana-Lorand, "'A Divinity Moving You': Knowledge and Inspiration in Plato's *Ion*," in *Plato on Art and Beauty*, ed. by Alison E. Denham (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 89.

not amount to an attack on poetry or the task of interpreting the poets in other ways. On the contrary, Socrates' criticism of Ion's claims and appeal to inspiration turns the reader towards a less literal mode of thinking about the poets, such as the enigmatic approach, as one option discussed in Chapter Two. Poetry, inundated with fertile multivocality, ambiguity, and "double speak" can be false in many ways while simultaneously telling the truth in many others.

In sum, the *Ion* does not present the rhapsode as an interpreter or literary exegete in the modern sense. Ion is not engaged in sophisticated metaphorical, allegorical, or otherwise "literary" (in the modern sense of examining literature from multiple symbolic angles) analysis of his favorite poet. Ion clearly understands his skill in terms of understanding the polymathy present in a literal reading of Homer's works. The dialogue as a whole denies that Ion possesses *techne*, for if he did, he would not feel powerless to speak on other poets. Whatever Ion is experiencing, and he is experiencing something, it cannot be assigned to any technical expertise on his part, for it applies neither to other *technai* nor even to the art of poetry as a whole. Otherwise, Ion could expand his skill beyond Homer. Through the character of Socrates, Plato refutes the popular idea that the poets (and rhapsodes, by extension) were polymaths who could be entrusted with educating Greeks on everything from seafaring to theology. Socrates' inspiration thesis resolves the tension between Ion's spurious claims to expertise and his genuinely moving experiences of Homer's poetry. One can grasp Ion's experience by understanding both his own and the poets' roles as *hermeneus* in the sense of passive conduits for divine communication with mortals. Their roles are similar to those of oracles or seers and, therefore, are not formed from genuine knowledge but rather divine intervention through possession and inspiration. Thus, Ion does not understand the revelatory potential of the poet's words and will persist in this lack of understanding until he understands the divine cause and substance of poetry's ability to move his soul. Accordingly, the

*Ion* does not comprise an attack on poetry *qua* poetry through its attack on the poets' knowledge. Though this particular dialogue does not explicitly expound on the possibility of interpreting poetry literarily as a non-literal vehicle for truth, it also does not condemn such a possibility.

However, the *Ion* does affirm that poetry has a divine source, and it asserts that this divine source accounts for its ability to move the soul, for it is a divine power that moves Ion upward through the magnetic chain suspended from Homer's Muse. The poets compose via this divine power, and this inspiration—and not any knowledge on the part of the poets—accounts for the greatness of their works. Plato, therefore, treats poetry not as a valueless or corrupting mimetic hobby for entertaining the masses, though it can be this when treated in the manner in which Ion treats it, but rather as a divine gift (θεία μοίρα) through which the gods speak to humankind.<sup>565</sup> That the poet lacks knowledge of the various subjects on which she writes invalidates her as a *teacher* who is equipped to *explain* her works to the people, but it does not invalidate her role as a fount of divine communication. Finally, as I argue more robustly in section IV, the particular manner in which Socrates describes the divine inspiration and function of poets indicates that poetry is *daimonic*, mediating between divine understanding and discursive human knowledge to present the human *psyche* with a revelation of divine nature. Poetry is one of the ways in which the gods reach down to us in order to draw us upward.

### III. Against the Ironists

A reading of the *Ion* that takes Socrates' inspiration thesis seriously is vital to this project's overall claims. Those claims are (1) one can read poetry as *daimonic*, (2) such a reading reveals that poetry can have a positive role in the soul's ascent, and (3) these first two claims, taken

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<sup>565</sup> *Ion* 534c.

together, significantly resolve much of the tension that constitutes the problem of poetry. As I argue in the following section, the *Ion* treats poetry in a manner quite close to other activities that are named as *daimonic* in the *Symposium*. However, there are two obstacles to claiming that a *daimonic* nature to poetry contributes to solving the problem of poetry that this chapter will address below. First, one could argue that Socrates does not seriously mean what he says about the divine inspiration of poetry in the *Ion*; instead, Socrates is just using his irony.<sup>566</sup> Second, one could argue that, even if one can understand poetry as *daimonic*, its positive role in the soul's ascent does not necessarily follow because it is possible that the *daimonic* is not always good for the human *psyche*. This section will respond to the first rebuttal. Then, it will argue for the *daimonic* status of poetry in Plato in section IV before responding to the second rebuttal in section V.

The present section first undertakes a brief outline of the linguistic and methodological difficulties of appealing to irony in a supportable manner. Nevertheless, such difficulties do not render appeals to irony unsupported in every case. Plato's Socrates does seem to employ sarcasm as well as more nuanced uses of irony in the dialogues. Accordingly, if one can demonstrate that she can only render a particular coherent, responsible, and interesting reading of a dialogue through an appeal to irony, then such an appeal is warranted. However, given the difficulties of determining

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<sup>566</sup> See, for example, Stern-Gillet, "On (Mis)Interpreting Plato's *Ion*"; Barry Dixon, "Phaedrus, *Ion*, and the Lure of Inspiration," *Plato: the Internet Journal of the International Plato Society*, No 8 (2008): 1-12; Christos Grigoriou, "Ion and the Concept of Enthusiasm," *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (2023): 13–26 wherein Grigoriou states that "[i]n *Ion*... we can trace what Vlastos calls a complex irony, according to which 'what is said both is and isn't what is meant' (Vlastos, 1991, 21). Plato does acknowledge a state of enthusiasm as a characteristic of poetic creation, an inspiration, that is, which comes involuntarily to the poet and drive him to an unconscious creation in a state of intense internal agitation and self-alienation. [But, t]he reference to a divine intervention, however, must not be taken literally." (24); and Franco V. Trivigno, "Technē, Inspiration and Comedy in Plato's *Ion*," *Apeiron* 45 (2012): 289-295 wherein Trivigno argues that the account of inspiration is ultimately an ironic *reductio* argument. However, at 295-305, Trivigno argues for a modified understanding of inspiration which combines with the oracular account of poetic composition. Thus, while Trivigno does employ the notion of insincerity on the part of Socrates' speech on inspiration, he ultimately argues for a view similar to my own. I disagree with Trivigno's reading of irony into the speech of Socrates, but I agree that, in order to understand *what* Socrates is getting at in the notion of inspiration, one must also understand Plato's treatment of the oracular in general as significant for his notion of inspiration. Ultimately, poets and oracles are only thinly distinguished from one another for Plato, and the power (and danger) of one is related to the power (and danger) of the other.

when irony is applicable and when it is not, one should only appeal to irony when there are good reasons for doing so. In cases where such reasons are absent—i.e., one can render the same coherent, responsible, and interesting reading without an appeal to irony—it is preferable to take Socrates as sincere. This study then examines the *Ion* and its treatment by two scholars who read irony into the text, Barry Dixon and Suzanne Stern-Gillet, in order to determine if one can make sense of this text without appealing to irony. This study concludes that a coherent, responsible, and interesting reading of the *Ion* is not only possible via the sincere interpretation of Socrates' inspiration thesis but that the sincere reading actually provides better coherency than the ironic reading offered by Dixon and Stern-Gillet.

The fundamental issue with reducing the inspiration thesis to irony is one of method. There are competing claims concerning what Socratic irony is and when one should apply it instead of taking Socrates at his word.<sup>567</sup> As Layne observes,

Plato never offers his readers a consistent clue for deciphering *when* Socrates is in earnest and *when* he is ironic. So those who appeal to Socratic irony are left with the precarious reality that those Socratic statements that do not square with a particular interpretation of the dialogues or contradict other Socratic claims may simply be deemed “exemplary moments of irony.”<sup>568</sup>

Layne points out that one can use irony to alleviate tensions between what Socrates says in one instance versus another. However, she observes that, to do this, one must interpret both sets of Socratic claims through a particular interpretation of Plato to determine which one is ironic. Layne strikes at the heart of one of the primary methodological issues with Socratic irony: arguing for an ironic interpretation of any passage without begging the question is tricky. One must already

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<sup>567</sup> See Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *The Philosophy of Socrates* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 58-69.

<sup>568</sup> Danielle A. Layne, "Double Ignorance: An Examination of Socratic Moral Wisdom" (Doctoral Dissertation, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2009), 53-86. Layne quotes Richard Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1953), 7.

presume to know which things Plato's Socrates "really means" and which he does not. One then appeals to irony to argue against any counter-evidence; this approach requires one to artificially displace passages that can serve as counter-evidence by assuming that those passages are ironic beforehand. While one can offer good arguments for why Socrates does not mean a particular claim or argument sincerely, it is often the case that scholars simply state something is meant ironically without giving a robust exegesis of the text explaining why. As is argued below, such question-begging arises repeatedly in otherwise excellent scholarship on the *Ion*.

Layne worries that one might use irony to force a reconciliation between one Socratic claim and another based on a preconceived notion of how one should interpret the text; additionally, this same act can easily create new inconsistencies among Socratic claims. Thus, one appeals to irony to reconcile two seemingly competitive claims, but the result is that she has only deepened certain inconsistencies and perhaps even created the need for an even more sweeping interpretation of Plato's works. Suppose one takes the remarks on inspiration in the *Ion* to be insincere. In that case, one has to explain what to do not only with all the other passages in Plato's corpus in which Socrates remarks on divine inspiration but also with all the philosophical claims to which inspiration connects. For example, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates mentions and seemingly praises various forms of inspiration while making his palinode to erotic inspiration and its role in the philosophical life.<sup>569</sup> Does this mean that we should also take his remarks on erotic inspiration to be similarly insincere? One certainly can treat the erotic as ironic, but doing so requires significant subsequent work to coherently reinterpret the dialogues in which it appears as a central theme.

Within the confines of the *Ion* alone, one may be able to argue that Socrates is not serious about divine inspiration. As an example, Stern-Gillet ascribes an "anti-poetry stance" to the *Ion* as

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<sup>569</sup> *Phaedrus* 244a-257b.



a whole, which, she asserts, has been chronically missed by many due to Socrates' "sarcasm," by which she means irony, going over their heads.<sup>570</sup> Moreover, Ferrari sees the image of the magnet negatively, stating that:

Socrates' strategy in conversation with the rhapsode Ion is to get him to see that poetic inspiration is not a prerogative of the poets alone... but is transmitted by them to intermediaries, such as actors and rhapsodes, enabling them to perform the poetry; and so the contagion spreads to its final carrier, the enthusiastic audience.<sup>571</sup>

For Ferrari, the image of the magnet is not the poetic equivalent of Diotima's ladder, but rather, it depicts divine inspiration as a "contagion." For both Stern-Gillet and Ferrari, it seems Plato means for the reader to come away from the dialogue with the realization that there is no epistemically reliable way to engage this material. Plato's Socrates thereby calls the poetry "inspired" as a cheeky way of communicating its particular epistemological worthlessness. Yet, suppose Socrates insincerely posits the inspiration thesis in the *Ion* to serve a broader claim. In that case, one must now explain how to deal with other references to the inspiration of poets, which persist throughout Plato's body of work from early to late texts.<sup>572</sup> The passages from the *Ion* in which Socrates argues that poetry is divinely given are not anomalous within the Platonic corpus; they are simply more numerous in this text than in others. The *Ion* is the only dialogue in which the divine inspiration of poetry is a central theme; nonetheless, the inspiration thesis is consistently supported throughout Plato's corpus more generally. Accordingly, the reader probably should take all mentions of inspiration ironically or unironically unless she can robustly support her reasons for not doing so in a particular text or passage. What the reader cannot do is

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<sup>570</sup> "On (Mis)Interpreting Plato's *Ion*," 190 and 192. Stern-Gillet's use of "sarcasm" does not seem to align with the overly-simplistic treatment of irony as sarcasm. Hence, even though Stern-Gillet uses the term "sarcasm," I treat her use of the term as referring to something like Vlastos' complex Socratic irony. See Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 41.

<sup>571</sup> Ferrari, "Poetry and Plato," 93.

<sup>572</sup> See previous notes 21 and 60-63 for references to passages wherein the poets are called divinely inspired stretching from early through late period dialogues.

take those passages as ironic or unironic in different places without justification; this introduces a considerable amount of additional interpretive work in the long run. In other words, often, it is the case that appeals to irony that are offered to resolve apparent tensions between Socratic claims are not only instances of question begging but are also not very successful at ameliorating inconsistencies in Plato's texts.

However, suppose one is willing to re-work her interpretations of the content connected to inspiration, thereby maintaining a consistent treatment of irony throughout the dialogues; she still has to justify her appeal to irony to sidestep accusations of question-begging. Why does she assume irony concerning certain claims and sincerity concerning others? She still must explain why a particular claim is ironic while another is sincere via a robust textual analysis that offers ample and rigorous evidence. Yet, there is still nothing like a consensus on methods for determining when and how one is to apply an ironic reading to the text.

Moreover, there is no consensus on what Socratic irony actually is. Vlastos' 1991 work problematized readings in which "ironic" simply meant "sarcastic" or "deceptive," contrary to its more common usage in the classical period.<sup>573</sup> For Vlastos, Socratic irony is more than saying the precise opposite of what one means, either openly or in a bid to trick the hearer. Under the deceptive or sarcastic notion of irony, Socrates says, for example, that poetry is divinely inspired, but does not actually mean this. Ion thinks Socrates does mean to claim poetry is inspired, however, and thus, the inspiration thesis serves to convince Ion of something through deceptively manipulating his belief in Socrates' claims in order to drive home another point. In the case of the *Ion*, this point is usually taken to be the epistemic and educational uselessness of poetry and rhapsody. Instead of this deceptive version of irony, Vlastos argues that Socratic irony entails

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<sup>573</sup> Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 23-28.

saying something that is sincerely meant but is also not meant in the precise way the hearer is likely to take it.<sup>574</sup> For Vlastos, the ironic Socrates “does and does not mean what he says.”<sup>575</sup> Vlastos’ approach to Socratic irony is to take Socrates as essentially saying one thing sarcastically while he means another sincerely. For example, Socrates might say he knows nothing, but he employs the word for “knowing” in different sense. In one sense, he knows nothing while in another, he is quite knowledgeable. In other words, one thing is said and not quite meant, but another thing is meant, but not quite said. This account of irony is sufficiently nuanced, and it provides the reader of Plato with a sophisticated way of understanding some of the more puzzling statements in the dialogues. However, a reliable method for determining when Socrates is ironic (even in this nuanced sense of irony) remains an open question. Furthermore, despite the historical influence of Vlastos’ scholarship, many still approach the *Ion* with a more sarcastic notion of irony, as is apparent below in the way Dixon and Stern-Gillet read irony into the *Ion*.

In terms of method, the most conservative and straightforward approach is to read irony into the text only when the language of irony is explicitly present. Vlastos tells us that the Greek ancestor of our modern term “irony” consists in the three forms εἰρωνεία, εἴρων, and

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<sup>574</sup> I say “Socratic irony” because this is the standard terminology. However, it is worth asking whether it is just as reasonable to speak of “Platonic irony,” especially given that our depictions of the ironic Socrates come from Plato, not at all from Aristophanes, and only very barely from Xenophon. Perhaps the historical Socrates was an ironic figure, but if we take the references to Socrates’ irony in the dialogues as describing fictionalized representations of Socrates’ communication style and as depicting actual events, then we must acknowledge that Plato was very good at irony himself, or else he could not have brought the spirit of the ironic Socrates to life so well. Furthermore, questioning the specifically “Socratic” quality of irony invites more questions regarding Vlastos’ answer to the Socratic problem. In what sense is the Socrates of the early dialogues uniquely ironic in a way that Plato himself demonstrably was not? Plato’s work might display genuine instances of irony of the sort described in Vlastos’ quotation above, but there is no way to tell whether they describe Socrates’ views *pace* Plato’s. This is not to say that the dialogues in general, and the early ones in particular, do not afford us any glimpse of the historical man, Socrates. I’m sure they do. It is only to say that we can’t effectively tease apart which elements of the dialogues are sincerely attributable to the historical Socrates and which are attributable to Plato when it comes to the problem of poetry specifically and the question of irony. We simply cannot functionally delineate where the historical Socrates ends and Plato begins with respect to these matters.

<sup>575</sup> Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 41.

εἰρωνεύομαι.<sup>576</sup> If we look at all forms together, there are about eight mentions of irony within the Platonic corpus; εἰρωνεία appears precisely one time (at *Republic* 337a), and εἰρωνεύομαι accounts for the other seven mentions; Plato does not appear to use εἶρων at all.<sup>577</sup> Of these eight instances, three are used to describe characters other than Socrates. Εἰρωνεύομαι appears at *Cratylus* 384a, where Hermogenes uses it to describe Cratylus, not Socrates.<sup>578</sup> The same word appears again at *Sophist* 268b, wherein it is used by the Stranger to describe one who can, as Nicholas White translates, “maintain his insincerity in long speeches to a crowd.”<sup>579</sup> Two more uses of εἰρωνεύομαι appear in *Gorgias* 489e, where Callicles uses it to refer to Socrates; Socrates then uses it immediately after this when he retorts that it is not him but rather Callicles who is being ironic. The invocation of Zethus in Socrates’ retort, a god of the hunt, could also lend authority to Socrates’ claim that he is not being ironic; it implies his sincerity in the “hunt” for the truth in the face of Callicles’ accusation of insincerity. At *Republic* 337a, Thrasymachus uses both εἰρωνεία and εἰρωνεύομαι to describe Socrates, and Socrates responds by arguing that Thrasymachus only says this because he refuses to accept the answers Socrates gives. Finally, at *Symposium* 216e, εἰρωνεύομαι is used by Alcibiades to describe Socrates, and the word appears at *Apology* 38a when Socrates says the people may call him ironic because of their inability to believe him when he says he is divinely compelled to pursue philosophy.

It is true that Thrasymachus indicates that Socrates was known for being “ironic;”<sup>580</sup> however, an examination of the instances in which irony is attributed to Socrates demonstrates

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<sup>576</sup> Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 23.

<sup>577</sup> Statistics on word use obtained from Perseus Digital Library.

<sup>578</sup> Reeve renders this passage as “[Cratylus] responds sarcastically and makes nothing clear.”

<sup>579</sup> Presumably not Socrates as this person is named a demagogue just a few lines later.

<sup>580</sup> *Republic* 337a. Thrasymachus states “that’s just Socrates’ usual irony” (αὕτη 'κείνη ἢ εἰωθυῖα εἰρωνεία Σωκράτους).

that Plato may not have meant it to be a genuine description of Socrates' character. Let us return to those five instances in which Socrates is described as ironic. In the *Apology*, Socrates says:

If I say that it is impossible for me to keep quiet because that means disobeying the god, you will not believe me and will think I am being ironical (εἰρωνευομένῳ). On the other hand, if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for men, you will believe me even less.<sup>581</sup>

Here, Socrates sees the ascription of irony as an accusation of dishonesty (the people do not believe him). Furthermore, in the *Apology*, Socrates seems quite serious in his reverence for the Delphic Oracle, its utterance regarding his wisdom, and its famous inscription to “know yourself.”<sup>582</sup> Recall, as well, that he persists in trying to properly interpret the god's (presumably Apollo's) dreams in the *Phaedo*,<sup>583</sup> a moment that further corroborates his sincerity in obeying the god and seeing philosophy as a divine calling. The reader has no reason to think Socrates is not sincere here, especially since what he thinks the people will “believe...even less” are uncontroversial descriptions of Socratic philosophy (i.e., discussing virtue and testing oneself with others). Accordingly, this passage from the *Apology* does not support Socratic irony as a true attribute of Plato's Socrates; instead, it supports the view, *contra* Vlastos, that Socrates was thought to be ironic, in the sense of dishonest, by those who did not understand what he was really about.

Socrates notes that when he is being sincere his philosophical style is frequently deemed dishonest by those who do not want to accept what he is saying. Thus, the treatment of irony in the *Apology* mirrors that in the *Republic* and *Gorgias* in that Socrates rejects the description of himself and declares that the interlocutor only thinks him ironic because of their own insincerity

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<sup>581</sup> *Apology* 38a.

<sup>582</sup> *Apology* 20e-23b.

<sup>583</sup> *Phaedo* 60d-61b.

or unwillingness to accept the truth. In *Symposium*, we do not get Socrates' response to being called ironic. Still, Alcibiades is probably an unreliable narrator regarding Socrates' character, especially since the younger man is revealed to be one who cannot quite follow Socrates down the path of philosophy.

Notably, there are other cognates worth considering besides the three that Vlastos names, but they follow the same patterns. There is εἰρωνικός and its adverbial form of εἰρωνικῶς, both of which, together, constitute another five instances within the undisputed corpus. These appear at *Laws* 908e to refer negatively to the “dissembling (εἰρωνικὸν) atheist”; at *Sophist* 268a and c, where it is used twice to denote the “insincere imitator (εἰρωνικὸν μιμητῆν)”; *Symposium* 218d where Alcibiades uses it to refer to Socrates' “inimitable ironic (μάλα εἰρωνικῶς καὶ σφόδρα) manner”; and at *Euthydemus* 302b where Socrates uses it in his narration to state that Dionysodorus “pretended to pause (εἰρωνικῶς πάνυ ἐπισχῶν)”. However, only one of these instances refers to Socrates himself (the example at *Symposium* 218d), and this use can be treated in the same way as Alcibiades' use of εἰρωνεύομαι. We should question his reliability as a narrator, especially when considering that all the other instances of εἰρωνικός or εἰρωνικῶς are used as negative descriptors denoting deception or dishonesty and are not applied to Socrates at all, but rather to characters we are likely not supposed to see as models for ideal philosophical behavior. Hence, cognates of εἶρων are used to refer to Socrates only approximately six times, and none of them appear in the *Ion*.

As Vlastos himself notes, words for irony had a predominantly negative connotation in classical use.<sup>584</sup> While Vlastos argues that Socrates' use of irony transforms the concept by moving it away from the notion of deception,<sup>585</sup> the primary texts do not support this view.

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<sup>584</sup> *Symposium*, 216e.

<sup>585</sup> Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 21 and 30.

Brickhouse and Smith astutely point out that Thrasymachus actually uses irony in precisely the sense of a kind of dishonesty or deception:

the main focus of Thrasymachus's complaint makes it clear that he thinks of the situation more as if Socrates were cheating at a high-stakes game in which the loser will suffer a certain degree of humiliation in defeat... Thrasymachus thinks that Socrates dishonestly uses unfair tactics just to avoid being defeated himself (this understanding is confirmed when Thrasymachus again criticizes Socrates' manner of arguing at 340d, 341a). Thus... Thrasymachus clearly thinks that Socrates is not being sincere. Thrasymachus's real complaint, as we see at the end of [*Republic* 336e-337a], is that Socrates is cheating by refusing to say what he really believes.<sup>586</sup>

Brickhouse and Smith further note that a similar accusation of dishonesty lies at the heart of Alcibiades' accusation of irony as well.<sup>587</sup> Moreover, most instances in which an interlocutor calls Socrates "ironic" appeal to something like dishonesty, and Socrates usually rebuts the ascription on the grounds of his sincerity. Hence, the reader should ask if the ascription of "irony" to Socrates as "usual" is meant to say more about how his brand of education was received and about the interlocutors with whom he is engaging than about Socrates himself. As Brickhouse and Smith note, "Socrates never endorses or admits to the characterization of himself as an 'ironist.'"<sup>588</sup> Thus, the most methodologically concrete approach, if one does want to assume irony, is to limit appeals to irony to those places where it is explicitly named. Yet, even this approach is still questionable, as the places in the text that directly refer to irony still do not clearly indicate that irony is actually meant to be a real attribute of Socrates. Furthermore, we still have no reason to read irony into the *Ion*, let alone much of Plato's remaining corpus. Most scholars do not limit their appeals to irony to those passages in which it appears linguistically; otherwise, there would be no examples of scholars reading irony into the *Ion*.

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<sup>586</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, *The Philosophy of Socrates*, 61.

<sup>587</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, *The Philosophy of Socrates*, 62.

<sup>588</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, *The Philosophy of Socrates*, 59.

Accordingly, the question remains: When does one apply irony, and when does one not? It cannot reasonably be the point of this survey of irony to argue that one should take everything Socrates says at face value. Even if Plato did not intend εἴρων and its cognates to describe his teacher reliably, Plato does employ comedy and a certain kind of “tongue and cheek” approach in his writing of Socrates. This comedic writing sometimes seems to truly amount to sarcasm or what Brickhouse and Smith call “mocking irony,” which they assert “Socrates commonly uses.”<sup>589</sup> Sarcastic irony does occur in Plato’s corpus. At *Ion* 541c, Socrates comments, “Ion, you’re superb,” when Ion has just claimed that the only reason he isn’t a general is because of Athenian favoritism working against him. The sheer arrogance of Ion’s claims in this moment is unmistakable, and it is hard to read anything other than genuine sarcasm in Socrates’ reply. Yet, Socrates’ retort is an instance of simple sarcasm and not Vlastos’ complex irony. As Brickhouse and Smith put it, this kind of “irony is in the mocking compliments and flattery Socrates lavishes on others.”<sup>590</sup> Socrates says, “You’re superb,” but the reader knows that he means something like, “Ion, now you are just being ridiculous.” Socrates’ statement is neither puzzling nor layered in its meaning. He says that Ion is superb. He means that Ion is not superb but, in fact, ridiculous.<sup>591</sup>

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<sup>589</sup> See Brickhouse and Smith, *The Philosophy of Socrates*, 62-63.

<sup>590</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, *The Philosophy of Socrates*, 63. Sometimes Socrates sarcastically addresses the other person’s arrogance, and just as sarcasm would be in any well-written literary work, it is fairly easy to discern the intent as sarcasm or as a joke.

<sup>591</sup> Note that the presence of more direct uses of sarcasm, puns and jokes, and so on does not have the kind of systematic character that many give to Socratic irony. Moreover, such jokes or mocking sarcasms are hardly unique to Plato’s Socrates. For example, Vlastos treats Xenophon’s depiction of Socrates in *Memorabilia* 3.11.16 as ironic, calling this passage a “big break” in the search for Socratic irony in Xenophon. Vlastos states: “Here Socrates turns skittish and goes to pay a visit to the beautiful Theodote. He offers her suggestions to enlarge her clientele and she invites him to become her partner in the pursuit of *philoi*. He demurs, pleading much business, both private and public, and adding: . . . ‘I have my own girlfriends (*philai*) who won’t leave me day or night, learning from me philters and enchantments” (Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 30). Since this is meant to imply “that these ‘girlfriends’ are philosophers, depressingly male and middle-aged,” and Theodote recognizes this, Vlastos argues that this is a use of irony which falls outside of its common classical treatment as mere deception and thereby represents the distinctly “Socratic” character of the irony we see more robustly in Plato’s early dialogues. Yet, while Vlastos is looking for a characteristically “Socratic” form of irony which diverges from what was the



Moreover, Vlastos' notion of complex irony is rooted in a genuine feature of the texts: what Socrates says and what Socrates means are not always clearly related at first blush. Otherwise, we would not have the tomes of work trying to tease out the precise meaning behind Socrates' famous proclamation to know nothing. Whether one calls it enigma, irony, or something else, experienced readers of Plato's works know that interpreting Socrates' words is often no straightforward task. However, the enigmatic quality of Socrates' statements does not need to amount to irony in the deceptive or sarcastic sense. Socrates can be sincere, but he still may not be saying what some characters or readers think he is. Brickhouse and Smith articulate a potential problem regarding the interpretation of Socrates' words:

what [Socrates] really does mean is...a matter for speculation. Of course, it might be fun to speculate about all kinds of tantalizing and curious hidden meanings in what Socrates says. But since we do not know of any limit to the kinds of speculation that might be equally possible, it seems foolish to pursue any of these lines of interpretation much further—at least as long as we think that the more direct interpretation...can be made to suffice.<sup>592</sup>

In this passage, Brickhouse and Smith make a sound point. How does one determine what Socrates really means in any given passage? The answer is unclear. However, it is not the case one must simply pass over the question in silence. Brickhouse and Smith set up a false dichotomy between interpreting what Socrates means and the perceived clarity of a "direct interpretation." Any interpretive effort whatsoever makes a claim to what is "really meant," and assuming straightforward sincerity does not change this reality. Hence, one can reasonably argue that, when

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norm at this time, it unclear why this passage (which does not use any term relating to irony) is taken as an example of irony (in Vlastos' "complex" sense) at all. Is this not merely a poetic turn of phrase by Socrates in which he presents a kind of simile between lovers wanting love potions and philosophers wanting arguments? Additionally, is one really to agree that other authors did not compose similar witticisms. Heraclitus' treatment of the bow is a play on words with a similar sort of double entendre implied, for example. Why are we not meant to take the enigmatic states of Heraclitus as the first examples of this compositional device? Why do we not call it Heraclitean irony? Or, perhaps we should ask why we do not call it Xenophonic irony, since this "big break" occurs in the work of Xenophon and may or may not be a historically accurate depiction of Socrates in reality. Perhaps Plato is simply a good writer who, like other good writers then and now, captures the reality of dialogue wherein characters crack jokes, tease one another, become exasperated with each other, or use creative turns of phrase that clearly say one thing but mean another.

<sup>592</sup> Brickhouse and Smith, *The Philosophy of Socrates*, 66.

reading a dialogue sincerely cannot render a comprehensible interpretation, an appeal to mocking irony, complex irony, enigma, etc., may well be useful and appropriate, provided the case for such an appeal is well argued and supported in the text.

Where does all of the above leave the reader of Plato? It seems that irony is not a clear-cut or systematically applicable tool for deciphering the meaning of Socrates' statements in Plato's works. However, it is not the case that Plato's Socrates always clearly means what he says precisely in all cases. Thus, while there can be good reasons for applying irony (sarcastic or complex) to a text, one ought not to do so without being able to offer rigorous support for why it is necessary. Accordingly, this study argues that no ironic reading of the *Ion* is necessary; one can reasonably interpret the *Ion* without recourse to irony and can thereby defensibly read Socrates' treatment of divine inspiration as sincere. By "sincere," I mean that Socrates is not being "ironic" in the sense of saying one thing and meaning another entirely. Or, to put it differently, Socrates really does claim that Ion's experience of Homer and the human experience of encountering poetry as psychologically moving has its cause in divine inspiration of some kind. Notably, the sincerity of the inspiration thesis allows the reader to see a coherent thread through the text mediating a certain tension between the experience of poetry and the absent expertise of poets and rhapsodes. Furthermore, the sincerity of the inspiration thesis allows for coherency between the *Ion* and other places in Plato's body of work, wherein the gods are described as the source of goodness, and divine inspiration is depicted as a gift mediating human limitations to divine understanding. Therefore, instead of resolving or explaining tensions in the text, an ironic reading, in the sense of Socrates being insincere regarding the inspiration thesis, is not only unnecessary for elucidating the meaning of the *Ion*, but it also renders the text inconsistent with other passages in Plato's corpus.

Let us look more closely at why an ironic reading is unnecessary by examining the appeals to irony offered by Dixon and Stern-Gillet. Dixon states that Socrates' speech on poetic inspiration "is a perfect example of an ironic speech given how it seems to be offering praise but is actually degrading both the rhapsode's and poet's art, by taking from them any claim to knowledge."<sup>593</sup> Hence, Dixon argues that one can only read the speech in praise of inspiration ironically because, otherwise, it contains a contradiction between praising and degrading. Dixon thereby claims that the speech is ironic because it "seems" to offer praise while "actually" degrading the poets and rhapsodes. However, such a claim already assumes an ironic reading in which Socrates says one thing but means another, and it assumes to know which things he means and which he does not. In other words, Dixon is already begging the question. The speech is only genuinely contradictory if it praises precisely the same things in precisely the same manner as the ones it degrades. Socrates can praise the poets as divine conduits and degrade them as false polymaths. Vlastos makes a similar observation:

In the epic the poet had claimed confidently that he puts into his verse knowledge imparted to him... by his divine mentor. To this claim Socrates responds with a characteristic ploy. His reply is, in effect: 'Yes, what the inspired poet puts into his poem is a wonderful, god-given thing; but *it isn't knowledge* – it can't be knowledge for it is mindless.' The poet's claim to be the direct beneficiary of divine prompting, Socrates accepts; he allows it at its strongest, conceding that at the moment of inspiration the poet is ἔνθεος, 'has god in him': he is 'god-possessed'... But the very form in which Socrates allows inspired poetry a superhuman source, debunks its claim to constitute knowledge.<sup>594</sup>

Layne also highlights this nuance when she points out that, in the *Apology*, while Socrates does find "that [the poets] possess their ability by nature (φύσει) and divine inspiration... they, through conceit of possessing the mere natural gift of poetry, unwittingly disgrace themselves by

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<sup>593</sup> Dixon, "*Phaedrus, Ion, and the Lure of Inspiration*," 7.

<sup>594</sup> Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 168. Again, Vlastos' own treatment of Socratic irony is frequently far more nuanced and conservative than the trend it seems to have spawned among other scholars.

thinking they know when they do not.”<sup>595</sup> Yet, *pace* Dixon, Plato can acknowledge both the divine inspiration of the poets while simultaneously finding them wanting for their hubris and inability to understand the source of their power, leading the poets to believe they have wisdom when they do not. Moreover, the inspiration thesis in the *Ion* actually plays an explanatory role in mediating the tension between the poets’ and rhapsodes’ lack of *techne* and the power of their works to move the soul. There is, therefore, no contradiction between praising and degrading. Ergo, the *Ion* does not require an ironic reading to render it comprehensible in view of its praise and degradation of poets. Socrates can coherently both praise and degrade at the same time in the *Ion* because he is not praising and degrading the same thing in precisely the same way. The simultaneity of Socrates’ praising and degrading is comprehensible without an appeal to irony.

Notably, the *Ion* actually requires that Socrates sincerely believe in the inspiration thesis for the text to effectively degrade the poets’ and rhapsodes’ claims to polymathy. If the inspiration thesis is insincere, then Socrates does not really address the odd case of Ion’s experience of Homer, leaving the door open for Ion to continue to appeal to various forms of skill on his part to justify his particular Homeric dispensation. The function of the inspiration thesis is to utterly humble the poets and rhapsodes by removing any credit for the power of their works. Curiously, Dixon comes close to acknowledging that the *Ion* only works if Socrates means what he says about inspiration. He states: “Socrates succeeds in taking from the rhapsodes and poets any claim to knowledge by using divine inspiration, an ironic speech which Ion eventually embraces.”<sup>596</sup> Dixon is correct in stating that Socrates does take their claims to knowledge away, but why must the argument regarding inspiration then be ironic? If it is insincere, then Socrates actually does *not* succeed in taking anything from the rhapsodes and poets. Instead, he has merely distracted the reader (and

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<sup>595</sup> Layne, “From Irony to Enigma,” 82.

<sup>596</sup> Dixon, “*Phaedrus, Ion, and the Lure of Inspiration*,” 6.

Ion) from the question concerning Ion's ability by offering the bard (and the reader) a lie instead of a genuine counter-explanation. Dixon's argument only works if Socrates *means what he says* regarding divine inspiration. Only then does Socrates successfully remove the rhapsode's claims to knowledge, for it is the otherness and the sheer externality of the divine inspiration that strips the poets of their claims to wisdom. If the poets and rhapsodes are not the sources of their own power, then we have an explanation for how they can say such moving things and yet have no real knowledge or expertise. Suppose Socrates is insincere in his invocation of divine inspiration. In that case, the argument of the *Ion* falls apart because Socrates fails to show how the poets can compose works that move the soul and yet know nothing themselves.

Dixon argues that Plato's treatment of poets and rhapsodes involves a much larger attack on the pedagogical and cultural norms of the times involving the public performance of poetry;<sup>597</sup> this assertion mirrors the claims of Chapter Two of this study, but it hardly needs an appeal to irony to stand. Socrates can criticize the belief in the poets' *techne* without having to claim anything about inspiration. The function of the inspiration thesis in the dialogue is to explain the ability of poetry to move the soul *despite* the ignorance of its authors. The inspiration thesis is not necessary to criticize the role of polymathic readings of the poets in Greek education. It is, however, necessary to contextualize this criticism with respect to Socrates' acknowledgment that poetry is genuinely moving. Dixon thinks that the claim to "[i]nspiration achieves Plato's task in the most efficient and suitable way for the type of interlocutor [i.e., an ignorant rhapsode] at hand."<sup>598</sup> Yet, the appeal to inspiration is unnecessary given Socrates' elenctic takedown of Ion's claims to *techne*. Socrates offers the inspiration thesis in response to Ion's bewildered statement:

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<sup>597</sup> Dixon, "*Phaedrus, Ion, and the Lure of Inspiration*," 6.

<sup>598</sup> Dixon, "*Phaedrus, Ion, and the Lure of Inspiration*," 6.

I have nothing to say against you on that point, Socrates. But this I know about myself: I speak about Homer more beautifully than anybody else and I have lots to say; and everybody says I do it well. But about the other poets I do not. Now see what that means.<sup>599</sup>

In response to Ion's urging to "see what [this] means," Socrates launches into his story about the magnetic rings and the divinely enthused who are suspended from the chains of Muses. Inspiration, then, is offered not as a final blow against Ion's claims to knowledge but rather as an explanation of the power of Ion's experience of Homer *despite* the ignorance of poets and rhapsodes. Given Socrates' rejection of the bard's claims to a *techne*, Ion does not understand how his experience of Homer is possible. Socrates, therefore, offers an explanation that preserves the legitimate and uncanny power of Homer's work to move Ion's *psyche* without Ion or Homer needing to have polymathic *technai* nor a singular *techne* at all. However, if Socrates' thesis is insincere, then he has not explained or preserved anything because he based his explanation on a claim that is ultimately false. On Dixon's ironic reading, the poets are not really inspired. Therefore, the *Ion* offers no real explanation of Ion's experience and thereby fails to actually explain the apparent contradiction between Socrates' praise of poetry's source and power and his degradation of the poets' and their use in Greek *paideia*.

If Socrates' goal were to undermine the public recitation of Homer or to reproach the value of poetry wholesale, then a dishonest appeal to inspiration would likely fail. While Ion may leave this discussion humbled by the realization that he has no expertise or knowledge, he will also be heartened by the knowledge that he is a divine conduit channeling the power of the gods through the muse to the poet to the rhapsode to the people, like an oracle or seer. Even if Ion walked away from the conversation entirely converted to everything Socrates has said thus far, there is no reason to think he or any of his former audience members would see this conversation as a reason to stop

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<sup>599</sup> *Ion* 533c.

reading, reciting, or even commenting on the poets. To the contrary, while he and those who listen to him would ideally reject the idea that Homer was a polymathic expert on practical matters, they would nonetheless still see Homer as all the more valuable. The poets' works become literal divine gifts even if people must reexamine their views on *what* about Homer's work is moving the soul if it is not the genius of his polymathy. Accordingly, it is unclear why Socrates would need to give the inspiration thesis insincerely in order to undermine the poets' role in Greek education at this time. If he appeals to inspiration insincerely, then his arguments are simply lies with no substance. However, if he appeals to inspiration sincerely, he has effectively done what Dixon wants his ironic reading to accomplish: adjudicate the tension between the reasons for praising poetry and the reasons for degrading poets. Socrates has undermined the standard way many Greeks understood the poets by inviting them to think of alternative ways to engage with the power of poetry to move the soul. Hence, he has asked the lovers of poetry to rethink poetry, not to abolish its presence in their lives altogether. Thus, if Socrates' task is to reframe how his contemporaries think about the experience of poetry and the knowledge of the poets, the sincerity of his claims regarding inspiration actually strengthens his success. The sincerity of the inspiration thesis allows Ion to be humbled and to become a better divine conduit who transmits the poets to the people without the same danger of arrogantly telling them about generalship or shipbuilding. If the inspiration thesis is not serious, then Socrates partly tries to convince Ion of his ignorance by lying to him about the nature of his experiences as a way to dismiss them. Surely, Plato's Socrates is a more capable philosopher than such a conclusion would have us believe.

In her essay on the *Ion*, Stern-Gillet also appeals to irony in interpreting the text. Her ultimate goal is to demonstrate that "Socrates' speech in the *Ion* in no way justifies the description

of Plato as the ancestor of the Romantic conception of the poet as a creative genius.”<sup>600</sup> Stern-Gillet’s arguments against the tendency to found Romantic notions of the poet in Plato are convincing and useful. Given that Plato’s works consistently treat the source of the poet’s abilities as lying outside of her, his account of poetic inspiration is absolutely a far-cry from any Romantic ideas of creative genius which cast the poet as a kind of tortured hero-genius. Quite to the contrary, Plato’s treatment of the poet in the *Ion* dispels any possibility that *the poet is herself* a genius. She becomes a divine conduit and is not responsible for the greatness of her works. Nevertheless, there is something of a false dichotomy floating in the background of some of Stern-Gillet’s otherwise sound analyses of the *Ion*; she targets the romantic notion of the poet-genius by treating the inspiration thesis as ironic in order to undermine its (mis)application among those who try to distill from it a kind of proto-romanticism. Yet, Plato can take up the idea of inspiration seriously *without* taking up a *Romantic* notion of it in particular. Still, Stern-Gillet ends up asserting, at least partly on the basis of appeals to irony, that the *Ion* takes up an “anti-poetry stance.”<sup>601</sup> She holds that Socrates’ “sarcasm” in the *Ion* “has gone unnoticed” by many<sup>602</sup> and cites the passage at 534b-c as an example of such irony or sarcasm,<sup>603</sup> concluding that, “[n]ot for the first time, Ion misses Socrates’ irony; at once bewildered and flattered, he agrees” that the poet is divinely inspired and not the source of her own creations.<sup>604</sup> Stern-Gillet’s line of reasoning implies that Socrates is only ironically ascribing inspiration and non-rationality to the poet and, not unrelatedly, the oracle. Ion’s agreement thereby demonstrates that he has missed the point.

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<sup>600</sup> “On (Mis)Interpreting Plato’s *Ion*,” 198.

<sup>601</sup> “On (Mis)Interpreting Plato’s *Ion*,” 190.

<sup>602</sup> On (Mis)Interpreting Plato’s *Ion*,” 169.

<sup>603</sup> “For a poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him. As long as a human being has his intellect in his possession he will always lack the power to make poetry or sing prophecy.”

<sup>604</sup> On (Mis)Interpreting Plato’s *Ion*,” 172.



Like Dixon above, Stern-Gillet asserts and does not argue that the appeals to inspiration in the *Ion* are ironic. Stern-Gillet does not explain *why* the reader (or Ion) ought to take Socrates' (admittedly poetic) description of the poet as "sarcasm," writing that "Socrates' sarcasm had already begun to load *entheos* with derogatory connotations and thus to make it ambiguous."<sup>605</sup> This is, again, an assertion and not an argument. It has yet to be shown *that* Socrates' speech on poetic inspiration is, in fact, ironic in either the mocking or complex sense. She asserts that, "once it is realised that Socrates' tactics consist in taking away with one hand the compliments that he dishes out with the other, [his] sarcasm becomes apparent."<sup>606</sup> In asking, "[h]ow seriously are we meant to take this speech [on inspiration]?" Stern-Gillet answers, "[o]nly half seriously."<sup>607</sup> The reader is left to wonder on what basis this assertion is made, and why irony is needed at all. One could take the speech on inspiration completely seriously and still retain Stern-Gillet's conclusions against the romantic notion of the poet as a creative genius. It is unclear what the ironic reading *does* for her interpretation of the dialogue. Stern-Gillet's assessment of the text, like Dixon's, grapples with the nuanced tension observed by Halliwell, who says that "[t]he dialogues betray a recurrent tension, embodied above all in the persona of Socrates, between attraction and resistance to the possibilities of poetic experience."<sup>608</sup> Similarly, Stern-Gillet remarks that

[i]n the phrasing of this thesis Socrates cunningly mixes flattering and unflattering language. To the extent that poets are mouthpieces for whatever deity temporarily takes over (*katechesthai*) their soul, they can be assimilated to soothsayers, seers and other hierophants. The truth value of their utterances, therefore, benefits from some divine warrant. Yet, to say that poems emanate from poets like oracles from prophets is but another way of saying that poets are not the authors of the beauties and the truths that they utter.<sup>609</sup>

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<sup>605</sup> On (Mis)Interpreting Plato's *Ion*," 192.

<sup>606</sup> On (Mis)Interpreting Plato's *Ion*," 180.

<sup>607</sup> On (Mis)Interpreting Plato's *Ion*," 178.

<sup>608</sup> Halliwell, *Between Ecstasy and Truth*, 159.

<sup>609</sup> On (Mis)Interpreting Plato's *Ion*," 178.

This quotation essentially points out that Socrates is affirming that the poets are divine conduits while rejecting their status as knowers or even autonomous creators. Again, we see that irony is offered to resolve the tension between praise and degradation, however, as argued above, this tension can already be mediated through a sincere reading of the inspiration thesis. Stern-Gillet can make this point without an appeal to irony.

In sum, scholars disagree about what Socratic irony is, and the concept has a complicated relationship to Plato's texts themselves. When isolating one's use of irony to those passages where εἶρων or its cognates appear, the ability to appeal to irony is narrowed considerably. The appearance of irony in Plato's texts is limited to instances in which Socrates is accused of being dishonest by those who do not understand his claims and commitment to philosophical life. Nevertheless, both Vlastos' account of complex irony and Brickhouse and Smith's acknowledgment of mocking irony provide nuance to this brief investigation. While methodological difficulties nevertheless remain, it is the case that one can make strong arguments for interpreting Socrates' words as either straightforwardly sarcastic at times (mocking irony) or sincere, in one sense while also ironic (in the sense of complex irony) in another. It is unclear how systematic any appeals to irony, simple or complex, should be or can be with respect to Plato's corpus. Yet, the act of interpretation is unavoidable and entails that it is sometimes reasonable and defensible to argue that Socrates either does not mean what he says, or, at the very least, means it in some nuanced or riddling manner. However, one should only appeal to irony, simple or complex, when such a reading can be justified as supporting a coherent, responsible, and interesting interpretation that cannot be rendered by a sincere reading of the same work or passage.

Accordingly, while some scholars see Socrates' claims regarding divine inspiration in the *Ion* as ironic, often in the simple sense that Socrates does not mean the inspiration thesis to be a

serious claim, it is unclear what doing so accomplishes. Scholars such as Dixon and Stern-Gillet have brought out many interesting, important, and supportable conclusions concerning the dialogue, but they have not demonstrated why the ironic approach is needed to render these conclusions sound. Nor have they demonstrated an “anti-poetry stance” in the *Ion* wholesale. In sum, they have not elucidated readings which *require* Socrates to be insincere about poetic inspiration. The conclusions for which these scholars have argued – i.e., the *Ion*’s denial of *techne*, creative genius, and knowledge to the poets and rhapsodes – can all be established without recourse to irony, sarcasm, or any other manner in which Socrates is unserious in his claim of poetic inspiration. Accordingly, the *Ion* can be rendered understandable without appeals to irony or insincerity concerning the inspiration thesis. On the contrary, it is by genuinely appealing to a divine origin for poetry’s power to move the soul that Socrates is able to sincerely maintain a tension between the good poetry can do and the need for reform regarding its cultural reception in his time. This tension is embodied well in the *Ion* wherein, as Halliwell puts it, “Socrates undertakes an almost scornful questioning of the poets’ pretensions and supposed wisdom,” and yet “nevertheless, he does not suggest that their works are without value.”<sup>610</sup> The nuance of this tension stands well enough on its own without appealing to irony as a hermeneutical device. Thus, this study maintains that the sincere reading of the dialogue is preferable insofar as it captures the nuance and complexities of the text in ways that the ironic reading elides. Taking Socrates’ inspiration thesis in the *Ion* as sincere can therefore sustain, and indeed actively supports, the conclusion that the poets and rhapsodes are not knowledgeable or experts in tandem with the conclusion that poetry has a power to move the *psyche*.

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<sup>610</sup> Halliwell, *Between Ecstasy and Truth*, 164.

#### IV. Poetry as *Daimonic*

It is true that Plato does not use the term “*daimonic*” to describe poetry anywhere in his dialogues. Nevertheless, one can compare the *Ion*’s depiction of divinely inspired poetry with Diotima’s account of the *daimonic* in the *Symposium* and with parallels made throughout the dialogues between poetry and *daimonic* activities. This comparison reveals a significant overlap between poetry and *daimonic* activities that is substantial enough to support reading poetry as a *daimonic* activity itself. At least three things elucidate the *daimonic* nature of poetry in the dialogues. First, Socrates describes the nature and function of poetry in a manner that is concretely *daimonic* according to Diotima’s account in the *Symposium*. Second, in both the *Ion* and elsewhere, Plato’s Socrates repeatedly speaks of poetry alongside other *daimonic* activities, indicating that he places poetry among them. Third, poetry in the *Ion* and elsewhere explicitly occupies the same “in-between” epistemological space between ignorance and knowledge ascribed to *daimonic* activities in the *Symposium* and other dialogues. This status of being “in-between” knowledge and ignorance is itself a *daimonic* quality with a mediating function related to bridging human and divine worlds.

As discussed in Chapter Two, Diotima describes the *daimonic* in the *Symposium*, providing substantial insight into the subject. This passage bears revisiting in the present chapter. First, Diotima explains the nature and function of the *daimonic*:

Everything spiritual... is in between god and mortal... [its power is to act as] messengers who shuttle back and forth between the two, conveying prayer and sacrifice from men to gods, while to men they bring commands from the gods and gifts in return for sacrifices. Being in the middle of the two, they round out the whole and bind fast the all to all.<sup>611</sup>

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<sup>611</sup> *Symposium* 202e: πᾶν τὸ δαιμόνιον μεταξύ ἐστὶ θεοῦ τε καὶ θνητοῦ... ἐρμηνεῦον καὶ διαπορθμεῦον θεοῖς τὰ παρ’ ἀνθρώπων καὶ ἀνθρώποις τὰ παρὰ θεῶν, τῶν μὲν τὰς δεήσεις καὶ θυσίας, τῶν δὲ τὰς ἐπιτάξεις τε καὶ ἀμοιβὰς τῶν θυσιῶν, ἐν μέσῳ δὲ ὄν ἀμφοτέρων συμπληροῖ, ὥστε τὸ πᾶν αὐτὸ αὐτῷ συνδεδέσθαι.

From this passage of the *Symposium*, the reader ascertains a chasm between the very “spaces” of divine and mortal existence that requires some binding element to link them. If we understand the gods to symbolize or reside in Plato’s intelligible realm, then this link must bridge the gap both ontologically and, consequently, epistemologically.<sup>612</sup> Without an ontological link, the causal efficacy of Forms and the Good to illuminate the sensible falls apart, leaving the order of the sensible without a prior source and leaving mortals without the ability to attain knowledge. The passage at *Republic* 476a-478e illuminates the causal link between Being and Becoming for both the being of the cosmos and the possibility of knowledge. Socrates explains that each Form “is itself one, but because they manifest themselves everywhere in association with actions, bodies, and one another, each of them appears to be many.”<sup>613</sup> Shortly after this statement, Socrates aligns the forms with Being when stating that “knowledge is set over what is [ἐπὶ μὲν τῷ ὄντι γνῶσις ἦν]” whereas ignorance is of necessity set over what is not [ἀγνοσία δ’ ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἐπὶ μὴ ὄντι],”<sup>614</sup> and “what is” is revealed to be the Forms.<sup>615</sup> Then, a middle category is revealed to be in between (μετέχω) what is and what is not; this is Becoming, or “what participates in both being and not being and cannot correctly be called purely one or the other.”<sup>616</sup> Becoming constitutes the sensible world of change, and it is built on the pattern of the Forms but is in motion and of a mixed nature to allow for generation and change. For example, beautiful things in Becoming are both beautiful and ugly rather than purely beautiful;<sup>617</sup> they

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<sup>612</sup> Diotima’s speech supports the claim that the “gap” in question is between the mortal/sensible and divine/intelligible, for her depiction of *eros* as a *daimon* facilitates an image of ascent from local knowledge of the mortal, sensible, and particular to its causal source in the intelligible. Hence, Diotima portrays Eros as mediating the gap between sensible beauty and intelligible Beauty, and, in doing so, he mediates the gap between the sensible and the intelligible more generally.

<sup>613</sup> *Republic* 476a.

<sup>614</sup> *Republic* 477a.

<sup>615</sup> *Republic* 476e-477a.

<sup>616</sup> *Republic* 476d-e.

<sup>617</sup> *Republic* 479a-b.

always fall short of identity with the Beautiful itself and contain some imperfection (i.e., ugliness).

Therefore, as Vinkesteijn notes, there is a “gap between the particularity of the self and the rest of the world, the world which is conceived to be structured according to or by the divine.”<sup>618</sup> Individual mortals cannot discern any transcendent order in the sensible without appealing to the primal and unchanging order found in the paradigmatic nature of Forms and their source in the Good. Mortals could not “ascend” the divided line if there was nothing to connect the sensible to the divine intelligible. In other words, because the mortal world is, in Vinkesteijn’s words, “structured according to or by the divine,” the gap between the mortal/sensible and the divine/intelligible has to be traversable, or the causal link between the two collapses. As Vinkesteijn puts it, the *daimonic* thereby becomes “the name for the space philosophy is supposed to traverse.”<sup>619</sup> Accordingly, the *daimonic* mediates the related gaps between the self and the divine as well as between Being and Becoming. The *daimonic*, being part-way between divine and mortal, knowledge and ignorance, beauty and ugliness, and so on does not fit clearly into one realm, but instead exists as something, an entity or an activity (or both) that partakes of both and is capable of relating to both. This mediative power renders the *daimonic* a “bind” that draws all of the cosmos together into a whole without any gaps.

Diotima outlines specific examples of *daimonic* mediation in human life, giving the reader vital insight into which kinds of activities and experiences might qualify as *daimonic*. She states: “Through them all divination passes, through them the art of priests in sacrifice and ritual, in enchantment, [all] prophecy, and sorcery [διὰ τούτου καὶ ἡ μαντικὴ πᾶσα χωρεῖ καὶ ἡ τῶν ἱερέων

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<sup>618</sup> Robert Vinkesteijn, “Philosophy and the *Daimonic* in Plato,” in *Conceptualising Divine Unions in the Greek and Near Eastern Worlds*, Vol. 7 (Boston, MA: BRILL, 2022), 209.

<sup>619</sup> Vinkesteijn, “Philosophy and the *Daimonic* in Plato,” 209.

τέχνη τῶν τε περὶ τὰς θυσίας καὶ τελετὰς καὶ τὰς ἐπωδὰς καὶ τὴν μαντείαν πᾶσαν καὶ γοητείαν].”<sup>620</sup>

Thus, according to Diotima and including the later addition of *eros*,<sup>621</sup> *daimonic* activities include:

1. Divination (τὸ μαντικόν)
2. Burnt-offering or sacrifice (ἡ θυσία, which can also mean the festival at which such offerings occur or a rite or ceremony)
3. Rites of initiation into the mysteries (ἡ τελετή)
4. Enchantment or incantation (ἡ ἐπωδή, the same word used in the *Phaedo* for the myth Socrates tells at the end)
5. Oracular or prophetic power (ἡ μαντεία)
6. Magic (πᾶς ἡ γοητεία)
7. Eros (ὁ Ἔρως)

All of these activities share the quality of mediation between human and divine worlds. They are all examples of human attempts to communicate with the divine (sacrifice, some uses of magic), to hear the divine communicate with humanity (divination, oracular and prophetic abilities, and some uses of magic), or elevate the human being to a higher and more divine state (rites of initiation, enchantment or incantation, and some uses of magic).

Diotima follows this list by explaining why humans need the *daimonic* as a mediating power. Highlighting the gap discussed above, she tells young Socrates that “[g]ods do not mix with men; they mingle and converse with us through spirits instead, whether we are awake or asleep [θεὸς δὲ ἀνθρώπῳ οὐ μίγνυται, ἀλλὰ διὰ τούτου πᾶσά ἐστιν ἡ ὁμιλία καὶ ἡ διάλεκτος θεοῖς πρὸς ἀνθρώπους, καὶ ἐγρηγορόσι καὶ καθεύδουσι].”<sup>622</sup> Hence, Diotima explicitly links the nature of the *daimonic* with the need for bridging a gap between the gods and humankind that the human, in her unmediated state, cannot traverse on her own. These *daimonic* activities thereby serve as vehicles through which this gap can be overcome. Finally, Diotima explains the particular nature of the *daimonic* in relation to the human being and knowledge. Unlike other forms of knowledge,

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<sup>620</sup> *Symposium* 203a.

<sup>621</sup> *Symposium* 203a.

<sup>622</sup> *Symposium* 203a. One is prompted to recall Socrates’ oneiromancy in the *Phaedo* here.

the *daimonic* occupies an epistemic state which is, like its own very nature, “in-between.” She tells us that one “who is wise in any of these ways is a man of the spirit, but he who is wise in any other way, in a profession or any manual work, is merely a mechanic [ὁ μὲν περὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα σοφὸς δαιμόνιος ἀνὴρ, ὁ δὲ ἄλλο τι σοφὸς ὢν ἢ περὶ τέχνας ἢ χειρουργίας τινὰς βάναντος].”<sup>623</sup> Thus, the *daimonically* wise person does not possess *techne* and cannot give an account of her knowledge but is rather one who has received some direct and immediate communication from the gods directly in the form of one of the above activities or experiences.

From the passages above, one can conclude that the description of poetry in the *Ion* marks it as *daimonic*. According to the *Symposium*, one concludes that insofar as the poet genuinely receives something from the gods, she necessarily receives it via the *daimonic*, for the “gods do not mix with men” without intermediaries.<sup>624</sup> If Socrates is serious in the *Ion* about attributing divine inspiration to the poets, then this inspiration can only be transmitted *daimonically* according to Diotima’s account. Still, poetry is attributed to the Muses, who are not described clearly as *daimones* themselves. Consequently, one may wonder how poetry could be *daimonic* since it is attributed to the Muses and not to a *daimonic* entity or power. Nevertheless, other forms of divine inspiration proceed through mediation, for, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates names patron gods for some of the *daimonic* activities on Diotima’s list. Socrates attributes the inspiration of oracles and prophets to Apollo; of mystic states and rites to Dionysus; of the erotic to Aphrodite; of poetry to the Muses.<sup>625</sup> Notably, Diotima offers her own mythology of the conception of Eros on the birthday of Aphrodite to explain why “Love was born to follow Aphrodite and serve her.”<sup>626</sup> Aphrodite is the patron goddess of erotic *mania* and inspiration, and she accomplishes this function through her

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<sup>623</sup> *Symposium* 203a.

<sup>624</sup> *Symposium* 203a.

<sup>625</sup> *Phaedrus* 265b.

<sup>626</sup> *Symposium* 203c.



*daimonic* emissary, Eros, born on the day of her birth and destined to serve her in all things. Hence, according to the *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, there is a chain of inspiration that proceeds from the goddess, Aphrodite, to the *daimon*, Eros, and then to the human lover. We can conclude, then, that though the gods do not mingle with men, through the *daimonic* they nevertheless transmit various forms of inspiration to humans, and the *Ion* tells the reader that poetry is one of those forms of inspired communication.

Therefore, *daimones* appear to be activities, entities, or perhaps both. In many ways, the entity and the activity seem to be one and the same. In the case of Eros, for example, his status as a *daimonic* entity is identical with his activity as striving for, yet never having, what he desires. Eros is summarized simply as “wanting to possess the good forever.”<sup>627</sup> The entity, Eros, is what he is by virtue of being identical to his activity. Eros is the personification of desire itself, the *activity* of desire as wanting the Good and the Beautiful but recognizing that one does not have them. Diotima tells Socrates that Eros “must be a lover of wisdom and, as such, is in between being wise and being ignorant;”<sup>628</sup> this is because *eros* is fundamentally constituted by a kind of tension between having and not having the object of its desire. Desire simply *is* this tension between lacking something for which we yearn and yet, nonetheless, possessing the resources required to pursue (though perhaps not permanently attain) it. Similarly, Eros is between beauty and ugliness,<sup>629</sup> having (in the sense of potency) and not having,<sup>630</sup> resource and poverty,<sup>631</sup> mortality and immortality,<sup>632</sup> and so on. Eros, the entity, is the personification of all that belongs to desire as a mediating force in human life. Hence, Diotima describes him as an activity fully constituted

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<sup>627</sup> *Symposium* 206a.

<sup>628</sup> *Symposium* 204b.

<sup>629</sup> *Symposium* 202b.

<sup>630</sup> *Symposium* 203d.

<sup>631</sup> *Symposium* 203c.

<sup>632</sup> *Symposium* 203e.

by what is “in-between;” he is always striving to bridge a gap because his very nature is to have one foot on either side of the chasm. Whether the *daimonic* is an activity or an active entity, the function is the same: mediation between humanity and some divine nature. Perhaps, one could even go so far as to say that there is a *daimonic* activity associated with each god. For example, Apollo, in being so vastly above human modes of knowing, thinking, and communicating, cannot simply convey divine truth to us without mediation. The mediation required for Apollo’s communication is, specifically, that of prophecy “which neither speaks nor conceals, but gives a sign.”<sup>633</sup> Similarly, Aphrodite reaches us through *eros* and Dionysus through mystic rites. The Muses, similarly, do not communicate with us directly but do so through poetry, music, art, and all their other purviews; these activities are the mode by which the Muses, in particular, bridge the gap between themselves and us. In each case, the god communicates divine truth to humankind through an activity that resides between mortal and divine “spaces” in order to bind the two together.

Accordingly, poetry comes to us from the Muses via *daimonic* mediation in the same way – whether that is through an actual *daimon* of poetry which may or may not exist, or through poetry itself as an activity that serves a *daimonic* function by enabling us to catch sight of the divine beyond us. Socrates’ description of the poets highlights this mediating function of poetry. He says that “poets are nothing but [messengers] [ἐρμηνῆς] of the gods, possessed by whoever possesses them,”<sup>634</sup> which mirrors Diotima’s language of the *daimones* as “messengers [ἐρμηνεῦον]” going between gods and mortals.<sup>635</sup> The activity of poetry, then, seems *daimonic* in and of itself, being another mode by which the *daimonic* binds all to all through its “shuttling back and forth.” As

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<sup>633</sup> DK 22B93.

<sup>634</sup> *Ion*, 535a: οἱ δὲ ποιηταὶ οὐδὲν ἄλλ’ ἢ ἐρμηνῆς εἰσιν τῶν θεῶν.

<sup>635</sup> *Symposium* 202e: ἐρμηνεῦον καὶ διαπορθμεῦον θεοῖς τὰ παρ’ ἀνθρώπων καὶ ἀνθρώποις τὰ παρὰ θεῶν.

noted above in section II, Collobert rejects the claim that the poets and rhapsodes are hermeneuts of the gods, arguing that “the identification [of inspiration with possession] is decisive. It allows Plato to argue that the poet cannot claim to be both inspired and hermeneutist, i.e., interpreter.”<sup>636</sup> However, as argued previously, this claim rests on a particular assumption regarding what is meant by calling the poets and rhapsodes ἐρμηνῆς.

Furthermore, however, Collobert’s claim is inconsistent with the description of the *daimon* as ἐρμηνῆς. For Collobert, the poets, by being out of their minds, are not rational, and she therefore concludes that they also cannot also be hermeneuts of the gods. Hence, she must understand ἐρμηνῆς as an essentially rational function of interpretation or exegesis. Yet, if we read ἐρμηνῆς as it appears in the *Symposium*, we see that, while *daimones* are described as hermeneuts of the gods, their method of interceding between gods and humans does not involve the transmission of precise, discursive claims. Quite to the contrary, as Diotima tells us, *daimones* act as hermeneuts by transmitting encounters with the divine through rites and rituals, oracles, and the erotic. None of these produces the knowledge that Socrates is critiquing Ion for claiming to have. Yet, Socrates still describes them as products of *daimonic* ἐρμηνῆς. In other words, poetry presents a possible link or bridge connecting humans to the divine just as eros, prophecy, and rites are said to do. Thus, while Collobert concludes from the *Ion* that the “poet cannot claim to be both transmitter and interpreter,”<sup>637</sup> ἐρμηνῆς actually seems to indicate that “transmitter” and “interpreter” are the same task and do not entail rational exegesis on the part of either the poet or the *daimon*. Considering the etymological origins of ἐρμηνῆς in the name of Hermes, as Socrates himself does,<sup>638</sup> is helpful here. Hermes is a psychopomp and messenger of the gods. His role is not to

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<sup>636</sup> Collobert, “Poetry as Flawed Reproduction,” 45.

<sup>637</sup> Collobert, “Poetry as Flawed Reproduction,” 46.

<sup>638</sup> See *Cratylus* 407e.

“interpret” messages in the sense of giving exegesis, but rather simply to deliver them. The poets, therefore, can be both out of their wits *and* hermeneuts of the gods insofar as being out of their wits enables them to take on the role of mediating conduit. The poet’s task as hermeneut is present *in* her poetic *mania*, not in contradiction with it. The inspired mode of the poet’s states does not undermine her status as ἐρμηνῆς. Instead, her role as ἐρμηνῆς is corroborated by understanding the connection between the poetic hermeneut of the gods and the *daimonic* one as essentially one and the same. Or, rather, the former is a species of the latter. Therefore, the poet is a hermeneut insofar as she is divinely inspired and thereby functions as a conduit for the *daimonic* activity of poetry.

Moreover, the *Ion* indicates that poetry not only shares this mediating function with other *daimonic* activities, but also that it shares the same goal of making the divine more present to humankind. For example, the image of the magnet indicates that poetry can, ideally, draw an individual upward toward the divine. Crucially, Socrates explicitly tells *Ion* that the purpose of divine inspiration in the poets, as well as in other *daimonic* people, is to make the divine known to us:

On account of these things the god, removing the intellect of these poets, uses them as servants like he uses oracles and diviners. He does this in order that we who hear these things know that it is not these poets – for whom the intellect is absent – who are saying such very worthy things; rather, it is the god himself who is speaking. So, through these poets, the god speaks to us loud and clear.<sup>639</sup>

While Collobert argues that removing the poets’ reason is meant to undermine the poet’s role as hermeneut, the *daimonic* reading demonstrates that the claim that the poets are inspired strengthens this role. Recall that Diotima held that wisdom imparted *daimonically* was not like wisdom gained

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<sup>639</sup> *Ion*, 534c-d, translation mine: διὰ ταῦτα δὲ ὁ θεὸς ἐξαιρούμενος τούτων τὸν νοῦν τούτοις χρῆται ὑπηρέταις καὶ τοῖς χρησμοδοῖς καὶ τοῖς μάντεσι τοῖς θείοις, ἵνα ἡμεῖς οἱ ἀκούοντες εἰδῶμεν ὅτι οὐχ οὗτοί εἰσιν οἱ ταῦτα λέγοντες οὕτω πολλοῦ ἄξια, οἷς νοῦς μὴ πάρεστιν, ἀλλ’ ὁ θεὸς αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ λέγων, διὰ τούτων δὲ φθέγγεται πρὸς ἡμᾶς.

through *techne*. The external source of what is communicated by the gods through the poet is part of what marks the poetry as divine and *daimonic*. The activity is externally initiated and bestows upon the individual something that she cannot communicate on her own. Socrates' *daimonion* presents a model for such experiences, as Luc Brisson notes in saying that "Socrates never takes the initiative, and never solicits the signal. The signal somehow 'falls upon him', without his expecting it."<sup>640</sup> The poets' lack of *techne* actually aligns with both the function and purpose of *daimonic* activity as that which mediates the human to the divine precisely by stepping outside of normal human modes of thinking and reasoning. It is only by presenting something otherwise unaccountable that the poet becomes a channel for the presence of the divine.

Aside from parallels between poetry's nature, function, and purpose and those of the *daimonic*, Plato consistently draws clear connections between poetry and other activities that Diotima identifies as *daimonic*. Presumably, this is because he sees poetry as a similar kind of activity. Diotima distinguishes between those who are wise *daimonically* and those who are wise through *techne*.<sup>641</sup> Diotima describes the *daimonic* as that which bestows knowledge and power *without techne*, which is precisely how poetry is described in the *Ion*. As the passage above (*Ion* 534c-d) shows, Socrates explicitly likens the poets to oracles and diviners. Indeed, this passage actually says that the god uses poets just like he uses poets and diviners (i.e., both are used to point humans toward the divine). In this passage, Socrates tells Ion that the function and purpose of poetry and the *daimonic* activities of prophecy and divination are the same. Thus, in the *Ion*, Plato claims that the same power and divine madness that enables *daimonic* activities also enables poetry. Again, in the *Phaedrus*, poetry is included in a list of four categories of divine madness.

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<sup>640</sup> Brisson, "Socrates and the Divine Signal According to Plato's Testimony," 4-5.

<sup>641</sup> *Symposium* 203a: "He who is wise in any of these ways is a man of the spirit, but he who is wise in any other way, in a [*techne*] or any manual work, is merely a mechanic." καὶ ὁ μὲν περὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα σοφὸς δαιμόνιος ἀνὴρ, ὁ δὲ ἄλλο τι σοφὸς ὢν ἢ περὶ τέχνας ἢ χειρουργίας τινὰς βάναντος.

The other three types are *daimonic* according to Diotima's list and include the madness of oracles, mystic rites, and Eros.<sup>642</sup> In the *Ion*, Socrates also states that "a poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and intellect is no longer in him. As long as a human being has his intellect in his possession, he will always lack the power to make poetry or sing prophecy."<sup>643</sup> Again, we see Socrates liken poetry and prophecy to one another, as he treats the power to make poetry and the power to sing prophecy as similarly conditioned by the need for divine possession. Additionally, Socrates' description of the poet as "winged and holy" clearly calls the *Phaedrus* to mind, in which Socrates, quoting some lines of poetry, makes a pun from the connection between eros and the Greek word for wings, *pteros*.<sup>644</sup> Thus, much like the wings of the soul, whose growth is attributed to erotic activity, poetry bears the soul aloft to a vision of the Beautiful.

Prophets and poets appear together again in the *Meno*, wherein Socrates again says that they both have an intuition of truth without being able to give an account of it through technical knowledge or knowledge of true causes.<sup>645</sup> Famously, Socrates again puts poets and mantics together in the *Apology* when he makes the same claim, that "poets do not compose their poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers and prophets who also say many fine things without any understanding of what they say."<sup>646</sup> Socrates repeatedly links the power by which poets compose to the power with which seers and prophets act. In the case of seers and prophets, this power is revealed in the *Symposium* to be *daimonic*. Further, in the *Symposium* such power to know the truth without being able to ground it in a true

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<sup>642</sup> *Phaedrus* 244a-245b.

<sup>643</sup> *Ion* 534b-c: κοῦφον γὰρ χρῆμα ποιητῆς ἐστὶν καὶ πτηγὸν καὶ ἱερόν, καὶ οὐ πρότερον οἷός τε ποιεῖν πρὶν ἂν ἐνθεός τε γένηται καὶ ἔκφρων καὶ ὁ νοῦς μηκέτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐνῆι: ἕως δ' ἂν τουτὶ ἔχη τὸ κτῆμα, ἀδύνατος πᾶς ποιεῖν ἀνθρώπος ἐστὶν καὶ χρησιμωδεῖν.

<sup>644</sup> *Phaedrus* 252b.

<sup>645</sup> *Meno* 99a-100a.

<sup>646</sup> *Apology* 22c.

understanding of forms and causes is named as the power of *daimonic* wisdom. In sum, Socrates likens poetic inspiration to the divine *mania* required for mystery rites, oracular utterance, and ascension via the erotic. Poetic inspiration also occurs for the same purpose as these other *daimonic* activities; the power to “make poetry or sing prophecy” is identified as the same. Furthermore, the same epistemic state characteristic of prophets and seers is also characteristic of poets. Thus, the power by which poets, oracles, prophets, and diviners share their ability to “say many fine things” without understanding is a *daimonic* power belonging to them, all of which poetry partakes in as much as the others in Diotima’s list. Otherwise, one must explain how the power of poetry is likened to the power of prophecy or divination so many times over and is said to produce the same results but is of a different nature entirely (i.e., somehow non-*daimonic* as opposed to all the things to which it is likened).

Finally, the epistemological character of *daimonic* activities and poetry reveal that they both aim toward the same goal. This goal becomes more apparent when considering what Socrates proclaims to be the very purpose of education in poetry in the *Republic*:

Aren’t these the reasons, Glaucon, that education in music and poetry is most important? First, because rhythm and harmony permeate the inner part of the soul more than anything else, affecting it most strongly and bringing it grace, so that if someone is properly educated in music and poetry, it makes him graceful, but if not, then the opposite. Second, because anyone who has been properly educated in music and poetry will sense it acutely when something has been omitted from a thing and when it hasn’t been finely crafted or finely made by nature. And since he has the right distastes, he’ll praise fine things, be pleased by them, receive them into his soul, and, being nurtured by them, become fine and good. He’ll rightly object to what is shameful, hating it while he’s still young and unable to grasp the reason, but, having been educated in this way, he will welcome the reason when it comes and recognize it easily because of its kinship with himself.<sup>647</sup>

Here, we see that education in music and poetry enables the young guardian to rightly judge between the fine and the shameful, even though “he’s still young and unable to grasp the reason.”

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<sup>647</sup> *Republic* 401d-402a.

The description of this kind of power of judgment closely mirrors Diotima's description of Eros, who she describes as "something in between wisdom and ignorance" and who she says has the power "to judge things correctly without being able to give a reason."<sup>648</sup> Just as poetry gives the guardians the power to judge the fine correctly without yet being able to "grasp the reason," so too does *daimonic* Eros have the power to judge correctly "without being able to give a reason." Both poetry and Eros instill the *daimonic* power of true opinion in the soul, giving it a mediatory intuition of what is good and bad and priming the soul for the further task of solidifying such intuitions with more explicit reasoning. The soul that falls under the *daimonic* ministrations of poetry will be able to "welcome the reason when it comes," but also to enjoy an intermediary understanding that directs them toward the right things in the meantime.

Music and poetry are particularly important because "rhythm and harmony permeate the inner part of the soul more than anything else, affecting it most strongly,"<sup>649</sup> hence, these activities have a special power over the soul that can move it toward philosophical contemplation of the Good. This power can also alert the soul to what might be missing, again, in an intuitive manner. In all of Socrates' examples, a *daimonic* intuition is the source of poetry's power over the soul. This intuition gives the soul a pre-discursive sense of what is right and wrong and can grant the soul a kind of immediate discernment that allows it to orient itself properly toward the truth. Socrates tells us, finally, that "education in music and poetry... ought to end in the love of the fine and beautiful."<sup>650</sup> The telos of education in these subjects points to the *daimonic* quality of poetry, for the mechanism by which *eros* directs the soul's ascent is precisely through the desire for the Beautiful initiated in the sight of the beloved. Poetry appears to direct the soul's ascent by

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<sup>648</sup> *Symposium* 202a: τὸ ὀρθὰ δοξάζειν καὶ ἄνευ τοῦ ἔχειν λόγον δοῦναι οὐκ οἶσθ'

<sup>649</sup> *Republic* 401d.

<sup>650</sup> *Republic* 403c.



cultivating in it a love of the Beautiful in rhythm and harmony and directing it to the Beautiful itself through this love. In both cases, the poetic and erotic, a *daimonic* mediation occurs that directs the soul toward what is good through the immediate presence of the Beautiful in particular, which invites the soul to follow its intuition upward toward the Forms. Thus, while the *Republic* is often seen as the primary text for discrediting poetry, as discussed in Chapter Two, it contains an affirmation of poetry's *daimonic* power to bring the soul toward the Good. However, this power operates not through the bestowal of knowledge but of what is in between knowledge and ignorance. Like *eros*, poetry is neither pure wisdom nor pure ignorance. Still, it points toward wisdom, providing the link of correct judgment by instilling in us a love of the Beautiful, leading to the Good itself.

The *daimonic* is elsewhere connected directly to true opinion or the power to judge things correctly without being able to give a reason. It results in an intuitive knowing that then requires philosophical examination to explain and justify. Poetry is referenced in the *Meno* when the power of true opinion via divine gift is attributed to soothsayers, prophets, poets, and statesmen.<sup>651</sup> Halliwell brings out how this kind of “in-between” knowledge is present in Socrates’ treatment of the poets specifically, noting that, while Socrates does affirm that there are “many beautiful things” found in the works of the poets, “Socrates does not himself explain how he recognizes [them]. Still less does he explain how he can recognize them without knowing (the whole of) what they mean.”<sup>652</sup> Yet, if we take poetry as a *daimonic* activity, then Halliwell’s puzzle here is resolved, for, in the *Symposium*, Diotima connects the *daimonic* in general and *eros* in particular to the power of true opinion. As discussed above, Diotima described those who participate in *daimonic* activities in general (be it divination, priestly arts, sacrifice and ritual, enchantment, prophecy, and sorcery)

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<sup>651</sup> *Meno* 99a-100a.

<sup>652</sup> Halliwell, *Between Ecstasy and Truth*, 165.

as those who are wise in ways other than having systematic knowledge (i.e., they are opposed to those with *techne*). Thus, the problem that Halliwell identifies regarding Socrates' treatment of the poets in which he can recognize "many beautiful things" without being able to give a systematic account of how or why further substantiates the connection between the poetic and the *daimonic*.

Since the goal of the *daimonic* is to bridge the gap between human and divine, it makes sense that it occupies an intermediary epistemological position between ignorance and knowledge; its goal is to get us beyond ignorance by directing us toward knowledge. But the "in-between" status of the wisdom conferred by *daimonic* activities is not a product of the inferior content of these experiences but rather a feature of their nature as mediatory. One cannot leap from ignorance to knowledge. There must be something between the two which awakens the soul to what it lacks. Hence, the *daimonic* is in-between precisely *in order to* "bind fast the all to all."<sup>653</sup> According to Aristotle, Plato never abandoned the doctrine that "all sensible things are ever in a state of flux and there is no knowledge about them."<sup>654</sup> No knowledge, yes. But there is something between knowledge and ignorance, just as there is something between what is and what is not. The power attributed to poetry to move the soul along with its divine status demonstrates that poetry occupies this in-between status, hitting on the truth but unable to give an account. Thus, Plato repeatedly places poets alongside oracles because both have the ability to say something true, but neither can discursively and precisely explain what this truth is. However, the inability to establish itself rationally is not a weakness of poetry (or the oracular or the erotic). Instead, it comprises its very nature as *daimonic*, enabling it to bridge a gap and aid the soul in its ascent toward the Good.

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<sup>653</sup> *Symposium* 202e.

<sup>654</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, trans. E.S. Forster, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 987a. All subsequent quotations from *Metaphysics* are taken from this translation. See also Levin, *The Ancient Quarrel*, 3-4: "Plato takes up Heraclitus' emphasis on the striking presence of change but restricts the applicability of that account to the spatiotemporal world, insisting that reality... is utterly free of mutation."

Accordingly, one can read poetry in Plato's corpus as *daimonic*, and this reading is especially evident when comparing the *Ion*'s focused discussion of poetry as without *techne* yet divinely inspired with Diotima's description of *daimonic* nature, activities, and powers in the *Symposium*. The *daimonic* functions to bridge the gaps between individual humans and the divine knowledge we desire and between the mode of our existence in Becoming and the divine mode of existence within Being. Poetry is not only described in the *Ion* as a power coming from divine inspiration and not from human *techne*, but its origin entails its *daimonic* nature in that the gods do not communicate things directly to humanity but rather through *daimonic* intercessors. Furthermore, the dialogues repeatedly place poetry alongside other activities named as *daimonic*, and its function is described in both the *Ion* and the *Republic* as alerting humans to divine reality and communication. Thus, poetry occupies a liminal epistemic space between knowledge and ignorance like other *daimonic* activities, and it has the power to invest the human with true opinion; it will ideally point her in the further direction of philosophical contemplation.

#### V. *Phaedrus* and the question of Bad Inspiration

As discussed at the beginning of Section III, there are at least two counter-arguments to the claim that a *daimonic* understanding of poetry's function in the philosophical life contributes to solving the problem of poetry. The first is that one could argue that Socrates does not actually mean that the poets are divinely inspired, and this position was addressed in Section III. The second counter-argument is that one could assert that, even if one can understand poetry as a *daimonic* product of divine inspiration, its positive role in the philosophical life does not necessarily follow. It can be argued that divine inspiration is not always good for the human *psyche*. After all, Hesiod's

Muses not only speak the truth, but they can also tell convincing lies.<sup>655</sup> In other words, Plato’s Socrates may genuinely attribute poetry to divine inspiration, but this fact alone does not necessarily mean he sees it as a good thing. At first blush, this counter-argument would seem to be easily dismissed. The dialogues consistently refer to the poets as divinely inspired,<sup>656</sup> and they also consistently state that “a god isn’t the cause of all things but only of good ones.”<sup>657</sup> The easy conclusion is that since the gods only cause good things, divinely inspired works are always good *insofar as* they are inspired. Unlike Hesiod’s Muses, who are adept at telling lies,<sup>658</sup> Plato’s Muses enjoy no such fiendish pleasures. Therefore, there can be no such thing as “bad inspiration,” which means that no divine inspiration leads one further from divine truth. Inspired works might lead one astray if they are improperly understood and interpreted. Still, insofar as the work is divinely inspired, it is, in and of itself, edifying for the soul’s ascent toward the Good.

However, the issue is not so easily brushed aside. Readers may recall that concerns over poetry in the *Republic* centered around the immoral content of poetic works by those such as Homer, who taught the young that the unjust life is preferable to the just.<sup>659</sup> Further, Socrates counts Homer among those poets who are divinely inspired.<sup>660</sup> And yet, Socrates states that Homer

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<sup>655</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 28-29.

<sup>656</sup> For poets as divinely inspired (ἐνθεός), see *Ion* 533e and 534b. For poets as divinely possessed or enthused (ἐνθουσιάζω), see *Meno* 99d; *Ion* 533e, 535c, 536b; and *Apology* 22c.

<sup>657</sup> *Republic*, 380c. See also *Phaedrus*, 242a: “if Love is a god or something divine—which he is—he can’t be bad in any way.” *Republic* 377d-383c deals with preventing the poets from telling any stories which depict the gods doing immoral deeds including warring with one another, lying, committing adultery, and so on. At *Republic* 380b, Socrates states “as for saying that a god, who is himself good, is the cause of bad things, we’ll fight that in every way, and we won’t allow anyone to say it in his own city.”

<sup>658</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 28-29.

<sup>659</sup> *Republic*, 392a-b: “[The poets] say that many unjust people are happy and many just ones wretched, that injustice is profitable if it escapes detection, and that justice is another’s good but one’s own loss. I think we’ll prohibit these stories and order the poets to compose the opposite kind of poetry and tell the opposite kind of tales.”

<sup>660</sup> Socrates says that Ion is suspended from the same chain of inspiration as Homer in the *Ion*, indicating Homer, too, is inspired (*Ion* 533d). At *Ion* 536b, Socrates references this chain of inspiration coming from Homer again, and he indicates that Orpheus and Musaeus have their own inspired lines as well. As for Hesiod, the situation is less clear. Socrates names Hesiod among these three inspired poets – Homer, Orpheus, and Musaeus – in the *Apology* at 41a. At *Symposium* 209d, Diotima names Hesiod alongside Homer and “the other good poets” as those who produce beautiful offspring in their poems. Still, there do not seem to be any straightforward indications that Hesiod is considered ἐνθεός by Socrates.

makes “foolish mistake[s]... about the gods” by depicting them as capriciously giving both good and evil to humans.<sup>661</sup> Ergo, “bad inspiration” seems to exist in the dialogues, for even when inspired, the poets still make “foolish mistakes” about the gods. Perhaps the strongest example of seemingly bad inspiration in Plato’s corpus appears in the *Phaedrus*. In that work, Socrates acquiesces to Phaedrus' insistence that the older man gives a speech praising the non-lover’s sanity over the lover's madness.<sup>662</sup> Socrates clearly remarks that he is divinely inspired by Pan and the Nymphs while giving the speech,<sup>663</sup> yet his *daimonion* prevents him from leaving the scene. Socrates states that his speech was “close to being impious,”<sup>664</sup> and the divine sign has indicated he must not leave until he makes “atonement for some offence against the gods.”<sup>665</sup> The Palinode Socrates subsequently offers up serves as this atonement, and it praises divine *mania* in general and that of Eros specifically. Notably, Socrates’ first inspired speech is marked as shameful, for he covers his head while speaking.<sup>666</sup> In contrast, when Socrates gives his palinode to Eros, he remarks that he no longer needs to cover himself, indicating that this second speech is not shameful.<sup>667</sup> In sum, the *Phaedrus* presents the reader with a clear-cut example of bad divine inspiration in that the speech is both clearly inspired and yet shameful, worthy of rebuke, and requires "atonement" for bordering on impiety. Yet, given the consistency with which Plato’s text maintains the benevolence of the divine, his dialogues seem to establish the existence of bad inspiration while simultaneously denying its logical possibility, resulting in an apparent contradiction.

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<sup>661</sup> *Republic* 379c-d.

<sup>662</sup> *Phaedrus* 237b-242a.

<sup>663</sup> *Phaedrus* 238c-d, 241e, 263d, 278b-c.

<sup>664</sup> *Phaedrus* 242d.

<sup>665</sup> *Phaedrus* 242c.

<sup>666</sup> *Phaedrus* 237a. He initially says he covers his head to prevent him from getting embarrassed by looking upon the beautiful Phaedrus, but at 243b Socrates reveals that he actually covered his head “in shame.”

<sup>667</sup> *Phaedrus* 2443b.

Accordingly, this chapter now turns to address this second counter-argument by looking more closely at the seemingly bad inspiration of Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus*. Upon closer examination, the inspiration of the first speech actually works in tandem with the *daimonion's* rebuke and the need for atonement. Hence, the inspiration of the first speech is ultimately good in the sense that it is edifying for the philosopher's soul. In order to demonstrate how the divine inspiration of a speech can be good, one must investigate the relationship between the form and content of the speech, as well as the role of interpretation in rendering an inspired speech edifying rather than damaging. Moreover, one should look at the context of the text more broadly and consider the significance of the particular deities named as the sources of inspiration. Thus, to briefly summarize the central claims argued below, one can understand the inspiration of the first speech as good in that the inspired elements, especially given the gods behind them, work against the speech's praise of the sober-minded non-lover. The inspiration of the first speech thereby corroborates what Socrates' *daimonion* communicates, and is thus good; it points him away from what was impious and guides him toward the truth of the matter at hand: the goodness of divine *mania* itself. Consequently, the harm or benefit of the speech as a whole rests on the shoulders of the interpreter, Socrates, whose task is to divine what is being communicated by the inspiring divinities correctly. Any harm that comes from the inspired speech is not causally located in its inspired status, but rather in the ignorance of the interpreter.

One should first understand that accepting the thesis that the *Phaedrus* does in fact depict an instance of "bad inspiration" is untenable by the standards of the dialogue itself. It is not the case that the *Phaedrus* simply offers an account of divine inspiration different from other dialogues like the *Ion* or the *Symposium*. The contradiction that lies at the heart of the issue, the concomitant claims of impious speeches or poems alongside claims of their divine causality, is

present in the *Phaedrus* itself. First, bad inspiration in the first speech would entail that divine power (the *daimonion*) fought against divine power (Pan and the Nymphs). Stories of the gods fighting are precisely the type to face banishment in the *Kallipolis*.<sup>668</sup> Disagreement among the gods specifically forms a considerable flaw in Euthyphro's logic in the eponymous dialogue, forcing the *mantis* to argue that piety is "what *all* the gods love."<sup>669</sup> Most importantly, though, a depiction of conflicting divine powers does not square with the *Phaedrus*' own depiction of the gods, for, in Socrates' later description of Zeus' procession outside the heavens, the divine is supposed to have a superior vision of the Forms.<sup>670</sup> All the heavenly beings are supposed to make this journey, for "[f]ollowing [Zeus] is an army of gods and spirits [δαίμόνων] arranged in eleven sections."<sup>671</sup> Hence, the gods and *daimones*, having all had an unimpaired vision of reality, are all good and all share in the Form of Knowledge itself.<sup>672</sup> On what basis, then, would one divinity lead the soul away from the ascent while another leads the soul toward it? The *Phaedrus* depicts all divinity as dedicated to those things above. It is in following the gods that the human soul ascends to see what they see, for it is the "one who follows a god most closely" who sees the greatest measure of reality.<sup>673</sup> Consequently, even the mischievous Pan and his Nymphs must be included in Zeus' ranks, and so, their impartations to humans must align with

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<sup>668</sup> *Republic* 378c-d: "The battles of gods and giants, and all the various stories of the gods hating their families or friends, should neither be told nor even woven in embroideries. If we're to persuade our people that no citizen has ever hated another and that it's impious to do so, then that's what should be told to children from the beginning by old men and women; and as these children grow older, poets should be compelled to tell them the same sort of thing. We won't admit stories into our city—whether allegorical or not—about Hera being chained by her son, nor about Hephaestus being hurled from heaven by his father when he tried to help his mother, who was being beaten, nor about the battle of the gods in Homer." See also *Republic* 391d: The poets must not "attempt to persuade our young people that the gods bring about evil or that heroes are no better than humans."

<sup>669</sup> See *Euthyphro* 7a-9e. Emphasis mine.

<sup>670</sup> *Phaedrus* 247a-e.

<sup>671</sup> *Phaedrus* 247a.

<sup>672</sup> *Phaedrus* 247d-e.

<sup>673</sup> *Phaedrus* 248a. Though the gods all personify different manners in which the soul comes into contact with reality (Apollo through prophecy, the Muses through poetry, Dionysus through the mysteries, Aphrodite through Eros, and so on), the myth of the winged soul in the *Phaedrus* portrays them all as directing the soul upward toward the Forms and the Good.

their perfect, divine vision of the Forms.<sup>674</sup> Second, Socrates says that the first speech was wrong because Eros “is a god or something divine,” and therefore “can’t be bad in any way.”<sup>675</sup> In other words, the speech criticizing one who is erotically mad was impious because it attributed something bad to what comes from the divine. Therefore, if we take the inspiration of the first speech as bad, then we are essentially saying that the divine inspiration was bad because it proclaimed divine inspiration (in this case, of *eros*) to be bad. Thus, it must somehow be the case that the first speech is *both* good *insofar as* it is divinely inspired *and* requires the *daimonion*’s rebuke and the atonement of the palinode *insofar as* something else about it is bad.

The key to resolving the apparent contradiction between inspiration and impiety lies in an examination of what elements of the first speech are marked as inspired vs. uninspired. On the one hand, the inspired elements are the form (verging on dithyramps, shifting from lyric to epic verse, and so on),<sup>676</sup> a kind of overtaking madness,<sup>677</sup> and the method of approach (choosing to

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<sup>674</sup> Of course, the story of Zeus’ procession outside the vault of heaven is an instance of mythopoesis for Plato. The reader is not meant to take it literally. Yet, the implications it holds for Plato’s understanding of divine nature can still hold. The myth tells us that divine nature has a superior relationship to reality, and that this superior relationship allows divine nature to unwaveringly put the cosmos in order according to the model of the Forms. One need not take the divine to literally include categories of entities such as the higher and lesser gods as well as *daimones* in order for these conclusions regarding divine nature to stand. Perhaps Plato’s “divine” is simply the reality of the Forms and the Good, and he chooses to personify this reality symbolically through such various entities. Hence, one could take Pan and the Nymphs as personifications of different aspects of that divine nature, aspects which are particularly manifest through poetic speech. Perhaps, however, Plato really did believe in the gods. He would certainly not have been an oddity in his time for doing so. Descartes, Kant, Kierkegaard, and many more believed in something like the god of Christianity. It would hardly be shocking if Plato truly believed in Zeus, Apollo, and Hera.

<sup>675</sup> *Phaedrus* 242e. Notably, Socrates’ description of Eros as either a god, or something divine is in line with the depiction of Eros as a *daimon*, for, as noted in Chapter One, *daimones* are referred to throughout the Platonic corpus as either gods or children of the gods. Hence, Eros is either a god or something divine (i.e., a divine child of the gods).

<sup>676</sup> *Phaedrus* 238c-d where Socrates says there is “something divine about the place” they are in and that the inspiration that has come upon him has him “on the edge of speaking in dithyramps.” See also 241e where Socrates indicates that his shift from lyric into epic poetry is the doing of the nymphs, and that they will possess him entirely if he does not stop now.

<sup>677</sup> Again, at *Phaedrus* 238c-d Socrates indicates that the reason for his “unusual flow of words” is the nymphs, and that he is so enthused that Phaedrus should not be surprised if Socrates ends up entirely overcome by nympholeptic madness. There is, in this way, a kind of ramping up effect hinted at both in this passage and at 241e. Socrates indicates he is not quite himself, and also that he senses the threat of totally losing his sanity if he continues, which indicates that a kind of nympholeptic madness is already upon him, and he worries it will take over.



begin by examining the basic terms in question).<sup>678</sup> Notably, none of these elements are implicated in the impiety of the first speech. On the other hand, the uninspired elements relevant to our inquiry are the topic itself, the conclusion or claim to be argued, and the motivations behind reciting the speech itself. It is among these latter, uninspired elements that we find the source of the first speech's error. The topic (to whom the boy should grant his favors) and the conclusion (to the sober-minded non-lover) belong neither to the inspiring divinities, nor to Socrates himself. They belong to Lysias first and to Phaedrus second, who is the cause of Socrates taking it up.<sup>679</sup> Since Socrates' goal is to give another version of the same speech, Phaedrus states that he will allow Socrates "to presuppose that the lover is less sane than the non-lover."<sup>680</sup> The motivation behind Socrates' decision to respond to Lysias' speech with one of his own is indicated in his invocation of the Muses: "Come to me, O you clear-voiced Muses... come, take up my burden in telling the tale that this fine fellow forces upon me so *that his companion may now seem to him even more clever than he did before*."<sup>681</sup> Socrates' invocation supports Harvey Yunis' claim that the young man explicitly sees this exchange of speeches as a competition between Socrates and Lysias.<sup>682</sup> It is hard to avoid the suspicion that the boy of both

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<sup>678</sup> See *Phaedrus* 263d-e. Socrates asks Phaedrus if he defined love in the first speech. When Phaedrus responds that he did indeed define it, Socrates responds: "Alas, how much more artful with speeches the Nymphs, daughter of Achelous, and Pan, son of Hermes, are... than Lysias, son of Cephalus. Here, Socrates directly attributes the decision to define love at the outset of the first speech to inspiration of the nymphs and Pan. Notably, this definition is what "allowed the speech to proceed clearly and consistently with itself," enabling Socrates to divine the flaw in it (265d).

<sup>679</sup> The topic and conclusion argued in the first speech obviously belong to Lysias as the originator of the claims, but at 244a, Socrates also tells the boy of the speeches that the first speech "was by Phaedrus, Pythocles' son, from Myrrhinus, while the one" he is "about to deliver is by Stesichorus, Euphemus' son, from Himera." While the parameters of the first speech were set up by Lysias, given that Socrates' goal was to deliver the same speech but better, here Socrates indicates that the *cause* of the speech was actually Phaedrus. The younger man's enthusiasm serves as the spark for not only the first speech, but the second one, the palinode, as well. Just before Socrates explains his *daimonion* has charged him to stay and give his recantation, Socrates says to Phaedrus "[e]ven as we speak, I think, you're managing to cause me to produce yet another [speech]" (242b).

<sup>680</sup> *Phaedrus* 236b.

<sup>681</sup> *Phaedrus* 237a-b. Emphasis mine.

<sup>682</sup> Harvey Yunis (ed.), *Plato: Phaedrus* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 104. Phaedrus' statement at 235d-e that "like the Nine Archons, I shall set up in return a life-sized golden statue at Delphi, not only of myself but also of you" if Socrates can make a better speech than Lysias demonstrates the confidence Phaedrus

speeches is none other than the beautiful Phaedrus, with Lysias and Socrates presented as the non-lover and mad lover, respectively, jousting for his affections.<sup>683</sup> Hence, both Lysias' and Socrates' speeches mark out a rivalry between earthly lovers using discourse to turn the young man's soul toward one lover over the other. It is notable that Socrates' repentant palinode ends in a prayer to Eros asking that Phaedrus be converted to philosophy.<sup>684</sup> Accordingly, both the central claim and the motivations of the first speech are morally suspect, marking a contest between the egos of would-be lovers. The uninspired elements of this first speech amount to Socrates' motivation to not embarrass himself in front of this handsome young man, and, to accomplish this, to argue Lysias' conclusion more skillfully. It is these elements which account for the impiety of the first speech, not the divine inspiration.

Having divided the inspired and uninspired elements of the first speech from one another, we can begin to see why the error belongs to the latter group. As noted above, the impiety of the

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has in his favorite. Yunis states that the Greek here, which reads ὡςπερ οἱ ἐννέα ἄρχοντες, ὑπισχνοῦμαι χρυσῆν εἰκόνα ἰσομέτρητον εἰς Δελφοὺς ἀναθήσειν, οὐ μόνον ἑμαυτοῦ ἀλλὰ καὶ σῆν, amounts to “a dare... on the order of ‘I’ll eat my hat if...,’ expressing [Phaedrus’] utter confidence that [Socrates] cannot outdo Lysias” (Yunis, *Plato, Phaedrus*, 107-108).

<sup>683</sup> See *Phaedrus* 243e. When Socrates asks where the boy is, Phaedrus responds, “He is here, always right by your side, whenever you want him.” This could, of course, be metaphorical. The boy, being fictional, is a device present whenever needed. But, of course, Phaedrus himself is present beside Socrates at this moment as well. Furthermore, as Yunis also notes, Socrates repeatedly uses the “the language of pederasty metaphorically to characterize the intensity of [Phaedrus’] enthusiasm for Lysias as a rhetorical artist” (*Plato, Phaedrus*, 109). Yet, what is Yunis’ reason for assuming this language is metaphorical? Plato might well intend Phaedrus and Lysias to be read as a genuine pederastic couple, with Socrates as the rival suitor, literally, who will convert Phaedrus to philosophy. Phaedrus is explicitly referred to as Lysias’ “lover” (ὁ ἐραστής) at 257b, a term which neither appears to be, nor needs to be, used “metaphorically” in the passage, and which explicitly invokes a pederastic relationship. Though, notably, in the case of 257b, Phaedrus is cast as *erastes* instead of *eromenos*. Again, at 237b, Socrates refers to Lysias as σου τῶν παιδικῶν, naming Phaedrus as the *erastes* again and Lysias as the *eromenos*. Nails puts Lysias’ birth at around 445 B.C.E. (*People of Plato*, 190) and Phaedrus in his “early adolescence” around 433 and his birth at approximately 444 B.C.E. (*People of Plato*, 232-233). Thus, both men, according to Nails’ research, were probably close in age. This makes them an odd, though not impossible, pederastic pair. Nails’ analysis of the available historical information of both men indicate that Lysias was likely rich, while Phaedrus was probably not (see *People of Plato*, 190-194 and 232-234). Then, there is the issue of Lysias’ Athenian citizenship, which has long been in dispute (see *People of Plato*, 192-93), whereas Phaedrus was an Athenian citizen. The two men therefore seem about equal in terms of age and social status, a point which makes their having a pederastic relationship, though not a homoerotic one, complicated. In any case, Socrates’ language does mark them explicitly as erotically involved without ambiguity. Whether we are to take this language as “metaphorical” requires further argumentation.

<sup>684</sup> *Phaedrus* 257a-b.

first speech resided in its assumption that madness only consisted of the purely harmful, earthly kind of insanity. It thereby denied the goodness of Erotic *mania* and proceeded to conclude that the boy should favor the non-lover. In order to right this wrong, the palinode draws attention to and praises four kinds of divinely given madness, all of which promote the ascent of the soul and enjoy a patron deity.<sup>685</sup> In a direct rejection of the conclusion of the first speech, the palinode names the madness of Eros as the best of all four kinds of god-given *mania*, and holds that the boy is best off favoring the true lover.<sup>686</sup> Therefore, it is the conclusion of the first speech, its rejection of the value of erotic *mania*, which renders it problematic. Conversely, the inspired elements of the first speech's form, enthused tenor, and method of approach all serve to reveal the error of the conclusion rather than support it.

To further explain how the inspiration of the first speech corroborates the promptings of Socrates' *daimonion*, we must examine both the nature of the inspiring divinities and the manner in which Socrates comes to realize the wrongness of the first speech. First, let us look at the gods to whom Socrates attributes his inspiration. Pan, the Nymphs, and Dionysus have the most central importance, but others are named as well. Aside from the initial invocation of the Muses, about halfway through the speech at 238c-d, Socrates states,

Phaedrus my friend, don't you think, as I do, that I'm in the grip of something divine [θεῖος]?... There's something really divine about this place, so don't be surprised if I'm quite taken by the Nymphs' madness [νυμφόληπτος] as I go on with the speech. I'm on the edge of speaking in dithyrambs as it is.<sup>687</sup>

The Nymphs are mentioned again when Socrates concludes the speech, saying:

Didn't you notice, my friend, that even though I am criticizing the lover, I have passed beyond lyric into epic poetry? What do you suppose will happen to me if I begin to praise

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<sup>685</sup> *Phaedrus* 265b-c. Again, these are named thus: (1) "oracular inspiration (μαντική ἐπίπνοια)" which is attributed to Apollo (2) "mystic rites (τελεστική)" which are attributed to Dionysus, (3) "poetic inspiration (ἐπίπνοια... ποιητική)" which is attributed to the Muses, and (4) "the madness of love (ἐρωτική μανία)."

<sup>686</sup> *Phaedrus* 265b.

<sup>687</sup> *Phaedrus* 238c-d.

his opposite? Don't you realize that the Nymphs to whom you so cleverly exposed me will take complete possession of me? So I say instead, in a word, that every shortcoming for which we blamed the lover has its contrary advantage, and the non-lover possesses it. Why make a long speech of it?<sup>688</sup>

Moreover, at 263d, the first speech is explicitly attributed to “the Nymphs, daughters of Achelous, and Pan, son of Hermes.” At 278b, it is indicated again that the Nymphs were the source of the speech, and, finally, the dialogue concludes with a final prayer to Pan at 279b-c. Panolepsy and nympholepsy are, therefore, fitting themes for a dialogue in which madness is front and center, and both have a history in Greek literature and culture which precedes their treatment in the *Phaedrus*. First and foremost, both Pan and the Nymphs were associated with mantic powers. According to Ustinova, nympholepsy was thought to give rise to both “prophetic inspiration and poetic rapture, as well as other kinds of mania.”<sup>689</sup> Both nympholepsy and panolepsy were associated explicitly with oracular powers, as “Pan is...able to seize or invade human beings, making them panoleptic, possessed by the god,” and when this happens, it “brings about divine inspiration, which confers mantic abilities.”<sup>690</sup> In fact, Ustinova highlights that Pan's association with vatic powers, at times, overshadowed those of Apollo himself. She states that, “[a]ccording to myth, Pan was Apollo's instructor in prophecy,” and that, “[i]n his native Arcadia, Pan was the foremost oracular deity.”<sup>691</sup>

Dionysus' presence is more subtle, but still significant. Socrates' mention of verging on dithyramps infers the inspiration of Dionysus, as dithyramps were associated with Bacchic

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<sup>688</sup> *Phaedrus* 241e.

<sup>689</sup> Ustinova, *Divine Mania*, 246. See also Corinne Ondine Pache, *A Moment's Ornament: The Poetics of Nympholepsy in Ancient Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); W. R. Connor, “Seized by the Nymphs: Nympholepsy and Symbolic Expression in Classical Greece,” *Classical Antiquity* 7, no. 2 (1988): 155–89; and Jennifer Lynn Larson, *Greek Nymphs Myth, Cult, Lore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>690</sup> Ustinova, *Divine Mania*, 246.

<sup>691</sup> Ustinova, *Divine Mania*, 246.

worship.<sup>692</sup> Dionysian worship is referenced at least two more times in the dialogue. Before the first speech, Socrates tells Phaedrus that he has followed Phaedrus in his “Bacchic frenzy,”<sup>693</sup> and Dionysian ecstasy is named again when Socrates discusses poetic *mania* and says the Muses give a “tender virgin soul” over to “Bacchic frenzy” and enable it to compose poetry.<sup>694</sup> Thus, counted together, the *Phaedrus* specifically references the *mania* or inspiration of at least three divine entities: the Nymphs, Pan, and Dionysus. Pan and the Nymphs in particular are worshiped in the very place where Socrates and Phaedrus sit to talk, and all three gods were associated with worship in rural or pastoral settings. Crucially, all of these gods are deities of madness in some way or another, a significant observation given that the point of the palinode is to praise Eros as a species of divine *mania*.

The mantic traits of Pan and the Nymphs specifically inform how one should read Socrates’ inspiration in the first speech. Socrates indicates that he sensed something was wrong “almost from the beginning” of this speech.<sup>695</sup> Yet, the divine sign only appears as he is leaving; it is not present with him *during* the speech. In contrast, Socrates indicates that his abilities as a “seer (μάντις)” were operative *during* the speech. The mantic powers connected to panolepsy and nympholepsy are the likely causes of Socrates’ divining something wrong “almost from the beginning” of his first speech, since they are the divine power present with him earlier on, and since he attributes his recognition of his offense to his abilities as a “seer.” In other words, the inspiring presence of Pan and the Nymphs pointed out Socrates’ error *even before his daimonion*

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<sup>692</sup> *Phaedrus*, 238d. Nehamas and Woodruff note in a footnote to their translation that a “dithyramb was a choral poem originally connected with the worship of Dionysus.”

<sup>693</sup> *Phaedrus*, 234d.

<sup>694</sup> *Phaedrus*, 245a.

<sup>695</sup> *Phaedrus*, 242d.

*does*. But how did they do this? In order to see how, we must now more closely examine the manner in which Socrates comes to realize the wrongness of the first speech. At 241e, he states:

Didn't you notice, my friend, that even though I am criticizing the lover, I have passed beyond lyric into epic poetry? What do you suppose will happen to me if I begin to praise his opposite? Don't you realize that the Nymphs to whom you so cleverly exposed me will take complete possession of me?

In this passage, Socrates indicates that his passing from lyric to epic poetry, even though he is offering a criticism of the lover, is a product of the Nymphs' inspiration. He therefore divines that there is something wrong in his criticism of the lover because epic poetry is used to praise the hero, not lambast him. The Nymphs, therefore, are making Socrates give his criticism through a form of poetic speech which is appropriate to praise instead. The conclusion is that the inspiring divinities, through their inspiration, are communicating that Socrates ought to be praising the lover rather than criticizing him. That Socrates immediately notes that the Nymphs will seize him completely *if he continues and praises the non-lover* strongly indicates that this switch to epic is divinely given *as a warning or a rebuke* against the central claims of Socrates' first speech. The interpretation of the inspiration as a warning is implied by the decision to stop the speech immediately rather than continue. Thus, this speech is genuinely inspired, but Socrates interprets the force of this inspiration as a warning *against* the primary claims of the speech rather than in support of them.

Hence, the realization of what Pan and the Nymphs are communicating via their inspiration is followed in quick succession by the *daimonion's* prohibition against leaving until the impious claims have been recanted and Socrates' subsequent remarks that he himself is a seer. All three moments work together to indicate the flaw and the correct path needed to ameliorate it. He states:

In effect, you see, I am a seer, and though I am not particularly good at it, still... I am good enough for my own purposes. I recognize my offense clearly now. In fact, the soul too, my friend, is itself a sort of seer; that's why, almost from the beginning of my speech, I was disturbed by a very uneasy feeling, as Ibycus puts it, that "for offending the gods I am honored by men." But now I understand exactly what my offense has been.<sup>696</sup>

In other words, for offending Eros and the gods of madness, Socrates is praised by Phaedrus, who is taken with his counter-speech to Lysias. Again, Socrates' *daimonion* only comes to him after he has concluded the first speech and is about to leave. Furthermore, the *daimonion* only offers a prohibition against leaving, not a message declaring what he did wrong. In fact, Socrates only says it indicates to him "some offense," but not the offense.<sup>697</sup> The more precise "what" of his offense is indicated via the divine inspiration of Pan and the Nymphs and is realized in the contrast between criticism and epic poetry. It is this moment where Socrates finally "gets it" and gives up his current thread of argumentation. The succession of recognizing the warning of Pan and the Nymphs, followed by the *daimonion*'s prohibition against leaving, are both subjects for Socrates' noted divinatory abilities, and he interprets *both* of them as communicating the same message: his first speech falsely praised the non-lover and criticized the lover, thereby denying the benefits of the gods' gift of *mania* in its various divine forms. Consequently, inspiration of the Nymphs and Pan is far from "bad." Instead, it is one of the things that allow Socrates to recognize his error and properly correct it, bringing him and Phaedrus closer to the truth.

It is true that, within the standard mythology of nympholepsy, the madness of Pan and his Nymphs is not free of danger. On the one hand, the *mania* of Nymphs is an ecstatic and desirable experience. As Ustinova remarks, "[t]he charm of these divine pleasures [offered by

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<sup>696</sup> *Phaedrus* 242c-c.

<sup>697</sup> *Phaedrus* 242c.

nympholepsy] is enormous,” but, she adds, they “may be dangerous for a mere mortal.”<sup>698</sup> She further notes that,

[b]eing in the grip of the god was awesome and precarious. On the one hand, Pan might inflict destructive madness on individuals or whole armies, and the nymphs could put an end to the earthly life of the one they chose. On the other hand, possession by the nymphs or Pan might bring about divine mania, bestowing visions of epiphany, vatic abilities, poetic inclinations, or sensations of extreme happiness.<sup>699</sup>

This danger mirrors that of Dionysus. Consequently, there is something of a parallel between Socrates in the *Phaedrus* and Pentheus in the *Bacchae* that further illuminates Socrates’ concerns regarding possession. It is perhaps worth mentioning that this tragedy premiered during Plato’s youth. Similar to that of Pan and the Nymphs, the madness of Dionysus—whom Socrates calls the patron god of mystical religious *mania*<sup>700</sup>—is associated with joyous ecstasy, but can also be utterly destructive, and is evidenced by Euripides’ depiction of the god of wine. Socrates’ fear that he is on the verge of total possession thereby recalls the punishment given to Pentheus by Dionysus in the *Bacchae*. Importantly, Pentheus is given over to madness precisely because he refuses to acknowledge the goodness of its divine species. In failing to give due reverence to the divine gift of godly *mania*, Socrates, like Pentheus, is threatened with being given over to that which his speech has spurned. Socrates’ speech is in praise of human reason and sanity over divine madness, and the gods of madness, in response, make the entire speech a *reductio* by having him speak in poetic forms associated with praise rather than scorn (epic) and ritual madness (dithyrambs). It is a lesson which Socrates, unlike Pentheus, wisely learns before it is too late. Importantly, though, this parallel between Socrates and Pentheus occurs within the Platonic context wherein the gods can only be good. The danger of madness in the *Phaedrus*

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<sup>698</sup> Ustinova, *Divine Mania*, 247.

<sup>699</sup> Ustinova, *Divine Mania*, 255

<sup>700</sup> *Phaedrus* 265b.



cannot be the product of godly caprice or offense. The threat of utter possession signals to Socrates (and the reader) what, precisely, is wrong about the first speech, and is therefore beneficial to him so long as he interprets it properly and heeds it.

The treatment of Pan and the Nymphs in the *Phaedrus*, and their dangers, also relates to the power of music and poetry and to the general nature of the *daimonic* as double-edged – good in itself, yet dangerous if misinterpreted by fallible humans. Ustinova observes the associations between Pan and the compelling nature of music and speech with reference to a 5<sup>th</sup>-century hymn, stating:

Pan's music is the Siren's tune, it enchants and enraptures, depriving the mortals of free will; it is irresistible and treacherous... In a state of nympholepsy a sensitive individual was inspired to the point of creating poetry, and could attain 'insight or understanding' that were beyond his capabilities in an ordinary state of mind.<sup>701</sup>

One may here recall that the cicadas singing in the background of Socrates' and Phaedrus' discussion are likened to the sirens, for Socrates says that "if they see us in conversation, steadfastly navigating around them as if they were the Sirens, they will be very pleased and immediately give us the gift from the gods they are able to give to mortals."<sup>702</sup> This gift is revealed to be none other than favor with the Muses, as Socrates' myth of the cicadas indicates:

The story goes that the cicadas used to be human beings who lived before the birth of the Muses. When the Muses were born and song was created for the first time, some of the people of that time were so overwhelmed with the pleasure of singing that they forgot to eat or drink; so they died without even realizing it. It is from them that the race of the cicadas came into being; and, as a gift from the Muses, they have no need of nourishment once they are born. Instead, they immediately burst into song, without food or drink, until it is time for them to die. After they die, they go to the Muses and tell each one of them which mortals have honored her.<sup>703</sup>

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<sup>701</sup> Ustinova, *Divine Mania*, 247-248.

<sup>702</sup> *Phaedrus* 259b.

<sup>703</sup> *Phaedrus* 259b-c.

Here, the siren-song of the cicada, perhaps like the siren song of Pan and the Nymphs, has a dual nature. To the indolent, it presents a temptation to surrender to their song with no reflection—to sleep in the midday or to give over to madness with no thought. In short, it is to fail to see something *more* in the song or *mania*. But to the philosopher, the siren-song constitutes a summoning call to reflect on this something more in the divine. One ought neither to resist the siren-song of Pan, nor should she take it at face value. She ought to treat it with reverence, giving over to it and then examining it.

Ferrari, in discussing the myth of the cicadas, likens Socrates to Odysseus and indicates that the philosopher has the ability to hear the siren-song safely:

The Siren song of the cicadas is dangerous only to those whose intellect is lazy; these the song will bewitch or beguile (the verb is *kēlein*) and put to sleep (259a). To sail past in safety, they would need to have their ears stopped with beeswax. For those whose inclination is to spend their noontime conversing rather than taking a nap, however, there is another way to skirt the Sirens. It is only a little riskier, and has the huge advantage of permitting the sailor to hear the beauty of their voices. We can sail past not as Odysseus' crew did, but as Odysseus himself did.<sup>704</sup>

Socrates, like Odysseus, knows how to hear the song without ruin. Philosophy provides the binding necessary to stay him to the mast. For Ferrari, the antidote to the charm of poetry (or panoleptic madness) allows us to enjoy it without risk, but it does not seem to rescue it from being ultimately a pleasant diversion rather than something valuable in its own right. As Ferrari argues:

The philosopher will not accept that the poet has a worthwhile understanding of the human and divine matters that he imitates, and so will not permit himself to take mimetic poetry seriously (*Rep.* X.602b). He will treat it as a kind of play (*paidia*)... The philosopher's playful approach to mimetic writing, however, is a special instance because mimetic art is not merely an insufficient teacher of truth: it is not in the business of getting at truth at all.<sup>705</sup>

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<sup>704</sup> Ferrari, "The Philosopher's Antidote," 106.

<sup>705</sup> Ferrari, "The Philosopher's Antidote," 110-111

Ferrari sees only a kind of permissive tolerance for the siren-song of poetry or panolepsy. Yet, Socrates' discussion of the cicadas indicates that they will be *pleased* by the two men's response to them. The cicadas mean to point toward something more, something which is available to the one who is paying the right kind of attention to them. Socrates must take this route around the cicadas' (and Pan's) song because there is something to be gained from it. Otherwise, would he not just stop up his ears and sail past without concern? To say that poetry and Pan's siren-song are incapable of teaching the truth and are meant only as play misses the way in which the divine presences (and there are many in this dialogue) serve to aid Socrates and Phaedrus along the way. Rather, might it be that if one does not understand these things as a kind of play, one will not be taught the truth *they do contain*? In other words, their method of conveying truth is simply a different one from rational discourse. As Ferrari himself puts it, Socrates thinks it better to hear the song because "it is a divine madness [that] can awaken us to the true beauty we have lost."<sup>706</sup> In saying this, Ferrari, *pace* his own point above, seems to acknowledge that *there is a good reason* for listening to the siren-song, despite its danger, and this reason persists beyond the goal of mere pleasure. The song *does* something for us. In Socrates' case, it lets him know that the gods are listening in, determining whether or not his discourse with Phaedrus leads them both to a vision of what the gods themselves see and love. Moreover, the gods not only hear their discourse, they weigh in on it, lending their maddening presence as a sign by which Socrates can correct his views.

Divine inspiration in the *Phaedrus* therefore drives home the realization that rational discourse serves something greater. This is what Layne argues in writing that, "rational, calculative (sober) reasoning in contrast to the inspired reasoning of the philosopher" mirrors

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<sup>706</sup> Ferrari, "The Philosopher's Antidote," 106.

what is said in the *Phaedrus* regarding augury, or forms of reading signs that involve pre-determined, and human-given techniques rather than the *mania* that touches the Pythia or the Sybil.<sup>707</sup> Layne compellingly demonstrates that these “human arts,” just like “rational, calculative (sober) reasoning” without inspiration, “say nothing of real value.”<sup>708</sup> These all-too-human arts are so impoverished, Layne remarks, because “they speak to no one” in particular and “because they do not go beyond themselves. They are not divinely (other-)touched, graced or enthused.”<sup>709</sup> In contrast to a Lysias who wields speech as a method to procure whatever goods he deems desirable—in this case, Phaedrus—Socrates wields speech protreptically in order to help Phaedrus convert to the philosophical life. Accordingly, unlike his rival, Socrates knows that the final aim of speech itself is to arrive at something more, and he thereby embraces divine inspiration as that which points him ever upward. In a certain sense, then, divine inspiration is *both* the siren song and the lashings which bind our Odyssean Socrates to the mast, ensuring a safe journey. As long as Socrates keeps his gaze on what the gods direct him toward, the song will not take him off course and will, in contrast, do quite the opposite. It is this steadfast vision of the true goal of rational discourse which enables Socrates to safely wield speech multi-vocally and multi-stylistically, including enthused, poetic speech.<sup>710</sup> Accordingly, as noted in Chapter One, even the lovers who consummate their love under divine madness are better off than the wholly self-controlled non-lovers. Why? Because the divinely mad couple is at least partly focused on reaching for the Beautiful together. Madness enables this focus, whereas self-control constrains, and even removes it from one’s concerns.

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<sup>707</sup> Danielle Layne, “Torch-bearing Plato,” 69.

<sup>708</sup> Danielle Layne, “Torch-bearing Plato,” 69.

<sup>709</sup> Danielle Layne, “Torch-bearing Plato,” 69.

<sup>710</sup> Layne explicitly ties Socrates’ abilities to use speech in this way to Socrates’ understanding that “rational endeavors” should be in the service of “something other than reason itself insofar as reason cares for and tends to the unique soul of the person before him” (“Torch-bearing Plato,” 61).

Still, it is certainly true that Socrates could have ignored or misinterpreted the promptings of the Nymphs, Eros, and his mantic powers via the *daimonion* and set off across the river back to town. In this case, the first inspired speech would have done psychological damage. Nevertheless, the damage would have been the product of Socrates' failings, not those of divine inspiration itself. Yet, the situation with the first speech is still overall positive in that any reader who came to the speech or heard the speech and was motivated by a desire to hear the divine in it would immediately recognize two things: (1) the incongruity between the form and content, which gives revelation regarding the content in itself, and (2) the inspired attempt to define love which leads the careful auditor to the realization that the whole speech is based on a woefully incomplete definition. In this way, the inspiration of the gods reaches backwards and forwards through time, indicating that, even had Socrates not divined properly, the gods' presence in the speech still had something to reveal to anyone else who could listen. This means that the content of Homer, Hesiod, and the other poets might be similarly faulty when read from one angle, but similarly revelatory when approached by one who wishes to hear what the gods have revealed.

In conclusion, then, in the *Phaedrus* it is through the use of the particular form of poetic language (lyric, epic, and (near) dithyrambs followed by a palinode), that the truth of Eros and divine *mania* comes to be revealed. Furthermore, far from being "bad," the panoleptic and nympholeptic inspiration of the first speech not only renders it edifying, but actually presides over the whole dialogue. At 263d, Socrates says that these gods are responsible for his having defined love, which is an improvement on Lysias' speech.<sup>711</sup> This passage alone demonstrates that the inspired speech was still more edifying than its uninspired predecessor because it was the inspiration that led Socrates to define his terms. Moreover, it was this definition which led the

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<sup>711</sup> *Phaedrus* 263d.

flaw in the speech to be made more obvious, thereby allowing the two men to realize that it only spoke to one species of *mania*, and that more needed to be said regarding the other species. Ergo, the first speech created the conditions for the second speech. Between the two speeches, a more complete picture of Eros emerges, one which details the dangers of selfish love in the first speech and the divine benefits of philosophical and divine erotic *mania* in the second. Hence, the first speech says true things when understood from a certain angle, begins properly with a definition, and ultimately includes a divine revelation of what is missing and needs further discussion through its poetic forms. It does all of these positive things because of the divinely inspired elements mentioned: the form, the enthused manner of its speaker, and its methodology. In short, as long as one is paying attention, the divine inspiration of the first speech is not bad at all, but compliments and even grounds the second speech.

Consequently, the dialogue as a whole, and not just the first speech, is the product of inspiration from Pan and the Nymphs. For, at the end of the dialogue, Socrates says to Phaedrus,

Now you go and tell Lysias that we came to the spring which is sacred to the Nymphs and heard words charging us to deliver a message to Lysias and anyone else who composes speeches, as well as to Homer and anyone else who has composed poetry either spoken or sung, and third, to Solon and anyone else who writes political documents that he calls laws: If any one of you has composed these things with a knowledge of the truth, if you can defend your writing when you are challenged, and if you can yourself make the argument that your writing is of little worth, then you must be called by a name derived not from these writings but rather from those things that you are seriously pursuing... a philosopher.<sup>712</sup>

The dialogue therefore contains a similar message to that of the *Ion*. The problem is not speech, be it the various modes of prose, poetry, or some mixture of the two; the problem is one's attributing human knowledge to what is given through divine madness, thinking one has knowledge which one does not, and busying oneself with obtaining the kind of knowledge which

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<sup>712</sup> *Phaedrus*, 278b-d.

does not lead us toward the divine. That this message is what Socrates says they “heard” in the place sacred to the Nymphs indicates that he sees this whole conversation as part of the divine inspiration which began the dialogue, and thus, the beginning speech is part of a longer story told by the gods of madness regarding the proper orientation of one’s soul toward all forms of writing and uses of speech. Socrates, our paradigmatic philosopher, understands that the gods direct us toward the true purpose of rational discourse. Thus, Socrates, here a kind of perfected Odysseus, is able to savor the sweet siren song of the cicadas, messengers of the Muses. However, not content to merely sail by, he is also further able *to use their song*. As a sufficiently capable diviner and pedagogue, he can direct the sirens’ tune toward its proper use as a divine gift with protreptic powers over the soul.

## VI. *Daimonic* Dangers and the Paradigm of Socrates

Plato’s dialogues consistently articulate the view that the gods only give good things to humankind, and they consistently treat poetry as divinely inspired; yet, Plato’s works also highlight that the influence of poetry on the soul can be dangerous. I have argued above that these dangers are the products of failure on the receiving end of inspiration, and that they cannot lie on the side of divine transmission. Still, more needs to be said about the dangers of poetry with specific reference to its status as *daimonic*. It is tempting to side-step the question of inspired poetry’s danger entirely by arguing that Plato’s less positive comments on poetry are simply critiques of *bad* and *uninspired* poetry. However, Socrates’ comments in the *Republic* are not limited to the consumption of aesthetically bad poetry. Rather, as discussed in Chapter Two, his remarks are often targeted at good poetry because it can move us deeply but in the wrong direction. Indeed, it seems the power of poetic language to affect the soul is the source of both its

benefits and its dangers. The more potent the poetry, the more potentially edifying and the more potentially dangerous. Poetry can function *daimonically*, in which case it becomes beneficial for the soul by enabling it to better engage in the philosophical life and try to bridge the gap between mortal and divine knowledge. However, when approached in the wrong way, it also has a powerful ability to move the soul away from divine truth.

Thus, given the importance of engaging poetry properly so as to reap its benefits and avoid its harms, two serious questions linger in the foreground of this study. First, what in the philosopher's approach enables her to approach poetry so that she can enjoy this divine gift without becoming like Euthyphro, Polemarchus, Glaucon, or Adeimantus, who use the poets irresponsibly?<sup>713</sup> In other words, *how* does one approach poetry correctly? Second, there is a lingering question as to *how* poetry, functioning *daimonically*, can be edifying for the philosopher's soul. When one engages it as *daimonic*, what does poetry *do* for the *psyche*? Chapter Four looks to one possible answer to this second question, while the remainder of the present chapter is dedicated to the first. The solution to the first question is twofold. First, one must understand *why* poetry is potentially dangerous: it has the power to move the soul. However, the reason for poetry's potential danger is the same as the reason for its potential benefit. Accordingly, the second part of the solution is to take Socrates as our paradigm, for he demonstrates how one can engage poetic language to move the soul toward the pursuit of divine truth. Nevertheless, since engagement with *daimonic* poetry always involves human

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<sup>713</sup> See the previous discussion on Polemarchus' invocation of Simonides in Chapter Two, Section III. See also Gordon, *Turning Toward Philosophy*, 74 referenced in the conclusion of Chapter Two. Gordon remarks that, "in painting their picture of the advantages of living the unjust life, Glaucon and Adeimantus rely almost exclusively on the poets, citing them repeatedly." Gordon offers ample textual support for this claim. See 361b, 363a-b, 363c, 364d, 364e, and 365c.



imperfection, it can never be foolproof. Nevertheless, Socrates' own behavior reveals that engagement with it is still a worthwhile risk.

Importantly, the dangers of poetry are not substantially different from the dangers potentially present in other *daimonic* activities. Plato is not “anti-poetry” for the same reason he is not anti-*eros* or anti-oracles. It is no coincidence that the dialogues present Socrates in discussion with experts in religion and poetry who seem to “get it wrong.” He also routinely engages youths in an erotic manner that counters that of the norms of Athenian culture. Socrates seeks to converse with them and treats them as equals rather than looking to sleep with them and treating them according to the standard hierarchy dividing *erastes* from *eromenos*.<sup>714</sup> His unique approach as an *erastes* who hopes his *eromenos* will question him in turn establishes that Socrates is doing something different from those around him when engaging erotically for the sake of philosophy.<sup>715</sup> While Plato depicts erotic relationships as potentially initiating one into a life of philosophical contemplation, he also expresses concern, through Socrates, over how these relationships can go wrong. Erotic relationships are not *just* edifying, they are also dangerous, as is demonstrated by the fact that the erotic dialogues spend so much time on the question of what the correct philosophically erotic relationship should actually look like. We must therefore view the danger of poetry in the same way that we view the danger of the erotic or the oracular. Just as the risk of choosing the wrong lover or engaging the right one in the wrong way has dire consequences for one's philosophical life, so too can engaging poetry without proper respect for its risks seduce the soul down the wrong path.

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<sup>714</sup> For a closer look at how Plato's Socrates subverts pederastic norms, see David Halperin, "Plato and Erotic Reciprocity," *Classical Antiquity* 5, no. 1 (1986): 60-80 and Anthony Hooper, "The Dual-Role Philosophers: And Exploration of a Failed Relationship," in *Alcibiades and the Socratic Lover-Educator*, eds. Harold Tarrant and Marguerite Johnson (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2014), 107-118.

<sup>715</sup> See *Alcibiades I* 135d-e.

Plato gives the reader counter-examples to Socrates, people who show the reader how *not* to engage the *daimonic*. Diotima and Socrates are contrasted with the likes of Euthyphro, a *mantis* who does not engage in philosophical contemplation, and thinks that he has knowledge that he does not. Euthyphro is, in some ways, the anti-Socrates in his treatment of the oracular. Socrates contemplates the Pythia's utterances through an immediate recognition of the gap between his ignorance of divine knowledge, and this leads him to interpret her remarks in a way that drives his philosophical life further toward the divine. Euthyphro, however, presents himself as a veritable expert on piety itself. Assuming he already knows what the gods want, our impious *mantis* wields the poets as proof with no critical engagement or investigation of his claims. Unlike Socrates, who knows that he does not know when presented with the oracle's words, Euthyphro already assumes that he *does* know, and that such knowledge is the prerequisite for giving the correct interpretation. Thus, Euthyphro's reception of the *daimonic* is doomed to present him with fleeting intuitions that will ever remain in the realm of opinion.

The later Platonists also thought of Socrates as the model for engaging the *daimonic*. Proclus, in addressing the very question of how "false oracular pronouncements" are given, states that "the falsehood is not in those giving the oracles but in those who receive the oracular pronouncements."<sup>716</sup> In other words, the immediate experience by which the divine bestows revelation is entirely reliable, but the interpretation is another matter. Proclus' point is directly supported by the *Timaeus*, wherein Socrates agrees with an ancient proverb stating that "Only a man of sound mind may know himself and conduct his own affairs,"<sup>717</sup> and states that

This is the reason why it is customary practice to appoint interpreters [τὸ τῶν προφητῶν γένος] to render judgment on an inspired divination. These persons are called 'diviners' [μάντις] by some who are entirely ignorant of the fact that they are expositors [ὑποκριταί] of utterances or visions communicated through riddles [αἰνιγμῶν]. Instead of

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<sup>716</sup> Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 112-116.

<sup>717</sup> *Timaeus* 72a-b: τὸ πράττειν καὶ γινῶναι τὰ τε αὐτοῦ καὶ ἑαυτὸν σώφρονι μόνῳ προσήκειν.

‘diviners,’ the correct thing to call them is, ‘interpreters of things divined [προφήται δὲ μαντευομένων].’<sup>718</sup>

This passage articulates a distinction between the enigma (literally, for the word here is αἰνιγμός) uttered by the oracle or *mantis* and the interpretation of that utterance by the prophet (προφήτης)<sup>719</sup> or expounder (ὑποκριτής).<sup>720</sup> Note that this passage does not use ἐρμηνῆς to refer to exegetical expert. Still, this passage from the *Timaeus* does not mean that *daimonic* activities are safe; all it demonstrates is that, in Plato’s day, there was both an act of divine *mania* and an act of rational exegesis that took place regarding divinely inspired activities. Yet, this distinction in and of itself, coupled with the repeated claim throughout Plato’s texts that the divine is the source of goodness only, demonstrates that the danger present in *daimonic* activities lies on the human side of the equation.

It seems that the fundamental first step in properly engaging poetry (and other *daimonic* activities) lies in setting aside double ignorance. Humans have a tendency to think that they understand when they do not and to thus substitute divine truth for something more human which appeals to their own egos. For example, in Euthyphro’s confidence that he is an expert in theology because of his mantic abilities, he rushes to the finish line of his intuitions and subsequently comes up with logically untenable ideas of piety – ideas which, he thinks, confirm

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<sup>718</sup> *Timaeus* 72a-b.

<sup>719</sup> Plato is inconsistent in his meaning where προφήτης is concerned. For example, its use at *Republic* 617d squares firmly with its meaning in *Timaeus* 72a-b. Grube renders it as “speaker” in his translation of the Myth of Er wherein the prophet is depicted as *explaining* “the message of Lachesis, the maiden daughter of Necessity” to the souls who are ready to re-enter mortal life. This meaning is repeated at 619b and 619c. But at *Phaedrus* 262d, Nehamas and Woodruff translate it as “messenger” in a passage that reads: “the messengers of the Muses who are singing over our heads may have inspired me with this gift.” Thus, the treatment of προφήτης in the *Phaedrus* aligns more with treatment of ἐρμηνῆς in that it seems to denote a conduit or messenger and not an expositor. At *Philebus* 28b, Frede translates it as “spokesman,” and at *Charmides* 173c, Rosamund Kent Sprague translates thus: “the mantic art is knowledge of what is to be and that temperance, directing her, keeps away deceivers and sets up the true seers as prophets of the future.” Hence, sometimes “prophet” is used to mean an expositor, and sometimes it seems to simply mean a transmitter.

<sup>720</sup> Here, ὑποκριτής means “expounder,” but it is more often used in Plato’s corpus to mean “actor.” For a few examples, see *Republic* 373b, *Charmides* 162d, *Symposium* 194b, and *Ion* 532d and 536a.

his own actions as correct. The seer does not think he does not know, and, thus, he sees no reason to think further about his experiences with his gift or his engagement with the theological materials of the poets. However, the character of Socrates gives us hope that those who have been initiated into philosophy and are, therefore, aware that they do not know, can engage with the *daimonic* in a more responsible manner. Plato's depictions of Socrates as he engages the poets foregrounds the right approach. As Layne notes in contrasting the poets' reception of divine inspiration with that of Socrates in the *Apology*, "[u]nlike the poets in the *Apology*, Socrates recognizes that his mantic moments or divine intuitions must be meditated with the particularly human work of examination in order to appropriate, even appreciate, what human knowledge may arise or be understood in such intuitions."<sup>721</sup> Accordingly, the reader can see why Ion is contrasted with Socrates in a manner similar to the way that Socrates is also contrasted with Euthyphro. Like Euthyphro, Ion is a channel of divine inspiration, but he treats the divine gifts as his own knowledge, rather than as an invitation to do the "particularly human work of examination." Socrates, in contrast to his mantic and rhapsodic foils in Euthyphro and Ion, approaches the poets with care, quotes them with consideration of the person to whom he is speaking, and gingerly treats them as enigmatic.

A return to the *Ion* here can demonstrate Socrates' ability, in contrast to Ion's own inability, to engage the power of poetry and poetic language to try to turn the rhapsode's soul in the right direction. From 533c-535a, Socrates's attempts to get Ion to acknowledge his double ignorance and understand the true nature of his inspiration reaches a zenith of sorts in a beautiful passage wherein Socrates uses poetic language himself. He says:

[I]t's a divine power that moves you, as a 'Magnetic' stone moves iron rings. (That's what Euripides called it; most people call it 'Heracleian.')

This stone not only pulls those rings, if they're iron, it also puts power in the rings, so that they in turn can do just what

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<sup>721</sup> Layne, "From Irony to Enigma," 84.

the stone does—pull other rings—so that there’s sometimes a very long chain of iron pieces and rings hanging from one another. And the power in all of them depends on this stone. In the same way, the Muse makes some people inspired herself, and then through those who are inspired a chain of other enthusiasts is suspended.<sup>722</sup>

Note that Socrates uses a poetic image in this passage in the form of the metaphor of the magnetic rings transmitting power.<sup>723</sup> Socrates also refers to the poets and their use of language. Socrates use of Euripides’ term for the magnet is important because most people, he notes, do not use that term, but rather use the term “Heracleian.” Ion, however, comes from Ephesus in Ionia, and Magnesia is an Ionian city. Socrates thereby uses an atypical term borrowed from a poet in order to give his speech a more personal touch for Ion. Socrates seems to craft his own speech according to what will be most likely to *move* Ion, just as he argues in the *Phaedrus* that the style and content of the speech must direct the soul of the hearer, ideally, of course, toward the Good.<sup>724</sup> Accordingly, Socrates actually explains Ion’s ignorance *by using the poets’ words as an authority*, for he says:

Just as Bacchic worshippers when they are possessed draw honey and milk from rivers, but not when they are in their right minds—the soul of a lyric poet does this too, as they say themselves. For of course poets tell us that they gather songs at honey-flowing springs, from glades and gardens of the Muses, and that they bear songs to us as bees carry honey, flying like bees. And what they say is true.<sup>725</sup>

Socrates again uses a poetic image. The poets, like bees gathering honey from flowers, gather songs from the Muses, bringing them to us so we may taste their sweetness. Socrates thereby uses poetic language to turn Ion toward the realization that he is not in possession of knowledge at all. That Socrates’ use of poetic speech has an effect on Ion’s *psyche* is clear from the rhapsode’s response: “Somehow you touch my soul with your words.”<sup>726</sup> Socrates is aware of the

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<sup>722</sup> *Ion* 533d-e.

<sup>723</sup> Poetic in the sense of the definition given in the introduction of this study, which was “a creative composition of words used in surprising, non-literal, and particularly evocative ways.” See page 1 of this study.

<sup>724</sup> *Phaedrus* 271d: “the nature of speech is in fact to direct the soul.”

<sup>725</sup> *Ion* 534a-b.

<sup>726</sup> *Ion* 535a.

power that poetry has to make the soul “see” some truth. In this case, he uses the compelling language of a poetic metaphor to teach Ion that he does not know what he thinks he knows.

The power of poetry to touch the soul can move one’s thought in the right or wrong direction, and Socrates’ concern with Ion’s misunderstanding of his power lies in just this danger of persuasion. After Ion has confessed to being so deeply affected by Socrates’ words, Socrates, in turn, asks him if he is in his right mind when he performs and has “the most stunning effect” on his audience.<sup>727</sup> Ion agrees that he is filled with inspiration and is out of his mind. Yet, when Socrates asks him “and you know that you have the same effects on most of your spectators too, don’t you?”<sup>728</sup> Ion replies:

I know very well that [I] do. I look down at them every time from up on the rostrum, and they’re crying and looking terrified, and as the stories are told they are filled with amazement. You see I must keep my wits and pay close attention to them: if I start them crying, I will laugh as I take their money, but if they laugh, I shall cry at having lost money.<sup>729</sup>

Thus, immediately after claiming to be divinely inspired and thus out of his mind, Ion then jokes about needing to keep his wits so that he can make money from the crowd’s reaction. This interaction lies at the heart of Plato’s concerns with rhapsodes, for it reveals that Ion is aware of the affect he has on others, but he does not use this knowledge to turn their souls in any particular direction. Instead, he uses it for personal gain. Socrates’ use of poetic language to make Ion aware of the true source of his power invites Ion to see that his power comes from something greater than himself and could be directed toward something more than his financial gain. When he knows where this power comes from, he can direct it, “appropriately and respectfully,”<sup>730</sup> towards a greater use. However, the existence of rhapsodes like Ion who “keep

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<sup>727</sup> *Ion* 535b-d.

<sup>728</sup> *Ion* 535d.

<sup>729</sup> *Ion* 535e.

<sup>730</sup> *Phaedrus* 265c.

[their] wits” so as to make money does not undermine the subject of their work. Just as we ought not to become misologues because there are those who know how to turn an argument any which way to serve their own purposes without any knowledge of truth,<sup>731</sup> we ought not to become haters of poetry because there are those who can use it to stir up our souls in any direction without knowledge of which direction is good. Hence, Socrates’ own engagement with poetic language in the *Ion* demonstrates how to employ it in a beneficial manner, while Ion’s unreflective use demonstrates the dangers of wielding a potentially *daimonic* activity without careful examination and with an aim toward what is ultimately good.

Socrates’ concern over Ion’s ignorance stretches beyond a concern for the rhapsode himself. As a transmitter of Homer, Ion plays an important pedagogical role in Greek society, one which he is really not fit to hold. In explaining rhapsodic inspiration, Socrates gives his famous image of the magnetic chain, saying that

[t]he middle ring [of the magnetic chain] is you, the rhapsode or actor, and the first one is the poet himself. The god pulls people’s souls through all these wherever he wants, looping the power down from one to another. And just as if it hung from that stone, there’s an enormous chain of choral dancers and dance *teachers and assistant teachers* hanging off to the sides of the rings that are suspended from the Muse.<sup>732</sup>

The mention of teachers here is significant. Ion, in being the center ring itself, is not a teacher. Teachers hang “off to the sides of the rings,” but this implies that Ion, in lacking any knowledge, in being a pure vehicle of the gods’ inspiration and nothing more, is, on his own, potentially dangerous. The danger lies, of course, in the simple fact that Ion and his audience members do not realize what he is and, more importantly, what he is not. He cannot teach the audience

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<sup>731</sup> *Phaedo* 89d-90d. Misology is described thus: “when one who lacks skill in arguments puts his trust in an argument as being true, then shortly afterwards believes it to be false—as sometimes it is and sometimes it is not and so with another argument and then another. You know how those in particular who spend their time studying contradiction in the end believe themselves to have become very wise and that they alone have understood that there is no soundness or reliability in any object or in any argument, but that all that exists simply fluctuates up and down as if it were in the Euripus and does not remain in the same place for any time at all.” (90c-d)

<sup>732</sup> *Ion* 535e-536a. Emphasis mine.

anything. He doesn't know anything. Like the technical rhetorician of the *Phaedrus*, Ion only knows the effects of drugs, but he has no knowledge of how to direct that knowledge toward an overarching good which presides over his *techné* as a whole. He has the power to direct the souls of his hearers, but he lacks the skill and knowledge needed to point them in the right direction. Those abilities belong to the philosophical pedagogue, personified by Socrates himself. There is probably nothing wrong with Ion being a rhapsode in and of itself, but there is something deeply wrong with the way in which he and the culture around him understand that job. Without recognizing his role for what it is, Ion presents a serious danger to the masses who hear him.

Sensing these unflattering conclusions, Ion returns to his claims that he is, in fact, in possession of himself: "I would be amazed if you could speak well enough to convince me that I am possessed or crazed when I praise Homer. I don't believe you'd think so if you heard me speaking on Homer."<sup>733</sup> Socrates' response is: "I really do want to hear you, but not before you answer me this: on which of Homer's subjects do you speak well? I don't suppose you speak well on all of them."<sup>734</sup> It is at this point that the reader may realize that Socrates has stopped Ion from speaking on Homer both times the bard has tried to do so. Socrates states that he is eager to hear him, but he won't let him begin until Ion comes to recognize his double ignorance and acknowledge the true origin of his powers. One wonders if Socrates, knowing his own love of Homer, is wary of letting Ion's inspiration charm him away from what is good for Ion's soul: to acknowledge that he does not know what he thought he knew. The philosopher, then, is best in touch with the *daimonic* nature of poetry and knows *when* to succumb to its force and when to wait and prepare the soul beforehand. In the *Ion*, Socrates shows the restraint needed for the

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<sup>733</sup> *Ion* 536d.

<sup>734</sup> *Ion* 536e.



latter situation, but in other texts, such as the *Phaedrus*, he indulges the pleasures of succumbing to the Muses.<sup>735</sup>

In sum, if we think of poetry as *daimonic* in a similar manner to the erotic, mystagogic, mantic, or oracular, we can better understand how dialogues like the *Ion* and the *Republic* are consistent with themselves and with other dialogues with respect to poetry. It makes sense that Plato depicts *daimonic* activities in an ambiguous light. They are good insofar as they come from the gods, but they are supremely dangerous insofar as they must be interpreted by fallible humans with a tendency to take the easy way out. Plato's Socrates, however, provides a counter-model that demonstrates beneficial ways of employing the power of the poetic. When wielded by a midwife-philosopher like Socrates, one who is able to look into our soul and see which speeches will best move it toward contemplation of the divine, poetic language gives the soul a chance to move in the right direction: toward contemplating of poetry's very source in divine reality. The power of poetry is made more dangerous by the ability of the ignorant to use it for personal gain without a proper knowledge of what they will actually do to the souls of those who they influence. These *daimonic* powers are, however, valuable for those who are ready to do the "particularly human work of examination"<sup>736</sup> in order to respond to the divine hand reaching down with her own raised hand reaching back up in response.

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<sup>735</sup> Note as well that the *Cratylus* 396e-387a follows a similar pattern to the *Phaedrus* in that both dialogues foreground "inspired" speeches that are followed by some kind of purificatory speech or conversation. In the *Phaedrus*, the purification lies in the palinode and the dialogue on rhetoric following it. In the *Cratylus*, the purification is referenced but takes place at another time. It is telling that the interlocutors in the former dialogues are not clinging to double ignorance. Hermogenes seems in touch with the limits of his knowledge. He is frustrated about not being able to understand naming, and while he defends a position, he does so with a ready willingness to be proven wrong at any moment. Phaedrus, likewise, does not pretend to know the truth at all, and seems besotted with the technical skill of rhetoric for its own sake. Yet, he too is eager to have Socrates test it, and to hear alternative speeches. In essence, then, the charm of inspiration has a valued place in pedagogy when dealing with interlocutors who want to understand, and who are open to having their souls turned toward the truth. Ion, however, is no such interlocutor. While Socrates does use instances of poetic language to help persuade him, he still must be purified of his double ignorance through a clear acknowledgement that what he claims to know actually evades him.

<sup>736</sup> Layne, "From Irony to Enigma," 84.

## VII. Conclusion

This chapter claimed that poetry can be understood as *daimonic* for Plato when read alongside descriptions of other *daimonic* activities laid out in the *Symposium*. Focusing on the *Ion* in particular, one can see that Plato writes about poetry in a manner that mirrors the nature and function of the *daimonic* activities, he places poetry alongside other activities which are explicitly named *daimonic*, and the epistemological status of poetry repeatedly mirrors the language used by Diotima to explain the epistemological status of *daimonic* wisdom. An analysis of the *Phaedrus* addressed the question of “bad inspiration,” which would problematize the *daimonic* answer to the problem of poetry by showing that even divinely inspired material can be “bad.” However, the analysis revealed that the *Phaedrus* does not actually present the reader with a case of “bad inspiration,” and instead demonstrates how divine inspiration renders whatever it presides over as ultimately edifying, provided the poet or auditor is paying the right kind of attention to it. Still, and crucially, the arguments so far have not removed, and were not intended to remove, the danger of poetry. To the contrary, the argument is that understanding poetry as *daimonic* allows us to understand how Plato can see poetry as dangerous *and also* be in favor of it as a *daimonic* activity. The *daimonic* nature of poetry allows this tension to remain intact without requiring the reader to conclude that Plato either rejects the value of poetry or that he says totally unreconcilable things across his body of work. With *daimonic* poetry, the reader can conclude that Plato both has reasonable concerns over the danger of poetry, and also thinks it has potential for the soul’s benefit, as it is able to move it, and powerfully so, in the right direction. Hence, his varying remarks on poetry do not contradict one another, but present us with complicated, but relatively consistent, picture.

The *Phaedrus* provides a sound addition to this study so far, for it ultimately reveals is that the true philosopher is *daimonic* in every way. The *Phaedrus* marries the *daimonic* activities of poetry, manticism, *eros*, and the mystagogic in order to convert Phaedrus to philosophy and make him aware of his hope in a divine knowledge. All divine madness is good for the philosopher who knows how to engage with it, provided she engages with it “appropriately and respectfully,”<sup>737</sup> acknowledging what she does not know. In the language of the *Timaeus* discussed in Chapter 2, there are those who can channel, but they cannot interpret. Their own lives, therefore, live in the shadow of what their inspiration *could* bring them, were they to turn toward philosophy, but because they have conceit to knowledge, they do not convert. The philosopher, in contrast, is one who is so oriented that she can act as both oracle and prophet, channel and interpreter. Socrates takes up both roles. In the *Phaedrus* specifically, he is both overcome by divine *mania*, and able to divine its meaning afterwards. Furthermore, Socrates can quote many different poets at any given time, and does so based on who he is talking to and what they are talking about. He both knows the effect he has on his audience, and *knows which effect he ought to produce and how to produce it*. Socrates is also the philosophical lover, directing his passion for Phaedrus into philosophical activity which brings them both closer to divine reality. In engaging Phaedrus in these ways, Socrates also seeks to initiate him, bringing him into the highest mystery of all, a vision of the divine Forms and their source, the Good itself. Thus, Socrates becomes our model for how to engage all *daimonic* activities. He is seer, lover, mystagogue, and poet, but, above all, he is all of these things because he is, first and foremost, a philosopher.

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<sup>737</sup> *Phaedrus* 265c.

Accordingly, Socrates' two statements of knowledge, that all he knows are the things of eros<sup>738</sup> and that all he knows is that he knows nothing,<sup>739</sup> connect to his claims to manticism<sup>740</sup> and his references to undergoing initiation via Diotima<sup>741</sup> and to initiating others via his own midwifery.<sup>742</sup> The claim to know nothing is related to the claim that he is erotic, a seer, a mystagogue, and a poet, for all of these roles involve the "in-between" status of one who is not wise himself, but nevertheless is a lover of wisdom.<sup>743</sup> Socrates does not have perfect wisdom, which belongs to the gods, but neither is he *merely* ignorant, for this would entail that he cannot even go searching for wisdom. Instead, he is the *lover of wisdom*, though not its possessor. The claim to know nothing is a claim to a kind of *daimonic* existence.<sup>744</sup> Socrates is thereby the true *mantis*, poet, mystagogue, and lover, because he knows how to channel all these *daimonic* activities toward their proper aim, the philosophical task of assimilating oneself as much as one is able to the divine. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the passage on Eros in the *Symposium* is frequently paralleled with descriptions of Socrates himself as the philosopher, that Socrates refers to himself as a seer, and that, even in the presence of rhetoricians, rhapsodes, comedians, and tragedians, he is the one who uses beautiful language to direct the souls of everyone present

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<sup>738</sup> *Symposium* 177e.

<sup>739</sup> *Apology* 23a-b.

<sup>740</sup> *Phaedrus* 232c.

<sup>741</sup> *Symposium* 210a.

<sup>742</sup> See *Theaetetus* 149a-151d.

<sup>743</sup> Gordon, *Plato's Erotic World* makes this connection between Socrates' claim to ignorance and his claim to knowledge of eros. Gordon points out that the exhortation for humans to "cultivate the psychic disposition of questioning" is related to the need to be "matched with and guided by someone who is a genuine *erastês* and who knows our soul." (7) Self-knowledge is thereby intertwined with erotic connections with other through which we engage in inquiry. Hence, Socrates' claim to know himself, and thereby know the boundaries of his own knowledge is tied to his engagement in erotic inquiry with others. Furthermore, as Gordon notes, "eros is the moving force behind our desire to know first causes the and noetic world," and "human eros, like the senses and emotions, need to be trained and guided toward its proper objects." (8) Hence, the claim to know nothing and the claim to know the things of eros are related in that the latter is the claim to remedy the former. See also 65-68 where Gordon links the two claims closely.

<sup>744</sup> Eros is a philosopher, after all. See *Symposium* 203d.

toward philosophy, should they be willing. In essence, then, Socrates represents the philosopher as the truly *daimonic* individual, *par excellence*.

## Chapter IV

### Poets and Philosophers: Plato's *Cratylus* and the Function of Poetic Language

#### I. Introduction

The previous chapter built upon the foundation laid by Chapters One and Two and argued for the primary claim of this study: one can read poetry as *daimonic*, thereby significantly resolving the seemingly contradictory nature of poetry as it is presented in the Platonic dialogues. Poetry functions *daimonically* by bridging the gap between the individual's situated and limited grasp of reality as well as the related gap between Being and Becoming that constitutes the separation between mortals and the divine. Achieving this mediatory function requires one to set aside certain interpretive approaches that view a poem as a vehicle for the transmission of concrete knowledge, especially polymathic content in the form of various *technai*. Problematic interpretive methods view the poets as instructing either the masses or an initiated few in practical or esoteric wisdom. The *pseudo*-instruction provided by these approaches to poetry prevents people from acknowledging their double ignorance. Their engagement with poetry makes them think that they have knowledge they do not, and thereby prevents them from seeking out actual wisdom. In contrast, to approach poetry as *daimonic*, one engages with its divinely inspired quality in a manner similar, though not identical, to how one engages with oracles. Thus, rather than assuming there is a human-given meaning that is either apparent at the surface-level or discernible with the right allegorical "key," the reader or hearer looks for a meaning that emerges by setting aside her presumed knowledge. Therefore, engaging with poetry as *daimonic* bears a resemblance to Socrates' investigation of the Pythia's statement that he is the wisest of all humans. However, the Pythia's oracular utterance speaks to a particular person in a specific time and place, and can therefore have a single, concrete meaning. Poetry, on the other hand, can

speak to many and at all times following its composition. Thus, through certain interpretive methods, poetry can easily come to “introduce forgetfulness into the soul.”<sup>745</sup> Like the “offsprings of painting,” which, “if anyone asks them anything...remain most solemnly silent,” the written words of the poet can speak “as if they had some understanding,”<sup>746</sup> but if one questions them, the words “continues to signify just that very same thing forever.”<sup>747</sup> Accordingly, in treating poetry as *daimonic*, one must treat the work as a living and protean manifestation of divine communication that can allow itself to be questioned and examined by different people and at different times.

While it is beyond the scope of this study to catalogue all of the ways in which poetry can operate *daimonically*, this final chapter turns to examine *how* poetry can function *daimonically* in more, if not absolutely, concrete detail. By examining the role of poetry in Plato’s *Cratylus*, one can elucidate at least one example of the *daimonic* function of poetry as it is engaged in Plato’s work. In this dialogue, Socrates states that he and his interlocutor must learn of the “correctness of names” (ὀρθότης τῶν ὀνομάτων)<sup>748</sup> from “Homer and the other poets.”<sup>749</sup> The *Cratylus* is famous, or perhaps infamous, for its subsequent etymological analysis of names given by the poets. To modern readers, etymology may not seem like a method of literary analysis.

Nonetheless, as Domaradzki notes, with specific reference to the *Cratylus*, etymology at this time functioned as a form of *allegoresis*:

in antiquity etymology was basically a... technique of interpretation. Given that the adjective ἔτυμος means ‘true’ and the related technical term τὸ ἔτυμον stands for ‘the true sense of a word according to its origins,’ one may point to a crucial difference between ancient ἐτυμολογία and modern etymology: both study the origin of words or names, but the former also enquires into their ‘true’ meanings. Consequently, more often than not, this

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<sup>745</sup> *Phaedrus* 274c.

<sup>746</sup> *Phaedrus* 275d.

<sup>747</sup> *Phaedrus* 275d-e.

<sup>748</sup> *Cratylus* 383a.

<sup>749</sup> *Cratylus* 391c-d.

ἐτυμολογία transmogrifies into a certain types of *allegoresis*. This can be spectacularly observed when, for example, Plato investigates what he rather tellingly refers to as the ὀρθότης τῶν ὀνομάτων.<sup>750</sup>

Moreover, the etymologies of the *Cratylus*—while appearing absurd from the perspective of modern linguistic analysis—are congruent with existing practices of the time. Ademollo remarks that it “makes no sense to judge the... etymologies by the standards of modern scientific etymology, which did not develop before the nineteenth century,” and that, “[o]n average,” Socrates’ etymologies in the *Cratylus* “are not wilder, or more ridiculous, than those of a great many other ancient writers on the subject.”<sup>751</sup> Additionally, these etymological practices are rooted in the traditions of mystery cults and are probably most strongly associated with Orphism, as is evidenced by the fairly recent discovery of the fragmentary remains of the *Derveni Papyrus*. In *PDerveni*, etymological *allegoresis* of poetry serves as a form of poetic *allegoresis* for the purposes of initiatory practices.<sup>752</sup> Many scholars have connected the allegorical analysis of Orpheus’ poetry in the papyrus to the etymologies of the *Cratylus*.<sup>753</sup>

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<sup>750</sup> Domaradzki, “The Beginnings of Greek *Allegoresis*,” 318-19. See also Obbink, “Early Greek Allegory,” 16: “it is clear that from early on in the Greek tradition there existed different types of allegory, and not only allegory but also etymology (the practice of finding meaning in the supposed derivations of words), metaphor, simile, polyonymy (multiple names for the same thing), and analogy. There is a desire for recourse to extended forms of metonymical explanation involving multiple correspondence as early as the early fifth century, that is to say *hyponoia* and allegory in the specific and restricted sense of hidden meanings, rather than the later rhetorical sense of a trope among others.”

<sup>751</sup> Francesco Ademollo, *The Cratylus of Plato: a Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 239.

<sup>752</sup> See Laks and Most, *Studies on the Derveni Papyrus*, 4: “The Derveni papyrus permitted scholars to glimpse for the first time directly and concretely a literary genre to which access had previously only been indirect and abstract. But this confirmation involved two surprises: that it was Orpheus who was involved rather than Homer, and that the physical *allegoresis* deployed was not worked through for its own sake but coexisted with, indeed was in the service of a project which was religious, and more particularly initiatory, in character.” See also Funghi, “The Derveni Papyrus,” 29; Obbink, “Cosmology as Initiation vs. the Critique of Orphic Mysteries,” 39-54; Claude Calame, “Figures of Sexuality and Initiatory Transition in the Derveni Theogony and its Commentary,” in *Studies on the Derveni Papyrus*, eds. André Laks and Glenn Most (Oxford University Press: 1997), 66-80.

<sup>753</sup> See Kahn, “Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus,” 55-63; Obbink, “Cosmology as Initiation,” 39; Ademollo *The Cratylus of Plato*, 124-125. Levin, *The Ancient Quarrel*, 76-79. See also Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion in Plato’s Dialogues*, 139-155. Nightingale discusses the Orphic tradition itself, including *PDerveni* in some detail and connects both the papyrus and the cult in general to Plato’s texts.



This chapter argues that Socrates' engagement with the poets in the *Cratylus* illuminates some ways by which poetry functions *daimonically*. In this dialogue, it is the form of poetic language itself that *does* something for the *psyche*. Socrates' use of poetry in the *Cratylus* reveals that the multivocal and enigmatic qualities often present in poetry allow it to serve as a medium through which the philosophical initiate can be made aware of the gap between the individual's limited grasp on reality and divine thought. Second, those same enigmatic and multivocal elements render poetry a fertile ground for the philosopher to challenge and investigate her assumptions about reality. Therefore, Socrates' remark that he and Hermogenes must learn about the correctness of names from "Homer and the other poets"<sup>754</sup> amounts to a serious claim that one can learn something important about the relationship between language and reality through poetry. Moreover, the connection between the *Cratylus* and mystagogic practices of poetic *allegoresis* foreground the manner in which poetic language can be part of the process of initiating the soul into philosophical contemplation. Hence, this chapter proceeds by first giving an overview of the central debate of the *Cratylus* by contextualizing it in relation to a Platonic metaphysical schema more generally. Ultimately, the *Cratylus* is not directed at resolving the debate between Cratylus' and Hermogenes' opposing views on the nature of naming, but is rather targeted at displaying the metaphysical error at the heart of both interlocutor's claims. By looking at names in the poets, Socrates demonstrates the plastic nature of language through his divinely inspired etymology, which displays the multi-vocal and image-like quality of language. Then, the chapter examines how beginning with the poets is philosophically productive, and *daimonic* in the dialogue. Next, the chapter analyses the parallels between the *Cratylus* and the *Derveni Papyrus* fragments. Socrates' etymology of names in the poets amounts to a recognized

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<sup>754</sup> *Cratylus* 391c-d.

method of *allegoresis* in his time, and parallels the methods used by the author of the papyrus. Since many scholars recognize the *Derveni Papyrus* as a mystagogic text in the Orphic tradition in which *allegoresis* serves an initiatory function, Socrates' etymology in the *Cratylus* may function as an initiatory use of *allegoresis* as well. Finally, the chapter argues that Socrates' mystagogic use of poetry to address the debate between Hermogenes and Cratylus reveals the particular nature of poetic language as *daimonic* with respect to its very form. The protean nature of poetic language enables it to make the philosophical initiate aware of the gap she must traverse. Also, the moving nature of poetic language, and language in general, provides the philosopher with inspiration that can ignite further discourse.

## II. The *Cratylus* and Platonic Metaphysics

The *Cratylus* presents the reader with a dilemma concerning the relationship between language and reality; however, upon closer examination, the dialogue as a whole is more focused on the philosophical assumptions about reality that lie behind the two horns of this dilemma. The two positions arise in a debate, already in progress when Socrates arrives on the scene, between the eponymous character, Cratylus, and another man whom Socrates immediately addresses as Hermogenes, the son of Hipponicus.<sup>755</sup> Cratylus argues that “there is a correctness of name for each thing, one that belongs to it by nature.”<sup>756</sup> Hermogenes argues the opposite position, claiming that naming is nothing “besides convention and agreement.”<sup>757</sup> The debate between these two men is often framed as one between the opposing positions of linguistic naturalism

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<sup>755</sup> *Cratylus* 384a. The use of the patronymic is particularly meaningful given that the etymology of Hermogenes' name (son of Hermes) introduces an alternative patronymic that both Cratylus and Socrates acknowledge and discuss in the course of the dialogue.

<sup>756</sup> *Cratylus* 383a.

<sup>757</sup> *Cratylus* 384c-d.

(Cratylus) and linguistic conventionalism (Hermogenes).<sup>758</sup> However, this debate is not the central philosophical issue of the *Cratylus*.<sup>759</sup> Instead, the dialogue primarily concerns the correspondence between language and reality. Socrates' approach rejects both the views of Cratylus and Hermogenes and instead highlights the necessary slippage between language as an image of Being versus Being itself. Thus, Socrates' own position takes accurate observations about reality from both men's views, and he incorporates these accurate parts into a third position on language that accommodates a Platonic conception of reality and the relationship between Being and Becoming. In other words, Socrates' approach to names in the *Cratylus* reveals that both men have made a mistake regarding the relationship of Being to Becoming and have applied that mistake to their theories of naming.<sup>760</sup>

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<sup>758</sup> See Sedley, *Plato's Cratylus*, 3.

<sup>759</sup> *Cratylus* 432c-d: "Suppose some god didn't just represent your color and shape the way painters do, but made all the inner parts like yours, with the same warmth and softness, and put motion, soul, and wisdom like yours into them—in a word, suppose he made a duplicate of everything you have and put it beside you. Would there then be two Cratyluses or Cratylus and an image of Cratylus?... [D]on't you see that we must look for some other kind of correctness in images and in the names we've been discussing... [For] names would have an absurd effect on the things they name, if they resembled them in every respect, since all of them would then be duplicated, and no one would be able to say which was the thing and which was the name."

<sup>760</sup> This position in and of itself is not unique to this study. See, for example, Simon Keller, "An Interpretation of Plato's *Cratylus*," *Phronesis* 45, no. 4 (2000): 284–305. Keller argues that "commentators have overestimated the extent to which the *Cratylus* is concerned with the question of the correctness of names" (285). Instead, Keller claims that "Plato's main concern in the *Cratylus*... is to argue against the idea that we can learn about things by examining their names" and that, while questions regarding naturalist or conventionalist theories of language do "arise in the dialogue," they "are subordinate" to this main concern (284). However, Keller's argument rests on the idea that Plato is attacking the use of "etymology as a form of philosophical inquiry" (285). This is a common view, and something similar is expressed in Kahn, "Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus," 55-63 and in Obbink, "Cosmology as Initiation vs. the Critique of Orphic Mysteries," 39. Both Kahn and Obbink see the etymologies in the *Cratylus* as a reference to cultic practices, and both see Plato as criticizing these practices through Socrates' use of etymology in the dialogue. This study does not argue that Socrates' etymologies should be taken as a straightforward endorsement of cultic uses of etymology. However, it also does not claim they are meant to signal a complete rejection of the kind of engagement with the poets undertaken by Socrates in the *Cratylus*. Instead, it asserts that there is *something* to this kind of practice even if it does not stand up to scrutiny when used in the manner of those such as the author of the *Derveni Papyrus*. Thus, Plato's depiction of etymologies in the *Cratylus* functions as a transformation of existing practices, and not as a full and outright rejection of them. Keller notes the passage at 428b wherein Socrates says he will sign up for Cratylus' course if the Sophist can say something better about naming. Keller astutely remarks that this statement suggests "that Cratylus may be one of the professional etymologists whose pretensions are at issue" (299). This suggestion might also indicate that Socrates' etymologies, especially as they are marked as "inspired," are intended as a counter to practices like those of Cratylus. In other words, the presence of Cratylus as a possible foil here for Socrates' inspired but non-expert etymologies could further support the claim that what Socrates is doing is a transformation of current practices.

One must first examine Cratylus' position on naming, which, in the context of the dialogue itself, also necessitates an examination of whether and to what extent it is consistent with the Heraclitan idea of flux. We know that Cratylus became known as a radical Heraclitan later in his life.<sup>761</sup> This historical reality has led some scholars to see Cratylus' position in the *Cratylus* as Heraclitan and to see Socrates' engagement with the eponymous character as a refutation of Heraclitan flux itself.<sup>762</sup> Nevertheless, other scholars have argued that Cratylus was not meant to be a stand-in for views of Heraclitus.<sup>763</sup> Regardless of whether or not Cratylus understands himself to be Heraclitan in his views, his actual claims do not fit with a Heraclitan view of flux. Furthermore, Plato's Socrates does not refute the notion of flux itself, but he does draw attention to its relevance in problematizing the views of both Cratylus and Hermogenes.

The historical Cratylus was a Sophist who influenced Plato's early philosophical development. Guthrie tells us that Cratylus was an adherent to "the most extreme" version of the flux-doctrine, and states that he "finally decided that he ought to say nothing at all" and instead "only moved his finger."<sup>764</sup> According to Guthrie, Cratylus "criticized Heraclitus for saying that one cannot step twice into the same river on the ground that one could not do so even once."<sup>765</sup>

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<sup>761</sup> See W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists*, 201-209.

<sup>762</sup> See, for example, Christine J. Thomas, "Inquiry Without Names in Plato's *Cratylus*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46, No. 3 (2008): 341-364. Thomas states that Socrates "warns Cratylus not to embrace without pause the Heraclitean assumptions buried in certain names" (348-349), indicates that Cratylus accepts "the Heraclitean view without question" (349), and seems to conflate Socrates' refutation of Cratylus' position overall with a refutation of Heraclitanism (see 360). Indeed, Thomas' analysis in general proceeds under the assumption that Cratylus' position is Heraclitan, and uses the two interchangeably. See also Robin Reames, "Heraclitean Opposition and Parmenidean Contradiction," in *Seeming and Being in Plato's Rhetorical Theory* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 77-98. Reames contends that, with respect to "the Heraclitean doctrine of flux," Socrates "explicitly disputed" it (81).

<sup>763</sup> See Sedley, *Plato's Cratylus*, 18. Though his claim holds different implications for this study than Sedley's claim that the Cratylus of the *Cratylus* is not a Heraclitan yet, Matthew Colvin argues that the view of flux referenced in the *Cratylus* is not a Heraclitan view of flux at all. Rather, he argues that Plato presents the reader with a distinctly different view of flux for his own philosophical purposes. See "Heraclitean Flux and Unity of Opposites in Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Cratylus*," *Classical Quarterly* 57, No. 2 (2007): 759-769.

<sup>764</sup> Guthrie, *The Sophists*, 201.

<sup>765</sup> Guthrie, *The Sophists*, 201.

From Aristotle, we learn that Plato became “familiar with Cratylus and with the Heraclitan doctrines (that all sensible things are ever in a state of flux and there is no knowledge about them),” and held to “these views...even in later years.”<sup>766</sup> Furthermore, Aristotle claims that Plato’s own thought married Heraclitan flux to Socrates’ work with definitions to produce the multi-level theory of reality consisting of Being and Becoming or the Intelligible and Sensible realms:

Socrates...was busying himself about ethical matters and neglecting the world of nature as a whole but seeking the universal in these ethical matters, and fixed thought for the first time on definitions; Plato accepted his teaching, but held that the problem applied not to any sensible thing but to entities of another kind—for this reason, that the common definition could not be a definition of any sensible thing, as they were always changing. Things of this other sort, then, he called Ideas, and sensible things, he said, were apart from these, and were all called after these; for the multitude of things which have the same name as the Form exist by participation in it.<sup>767</sup>

Thus, according to his student, Plato combined Heraclitus’ view of flux with Socrates’ ideas of fixed definitions and developed a multi-layer view of reality consisting of a level inhabited by stable Forms or Ideas (i.e., Being) and a level inhabited by sensible things which are ever in flux. Critically, Aristotle says, “for the many things that are named after the Forms exist by participation” (κατὰ μέθεξι γὰρ εἶναι τὰ πολλὰ ὁμώνυμα τοῖς εἶδεσιν).<sup>768</sup> Given what Aristotle tells us, it is unsurprising that Plato wrote a dialogue combining the characters of Cratylus and Socrates. It is also unsurprising that that dialogue centralizes concerns over the nature of names in light of the relationship of language to Heraclitus’ doctrine of flux.<sup>769</sup>

It would, however, be surprising if Plato intended for Socrates to refute Heraclitan flux through the dialogue with Cratylus. After all, Aristotle tells us that Plato believed in flux as the

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<sup>766</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 987a-b.

<sup>767</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 987b.

<sup>768</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 987b. Translation revised from Forster.

<sup>769</sup> It is explicitly mentioned in the text. See, for example, *Cratylus* 402b-c.

“space” of the sensible and believed that sensibles, which were ever-changing, were named after more stable entities, but were not identical with these entities. It is Socrates and not Cratylus, after all, who points out that things and their names cannot be identical, and this point presupposes the reality of flux regarding sensibles:

Suppose some god didn't just represent your color and shape the way painters do, but made all the inner parts like yours, with the same warmth and softness, and put motion, soul, and wisdom like yours into them—in a word, suppose he made a duplicate of everything you have and put it beside you. Would there then be two Cratyluses or Cratylus and an image of Cratylus?... [D]on't you see that we must look for some other kind of correctness in images and in the names we've been discussing... [For] names would have an absurd effect on the things they name, if they resembled them in every respect, since all of them would then be duplicated, and no one would be able to say which was the thing and which was the name.<sup>770</sup>

Sensibles are “named after” the Form. Therefore, taking what Aristotle tells us about Plato's thought in combination with this passage, it seems that the correspondence concerning language and reality requires consideration of three things: the Form, the name, and the particular sensibles that share it. From the Platonic position, names are supposed to differ from the things they name, and there is perhaps even more variation between names and the multiplicity of sensible things categorized under them.

Yet, Cratylus' position is that names can only be correct. The upshot of this view, according to W. C. K. Guthrie, is that names are “right, or they are nothing, simply unmeaning noises like the banging of a gong.”<sup>771</sup> However, Guthrie interprets Cratylus' position as Heraclitan when he states: “[Cratylus] evidently thought (as one would expect from what is put into his mouth in Plato's *Cratylus*) that to utter any statement is to commit oneself to the affirmation that something *is*.”<sup>772</sup> Yet, this is not the position that Plato actually puts into the

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<sup>770</sup> *Cratylus* 432c-d.

<sup>771</sup> W. C. K. Guthrie, *The Sophists*, 207.

<sup>772</sup> Guthrie, *The Sophists*, 201.

mouth of Cratylus. As Simon Keller remarks, while Cratylus' view leads him to say that "one can neither speak nor say anything falsely,"<sup>773</sup> and "for him this is not a relativist claim."<sup>774</sup> According to Keller's interpretation of Cratylus' view—which differs from Guthrie's—those "whose speech does not accord with the stringent rules of natural correctness are not really speaking."<sup>775</sup> Cratylus says exactly this at 430a when he explains that, in his view, one who speaks falsely is "just making noise and acting pointlessly, as if he were banging a brass pot." Keller's assessment finds further purchase in Cratylus' own words at 429d-e wherein the Sophist expresses a view much more Parmenidean than Heraclitan; he asks how anyone can "say the things he says and not say something that is? Doesn't speaking falsely consist in not saying things that are?"<sup>776</sup> Rather than reminding one of Heraclitus' enigmas, Cratylus' question more closely echoes Parmenides' poetry. As Parmenides puts it, "that which is there to be spoken...of must be,"<sup>777</sup> and being "must either fully be or not [be]."<sup>778</sup> One could argue that Cratylus' claim is that *if* one can say something, they can only say what is; but, since flux is all there is, one cannot actually speak at all. While this response is in-line with what Cratylus seems to believe, it is not born out in Plato's depiction of him in the *Cratylus*. Cratylus *is speaking* in this dialogue, and since he does express the idea that speaking falsely amounts to not actually speaking at all,<sup>779</sup> it stands to reason that Cratylus in the *Cratylus* thinks that one *can* say what is. The other alternative is that Cratylus *thinks* he is espousing a Heraclitan view and does believe in the flux, but does not yet see that his claims about naming logically entail that he cannot actually be

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<sup>773</sup> *Cratylus* 429e.

<sup>774</sup> Keller, "An Interpretation of Plato's *Cratylus*," 299.

<sup>775</sup> Keller, "An Interpretation of Plato's *Cratylus*," 299.

<sup>776</sup> *Cratylus* 429d-e.

<sup>777</sup> DK 28B6

<sup>778</sup> DK 28B8. Content in brackets is my own emendation for clarity.

<sup>779</sup> At 430a, Cratylus explains that, in his view, one who speaks falsely is "just making noise and acting pointlessly, as if he were banging a brass pot."

having the conversation he is having with Socrates all. The two men may as well just be banging gongs at one another. Cratylus may not yet consciously adhere to the Heraclitan doctrine of flux. Or, perhaps he does, but he simply does not understand how his claims about language are inconsistent with such a doctrine. Nevertheless, the view that actually follows from what he says is that naming cannot admit of degrees. Anything other than a correct name with a one-to-one correspondence between what is and what is named is simply nonsensical non-speech.

The caricature of Cratylus' silently wagging his finger and refusing to say anything at all demonstrates that, at some point in his later life, he learned that, if flux is all there is, true speech is impossible. Still, on Plato's depiction of him in the *Cratylus*, he does not grasp this yet, as is evidenced by his inability to grasp, initially, why Socrates would make the correspondence between names and things at 432c-d. The disconnect between Plato's characterization of Cratylus and the later historical man could be related to the dramatic dating of the dialogue. Debra Nails, David Sedley, and others have argued that the dramatic date of the text should be set a decade or more before Socrates' trial. This dating entails that Cratylus is much younger than Socrates and that the dialogue takes place long before Cratylus' noted influence on Plato.<sup>780</sup> Ademollo points out that there are two passages wherein the younger age of Cratylus is made apparent; this happens at 429d, "where Socrates says the sophism Cratylus has just put forward is 'too clever' for him and his age," and at 440d, "where Socrates invites Cratylus to inquire further on the grounds that 'you're still young and in your prime.'"<sup>781</sup> These passages likely position Cratylus as being early in his career, thereby suggesting that his depiction in the dialogue may indicate that he is not yet a fully-fledged Heraclitan. On these considerations of dramatic dating,

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<sup>780</sup> See Nails, *The People of Plato*, 105-106. See also Francesco Ademollo, *The Cratylus of Plato*, 14, and Sedley, *Plato's Cratylus*, 3 (note 5). Sedley dates the setting of the dialogue to "at least a decade before Socrates' death in 399."

<sup>781</sup> Ademollo, *The Cratylus of Plato*, 14.



Sedley writes that “Cratylus, influenced by Socrates’ etymologies, becomes a believer in flux for the first time during...the dialogue.”<sup>782</sup> Thus, Sedley sees Plato as intentionally depicting Socrates as the one who brings Cratylus to see the contradictions in his thinking about language and reality, thereby spurring the young Cratylus to develop his views further and turn into the radical Heraclitan we know he became. Still, dating the dialogue is not a simple affair, and there are those who disagree with Nails, Sedley, and Ademollo on the dramatic date of the *Cratylus*.<sup>783</sup> In any case, even if the dramatic date could be concretely established, whether or not Cratylus consciously and faithfully takes up the views of Heraclitan philosophy remains a matter of speculation. Furthermore, the question of Cratylus’ *awareness* of what he is arguing in the dialogue is beside the point. Socratic interlocutors are often unaware of the conclusions to which their claims ultimately lead; this point is a major basis for the *elenchus* itself. Hence, regardless of whether Cratylus realizes it or not, his claims have some significant problems from the perspective of Heraclitan flux.

Taken together, the claims actually made by Cratylus, Socrates’ replies, the historical characterization of Plato’s thought via Aristotle, and the ontological ideas underlying the discussion of language as a whole all point away from Cratylus’ presence as a stand-in or mouthpiece for Heraclitan flux. In addition to the arguments offered above, one should consider Heraclitus’ own use of language, especially in view of the ultimate themes of this study. While, for Cratylus, names cannot be partly true or partly false, let alone both true *and* false at the same time, Heraclitus’ writings reveal a man who was more than comfortable with poetic ambiguity.

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<sup>782</sup> Sedley, *Plato’s Cratylus*, 18.

<sup>783</sup> For a very recent example dealing with similar themes to the present study, see Colin C. Smith, “The Case for the 399 BCE Dramatic Date of Plato’s *Cratylus*,” *Classical Philology* 117, No. 4 (2022): 581-761.

Heraclitus' enigmatic wordings suggest that the Presocratic thinker both accepted and intentionally made use of the inherent ambiguities of poetic language. Heraclitus' philosophy is communicated through verse, and the surviving fragments employ multivocality and ambiguity as a method through which Heraclitus expresses his views of unity-in-flux. For example, consider the following fragments:

The wise is one alone; it is unwilling and willing to be called by the name of Zeus.<sup>784</sup>

The same thing is both living and dead, and the waking and the sleeping, and young and old; for these things transformed are those, and those transformed back again are these.<sup>785</sup>

God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger, but changes the <fire,> when mingled with perfumes, is named according to the scent of each.<sup>786</sup>

One must ask how Cratylus' position that a name is either correct or it is nothing can square with these Heraclitan enigmas. On Cratylus' view, it should be either true or false to give wisdom the name of "Zeus." This name either is correct or is nothing. Yet, Heraclitus' words indicate something else; they state that it is *both* correct *and* incorrect to call wisdom by the name of Zeus. For Heraclitus, there is one thing, wisdom, but that thing both is and is not "Zeus" in name. The logical conclusion of what Cratylus has said is that calling wisdom "Zeus" is either right or wrong, but Heraclitus' statement breaks open the rigid binarity at the heart of such a claim. The nature of wisdom, itself one, is somehow articulated in multiplicity. It is, therefore, both captured and not captured "correctly" by the name of Zeus. Heraclitus' statement is more compatible with Socrates' point that names are images that are true or false in accordance with how well they capture a *likeness* to their referent.<sup>787</sup> The fragment is less compatible with Cratylus' view that names are either wholly correct or nothing at all. While Cratylus seems to insist that names must

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<sup>784</sup> DK 22B32.

<sup>785</sup> DK 22B88.

<sup>786</sup> DK 22B67.

<sup>787</sup> See *Cratylus* 430b-432d.

share a one-to-one correspondence to their referents, Socrates' approach suggests that names, as images used to articulate a likeness of something in a temporally constituted manner, are vulnerable to Heraclitan flux. The temporality and image-quality of names thereby entails a necessary *difference* between them and the thing to which they refer.

Thus, the correctness of names can admit of degrees, for, as Socrates says when comparing naming to painting,

primary names may be compared to paintings, and in paintings it's possible to present all the appropriate colors and shapes, or not to present them all. Some may be left out, or too many included, or those included may be too large... So doesn't someone who presents all of them, present a fine painting or likeness, while someone who adds some or leaves some out, though he still produces a painting or likeness, produces a bad one?... What about someone who imitates the being or essence of things in syllables and letters? According to this account, if he presents all the appropriate things, won't the likeness—that is to say, the name—be a fine one? But if he happens to add a little or leave a little out, though he'll still have produced an image, it won't be fine? Doesn't it follow that some names are finely made, while others are made badly?<sup>788</sup>

However, Cratylus has previously stated that “it's possible to assign paintings incorrectly, but not names, which must always be correctly assigned.”<sup>789</sup> Here, again, it is Socrates' statements that align more closely with Heraclitus' use of language, for in stating that wisdom both is and is not properly called by the name of Zeus, I take Heraclitus to be pointing out the ways in which Zeus both does and does not personify wisdom. The duality in Heraclitus' words fits with what we know of his philosophical view of a unity in flux. He holds that a unified divine *logos* is expressed through the eternal flux in which everything is ultimately one through perpetual change.<sup>790</sup> Thus, opposites are nevertheless unified through the continual flow of exchange from

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<sup>788</sup> *Cratylus* 431c-d.

<sup>789</sup> *Cratylus* 430d-e.

<sup>790</sup> See DK 22B50: “Listening not to me but to the *logos* it is wise to agree that all things are one.” Also see DK 22B8: “What is opposed brings together; the finest harmony (*harmonia*) is composed of things at variance, and everything comes to be in accordance with strife.”

one state to its opposite (i.e., “these things transformed are those, and those transformed back again are these”).<sup>791</sup> As Patricia Curd puts it,

A fundamental part of [Heraclitus’] insight is seeing how all that is known constitutes a unity. Heraclitus himself offered signs of this unity in his paradoxes about the unity of opposites. He insisted that, despite the fact that there is universal change, there is a single, unchanging, law of the cosmos – the *logos* which both underlies and governs these changes... The physical sign or manifestation of the *logos* is fire, an element that is always changing, yet always the same.<sup>792</sup>

The Heraclitan fragments illustrate this kind of monism-in-flux through the use of enigmatic poetry to try to capture both the *logos* present in this continual cosmic motion of change and the impossibility of articulating the *logos* in language in any once-and-for-all, univocal manner.

Specific utterances are essentially always both true and false because of the continual cosmic flux. Accordingly, Heraclitus offers the following enigmatic statements, all of which illustrate an attempt to articulate the inarticulable (because always changing) unity of opposites by employing duality and ambiguity in language:

Things taken together are whole and not whole, <something which is > being brought together and brought apart, in tune and out of tune; out of all things there comes a unity, and out of a unity all things.<sup>793</sup>

Changing, it rests.<sup>794</sup>

Fire is want and satiety.<sup>795</sup>

In other words, to capture the nature of things, one must speak in a way that draws attention to the ever-moving flow between opposites. This type of language-use appears to be in conflict with Cratylus’ claims, for it operates precisely by capturing the way in which a name both does and does correspond to its referent. Rather than asserting a static correctness of names,

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<sup>791</sup> DK 22B88.

<sup>792</sup> Curd and McKirahan, *A Presocratics Reader*, 29-30.

<sup>793</sup> DK 22B10.

<sup>794</sup> DK 22B84.

<sup>795</sup> DK 22B65.

Heraclitus' fragments instead suggest that names can only serve their purpose by capturing the ever-present tensions or dualities in the things we want to name. Therefore, calling "wisdom" by the name of "Zeus" both illuminates some things about wisdom's nature (i.e., wisdom is "willing" to be called by this name) *at the same time* that it obscures others (i.e., wisdom is "unwilling" to be called by this name). Therefore, one can see how the later Cratylus' approach pushed Heraclitus' logic to the extreme. Whereas Heraclitus used poetic, enigmatic language to destabilize the overly concrete binarity of human thinking, Cratylus gave up speech altogether, acknowledging that a commitment to absolute flux rendered the ability to say anything true at all to be an ultimately Sisyphean task. Nevertheless, the Cratylus of Plato's dialogue does not express views in line with Heraclitan flux. Instead, it is Plato's Socrates who suggests a view of language that is more in-line with Heraclitus' own approach.

Socrates' other interlocutor, Hermogenes, argues for the position opposite to that of Cratylus, asserting that naming is nothing "besides convention and agreement."<sup>796</sup> This study does not require a close examination of Hermogenes' position or Socrates' refutation of it; we will only examine Hermogenes' views insofar as they illuminate how both his and Cratylus' views of language assume the same reality and ask the same fundamental question regarding its relationship to language. For Hermogenes, names do not correspond perfectly and naturally to a real referent. Instead, names are simply assigned arbitrarily and rendered comprehensible via convention. And yet, Hermogenes does not take up the relativism of sophistic thinkers such as Protagoras. When asked by Socrates if "the being or essence of each" thing is "something private for each person, as Protagoras tells us," Hermogenes answers in the negative, agreeing, instead, with the claim that "things have some fixed being or essence of their own."<sup>797</sup> Hermogenes

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<sup>796</sup> *Cratylus* 384c-d.

<sup>797</sup> *Cratylus* 385e-386a.

thereby asserts that the reality of names is separate from an objective reality which nevertheless does exist.<sup>798</sup> This suggests that Hermogenes appeals to conventionalism because he recognizes that it is impossible for a name to capture the entirety of its referent. Similarly, since Cratylus thinks correct naming is possible and does not admit of degrees,<sup>799</sup> he must believe that naming has an objective and static object that it names. In other words, Cratylus must agree with Socrates and Hermogenes in proclaiming that objective reality exists (that he essentially paraphrases Parmenides, as discussed above, indicates that he believes as much).<sup>800</sup> However, unlike Hermogenes, Cratylus thinks that names *can* capture the entirety of their referents. Therefore, both interlocutors are grappling with the question of how names, which are demonstrably plastic in their use, and which often correspond to a sensible world that is, itself, plastic by nature, can ever accurately relate to objective reality. It seems that there must either be a one-to-one correspondence between names and reality, meaning there can be no plasticity in naming (Cratylus' view), or there must be no correspondence at all, meaning there is only plasticity (Hermogenes' view). In short, Hermogenes and Cratylus have the same starting point in mind, and the same problem; they merely come to opposite conclusions regarding the

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<sup>798</sup> *Cratylus* 385e-386d.

<sup>799</sup> Note that at *Cratylus*, 432d-e, Socrates argues that naming can and does operate by degrees: "Take courage then and admit that one name may be well given while another isn't. Don't insist that it has all the letters and exactly resembles the thing it names, but allow that an inappropriate letter may be included... Things are still named and described when this happens... So even if a name doesn't include all the appropriate letters, it will still describe the thing if it includes its pattern—though it will describe the thing well, if it includes all the appropriate letters, and badly, if it includes few of them." Note that this logic applies to language as a whole, for "if an inappropriate letter may be included in a name, an inappropriate name may be included in a phrase. And if an inappropriate name may be included in a phrase, a phrase which is inappropriate to the things may be employed in a statement."

<sup>800</sup> One should note, however, that Cratylus does not seem very aware of what he is actually claiming or what he actually believes. He does appear to think he is a Heraclitan given his remarks at 444d-e where he states that he has already "taken a lot of trouble over the matter, and things seem to me to be very much more as Heraclitus says they are." While Sedley argues that Cratylus converts to Heraclitanism in the course of his discussion with Socrates, this remark by Cratylus at the very end of the dialogue probably contradicts this conclusion (Sedley, *Plato's Cratylus*, 18). Unless, of course, we want to assert that when Cratylus says he has "taken a lot of trouble over the matter" he simply means this to be the case over the course of this conversation with Socrates. Nevertheless, to return to the conclusion given earlier in this chapter, regardless of what Cratylus thinks he believes and thinks he is claiming, his actual statements do not accord with the historical picture of Heraclitan thought.

resolution. Cratylus comes down on the side of names matching reality either perfectly or not at all. Hermogenes gives up all hope of any real correspondence whatsoever; he holds that names are just random sounds that we agree to use to refer to something which is, itself, real, even though its name is not.

However, Cratylus and Hermogenes fall prey to a false dichotomy arising out of Presocratic thought that Socrates addresses both in the *Cratylus* and in the *Republic*. There was a debate between Heraclitan flux and Parmenidean Being that was central to much of classical Greek philosophy. Plato's work can be read, in part, as an attempt to settle this debate by positing a tri-level ontology, one example of which appears in the *Republic* in Book V, 477a-479c. Therein, Socrates connects this ontology to the nature of knowledge, and he also subtly relates it to the limits of speech. At the top of the schema, there is "what is," over which knowledge presides.<sup>801</sup> Given that the images of the Line and the Cave follow this statement and are explained epistemologically in relation to it, it is clear that this realm of "what is" comprises the static Being of the Forms, marking out Plato's own version of Parmenidean Being, though Plato's view is less monistic. Then, there is "what is not," the purview of ignorance alone, the province of abject nothingness.<sup>802</sup> Crucially, however, there is something in between the two that is described explicitly as "intermediate" between "what is and what is not."<sup>803</sup> This is what can be called "Becoming," a space in between absolute Being and absolute nothingness, the moving realm of coming to be and dying away. In Becoming, nothingness mixes with Being to produce images of the Forms which owe their being to these eternal paradigms, yet flow through various permutations and experience a privation of total adherence to their model in Being. As Socrates

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<sup>801</sup> *Republic* 477a.

<sup>802</sup> *Republic* 477a.

<sup>803</sup> *Republic* 477a-b.

puts it, this intermediate space “participates in both being and not being and cannot correctly be called purely one or the other.”<sup>804</sup> In other words, Becoming is essentially Plato’s own version of Heraclitan flux. Plato thereby creates a metaphysical schema in which absolute Being and flux co-exist, the latter being a moving and imperfect image of the former, which remains ever complete and therefore at rest.

Socrates draws out the conclusions of this tri-fold schema for speech, and, in doing so, he gestures toward the key fault in both Hermogenes’ and Cratylus’ understandings of language. In the passage from the *Republic*, Socrates indicates that when we speak of things in Becoming, whatever we say is necessarily both true and false. Regarding this intermediate space, we must ask, “of all the many beautiful things, is there one that will not also appear ugly? Or is there one of those just things that will not also appear unjust? Or one of those pious things that will not also appear impious?”<sup>805</sup> The answer is that “[t]here isn’t one, for it is necessary that they appear to be beautiful in a way and also to be ugly in a way.”<sup>806</sup> Socrates then connects this ontological and epistemological schema to speech: “Is any one of the [many particulars] what we say it is...any more than it is not what [we say] it is?”<sup>807</sup> The answer is “no,” but Socrates also states that the things in Becoming are enigmas (αἰνίγματα), things captured in riddling sayings which are “ambiguous,” as “one cannot understand them as fixedly being or fixedly not being or as both or as neither.”<sup>808</sup> Accordingly, the debate between Hermogenes and Cratylus fundamentally misunderstands the nature of speaking about the sensible world. Moreover, given Socrates’ argument at the end of the *Cratylus* that we would, ideally, reach a point where we investigate

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<sup>804</sup> *Republic* 478d-e.

<sup>805</sup> *Republic* 479a.

<sup>806</sup> *Republic* 479a-b.

<sup>807</sup> *Republic* 479b.

<sup>808</sup> *Republic* 479b-c.



without images at all (images, in this case being names), we can also conclude that Being is not something one can capture once and for all through the inherently temporal nature of language.<sup>809</sup> Ergo, language has neither a one-to-one correspondence to Being nor does it have no correspondence at all. Instead, any speech about the world will be of a mixed nature, neither entirely arbitrary, nor entirely adhering to its object. Thus, language in Becoming is fundamentally marked by the qualities of the sign or the image, and it thereby directly relates to, but is never identical with, any of its objects.

Consequently, the central debate of the *Cratylus* arises from a misunderstanding regarding the nature of reality and the place of the human being who must usually use language (both in thought and in dialogue with others) in order to understand it. Language itself is explicitly connected to images, and Socrates remarks that images are never the things they are images of.<sup>810</sup> Hence, he and Cratylus eventually agree that the highest form of investigation and knowledge is through the things themselves, and not through their names, for “it is far better to investigate them and learn about them through themselves than to do so through their names.”<sup>811</sup> This statement recalls the division between Forms and particulars, and is clarified in Nehamas’ essay regarding the question of self-predication in relation to the Forms. As Nehamas puts it, “[j]ust as, on the ontological level, only the beautiful itself is beautiful, so, on the semantical, the word ‘beautiful’ is strictly speaking only the name (*onoma*) of the beautiful itself and nothing else. The word, we may say, is only ‘derivatively’ the name of beautiful things.”<sup>812</sup> While Nehamas further argues that Plato “retains *onoma* and *onomazein* (naming) for cases where a

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<sup>809</sup> See *Cratylus* 439a-b.

<sup>810</sup> *Cratylus* 432a-d.

<sup>811</sup> *Cratylus* 439a-b.

<sup>812</sup> Alexander Nehamas, “Self-Predication and Plato’s Theory of Forms,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, No. 2 (1979): 100.

word expresses the nature or essence of its referent,”<sup>813</sup> the *Cratylus* points out that a name can never fully express the nature or essence to which it refers (or else it would become a duplication of the referent). Hence, the most complete way to cognize Being resides in the meta-linguistic contemplation of *noesis*.

Socrates’ conclusion that it is best “to investigate... and learn about [the things that are] through themselves” rather than “through their names” is evocative of what he says in the *Republic* regarding *noesis*. At this level, the philosopher “only [makes use] of forms themselves, moving on from forms to forms, and ending in forms.”<sup>814</sup> Since reaching this level of understanding is something Socrates never appears to credit himself with having done, it seems that the use of language itself relates to the philosopher as lover of wisdom instead of one who has actually become wise. Nevertheless, this transcendence of language altogether to a realm of meta-linguistic contemplation of forms through forms is the ultimate goal of the philosopher’s striving after wisdom. The one who has achieved true knowledge operates without the use of sensible images, be they the things in the world or names, and thinks via the Forms themselves without the discursivity of words. Still, since meta-linguistic *noesis* is an ideal and not something that the embodied philosopher seems to achieve easily or often (if at all while embodied), it is not the case that the philosopher has no use for images or language. Indeed, if this were the case, Plato’s entire philosophical project would be useless. Speech is clearly a key element in the philosophical initiate’s journey, even if her ultimate goal is to achieve a state wherein it is no longer needed. Therefore, viewed from a certain angle, the *Cratylus* is not about language *qua* language. Instead, it is about making the would-be philosopher, the hopeful initiate, realize his position in relation to this goal, and understand the limits of the main tools available to him in his

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<sup>813</sup> Nehamas, “Self-Predication and Plato’s Theory of Forms,” 101.

<sup>814</sup> *Republic* 511b-c.

embodied, mortal state. In this case, the tool is language, and the initiate cannot employ it meaningfully in service to his goal until he is made aware of both the nature of speech itself, and how it relates to the gap that he must traverse between Being and Becoming.

### III. Beginning with the Poets

The *Cratylus* is particularly famous for Socrates' long and rather tedious etymological analysis of names in Homer and Hesiod. The etymologizing undertaken in the *Cratylus* was a form of poetic *allegoresis* during Plato's time, and it was a fairly common practice.<sup>815</sup> While Socrates' etymologies are often treated as a kind of critique of such practices,<sup>816</sup> the etymologies serve a more positive purpose than such treatments claim. Since Hermogenes rejects the ideas of certain Sophists,<sup>817</sup> Socrates states that they must take another path and about the correctness of names "from Homer and the other poets."<sup>818</sup> Socrates then launches into the etymological analysis of names from Homer and Hesiod. Socrates' choice of starting point is not trivial. In poetry we find the names of things, heroes, and gods, stated in detail and expounded upon. We learn not of the sea, or dawn, but of the sea's wine-darkness and dawn's rosy fingers. In the first book of the *Iliad* alone, Apollo is given numerous titles: "Apollo who strikes from afar,"<sup>819</sup> "The

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<sup>815</sup> See Domaradzki, "The Beginnings of Greek *Allegoresis*," 318-19. See also Obbink, "Early Greek Allegory," 16: "it is clear that from early on in the Greek tradition there existed different types of allegory, and not only allegory but also etymology (the practice of finding meaning in the supposed derivations of words), metaphor, simile, polyonymy (multiple names for the same thing), and analogy. There is a desire for recourse to extended forms of metonymical explanation involving multiple correspondence as early as the early fifth century, that is to say *hyponoia* and allegory in the specific and restricted sense of hidden meanings, rather than the later rhetorical sense of a trope among others."

<sup>816</sup> See note 759.

<sup>817</sup> One should note that, while the Sophists are discussed in the remainder of this chapter, they are done so in a manner that reflects their role in Plato's thought, which does not always depict them in ways that are always charitable or accurate. For more on the historical Sophists, including those mentioned in Plato's *Cratylus*, see G.B. Kerford, *The Sophistic Movement* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>818</sup> *Cratylus* 391c-d.

<sup>819</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, trans. A.T. Murray, see lines 14, 21, 76.

lord Apollo, whom fair-haired Leto bore,”<sup>820</sup> “Phoebus Apollo,”<sup>821</sup> and “Apollo, dear to Zeus.”<sup>822</sup> The poets are rather obsessed with names, and their methods of naming highlight the relationship between a name and the referent it picks out. Specifically, the poets’ multi-vocal treatment of names reveals that, while the reality underlying a name may be a unified whole, its various epithets function to articulate that whole by focusing on discrete facets of it.

If we recall the claims from the *Ion*, Socrates cannot choose to begin with the poets because he thinks that they, themselves, possess some kind of expertise on names. Instead, his choice of beginning makes use of the very form of poetic language itself, which can serve to illuminate reality in a manner often occluded by the more concrete, univocal meanings employed in straightforward propositional language. Poetry, by communicating through multi-vocal, enigmatic, and ambiguous means, gets at more meanings at once than does plainer language. A name can be correct in one way but occlude other revelatory meanings in another. Yet, epithets, such as “far-shooting Apollo,” can be taken in many different metaphorical ways as well. In short, by beginning with poetry, Socrates lays the multi-vocal, ambiguous, and enigmatic nature of poetic language bare for the other two men to see. He thereby demonstrates that they have both missed something central to understanding language in general. Thus, Socrates’ use of poetic language unveils some important truths about language itself as it relates to reality and to the *telos* of the philosophical life.

First and foremost, one must note a key division in the etymological passage. While the first part of the analysis is not inspired, the second, longer part is explicitly denoted to be the product of inspiration. Socrates begins by examining the ascription of both “Skamandrios” and

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<sup>820</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, trans. A.T. Murray, see line 37.

<sup>821</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, trans. A.T. Murray, see lines 44, 65, 73, 183, 371, 381-82, 439.

<sup>822</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, trans. A.T. Murray, see line line 87.

“Astyanax” to Hector’s son in the *Iliad*, arguing that Homer must have intended the former to be the correct name because it was given by the men of Troy rather than the women. The assumption is, of course, that men are wiser than women. Importantly, Socrates argues that Homer *intended* to indicate which name is correct.<sup>823</sup> As discussed in Chapter Two, and as Yulia Ustinova remarks, the Greeks believed that the poets had special knowledge imparted to them via a “divine will [which] was needed for a mortal poet to be able to know what a regular mortal could not know.”<sup>824</sup> Hence, from the broad view of a general historical lens, nothing is noteworthy in Plato’s ascription of divine knowledge to the poet. However, from the narrower perspective of the Platonic lens, as previously discussed, the ascription of conscious expertise in naming to Homer should give the reader significant pause. Plato consistently denies that the poets possess knowledge of their own, and he makes it clear in both the *Apology* and the *Ion* that the poets compose via divine inspiration, not personal brilliance.<sup>825</sup> Homer could not have consciously crafted any hidden theories of correct naming in the *Iliad* that would help this investigation. Given the prevalence of this literal approach to the poets, it stands to reason that Socrates’ first foray into investigating the relationship between poetry and naming takes it up and reveals it to be faulty. Socrates asks, “perhaps...I’m talking nonsense, and that I’m wrong to suppose that I’ve found a clue to Homer’s beliefs about the correctness of names?”<sup>826</sup> Here, the Greek indicates that Socrates has been trying to elucidate Homer’s opinions (τῆς Ὀμήρου δόξης) about the correctness of names. Since we know that Plato’s Socrates is repeatedly uninterested in what the poets themselves think, this line of questioning can be regarded as a wind egg. Homer’s opinions are not based on knowledge; Homer has no knowledge.

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<sup>823</sup> *Cratylus* 392d.

<sup>824</sup> Yulia Ustinova, *Divine Mania*, 263.

<sup>825</sup> *Apology* 22b-c, *Ion* 533e.

<sup>826</sup> *Cratylus* 393b.

However, as the previous chapter argued, one can approach the poets in a manner akin to how one approaches an oracle by employing methods for interpreting divine enigmas;<sup>827</sup> this is the manner in which Socrates now turns toward naming in the poets. A marked shift occurs beginning at 396a when Socrates gives etymologies of Zeus, Cronus, and Ouranos:

[T]he name ‘Zeus’ is exactly like a phrase that we divide into two parts, ‘*Zēna*’ and ‘*Dia*’, some of us using one of them and some the other. But these two names, reunited into one, express the nature of the god—which is just what we said a name should do. Certainly, no one is more the cause of life (*zēn*), whether for us or for anything else, than the ruler and king of all things. Thus ‘*Zēna*’ and ‘*Dia*’ together correctly name the god that is always the cause of life (*di’ hon zēn*) for all creatures. But, as I say, his name, which is really one, is divided in two, ‘*Dia*’ and ‘*Zēna*’. When one hears that Zeus is the son of Cronus, one might find that offensive at first and it might seem more reasonable to say that he is the offspring of a great intellect. But in fact Cronus’ name signifies not a child (*koros*), but the purity and clarity of his intellect or understanding. According to legend, he was the son of Uranus (Heaven), whose name is also correctly given, for the sight of what is above is well called by the name ‘*ourania*’ (‘heavenly’)—looking at the things above (*horōsa ta anō*)—and astronomers say, Hermogenes, that results in purity of Intellect.<sup>828</sup>

The two names of Zeus, “united into one,” express his nature. “Zeus” has a notoriously odd dual declension typically with two different stems (*zena* or *dia*) between the nominative and the oblique cases. Interestingly, Socrates does not attribute correctness to one or the other, but rather states that the god’s nature can only be expressed through a consideration of both. Hence, Zeus becomes the one on account of which (*dia*) there is life (*zen*), or, more simply, “the cause of life.” One wonders how Cratylus could see Socrates’ etymologies as being in line with his own

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<sup>827</sup> I argued for this parallel in Chapter One. E.R. Dodds also parallels them: “Plato perceived... a real and significant analogy between mediumship, poetic creation, and certain pathological manifestations of the religious consciousness all three of which have the appearance of being ‘given’ *ab extra*.” Dodds notes that, to “the intuitions both of the seer and of the poet [Plato] consistently refused to the title of knowledge, not because he thought them necessarily groundless, but because their grounds could not be [rationally] produced” and Dodds also notes that poetry, prophecy, and the Corybantic are all “in some sense channels of divine or *daimonic* grace.” (Dodds, “Plato and the Irrational Soul,” 218-220)

<sup>828</sup> *Cratylus* 396a-396c.

approach.<sup>829</sup> It is unclear how Cratylus' position could accommodate the correctness of a name obtaining only when it is combined with another name. If a name is either correct or nothing, then the conclusion would have to be that *both zena* and *dia* are nonsense, since neither of them captures their referent's nature on their own.

The stylometric work of Harold Tarrant corroborates my claim that this passage wherein the names of Zeus, Cronus, and Ouranos are examined marks a shift in the text. Tarrant writes that sometimes "a switch of register occurs when [Socrates] feels under the influence of some other almost magical force,"<sup>830</sup> and he observes just such a "switch of register" into the oracular or magical voice at *Cratylus* 396a. As Tarrant points out, "The diction that Socrates has broken into will shortly be described as that of inspiration," as both "Socrates and his current interlocutor Hermogenes remark on Socrates' diction at 396c-d."<sup>831</sup> Regarding Socrates' approach, Tarrant reminds the reader that it is "important that we recognize this material not simply as linguistic, but also as theological, telling us about the gods through their names, for this kind of material is the most likely to attract religious experts who make some claim to divine inspiration."<sup>832</sup> Hence, while Socrates first claims to be stumped about the origins of "this wisdom which has suddenly come upon [him] – [he does] not know from where," it is not surprising that he eventually names Euthyphro as the probable source.<sup>833</sup> The language in this passage, as Tarrant also observes,<sup>834</sup> recalls the magnetic image given in the *Ion* by which the Muse inspires the poet, who inspires the rhapsode, who inspires the audience. Socrates is drawn

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<sup>829</sup> See *Cratylus* 429b-c. Cratylus says, "your oracular utterances—whether inspired by Euthyphro or by some other Muse who has long inhabited your own mind without your knowing about it—seem to be pretty much spoken after *my* own mind."

<sup>830</sup> Tarrant, "Socrates' Other Voices," 508.

<sup>831</sup> Tarrant, "Socrates' Other Voices," 510.

<sup>832</sup> Tarrant, "Socrates' Other Voices," 510.

<sup>833</sup> *Cratylus* 396d.

<sup>834</sup> Tarrant, "Socrates' Other Voices," 512.

“upward” toward the origin of divine inspiration through the magnetic pull of Euthyphro’s own inspiration. But Euthyphro’s inspiration comes from a source external to him, and thus, its transmission to Socrates means that Socrates’ inspiration, too, is divinely inspired through Euthyphro by the transitive property.

Socrates’ treatment of poetic language in the inspired etymologies evokes what Jessica Decker calls “double speak.” This is Decker’s term for poetic, religious, and philosophical modes of speaking that use ambiguity or enigma to “mediate[s] between mortal and divine” and is “strategically implemented to subvert dualistic [in the sense of binary] habits of mortal thinking and introduce a different kind of awareness, an awareness of multiplicity and paradox.”<sup>835</sup> Socrates’ inspiration further supports the presence of “double speak” in this passage. As Decker notes, double speak is never undertaken by mundane humans but always occurs in the mode of super-human or divine speech:

The poetic device of double speak is not a mortal feature; those who use double speak are either immortals or, sometimes, heroes with divine aid such as Odysseus. In the Presocratic texts, Heraclitus adopts an oracular voice (which is never merely a mortal voice, in the tradition of the oracle); Parmenides’s poem is spoken from the lips of a goddess, and as for Empedocles, he declares himself a god and explicitly engages in double speak.<sup>836</sup>

Thus, in a dialogue informed by Heraclitan themes, Socrates’ transition into an oracular register and calling upon the persona of a religious expert suggest the presence of Decker’s enigmatic “double speak,” which is a form of speech that one invokes to mediate the tension between divine and human knowledge. Accordingly, double speak is traditionally employed to serve a *daimonic* function. Given that Socrates is discussing the names of the gods, this seems all too appropriate, for the gods engage in the kind of meta-linguistic contemplation for which the

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<sup>835</sup> Decker, “Double Speak in the Ancient Greek Poetic Tradition,” 237-238.

<sup>836</sup> Decker, “Double Speak in the Ancient Greek Poetic Tradition,” 238.



philosopher strives. It is only in speaking about the gods, in trying to grasp their nature, that we, humans, must employ language. The language used must be a language that can capture a complex meaning that properly escapes discursive articulation in full and draws attention to this escape.

Decker specifically relates the strategic subversion of dualistic mortal thinking to the philosophical tradition of the Presocratics, stating:

In the texts of Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Empedocles, double speak creates a third space through its meditation between mortal and immortal: rather than the automatic binary operation of mortal thinking and perception, like flipping an on/off switch or coding 0/1, their teachings make possible a third space where the paradox and simultaneity of these two options becomes apparent. This is a different kind of awareness, closely associated with *metis*, where the subject is able to perceive the relationships and paradoxes that exist between the knower and the seeming objects of knowledge, as well as the habits of thinking and perceiving that nourish the repetition and growth of those patterns. To adopt some ambiguous speech, we might call this *quantum* awareness: an intuitive sense of proportions, holding contradictory things simultaneously, recognizing the unity implicit in duality, ‘getting’ the joke.<sup>837</sup>

In the *Cratylus*, Socrates’ etymologies subvert binary thinking by unfolding the gods’ complex natures. The names initially do not seem capable of capturing divine natures, and the words mean something different on the surface. However, once investigated through etymological *allegoresis*, one can see how the names evoke an essence, one which is unified and perfect from a god’s-eye-view but complex from a human perspective. Thus, poetic language is a way in which the phenomena of “quantum awareness” can be engendered in a listener with the express purpose, according to Decker, of making the hearer aware of the gap between what is said and the corresponding objects of knowledge. As argued above, Socrates wants to demonstrate to Hermogenes and Cratylus the flaw in their metaphysical assumptions, under which they failed to properly account for the mixed nature of Becoming and its significance for speech. Beginning

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<sup>837</sup> Decker, “Double Speak in the Ancient Greek Poetic Tradition,” 242.

with the poets by undertaking an etymological *allegoresis* is thereby an excellent starting point. This beginning allows Socrates to highlight the manner in which language can be used in creative ways to capture the underlying unity of reality, but only by itself being continually moving or fractured so as to illuminate its limits and point beyond them. In other words, when we approach poetic language as double-speak, or enigma, it can foster a “quantum awareness” in us of the simultaneous relationship and separation between divine Being and mortal Becoming.

Socrates’ etymologies can be read as instances of double speak themselves. They open up the conceptual field regarding things named and allow Socrates and his interlocutors to examine these referents from various angles. This practice encourages one to develop an awareness of the gap between articulable thought and the primordially perfect and unified Being to which it ideally corresponds. For example, at *Cratylus* 404e-406a, Socrates gives several different accounts of Apollo’s nature, each of which corresponds to a different aspect of the god’s nature. He states that many “are afraid of his name because they think it indicates something terrifying”<sup>838</sup> and, as Reeve notes in his translation of this passage, this fear comes from assuming the root to be *apolluon* (the destroyer). However, according to Socrates, “the name is most beautifully suited to... the four powers of the god. It comprehends each of them, expressing his power in music, prophecy, medicine, and archery.”<sup>839</sup> Following a somewhat tedious and winding etymological path, Socrates arrives at an etymological basis for each of Apollo’s four powers and concludes that his name “comprehends each of the powers of the god, who is a single minded, always shooting washer, who makes things move together.”<sup>840</sup> Recall that Domaradzki

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<sup>838</sup> *Cratylus* 404e.

<sup>839</sup> *Cratylus* 404e-405a.

<sup>840</sup> *Cratylus* 406a.

notes that etymology functioned as a form of *allegoresis*.<sup>841</sup> Hence, Socrates' approach to Apollo's name highlights how a single name can invoke multiple meanings when examined through this etymological form of poetic *allegoresis*. In these cases, the referent is revealed to overflow all possible meanings encapsulated in any single account. Moreover, the protean nature of poetic language as a non-literal form of speech beckons us to look for obscured meanings in the name that have been previously overlooked. Socrates' approach reveals a kind of "quantum awareness," in Decker's words, of Apollo's nature.<sup>842</sup> In other words, poetic language fosters an awareness of several meanings, some of which appear contradictory, all at once.

Socrates' etymological explanation of the nature of *daimones* in Hesiod further demonstrates how Socrates employs this method of *allegoresis* to point to deeper philosophical truths. He notes that Hesiod "speaks of a golden race, which was the first race of human beings to be born," and this is that of the *daimones*.<sup>843</sup> When Hermogenes asks, "so what?" Socrates says: "Well, I don't think he's saying that the golden race is by nature made of gold, but that it is good and fine."<sup>844</sup> From this, Socrates goes on to look at the etymology, and, determining that the good and fine are synonymous with the wise, he determines that "daemons are wise and knowing."<sup>845</sup> Further, he concludes that good and wise people can also be "golden" and *daimonic*. In this passage, we see that the allegorizing—rather than a literal reading—of Hesiod gives rise to insight into the nature of the *daimonic*. Yet, there is even more here than is told by

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<sup>841</sup> Domaradzki, "The Beginnings of Greek *Allegoresis*," 318-19. See also Obbink, "Early Greek Allegory," 16: "it is clear that from early on in the Greek tradition there existed different types of allegory, and not only allegory but also etymology (the practice of finding meaning in the supposed derivations of words), metaphor, simile, polyonymy (multiple names for the same thing), and analogy. There is a desire for recourse to extended forms of metonymical explanation involving multiple correspondence as early as the early fifth century, that is to say *hyponoia* and allegory in the specific and restricted sense of hidden meanings, rather than the later rhetorical sense of a trope among others."

<sup>842</sup> Decker, "Double Speak in the Ancient Greek Poetic Tradition," 242.

<sup>843</sup> *Cratylus*, 397e-398a.

<sup>844</sup> *Cratylus*, 398a.

<sup>845</sup> *Cratylus*, 398b.

Socrates. In equating the *daimonic* with gold and with goodness and wisdom, he furthers other claims made throughout the Platonic corpus regarding the desirability of the just life. He uses double speak as if to say: “be a *daimonic* human and you will have riches – gold – but not in the way you now want them or think of them; instead, your understanding of what is most valuable will change, and you will be the better for it.” Socrates thereby shows how poetic language, which says more than it initially seems, can elucidate important truths.

Consequently, a creative examination of poetic language opens up our conceptual field. A more trivial, but illustrative, example of how our concepts are shaped and re-shaped through poetic language can be given by looking at Homer’s repeated refrain of “the wine-dark sea.” In calling the sea “wine-dark” repeatedly, Homer does not merely offer an aesthetically pleasing description of its depth, which is dark and opaque like wine. He also conjures up connections to Dionysus’ sacred liquid, which parallels the intoxicating call of the wine amphora and the sublime pull of nautical adventures for a seafaring man wanting to claim his place in history. The parallel further serves as a harbinger of danger by inviting the comparison between the potential for the joy of drunken ecstasy and the danger of mad oblivion. Both the divine drink and the treacherous, raging sea threaten to swallow their lovers completely. Yet, at the same time they both promise reprieve, be it through Dionysian gladness in wine, the provision of food through fishing, or the potential heroism in traversing the “wine-dark” waters. In essence, the particular quality of poetic language, inherently dependent on non-literality, can have a profound influence on the manner in which we form and reform our ideas about the world. It is notable that poetic language can do this without the author intending all or even any of the meanings evoked by her words. Accordingly, it is important to note that Socrates’ etymologies would have been

recognized as a form of creative poetic interpretation. As such, their function is to generate new possibilities through which the human mind can pursue understanding.

Socrates' method is not uncommon in his day, and predominately relies on what we might call "semantic etymology" in which two words sound alike, and are thereby taken to have the same or similar meaning.<sup>846</sup> Socrates relates Rhea (Ῥέα) to reo (ῥέω) not because of any genuine historical connection in the respective development of either word, but because they sound the same.<sup>847</sup> Further, Socrates' approach is not robustly concerned with the objective accuracy of the names discussed. The names might be more or less true, but his approach more directly highlights how engaging with names poetically invites a deeper "quantum awareness" of the things themselves. Accordingly, he sometimes offers multiple etymologies for the same name, all of which, of course, cannot be correct at once, as he does for the name of Apollo. Hence, the etymologies that Socrates gives are not intended to teach Hermogenes about the correctness of *specific names*. Instead, they are meant to teach him about naming itself as an activity that is never really "done" and requires the periodic (re)introduction of Decker's "quantum awareness" in order to remain alive and useful.

The etymologies at the heart of the *Cratylus* are the primary source of its enigmatic quality. Some scholars argue that they are meant either to ironically lampoon the poets, or, conversely, to reject Hermogenes' linguistic conventionalism. Levin points to the first interpretation in arguing that "Plato's most direct and prominent opponent with respect to etymologizing is in fact the Greek literary tradition of the eighth through fifth centuries,"<sup>848</sup> and that "Plato employs the literary tradition's techniques and assumptions, with the ultimate goal of

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<sup>846</sup> The author of the *Derveni Papyrus* takes up a similar approach, which I will examine in the following section.

<sup>847</sup> *Cratylus* 401e-402b.

<sup>848</sup> Levin, *The Ancient Quarrel*, 5.

discrediting them.”<sup>849</sup> Sedley appeals to the latter view when he states that the “strategic function [of the etymologies] in the dialogue” is to serve as “the final stage of Hermogenes’ refutation.”<sup>850</sup> However, I find both approaches insufficient to explain the rather breathtaking sweep of Socrates’ etymologies; they are long and tedious but at times quite moving, and form a considerable portion of the dialogue itself. It would be odd if they were merely meant as an ironic appropriation of popular methods for the purpose of mocking them. Nor do the etymologies seem like anything more than a final blow to linguistic conventionalism. While the etymologies do serve to convince Hermogenes that he was wrong to attribute naming to nothing but convention, they also confuse Cratylus’ position as well, for they demonstrate that, while there is something like a correctness of names, this is not nearly as rigid, univocal, or concrete as the Sophist seems to think. Furthermore, the connection noted by Levin between the etymologies of Socrates and other similar practices during the classical period can form a positive link rather than a negative one. In other words, Socrates might be employing known methods of etymology and *allegoresis* precisely *because* he thinks that there is something to be gained from this approach, and not because he wants to mock or ultimately undermine these methods. He may well be modifying them to the task of philosophy. Ergo, this study takes Socrates to mean what he says in starting from the poets. It is the ever-moving and multivocal treatment of names captures the underlying truth that reality is always escaping human articulation, and that, nevertheless, the attempt to articulate the truth of Being in creative ways still brings something true to the fore.

In these ways, poetry in the *Cratylus* is employed *daimonically* to both remind us that Being escapes articulation in language, and to provide us with a creative method through which

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<sup>849</sup> Levin, *The Ancient Quarrel*, 31.

<sup>850</sup> Sedley, *Plato’s Cratylus*, 5.

we can investigate the things that have thus far gone unrealized in our functional conceptions of reality. Thus, rather than serve as a kind of foil to the ultimate claim that philosophical contemplation into things should proceed meta-linguistically, the inspired etymologies of the *Cratylus* serve as a *daimonic* mediation that inspires the philosopher to realize the distance between her position in the cosmos and her desired end in divine wisdom. The etymologies lead into and, indeed, bring the reader to see why meta-linguistic contemplation is the ideal. The poetic examination of names first illuminates all the ways that ordinary language fails to capture a reality that is always overflowing its attempts to define things. Then, it leads us to see, like Heraclitus did, that the speech best suited to trying to speak of Being is enigmatic in that it has to say more than one thing at a time in order to capture something beyond finite human concepts, which rely on rigid binarity to remain lucid. Socrates thereby uses poetic language not as a step *away* from noetic contemplation, but rather as a bridge leading *toward* it, making us aware of the need to move past the attempt to reason in language to the ability to reason from Forms to Forms using only Forms.

#### IV. Poetry and Mystery Cults: Plato's Appropriation of Cultic Mystagogy

Socrates' etymologies in the *Cratylus* significantly mirror practices common during Plato's time in which poetic *allegoresis*, often in the form of etymologizing, was used as an initiatory exercise in mystery cults, especially Orphism. Furthermore, while it is not the case that Plato unreflectively or without qualification agreed with the use of etymology to achieve insight through *onomata*,<sup>851</sup> his treatment of etymology in the *Cratylus* is also not simply an attempt to

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<sup>851</sup> As Levin points out, authors of the classical literary tradition have a "powerful interest, manifested in their recourse to etymology, in what they view as deep connections between elements of language and of reality... they focus most often on showing how a wide range of proper names, once analyzed, disclose something salient about the natures of their individual bearers." (Levin, *The Ancient Quarrel*, 5)

discredit the traditions he inherited. This section now examines the parallels between the etymological passages in the *Cratylus* and the surviving text of the *Derveni Papyrus*, an Orphic text of poetic *allegoresis*. It argues that Socrates employs poetic *allegoresis* in an initiatory manner similar to *PDerveni*, but that he modifies his approach primarily by divorcing the endeavor from an attempt to decipher the poet's intended meaning. This modification highlights that the form of poetic language can be responsible for its *daimonic* (i.e., in this case, inspiring and initiating) power as opposed to the polymathic wisdom of the composing poets. Thus, the *daimonic* inspiration of poetry is not present through a once-and-for-all interpretation, but rather is a living and moving power that requires continual re-examination and can re-initiate different people at different times through its protean ability to open up multiple meanings for philosophical examination. Hence, the *daimonic* function of initiation rites and of poetry come together in the *Cratylus* as they did in Orphism, but with some key differences that direct the initiation at philosophy as the true way to "purify" the soul (from ignorance).

As noted in the previous section, Socrates claims that his etymologies, beginning with Zeus, are inspired. However, he attributes his inspiration to Euthyphro. Therefore, one is tempted to dismiss both the etymologies and their inspired status. Given his characterization in the dialogue named after him, Euthyphro's inspiration does not exactly inspire confidence. However, as Sedley argues, Euthyphro's depiction in the earlier text need not undermine his inspired impartation to Socrates in the *Cratylus*:

[W]e should not too readily assume that Plato considers Euthyphro to have been as bad at etymology as he was, in the eponymous dialogue, at understanding the nature of holiness. Plato is quite happy with the idea that people who prove to be morally confused under Socratic cross-examination may nevertheless be genuinely accomplished in their own specialist disciplines – for example, the craftsmen whom Socrates describes himself questioning at *Apology* 22c–e. Euthyphro's reputation in the discipline of etymology may well have been unimpeachable.<sup>852</sup>

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<sup>852</sup> Sedley, *Plato's Cratylus*, 40.



To bolster Sedley's point, as argued in Chapter One, Euthyphro's flaw in the eponymous dialogue is his overestimation of his own knowledge, but not necessarily his status as a *mantis*. The latter is left open to speculation, but given Socrates' repeated claims that oracles speak through inspiration and not knowledge, it is possible that Euthyphro is the genuine thing. Hence, while we should surely be suspicious of any attempts to attribute a philosophical method to the seer, in matters of inspiration he may be seen as reliable. That is to say, his inspiration, like all inspiration, still requires cautious interpretation, but may still be regarded as genuine.

The possible reliability of Euthyphro's inspiration regarding divine names is strengthened by the consideration that Euthyphro might have been a cultic practitioner of the Orphic variety. As Nightingale demonstrates, "Plato borrows a number of ideas and phrases from the Orphics."<sup>853</sup> She concisely summarizes how Orphic theology was significantly reliant on allegorical engagement with the mythical poet Orpheus, as well as on a robust adherence to myth:

The Orphic practitioners used books of poems ascribed to Orpheus and Musaeus (legendary figures) in their teachings and rituals. The poems contained a cosmogony and an anthropology. In the Orphic theogony, Zeus and Demeter give birth to Persephone; Zeus then rapes Persephone, and she gives birth to Dionysus. The Titans kill and eat Dionysus, and Zeus destroys them with a thunderbolt. This event brings humans onto the scene: human souls were born from the soot of the burned Titans. The human soul is part Titanic and part Dionysian. Though it is divine and immortal, it carries the original sin of its Titanic forefathers. Because of this sin, the gods punished human souls by "imprisoning" them in a body and making them undergo reincarnation. In the Orphic soteriology, if the soul "purifies" itself and goes through initiation, the gods "release" it from the cycle of reincarnation and it lives an everlastingly blessed life with the gods in Hades."<sup>854</sup>

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<sup>853</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion*, 20 and 148-155.

<sup>854</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion*, 20.

If he was a member of this cult, Euthyphro would have been very familiar with the kind of theological *allegoresis* in etymology that Socrates undertakes in the *Cratylus*, and that one sees in the extant fragments of the *Derveni Papyrus*, an Orphic text.<sup>855</sup>

Charles Kahn posits that Euthyphro was an Orphic in an essay entitled “Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus?”<sup>856</sup> Kahn acknowledges the entirely speculative nature of such a question and grants that an answer is impossible.<sup>857</sup> He nevertheless undertakes an examination of the question for two reasons that are relevant to this study. First, Kahn states that “the philosophical allegories of the papyrus are of considerable importance for understanding one kind of doctrine that Plato is reacting against in the *Cratylus*, and which is attributed there to the inspiration of Euthyphro,” and second, he notes that “even if Euthyphro and the Derveni author are not the same person, they present much the same religious and intellectual milieu.”<sup>858</sup> As to Kahn’s first point, it is true that the papyrus is important for understanding the *Cratylus*, but whether Plato is reacting against the approach one finds in the papyrus or positively appropriating on some level requires a deeper examination. This section undertakes such an examination and arrives at a different conclusion than Kahn’s. However, to Kahn’s second point, while the evidence is sparse for connecting Euthyphro to the Orphism practiced by the author of *PDerveni*, it is, nevertheless, fairly convincing.

Kahn offers several pieces of evidence connecting the religious tradition of Euthyphro to that of *PDerveni*. First, “each lays claim to an expertise in matters concerning the gods (*theia*

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<sup>855</sup> See Charles Kahn, “Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus?” 55-63. While Kahn’s main thesis, that Euthyphro might have been the unknown author of *PDerveni*, is magnificently speculative and therefore impossible to confirm or deny at this point, I find his arguments that Euthyphro was an adherent of Orphism to be largely convincing. This would imply that Euthyphro may well have been versed in the kind of etymology that Socrates undertakes, and that his “inspiration” for such a task would be seen as legitimately appropriate.

<sup>856</sup> See Kahn, “Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus,” 55-63.

<sup>857</sup> Kahn, “Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus,” 55.

<sup>858</sup> Kahn, “Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus,” 55.

*pragmata*), an expertise that permits them to recognize in old poems and stories a deeper meaning that the many do not understand.”<sup>859</sup> One could argue that the author of *PDerveni* exhibits a more sophisticated approach than Euthyphro’s treatment of the gods in the eponymous dialogue, but Kahn’s point still stands in general. Both Euthyphro and the author of the papyrus do look for meanings in myth and poetry that “the many” do not grasp. Moreover, Kahn points out that Euthyphro’s “prosecution of his father for murder reflects a fanatical obsession with ritual pollution and the need for purification that is not at all typical of Greek attitudes on the subject.”<sup>860</sup> Kahn connects this observation with “Euthyphro’s interest in violent myths... in particular in stories ‘that the many do not know’ (6b-c),”<sup>861</sup> and holds that Euthyphro’s mysterious comment regarding such unknown stories is an allusion to the tale of Dionysus’ dismemberment by the Titans, a key narrative in Orphic theology.<sup>862</sup> When Socrates asks Euthyphro if he believes the stories about the gods, the *mantis* responds by saying that he believes them all in addition to many more astonishing ones unknown by the many.<sup>863</sup> Kahn remarks that “the only story more shocking than the castration of Ouranos is likely to be the dismemberment of Dionysus by the Titans, ‘which many do not know’.”<sup>864</sup> Kahn is onto something. There are not many horrifying stories of which the average educated Athenian would have been ignorant. Hence, it is reasonable to think that the story on the table would be one connected to cultic practitioners who did not share them with just anyone. Furthermore, among those mystery cults, the Orphics would certainly be the most likely to offer a clandestine and appalling story.

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<sup>859</sup> Kahn, “Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus,” 55.

<sup>860</sup> Kahn, “Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus,” 56.

<sup>861</sup> Kahn, “Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus,” 57.

<sup>862</sup> Kahn, “Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus,” 57-58.

<sup>863</sup> Kahn, “Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus,” 58 and *Euthyphro* 6b.

<sup>864</sup> Kahn, “Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus,” 58.

Perhaps Kahn's most convincing piece of evidence is that the followers of Orpheus and their views are mentioned in the *Cratylus* at 400c when Socrates gives an etymological account of σῶμα, the body, and at this point in the dialogue a connection is also made to the followers of Euthyphro. Kahn states that "the Orphic etymology for σῶμα is followed shortly afterwards by the quotation of two hexameter verses from a poem of Orpheus and immediately preceded by an etymology for ψυχή that is designed to please the followers of Euthyphro."<sup>865</sup> This is an argument from proximity that is, in and of itself, still fairly speculative. However, as Kahn subsequently observes, the etymology of ψυχή, which is explicitly meant to please Euthyphro and his followers, "proposes a fantastic derivation of ψυχή from φύσιν ὀχεῖν καὶ ἔχειν, 'to hold and carry nature', on the grounds that not only does the soul possess and transport the nature of every body, according to Anaxagoras, it is soul and reason (*νοῦς*) that 'holds and orders (διακοσμοῦσα) the nature of everything else' (400a)."<sup>866</sup> With this, Kahn can point to a shared interest among Euthyphro, the Orphics in general, and the author of the Derveni Papyrus specifically in the *allegoresis* of the poets and in Ionian cosmology. This final observation of the connection Plato makes in the text of the *Cratylus* between Orphism, Ionian cosmology, and pleasing the followers of Euthyphro grounds Kahn's speculation that Euthyphro was associated with Orphism. Kahn's thesis is, therefore, entirely plausible and potentially corroborated by Plato himself.

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<sup>865</sup> Kahn, "Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus," 59-60.

<sup>866</sup> Kahn, "Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus," 60. Kahn seems to think this second explanation is only given to align it with Euthyphro and stands apart from the more plausible account given just before. Yet, the account of soul meant to please Euthyphro actually aligns quite well with what Socrates says about the soul in the *Phaedrus* at 246b-c: "All soul looks after all that lacks a soul, and patrols all of heaven, taking different shapes at different times." Though Socrates' etymologies are "incorrect" in terms of linguistic accuracy, one must not take them to be automatically "incorrect" in terms of what they reveal. Many of them point to ideas that are corroborated in other places throughout the dialogues. Hence, it is not *prima facie* clear why Socrates' etymologies are meant to undermine the practices of those like Euthyphro and the author of *PDerveni* rather than usefully employ them.

However, Kahn thinks that Plato is nonetheless intentionally undermining the philosophical usefulness of Socrates' etymologies. For example, regarding the account of ψυχή given above, Kahn appears to think that this second explanation is only given to align it with Euthyphro and stands apart from the more plausible account given just before. Yet, the account of the soul meant to please Euthyphro actually aligns quite well with what Socrates says about the soul in the *Phaedrus* at 246b-c: "All soul looks after all that lacks a soul, and patrols all of heaven, taking different shapes at different times."<sup>867</sup> Kahn thinks that the position on language revealed through the etymologies is that of Euthyphro, and that Socrates ultimately rejects it. Similarly, Dirk Obbink states that, with the Derveni author, we find "ourselves suddenly caught in the thickets of reasoning and analysis by techniques which, though they may have been toyed with by the young Socrates, came eventually to be abjured by Plato."<sup>868</sup> Kahn also states that both "the Derveni author and Euthyphro take their place in a larger array of thinkers and writers who illustrate the surprising vogue of Heraclitus in the last generation of the fifth century and the first generation of the fourth."<sup>869</sup> Kahn thereby implies that Plato's intention with the etymologies is to reveal and refute the Heraclitanism of his day, especially as it was filtered through the Orphics. Yet, as argued above, Plato was himself amenable to Heraclitus' views, though, admittedly, in some attenuated way. Furthermore, since the results of the etymologies, such as with ψυχή, are often in line with what we already know of Socrates' views in other

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<sup>867</sup> As Gordon notes, "Plato could have had Socrates choose other words that have similar sounds and are family plausible, etymologically speaking... it is fair to assume that what Plato himself chooses – and does not choose – to link together is deliberate and conscious. We must therefore take seriously Plato's choice of acoustic resonances, even if we do not take the etymology seriously as an accurate description of word origins" (*Plato's Erotic World*, 59-60). Of course, the Plato's choice could boil down to wanting to demonstrate Euthyphro's view. However, the fact that many of his etymologies result in claims that are in line with what is said in other dialogues indicates that Plato likely chooses the semantic pairings at least partially on the basis of their ability to reveal something true or interesting about the things in question.

<sup>868</sup> Dirk Obbink, "Cosmology as Initiation vs. the Critique of Orphic Mysteries," 39.

<sup>869</sup> Kahn, "Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus," 56.

dialogues, it is more likely that Plato is employing existing models of *allegoresis* in order to derive illuminating meanings that the reader knows Plato is likely to see as true.

Plato certainly uses Presocratic thought and the methods of Orphic *allegoresis* in transformative ways, neither rejecting them completely nor leaving them entirely as they were. He takes up Anaxagoras' *nous*, for example, but moves it into the realm of metaphysical true causes and away from physical cosmologies. He marries Parmenidean Being to Heraclitan flux by deriving a hierarchical cosmos capable of accounting for both consistency and change. He adapts Pythagorean notions of the dyad to structure his theory of forms and the unwritten doctrines. In short, Plato takes up the views of both his predecessors and his contemporaries in positive ways all the time. Hence, one must not take Socrates' etymologies as some kind of insincerely executed foil simply because they are derived from Orphic approaches to Presocratic cosmologies or because they were inspired by Euthyphro. It is not obvious why Socrates' etymologies are meant to undermine the practices of those like Euthyphro and the author of *PDerveni* rather than to employ and transform them as Plato does with many other viewpoints and methods throughout his works. Therefore, it is more likely that Plato is appropriating and transforming these Orphic and Presocratic views and methods concerning poetry in order to employ them for philosophical edification. Consequently, Plato composed the *Cratylus* with parallels to either the *Derveni Papyrus* itself, or texts similar to it, that were in circulation during his time, in order to turn its methodology toward a philosophical use. In other words, Plato does not so much "toy with" the techniques of Orphic *allegoresis* as he robustly *uses* them.<sup>870</sup>

Hence, we ought to turn now toward specific parallels between the papyrus and the *Cratylus*. Chapter One already discussed the dating of the papyrus and noted that it is highly

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<sup>870</sup> Dirk Obbink, "Cosmology as Initiation vs. the Critique of Orphic Mysteries," 39.

likely that, even if Plato was not familiar with *PDerveni* specifically, he would have been familiar with the typical approaches to Orphic *allegoresis* and mystagogy more generally. The techniques Socrates employs in the *Cratylus* mirror those of the papyrus in some significant ways. Sometimes this similarity rests in the conclusions drawn from the interpretive work. For example, as Domaradzki notes, “both Socrates and the Derveni author allegorically equate Kronos with mind.”<sup>871</sup> However, there are many similarities with respect to method as well. Both the papyrus and the *Cratylus* take up a more broadly ancient Greek idea that naming was intimately connected to the prophetic. Levin draws out this connection, citing instances in which names are regarded as well-given because they end up fulfilling their hoped-for realities: “Because the assignment is fitting, yet was made at birth, one is led inevitably to speculate about a super natural influence playing a role at this initial stage.”<sup>872</sup> Naming or understanding names, in some sense, is an oracular and prophetic endeavor which combines an inspired utterance (the name) with a prophetic interpretation (what the name entails for the referent). The hope that a name contains prophetic information about the referent indicates that names are both descriptive and prescriptive for the ancient poets. Thus, naming has a particularly complex and important relationship to reality itself. “It is evident,” states Levin, that ancient authors “were quite concerned with the issue of connections between elements of language and those of reality.”<sup>873</sup> But connections were not assumed to be merely present; analyzing names was considered a potentially revelatory endeavor, which Socrates undertakes in the *Cratylus*, as does the author of *PDerveni*.

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<sup>871</sup> Domaradzki, “The Beginnings of Greek *Allegoresis*,” 319.

<sup>872</sup> Levin, *The Ancient Quarrel*, 23.

<sup>873</sup> Levin, *The Ancient Quarrel*, 30.

The etymological and allegorizing claims that Socrates makes are undeniably similar to claims made in the papyrus. Take, for example, Col. XIII of *PDerveni*, which I quote in full, including lacunae:

[Quoting Orpheus] ‘Zeus when he heard the prophecies from his father’  
[Returning to author’s voice] For neither did he hear this time – but it has been made clear in what sense he heard – nor does Night command (this time). But he makes this clear by saying as follows:  
[Quoting Orpheus] ‘He swallowed the phallus [αἰδοῖον] of [. . .], who sprang from the aither first.’ [Returning to author’s voice] Since in his whole poetry he speaks about facts enigmatically, one has to speak about each word in turn. Seeing that people consider that generation is dependent upon the genitalia (αἰδοῶν), and that without the genitals there is no becoming, he used this (word), likening the sun to a phallus (αἰδοίωι εἰκόσας τὸν ἥλιον). For without the sun the things that are could not have become such . . . things that are . . . the sun everything...

Here, there is a connection between the gods and cosmic principles. In this way, the gods are associated with metaphysical levels of reality which ultimately constitute the same unified whole. Plato makes this same connection between gods and cosmic principles in the *Cratylus* by connecting Ouranos to what is beyond being (the One or the Good), positing him as above the pure intellect of Kronos,<sup>874</sup> who symbolizes mind.<sup>875</sup> Zeus, in turn, is tied to ordered generation.<sup>876</sup> In these examples, Socrates treats the etymologies of the gods as allegories for their archetypal relationships to levels of Plato’s metaphysical schema (the Good beyond Being, Being, the demiurge which orders generation or Becoming on the model of divine Being). However, Socrates is not only mirroring the approach of the *Derveni* commentator, but also the content, for the commentator likewise connects Zeus to generation via an etymology which relates him to genitalia and, subsequently, to the sun as the symbol of generative life.

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<sup>874</sup> See *Cratylus* 396b-c.

<sup>875</sup> See *Cratylus* 396b.

<sup>876</sup> See *Cratylus* 396a-b



Another connection seen in Col. XIII of *PDerveni* is the use of a semantic etymology in which words that sound like other words share meaning. This makes sense, too, in light of the *Cratylus*' focus on the naturalness of names in light of how they *sound*. This is seen at 426e in which the letter 'r' is seen as "a tool for copying every sort of motion." Thus, there appears to be some relationship between sounds and meaning. However, Socrates does not seem to hold to this view exclusively, and he significantly problematizes it later on.<sup>877</sup> Still, he uses semantic etymology to arrive at claims about the cosmos in relation to naming which remain remarkably in step with what we know of Plato's metaphysics in general. Similarly, the *Derveni* commentator uses the similarity of sounds in word to derive the meaning of Demeter's name, arguing that "(she/it) was called Demeter as the Mother Earth (Ge Meter), one name from the two; for it was the same."<sup>878</sup> The similarity in sound between Ge Meter ("mother earth") and Demeter are offered as evidence for the meaning of Demeter's name as "mother earth" and her identity with Gaia herself. Again, this is all based on the sounds of the words.

Socrates does something similar in several locations throughout the *Cratylus*. See, for example, *Cratylus* 400b-c, wherein Socrates not only takes up this approach, but explicitly links it to cultic semantic etymology—first to the Pythagoreans, and then to the views of Orpheus (which he appears to endorse over the former):

Thus some people say that the body (*sōma*) is the tomb (*sēma*) of the soul, on the grounds that it is entombed in its present life, while others say that it is correctly called 'a sign' (*sēma*) because the soul signifies whatever it wants to signify by means of the body. I think it is most likely the followers of Orpheus who gave the body its name, with the idea that the soul is being punished for something, and that the body is an enclosure or prison in which the soul is securely kept (*sōzetai*)—as the name '*sōma*' itself suggests—until the penalty is paid; for, on this view, not even a single letter of the word needs to be changed.

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<sup>877</sup> See *Cratylus* 437a-c.

<sup>878</sup> Col. XXII.

In this passage, the meaning of the body is explored via various semantic connections under the assumption, seen above in the passage from *PDerveni*, that if words sound the same, they share a common meaning. The body (*sōma*) perhaps shares a meaning with “tomb” (*sēma*), indicating that it is a negative space from which the soul yearns to take flight (the Pythagorean position). Or, perhaps it shares a meaning with “sign” (*sēma*) in that it communicates meaning in the world through the body. Or, perhaps, the Orphics have it right, and the body is an “enclosure” (περίβολος) ensuring that the soul is protected (*sōzetai*) until it can learn what it must and claim its salvation. In this third and final possibility, the semantic connection is to the verb σώζω (“to save, keep alive, preserve”), and references the Orphic mythology of the original sin of the slaying and dismemberment of Dionysus by the Titans, for which humans, as beings formed by fallen Titans, must atone through their embodied lives.

Further, in the metaphorical linking of the physical sun as an analogue for the cosmic principle of generation and life itself, which is identified with Zeus, another parallel can be seen between the papyrus and Plato’s approach in the *Cratylus*. Socrates, speaking of the unique double declension of “Zeus,” says:

[T]he name ‘Zeus’ is exactly like a phrase that we divide into two parts, ‘Zēna’ and ‘Dia’, some of us using one of them and some the other. But these two names, reunited into one, express the nature of the god—which is just what we said a name should do. Certainly, no one is more the cause of life (zēn), whether for us or for anything else, than the ruler and king of all things. Thus ‘Zēna’ and ‘Dia’ together correctly name the god that is always the cause of life (di’ hon zēn) for all creatures.<sup>879</sup>

Not only does this passage exemplify a semantic etymology between Zēna (Ζῆνα, the sing. masc. acc. poetic form of “Zeus”) and zēn (ζῆν, the pres. inf. act. of “to live”), arguing that the former invokes the idea of the latter because of how they *sound*, but it also demonstrates another

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<sup>879</sup> *Cratylus* 396a-b.

similarity with the papyrus in arguing that multiple names stand for different aspects of the same deity. Col. XXII exemplifies this connection:

Earth (*Gē*), Mother (*Mētēr*), Rhea, and Hera are one and the same. She was called Earth (*Gē*) by convention; Mother, because all things are born from her; *Gē* and Gaia, according to each one's dialect. She was named Demeter, just like *Gē-mētēr*: one name from both, for it was the same. And it is said in the *Hymns* too: 'Demeter Rhea *Gē Mētēr* Hestia Deio.' For she is called Deio too, because she was cut (*edēiōthē*) during sexual intercourse. He will make clear...according to...and Rhea because many and...animals were born...from her. Rhea...<sup>880</sup>

Here, we see that both convention (dialect) and a kind of carving up the essence of the thing leads to several different names being given to one cosmic reality. As Obbink notes regarding this passage: “[the author's] synthetic view of cosmology here finds an etymological counterpart. Just as the multiplicity of things that exist is traceable back to a prior unity, so also names multiply, but their referents are in some sense ‘the same.’ This view sets up a hidden reality beneath language and invites a reader to interpretive action.”<sup>881</sup> Similarly, “Apollo” is granted the status of an especially excellent name because it captures the multiplicity of his nature (god of music, prophecy, medicine, and archery) in one appellation.<sup>882</sup>

Throughout the *Cratylus*, there is a distinction between the name giver and the name user. The name-giver is never revealed, but may actually be the poet, as is demonstrated by the fact that Socrates begins investigating names with the ones given by the poets, and the name-user is identified with the dialectician who then investigates whether the names achieve the desired likeness to their referent. The *Derveni Papyrus* does name the name-giver though, identifying him as the poet:

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<sup>880</sup> Col. XXII.

<sup>881</sup> Obbink, “Early Greek Allegory,” 18. Gordon connects this idea of a hidden unity beneath language to the erotic undertones of the *Cratylus* by pointing out that “[e]rotic philosophy activity aims at movement from our position in the differentiated world of objects toward strengthening or possibly reestablishing our link to original unity” (57).

<sup>882</sup> See *Cratylus* 404e-406a.

So he (sc. Orpheus) named all things in the same way as finely as he could, knowing the nature of men, that not all of them have a similar nature nor do all want the same things. When they have the power, they say anything that occurs to each one's heart, whatever they happen to want, never the same things, through greed (or: arrogance), sometimes also through lack of understanding.<sup>883</sup>

Here, we see that Orpheus—the “he” naming all things as finely as possible—is the poet-name-giver. Furthermore, this passage introduces the rest of column XXII quoted above in which the many names for Earth were discussed. Hence, the commentator appears to affirm that the poet carves up the nature of reality in such a way as to use names to reveal different things about what is essentially unified. This is necessary because of the ignorance of humans, who never say “the same things” but instead seem to need many different ways to grasp the same thing. This falls in line with Socrates' description of language as a tool for dividing being.

Furthermore, the very set-up of the dialogue appears to reference ideas present in the *Derveni Papyrus*. As Funghi points out, Col. XX “contains a criticism of those people who undergo initiation in the cities and of those who undergo it by means of a private professional and who make the author of the fragment also feel sorry for [28] them, since they have wasted their time and money.”<sup>884</sup> The passage that Funghi is referring to reads as follows:

. . . those men who, while performing the rites in the cities, have seen the holy things, I wonder less that they do not have knowledge. For it is not possible to hear and at the same time to understand (or: learn) what is being said (τὰ λεγόμενα). But all those who (hope to acquire knowledge?) from someone who makes craft of the holy rites deserve to be wondered at and pitied. Wondered at because, thinking that they will know before they perform the rites, they go away after having performed them before they have attained knowledge, without even asking further questions, as though they knew anything of what they have seen or heard or learned; and pitied because it is not enough for them to have spent their money in advance, but they also go off deprived even of their judgement. Hoping before performing the holy rites that they will attain knowledge, they go away after having performed them deprived of hope too. . . . by his own . . . mother... sister...<sup>885</sup>

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<sup>883</sup> Col. XXII. Ademollo notes that some have argued the name-giver to be Orpheus via the *Derveni Papyrus*. Though he rightly notes that we have no way, as of now, of concretely validating such a hypothesis. See Ademollo, *The Cratylus of Plato*, 124.

<sup>884</sup> Funghi, “The Derveni Papyrus,” 27-28.

<sup>885</sup> Col. XX.

Here, we must think of the opening of the *Cratylus*, 383a-391c, during which passage Socrates and Hermogenes begin by discussing the Sophists' views of language. Protagoras and Euthydemus are brought up, and Hermogenes confesses to being both discouraged and unsatisfied with their approaches. Here, he has spent his money trying to learn about the nature of language in relation to reality by way of "private professionals" and he has come away not only poorer, but "deprived of understanding as well." The Sophists clearly having failed him, Socrates encourages him to turn to the poets. It is hard to believe that this is a coincidence. Standing in front of Socrates is a hopeful initiate into philosophy: Hermogenes is one who wishes to know and is able to admit his ignorance. He has pursued the methods of understanding specifically condemned by the Orphic commentator and has come away empty-handed. Now, Socrates advises him to turn toward the poets via a method of exegesis that is demonstrably connected to Orphic ideas of *allegoresis* as *mystagogy*. Consequently, one might also further understand why Hermes is highlighted as the god of profit. When Hermogenes puzzles at Cratylus' claim that he is not properly named "son of Hermes,"<sup>886</sup> Socrates says: "Perhaps he thinks you want to make money but fail every time you try,"<sup>887</sup> thus indicating that Hermogenes

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<sup>886</sup> Nails observes that Hermogenes "was a *nothos*, acknowledged by his father and often called by his patronymic." Thus, Cratylus' focus on the literal patronymic contained in Hermogenes' name might be a playful take on how others commonly refers to Hermogenes, which is typically as the son of Hipponicus (Nails, *The People of Plato*, 162).

<sup>887</sup> *Cratylus*, 384c. Later at 391b-c, Socrates states: "Your brother Callias got his reputation for wisdom from [the Sophists] in return for a lot of money. So you had better beg and implore him to teach you what he learned from Protagoras about the correctness of names, since you haven't yet come into any money of your own. notes that implying that Hermogenes had some just expectation of inheriting from his father." Nails reads this passage as "implying that Hermogenes had some just expectation of inheriting from his father," and notes that "a *nothos* was allowed to receive bequests and also to receive gifts *inter vivos*" (Nails, *The People of Plato*, 163). However, Nails further remarks that "no author represents Hermogenes as money-grubbing" (Nails, *The People of Plato*, 163). From Nails assessment, one can see that Socrates may be playing with ideas of monetary versus intellectual inheritances, noting that while Hermogenes neither has nor, perhaps, wants the former, he is in a position to gain the latter through "joint investigation." This may also be the reason for Plato drawing our attention to the mythical patronymic in the etymology of Hermogenes' name. While he may not be an inheritor of Hipponicus' estate in the same manner as his legitimate brother, he is an inheritor of the father of his namesake, Hermes, who functions as a messenger flitting back and forth from the underworld to the mortal world to the divine world. Thus, Hermes takes up a kind of in-between nature similar to that of eros and of the philosopher.

wants to gain something (knowledge), but keeps losing money instead, and thereby fails to “profit” from his hermeneutical endeavors. This passage also implies that Cratylus and Hermogenes might be working with two different notions of what constitutes “profit,” thereby explaining why Cratylus does not think Hermogenes’ godly patronymic is fitting.

With the turn toward the issue of initiation for profit, another parallel is brought to the fore. Part of Socrates’ intention in using these particular methods might be to present a counter-initiation of the soul into philosophy to that given by both Orphism *and* Sophistry. The Sophists take on a considerable presence in the beginning of the *Cratylus*, and it is their approach that is rejected in favor of poetry. Representing a heterogeneous group of thinkers who hardly disagree with Plato’s ideas wholesale, Plato nevertheless casts the Sophist repeatedly as some kind of “anti-Socrates.” The reason for this, I assert, is related to Plato’s similar treatment of Orphic initiators, and if he is appropriating Orphic methods and positing philosophy as its alternative, this further elucidates the treatment of the Sophists in the *Cratylus*. Orphic initiators are to philosophical midwives what Sophistry is to philosophy. As Nightingale tells us, “Orphism was a private religion run by freelance practitioners all over the Greek world.”<sup>888</sup> Similarly, Sophists were freelance teachers of philosophy and rhetoric. The problem with both the Orphics and the Sophists, as they are contrasted with Socrates, pertains to a kind of commodification of initiation.<sup>889</sup>

The Orphics are referred to as charging for their initiatory services, which is a practice that the *Derveni Papyrus* author appears to deride as the sign of a false prophet.<sup>890</sup> The Sophists,

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<sup>888</sup> Nightingale, *Philosophy and Religion*, 20.

<sup>889</sup> This might also be the case for the Eleusinian Mysteries, which seem to have also involved payment. As Kevin Clinton has remarked, “a highly probable restoration in a law dated ca. 460 B.C.E.” reads “... an obol from each initiate. The two hierophantides are to receive each of them a half obol from each initiate. The priestess of Demeter is to receive at the Lesser Mysteries an obol from each initiate and at the Greater Mysteries an obol from each initiate.” (See Clinton, “Epiphany in the Eleusinian Mysteries,” 86-87).

<sup>890</sup> Col. XX.

as is well known, also charged for their teachings. This fact is repeatedly mentioned in what could be read as a mocking tone in the opening of the *Cratylus*, and it leads to the decision to learn from the poets instead, the Sophists having failed and Socrates not having enough money to learn the truth from Prodicus. Importantly, Prodicus specifically wrote a treatise on the correctness of words, “and had an interest in synonyms, which indicates an interest in Homer as a respository [*sic.*] of data about language, and not just as a teller of tall tales about battles and misbehaving gods.”<sup>891</sup> Thus, the issue with the freelance initiators and Sophists, for Plato, is not one of content, practice, or even belief, but rather *one of orientation toward the task itself*. Prodicus used Homer as a polymath who hid knowledge which could be mined and taught to others, for a price. Yet, the teacher or initiator who requires payment has not yet learned the truth (which, incidentally, Orphism claims to teach)—namely, that what matters most is not bodily but psychical. The true initiator and teacher knows that assimilation of the soul to divine knowledge is the highest good, and thereby they do not seek payment. Furthermore, the true initiator knows that whatever truth is in Homer is the result of divine inspiration and is not the product of human knowledge at all. If we recall that the poet and priest both sit above the Sophist in the hierarchy of souls, we can see that Socrates moves from Sophistic initiation, to cultic initiation, to philosophical initiation. He employs the methods of the former but *directs these methods* toward a different end (i.e., philosophy).

Further, the exclusion of monetary exchange from true initiation also foregrounds the erotic content of philosophical initiation as something that requires a rejection of all exchange mentality.<sup>892</sup> This can be seen in the *Symposium*, which appropriates elements of the Eleusinian

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<sup>891</sup> Obbink, “Early Greek Allegory,” 16.

<sup>892</sup> While the *Cratylus* is not typically thought of as an erotic dialogue, Gordon notes that “Plato provides explicit evidence in *Cratylus* and *Symposium* that he consciously plays on the homophonic or acoustic resonance between things asked (*to erôtēma*) and erotic things (*ta erôtica*) to establish philosophical links between them” (8, see also

Mysteries, wherein Alcibiades attempts to achieve initiation through an exchange with Socrates.

The language in this passage is epiphanic and mystagogic. As Kevin Clinton explains:

The hierophant's task was *ἱερά φαίνειν*, which could mean "to show sacred objects" or "to make the sacred appear." In the latter case he did more than show sacred objects, i.e., he *made gods appear* in addition to the sacred objects, or perhaps was mainly associated with the appearance of the gods.<sup>893</sup>

This is reminiscent of Alcibiades' description of Socrates as one who appears mundane, but upon inspection is like a statue who, when cracked open, is filled with gods.<sup>894</sup> In essence, Alcibiades recognizes Socrates as one who can "make the sacred appear." That Alcibiades is rejected on the basis of trying to trade bronze for gold speaks not to Classical Athenian sexual mores, but rather to the fact that Alcibiades had failed to understand the crucial difference between initiation into philosophy via the erotic and initiation into mystery cultus and Sophistry via payment.

Fundamentally, Alcibiades is rejected not as a lascivious lover, or as an inappropriate one, but rather as not a lover at all, for, by Plato's account, lovers certainly do not accept payment for their attentions. With the above points in mind, I submit that Plato intentionally takes up an approach similar to the one that is evinced in the *Derveni Papyrus* in order to posit philosophy as the true mystery cult over and above the others and above the teachings of the Sophists.

Philosophy stands, then, both as the ideal religious or spiritual practice *and* the ideal intellectual one, effectively including both elements into one endeavor.

Another important parallel between the *Cratylus* and *PDerveni* lies in its very method of initiation, which is that of poetic cosmology as mystagogic. This is evidenced by the fact that

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58-65). Furthermore, Gordon argues that eroticism in the dialogues is rooted deeply in Socratic method and the act of questioning in dialogue (see 65-68). She argues that "the offspring of eros... is a specifically philosophical *logos*, namely, questioning" (67).

<sup>893</sup> Clinton, "Epiphany in the Eleusinian Mysteries," 85.

<sup>894</sup> That Alcibiades is treating Socrates as hierophant in this passage, one who "makes the sacred appear," is made more likely when one considers that Alcibiades found himself in hot water for supposedly profaning the Eleusinian Mysteries, and thus the audience of Plato's *Symposium* would have been primed to hear the cultic religious content of Alcibiades' speech.



Socrates and Hermogenes persist in this style of etymology in a manner that maps onto an allegorical reading of the symbolic connection between the cosmos and levels of reality. For, after the three patriarchs of the gods, we see an examination of the names of *daimones*, heroes, humans, and the soul and body, reflecting the cosmos in descending order from the three hypostatic gods. Gordon notes this cosmology in etymology, remarking that

[a]fter discussing a number of mythological figures whose names suit their natures, Socrates next discusses, in order, the etymologies for gods (οἱ θεοί), heroes (οἱ ἥρωες), and human beings (οἱ ἄνθρωποι), implying a hierarchy among them (397c ff.). He then gives the origins for human soul (ἡ ψυχή) and then the human body (τὸ σῶμα). This mirrors in gross terms the creation of the cosmos as *Timaeus* tells it, and is a familiar pattern in the Platonic corpus. In broad strokes, Socrates often works from the divine to the spiritual to the human, and within his discussions of humans he works from psychic to somatic.<sup>895</sup>

Obbink points out that the re-telling of cosmologies or mythology in general often plays a key role in initiatory purification by essentially re-establishing cosmic order in mystagogic contexts.<sup>896</sup> Obbink states that this “is a well-attested, often overlooked use to which mythographic poetry was put in private circles... The most basic means of ‘reinstalling normal order’... is ‘to repeat cosmology’.”<sup>897</sup> In essence, then, what the *Cratylus* gives us is an inspired cosmology in etymology. Here, one can see that this repetition of cosmology through etymology (for Socrates goes through all levels of reality in etymological form, discussing everything from the highest gods to physical principles), is used as an initiatory practice meant to bring Hermogenes into the cosmic order of a tiered metaphysics. Plato thereby reinvests the story with new meanings, connecting them to an account of the human’s place within a divine cosmos, continually in tension between eternal and temporal modes of knowledge, particularly illustrated

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<sup>895</sup> Gordon, *Plato’s Erotic World*, 58.

<sup>896</sup> Obbink, “Cosmology as Initiation vs. the Critique of Orphic Mysteries,” 50.

<sup>897</sup> Obbink, “Cosmology as Initiation vs. the Critique of Orphic Mysteries,” 50.

in our need for language itself. Importantly, Obbink's description of what the *Derveni* author is doing mirrors precisely what Plato himself seems to be depicting Socrates as doing:

I suggest therefore that the *Derveni* author sees himself as answering in his treatise a potential criticism of Orphic *teletai*. Unlike those who go away without understanding what they have seen or heard or learned, the *Derveni* author asks questions about the Orphic poem, engaging in procedures of interpretation that use instruction in cosmology and mythology as a form of initiation, that is, by engaging in a creative remythologizing (Burkert 1968) of what he takes to be the Orphic poet's originally conceptual insights.<sup>898</sup>

Though Obbink does not think that Plato himself is doing precisely this, the connection between this description of the *Derveni* author's approach and that of Plato does not escape him: "Even Plato and the Hippocratic tradition, though critical of initiatory technicians, ultimately embraced the language and imagery of mystery initiation as a vehicle for describing philosophical enlightenment."<sup>899</sup> I agree with Obbink's assertion that "The *Derveni* author's attitude is somewhat different, in that rather than seeing cult and mysteries as metaphors for philosophical activity, as do Plato and the Hippocratic tradition, he sees in his poetic text clues for understanding the true basis of cult and the craft of initiation."<sup>900</sup> This point is fair, for Plato does not attribute *hyponoia* to the poets *in precisely the same way*. I would argue that the mechanism of *hyponoia* in the poets, for Plato, is less about content and more about function (i.e., what reading poetry does for our thinking). Plato is creatively "remythologizing" the traditional cosmological accounts of the poets. For Plato, however, this cosmological initiation is not complete without the "antidote" of philosophical dialectic, hence Socrates' request that Hermogenes and he purify themselves after this indulgence. Thus, Plato depicts Socrates as using a typical cultic approach to *allegoresis* as mystagogy in order to initiate Hermogenes into philosophy as if into a mystery cult. In this way, both the form and content of Socrates'

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<sup>898</sup> Obbink, "Cosmology as Initiation vs. the Critique of Orphic Mysteries," 52.

<sup>899</sup> Obbink, "Cosmology as Initiation vs. the Critique of Orphic Mysteries," 53.

<sup>900</sup> Obbink, "Cosmology as Initiation vs. the Critique of Orphic Mysteries," 53

allegorizing and etymologizing cannot be separated. The practice itself is initiatory, as it was for practitioners of the mystery cults in general, and the author of *PDerveni* in particular.

In conclusion, the *Cratylus* is significantly related to the writings of authors such as the unnamed writer of the *Derveni Papyrus*. This connection is potentially strengthened through Socrates' claim to be inspired by Euthyphro, who, according to Kahn's arguments, may also be an Orphic. Hence, Socrates undertakes a literary method of examining the making, meaning, and correctness of names that has significant direct parallels to those undertaken by the author of a mystagogic Orphic text, and he says that this undertaking is explicitly inspired by a prophet who may have also been an Orphic. Furthermore, through the course of giving these etymologies, Socrates highlights the moving nature of language as key to its attempts to capture a fundamentally stable reality. Hence, he draws attention to the ambiguous or enigmatic quality of language as the very basis for its revelatory success. Fundamentally, the movement of language is not detached from its stable origins, and this is what enables it to do something for us philosophically. As Kahn remarks, both the *Cratylus* and the *Derveni Papyrus* "reflect the Heraclitean view that the truth of things is somehow available to us from the beginning, always staring us in the face; but that most people are unable to comprehend the real meaning of what they are thus confronted with."<sup>901</sup> Crucially, Plato's view *agrees* with Kahn's reading of Heraclitus here in claiming that "the truth of things is somehow available to us from the beginning." This conviction is not just at the heart of the Heraclitean *logos*, but forms the entire basis for Plato's theory of Recollection and his claim that we all have an inkling of the Good, that we long for it but need to do more work, hopefully with some *daimonic* aid, to truly grasp it. Plato's repeated appeals to the erotic nature of the human show that we are perpetually both in

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<sup>901</sup> Kahn, "Was Euthyphro the Author of the Derveni Papyrus," 61.

contact with truth and separate from it. Plato appears to be overtly referencing poetic exegesis via allegory and semantic etymology as a kind of initiatory practice in the contemplation of language as it relates to Being. Engaging poetic language in the manner of the Orphics functions *daimonically* to make the human aware of the gaps between her utterances and the reality that they try to capture, thereby inviting her as an initiate into the practice of philosophical inquiry through joint investigation.

#### V. The *Daimonic* Function of Poetry in the *Cratylus*

The goal of this chapter was to give a more concrete example of *how* poetic language can function *daimonically*. The claims regarding this issue are threefold. First, language is a moving image of Being in that it can only relate to Being through a perpetual motion in which it discursively explores the plenitude of Being through time. Second, poetic language in particular functions in a uniquely important manner by disrupting the otherwise reified concepts used by discursive, rational thought in order to continually revitalize its motion. Third, this disruption has the force of *daimonic* revelation when combined with the account given in the *Ion* of poetry as divinely inspired and with the arguments given in Chapter Four for poetry's *daimonic* nature.

Thus, at least one way in which poetry functions as *daimonic* resides not in a god-given polymathic *techne*, but rather in the evocative quality of poetry itself. Therefore, one of the inspired elements of poetry can be its particular use of language, which invites new possibilities for thinking old ideas. Again, Socrates is employing the kind of approach used by the *Derveni* author and others like him (or her), but he is rejecting the claims to precise knowledge held by the poets themselves. As Obbink points out:

in the *Derveni* author's view, the world of Orpheus' narrative, understood correctly... mirrors our cosmos. The author takes Orpheus to have had access to truths about the

world which he intentionally clothed in enigmas. Access to understanding, for the author, is gained from an interrogation of that text, and he sees understanding the world as in some sense analogous to understanding Orpheus' poem.<sup>902</sup>

Socrates also uses poetic naming to mirror cosmic principles and their organization, but not on the basis of explicit knowledge on the part of the poet. Rather, this mirroring comes from the immediate connection between Being and Becoming which the poet, in composing under divine inspiration, is able to evoke without necessarily knowing how or why.

One of the ways in which poetry can function *daimonically* through its very form is by keeping the language we use to articulate thought in continual and living motion. It seems that, for Plato, language without motion ceases to be productive in the striving for wisdom. Here, one is reminded of Socrates' concerns about relying too heavily on the written word and the "dead" nature of static language.<sup>903</sup> Interestingly, it is possible that this very concern explains at least one of the reasons for Plato's engagement with Orphism in the *Cratylus*. As Funghi notes, there was a "tendency" that

constitutes a distinctive feature of those people who claimed allegiance to Orphic modes of thought, and what remains of such literature reveals an inclination not to crystallize the written discourse but rather to perpetuate an 'open' text (and one whose vitality until the end of paganism may have depended precisely upon its receptivity), one capable of being 'contaminated' and at the same time able on its own to permeate different religious modes.<sup>904</sup>

Of course, Plato nevertheless engaged in writing. Yet, his chosen form, the dialogue, supports his views on language in relation to the soul's erotic, temporal yearning. The dialogue is a written form in motion, forever somehow "unfinished" in that Plato ends some dialogues aporetically, leaves questions unanswered, appears to purposely propose faulty arguments which invite the

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<sup>902</sup> Obbink, "Cosmology as Initiation vs. the Critique of Orphic Mysteries," 42.

<sup>903</sup> *Phaedrus* 275d-e.

<sup>904</sup> Funghi, "The Derveni Papyrus," 29.

reader to reflect on the issue further, and is limited by the interlocutors and their relative expertise and particularities.

The *Cratylus* itself includes the invitation to contemplate the dialogue's themes through perpetual motion. When Cratylus proclaims that Socrates' etymological approach reflected the Sophist's own mind on the matter, Socrates responds:

But, Cratylus, I have long been surprised at my own wisdom—and doubtful of it, too. That's why I think it's necessary to keep re-investigating whatever I say, since self-deception is the worst thing of all. How could it not be terrible, indeed, when the deceiver never deserts you even for an instant but is always right there with you? Therefore, I think we have to turn back frequently to what we've already said, in order to test it by looking at it “backwards and forwards simultaneously,” as the aforementioned poet [Homer] puts it.<sup>905</sup>

This claim that what Socrates has said should be doubted and investigated continually does not amount to an admission that it is incorrect. Recall that, even on his death bed, Socrates proceeded with the same caution regarding his own calling to practice philosophy in the way he did.<sup>906</sup> Rather, Socrates cautions his comrades by noting that what he has said so far could be always be wrong; of course, this is always true of anything anyone says. It is only in recognizing this and committing oneself to honest investigation and reinvestigation that it becomes possible for one to achieve any kind of true wisdom. In the final lines of the text, Socrates encourages Cratylus to “investigate [whether or not all things are in motion] courageously and thoroughly and not accept anything easily,” to which Cratylus responds, ending the dialogue, “I'll do that, Socrates, but I hope that you will also continue to think about these matters yourself.”<sup>907</sup> Thus, rather than ending with a summary of what has been discovered, the dialogue ends with an open-ended invocation that both parties persist in their investigations of these topics, implying that the

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<sup>905</sup> *Cratylus* 428d.

<sup>906</sup> *Phaedo* 60d-61b.

<sup>907</sup> *Cratylus* 440d-e.

soul's journey to truth is unending. Language, then, as the human mode of investigating and articulating the world through images, is likewise inexhaustible and always moving. It is a tool of the fallible human, and, like philosophy itself, it only remains alive and truth-seeking when it is in perpetual, investigative motion.

Hence, the temporality of human being and thought, especially as it is expressed through language, is directly connected to the need for *daimonic* mediation in the human's ascent.

Language is a function of human cognition, which is itself constituted in and characterized by temporality, which is a moving image of eternity. We are told in the *Timaeus*:

Now it was the Living Thing's nature to be eternal, but it isn't possible to bestow eternity fully upon anything that is begotten. And so he began to think of making a moving image of eternity: at the same time as he brought order to the universe, he would make an eternal image, moving according to number, of eternity remaining in unity. This number, of course, is what we now call 'time.'<sup>908</sup>

We are told via the *Timaeus* that the cosmos is designed to be a moving image of the ontological plenitude of eternity, unfolding in time. Eternity, for Plato, is not a temporal concept but an ontological one. Eternity is absolute ontological actuality, perfection, and fullness. Time, however, is the unfolding of eternity as moving from potency into act. It is an unfolding manifestation of eternity rather than an "all at once" copy of it. Accordingly, the human's intermediary position in the cosmos is distinguished by its place within time, which is itself an image, not a precise reproduction, of the simple unity of Being. The nature of the human as erotic is, therefore, fundamentally derived from her temporal being. As Jose Baracat observes, "the desiring being is a being projected into the future. Of course, in the Platonic myth, magnificently recounted in the *Symposium*, desire has to do with need and with the unavoidable

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<sup>908</sup> *Timaeus* 37d.

and endless seek for plenitude.”<sup>909</sup> It is because of our existence in time, an existence in motion, that we require mediation through the *daimonic*, for time entails that our desire for knowledge of Being and the Good is perpetually projected into the future and only ever partially satisfied in the present. One is reminded of Diotima’s description of learning itself as a temporal project with precarious satisfaction.<sup>910</sup>

Language, as the medium through which we articulate our understanding of what is primordially non-articulable, attempts to divide Being at the “joints”<sup>911</sup> in order to consolidate our grasp of it. But this practice is necessarily always imperfect; what is articulated in language is always an image, a particular understanding of what is first undivided and thereby necessarily exceeds any specific pronouncements. Language, then, is like the human herself. It tries to understand and articulate Being the only way it can, which is through its temporally embodied contact with the forms as images in the movement of Becoming (unless one achieves the incredibly difficult ability to contemplate the forms meta-linguistically, of course). In this way, language is fundamentally characterized by movement, incompleteness, and desire as a kind of perpetual grasping which drives the soul (ideally) upward. According to Pickstock: “In the *Cratylus*... Plato shows that his concept of knowledge as linked to desire and motion is also a concept of [discursive] knowledge as linguistic.”<sup>912</sup> Human knowledge is constituted through the erotic “having and not having” of articulated discourse. Pickstock also highlights the bodily quality of language, which marks it as a “certain threshold between understanding and sensation and ultimately between the forms and the particulars which share in their nature.”<sup>913</sup> The

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<sup>909</sup> José Baracat Jr., “Soul’s Desire and the Origin of Time in the Philosophy of Plotinus,” in J. F. Finamore, J. Phillips (eds.), *Literary, Philosophical, and Religious Studies in the Platonic Tradition*, Sankt Augustin, Academia Verlag, 2013, 35.

<sup>910</sup> *Symposium*, 208c-b.

<sup>911</sup> *Phaedrus* 265e.

<sup>912</sup> Pickstock, “The Late Arrival of Language,” 241.

<sup>913</sup> Pickstock, “The Late Arrival of Language,” 241.



language of “threshold” here draws attention to the very nature of language as something that already relates to the human as an “in-between” kind of thing. Poetic language functions to essentially make us aware of this threshold and open up possibilities for thinking beyond our current linguistic limits.

Poetry, in its oracle-like treatment of language through signs, symbols, allegory, metaphor, etc., is able to de-stabilize our concepts and re-open them for inquiry in potentially fruitful and revelatory ways. Socrates demonstrates this in the *Cratylus*. As Audre Lorde puts it, “it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to be birthed, but already felt.”<sup>914</sup> Lorde highlights the proto-knowledge that poetic language expresses when she says that poetry is a “distillation of experience from which true poetry springs,” and that this “births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.”<sup>915</sup> Speaking to the revelatory power of poetry, its ability to create new philosophical possibilities, Lorde comments that she “could name at least ten ideas [she] would have found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems.”<sup>916</sup> This power that Lorde describes could be dangerous, as it is not a given that we “birth” good ideas in congress with poetry. However, Lorde also cautions that the power of poetry does not reside in “idle fantasy”<sup>917</sup> or an untethered and indulgent appeal to think whatever we want in relation to poetic language. Instead, she states that the power of poetry lies in “a *disciplined* attention to the true meaning of ‘it feels right to me.’”<sup>918</sup> In this way,

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<sup>914</sup> Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>915</sup> Lorde, “Poetry is not a Luxury,” 36.

<sup>916</sup> Lorde, “Poetry is not a Luxury,” 37.

<sup>917</sup> Lorde, “Poetry is not a Luxury,” 37.

<sup>918</sup> Lorde, “Poetry is not a Luxury,” 37. Emphasis mine.

Lorde echoes a kind of Platonic view in that she suggests that poetry connects us to a kind of primordial apprehension of truth.

Indeed, if the *Cratylus* engages Heraclitanism in at least some positive ways, then here we ought to consider Heraclitus' claim that we are "above all...in continuous contact" with the *logos*.<sup>919</sup> However, because many "do not understand such things, nor when they have noticed them do they know them," humans often "seem to themselves" to understand.<sup>920</sup> This second fragment bears a strong resemblance to Socrates' own views of double ignorance as expressed in Plato's works. Moreover, the problem of double ignorance—namely, that one who does not know that she does not know will not seek knowledge<sup>921</sup>—also has a prior articulation in Heraclitus.<sup>922</sup> Notably, something very like Heraclitus' claim that humans are always primally in "continuous contact" with the divine *logos* is echoed in the *Republic*, wherein Socrates says that "[e]very soul pursues the good and does its utmost for its sake. It divines that the good is something but it is perplexed and cannot adequately grasp what it is or acquire the sort of stable beliefs it has about other things."<sup>923</sup> For Plato, then, humans, as "in-between" beings, are fundamentally in "continuous contact" with eternal reality, despite the limitations of a moving, as opposed to perfect and therefore static, grasp of this connection.

Lorde's notion of a "disciplined attention" to "it feels right to me" evokes the Platonic call to obey the call of *eros* as it draws our soul toward its true source in Being. The frenzy stirred up by the perception of beauty in another enables us to actualize an intuitive longing for Beauty itself that one had not previously understood but had nevertheless felt in an inarticulable

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<sup>919</sup> DK 22B72.

<sup>920</sup> DK 22B17.

<sup>921</sup> For example, see *Alcibiades I* 106d. Socrates asks his would-be beloved, "[w]ould you have wanted to learn or work out something that you thought you understood?"

<sup>922</sup> DK 22B18.

<sup>923</sup> *Republic* 505e.

way. Similarly, the nature of poetic language gives a voice to intuitions or feelings we might have about what has not yet been said in our pursuit of wisdom. It gives us ways of saying things that we did not know we could say before encountering poetry. It is not coincidental, then, that Lorde seems to connect poetry to a kind of creative birthing of ideas, as does Plato in the *Symposium*.<sup>924</sup> The poetic, then, becomes part of the philosophical process of attending to the erotic pull, as, to quote Lorde again, “we can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it.”<sup>925</sup> Poetry, then, operates in the space between our immediate, but un contemplated, connection to divine Being, and our task of contemplating this Being, trying to pin it down so we can test our intuitions and better commune with it.

Notably, Plato draws the reader’s attention to the mediating nature of language and its connection to the erotic early on in the *Cratylus* when he uses phrases such as “joint investigation.”<sup>926</sup> The Sophists’ failure to recognize the intersubjective essence of language appears to be the reason for Socrates’ rejection of their teachings on the question of naming. The notion of language as a power that lies in shared movement between people is already present at the beginning of the text, as evinced by the critique of the Sophists:

To be sure, if I’d attended Prodicus’ fifty-drachma lecture course, which he himself advertises as an exhaustive treatment of the topic, there’d be nothing to prevent you from learning the precise truth about the correctness of names straightaway. But as I’ve heard only the one-drachma course, I don’t know the truth about it. Nonetheless, I am ready to investigate it along with you and Cratylus... it’s certainly difficult to know about these matters, so we’ll have to conduct a joint investigation to see who is right, you or Cratylus.<sup>927</sup>

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<sup>924</sup> *Symposium* 209a, wherein Diotima connects poetry to “begetting.”

<sup>925</sup> Lorde, “Poetry is not a Luxury,” 37-38.

<sup>926</sup> See *Cratylus* 384c.

<sup>927</sup> *Cratylus* 384b-384c.

This passage criticizes the pedagogical methods of the Sophists and demonstrates how those methods belie a fundamental misunderstanding of the topic of which they purport to give an “exhaustive treatment.” Prodicus claims to know all there is to know about the nature of language (via naming), and he disseminates this knowledge through the model of an active–passive relationship between teacher and student. Like the rhapsode, he can produce a desired effect (in this case, persuasion), but he does not know if the effect is actually leading somewhere beneficial in an absolute sense.

In contrast, Socrates states that he will have to “investigate it along with you and Cratylus,” and that, while it is “difficult to know about these matters,” the solution is a “joint investigation to see who is right.”<sup>928</sup> Prodicus’ method indicates that he already has the knowledge and then passes it on, but Socrates’ method indicates that the knowledge is possessed in the moment between all parties engaged in the dialectic. One is reminded of Socrates’ hope in the *Alcibiades I* that his erotic relationship with the younger man will become reciprocal, which subverts the exchange mentality of traditional Athenian pederasty. Alcibiades notes this reversal clearly, stating: “we’re probably going to change roles, Socrates. I’ll be playing yours and you’ll be playing mine, for from this day forward I will never fail to attend on you, and you will always have me as your attendant.”<sup>929</sup> To this, Socrates replies: “after hatching a winged love in you, it will be cared for by it in return.”<sup>930</sup> Obtaining wisdom, we learn, requires the moving dialectic which involves a joint investigation with all parties who contribute to the search together. Therefore, Prodicus’ claim to be able to teach the entire content of the issue *to* someone (for a price) indicates that he does not understand the nature of language and its relationship to

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<sup>928</sup> *Cratylus* 384c.

<sup>929</sup> *Alcibiades I* 135d.

<sup>930</sup> *Alcibiades I* 135e.

knowledge in the first place. Accordingly, right after Hermogenes rejects the prospect of learning from the Sophists, Socrates states that they should begin with the poets.<sup>931</sup> We can now read this choice of beginning as signaling something about language itself that has been missed by the other authorities mentioned, and that will be brought out by Socrates' modified approach to ritual *allegoresis* through etymology. Given the arguments offered so far, this missing quality is language's inherent image-like quality with respect to the human's erotic, "in-between" cosmic position at the threshold dividing Being and Becoming.

This focus on investigation itself as something "joint," as opposed to a scenario in which knowledge is imparted from teacher to student, evokes a recognition of the erotic elements of the *Cratylus*. Notably, Gordon connects Sophistry in Plato to a kind of "anti-eroticism," which is both overly confident in its own answers and yet is so because it lacks a belief in truth beyond *doxa*. Hence, she states:

The unquestioning soul is a soul in denial of its origins and its current alienated condition. The unquestioning soul is unerotic... To believe with [Plato's depictions of] the sophists that we each have our own truth, or that there is no truth, or that *logos* is only a tool of persuasion or agonistic discourse is to believe that there is nothing to desire beyond the *logos* itself... Questions are the type of discourse best suited to these erotic pursuits of what lies beyond human limitation. Anti-erotic sophistry, however, relies on the premise that *doxa*, or opinion, is all there is.<sup>932</sup>

Gordon's claims make sense especially when considering how Socrates emphasizes the comprehensiveness and certainty of Prodicus' teachings on names. Such a teacher would not be erotic, then, because he would not see the endeavor as a joint one where the two parties seek out a truth they lack. This vision of mutually shared investigation also mirrors ways in which Plato seems to subtly shift the balance of Greek homosexual mores toward something more reciprocal.

As David Halerpin puts it:

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<sup>931</sup> *Cratylus* 391b-d.

<sup>932</sup> Gordon, *Plato's Erotic World*, 75.

...the Platonic approach all but erases the distinction between lover and beloved, between the active and the passive partner – or, to put it better, the genius of Plato’s analysis is that it eliminates passivity altogether: according to Socrates, both members of the relationship become active, desiring lovers; neither remains solely a passive object of desire.<sup>933</sup>

On Halperin’s account, Platonic eros stood apart from the culture of the day which circumscribed homoerotic relationships through an explicit power dynamic between *erastes* and *eromenos*.<sup>934</sup>

Frisbee Sheffield notes that “the tradition of pederastic eros... did not traditionally include the love of other persons for their own sake, but rather an exchange of benefit for both parties – *pederasteia* for *philosophia*.”<sup>935</sup> This traditional arrangement mirrors the money-for-philosophy approach that Plato finds so distasteful among the Sophists, setting up a parallel between traditional, pederastic relationships and the Sophistic pedagogical paradigm. As I have previously argued in another piece,

while Plato does not seem troubled by the concept of asymmetry itself in a relationship (say, in terms of levels of knowledge, age, or even social standing), the traditional power dynamic presented by the norms of his time required one partner to play the passive/submissive role, whereas Plato envisions both partners as active participants in the cultivation of what is mutually held between them.<sup>936</sup>

Thus, Plato is presenting a more equal, “joint” conception of *eros* in a philosophical relationship. This parallel between the erotic and this inquiry into language further strengthens the claim that Socrates’ goal in beginning with the poetics is to effect a *daimonic* mediation, invoking the

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<sup>933</sup> David Halperin, "Platonic Erôs and What Men Call Love," *Ancient Philosophy* 5, no. 2 (1985): 168. See also Halperin, "Plato and Erotic Reciprocity," 60-80. Though, Halperin’s later piece differs somewhat from his 1985 essay in terms of his views on erotic reciprocity.

<sup>934</sup> See K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978), 84: “we notice that... homosexual relationships in Greek society are regarded as the product not of the reciprocated sentiment of equals but of the pursuit of those of lower status by those of higher status. The virtues admired in an *eromenos* are the virtues which the ruling element in a society (in the case of Greek society, adult male citizens) approves in the ruled (women and children).” Also, “One could be *erastes* and *eromenos* at the same stage of one’s life, but not both in relation to the same person” (Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 85). Thus, homosexual relationships in ancient Athens traditionally had a subordinate/passive and dominant/active partner.

<sup>935</sup> Sheffield, “The *Symposium* and Platonic Ethics,” 122-123.

<sup>936</sup> Hill, “Alcibiades the Bad Lover,” 16 n28.

*daimonic* potential of not only poetry, but *eros* too, using both simultaneously to initiate Hermogenes into philosophy.

At *Cratylus* 398d-397a, the inspired treatment of poetry is juxtaposed with the need for a purification ritual just in case it leads the interlocutors astray. Later, Socrates tells Hermogenes that “there is not only a serious way of explaining the names of these divinities but a playful one as well. You’ll have to ask others for the serious one, but there’s nothing to prevent us from going through the playful one—even the gods love play.”<sup>937</sup> The *Cratylus*’ treatment of poetic language as something inspired yet also “playful” and in need of some additional thing to “purify” it is echoed in other passages in Plato’s corpus. At *Phaedrus* 265c, Socrates describes the “poetical” and *daimonically* prompted palinode as having been sung “playfully, but also appropriately and respectfully.” In treating language “playfully,” the philosopher is admitting to the impoverished reality of language as it relates to absolute Being. This playfulness does not undermine the philosophical value of engaging with poetic language; rather, it contextualizes its relative importance in relation to the philosopher’s ultimate goal of obtaining true wisdom through meta-linguistic contemplation. Another relevant passage for comparison appears in the *Republic*, wherein Socrates states:

If the poetry that aims at pleasure and imitation has any argument to bring forward that proves it ought to have a place in a well-governed city, we at least would be glad to admit it, for we are well aware of the charm it exercises (ὡς σύνησμέν γε ἡμῖν αὐτοῖς κηλουμένοις ὑπ’ αὐτῆς). But, be that as it may, to betray what one believes to be the truth is impious. What about you, Glaucon, don’t you feel the charm (κηλῆ) of the pleasure-giving Muse, especially when you study her through the eyes of Homer?<sup>938</sup>

Should poetry’s defense fail, Socrates encourages them to then “repeat the argument[s] [against poetry] like an incantation (ἐπάδοντες) so as to preserve ourselves from slipping back into that

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<sup>937</sup> *Cratylus* 406b-c.

<sup>938</sup> *Republic* 607c.

childish passion for poetry which the majority of people have.”<sup>939</sup> Here, like in the *Cratylus*, the jury is out. The power of poetry to move the soul is acknowledged, and sober philosophical reasoning is seen as the “antidote” to its potentially (but not necessarily) harmful effects as a potent “charm.” Yet, perhaps poetry will be found to be beneficial, in which case its magical (“charming” or “bewitching”) effect on the soul is not a negative.

The same word used in the above passage from the *Republic*, κηλέω (“charm, bewitch, beguile”), is used in the *Laws* to indicate the use of poetry and music to “bewitch” the souls of the young into believing the right things, and thus explicitly indicates that the potency of poetry can work on the soul in a positive direction.<sup>940</sup> It appears in the *Republic* at several other places as well. At 358b, it appears to indicate not the bewitching power of poetry, but of the Socratic *elenchus*.<sup>941</sup> In fact, at 410a-411b, Socrates highlights the tension in which the bewitching power of poetry ought to be held. He argues that poetry is necessary for educating the philosophical nature of the soul, but this must be balanced with physical training which enables us to become sufficiently strong rather than too soft. Too much physical training and not enough poetry results in a “savage” soul that has no attunement or sensitivity to philosophical pursuits, but too much music and poetry results in a soul which is a “feeble warrior” and does not have the strength to truly become what it ought. The implication is that poetry “softens” the soul, making it receptive to truth, but this receptivity, when untethered from investigative rigor, can become too subjective, and it is dangerous without this counterbalance. We need the other side of this process—namely, sufficient spiritedness which allows us to aggressively investigate what is

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<sup>939</sup> *Republic* 608a.

<sup>940</sup> *Laws* 840b-c: “right from their earliest years we’re going to tell them stories and talk to them and sing them songs, so as to charm them, we trust, into believing that this victory is the noblest of all.”

<sup>941</sup> Glaucon encourages them to continue the discussion, and states: “for I think that Thrasymachus gave up before he had to, charmed by you [Socrates] as if he were a snake.”



revealed to our sensitivities through poetry. Thus, Socrates' two-fold process in the *Cratylus* of a "playful" and "inspired" *allegoresis* of the names given by the poets is acceptable, and seemingly necessary,<sup>942</sup> *so long as* it is accompanied by the purgative effects of the argumentative power fueled by a sufficiently exercised *thumetikon* which has been trained in war (i.e., argumentation) and is ready to hold the soul responsible for the ideas to which it gives "birth in beauty" under the inspiration of poetry.

The poetic etymology of Apollo's name, given in the *Cratylus*, foregrounds the tensions present in this presentation of poetic language, of language more broadly, and of philosophy itself. Socrates summarizes the etymology of Apollo's name, signaling him as "a single minded, always shooting washer, who makes things move together."<sup>943</sup> Here, Plato is echoing the Homeric hymn to Apollo, and, as Decker points out,

[T]he three areas of *timai* that the hymn identifies as belonging to Apollo are the bow, the lyre, and the oracle, which all demonstrate his double character. Just as Apollo is the god of music and bright clarity, he is also the god of the darkest obscurity of the oracle and the terrible destruction of plague. Though he is a god of order in Zeus's Olympian cosmos, his presence brings a high-strung tension to this order, a threat of imminent destruction.<sup>944</sup>

To the three, Plato adds a fourth, medicine, which, for Plato, has deep connections to speech itself as a *pharmakon*, both as a medicine and a poison.<sup>945</sup> Apollo's connection to the Muses and his paternal relation to Orpheus further connect him deeply to poetry. As the god of purification, he is one who cleanses so as to "makes things move together,"<sup>946</sup> which, one could argue, is precisely the task Socrates is engaged in with his holy etymology, making all elements of Apollo's nature "move together" as one in a single name. Apollo, as "the purifying god who

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<sup>942</sup> Given that Socrates indicates that this is the correct starting place sans expertise from the Sophists.

<sup>943</sup> *Cratylus*, 406a.

<sup>944</sup> Decker, "Double Speak in the Ancient Greek Poetic Tradition," 238-39.

<sup>945</sup> See *Phaedrus* 270b wherein rhetoric is referred to as a *pharmakon* for the soul.

<sup>946</sup> *Cratylus* 406a.

washes away... such evil impurities and releases... us from them,”<sup>947</sup> represents our antidote to the charm of poetry. Yet, he also represents poetry itself.

Apollo therefore personifies philosophy as marked by the tension between what we desire (the ability to “hit” our target, wisdom) and our methods for pursuing it: philosophical dialectic, poetic inspiration, oracles, and purgative rituals. Apollo personifies the tension in philosophy as requiring many “drugs,” and demonstrates why the philosopher may need various forms of *daimonic* inspiration, including poetry. One “drug” is taken (poetry), but then its antidote (dialectic) is required, which, in turn needs the other again (poetry, eros, or something else *daimonic*). Hence, Apollo symbolizes the manner in which the philosophical life, which for Plato directs itself toward the divine, pairs *daimonic* inspiration and discursive reason in a dialectic of their own, taking turns as poison and medicine. Apollo’s four-fold description invokes the idea of the philosopher as one who is always aiming at the Good, attempting to understand everything as a whole under its auspices, and perpetually working to purify herself of any pollution in her ideas of it. Poetic language in particular seems to have an entirely double nature, both potentially healing and potentially destructive, perhaps necessary, but still dangerous. Yet, Apollo gives us hope. The philosopher, aided by divine mediation, can press on in the belief that, with diligence on her part, the philosopher’s god will purify all speech and make it move together as one, mediating her mortal knowledge to the divine via the perpetual motion of philosophy. With this goal in mind, the philosopher not only need not fear poetry, but can actually embrace it as a life-giving species of *daimonic* inspiration leading her toward divine wisdom.

## VI. Conclusion

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<sup>947</sup> *Cratylus* 405b.

The *Cratylus* presents language in general as a tool that enables us to contemplate Being through images. Socrates states: “just as a shuttle is a tool for dividing warp and woof, a name is a tool for giving instruction, that is to say, for dividing being.”<sup>948</sup> The decision to describe language as a shuttle further foregrounds motion. The shuttle only operates as an effective tool when it is moving. Language is only a tool for dividing being—for giving us instruction on it—when it is moving. Language remains in motion through the continual re-opening of its concepts for renewed investigation, and poetry is one method for effecting this re-opening. In the *Cratylus*, Socrates employs an etymological *allegoresis* of the poets in a manner similar to others during his time. Most significantly for this study, Socrates’ approach bears a particular similarity to etymological *allegoresis* as employed in initiatory practices in Orphism. Thus, this chapter argued that Socrates employs such interpretive methods in order to initiate Hermogenes into the philosophical life.

The etymologies, which together comprise an allegory of the Platonic cosmos, including its metaphysical schema and the role of the human in it, accomplish their initiatory goal through the *daimonic* function of poetic language itself. In other words, the *Cratylus* demonstrates how poetry can operate *daimonically* by way of its very form. The form of poetic language, which expresses meaning through non-literal uses of language, destabilizes pre-existing ideas and challenges, affirms, and reopens them in ways that keep them living and breathing. While propositional language is also needed, it relies on concretizing something to which we only have a dynamic access. Thus, propositional statements inevitably fail to account for the true essence of their referents in some aspect or other. Poetic language can thwart this over-concretization. In demanding the practiced contemplation of metaphor, symbol, and allegory through which we can

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<sup>948</sup> *Cratylus* 388b-c.

rethink the meanings of things that we otherwise take for granted, poetic language lets “meaning grapple for its existence.”<sup>949</sup> It helps us form new associations, explore nuances, and bring additional realities to surface. Accordingly, the *Cratylus* illuminates at least one way in which poetry can function *daimonically*, for poetic language allows the fallible human intellect to both become aware of the gap between human and divine understanding and inspires her with new paths for contemplating Being.

We should, nevertheless, listen to Socrates and be cautious not to overestimate any engagement with poetry as the final word. The *Cratylus* ends with an exhortation for all of them to begin again, in a sense. What they have done so far has not exhausted the topic in the slightest. This ending makes sense, for, if the content of the dialogue is meant to point to the perpetual motion needed to make language a useful and moving image of Being, then it cannot end any other way than by returning to the beginning, setting the whole thing in motion anew. Therefore, it would be a mistake to think that Plato intended Socrates’ etymologies to get at anything precise. Precision is not the goal of *daimonic* activities. When Socrates tells Hermogenes that the etymologies were “playful,”<sup>950</sup> Plato seems to be letting the reader in on the fun, acknowledging that this is not the final goal of the investigation but a necessary creative space that playfully allows new concepts to arise in connection to otherwise concretized ideas. Poetry is the fuel that keeps language in perpetual motion as a moving image of Being, fulfilling its role so long as it never stops circulating.

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<sup>949</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, “How to,” in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, edited by AnaLouise Keating (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 232.

<sup>950</sup> *Cratylus*, 406b-c.

## Conclusion: Questions, Answers, and Further Avenues

...To keep out the world  
I burrow under blankets  
And like a spider in her web  
Spin images and words  
Fashioning another kingdom  
More real than the outer...  
El sueño mundo –  
The sum of the collective –  
Is dimmer than my soul's dream ...  
In my cave of bed and quilt  
Sueño another world.  
While el otro mundo dreams me  
– Gloria Anzaldúa, "Like a Spider in her Web"

"[L]anguage's function... is to return to life what had been abandoned to the powers of death."  
– Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 8.

### I. Summary of the Study and Its Conclusions

This study examined an issue regarding Plato's treatment of poetry<sup>951</sup> and posited a possible solution to it. The introduction explained that this issue, the "problem of poetry," resulted from a tension present among the remarks made about poetry by Plato's Socrates. In many of the dialogues, he refers to poets and poetry as divinely inspired<sup>952</sup> and even as a "divine gift."<sup>953</sup> Furthermore, Socrates often argues that the divine can only be the source of good things for human beings.<sup>954</sup> Thus, if poetry is divinely inspired and the divine only causes good things, poetry must be good. However, many of Plato's dialogues also argue that the poets have no knowledge of the things about which they write.<sup>955</sup> Socrates even says that poetry is only an image of an image because those who write it use the images they have of reality and compose

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<sup>951</sup> See the Introduction to this dissertation, page 1. Poetry was defined as "a creative composition of words used in surprising, non-literal, and particularly evocative ways, and it is often, but not always, metrical."

<sup>952</sup> *Apology* 22c, throughout the *Ion* (see 533e and 534b), *Phaedrus* 533e, and *Laws* 719c.

<sup>953</sup> *Ion* 534c.

<sup>954</sup> For examples, see *Laws* 907a, *Republic* 379c, and *Phaedrus* 242d-243a.

<sup>955</sup> *Apology* 22b-c, *Ion* 533e.

an image even further removed from the original via a poetic representation.<sup>956</sup> Moreover, poetry frequently contains impious or vicious depictions of the gods and humans.<sup>957</sup> Poetry is thereby not only epistemically problematic, but it also has the potential to corrupt the morals of those who hear it. Complicating the matter further, sometimes in the same work, Plato's Socrates even express both the view that poetry is divinely inspired and the view that the poets are ignorant, as is the case with the *Ion*.

Accordingly, the problem of poetry results from the apparent incompatibility between what seem to be positive characterizations of poetry (i.e., it is divinely inspired and the divine is only the source of good) and negative ones (i.e., it is the product of ignorant poets and only contains images of images, some of which are impious). The tension between these apparently contradictory claims leads one to question the value of poetry for Plato in the philosophical life. Since the philosopher is a lover of wisdom, and since poetry appears to have a dubious, or even predominantly negative, relationship to the acquisition of knowledge, some scholars have argued that Plato's view is ultimately "anti-poetry."<sup>958</sup> However, this dissertation argued that Plato is not "anti-poetry" and posited a solution to the problem of poetry. It argued that Plato's treatment of poetry suggests that it can function as a *daimonic* activity. When it functions in this way, i.e., *daimonically*, poetry can play a beneficial role in the ascent of the philosopher's soul toward knowledge of the Forms and the Good. Additionally, reading poetry *daimonically* contrasts with other interpretive methods prevalent during Plato's time. Hence, at least some of the apparent contradictions among Socrates' various remarks on poetry can be understood in light of the many different ways in which one can approach poetry. Plato's Socrates problematizes some

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<sup>956</sup> *Republic* 601a.

<sup>957</sup> *Republic* 389d-390d and 392a-b.

<sup>958</sup> See notes 42-49.

approaches while leaving open the possibility that others may be beneficial to the philosopher's ascent. Indeed, the repeated claim that poetry is divinely inspired strongly suggests that poetry can be *daimonic*. In light of this *daimonic* potential, Socrates warns against the dangers of poetry when it is approached in certain ways, but he also invites the reader to consider other ways in which poetry can be engaged so as to produce positive psychological effects. Moreover, the character of Socrates himself models some of these other, beneficial ways of thinking about and engaging with poetry.

This study proceeded from an approach to Plato's work which draws from what Catherine Pickstock calls "the other Plato," one who, to re-quote Pickstock,

involves an interlinked attention to... the literary idioms of the dialogues: the dialogue form, the patterns of imagery and metaphor, and the deployment of myth and reference to ritual... to the religious background that is constantly invoked... [and to] a more positive view of... the material realm than is often ascribed to him... [For] it is material pictures and practices that are seen to play a vital mediating role in terms of ascent to the forms.<sup>959</sup>

Accordingly, this study employed a rather holistic and somewhat coherentist approach to reading the dialogues in which several dialogues from different periods of Plato's writing career were examined. In line with Pickstock's characterization of the "other Plato," this study also viewed the dialogue form, Plato's employment of images, metaphor, mythopoesis, and his treatments of ritual and religious practices as serious contextual markers that one must heed in order to responsibly interpret his texts. Furthermore, the methodology of this dissertation largely set aside considerations of Socratic irony in interpreting the dialogues, and instead argued for sincerity in Socrates' claims regarding divine inspiration among others.

Chapters One and Two set the stage for the argument that poetry can function *daimonically*. Chapter One did this by establishing the philosophical role played by activities and

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<sup>959</sup> Pickstock, "The Late Arrival of Language," 239.

experiences that are stereotypically considered “rational” by modern readers of Plato’s texts. Instead, Chapter One argued that Plato robustly employs “patterns of imagery” and “the deployment of myth and references to ritual,” to re-quote Pickstock above. In contrast to readings of Plato that hold that humans *only* obtain knowledge of reality through dispassionate, disembodied reasoning about reality, our attention to Pickstock’s “other Plato” reveals a philosopher who gives direct attention to imagery, metaphor, myth, and ritual as parts of the philosophical life. Hence, Plato’s “rational” philosopher is not one who eschews emotional, spiritual, aesthetic, or otherwise embodied experiences, but rather one who conceives of the “rational” as a divine order governing the cosmos. Under this conception of reason, human discursive reasoning and *daimonic* experiences can *both* reveal this divine order to us.

Chapter Two then proceeded to examine the reasons for viewing Plato as “anti-poetry” by focusing primarily on the banishing of the poets in the *Republic*. The *Republic* does seem to offer several damning arguments against most poetry. Specifically, it seems to hold “poetry that aims at pleasure and imitation,”<sup>960</sup> which includes most of Homer, Hesiod, and the tragedians and comedians, in contempt as having a grave ability to corrupt the *psyche*. Nevertheless, Chapter Two argued that, upon closer examination, the criticisms against poetry in the *Republic* primarily obtain only when one interprets poetry in certain ways. The chapter then examined two common interpretive methods during Plato’s time: the literal method of interpretation, which was thought to result in practical wisdom for the masses, and the allegorical interpretation employed by those who sought hidden material or theological knowledge left by the poet. Both approaches were problematized along similar lines. The literal approach to poetry assumes that the poet is a polymath whose work contains accurate depictions of various *technai*. Thus, the masses, in being

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<sup>960</sup> *Republic* 607c.



educated on the poets, are being likewise educated in the pseudo-knowledge portrayed in the poetic works. The result is a kind of *pseudo*-education that prevents people from seeking out genuine knowledge precisely because they have been led to believe that they already have it.

The allegorical approach likewise assumed knowledge on the part of the poet, though this knowledge was hidden beyond the literal words on the page. Similar to the literal method, this approach to allegory still left its adherents clinging to a fixed and pragmatic body of knowledge they thought the poet could transmit to them. The difference was that, in the case of allegory, getting to this knowledge required the right “key.” Consequently, people still focused on uncovering authorial intent rather than investigating important matters for themselves. Hence, considering that the interlocutors of the *Republic* use the poets in ways that take up these popular methods, one can read the critiques of poetry in the *Republic* as critiques of poetry *under certain readings*, and not in any and all cases. Chapter Two concluded by pointing out that Socrates hints at a way to allow poetry to return to the *Kallipolis*. Namely, she needs her defenders to speak on her behalf and demonstrate her value beyond mere pleasure. Chapter Two then argued that this caveat suggests that Plato wants the reader to think of alternative interpretive approaches to poetry in which it does not fall prey to the arguments against it given earlier in the *Republic*. This conclusion set the stage for the argument that an approach to poetry that takes it as *daimonic* is one such possible alternative.

Chapter Three presented the central arguments of this study. It began with an overview of Plato’s *Ion* and argued against readings that see Socrates’ “inspiration thesis” – the claim that the poets compose through divine inspiration and not through personal knowledge or ability—as insincere. In contrast, Chapter Three argued that Socrates really does mean to claim that poetry is divinely inspired. However, the *Ion* also argues that the poets and rhapsodes have no genuine

*techne*, and certainly not a polymathic one. Thus, the *Ion* presents both of the claims that constitute much of the problem of poetry at once. This study then argued that their simultaneous appearance suggests that they are actually implicated in one another. In other words, the lack of genuine knowledge on the part of the poets introduces the question of how their poetry can be so moving for the human *psyche*. Rather than dismiss the idea that poetry does move the soul, Socrates instead offers the inspiration thesis, holding to *both* the claim that poetry is divinely inspired and that the poets and rhapsodes are ignorant. Thus, the *Ion* establishes that the power of poetry comes from a divine source, and that it cannot be reduced to its technical content.

Next in Chapter Three, I compared the description of divinely inspired poetry to Diotima's characterization of the erotic in the *Symposium*. This comparison illuminated how poetry, while not called *daimonic* explicitly, is nevertheless described and treated as a *daimonic* activity. The *daimonic* function of poetry demonstrates how Plato can value it in the philosophical life; however, there is a potential rebuttal to consider. If the *daimonic* (in the form of divine inspiration in poetry, eros, rites, or oracles) is not necessarily always good for the human soul, then a *daimonic* side to poetry does nothing to resolve the problem of poetry. Thus, Chapter Three looked at Plato's *Phaedrus* and examined one potential example of "bad inspiration." However, upon examining the text more closely, Chapter Three concluded that the inspiration depicted in the Socrates' first speech in the *Phaedrus* was not "bad," but rather significantly supported the other divine elements of the dialogue such as Socrates' *daimonion* and the goodness of *eros*. Accordingly, Chapter Three concluded by arguing that while *daimonic* poetry can present dangers to the human *psyche*, these dangers arise in relation to the human side of the inspiration and have nothing to do with their divine origins. Moreover, Plato's

characterization of Socrates as the *daimonic* man (i.e., the ideal philosopher) presents the reader with a practical model for engaging the *daimonic*.

Finally, Chapter Four examined Plato's *Cratylus* in order to elucidate a specific example of at least one of the ways in which poetry can function *daimonically*. This chapter argued that Socrates' etymologies in the *Cratylus* are seriously, not ironically, undertaken. Further, their resemblance to Orphic methods of initiation through poetic *allegoresis* suggests that Socrates is employing poetry in a mystagogic way. This initiation functioned by employing poetic language itself in a *daimonic* way to make the reader aware of the difference between a name and the thing it captures. The etymologies played with multivocality, ambiguity, semantics, and metaphor to evoke complex meanings behind the names examined. These meanings often tied together multiple accounts at once, and they emerged from a creative contemplation of the name. Socrates derives meanings that bear striking resemblances to Plato's own metaphysical ideas.

Furthermore, these etymologies operate in a manner similar to the enigmatic utterances of oracles or Heraclitus, which were intended to make seemingly paradoxical truths about divine reality available to the limited mode of mortal communication through language. The approach to poetic language in the *Cratylus* reveals how poetry can operate *daimonically* by highlighting the gap between divine Being and mortal Becoming, and can invite mortals to re-investigate what they thought they knew by offering them new ways to articulate the same things.

In sum, poetic language, as divinely inspired, can reinvigorate philosophical contemplation by de-sedimenting concepts articulated in language that have become stagnant. Poetic language, therefore, can be an essential part of producing philosophically functional language, which is a moving and living image of Being and not Being itself. Socrates' treatment of Apollo at 404e-406a in the *Cratylus* reveals the two-fold nature of philosophical

contemplation as relying on a risky but necessary and natural tension between *daimonic* revelations of inarticulable, unchanging divine Being and our dialectical attempt to employ reason to test and interpret such revelation. In his own writing practices, Plato understands and addresses the limits of language and the need for exploiting its boundaries in order to get at more transcendent modes of “seeing” the truth. Plato explicitly uses myth to reveal metaphysical truth. For example, one can read the “likely story” of the *Timaeus* as a mythic cosmology that reveals an image of reality and not reality itself. Many of Plato’s dialogues highlight the way in which words can reveal the truth of a thing precisely by *not* being that thing, and thus point beyond images entirely to what cannot be imagined.

The truth is revealed through the image precisely because we come to grasp the difference between the image and the reality that it strives, but always somewhat fails, to capture. While Plato is clear through the dialogues that images are not to be mistaken for the thing itself, this does not mean that images are bad or useless. Socrates describes himself as “greedy for images” in the *Republic* when he makes use of the simile of the Sun, and, as stated earlier, Plato employs images over and over again as devices for explicating his metaphysics.<sup>961</sup> Plato is comfortable with the creative use of language to point beyond its immediate meaning to an “imaging” meaning, a meaning that cannot be captured in propositional statements but must be experienced through likeness. However, for language, and images in general, to serve a useful function, they must be understood *as images* and therefore not as the thing in question itself. The thing will always escape the images of it. Images operate as a tool to capture Being-in-motion. We know that Plato views language as unable to fully capture the truth of Being, especially when language becomes too fixed. This is demonstrated in the *Seventh Letter* wherein he states: “no

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<sup>961</sup> *Republic* 489e.

sensible man will venture to express his deepest thoughts in words, *especially in a form which is unchangeable.*”<sup>962</sup> This passage demonstrates that Plato wanted living words, not dead ones, as his legacy. The ability of poetic language to remain relevant to produce motion in our thinking, explains why Plato valued its *daimonic* function despite his concerns regarding its abuses in his time.

In the dialogues where we see seemingly negative remarks on poetry, we can look back and see that the criticism was directed not at poetry *qua* poetry, but at its use by ersatz philosophers: rhapsodes, sophists, orators, and priests. Under this review, it emerges that Plato never intended to banish poetry; he intended to banish its abusers, those who would wield it as a drug with no knowledge or care for its effects. The philosopher, by contrast, becomes the true priest, wise-woman, rhapsode, orator, and, yes, even poet, when she directs herself not toward reason alone, for its own sake, but toward the Good under in which all *daimonic* and discursive elements of the human experience come together and are directed at one goal: obtaining divine wisdom and assimilating oneself to it. When the philosopher is directed at this task, she not only need not fear poetry, oracles, or lovers, but she is also best equipped to value these things for what they truly are: little glimpses of what the gods know as they know it.

## II. This Study and the Contemporary Relevance of Platonism

The idea that words have a hold on reality is an ancient one—more ancient than Plato. It is the thought behind the act of incantation itself, the idea that words invoke, actualize, and even transform reality in some way. “Words have power,” “watch your tongue,” and “words hurt”—we say these things to our young ones, striving to instill in them the realization that they are

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<sup>962</sup> Plato, *Seventh Letter*, Trans. Glenn R. Morrow, 343a. Emphasis mine.

responsible for what they speak into the world. Speech is a kind of act with a murky, seemingly magical influence on reality. Perhaps no words are so powerful as names. A name is no trite thing. Numerous cultures view names as precious, guarding them against ill-intended outsiders. To curse someone, you must know their name. To expel a demon, you must know its name. It was in giving his name that Odysseus brought the wrath of Poseidon down on his head. Naming seems to invoke the very being or essence of the thing, granting the speaker a power over it. Or, perhaps, naming has no power over the thing itself but rather over our ability to think the thing, to know it, to relate to it. To control a name is to control the narrative of the thing and how others can think about it. Naming has the power to bring the thing into *our* world or to banish it. Accordingly, re-naming is a powerful act. The erasure of personal names and their substitution for new ones was a fundamental part of the subjugation process for enslaved peoples. Returning to old names, therefore, is a return to old powers, thoughts, and world-orientations. Choosing a name is choosing a world. Reclaiming one's name or reinventing one's name are forms of self-ownership and self-determination, ways in which we construct and direct our being in the world. A name is not just a name; a name is a calling forth, an instantiation, a recognition or rejection of what we will and will not acknowledge as real in our thinking and speaking—in word, it is an Incantation.

The word ἐπαείδω (“to sing as incantation or charm”) appears within the Platonic corpus around 18 times.<sup>963</sup> It often points to using words mytho-poetically as persuasive “incantations” that possess power over the human *psyche*.<sup>964</sup> The use of ἐπαείδω indicates that the power of language operates in a manner that is beyond the purely rational.<sup>965</sup> The obvious magical, cultic,

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<sup>963</sup> *Phaedo* 77e, 114d; *Theaetetus* 149d, 157c; *Phaedrus* 267d; *Laws* 664b, 665c, 666c, 773d-e, 812c, 837e, 944b; *Republic* 608a; *Charmides* 155e, 157c, 176b.

<sup>964</sup> *Laws* 664b, 665c, 666c, 773d-e, 812c, 944b; *Charmides* 157c.

<sup>965</sup> In the sense of *dianoia*.

and ritual connotations of the word suggest that Plato views language as a kind of incantation that, within the microcosm of the human intellect, calls forth a persuasive image of the world and allows us to restructure, for better or worse, our understanding of the cosmos. This reality of the power of words invites a profound boon and a profound danger into our world, for with our words, we can instantiate both what ought and what ought not to be. Understanding this power illuminates why Plato might have thought of poetry as *daimonic*. Words, especially when used poetically, can aid us in imagining reality *better*, providing a link between the human being and divine understanding, which mediates the latter to the former. Through the charm of creative language, reality opens itself to the philosopher in numerous ways, allowing the soul to contemplate it more closely and assimilate herself to it more accurately.

Setting aside the problem of poetry for a moment, one cannot help but note the historical connection between what has been rejected in the “rationalist” Plato and various marginalized groups. Women, indigenous people, people with disabilities, and various different “othered” groups have frequently been associated with the body over the mind, the particular over the universal, emotion over reason, the natural over the “civilized,” and ritual and religion over scientific models of knowledge. The knowledge held by these groups has been ignored, if not outright derided as inferior, at least in part due to a long-standing tradition in the so-called “West” of associating what is best with what is rational, and what is rational with what is (a certain conception of) masculine. The connection of the feminine to embodied knowledge, emotion, and particularity has been noted repeatedly in feminist scholarship.<sup>966</sup> This connection

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<sup>966</sup> For an impressively sweeping, if not at times unnuanced, account of the historical trajectory of this idea beginning with Plato, see Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason* (London: Routledge, 1984).

gains intensity, and the addition of even more incredible violence, when further applied to race<sup>967</sup> and disability.<sup>968</sup>

Let us assume Whitehead is right, and let us also grant that a rationalist reading of Plato plays into a philosophical tradition that perpetuates the exclusion of various peoples due to the historical prioritization of the concept of “reason” and its symbolic connection to the masculine over and above other sources of knowledge. Consequently, in addition to working toward solving the problem of poetry, there is much to be gained from a re-appraisal of sources of non-rational paths to knowledge in Plato, such as the poetic. The poetic, in standing alongside the erotic, the ritual, and the religious, has been symbolically feminized or “otherized” through the centuries. “For women,” writes Audre Lorde, “poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence... Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.”<sup>969</sup> Similarly, she sees the erotic, too, as something that has since been relegated to the feminine and devalued:

The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information

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<sup>967</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins, “The Sexual Politics of Black Womanhood,” in *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 163-180. Hill Collins discusses the compounding of patriarchal values when exercised over and against Black women. Connections between the white feminine and the earth, domesticity, and chastity result in a need to connect the Black feminine as animalistic, barbaric, and sexually deviant. In both cases, the feminine (white or Black) takes on the quality that it must to service and undergird a notion of (white) patriarchal ideas of the man of reason as distinct from the natural, the animal, the domestic, and the erotically vulnerable.

<sup>968</sup> See Susan Wendell, “Toward a Feminist Theory of Disability,” in *The Feminist Philosophy Reader*, eds. Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo (New York: McGraw Hill, 2008), 826-841, in which Wendell compellingly argues that the oppression of the body due to historical associations of it with matter and the feminine reaches a kind of fever-pitch in the oppression of disabled persons. Wendell holds that the “oppression of disabled people is the oppression of everyone’s real body.” (831) The historical localization of the autonomous subject with the disembodied rational mind results in catastrophic fears regarding the uncontrollable body, and the female body (through childbirth, menstruation, and menopause) and the disabled body are especially seen as the symbols of this fear realized. Thus, Wendell asserts, the liberation of the disabled body and, relatedly, the female body, signals the liberation of all bodies from the general fear of embodiment wholesale.

<sup>969</sup> Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 37.



within our lives... [It is a] power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge.<sup>970</sup>

Therefore, attempting to unravel the problem of poetry in Plato not only has the potential benefit of solving a particular longstanding problem for Platonic scholarship, but also the potential benefit of re-conceptualizing the economy of ideas in which we currently exist, which flow directly into and out of structures of oppression. Plato, the “other Plato,” I argue, sees the poetic (and the erotic, and the *daimonic* in general) as a powerful source of “energy for change.” This is a change that occurs in our world, not in the cosmos itself, but in the *microcosmoi* of humanity and the individual human consciousness. Plato would, I dare to think, agree with Lorde when she says that “there are no new [Ideas]. There are only new ways of making them felt—of examining what those ideas feel like being lived.”<sup>971</sup> The poetic is one such way of making ideas felt, of examining what it is like to actually encounter them in the motion of life.

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<sup>970</sup> Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” 53.

<sup>971</sup> Lorde, “Poetry is not a Luxury,” 39.

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