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On (mis)interpreting Plato's Ion.

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Summary: Plato’s Ion, despite its frail frame and traditionally modest status in the corpus, has given rise to large exegetical claims. Thus some historians of aesthetics, reading it alongside page 205 of the Symposium, have sought to identify in it the seeds of the post-Kantian notion of ‘art’ as non-technical making, and to trace to it the Romantic conception of the poet as a creative genius. Others have argued that, in the Ion, Plato has Socrates assume the existence of a technē of poetry. In this article, these claims are challenged on exegetical and philosophical grounds. To this effect, Plato’s use of poiētēs and poiēsis in the Symposium is analysed, the defining criteria of technē in the Ion and other dialogues are identified and discussed, and the ‘Romantic’ interpretation of the dialogue is traced to Shelley’s tendentious translation of it. These critical developments lead to what is presented as a more faithful reading of the dialogue. In the Ion, it is claimed, Plato seeks to subvert the traditional status of poetry by having Socrates argue that poetry is both non-rational and non-cognitive in nature. In the third part of the article, suggestions are offered as to the contribution made by the Ion to the evolution of Plato’s reflections on poetic composition, and particularly as to the reasons which later induced Plato to substitute the concept of mimesis for that of inspiration in his account of poetry.

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Plato’s Ion is a strange and frustrating piece. It is brief, yet contains repetitions. It is doctrinally slight, yet its influence on subsequent thinking on poetry has been considerable. It makes two apparently simple points, yet it continues to give rise to
conflicting interpretations. It features Socrates in his usual sarcastic mood, yet the sarcasm, as often as not, has gone unnoticed.

Why has this very short Platonic dialogue been so differently received by so many writers and philosophers, some of whom rank amongst the greatest in our tradition? Are there conclusive grounds for preferring one interpretation to others? A full answer to these questions would require a comprehensive survey of the reception and fluctuating fortunes of the dialogue, from Cicero to Jean-Luc Nancy and Christopher Janaway via Ficino, Goethe, Shelley and Heidegger. Fascinating though such a study would be, it would far exceed the scope of the present piece. Selection being therefore unavoidable, I shall focus, by way of an introduction, on what is arguably one of the most significant readings of the Ion to have come out in the last fifty years, Eva Schaper’s in Prelude to Aesthetics (London: 1968).

Schaper’s main concern is with the history of aesthetics. So much is clear from the title of her work. But aesthetics as we know it, namely as a branch of philosophy which deals with clusters of conceptual issues connected with art and the arts, is a modern discipline. At its core is a highly theorised concept of art as an autonomous and intrinsically valuable pursuit. It is far from obvious that Plato and philosophers belonging to the Platonic tradition had a corresponding concept or were even groping their way towards such a concept. ¹ Admittedly, Schaper is well aware of the existence of discrepancies between ancient and modern concepts and expresses concern not to project the present onto the past (p. 11). Yet, her main purpose in Prelude to Aesthetics is to trace the origin of some of the themes and distinctions which later proved central to aesthetics in its post-Baumgarten form. The very nature of her research, therefore, allows her unashamedly to adopt a standpoint
which most historians have to guard against, in so far as she has chosen to survey the past from the vantage point of the present. Interested only in ideas that have survived, she has no immediate reason to chronicle the successive stages of their transformation to their present form. To make good her historical claim, however, she does have to offer detailed exegeses of relevant individual works such as the Ion.

Schaper’s account of the early stages of philosophical thinking about the arts in the tradition of western philosophy proceeds from the general assumption that Plato and Aristotle ‘contributed formative ideas which have since made up a large portion of our common stock of aesthetic notions’ (p. 13). In itself this claim is inoffensive, not to say platitudinous. What is far from inoffensive, however, is the way Schaper construes it. For all the sophistication of the account that she gives of the crucial period between 1770 and 1820, her suggested narrative of the history of western aesthetics starts with an oversimplified presentation of Plato which makes him the ancestor of romantic aesthetics as a whole. This presentation, which is based on her reading of Plato’s own writings and those of his Romantic epigoni and translators, has, so far as I know, remained unchallenged. Indeed, it shows signs of hardening into orthodoxy.

My disagreement with this reading of the Ion prompted me to write the present piece. Yet I do not mean here to be merely adversarial. Criticisms of Schaper’s interpretation of the Ion will lead to arguments in support of what I shall claim to be a more faithful reading of the dialogue. In conclusion, suggestions will be ventured on the contribution made by the Ion to our understanding of the evolution of Plato’s reflections on poetry.
As is the case with a number of Plato’s minor dialogues, the authenticity of the Ion has been questioned in the past. As with all of Plato’s writings, save possibly the Seventh Letter, we can only hope to establish a relative dating with any real accuracy. I shall, however, assume both that the Ion is by Plato, and that it was written before the Republic and, most probably, before the Meno. These two assumptions will be adequate for my current, mainly philosophical, purpose.

I. The Context

Socrates questions Ion, a Homeric rhapsode, on the nature of what I shall cautiously call his ‘occupation’. The rhapsode in question is a brainless performer full of himself. He has just won a prize at a competition and presents himself to Socrates still dressed in the finery that the occasion demands. Under the sly prompting of Socrates, he makes a number of preposterous claims about himself, his ‘occupation’ and his preferred poet, Homer. Not only does he profess to be able to recite, interpret and embellish Homer’s poetry as well as to understand his mind; he also claims competence in all of the many topics broached by Homer in his verse (530b2-d5). The elenchus that follows falls into two parts, separated by an uncharacteristically long speech by Socrates. In the course of the elenchus Socrates exposes the fatuousness of Ion’s hermeneutic claims by showing him that he possesses neither expertise (τέχνη) nor knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) in the many subjects treated by Homer (532c6 and 536c1). In his speech, Socrates widens the scope of the argument to include poetic composition as well as rhapsodic performance. Poetic excellence, he then suggests, is not due to the exercise of any specific cognitive skill
on the part of the poet but to some divine favour or dispensation (θεία μοῖρα). He then utters the following famous lines, which, for a reason soon to be revealed, I here deliberately quote in Shelley’s flowery rendering:

...a Poet is... a thing ethereally light, winged, and sacred, nor can he compose anything worth calling poetry until he becomes inspired, and, as it were, mad, or whilst any reason remains in him. For whilst a man retains any portion of the thing called reason, he is utterly incompetent to produce poetry or to vaticinate.

(534b3-6)

Rhapsodes, too, Socrates continues, share in divine possession although they do so indirectly, through the intermediary of the poet whose verse they interpret. In their case, too, it is divine possession, as opposed to knowledge, which accounts for their ability ‘to speak amply and beautifully’ (542a5). Not for the first time, Ion misses Socrates’ irony; at once bewildered and flattered, he agrees.

II. Schaper’s claims

Schaper makes high claims for this short dialogue.

The Ion, in her view, deserves to be described as ‘a study in aesthetics’ on the ground, so she writes, that Plato ‘specifies for literature something which could be said, in other specific terms, about other arts’ (p. 22, my italics). No doubt it could, and it was. But that happened much later, when literature, music, and the plastic arts began to be viewed as species of an identifiable genus or class called ‘art’. Whether Plato ever conceived of such a class is unclear. What is certain is that he does not do so in the Ion. Indeed, as we shall see presently, a central claim of that
dialogue is that poetry resists classification as a τέχνη, the Greek term that Schaper, in common with many others, translates as art. Poetry is unlike such traditional τέχναι as arithmetic, medicine, painting, and sculpture. The very manner in which Socrates is there made to draw the contrast between what is and what is not a τέχνη, therefore, rules out the possibility that Plato might have conceived the Ion as a dialogue about what we call ‘the arts’, or would have extended to what we call other art forms the claims that he makes about poetry.

Schaper’s second, and main, contention regarding the Ion is that it contains a latent expression of a distinction that was later to assume paramount significance for western aesthetics, the distinction between art and knowledge (p. 21). She reads the Ion as an argument directed at the traditional conception of poetry as a technē, construed as a conjunction of skill and knowledge. From this she infers that it presents the poet as what we, with our modern conception of the artist, would recognise as a creative maker. She writes:

Plato is largely responsible for a gradual dissociation of the technical and creative senses [of poiēsis], since he denied that the poet had technē, meaning skill and knowledge, whilst admitting that he may still practice poiēsis. A stress on the untechnical nature of creative making has become absorbed in our notion of art. (p. 22)

She then claims to discern this very same distinction fully spelled out in the following lines of the Symposium, extracted from Diotima’s encomium of love:

οἶσθ᾽ ὅτι ποίησίς ἐστί τι πολύ· ἡ γάρ τοι ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄμτος εἰς τὸ ὄμτο μέτωπι αἰτία πᾶσά ἐστι ποίησις, ὥστε καὶ αἱ ὑπὸ πάσαις ταῖς τέχναις
ἐργασίαι ποιήσεις εἰσὶ καὶ οἱ τούτων δημιουργοὶ πάντες ποιηταί.

(Symposium, 205b8-c2)

Schaper quotes the passage in Michael Joyce’s popular translation:

You’ll agree that there is more than one kind of poetry (poiēsis) in the true sense of the word - that is to say calling something into existence that was not there before, so that every kind of artistic creation is poetry (poiēsis), and every artist is a poet (poiētēs).

Schaper’s gloss on these lines reads as follows:

poiēsis, which originally meant just making or fabricating, … acquired the overtones of ‘creating’, distinguishing it from other kinds of making, and poiētēs came to stand for the creative artist in general (p. 22).

Consulted without the original to hand and taken out of context, Michael Joyce’s translation, admittedly, would lead anyone interested in the history of aesthetics into thinking that Plato distinguished poets in particular and artists in general from craftsmen of all descriptions. The truth of the matter, however, is that Plato’s text supports neither Joyce’s translation nor Schaper’s gloss. To take the measure of the liberties that Joyce has taken with Plato’s text, compare his translation with the following word for word rendering of the same passage:

You know that poiēsis (making) is a multiple thing. The reason is that a cause for anything at all that comes out of non-being into being is in every case a poiēsis (making), with the result that the activities that fall under all the technai are also poiēseis (makings) and those who produce by engaging in these activities are, all of them, poiētai (makers).
As the passage makes plain, *poiēsis*, in Plato’s usage, can refer to *any* kind of fabrication, composition or creation which brings a new thing (or being) into existence. For Plato, therefore, activities as diverse as the cutting of greaves, the building of bridges and the chiselling of a frieze are as deserving of the name of *poiēsis* as are the writing of verse and the composition of music. That this is so is confirmed when earlier (196e-197b), in his self-conscious and contorted speech, Agathon includes the generation of living things under the heading of *poiēsis*. As for *poiētēs*, it, too, has both a generic and a specific use in Plato’s writings. Used generically, it applies to all kinds of inventors and makers; in the *Euthyphro* (3b2), for instance, it denotes one who invents gods, in the *Republic* (597d2), one who makes beds. Used specifically, as in the *Ion*, *poiētēs* means a maker of poetry. Schaper’s suggestion that Plato restricted *poiētēs* to one species of (creative) writer is therefore belied by the lexical evidence.

Plato’s generic use of *poiētēs* is made abundantly clear in the very lines that Schaper has quoted. Diotima’s reason for mentioning *poiēsis* and *poiētēs* in her speech is to provide a tame analogy in support of her more outlandish and compressed claim regarding the omnipresence of love in human lives. Having first described love as desire for the beautiful, then posited that desire for the beautiful is nothing other than desire for the good, then contended that ‘all human beings wish always to enjoy good things’ (205a6-7), then defined happiness as the ultimate fulfilment of desire, Diotima blithely concludes that all of us, all the time, are ‘lovers’ (204d2-205b2). Not surprisingly, this perplexes Socrates who mildly remarks that her all-encompassing concept of love is at variance with current usage. To allay his doubts, Diotima points to what she sees as an uncontroversial example of discrepancy between meaning as determined by contingent linguistic practices and meaning as
determined by etymology. In current Attic speech, she states, the words *poiēsis* and *poiētēs* are kept for poets although, by virtue of their etymology, they have the much wider meaning of ‘making’ and ‘maker’:

...*poiēsis* includes a large range of things: after all, what causes anything whatever to pass from not being into being is all *poiēsis*, so that the productive activities that belong to all the different kinds of expertise are in fact kinds of *poiēsis*, and their practitioners are all po[i]ets... Nevertheless... they are not called poets, but have other names; one part has been divided off from *poiēsis* as a whole, the part that is concerned with music and verse, and is given the name of the whole. This alone is called *poiēsis*, and those to whom this part of *poiēsis* belongs are called poets. (205b8-c9; tr. Rowe)

In establishing a parallel between *erastēs* and *poiētēs*, Diotima is not made to attach any further significance, aesthetic or other, to the fact that a particular group of makers (*poiētai*), namely those who concern themselves with music and verse, has been divided off from the class of makers as a whole. In so far as Diotima can here be assumed to speak for Plato, her speech provides no evidence whatsoever that at the time of writing the *Symposium* Plato distinguished poetry from other forms of making.

*Pace* Schaper, I conclude, therefore, that the above lines from the *Symposium* (205b8-c2) do not provide evidence for the emergence of the category of ‘art’ in western philosophical aesthetics. They do the exact opposite. They show that although Plato recognised the common-language distinction between poetry and other kinds of making, he chose not to endorse it. Rather than heralding our modern conception of ‘art’ as creation and of the poet as ‘artist’, Diotima’s speech firmly
relegates poetry to the large class of making, and the poet to the ranks of dēmiourgoi.14.

Schaper’s misinterpretation of a particular passage in one of Plato’s dialogues is not as innocuous as it might seem at first sight. It led her to ascribe to Plato a belief in the high value of poetic creativity for which, as will presently be seen, his early works provide no textual evidence. It lent a spurious legitimisation to the extensive use that she makes of the vocabulary of creation in her exegesis of the Ion15. Phrases such as ‘all creative art’, ‘the act of creation’, ‘the activity or practice of the poet/artist’ abound in this chapter of her book. More seriously still, her misinterpretation induced her to expand her opposition between Platonic making and creating into a thesis which would see in Plato’s Ion the ancestor of the romantic conception of the poet:

The specialness of the poet’s inspired mission has been a favourite topic of speculation since [Plato]. The elaborate mythology of the poet as the inspired bard, in touch with the forces on high through intuitive powers totally other than those of the intellect, is a peculiarly Romantic vision of this development. (pp. 35-36)16

In her thesis on the genealogy of the romantic poet, Shaper does not stand alone. Long before she put pen to paper, the Romantics themselves had propagated it. Her plain prose echoes what Shelley was pleased to call the ‘evanescent visitations of thought and feeling’, which he described in a memorable passage:

These and corresponding conditions of being are experienced principally by those of the most delicate sensibility and the most enlarged imagination ...

Poets are not only subject to these experiences as spirits of the most refined
organization, but they can colour all that they combine with the evanescent hues of this ethereal world... Poetry thus makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world; it arrests the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life.17

Although there is no specific mention of Plato in this passage, we must remember that Shelley saw himself as a Platonist. His renderings of the Ion and the Symposium, although they fall far short of our own standards of accuracy, cannot be said to be especially lax by the standards of his time. First published posthumously in 1844 and many times reprinted for the Everyman Library, they long remained the point of entry into Plato for Greekless readers in the English-speaking world. His Defence of Poetry (written in 1821 and published posthumously in 1840), which is replete with references and allusions to Plato and other classical authors, encourages a particular reading of the Ion which, in any case, was thoroughly attuned to the spirit of his age.

Significantly, all quotations from the Ion in Schaper's Prelude to Aesthetics are in Shelley's rendering. She justifies this choice on the ground that, in Shelley's version, some of the points in which she is interested are stated 'in a more forceful way' (pp. 137-38). Presumably to reassure her readers, she adds that Shelley's emphasis on certain points does not jeopardise the accuracy of his translation.

Schaper does not ask herself whether Plato would have recognised his romantic progeny. I shall now attempt to do so for her.
III. Socrates’ main speech (533c9-535a2)

Unlike 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.

Socrates’ main point is simple enough, at least at first sight: it is not knowledge or expertise that enables rhapsodes to excel in their function but some form of divine possession, which comes to them through the mediation of the poet whose verses they chant. Poets, Socrates claims, are the direct recipients of a rare divine gift, which he proceeds to describe metaphorically as the ability to gather honey in the glades of the Muses (534b2). In 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 (katechēsthai18) their soul, they can be assimilated to soothsayers, seers and other hierophants19. 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. Socrates encourages this less than flattering version of his thesis when he claims that, at the time of composition, poets are ‘out of their mind’. They are intoxicated (bakteuein20) and in a state of ecstasy (enthousiazein21).

How seriously are we meant to take this speech? Only half seriously, I submit.
Seriously, in so far as there is no doubt that Plato, at any rate in the dialogues belonging to the middle period, does not invariably dismiss as noxious the manifestations of the non-rational soul in the lives of human beings. In the recantation speech in the *Phaedrus*, as is well-known, he has Socrates speak in praise of the divine madness from which there stem inspired prophecy, the healing power of mystical purificatory rites and poetic frenzy. Even those of a sceptical and rationalistic turn of mind should not dismiss out of hand the powerful arguments put forward by E.R. Dodds and F.M. Cornford in the middle of last century to show that the mature Plato leavened Socrates’ rationalism with mystical beliefs which were probably inherited from a tradition that loosely combined Orphic ideas with elements of Pythagoreanism and shamanism. In Dodds’ words, ‘Plato... cross-fertilised the tradition of Greek rationalism with magico-religious ideas whose remoter origins belong to the northern shamanistic culture.

That may well be. But the story is even more complicated than this remark would suggest. Plato’s near contemporary, Democritus, held views on the role of non-intellectual, non-rational, factors in the genesis of poetry. For all his seemingly crude materialism, Democritus, it seems, had sought to account for poetic excellence by some form of divine afflatus to which poets are receptive by virtue of their extraordinary nature. Of Homer, for instance he had written: ‘Endowed with a god-like nature (φύσις θεαζούσα), Homer crafted (ἐτεκτήνατο) an ordered structure of manifold verse’. The presence of a *hapax legomenon* (θεάζω) in this line can justifiably be taken to constitute an argument in favour of its authenticity. Our source for the quotation, Dio Chrysostomus, adds by way of explanation that: ‘without a divine and daemonic nature, it is impossible to create such beautiful and wise poems’ (DK
From his use of τεκταίνομαι, we may speculate that Democritus held that divine possession needed to be accompanied by some form of technical expertise. But the evidence is too thin to be decisive. What is certain is that some later thinkers considered Democritus to be of one mind with Plato on the subject of the genesis of poetry. So we are told by Cicero: ‘Democritus denies that poets can compose great poetry without divine frenzy. Plato also held this view.’ So we are told again, some two hundred and fifty years later, by Clement of Alexandria: ‘Likewise [i.e. like Plato in Ion 534B] Democritus held that truly beautiful poetry is that which the poet has composed with enthusiasm and divine afflatus (μετ’ ἐνθουσιασμοῦ καὶ ἱεροῦ πνεύματος).’ True, Plato never quotes Democritus, nor even mentions him by name. Yet it is hardly likely that he would have been unacquainted with his older contemporary’s view that divine possession is a source of poetic excellence. We may well suspect, therefore, that Plato meant Socrates’ remarks on furor poeticus to contribute to a pre-existing debate.

Even so, they need not, and should not, be taken entirely at face value. The rapid exchanges which bracket the main speech are laced with Socrates’ usual irony. Compliments are no compliments to those who eagerly assent to them, and Socrates’ questions are no questions to those who take them at face value and earnestly address them. By comparison, Socrates’ main speech, for all its pretty metaphors, is uncharacteristically didactic and ponderous. Yet, once it is realised that Socrates’ tactics consist in taking away with one hand the compliments that he dishes out with the other, the sarcasm becomes apparent.

Consider the seesaw manner in which the argument proceeds.
Socrates first denies that poets possess any specialised cognitive skill (*technē*). But such cognitive lack, we might think, is more than compensated by the divine dispensation (*theia moira*²⁷, *theia dunamis*²⁸ or, later, *katochokē*²⁹) which Socrates supposes poets to receive. On his part, however, this is a backhanded compliment which effectively takes away from poets any credit that one would otherwise have been inclined to give them for their poems. So much indeed is implied by the famous metaphor of the Magnesian stone, which Socrates brings in next. In the same way that an iron ring cannot resist the power of attraction of a nearby magnet, so poets cannot choose whether or not to become conduits of the gods. Being entirely passive in that respect, poets are not responsible for what they write and do not, therefore, deserve praise for it.³⁰ As Socrates explicitly concludes at the end of his speech: ‘Fine poems are not human or the work of men, but divine and the work of gods’³¹.

Socrates next describes poets as ‘full of god’ (*entheoi*³²) and puts them on a par with Corybantes. However, this is no unmitigated eulogy, at least if we are to judge from the attitude expressed, much later, in the *Laws*, where the Corybantic state, frenzied and intoxicated, is described as a pathological condition³³. Socrates’ repeated description of poets in the *Ion* as *ekphrones* and *ouk emphrones*³⁴ (‘senseless’ or ‘not in their right mind’) shows that, in his view, inspiration comes at the price of the temporary loss of one’s rational and cognitive faculties. As he says in the *Apology* and the *Meno*, poets do not know what they are talking about³⁵ and cannot, therefore, account for whatever words of wisdom might be contained in their poems. Far from being creative geniuses, as the Romantics would have it, poets, in the *Ion*, are no more than passive and irrational mouthpieces of the gods. We are never told
precisely which god is responsible for the inspiration of poets. While the mention of Corybantes would appear to suggest Dionysus, the reference, later in the speech, to Tynnicus’ paean, as well as the repeated allusions to the mediatory role of the Muses, tip the balance in favour of Apollo.

Socrates soon builds up this point into a theory. Having presented theia moira as a factor that effectively alienates a poet from his nous, he now suggests that it alone can account for poetic excellence: ‘a poet… cannot compose poetry until he has become possessed by the god and rendered senseless so that his mind is no longer in him’\textsuperscript{36}. What is more, so Socrates asserts, the god wants us, the poet’s audience, to be aware of the divine origin of the poems we love. Indeed, it is to bring out (ἐνδεικνύναι) this very point that ‘the god has deliberately sung the finest of songs through the meanest of poets’\textsuperscript{37}. These Socratic claims authorise two inferences. First, fine poems are divine gifts presented to poets when their reason is dormant, viz. when they are no longer themselves\textsuperscript{38}. Secondly, in the intervals between the Muse’s inspiring interventions, the poet reverts to his everyday, unremarkable, persona. As a proof (tekmerion), Socrates takes the example of the poet Tynnicus. Although for the most part a poetaster (phaulotatos), Tynnicus was once in his life favoured by the Muse’s capricious attention. As a result, he wrote the one paean that everyone remembers. Lucky for Tynnicus, one might say. Yet, as he himself recognised, this poem was literally ‘a godsend’ (heurēma ti Moisian, 534e1). It is, therefore, only in a manner of speaking that he himself can be said to be its author.

Can we see in Plato’s appeal to the divine in the form of theia moira an allusion to Democritus’ physis theazousa? Possibly so, but in that case we must recognise a crucial difference between the two philosophers. While Democritus’ poet
is supremely and uniquely gifted, Plato’s is merely the recipient of rare good luck. Whatever Kant and the Romantics may have drawn from Plato’s account of poetry, it certainly was not their concept of genius. Indeed, to be a genius, or to be endowed with a god-like nature, are innate and permanent conditions. As he is presented in the Ion, by contrast, Plato’s poet can achieve greatness only intermittently and through the agency of some divine being. True, he is described as a κοῦφον γὰρ χρῆμα... καὶ πτηνὸν καὶ ἱερόν (534b3-4), but that description has to be taken in context. Being κοῦφος (light, unsubstantial), the poet can easily become a channel for the god. Being πτηνὸς (winged), he can fly around and, like bees, gather honey (alias poems) in the glades of the Muses (alias the true authors of these poems). Being thus suited by nature and temperament to the function of vessel for higher beings, it is only vicariously that the poet can be described as ἱερὸς (hallowed). Taken together, these characteristics make him a strange phenomenon (χρῆμα). Plato’s irony may, in this instance, be gentle, but it still bites.

IV. When is a τέχνη not a τέχνη?

Tynnichus’ one fine paean, let us remember, does not constitute the whole of his oeuvre. His non-inspired poems, one readily infers, were composed entirely from his own, unaided, resources. The fact that they were poems nonetheless, i.e. pieces of writing composed in accordance with formal principles of versification and rhyme schemes, would appear to justify the further assumption that they testified to some mundane form of poetic competence on his part. Such an assumption would be plausible enough, not to say natural. Ficino and Bekker had made it long ago, as
well as, most probably, Shelley. In its support, both Ficino and Bekker had invoked the following well-known passage from the *Phaedrus*:

... if any man come to the gates of poetry without the madness of the Muses, persuaded that skill [*technē*] alone will make him a good poet, then shall he and his works of sanity with him be brought to naught by the poetry of madness (245a5-8).

Going slightly further than these commentators, one might be tempted to draw from these lines an embryonic theory of artistic creation. Christopher Janaway does so. In the above lines, he claims, Plato makes the achievement of poetic excellence conditional upon both technical competence and divine inspiration. While a poet needs to have mastered the *technē* of versification in order to write formally correct poems, he cannot rise above the commonplace without the addition of a touch of divine madness. Having once read these two conditions in the *Phaedrus*, the temptation is great to project them, proleptically, on to the *Ion*.

Admittedly, Janaway is well aware of the risks involved in using one Platonic dialogue to explain another. Furthermore he mostly refrains from using the vocabulary of necessary and sufficient conditions in his interpretation of the *Ion*. Yet, by reading in that dialogue a distinction between the poetically fine and the merely technically competent, he comes close to aligning its main thesis to the lines 245a5-8 of the *Phaedrus*. As he wrote in 1992:

...as regards the rhapsode as performer and as regards the poet, it is specifically the fineness of their output that cannot be explained by way of *tekhnē*... Plato genuinely assumes the existence of poetic and rhapsodic *tekhnai*.46
And again in 1995:

He [Plato] does not deny the common-sense view that being a poet or rhapsode is a form of craft or expertise. It is merely that whatever teachable, learnable expertise a poet or rhapsode may command is not the true source of the beauty of good poetry or good rhapsody, not the basis of artistic success (as we would call it). Seen in this way, the Ion becomes a less puzzling work.\textsuperscript{47}

Unlike Janaway, I regard the Ion as a highly puzzling work. I suspect that Plato intended it to be puzzling. If so, we would be doing him no favour by taming his message. My main reason for resisting Janaway’s reading, however, is not that it is tame, but that it lacks firm grounding in the text. The weight of textual evidence, as I shall now argue, goes against Janaway’s suggestion that, in the Ion, Plato genuinely assumes the existence of a technē of poetry. For reasons of space, I shall not address the parallel question of the technē of rhapsody.\textsuperscript{48}

The phrase ποιητικὴ τέχνη does not occur as such in our dialogue. It is, in fact, rare in Plato: only once in the whole corpus does it refer to competence in versification.\textsuperscript{49} What does occur in the Ion, however, is ποιητική, but unattached to any noun. In 532c8-9, Ion explains that his critical skills are limited to Homer, the greatest of all poets. Socrates retorts that this only goes to show that Ion is incapable of discoursing on any aspect of poetry ‘with art and knowledge’ (τέχνη καὶ ἐπιστήμη). Indeed, he claims, not only do poets all tend to write on the same subjects, but also the critical ability to judge of the best entails ability to judge of the worse. A competent critic, therefore, can exercise his skill over the whole range of poetry.
Socrates rounds off the point by saying in 532c8-9: ποιητικὴ γὰρ ποῦ ἐστιν τὸ ὅλον. ἢ οὔ.

The syntax of this sentence is unclear. Is ποιητικὴ the subject or the complement of ἐστιν? Is ἐστιν in this instance used quasi-im impersonally and τὸ ὅλον adverbially? As a result of these uncertainties, the line can be, and has been, translated in three different ways. Some translators take their cue from the immediate context, which includes, in 532d1-2, καὶ ἄλλη τέχνη ἠντιουν (‘any other technē whatever’), as well as, in 532e4-5, a parallel wording, γραφικὴ γὰρ τίς ἐστι τέχνη τὸ ὅλον: (there is, isn’t there, an art of painting as a whole’). Reading ποιητικὴ as short for ποιητικὴ τέχνη, they translate: ‘there is an art of poetry, I take it, as a whole, is there not?’50. Other translators, mindful, presumably, of the grammatical rule that predicates seldom take the article51, make τὸ ὅλον into the subject of the sentence, and render the line as: ‘I suppose that the whole thing is poetry’52. Yet others, unconcerned, presumably, with grammar, but mindful of the fact that Plato sometimes uses ποιητικὴ for poetry53, translate: ‘Poetry is a whole, isn’t it?’54 Who is right? The first translation has both context and grammar on its side. It has the further advantage of allowing for the possibility that, in this instance, τὸ ὅλον is used adverbially.55 Therefore, and notwithstanding the rarity of the phrase ποιητικὴ τέχνη in Plato, I adopt it.

What, then, does 532c8-9, so interpreted, tell us of Plato’s conception of this putative ποιητικὴ τέχνη at the time of writing the Ion? The answer is: ‘very little’. Socrates posits hypothetically that poetry is one single technē and denies, therefore, that there could be separate technai corresponding to each poet (e.g., a technē of
Homer, a technē of Hesiod etc.) If poetry were a technē, then its principles would be applicable across the whole field of poetry. Socrates does not say any more than this. He does not commit himself to the existence of such a technē and leaves its nature otherwise undefined. Most significantly, he fails to specify the competencies that it would bring into play. No doubt, one reason for Socrates’ reticence is that, at this particular stage of the elenchus, he does not need to be more specific. To impress upon Ion the fatuousness of his exegetical pretensions, all Socrates has to do is to appeal to views that Ion himself – as well, presumably, as those listening to the conversation – holds. One such conception is that poetry is a single field. Another is that poetry is a technē. The wide currency of these assumptions accounts for the rhetorical nature of Socrates’ question: ‘there is an art of poetry, I take it, as a whole, is there not?’

Does Socrates mean these assumptions to go unchallenged? Does he himself view poetry as a technē? For an answer to these questions, one needs briefly to turn to Plato’s generic conception of technē.

Considerations about contemporary Athenian politics lead Socrates, in the opening pages of the Protagoras, to assert that virtue is unlike matters of specialist expertise (τέχνη) such as painting, flute playing and shipbuilding. Whatever is not a matter of specialist expertise, he then suggests, cannot be taught. Virtue, therefore, is not teachable (318b-320a). In the concluding pages of this confusing dialogue, Socrates defines virtue as knowledge (ἐπιστήμη). From this he infers that virtue, like all forms of knowledge, is teachable (361b). Unfortunately, Socrates does not, at that point, specify either by whom or how virtue might be taught. This omission
notwithstanding, the two opposing arguments are sufficiently developed to yield Plato’s conception of teaching in the *Protagoras*. Teaching consists in imparting precepts, rules or principles rather than in leading by example. Only what is generalisable, such as specialised expertise or knowledge, therefore, can be taught.

Two additional criteria of *technē* are spelled out in the *Gorgias*. Socrates, who is there featured at his most belligerent against the Sophists, makes a distinction between *technai* properly so-called, such as medicine, and pseudo-*technai* or *empeiriai*, such as pastry baking. To warrant the status of *technē*, he argues, a practice must be both amenable to a rational account and justifiable in terms of the good of its object or recipient. An *empeiria*, by contrast, is not informed either by rationally evolved principles on the nature of its practice, or by a concern for what is best. Its main aim is to please its recipient or customer. To the extent that it operates by guesswork or rules of thumb, an *empeiria* is no more than a mere knack. Applying this distinction to rhetoric, Socrates claims that, in the hands of the Sophists, rhetoric is not a genuine *technē* but an *eidōlon* (phantom) of a *technē*, a mere knack whose overriding aim is to flatter the crowd. Subsequently Socrates extends to poetry his condemnation of rhetoric. Poets, like rhetors, he argues, use language to gratify their audience, without giving thought to the moral effects of their words. No more than rhetoric, Socrates thus implies in the *Gorgias*, is poetry a *technē*.

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates is less dismissive of rhetoric. Although it is often no more than a mere game or pastime (*tribē*), rhetoric might, he now concedes, achieve the status of *technē*. To do so, it must be accompanied by knowledge (as opposed to opinion) and be informed by a concern for truth (as opposed to verisimilitude). Such knowledge and truth must pertain both to the nature of what is to be persuaded, i.e.
the human soul, as well as to the topic on which the user of rhetoric speaks. Whenever it becomes a technē, Socrates concludes, rhetoric shades into dialectic or philosophy.

From the evidence of these three dialogues, we may infer that an activity ranks as a technē if: (1) it aims at truth; (2) it embodies general principles on the nature of its subject-matter or defining activity; (3) it derives from such principles standards of excellence; (4) it is concerned with the good of its object or recipient; (5) it can give a rational account of itself; and (6) it can be imparted by teaching. In Plato’s usage, therefore, technē is a success word, which can only denote a rational and cognitive activity. As such, it is semantically close to epistēmē and sophia.

As will presently be seen, the concept of technē is more richly developed in the Ion than might have been expected from a dialogue of that size and relative date. To begin with, it meets three of the above criteria. A technē, Socrates repeatedly tells Ion, is a sphere of cognitive activity based on rules and principles which any competent practitioner should be able to extrapolate (criterion no. 2). What is more, such principles yield criteria by means of which the merit of the products or characteristic activities of a technē can be appraised (criterion no. 3). Lastly, to the extent that the inspired poet of Socrates’ main speech is described as incapable of giving a rational account of his activity, we may infer that criterion no. 5 above is implicitly present in the Ion.

To these standard criteria of Platonic technē, Socrates, in the Ion, adds an extra one, viz. that each technē has an object that is exclusive to itself. He begins by stating that each technē has an identifiable specialised field: ‘… to each technē a god has
assigned the knowledge of a particular subject matter’ (537c5-6). The knowledge
provided by a particular technē, he further specifies, cannot be supplied by any other:
‘...it is so with all the technai, that what we know by any one of them, we cannot
know by another’ (537d1-2). From these two propositions conjoined, it follows that
the same subject matter - or the same subject matter under the same aspect - cannot
be known by any other technē than the one whose own specialised object it is. This
particular criterion, which will reappear, in one form or another, in later dialogues, is
the motor that drives the elenchus, both at the beginning and at the close of the
dialogue.

Strong commitment to this criterion accounts for the fact that Socrates makes
no epistemic distinction between first-order applications and second-order exercises
of the principles of a technē. Any second-order discourse, such as that of the critic’s,
or the teacher’s, which takes the exercise of a particular technē as its intentional
object, he asserts, must be informed by mastery of the technē in question. Failure to
comply with this condition renders critical discourse incompetent. Hence, for
Socrates, to be a critic of a particular technē does not consist in possessing a separate,
additional, technē but in engaging in the critical evaluation of the products of a
sphere of activity of which one is oneself, at other times, a practitioner. Pace Ion,
therefore, the general’s competence in hortatory rhetoric far exceeds the rhapsode’s.
Pace Ion, the charioteer is better qualified than the rhapsode to evaluate Homer’s
descriptions of the technē of chariot-driving.

In the hands of Socrates, this criterion is a deadly weapon. It brings to naught
Ion’s exegetical pretensions. It removes criticism, literary and other, from the ranks
of cognitive activities. Worse even, in so far as Socrates’ objections against rhapsody
apply also to poetry, it threatens the traditional status of poetry as a technē. Indeed, if lack of technē impairs the rhapsode’s ability to comment on Homer’s verses, we are encouraged to infer that it also impairs Homer’s ability to write them. If the charioteer is better qualified than the rhapsode to appraise Homer’s descriptions of chariot-driving, then perhaps he would also have been better qualified than Homer to write them. As the simile of the Magnesian stone suggests, the rhapsode’s ineptitude mirrors the poet’s own. Must we conclude, then, that, in Socrates’s eyes, Homer is a fraud, just as Ion is a fraud? To the extent that the poet writes of the traditional technai of chariot-driving, medicine, spinning, sea-faring etc., the answer would appear to be ‘yes’.

Such a nakedly counter-intuitive conclusion, however, would not be in keeping with the enigmatic tenor of the Ion. In fact, Plato has Socrates qualify this conclusion in advance of its being drawn, by offering an explanation as to why we love poetry and are in awe of poets. This is the purpose of the main speech. As we saw, Socrates’ explanation is ambiguous. As we shall see, it explains little. But it makes one claim about poetic inspiration that is often overlooked. Each Muse, says Socrates, has her clients: to one, the epic poet, to another, the praise singer etc. Socrates goes as far as suggesting that the relationship between the Muse and her clients is exclusive, and that it tends to be for life. Which is but another way of saying that, contrary to the popular assumption that he had used in 532c8-9 (‘there is an art of poetry, I take it, as a whole, is there not?’), poetry is not one single field. It does not embody general principles which its practitioners, the poets, can extrapolate and apply to poetic genres other than their own. Since the main speech is the most likely part of the dialogue to convey Plato’s own views, I conclude that, at the time of writing the Ion, he meant to challenge the traditional status of poetry as a technē. Pace
Janaway, therefore, I conclude that Socrates’ single (probable) mention of such a technē in 532c8-9 is best interpreted as a tactical, as opposed to a sincere, assumption.

It may here be objected that at no point in the main speech does Socrates explicitly deny the existence of a poetic technē. Failure to deny that something exists, it might be said, is compatible with assuming that it does exist. From Socrates’ total silence on the nature of this putative technē of poetry, however, it seems to me more likely that Plato intended to raise serious doubts in our minds concerning its existence. Admittedly, this, too, is an argument ex silentio. But the central role played by the concept of technē in the Ion confers on this particular argument from silence an authority rarely enjoyed by arguments of its kind.

In any case, what would the ποιητικὴ τέχνη of popular assumption include? Presumably, it would include knowledge of the metres of lyrical, epic, elegiac etc. poetry, as well as the ability to use them correctly and appropriately. Whether poets, at the time, could gain such expertise independently of being actively engaged in the writing of poetry, is doubtful. There does not appear to have been, at the time, a tradition of theoretical reflection on metre, corresponding to the study of harmonics then already undertaken by Aristoxenus of Tarentum’s predecessors. More to the point is the fact that knowledge of the principles and rules of metre, however obtained, could not, on its own, guarantee the excellence of its applications. This obvious point, which Plato was to make in the Phaedrus, and which provides Janaway with his main argument, has an implication that is neither obvious nor favourable to his overall interpretation of the Ion. For it shows that poetry differs from the technai of Plato’s standard list in the following, highly significant, respect.
Possession of any standard Platonic technē suffices to empower its practitioner. The doctor’s mastery of the technē of medicine, for instance, ensures that, in normal circumstances, patients will benefit from his ministrations. The charioteer’s mastery of his own technē suffices to ensure that, other things being equal, his horses will complete the race in good time or reach their intended destination. As the case of Tynnichus suggests, expertise in metrical matters, by contrast, even if it were to be dignified with the name of technē, would not be similarly empowering. Indeed, in judging the merit of poetry for the most part by non-cognitive criteria, we effectively recognise the fact that poetry is not a bona fide technē in the Platonic sense of the word. The technical expertise involved in the writing of poetry simply does not yield the criteria by which the worth of its products can be assessed. And it is precisely because technical expertise plays an ancillary role in the writing of poetry that Plato’s Socrates can argue that poets are incapable of doing what the practitioners of uncontroverted techmai do as a matter of course, i.e. give a rational account of their practice. From this we may infer that he would have denied that good writing is teachable.

Poetry, therefore, fails to meet the criteria of Platonic technē. For all the high value that we ascribe to it, poetry consists in the disenfranchisement of knowledge and reason. Because he was concerned to contain such forces, Plato distrusted poetry. Among the various ways in which he expresses this distrust in the Ion is the denial of the status of technē to poetry.

V. The condition of being inspired (entheos)
Why has Plato’s anti-poetry stance in the Ion so often been missed, even by serious historians of aesthetics? One reason could be that the modern concept of inspiration is not a good match for the Greek entheos. Unlike entheos, the English epithet ‘inspired’ tends to be used only to describe the impulse to artistic creation. Even in this narrower context, it is equivocal since it carries no indication as to whether the source of inspiration is to be located inside or outside the artist’s mind.

The idealist aesthetician R.G. Collingwood who, in broadly Platonic fashion, conceived art as non-technical making, neatly uncovered the ambiguity of the modern concept of inspiration. On one interpretation of the term, he wrote in 1938, ‘the artist’s activity is controlled by some divine or at least spiritual being that uses him as his mouthpiece’. On another interpretation, as typically exemplified in the works of Freud and Jung, the artist’s work is conceived of as ‘controlled by forces which, though part of himself and specifically part of his mind, are not voluntary and are not conscious, but work in some mental cellar unseen and unbidden by the dwellers in the house above.’ Clearly, in the Ion at least, Plato conceives of the condition of being entheos in the first of Collingwood’s two senses. Ascribing poetic production to divine intervention, he denies that it could be conscious and deliberate, and argues that poets were therefore not responsible for their productions. This particular concept of inspiration has long been out of favour with poets and philosophers alike. Nietzsche, who claimed familiarity with this kind of inspiration, relished the thought that no one else in his time did. Invocations to the muse, therefore, have become an antiquated and toothless metaphor. As such, they are compatible with a view that works of art are the deliberate and responsible creations of their authors. Indeed, by a curious paradox, modern poets who invoke their Muse are understood to be making a self-conscious appeal to their own poetic
power. As for the second view of inspiration distinguished by Collingwood, it, too, is now largely discredited; it is hardly ever invoked aetiological, as a causal force. Both conceptions, as Collingwood recognised, are philosophically useless.

When used by Plato in the Ion, entheos was far from the toothless metaphor that it has become for us. It had descriptive force. It alluded to traditional invocations to the Muse, such as Hesiod’s in the Theogony (22-34). Yet, at the same time, Socrates’ sarcasm had already begun to load entheos with derogatory connotations and thus to make it ambiguous. As the Pythian priestess is not responsible for the oracles that she renders, Socrates intimates, so poets are not the authors of what we call ‘their’ poems. Unless one bears in mind the differences between Plato’s concept of inspiration and our own, one is liable to misunderstand the Ion.

VI. Shelley’s Cloudy Platonism

Shelley proves to be a case in point. His concept of inspiration evinces the ambiguity noted by Collingwood. On the one hand, traces of Plato’s passive concept of poetic inspiration can be detected in A Defence of Poetry. The poetic impulse, for example, is there ascribed to ‘the interpenetration of a diviner nature through our own’. On the other hand, as the following famous lines show, Shelley did not consistently view poetic inspiration as a gift from some outside agency:

... the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness: this power arises from within.
Presumably because Shelley located the creative impulse within the poet’s own unconscious, he conceived it as unpredictable. As he wrote, 

Poetry… is not subject to the control [sic] of the active powers of the mind, … its birth and recurrence has no necessary connexion with consciousness or will.\textsuperscript{72}

This view did not prevent him from extolling the high cognitive value of poetry. Indeed, he deemed it to be: 

... at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and to which all science must be referred.\textsuperscript{73}

It was perhaps unsurprising that Shelley should bring his own views on poetic inspiration to his translation of Plato’s \textit{Ion}. Unsurprising, but unfortunate. Take the following crucial lines in Socrates’ speech:

\begin{verbatim}
άτε οὖν οὐ τέχνη ποιοῦντες καὶ ποιλλὰ λέγοντες καὶ καλὰ περὶ
tὸν πραγμάτων, ὃςπερ σὺ περὶ Ὅμηρου, ἀλλὰ θείᾳ μοίρᾳ,
tοῦτο μόνον οἶς τε ἐκαστὸς ποιεῖν καλὰς ἐφ᾽ ὁ ἡ Μοῦσα
αὐτὸν ὄρμησεν, ὁ μὲν διθυράμβους, ὁ δὲ ἐγκώμια, ὁ δὲ
ὑπορχήματα, ὁ δ’ ἐπη, ὁ δ’ ἰάμβους. (534b7-c4)
\end{verbatim}

Shelley translates:

Thus, those who declaim various and beautiful poetry upon any subject, as for instance upon Homer, are not enabled to do so by art or study; but every rhapsodist or poet, whether dithyrambic, encomiastic, choral, epic, or iambic, is excellent \textit{in proportion to the extent of his participation} in the divine influence, \textit{and the degree in which} the muse itself has descended on him. In other respects, poets may be sufficiently ignorant or incapable. (My italics)
Coming from Shelley, this clumsy bit of prose should already have put us on our guard. Much worse is the fact that the translation is unacceptably ‘dynamic’. To see how it is so, compare it with the following word for word rendering of the passage:

Therefore, as it is not by technē that, when dealing with their various subjects, they make and speak the many fine things that they do, as is so with you when you are dealing with Homer, but as a result of a divine dispensation, it follows that each one of them is capable of succeeding in only the one thing that the Muse has impelled him to, one dithyrambic poetry, another encomia, another choral poetry, another epic, and another iambic verse. In other genres each of them is useless.

As can be seen from my italics, Shelley has introduced into Plato’s first sentence three qualifying conditions as well as one noun, i.e. ‘participation’. Why has he done so? While we can only speculate on the translator’s reasons for so changing his author’s text, it is tempting to suggest that his aim was to bring it into line with the reality of poetic composition, as he saw it. Inspiration, Shelley knew, is by nature intermittent and admits of degrees. To the degree of a poet’s inspiration, he thought, corresponds the degree of excellence of his poem. As he was well aware, poets can, and occasionally do, write when inspiration is weak. Admittedly, the resulting poems are often mediocre. Yet, for all their mediocrity, they are poems nonetheless. To express this point, he tacked qualifying expressions on to the end of Plato’s sentence. As for his addition of ‘participation’, it has the effect of encouraging the reader of his translation to think that, in Plato’s view, fine poems result from collaboration between Muse and poet. Or, as Janaway would suggest a century and a half later, the verses themselves are the poet’s handiwork, but the beauty is the Muse’s own contribution.
Shelley’s little additions have the effect of taking the sting out of Socrates’ speech. For, as we saw earlier, Socrates’ notion of inspiration is stark and simple: it is the possession of the poet by a divinity. The problem of how to account for less inspired poems, or non-inspired ones, as penned by the likes of Tynnichus, is simply not addressed in the *Ion*.

Classicists may well raise their fastidious eyebrows at Shelley’s creative way with translation, but Shelley scholars have long known him to be an unreliable guide to Plato. Thus Simon Hayes:

Shelley often seems unaware… of the Socratic irony in Plato’s dialogues… he understands Socrates’ characterisation of the poet in the *Ion* as a passionate defence, rather than as a sly and magnificent subversion.74

As for aestheticians, they tend to take Shelley too seriously. Drawing on Shelley’s theoretical writings for the Romantic conception of the artist, Schaper, for example, also used his translation of the *Ion* as supporting evidence for her historical claim that Plato is the ancestor of that conception. What is wrong with her argument is not that it is circular; not all circular arguments are vicious. In this particular case, the popularity of Shelley’s rendering, which partly explains why the Romantic conception continued to find favour with the general public after poets themselves had rejected it, goes some way to justifying Shaper’s strategy. Where she erred was in not checking the translation. Had she done so, she would have realised that the author of the *Ion* would not have recognised the progeny that she ascribes to him.

Let us briefly recapitulate the evidence. Plato’s poet, far from being a creative artist, is denied the authorship of his poems. Far from being hailed as a genius, he is
given no praise for the fineness of his poems. Far from being a person of the ‘most delicate sensibility and the most enlarged imagination’75, he is some kind of frenzied and uncontrolled hierophant. Instead of soaring above the everydayness of rule-following practices, he is not said even reliably to engage in them. Whenever he utters profound truths, he does so unwittingly76.

True, he is favoured with *theia moira*. Ion was satisfied with that sop. Should he have been?

VII. *Theia Moira: Socrates and A.E. Housman*

*Theia moira* is infrequent in ancient Greek. Plato is one of its heavier users, yet even he does not use it much. Of its twelve occurrences in the undisputed dialogues, five are in the *Ion*, one in the *Apology* and the *Phaedo* respectively, two in the *Meno*, one in the *Phaedrus*, and two in the *Laws*.77 Its reference is uniformly indeterminate: we are never told which god, or gods, dispenses the favour in question.78 Whether or not for this reason, as I shall now argue, the phrase in itself carries minimal explanatory power.

In the *Meno*, most characteristically, Socrates uses *theia moira* to account for the fact that some people can, through right opinion, advise others in practical matters. Since right opinion cannot be taught, Socrates suggests that it comes by divine dispensation, which is but another way of saying that it is unaccountable. In the *Ion*, too, the phrase is no more than elegant camouflage for the dearth of
explanation. While encapsulating an oblique allusion to traditional invocations to
the Muse, it suggests that the poetic impulse is mysterious, and that its outcome can
be no more than a chance happening, unpredictable, unrepeatable and therefore
unteachable. As David Melling wryly notes, ‘divine inspiration de-mythologized is
serendipity’79. Plato’s Socrates’ view is that poems come from a source that is other
than the poet’s intellect and reason. He makes this point in two ways. In his
flattering mode, he ascribes the charm or power of poetry to some extra-human
source, such as divine dispensation. In his unflattering mode, he takes a reductivist
stance and describes poems as manifestations of mental imbalance, if not madness.
In neither case does the explanans adequately account for the explanandum.

The explanatory vacuity of theia moira is well brought out in a modern text
whose author could hardly be suspected of Platonic sympathies, i.e. The Name and
Nature of Poetry80 by A. E. Housman. In this famous lecture, the author of The
Shropshire Lad, who was also the editor of Manilius, outlines his views on the nature
of poetry, passes value judgments on different epochs of English poetry, and
describes his own practice as a poet. His observations present unexpected
similarities with Socrates’ own in the Ion. Whether these similarities were intended
as such is doubtful. What, on the other hand, seems likely is that Housman’s own
theoretical leanings predisposed him to find some of Socrates’ views on poetry
highly congenial. 81

Housman begins by marshalling a vigorous argument to show that prose and
poetry differ in nature and aim. Prose should be ‘a trustworthy implement for
accurate thinking and the serious pursuit of truth’ (p. 18). Poetry, by contrast, ‘is not
the thing said but a way of saying it’ (p. 37); as such, it should have no other end
than itself. Failure to respect this disparity, so Housman contends, marred most eighteenth century poetry. Housman expressed his anti-intellectualist conception of poetry in a number of ways, some of which echo Socrates’ own contentions in the *Ion*. Thus Housman dismissed most literary criticism as mere flummery. In the *Ion*, Socrates challenged the pretension of literary criticism to be a *technē*. Later, in the *Protagoras*, he was to deride those sophists who posed as literary critics. Housman’s appeal to a mechanical metaphor to express the view that the function of poetry is ‘not to transmit thought but to set up in the reader’s sense a vibration corresponding to what was felt by the writer’ (p. 12) is reminiscent of Socrates’ use of the Magnesian stone analogy to make a similar point. As for Housman’s description of poetry as a secretion, probably of a ‘morbid’ kind, it can be read as a tame version of Socrates’ more outlandish comparison of poets with Bacchants and Corybantes.

The Platonic echo rings even clearer in the remarks with which Housman concludes his lecture. Switching to the autobiographical register, he now describes his own experience of poetic inspiration:

Having drunk a pint of beer at luncheon – beer is a sedative to the brain, and my afternoons are the least intellectual portion of my life – I would go out for a walk of two or three hours. As I went along, thinking of nothing in particular, only looking at things around me and following the progress of the seasons, there would flow into my mind, with sudden and unaccountable emotion, sometimes a line or two of verse, sometimes a whole stanza at once, accompanied, not preceded, by a vague notion of the poem which they were destined to form part of. Then there would usually be a lull of an hour or so, then perhaps the spring would bubble up again. I say bubble up, because, so far as I could make out, the source of the suggestions thus proffered to the
brain was an abyss which I have already had occasion to mention, the pit of the stomach. When I got home I wrote them down, leaving gaps, and hoping that further inspiration might be forthcoming another day. Sometimes it was, if I took my walks in a receptive and expectant frame of mind; but sometimes the poem had to be taken in hand and completed by the brain, which was apt to be a matter of trouble and anxiety, involving trial and disappointment, and sometimes ending in failure. I happen to remember distinctly the genesis of the piece which stands last in my first volume. Two of the stanzas, I do not say which, came into my head, just as they are printed, just as I was crossing the corner of Hampstead Heath between Spaniard’s Inn and the footpath to Temple Fortune. A third stanza came with a little coaxing after tea. One more was needed, but it did not come: I had to turn to and compose it myself, and that was a laborious business. I wrote it thirteen times, and it was more than a twelvemonth before I got it right.

A down to earth Englishman who was also a fine poet, Housman talks - is it disparagingly? - of beer, the suspension of intellectual activities, aimless reverie in the countryside, and the pit of the stomach. Plato’s Socrates, seemingly more deferential, had invoked divine possession. Yet, once Socrates’ speech is divested of its mythological trappings, reduced in scope and translated into everyday speech, its central contention on inspiration bears a striking resemblance to Housman’s own in his concluding remarks. Both describe the process of poetic composition as non-rational. Both suggest that it originates outside the self. Both use inspiration to account for the beauty and power of poetry. Socrates construes inspiration as a numinously charged experience which takes the poet unawares. Housman, who is less theoretically inclined, likens it to a spring that bubbles up when the intellect is
quiescent. Whether a poet sets out to compose or not, they agree, depends mostly on forces and factors outside his control. What precisely these forces and factors are, neither really professes to know.

At this point a significant difference emerges between Plato’s Socrates and Housman. While Housman is content to leave the process of poetic composition unexplained, Socrates is not. While Housman appears to value inspiration all the more for being non-rational and adventitious, Socrates values it less. Having made the same central descriptive claim, Plato’s Socrates and Housman therefore adopt opposing evaluative attitudes to it.

VIII. After the Ion

Despite its frail frame and traditionally modest status in the corpus, Plato’s Ion has given rise to large exegetical claims. In deflating some of these claims, I hope to have contributed to the clarification of a small corner of the history of Platonism. Thus I have argued 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. If some, such as Schaper, could claim that he was, it is because they allowed themselves to be misled by Shelley’s translation and interpretation of the dialogue. Far from presenting creativity as the poet’s defining feature, or so I have argued, Plato in the Ion has Socrates defend the view that poets are amanuenses for whatever numinous force happens to move them at the time. The contention that Plato introduced into western aesthetics the demarcation between creative activities, such
as poetry, and all forms of technical making, I have made bold to claim, is based on a
demonstrably erroneous reading of a page of the Symposium (205b).

Even relatively minor mistranslations can have disproportionately large
theoretical effects. So much has been confirmed in the foregoing pages. These pages,
however, have not merely provided an object lesson for philosophers on the risks
involved in using translations without first checking their credentials. They have
also yielded more positive outcomes. By contributing to ongoing discussions on the
nature of Plato’s early reflections on poetry, they have brought to light some of the
similarities and differences that obtain between ancient and modern concepts of
inspiration. That conclusion allows us to ask one final, and crucial, question: why
did Plato, later in life, replace *theia moira* by *mimēsis* in his account of the poetic
process?

That Plato was puzzled by, and distrustful of, poetry is obvious from the text
of the Ion. He did not think that *theia moira* could adequately account for either the
poetic impulse or the execution of its product. So much is clear from the ironic way
in which, as we saw, he had Socrates handle this notion. That he should later have
sought to replace it by a more robust explanation is therefore unsurprising. But a
further, less immediately obvious, reason for the replacement of *theia moira* by
*mimēsis*, it seems to me, is already embryonic in Socrates’ description of poets as
conduits for the divine afflatus. If poets are not fully and properly authorial, then it
makes no sense to enlist them in the service of the state, as Plato will do in the third
book of the Republic, by giving them directives as to what, and how, they should
write. We can well see why the view of the poet as passive, irrational and
uninformed about the subject matters on which he writes is incompatible with the
moral and social responsibility that Plato later wanted to place on him. Conversely, to blame poets for being content to reproduce appearances and thereby to propagate moral falsehoods, as Plato will do in book X of the Republic, implies that they could avoid doing so. Again, Plato’s new conclusion is incompatible with the Ion. As we saw, the frenzied bards whom Socrates describes in the Ion as dependent upon the capricious bounty of theia moira are not fit to bear moral responsibilities. Indeed, do they not often achieve their effects by giving mendacious accounts of divine misdemeanours? Within the context of the Republic, theia moira had become a serious liability. In any case, why should the gods, whom Socrates describes in the Ion as prompts for poets, deliberately blacken their own good name with mortals by spreading tales of their own scurrilous behaviour? On all these accounts, therefore, theia moira had to be relinquished. It could not be fitted into the social philosophy of the Republic. There were also new questions of ontology of which the Ion contains no apparent signs that they were in the making. Once that ontology had been put in place, theia moira had to go.

Read in this light, the openly pejorative conception of mimēsis, as defended in the Republic, is already foreshadowed in the ambiguous notion of theia moira, as presented in the Ion. Admittedly, so to interpret the evolution of Plato’s views on poetry is tantamount to reading in Plato’s shortest dialogue an early attack on poetry. Pace all those who would wish it to be otherwise, I conclude, unrepentantly, that Plato’s Ion is no eulogy of poetry.
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Endnotes

1 For vigorous arguments in support of extending the compass of aesthetics as a historical category, see Halliwell (1991) 321-27.

2 A similar claim, although less clearly articulated, had already been made by Craig LaDrière (1951) 32-33.

3 J. Annas (1982) 343, implicitly endorses Schaper’s historical hypothesis when she writes that in the Ion Plato ‘talks of the poet in a very Romantic vein’ and that he ‘realizes that the poet is a true creator answering only to artistic standards’. In the preface to her edition of the Ion, P. Murray (1996) 2 n.4, describes Schaper’s book as ‘a thoughtful and perceptive study’.

4 For an account of early scholarly doubts on the matter, see I. Bekker, (1826) vol. II, 425-26. For a brisk summary of Wilamowitz’ vacillations over the authenticity of the Ion, see Flashar (1958), pp. 8-9. Most scholars nowadays take the Ion to be by Plato’s own hand.

5 The Ion is generally assumed to have been written early in Plato’s career. While Wilamowitz (1829-1820), 36-37, finally considered it to be Plato’s first work, others have recently suggested that the Ion’s doctrinal affinities with the Meno make a later date of composition more likely. For this view, see R. Woolf (1997) and, for a more tentative version of this hypothesis, C. LaDrière (1951).

6 534c1; 536c2 and d3; 542a4. At 535a4 Ion eagerly accepts Socrates’ suggestion that good poets are so by divine dispensation.

7 In the Politicus (588c) Plato arguably envisages the existence of a class of ‘ornamentation and painting and all the imitations created by the use of painting and music solely for our pleasure’ (tr. H.N. Fowler). He belittles this putative class by calling it a ‘plaything’ (paignion).

8 In section IV below, I turn to Christopher Janaway’s (1995) rejection of this interpretation.

9 Janaway (1995), 16, makes a similar claim, although more cautiously formulated.

10 First published in the Everyman’s Library in 1935 and reprinted in Hamilton and Cairns (1961, numerous subsequent re impressions). Although Michael Joyce’s rendering of these
lines is criticised below, it must in all fairness be pointed out that any translation of the *Symposium* then published under that imprint is likely to have been aimed at the Greekless general public rather than at scholars and philosophers.

11 From the evidence of the *Sophist* (265b), Plato was to continue to use *poiēsis* in the generic sense of production long after the completion of the *Symposium*. In 265b9-10 *poiētikē*, which in the context is synonymous with *poiēsis*, is defined as ‘any capacity which causes things that previously were not to come into being’.

12 Ast (1836) lists thirteen occurrences in Plato of *poiēsis* in the generic sense, to mean fabrication (in the sense of ‘making’) or production, and twenty-two in the specific sense, to mean verse or musical composition. Vicaire (1964), pp. 147-156, compiled and classified the occurrences of *poiētēs* and *poiēsis* in the corpus. From the early dialogues to the *Laws*, so he showed, Plato often uses *poiētēs* and *poiēsis* in their etymological sense of ‘maker’ and ‘production’. See also Duchemin (1955) 12-37.

13 I am here indebted to Rowe (1998), 177-181, for the analysis of the structure of Diotima’s argument.


15 This is in spite of the fact that, as some commentators have noted, the *Ion* makes no mention of the kind of creativity that came later to be associated with the practice of any art form. For a clear though later statement of this point, see Moravcsik (1982), 37: ‘Plato’s portrait of the artist lacks conspicuously – by modern standards – in emphasis on originality and creativity, traits associated in modern times very closely with the artist’.

16 To appreciate the longevity of the Romantic conception of the poet, see, e.g., Heidegger (1953).

17 Shelley (1840) 136-137.

18 533e7, 534a4 and 5, 534e5 (twice), 536a8, 536b4 and 5, 536c4, and, later, 542a4.

19 534b7 and d1.

20 534a4.

21 533e5, 535c2, 536b3.
Phaedrus, 243e-245c. See also the ascription of the theory of metempsychosis to ‘priests and
divinely inspired (theoi) poets’ in Meno 81a-c. Yet Socrates’ irony in the latter passage should
warn the reader not to take this point literally.

Dodds (1951), 209 and Cornford (1952), chapters V and VII, passim.

Tr. Freeman (1948), adapted.

DK 68A17; De Divinatione, I 37, tr. W.A. Falconer (1923). See also De Oratore, II 46, 194 and
Horace, Ars Poetica, 295. For a balanced view of the exegetical value to be ascribed to Cicero’s
assimilation of the views of the two philosophers on poetic inspiration, see Tigerstedt (1969),
72-76.

DK 68A18; Stromata, vi 168.

534c1, 535a4, 536c3 and 536d2.

533d3, 534c6.

536c2.

As noted by Woodruff (1982), 138, ‘Inspiration negativizes responsibility’.

534e2-4.

5334 and 6, 534b5.

Laws, 790d-e.

534a1, 2, and 5-6, 534b5

Apology 22b-c; Meno, 99c-d. See also Protagoras 347e.

534b6 and d3.

534e6-7.

In so far as this point is presented by Socrates as a put-down, it could be said to contain the
seeds of Plato’s later identification of the self with the reasoning part of the soul. So at least
claims Woolf (1997), 189-99. Woolf, however, goes considerably further than I would deem
prudent in claiming that Plato presents an embryonic theory of the self in the Ion and the
Meno.

In The Critique of Judgment, Kant defines genius as ‘the innate mental aptitude (ingenium)
through which nature gives the rule to art’, tr. Meredith (1952), part I, para. 46.

41 See section VI below.

42 In his *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis, De Amore*, VII, 12-14, Ficino ascribes to Plato a distinction between human and divine madness; while the former incapacitates and debases human reason, he claims, the latter illuminates the rational soul and can bring it back to the higher realities from which it proceeds. From the *Phaedrus*, Ficino infers that Plato viewed poetic exaltation (*poeticus furor*) as a species of divine madness. In the *Ion*, the Florentine commentator then contends, Plato describes this type of beneficial madness. Ficino’s notorious syncretism accounts for his use of Neoplatonic concepts and categories in what purports to be a commentary on a Platonic dialogue. His interpretation of the *Ion* as a eulogy of the divine madness of poets, therefore, must be treated with extreme caution.

43 In his variorum edition of Plato’s dialogues, Bekker (1826) glosses Socrates’ long speech in the *Ion* as follows: ‘Artem in carminibus componendis non omnino tollit Plato; sed nil valere inquit solam artem sine poetico ardore, cui plurimum tribuit. Ars enim est musae voluti ministra’, p.447. To substantiate this interpretation, he invokes *Phaedrus* 245a5-8, which he takes to be a parallel passage.

44 All quotations from the *Phaedrus* are from Hackforth (1952). Before reading the above-quoted lines as an unmitigated eulogy of poetry, however, one should bear in mind that in that dialogue’s eschatological myth (248a-e) the poet’s soul comes sixth only out of nine levels of souls.

45 Janaway (1995), 168. See also 32. See also Janaway (1992).

46 Janaway (1992), 2, my underscoring.


48 Flashar (1958), 77-96, gives powerful arguments for interpreting Socrates’ mentions of a *rhapsōdikē technē*, as occurring in 530b5-6, 538b-c, 539e3, 540a1-2 and d, and 541a1-2a, as tactical assumptions.
Phaedrus 245a5-8, cited above. As noted in note 12 above, Plato uses poiētikē technē in the Sophist (219d1-2 and 265a4-5) to refer not specifically to poetry, but generically to expertise in the field of production as opposed to that of acquisition.


Goodwin (1894), para. 956.


See, e.g., Republic (607b5) on ‘the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry (ποιητική)’ and Gorgias (502d1) in which poetry (ποιητική) is said as a demagogic discourse (δημηγορία).

So Pradeau (2001), who translates exactly as Canto (1989) does. Canto draws attention to the difficulty of ascertaining the meaning of the sentence.

It is used adverbially in Phaedrus (261a7).

I here disagree with Murray (1996), 108-109, who takes ‘the whole’ to be constituted by the joint fields of poetry and rhapsody.

Gorgias (464c-465a).

I borrow the felicitous rendering of empeiria by ‘knack’ from Zeyl (1987).

Gorgias 501e-502d.

Phaedrus, 260e, 262c, 270b.

The extent of the similarities between the three terms is too complex a matter for the present context, although it may be mentioned that Kahn (2000), 215, has lately claimed them to be synonymous. As used in Plato’s early to middle dialogues, claims Woodruff (1990), the terms are interchangeable. Ast (1826) defines technē as ‘ars, peritia, cognitio etiam ratio’.

As has been observed many times, this is inaccurate. Pindar was an exponent of several poetic genres. See, for instance, Tigerstedt (1969), 28.

See Barker (1978).

Flashar (1958), 59, has well said, ‘Dieser Satz [‘good poets indite these beautiful poems not thorugh technical expertise but through inspiration’, 533e-7]… besagt für den Ion, dass es eine
ποιητικὴ τέχμη, die so geartet ist wie die andere τέχμα, überhaupt nicht gehen kann’. Yet he overplays his hand and does go beyond the evidence when he claims that ‘das Fehlen der τέχνη ist kein Zeichen von schlechter Dichtung’.


66 Collingwood (1938), 126.

67 Nietzsche gushes: ‘Has anyone at the end of the nineteenth century a distinct conception of what poets of strong ages called inspiration?… One hears, one does not seek; one takes, one does not ask who gives; a thought flashes up like lightning, with necessity, unalteringly formed – I have never had any choice. An ecstasy whose tremendous tension sometimes discharges itself in a flood of tears, while one’s steps now involuntarily rush along, now involuntarily lag; a complete being outside of oneself with the distinct consciousness of a multitude of subtle shudders and trickles down to one’s toes…. This is my experience of inspiration; I do not doubt that one has to go back thousands of years to find anyone who could say to me “it is mine also”, Ecce Homo, Thus Spoke Zarathustra’, 3, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (1979). I owe this quotation to my colleague Jill Marsden.

68 For a well-known example of this phenomenon, see the dialogue between Muse and poet in Alfred de Musset’s La Nuit de Mai.

69 T.S. Eliot (1933), 90, aptly calls Shelley a ‘cloudy Platonist’.

70 Shelley (1840), 136.

71 Ibid., 135, my italics.

72 Ibid., 138.

73 Ibid., 135.

74 Haines (1997), 80.

75 Shelley (1840), 136. See also his view that ‘a poet is more delicately organized than other men’, ibid, 139.

76 See Meno (99d3-4).

77 In the Apology (33c6) Socrates uses it to refer to his god-given mission of cross-examining his fellow Athenians; in the Phaedo (58e6), god’s dispensation is said to accompany Socrates
into death; in the *Meno* (99e6 and 100b2), it refers to virtue which some possess without needing to be taught; in the *Phaedrus* (244c), it is used to refer to the view of the ancients that madness was a divine gift to predict the future; in the *Laws* (642c and 875c), it refers to the possession of natural virtue.

78 Plato’s Socrates’ silence on the matter may be accounted for by his view, as professed in the *Cratylus* 400d7-9, that ‘we know nothing of the gods, neither of them nor of the names by which they may call themselves’.


80 Housman (1935). The lecture itself had been delivered in 1933.

81 A quotation, curiously unreferenced, from the *Phaedrus* (245a) is included in the text of the lecture, pp. 38-39.

82 Ibid., p. 7. See also Housman (1927), in Diggle and Goodyear (1972).

83 Housman (1935), 49-50, my italics.

84 In the *Laws* IV (719c4-5), Plato used the same metaphor: ‘whenever a poet is seated on the Muses’ tripod, he is not in his senses, but resembles a fountain, which gives free course to an upward surge of water’, tr. R.G. Bury (1926).

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