

## CHAPTER ONE

# TALKING ABOUT HOMER

*Poetic Madness, Philosophy, and the Birth of Criticism*

### TALKING ABOUT HOMER

It is, at this point, impossible to trace the beginning of the Western idea of poetic madness that was certainly already part of Homer's world. Socrates, however, develops a *theory* of poetic madness<sup>1</sup> that has become deeply important not just to the way we understand poetry, but to philosophy's self-understanding. This theory both manifests and unfolds the tension between poetic and philosophical speaking. This chapter, therefore, will return to Plato's ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry—not via the *Republic*, but via the *Ion*, a text that sets out to create an identity for philosophy in contradistinction to poetry, with which it competes in the marketplaces of speech.

In the first part of this chapter, I want to analyze Plato's concept of poetic madness as it first emerges in the short dialogue *Ion*. There, poetic madness serves to differentiate the procedures of philosophy and poetry as the controlled and repeatable labor of thought versus the spontaneous production of a text that is by definition unique; in the process, the *Ion* uses the idea of poetic madness to establish the necessity of criticism as a discipline different from poetry. While the dialogue does not outline the field of criticism as a concrete practice, it argues for the necessity of a discipline devoted to the knowledge of poetry, a discipline that would operate under the aegis of philosophy rather than of poetry.

I will suggest that in its relation to poetry, philosophy essentially defines itself as criticism, as a discourse *about* poetry that poetry itself cannot achieve. This operation depends on a theory of divine poetic madness, a notion, perhaps ironically, that the poets themselves appear to have cultivated. In Plato's dialogue, mad speech emerges as a speaking that eludes the

conscious control of the speaker; the mad poet, then, cannot claim authority over his poetry, no matter how great a poem he has produced.

In Plato's presentation, madness appears as a condition that cannot be deliberately controlled—a point Socrates makes more forcefully in the *Phaedrus*. If that is the case, then the making of poetry itself is uncontrollable. Every act of poesis is unique and unrepeatable. Nonetheless, of course, poetry exists as *logos*, and can thus be inserted into philosophy. Philosophy, in turn, is not just accidentally or by convention but essentially speech about speech, as the reiterative structure of all Platonic dialogues shows. The last section of this chapter will develop this argument at length.

“Sing to me, Muse . . .”

In the very first line of what can be considered Greek founding poetry, in the first line of what was regarded to be, for the longest time, poetry incarnate, the poet asks for his share of divine inspiration. Homer sings, but his song appeals to another song: sing, Muse, so that this song can be sung. Homeric song commences as a song about the possibility of singing, and the first thing it says is that song must start somewhere else. The invocation creates an odd temporal twist, reminiscent of the logic of future perfect prophecy which the introduction developed. If song can begin only once the Muse has sung, how can you sing to the Muse? Conversely, perhaps the Muse has always already sung, and the invocation is an instance of the rhetorical—and profoundly poetic—figure *hysteron proteron*. In either case, the opening lines of the *Odyssey* reproduce the paradoxical temporality that appears to pervade all inquiries into the logic of poetic and prophetic divine intervention.

In Homer's (ritual?) invocation, poetic inspiration still appears as mythology. Socrates' *philosophy* of poetic madness takes its departure from here. One of the central issues of literary theory has always been the question of who or what is speaking when there is speech, along with the consequences this question entails for artistic production. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, various theoretical systems have redefined this issue, among them Marxism, Nietzsche's writing, and, perhaps most influentially, psychoanalysis. I will, however, step back from the contemporary theoretical scene in order to at least attempt to approach Plato's writing on its own terms (fully aware, I hope, of the ironies involved in this phrase). There, in one of the earliest sustained critiques of literature available to us, we already find the notion of poetry as a process that is fundamentally beyond the poet's control. To the ancient tradition, or to the extent that Socrates can be said to formulate this tradition, the notion of *creative* subjectivity appears to be deeply alien, even more alien perhaps than to psychoanalysis.<sup>2</sup> The notion of divine poetic madness in ancient Greece, first elaborated *theoretically* by Plato's Socrates, prefigures many of the problems that have troubled literary theory over the last decades. Although Socrates' work, especially as we have come to see it through Nietzsche's

passionate critique, rather seems to indicate the inauguration of what will later become a full-blown theory of subjectivity, Plato's oeuvre also marks the place where the critique of a notion of art as subjectivey controlled representation is already philosophically formulated. It is precisely in this context that the *Ion* juxtaposes the question of poetic madness with the question of philosophy.

This is not to suggest, to be sure, that literary theory has merely come full circle since Plato. It is possible, as Foucault suggested, that the idea of a subject as a self-controlled entity that authorizes a work is relatively young and remained, at least in its purest formulations, largely contained in what has been summarily called the Age of Reason.<sup>3</sup> But the figure of the circle, of return, will not do, if only because repeating a state never simply means to return to it. If it is possible to point out certain convergences between Socrates' thought and poststructuralist and related matters, that does not mean that they are, therefore, identical, or even similar in structure or result.<sup>4</sup> The history, or, in Nietzschean terms, the genealogy of this convergence, cannot be erased. In the wake of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida, much critical thought has been given to "Platonism," a homogenizing term covering widely divergent Western philosophies on the grounds that they share a small number of core assumptions. By now, however, it seems necessary to also isolate Plato from this fiction of "Platonism" as far as possible, in order to focus on those elements of Plato's writing that are uniquely his. A first step in this enterprise is to acknowledge once again a point that has been made frequently, but often much too obliquely: Plato's writing on poetry, a significant portion of his oeuvre, constitutes a scandal that has never been repeated in any influential Western work. In Book X of the *Republic*, Socrates says that he was "particularly [right] when reflecting on poetry . . . , in not admitting any part of it that is imitative" (595 a).<sup>5</sup> Socrates' banning the imitative poets from the ideal state might well be the most famous event in Plato's writing. Gadamer calls it "the most difficult challenge posed to the self-consciousness of the German mind in its encounter with the spirit of antiquity."<sup>6</sup> This is a very cautious formulation: Socrates' indictment is alien not only to the mind-set of modern aesthetics (let alone merely the "German mind"), there is ample evidence that the "spirit of antiquity" found it just as strange, lethally strange in the end. Since a poet was one of Socrates' accusers at his trial, poetry as an institutuion is surely implicated in his execution. Perhaps his poetry embargo was, in itself, not enough of a scandal to warrant his death, but this death was nonetheless inflicted at least in part in the name of poetry.<sup>7</sup>

The banning of the poets, then, positions Socrates in a zone equally remote from "the spirit of antiquity" and the entirety of modern cultural theory and ideology. While the uniqueness of Socrates' vision of a state without poets and the importance of that vision for the whole of Plato's oeuvre can hardly be overemphasized, there is, at the same time, a danger in focusing on this passage too much. Its very prominence has obscured the diversity of Plato's writings on poetry and the poets, and there is a pervasive tendency in

the criticism of Plato's work to read every statement on poetry in the light of the *Republic*'s critique of *mimēsis* and poetic *psychagogia*.<sup>8</sup>

Even though at some points I will refer to the *Republic*, my topic is neither the theory of *mimēsis* nor the overtly political aspect of Plato's literary theory, and the *Republic* will therefore play a subordinate role. Even though the Socrates of the *Republic* does, to a certain extent, link madness and poetry, he does not develop a theory of the mad poet. In the *Republic*, the madness of the tyrant is presented as the breakdown of the proper hierarchy of reason, spirit, and desire (*logistikon, thumos, epithumia*); any type of poetry that caters to desire instead of to virtue—that is to say, according to Socrates, almost the entirety of poetry—potentially aids in that breakdown. Poetry in the *Republic*, then, can be a contributing factor to moral madness, but it is neither mad itself nor madly conceived. Contrary to the *Ion* (and the *Phaedrus*), the *Republic* treats poetry as a skill (*technē*), comparable with, even though inferior to, the skills and crafts that are useful to the state.

The following reading of the *Ion* will predominantly proceed along issues of philosophical strategy: Why is the figure of the mad poet of interest to philosophy? What does it contribute to Plato's theory of meaning? How does it help to accomplish the consolidation of philosophy's independence from and ultimately its hegemony over other privileged genres of discourse?

In the *Ion*, Socrates converses with a popular rhapsode of that name about the nature of his trade. Ion struggles to preserve an understanding of rhapsody as a skill or craft (*technē*) that necessarily presupposes knowledge (*epistêmê*) of the poetic product he delivers. Socrates contends that the accomplishments of rhapsody rest on divine inspiration, and that the rhapsode performs in a state devoid of knowledge, sovereign skill, and reason (*epistêmê, technē, nous*). He develops that theory in the famous monologue about the magnetic chain of divine inspiration linking poet, rhapsode, and audience. This speech contains the *Ion*'s most quoted lines: "For the poet is a light thing, winged and sacred, unable to make poetry before he is enthused and out of his mind and intelligence is no longer in him".<sup>9</sup>

Socrates' argument is based on two major contentions: First, if rhapsody were a skill consisting of a substantiated knowledge of poetry as such, Ion would have to be as good at performing Hesiod and other poets as he is at performing Homer, which, as he admits, he is not. Second, if rhapsody necessarily involved proper judgment of a text, Ion would have to command all the skills pertaining to the subject matter in Homer's poems, such as mixing drugs, charioteering, fishing, or commanding an army. While Ion readily admits that a physician or a charioteer is superior at judging whether or not Homer "speaks true" on such matters as medicine or the races, he is less ready to yield the rank of general—he insists with considerable tenacity that rhapsodes are experts on the skills of leading a battle. When Ion, despite Socrates' intervention, insists on the equivalence of rhapsody and warfare, Socrates somewhat impatiently faces him with a choice: "Choose, then, whether you

want to be held by us to be an unjust man or a divine one . . . ." Ion, coerced rather than convinced, answers that "to be held to be divine is far finer" (542a–b). This reply is ambiguous; Ion concedes nothing but his continuing loyalty to the register of appearance and performance. These lines, in fact, might be read to reveal considerable rhetorical skill on Ion's part, indicating that he might not be quite the simpleton he seems to be.

While Socrates' famous speech on divine inspiration and the magnetic chain of poetic power (533c–535a) reverberates throughout much of Plato's oeuvre, the *Ion*, I will argue, is primarily not a text on poetry but on rhapsody, and the importance of the theme of poetic madness in this dialogue emerges only once the issue of rhapsody is explored alongside. The significance of rhapsody, in turn, becomes clear only if we acknowledge it as a precursor of criticism. To substitute 'criticism' for 'rhapsody', is, of course, a thoroughly anachronistic move. Rhapsody can only be called a criticism *ante rem*, for there is no clearly defined field of practice in Plato's Greece that we could call by that term without some simplification. This changes, however, if we are willing to define criticism, very generally, as the mediating presentation of a literary text to an audience that seeks from this procedure an elucidation of the text's meaning beyond the information the text would provide without hermeneutic intervention. There is enough in the dialogue to suggest that this is the task that Ion performs.

While the definition provided above is not enough to delineate criticism as a methodical practice, it is precisely the condition of possibility of such a concerted discipline that the *Ion* starts to investigate.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the dialogue presents us with nothing less than the preconception of criticism under the aegis of philosophy. In Socrates' scheme, I will argue, poetic madness actually engenders the necessity of criticism. As such, the notion of enthusiasm is the key concept in a strategy that supplants the autonomy of poetry and subjects it, ultimately, to Socratic philosophy.

Like the *Phaedrus*, the *Ion* was long regarded one of the "minor" dialogues, possibly a hoax. Even though the authenticity of the *Ion* is established by now, the dialogue has never met with the kind of rehabilitation that the *Phaedrus* has enjoyed.<sup>11</sup> One can speculatively generate several possible reasons for this: the practice of rhapsody is located in a gray zone between poetry and theater, alien to the modern division of cultural labor and thus perhaps of subordinate interest to latter-day readers of Plato; the dialogue's predominant mood is comical rather than ironic and might thus appear un-Socratic; Ion, unlike Phaedrus, has appeared to many as a weak mind or even a fool—Allan Bloom calls him an "empty reciter of Homer," "the most conventional agent of what is most conventional"; Goethe labels him "extremely limited," "an oaf"<sup>12</sup>—unworthy of his interlocutor Socrates, not even a complying pupil but one who has to be badgered into acquiescence; one might say that Plato has treated central themes of the dialogue more persuasively and with more sophistication elsewhere. I suspect, however, that a significant reason

for the rather unappreciative treatment the *Ion* has received is due to the fact that the dialogue has been read as a treatise on *poetry*.<sup>13</sup> Read in this light, however, the *Ion* appears inconsistent or even confused, no matter how influential it has been for various theories of *furor poeticus*. Socrates' speech on poetry, habitually read as the dialogue's centerpiece and its only passage of genuine interest, is difficult to evaluate.<sup>14</sup> For even though it is possible to read the speech at face value, it seems at least as likely that it is a casual reiteration, or even, as Goethe suspected, a "persiflage,"<sup>15</sup> of an already established cliche of poetic enthusiasm.<sup>16</sup>

There are at least two aspects of Socrates' speech on enthusiasm that cast suspicion on his sincerity. For one, Socrates claims that he is merely repeating what the poets themselves say about their art (534a–b), a framing device that serves to effectively obscure Socrates' own position; secondly, Socrates' choice of words seems uncharacteristically "enthused" itself, pointing to the potentially parodic nature of his account.<sup>17</sup> More importantly, the progression of the dialogue as a whole casts ambiguity on the casual assertion of an inspirational "divine." Ion reacts to Socrates' *logoi* in exactly the same way he is portrayed as reacting to divine poetic inspiration: "Yes, by Zeus, . . . somehow you lay hold of my soul with these speeches, Socrates" (535a).<sup>18</sup> Socrates, then, has performatively, and with little effort, inserted himself into the "magnetic" process. Hence, the chain of inspiration, and his chain of argument that rests on that metaphor, do not appear to be very tightly linked. Unless we are meant to believe that Socrates himself is passing on a divine inspiration of his own, the origin of possession has moved to the secular in the blink of an eye. Certainly, Ion may simply be a readily impressionable soul, open to skillful *psychagōgia* not necessarily only of the divine kind. In that case, it is not the theory of magnetic links that is called into question (even though Socrates' performance of inspirational speech appears to ironize it considerably), but the validity of any specific act of divine inspiration.

In this regard, the passage points to a crucial problem that any theory of divine madness poses: how can the presence of divine influence be verified? Not every poet is visited by the gods; inspiration might stem from the Muse or from any clever philosopher (or sophist) roaming the marketplace. Divine inspiration, despite rituals of evocation, may be sudden and unpredictable: one cannot expect to go mad, not every madness is divine, not every poet is mad, and not even the mad poets are mad all the time. The poets, moreover, are the least reliable witnesses in this matter, mad or not. If they are mad, they cannot account for their madness, and if they are not, they might simulate madness, considering that "to be held to be divine is far finer" than to be thought just another common laborer.

Socrates will investigate this question of diagnosis at some length in the *Phaedrus*. In the *Ion*, he is concerned not with madness in general, but with rhapsodic inspiration, or, more precisely, the relationship between a text, its reader-custodian, and the audience of the reading. As it turns out,

Ion's enthusiasm is dubious, for during his performance, divine powers do not seem to render Ion senseless at all. Certainly, at first he seems to comply with Socrates' argument: "When I speak of something pitiful, my eyes fill with tears, and when of something frightening or terrible, my hair stands on end from fear and my heart leaps" (535c). Socrates suggests that this is rather unreasonable behavior in light of the fact that Ion sits safe and adorned in the middle of a favorable audience, and that the only explanation for such irrational affectation must be divine poetic inspiration. Ion agrees.<sup>19</sup> This passage is misleading, however, if naively taken at face value. In the next breath, Ion imparts that while supposedly magnetized by Homeric passion, he keeps close watch of his audience's emotional response:

For I look down on them each time from the platform above as they are crying, casting terrible looks and following with astonishment the thing said. I must pay the very closest attention to them, since, if I set them to crying, I shall laugh myself because I am making money, but if they laugh, then I shall cry because of the money I am losing. (535e)

Ion, then, is hardly entirely in the grip of divine powers, as the radical formulations of Socrates' earlier speech had suggested. Instead, he is quite conscious of manipulating his audience, and his own passions are diametrically opposed to those of his listeners instead of being "magnetically" related to them. This incongruence unchains the links Socrates had joined. The relationship between poetic text, rhapsodic text, and the passion of the audience emerges as far more complicated than initially asserted.

Any reading of the *Ion* that subscribes to Socrates' initial claim that poets and rhapsodes operate in identical or at least very similar fashion runs the risk of falling into the same trap Socrates sets out for Ion. Valid interpretations of the *Ion* which read Socrates' objections to rhapsody as veiled objections to poetry would have to operate on the assumption that poetry and its interpretation proceed in a comparable manner.<sup>20</sup> If the conditions of making poetry were the main concern of the dialogue, however, then Socrates' interaction with Ion after the delivery of his speech would be curiously redundant. We would be left with a rather conventional theory of inspiration, for although the dialogue contains the seeds to challenge an uncritically received view of poetic enthusiasm, it leaves this concept more or less untouched. As a celebration of poetic *mania*, a text like the *Phaedrus* is far more subtle and profound, and as a denunciation of poetry, the *Republic* gives more sustained and more engaging arguments. Certainly, these two standard approaches are not impossible; the presence of Homer does indeed permeate the dialogue, and the status of poetry undoubtedly is at stake, if only indirectly. To read the *Ion* as a sketchy anticipation of the later dialogues' arguments, however, buries the very theme that, peculiar to the *Ion*, makes this short text so fascinating. This theme, to be sure, is not poetry. Not only does the dialogue carry the name of a rhapsode, its main concern throughout the dialogical part is the investigation

of interpretation or the nature of critical knowledge. Far more space is devoted to the discussion of Ion's trade than to poetry, and, as demonstrated above, Ion himself does not fit the criteria Socrates develops for the poets. We must distinguish carefully between what Socrates says about poetry and what he says about rhapsody, for the magnetic chain may be brittle.

The Ion who, ever mindful of profit, monitors his audience's affective response, is not mad, certainly not mad enough to fit the stringent criteria Socrates has established in his speech to describe poetic madness—to be devoid of *nous*, *epistêmê*, and *technê*. The implication, I will suggest, is that there is no such thing as a mad critic, or even that criticism *must* not be mad, since it must differ from poetry to perform its task. Before Socrates, it seems that the poets had provided their own critique, a critique that did not have to take a discursive, nonpoetic form, but had consisted in a constant allusive rewriting of poetic material or in the poetic self-reflection of the lyrics of authors like Homer, Hesiod, and Pindar. Thus, the reworking of the Homeric *muthos* in the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides constituted the main venue of its interpretation and reinterpretation. In Socrates' time, however, the poets were already sharing the task of interpretation with a growing number of nonpoets. "Talking about Homer" was in the process of becoming a veritable business for those who themselves didn't engage in the making of poetry. The Sophists, Socrates' privileged competitors in the marketplace of knowledge and *psychagôgia*, are known to have grounded their claims to wisdom to a large extent in a knowledge of the poets. The early dialogue *Protagoras*, for instance, shows Socrates in interpretive contest with the Sophist Protagoras, who stresses that "it is an important part of education for a man to be strong in poems. This, however, consists in being able to understand what the poets say, what is composed well and what not, also to explain it when asked and to give an account" (339a). In this dialogue, the practice of criticism takes on the character of a philosophical *agon* when Socrates challenges Protagoras's reading of a poem by Simonides with a close reading of his own. Socrates' counterarguments are skillful and persuasive, even though he later dismisses the enterprise of competitive interpretation as silly.

In contrast, the *Ion* does not engage in the practice of hermeneutics but begins to develop a *theory* of criticism designed to establish the fundamental difference between the *logoi* of poetry and the *logoi* of philosophy.<sup>21</sup>

To be sure, Plato's dividing line between poetry and philosophy has been redrawn again and again. Aristotle already struggled to integrate Platonic dialogues into his generic paradigms,<sup>22</sup> and to modern readers especially, Platonic writing has appeared uncommonly 'poetic'.<sup>23</sup> It is also true that Socrates does at times investigate formal aspects of philosophical speech and/or different poetic genres in considerable detail. It is all the more important to appreciate that Plato's understanding of 'poetry,' in contrast to later accounts, does not include the differentiation between figurative and literal language or fictional and nonfictional narratives. The *logos/muthos* distinction

as fiction/nonfiction, to give a prominent example, appears post-Platonic, and in Plato's writing the two terms cannot always be cleanly distinguished.<sup>24</sup> Even in the *Republic*, where questions of poetic genre are of paramount importance, Socrates never advises a ban on *all* poets. Fundamentally, poets are nothing more or less than "the makers of tales" (*Republic*, 377b) and the making of tales (as *muthoi*) is as indispensable to the ideal state (cf. *Republic*, Book II and III) as the use of images to communicate philosophical ideas. Even though poets are accused of making "false" tales, the education of the guardians proceeds by tales equally false.

Needless to say, Socrates freely avails himself of what seem to us "poetic" modes of speech. It is worthwhile to note, however, that Plato's Socrates, unless in quotation, *never* speaks in verse, even though he contemplates composing music in the *Phaedo*. In fact, the verse/prose distinction might be the sole "formal" criterion to distinguish his discourse from that of the poets.<sup>25</sup> Aristotle notes right at the beginning of the *Poetics* that the "public classifies all those who write in meter as poets and completely misses the point that the capacity to produce an imitation is the essential characteristic of the poet."<sup>26</sup> For Socrates, however, whose conception of *mimēsis* is at times far more comprehensive than that of the *Poetics*, the "capacity to produce an imitation" is inherent to all speech, not only poetic speech. Language is imitation, but in contrast to the imitation in painting or sculpture, "language can also be true" (*Cratylus*, 431d).<sup>27</sup> In theory, then, Socrates cannot rule out that "true" language occurs in poetry.

If the criteria neither of form nor of hypothetical truth-value can be established to distinguish philosophy and poetry with satisfactory rigor, then another criterion needs to be found. It is here that the significance of a concept of poetic madness gains its full force, for it provides the terms on which different modes of speech can be classified according to the different nature of their production or conception. The truth of poetry, the *Ion* suggests, differs from the truth of philosophy at the point of its source. There is no great poetry as long as the poet holds on to *nous* as to a possession (*ktēma*, *Ion* 534b).<sup>28</sup> Thus, the theory of poetic madness dispossesses the poet, first of his *nous*, and then, in consequence, of his poetry. In the *Republic*, we learn that "just as poets are fond of their poems and fathers of their children, so money-makers too are serious about money—as their own product" (*Republic*, 330c). In the *Republic*, the poets are in charge of their works, and hence accountable for them. Within the theory of poetic madness as it emerges in the *Ion*, however, poems cease to be the product of their poets.

In an important sense, every form of madness entails dispossession. It is the postulate of madness that subverts the first definition of justice the *Republic* offers:

[I]f a man takes weapons from a friend when the latter is of sound mind, and the friend demands them back when he is mad, one shouldn't give back

such things, and the man who gave them back would not be just, and moreover, one should not be willing to tell someone in this state the whole truth.

What you say is right, he said.

Then this isn't the definition of justice, speaking the truth and giving back what it takes.

It most certainly is, Socrates, interrupted Polemarchus, at least if Simonides should be believed at all. (RP, 331c-d)

In this passage, truth appears to be analogous to possessions to which one has a right only as long as one is sane—in other words, it qualifies as a property only to the sane. Madness cancels the right to this property just as it annuls the legal right to property according to one of Solon's laws. While the notion of intellectual property is not a legal one in Greece, it plays a major role in the laws of philosophy.<sup>29</sup>

In the *Ion*, these implications remain unspoken. The problem of property surfaces instead in the question of criticism. To repeat, the term *criticism* is an anachronism, but rhapsody was not simply recital as some readings of the *Ion* assume or imply.<sup>30</sup> For while the rhapsodes might have derived their glory from the glory of the texts they treated (and the Greeks, not to forget, venerated Homer beyond any veneration for a literary text imaginable to us today),<sup>31</sup> they were, in their comments, certainly not bound by any pieties to the “sanctity of the text” at their disposal. The rhapsodes were free to paraphrase, embellish, interpret and comment on them at their discretion. Ion himself stresses this point when he claims that there is no one in his trade who can produce “so many beautiful meanings” (530d) out of Homer as he.

Meaning, here, is *dianoia*—one of the key terms of the text. It can mean thought and intention as well as meaning, to name just a few possible translations. At the outset of the discussion, Socrates had expressed envy of the rhapsodes for their ability to “discern [the poets’] meaning (*dianoia*)” and their task of “mediating the meaning of the poet for the audience” (530b–c). That this task implies considerable critical intervention on the part of the rhapsode is obvious: “It is surely worth hearing, Socrates, how well I have adorned Homer” (530d). Here, Ion, presumably unaware of the analogy, uses the same word Socrates had used to describe Ion’s ornamental stage apparel. Ion adorns the texts he recites in the same way he decorates his own body; Socrates tells him that “it befits your art for the body to be always adorned and for you to appear as beautiful as possible” (530b), and he repeats this point later in the dialogue (535d). Ion, then, presents the body of the Homeric writings on stage, gaudily decked out for the spectacle of the text which becomes, or coincides with, the spectacle of the rhapsode. The text disappears into the performance of the critic, and the epic becomes theater. The critical act cannot be distinguished from its object. Socrates, however, will insist on this distinction.

It is worthwhile noting, by the way, that Ion concedes that the rhapsodes, to legitimize their trade, need to have a knowledge apart from any *dianoia* intrinsic to the text or its performance, even though he has no quarrel with the concept of divine poetic madness per se. It is the rhapsode, after all, not the poet who, he insists, would make a good general. Why is Ion so disinclined to give up the image of the rhapsode as a quasimilitary power? What is it in interpretation that may make it comparable to warfare?<sup>32</sup>

Ion makes different claims as to the object of the rhapsode's *epistêmê*. Although he has to give up these claims in the face of Socrates' superior argumentative skills, they are worth noting, not the least for a certain compatibility with latter-day notions of criticism. Ion is ready to concede that he is incompetent to judge specific subject matter; but in response to Socrates' question after the rhapsode's proper field of knowledge, he designates the whole of the poem: "Everything (*hapanta*), I claim, Socrates" (539e). Thus, he hints at the concept of a textual whole different from the sum of a text's parts, and different from the accumulated subject matter it pertains to. Ion does not, as we would wish, elaborate on this embryonic idea of poetic structure. His next attempt to carve out for himself an epistemic niche concerns a knowledge of style, of different registers of diction, "[t]he things that are appropriate, I for one suppose, for a man to say, and the sort for a woman, and the sort for a slave and the sort for a free man, and the sort for one who is ruled and the sort for one who is ruling" (540b). When Socrates refers Ion back to subject matter—"the rhapsode will know, but not the cowherd, what things it is appropriate for a cowherd who is a slave to say to calm angry cattle" (540c)—Ion at first gives in. When Socrates extends the analogies to the general, however, he encounters resistance:

- S: Well then, will he [the rhapsode] know such things as are appropriate for a man who is a general to say when exhorting his troops?
- I: Yes, the rhapsode will know such things.
- S: What? Is the art of rhapsody generalship?
- I: I would certainly know such things as are appropriate for a general to say.  
[ . . . ]
- S: Since you know military matters, do you know them through the art by which you are an expert at generalship or the one by which you are a good rhapsode?
- I: For me, at least, there doesn't seem to be any difference.
- S: What? You say there is no difference? Do you say that the art of rhapsody and the art of generalship are one or two?
- I: To me, at least, it seems to be one. (540d–541a)

Some of Plato's readers have been inclined to read this passage as a comical interlude or as a psychographic device meant to expose Ion's

self-misconception.<sup>33</sup> The image of the general, though, is hardly innocent: Socrates will devote much of his discussion of the perfect state to the education of the military “guardians,” and he will involve the poets in this education. More important, though, is the role of the general within the poetry Ion presents. Socrates suggests that Homer, “as all other poets, too” deals preeminently with war (531c). By this time, we already know that being an expert poet (as opposed to being divinely inspired) would mean being an expert on poetry’s subject matter—waging war and writing war would be the same thing. Ion-the-general, then, inserts himself into poetry as its mastermind. In assuming the rank of general, he also seizes command of the *Iliad*, taking the place of the (divine and human) commanders who direct the action of the war epic. Certainly, the epic with its central narrator lends itself to this operation more than lyric or dramatic poetry—but it is in this image of strategic usurpation that the truth of Socratic criticism surfaces. If the mad do not have a right to property, as we have seen, then poetic speech—and this is true for *all* mad speech—is up for grabs. Mad speech is relinquished by its speaker at the moment of its utterance—it is never his to begin with.

In this light, the *Ion* does not so much raise the question of the legitimacy of poetry (although, naturally, this question is implicated in the question of criticism) as it does the question of the legitimization of a poem’s self-appointed guardians. Socrates early on had posed the question of a text’s *dianoia* as the guiding question of the dialogue. Although Socrates will deny the poets both *nous* and *epistêmê*, he will never deny that there is *dianoia* in poetry. It is not the presence of *dianoia* that is at stake but the nature of its production. The postulate of enthusiasm, the “god within” poetic speech, entails that *dianoia* here cannot be read as the poet’s intentional thought but as meaning (somehow) present in the text but not controlled by its author. If criticism, as even Ion readily concedes, should consist in the ascertainment of this *dianoia*, the critic’s operation has to be fundamentally different from poetic production. It is thus that the hypothesis of poetic madness establishes the necessity of criticism.

Ion, however, is neither a competent reader of poetry *to olon*, nor is he truly inspired. Thus, being simultaneously too close and not close enough to the poet, he can neither provide nor understand poetic *dianoia*. Unlike the physician or the horseback rider, he has no expertise to contribute to Homer’s subject matter, and, being *atechnos*<sup>34</sup> (532c) in the presence of poets other than Homer, he commands no knowledge about poetry in general (532c). Clearly, the latter charge appears more grave, opening the question of the very possibility of a discipline, or *technê*, of criticism.

To repeat, the theory of divine poetic madness establishes the necessity of a criticism of *dianoia*. Socrates sets out to prove that the rhapsode is not as much a hermeneut of meaning as he is a mediator of affect.<sup>35</sup> While Ion cannot account for his virtuosity there is, however, also no reliable indication that he is a bad interpreter. In fact, Ion seems ready to perform several times,

and it is Socrates who holds him back with always yet another question. Socrates is either not able or not willing to distinguish between good and bad criticism before he has constructed a *theory* of criticism that would be different from a theory of poetry. And it is predominantly this theory of criticism that is at stake in the *Ion*, not the theory of *mimêsis* that is habitually associated with Plato's poetological dialogues.

Socrates readily grants the status of *technê* to the experts in painting, music, sculpture, flute playing, and singing to the lyre (532e–533c).<sup>36</sup> His analogies lead up to the art of rhapsody itself:

S: . . . nor in regard to aulos playing, cithara playing, singing to the cithara, or rhapsody, you never saw a man who is clever at explaining Olympus, or Thamyras, or Orpheus, or Phemius the Ithacan rhapsode but is at a loss about Ion and has nothing to contribute about what in rhapsody he does well and what not? (533b–c)

Here, Socrates makes the explicit move towards a metacriticism where not the text, but the critic becomes the object of expertise. (In fact, all the rhapsodes mentioned besides Ion are mythical figures, poetic constructions themselves.) The issue now is not Homer, but “talking about Homer,” or even talking about the rhapsodes talking about Homer. The question of poetic enthusiasm is less relevant in this dialogue than the question of critical inspiration, and poetic representation less relevant than critical representation. The *adequatio rei atque cogitationis* of the primary text, the major theme of the poetry discussion in the *Republic*, never directly gets into focus.

In Socrates' argument, the necessity of criticism implies an irreducible difference between criticism and poetry. Again, if divine madness is the sole guarantor of poetry's greatness, then this madness must be *verified*. If there is to be a critic, then first and foremost he has to be a knower of madness. To know a thing, as Socrates has pointed out, is to know its opposite as well. To know great poetry is to know bad poetry. To know madness, then, would be to know sanity (*sôphrosunê*).

Criticism, then, divides into at least two different types of *epistêmê*. First, it must be a science of the soul. Second, and more importantly, any *epistêmê* of poetry must account for the enigma of meaning. In the absence of poetic *technê*, the presence of poetic meaning cannot be accounted for by the process of poetic production in the same way that the presence of a sturdy table can be accounted for by the process of carpentry (not that the latter case is a simple one, by any means). The name of divine madness marks this unaccountability. While the *Ion* merely establishes the need to pursue the two projects I have outlined, Socrates will devote himself to the science of the soul in other dialogues, most prominently in the *Republic* and in the *Phaedrus*. The latter, moreover, will provide a tentative answer to the origin of meaning with regard to poetry, to the *technê* of speaking as truth-making,

to the nature of the soul, and, again, to madness. This time, however, the philosopher, too, will go (a little) mad.

In Platonic theology, we will see, poetic meaning is always divine—or, more precisely, the divine is nothing but the ultimately unaccountable presence of meaning, a meaning philosophy can only point to, but not beget: the glory of sanity is in diagnosis, not in creation.

#### PHAEDRUS: MADLY MADE MEANING

In the *Ion*, drawing upon a widely accepted general notion of enthusiasm, Socrates speaks of divine madness without providing any comprehensive explanation of his terms; *Ion* investigates not so much the nature of poetic *dianoia* as the theory and practice of its critical reconstruction. The question of how, in the absence of *technē*, *epistêmē*, and *nous*, meaning is to be generated in the first place, remains open. It is only in the *Phaedrus*, Plato's great dialogue about divine madness, that Socrates returns to the question of madly made meaning. This time, Socrates, led by the promise of a fine *logos* like a donkey by a carrot, abandons his usual territory, the marketplace of the city, for the countryside. With Phaedrus, he settles down in a divinely animated place, the domain of nymphs, myths, and the wild God Pan. The talk will be of lovers, love, and speeches.

The *Phaedrus* is a notoriously difficult text, so intricately structured that it was long taken to be the badly composed product of a mind either immature or clouded by old age.<sup>37</sup> One of the difficulties the text poses is its self-reflexively polygeneric quality, comprising a written speech read aloud, two spoken speeches, three myths, dialogue in various atmospheric modes from flirtatious to technical, and, lastly, a prayer. This complex weave of styles corresponds to a multitude of topics broached, among them the nature of the soul, of knowledge, and of philosophy as well as the relative values of mythology, love, madness, and writing. While it is certainly legitimate, or even necessary for any reading to single out and privilege one or several themes over others, the dialogue does not, to my mind, provide a thematic integrative focus comparable to the way the *Republic* integrates its various themes into the project of discursively constructing the ideal state.

Owing to the complexity of the dialogue, the *Phaedrus* is traditionally divided in two parts, one consisting of speeches, the other analyzing and critiquing them.<sup>38</sup> The first part includes the speech of Lysias, read by Phaedrus, Socrates' impromptu rejoinder to this speech, and his recantation of his first speech. The first two *logoi*, a speech by Lysias and Socrates' rejoinder, advocate the cause of the nonlover over that of the lover, advising young boys to yield to the former rather than to the latter because of the dangers and unpleasantness associated with the state of erotic madness. Socrates prepares to leave when his *daimonion* interferes, commanding him to recant the insult done to the god Eros in the first two speeches. Part I would then close with

Socrates' second speech, where he extols the virtue of "certain kinds" of madness, above all erotic madness. This recantation, or palinode, to Eros expands into a theory of *anamnēsis* or recollection: the lover experiences erotic madness at the sight of a beautiful boy, which in turn triggers the recollection of the idea of beauty which his soul glimpsed on its voyage with the gods in the place "beyond heaven."

The second part of the dialogue, reflecting back on the three speeches about love, is devoted to a discussion of rhetoric, speech writing, and writing in general. It contains the famous "myth of Theuth" that criticizes writing as harmful to memory. Constituting a pseudoknowledge inferior to any knowledge that would be "inscribed in the soul," writing, severed from its author—its "father"—does not know how to address different readers differently and is thus useless to philosophical *psychagōgia*, Socrates says. Writing is helpless against (mis-)appropriations by readers. Thus, true lovers of wisdom, who might playfully divert themselves with writing, will not commit their serious knowledge to such an unstable vehicle.

The writing of poetry, however, at first seems to constitute an exception to this rule. The *Phaedrus* lends vehement support to a notion of poetry that is decidedly not authorized by the poet, a poetry that is above all authenticated as poetry only by the notion that during its production the poet's self-possession is reduced to nothing. In the *Ion*, Socrates had told the story of Tynnichos of Chalkis:

[H]e never composed a single poem worth recalling, save the song of praise which everyone sings, well-nigh the finest of all lyrical poems, and absolutely what he called it, an 'Invention of the Muses.' By this example above all, it seems to me, the god would show us, lest we doubt, that these beautiful poems are not human or from man, but are divine and from the gods, and that the poets are nothing but the gods' speakers, each one possessed by the divinity who possesses him. And to prove this, the deity on purpose sang the loveliest of all lyrics through the most miserable poet. (534d–e)

This passage illustrates well the radical nature of the assumptions on which Socrates operated in the *Ion*. Tynnichos of Chalkis is not just a mediocre poet, he is the worst of them all, and his song of praise is not just a felicitous piece of work, it is the loveliest of all lyrics. If the least poet can write the most beautiful of poems, then poetic madness operates indeed wholly independently from the human body it avails itself of. The poet is nothing but a random conduit, and it seems that he would not even have to be a poet at all, since whatever *technē* he has at his disposal is nil. Possessing nothing, he is nothing but possessed (*katechomenoi*), an object pure and simple.

At the same time, the case of Tynnichos of Chalkis emphasizes the uniqueness of the divinely inspired poem, presenting it as a *single* text, an utterance of fundamentally unrepeatable quality. The central significance of

the question of repetition links the *Ion* to the larger issues at stake in the *Phaedrus*. On the whole, the *Phaedrus* puts forth the notion of divinely inspired poetry within a framework quite different from that of the *Ion*. Here, only the most finely tuned soul—"the tender, virgin soul" (245a)—can become a poet, and poetry is defined both by skill and inspiration:

... if any man come to the gates of poetry without the madness of the Muses, persuaded that *skill alone* [emphasis added] will make him a good poet, then shall he and his works of sanity with him be brought to nought by the poetry of madness, and behold, their place is nowhere to be found. (245a)

It is here, moreover, that poetry is explicitly linked to philosophy; for certain poets, Socrates says, might be deserving of the name philosopher. At first glance it seems that this particular poetry, privileged over the mere employment of *technē*, furnishes the first conception of a poetic genre that will later be called philosophical poetry (culminating in Hölderlin). However, Socrates never says that poetry might be philosophical, only that poets who can critique their own work in retrospect might be philosophers:

tell . . . Homer and all others who have written poetry whether to be read or sung . . . that if any of them has done his work with a knowledge of the truth, can defend his statements when challenged, and can demonstrate the inferiority of his writings out of his own mouth, he ought not to be designated by a name drawn from those writings, but by one that indicates his serious pursuit. (278c)

This name, needless to say, is the name of the philosopher (278d). Again, as in the *Ion*, the highest merits are not in poetry but in the reflection on poetry; poetry, as the product of divine inspiration (but not divine inspiration alone, in this dialogue), unquestionably remains subjected to philosophy, even though poet and philosopher can now inhabit the same body (but not at the same time). Thus, the relationship between poetry and philosophy remains profoundly asymmetrical (as we will see, in this it resembles the structure of desire in the relationship between the beloved and the lover). Poetry, however, is more than just one of many objects of philosophy; it rather provides philosophy's privileged object of usurpation.

The following pages will concentrate on the structural principle of recantation, which I read as one of the most important clues, possibly even the single most important one to the architecture of the dialogue. At several points, recantation serves as the rhetorical gesture that propels the dialogue forward. Socrates' first speech renounces the speech of Lysias, which constructs a situation in which a non-lover attempts to persuade a boy to yield to his desire rather than to that of his erotically inflamed rival. Socrates recasts Lysias's argument, but he also changes the parameters of the narrative

hypothesis: now it is a lover *posing as* a non-lover who is speaking. The argument about the superiority of a sane sexuality over erotic madness is thus implicitly subverted, appearing as a clever deceptive device hiding precisely what it denounces: Eros. In admiration of Socrates' performance, Phaedrus recants his original endorsement of Lysias. In his second speech, the "palinode," Socrates recants the arguments of his first speech, replacing the (deceptive) attack on desire with a celebration of Eros and erotic love. In the following disquisition about rhetoric, Socrates disavows his second speech as well, calling it a "play" or a "jest." In the final scene, Socrates appears to abandon the principle of rational dialectical discourse he has just espoused when he enters into prayer to one of the maddest gods, Pan.

This repeated recurrence of complete reversal is a striking feature of the dialogue; it certainly constitutes more than the mere refutation of inferior arguments, and it is quite different from, say, Hegelian dialectic. The dialogue does not proceed by refinement, moderation, or progressive reconsideration of the original arguments but, more often than not, by complete inversion—an inversion that is less teleological than it may appear. The *Phaedrus*, I will argue, suggests nothing less than that recantation is the privileged mode of philosophical procedure itself; in this sense, Benardete can indeed single out the *Phaedrus* as the dialogue that "comes closest of any dialogue to having a structure that is a passkey for every other dialogue."<sup>39</sup>

Interestingly, Socrates draws upon an anecdote from poetry in order to explain the need for his palinode to Eros:

There is for those who sin against the gods in poetry an old purification about which Homer knew nothing, but Stesichorus did. For when the latter was robbed of his sight because of his slander of Helen, he did not remain ignorant of the cause, but as one familiar with the muses he recognized it and wrote immediately his 'This Story is not true, for never did you enter the gracious ships, nor did you ever come to the fortress of Troy,' and after having composed the whole so-called palinode, he regained his sight immediately. (243a–b)

This anecdote links the theme of blindness and insight, privileged in philosophical discourse over all other themes, to the rhetorical gesture of recantation; analogously, Socrates uncovers his face, hidden under his cloak during his first speech, when he starts his palinode to Eros (the same Eros who was playfully hidden, or hiding, in Socrates' first speech). He can literally see—and be seen—again now. On his own terms that are to follow in the palinode, Socrates thus declares himself a potential lover. Vision, as well as visibility, is essential on the path to a philosophy animated by Eros.

This is hardly the end of the story, though, for vision, albeit important, is ultimately not to remain the highest form of perception. Socrates' palinode itself demonstrates that sight can in turn lead to both insight and its loss: while the onset of erotic madness depends on visual impact, the transformation of

its philosophical potential into knowledge depends on the lover's soul's power to prevail over the senses. Thus, the recantation that restores vision in turn leads to the recantation of vision, just as Socrates must recant first the insult to Eros and then the hymnic palinode to Eros itself. This structural principle is mirrored in turn in the fact that Plato writes a dialogue and then, in writing, has writing denounced by Socrates.

The necessity of recantation is grounded, trivially, in the ultimate untruth of anything that can be said. The unattainability of *complete* truth is a *topos* familiar to all readers of Plato, crystallized in the *Apology*'s famous "I know that I know nothing."<sup>40</sup> It appears, furthermore, that Socrates' truth, while unattainable, is at least approachable, that there is a line connecting the limited knowledge we can have to the absolute knowledge we cannot have, and that the philosophical mind can travel on this line until the distance to truth is almost imperceptible. This model underlies much of Western philosophy. Discussing Hegel and Rousseau, Plotnitsky notes that "Derrida correctly sees the metaphysics of proximity as the metaphysics of presence," and that "the metaphysics of presence is always a profoundly infinitist metaphysics, which has among its major sources Socrates and Plato." Furthermore, these metaphysics would entail that "the best philosophical minds . . . may come extremely close, even into immediate proximity to the absolute continuum of Absolute Knowledge. The *line* would still be their best model . . ."<sup>41</sup> The line, understood as a pattern of infinity and continuity, is certainly the structural principle of Socrates' most important arguments, fables, and stories, among them, for example, the parable of the cave with its movement of knowledge from the apprehension of shadows to the vision of the sun. While the idea of the line thus links Plato to Enlightenment philosophers and most thinkers beyond, it might be more fruitful to focus on the difference between these lines. While Hegel, for example, privileges the spiral that will never lead back to its beginning, Socrates' linearity, more often than not, involves circular movements (sometimes spatial, as in the parable of the cave, sometimes epistemological, as in the theory of *anamnēsis*). Even the philosopher who sees the sun will go back to the cave. There is a decisive difference, however, between the circle of the *Republic* and the analogous figure of the *Phaedrus*. The parable of the cave contains an extreme moment where the mind gazes into the sun. In the *Phaedrus*, the voyage of the philosopher's soul, read together with the teaching of *anamnēsis*, resembles a loop. The moment of hypothetical absolute knowledge, comparable to the vision of the sun, never occurs: even the most skillful of riders "just barely glimpse the beings" and "all depart after much trouble not having partaken in the contemplation of the beings" (247d–248b). No matter how often the voyage is repeated, the soul will get only so far. The line never touches the point of full intuition; while truth can be approximated, the proximity is never infinitesimal.

I will leave the graphic metaphors, for they fail to account for the tricky temporality that Socrates introduces in the myth of the soul. Progress toward knowledge is possible within the philosopher's bodily life, his mortal existence; the eternal life of the immortal soul, however, consists in a never-ending pattern of rise and fall with neither beginning nor end. If knowledge is always the recuperation of knowledge, as the theory of recollection implies, then there can be no becoming of knowledge as in the Hegelian model, only a reconstitution. Knowledge is always already there, and "there" is always already past, since recollection is always inferior to the moment that is recollected. It is important to bear in mind that this superior form of knowledge, the state recollected, is not part of discursive life, or philosophy—since the soul acquires a body only on the descent, it is a state without body, and consequently without articulated speech.

Socrates' palinode contains at its center a variation on the theory of ideas. These entities exist "without color or shape" in a place "beyond heaven." They are eternal and immutable. The truth of being is present independent of any knowledge of this truth. In fact, direct access to the ideas is denied to all human souls in bodies. The Socratic soul, however, is eternal as well, even though not immutable, and in its disembodied state it gains proximity to the ideas. When the soul acquires a body and returns to Earth, it forgets what it has seen. Only the possibility that some souls retain a faint memory of their voyage accounts for the possibility of knowledge, inscribing it into the inescapable temporality of ascent and descent. The myth of the soul contains no hypothetically atemporal moment (as far as the soul is concerned), and thus no moment of fulfilled knowledge. While it might seem at first glance that the narrative of the soul is cleanly framed by the two moments of knowledge and remembrance—where one would be the recuperation of the other—at closer inspection, neither original knowledge nor its remembrance is ever achieved.

Hypothetically, there is no way to tell whether the soul is on the ascent or on the descent, whether it is moving towards or away from Truth. Griswold paraphrases the implications for dialogical philosophy as follows:

The 'dialogue' . . . would seem to be an endless enterprise. . . . It might well seem that if the goal of wisdom or episteme . . . is not achievable, then it ought to be forgotten. For perpetual dissatisfaction scarcely seems desirable . . . Given the endlessness of philosophical conversation, it would seem impossible to distinguish between progress and regress . . .<sup>42</sup>

Subsequently, however, Griswold launches into his own recantation when he abandons this train of thought in favor of an excursion into the ethical dimension of the imperative of self-knowledge. The notion of self, however, is so deeply implicated in the infinite narrativity of the discourse on the soul, Griswold's palinode fails to exorcise the demons he has summoned: the problems affecting knowledge in general affect self-knowledge just as well, and

the points cited above may be better taken than he had meant them to be. The transitory, self-canceling quality of philosophical speech does indeed threaten to lock it into immanence, for the dialogical process does not provide any moment at which a hypothetical transition to a higher order of meaning could occur. Speech contains no caesura of metaphysical conversion, and if transcendence is to occur, it will occur elsewhere.

In order for philosophical dialogue to become metaphysically meaningful speech, then, the potential of transcendent meaning has to be intrinsic to the very first utterance philosophy uses as its point of departure. As Socrates says in the *Theaetetus*, he can never be more than the midwife of meaning; insemination must take place outside of philosophy as dialectic; philosophy, then, is infertile. Philosophical Eros is indeed nonreproductive, since, as the *Phaedrus* suggests, it gives birth only to the self engaged in it; yet, it is not masturbatory, or at least not a solitary pleasure. ‘Platonic’ love, the *Phaedrus* implies, is directed at the self, not the other, yet the other is necessary. The lover is attracted to the beloved because the image of the beloved, resembling the personal god of the lover, offers understanding of the lover’s own past, a pathway to remembrance. The lover seeks in the process a knowledge of himself that, even though it may be located in the other, is not a knowledge of him. Conversely, the beloved reciprocates only because he sees his beauty reflected in his lover’s gaze, not because of the sight the lover would offer to an unreflected glance:

. . . the ‘flood of passion’ pours in upon the lover. And part of it is absorbed within him, but when he can contain no more the rest flows away outside him, and as a breath of wind or an echo, rebounding from a smooth hard surface, goes back to its place of origin, even so the stream of beauty turns back and reenters the eyes of the fair beloved. (255c)

The homoeroticism of the passage, then, is not entirely accidental or merely culturally prescribed, even though the myth of the soul hypothetically accounts for heteroerotic engagements as well. While the man-boy encounter is not symmetrical, it does imply the possibility that the beloved can, in turn, become a lover and proliferate the process of replacements. Otherwise, the analogy between Eros and philosophy would not work. At the same time, the homosexual nature of the encounter skirts the issue of reproduction that would invariably enter the description of a heterosexual relationship. Philosophical Eros, however, must be non-reproductive since truth understood as eternal truth cannot be created. While speech can be the “offspring” of the speaker, truth, within the circular history of the soul, always either precedes or succeeds its contemplator.

Truth, then, is the ultimate object of desire if desire is defined so as to preclude, or fall forever short of, consumption. Socrates’ narrative of divine eroticism clearly spells out that the flight for truth is checked as soon as physical desire is consummated. Socrates, however, does by no means advance a