

KENNETH DORTER

The *Ion*: Plato's Characterization of Art

I

THERE IS NO QUESTION that Plato regarded art as a serious and dangerous rival to philosophy—this is a theme that remains constant, from the very early *Ion* to the very late *Laws*—but beyond this there is much disagreement. Did he respect art and appreciate its merits, or was he contemptuous and unappreciative of it? Or was he inconsistent? One reason for this uncertainty is that none of the three dialogues usually consulted for Plato's theory of art is concerned with the problem of art in its own terms. The praise of art (music) and censure of artists in the *Republic* and *Laws* are always with a view toward their advantages and disadvantages for education and the state; and the remarks in the *Phaedrus* are incidental to an analysis of *eros*. For this reason, careful examination of the *Ion* is invaluable as a vehicle for entering into Plato's thought on art: not only is it the one dialogue devoted exclusively to the question of art, it is the only dialogue which discusses art in its own terms at all.

Yet it is one of Plato's most neglected dialogues. Although everyone seems ready to admit that it is "delightful," it is not generally regarded as very substantial.¹ It is the aim of this essay to dispute that estimate and, at the same time, examine the nature of art. Even if all the themes of the

Ion recur in later dialogues, as many of them certainly do, the *Ion* gives them a unity, completeness, and unbiased perspective that is not found elsewhere in Plato.

Artists commonly make use of skills to achieve control over their materials, and skills often take aesthetic considerations into account, as in the case of carpentry. In between, there are fields in which art and skill are so closely wed that it is impossible to designate either as subordinate to the other. These are the fields generally called applied arts, such as architecture, landscape gardening, design, etc. Presumably because of this common interdependence between art and skill, there is a perennial tendency to regard art as nothing more than a specialized form of skill or experience. With this evidently in view, the question of art is approached in the *Ion* by means of an effort to distinguish it from skill or science.² This is done essentially in three sections, in addition to a prelude (530a-d) and conclusion (541e-542b). The first section (531a-533c) distinguishes art from skill or science by arguing that unlike skill or science it does not consist of universally applicable principles; the third (536e-541e) makes the same distinction, elaborating the first argument, by arguing that art, unlike skill or science, is not necessarily based on an understanding of its subject matter; the second section (533c-536d), on the other hand, offers some positive suggestions as to what art essentially is. Thus the perspective of the first

KENNETH DORTER is associate professor of philosophy at the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada.

and third sections is primarily negative in showing what art is not, while that of the second section is basically positive.

Although the second section is the positive one, it is also left undeveloped and obscure. The first and third are argued elaborately and carefully, with plenty of examples, in a lucid question and answer style, whereas the second consists for the most part of long mythic, metaphoric speeches by Socrates, with much suggestiveness and little explanation. Dramatically, the reason for the elipticity of this section is, at least in part, Ion's characteristic inability to pay attention to any poetry other than Homer's (538b8-c4). He seems unable to concentrate on Socrates' poetic discourse: after twice agreeing that artists (including rhapsodes) create when possessed and out of their senses (535a, d), he abruptly announces:

You speak well, Socrates. I would wonder, however, if you can speak so well as to convince me that I praise Homer by being possessed and mad. And I think I wouldn't seem so to you if you heard me speaking about Homer. (536d)

Here, as elsewhere (530d, 537a), he is much more eager to perform his rhapsodic art than to engage in an intellectual inquiry. The first and third sections are typical Socratic refutation, prosecuted with typical Socratic energy and thoroughness. The second section is Socrates' response to Ion's demand that he investigate the positive aspect of art (533c), and (again typically) Socrates shows himself unwilling to elaborate his own views any further than he is compelled to do by his companion's perseverance—which, in Ion's case, is not very far. This section, therefore, demands considerably more analysis and elaboration on our part than do the others, and will be saved for last.

II. ION, SECTION I

If the *Ion* is to be a work about *art*, as the second section indicates, it must be necessary not only to see Ion as representative of rhapsodes in general—he is certainly portrayed as one of the best (530b1)—but also to see Ion and the art of rhapsodizing as representative of art in general.³ But why

rhapsodizing? It is certainly not one of the most fundamental arts, not even in Plato's day. The reason lies, I suspect, in the ambiguity of the rhapsode's status. The fact that an interpretive or performing artist, such as a rhapsode, actor, musician, or dancer, is confronted not with "raw material" as a "primary" artist is, but with a finished work of art, puts him in a more complex position than the primary artist. Not only is he a creator for his audience, he is also an audience for the primary artist.

Any theory of art which does not take account of both the source and the destination, the artist and the audience, must be incomplete. Despite the fact that if there were no artist there would be no art work, the meaning of the act of creation for the artist is sometimes ignored in theories of art. But the importance of the audience should not be overlooked either. Indeed, at times the determination of the audience supersedes that of the creator: what the work means to the audience may take precedence over what it meant to the artist. The Dadaists, for example, conceived of themselves as anti-artists, but the audiences found themselves relating to Dada as to art, so Anti-art became a species of Art. What the creator created as an opposition to art, the audiences' response transformed into art. And "found art" provides us with the example of art that has an audience but no artist.

Plato's choice of the rhapsode offers him this double perspective without which the view of art would be incomplete. Ion is not only an artist but also Homer's audience, and this is of some importance in section two, as we shall see.

The argument of the present section is essentially that art is not a skill or science, because its techniques are not indifferently transferable from one instance to another, as with skills and science. It begins with Ion's admission (or is it a boast?) that his ability is limited to the poetry of Homer: "This seems to me to be sufficient" (531a). He concedes to Socrates, however, that where other poets, such as Hesiod, agree with Homer, he ought to be able to be given an equally fine explanation of what any of them say (and here we see that the rhap-

sode's art was not limited to recitation). But what about where they disagree? Ion acknowledges (thus inviting Socrates' attack in section three) that a good prophet is better able than a rhapsode to comment not only on passages where Homer and Hesiod agree about prophecy but also where they disagree. Now, since all poets speak about the same sort of things as Homer, one would expect the rhapsode to be able to speak about all poets, just as when the prophet can speak about a theme (prophecy) in some one poet, he can speak of all the others who treat of that same theme (531a-d). Ion, however, cannot do this. The reason, he says, is that the other poets are beneath comparison with Homer.

This explanation will not suffice, as Socrates patiently points out, for a skill should enable one to make qualitative comparisons and judgments within its sphere, and thus should enable one to recognize and comment on both good and bad instances of it. Men skilled in arithmetic and medicine, for instance, are readily able to judge both good and bad statements about these fields. Therefore Ion, too, should be able to judge not only Homer but the inferior poets as well (531d-532b).

ION: Then whatever is the reason, Socrates, that when anyone discusses another poet, I am unable to pay attention or contribute anything at all worth saying, and absolutely doze off; but when anyone remembers Homer, I immediately wake up and pay attention, and am not at an impasse as to what to say?

SOCRATES: It is not difficult to guess at the reason, my friend. Rather it is clear to everyone that you are unable to speak about Homer by skill or science. For if you were able by skill, you would also be able to speak about all the other poets. (532b-c)

Socrates emphasizes this point by a comparison between rhapsodizing and various forms of art criticism:

SOCRATES: Then have you ever yet seen anyone who, with regard to Polygnotus, the son of Aglaophon, is formidable at showing what he paints well and what he doesn't, but is unable to do so with regard to the other painters? And whenever anyone exhibits the works of the other painters, he dozes off, and is at an impasse, and doesn't have anything to contribute; but when he needs to show his knowledge about Polygnotus or any

other one painter you wish, he wakes up and pays attention, and isn't at an impasse as to what to say?

ION: Not at all, by Zeus. (532e-533a)

This point is extended to include also the criticism of sculpture, of various forms of music, and even of rhapsodizing. Interpretive art is thus seen to be essentially different from the related skills or sciences of criticism, including literary criticism.⁴

The critic has at his disposal certain principles or canons which can be applied at will to various instances of his special kind of art. If these principles are not applied with quite the mechanical ease with which a worker applies the principles of his craft to his material, the difference seems to be only one of degree of subtlety or complexity. Artists, however, do not seem able to do this, finding their fertility dependent on a certain kind of soil, and not generally transferable to other soils. As Socrates later points out by way of example, each rhapsode is dependent on a certain poet, who is, in turn, dependent on a certain Muse (536a-b).

Does this argument, distinguishing art from skill and science, seem justified in the case of interpretive arts, and even in that of art generally? To answer this we must test the argument against our own experience. But this task is complicated by the fact that of the two components of rhapsodizing, performance and exegesis, it is the exegetic aspect that is under consideration; whereas there no longer seems to be any performing art which has exegesis as a formal component. Performers, it is true, develop definite interpretations of their favorite artists as a result of their intimate contact with the artists' thought—rather than through the application of canons of criticism—and in this respect resemble the rhapsode (cf. 530b-c). Moreover, they are often willing and even eager to expound these interpretations, as actors and directors will discuss playwrights, musicians and conductors will discuss composers, and so on. However, this is now regarded as an adjunct to their profession rather than an inseparable function of it, and is consequently so rarely displayed in public that one cannot make any general-

zations about it. For this reason, we shall have to translate Socrates' questions about exegesis into questions about performance. This can be done, I think, without violence to the argument, since the same factors that make a performer better able to explain one artist than another would also, presumably, make him better able to perform that artist; certainly Socrates and Ion treat these two functions of rhapsodizing as inseparable in this way.

Therefore, testing this argument with regard to the interpretive arts, and art generally, amounts to asking in the first instance whether actors, for example, find themselves more adept at interpreting and performing certain kinds of roles or styles of drama than others; whether musicians similarly find themselves significantly more responsive to certain styles of music or certain composers; whether this is true of dancers; etc. In the second instance we must ask whether composers, for example, are naturally more comfortable with any one style than another, and similarly with painters, sculptors, poets, dramatists, writers of fiction, etc.

Like most generalizations about artists, answering these questions is bound to be a tricky affair. On the whole, however, I should think that Ion's case is essentially representative, though not all artists are quite as narrow as he. The Greek conception of the diversity of Muses reflects that culture's general concurrence that artists were wedded to particular styles of modes, and that the source of one such mode is distinct from that of the others. This is not to say that an artist cannot change styles, but rather that he himself must change in order to do so; he cannot don various styles at will with the indifference of a craftsman choosing the appropriate technique for a particular project.

In our own day, as well, although belief in the Muses does not figure among the cardinal tenets of our faith, we tend to speak of differences in temperament among artists, by which we distinguish both the work and commitment of one artist from another; and it seems likely that the conception of the Muses as several and discrete,

rather than as a single deity, is an expression of this factor. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner, and Stravinsky, all are composers of the first rank, but their music expresses considerable temperamental differences, so that none of them, at their maturity, would likely be very successful at expressing himself in the style of one of the others—even abstracting as far as possible from the historical differences of style. These temperamental differences are evident among performers and listeners, as well, many of whom will be unsympathetic to one or more of these composers, while not necessarily denying their genius. In the other arts, it goes without saying, these factors figure as strongly as in music.

Some temperaments, of course, are more versatile than others, but all are characteristically delimited, so that no matter how great and versatile an artist may be, his work will always be vastly supplemented (not merely overlapped) by that of others. But a craftsman, whose work consists of the application of a learned skill, may make use of its objective rules independently of any temperamental bias. That is why few, if any of us, are content to confine our enjoyment of an art form to the work of a single artist. It would require the virtual coincidence of our temperament with the artist's, as in the case of Ion and Homer. But this does not hold true of skills, for a skilled craftsman can accommodate his skill to all styles and temperaments.

This argument does not, of course, deny that there may be an interdependence between art and skill—art making use of skills and skill taking aesthetic factors into account—but only that the one can be reduced to the other. This distinction is more evident, the greater the degree in which the art or science is mastered by the practitioner. A very poor artist may have little or no inspiration, and rely almost exclusively on the mechanical application of learned techniques, in which case there is no reason why he cannot be quite versatile in the number of styles he can imitate—as, for example, a successful art forger may. Conversely, someone who has only a slight grasp of some skill may be able to apply it

only in a few isolated instances, not having sufficient comprehension of the general principles underlying it to be capable of much versatility. Thus, as the degrees of art and skill diminish, the practitioners converge in terms of their versatility. But the greater the degree in which the art or skill is present—i.e., the “better” the artist or skilled person is—the more evident is the distinction: the artist becomes more individual and distinctive (all other things being equal—as mentioned above, the individuality of some artists is broader than that of others), and the skilled person more versatile and consistent. It is perhaps for this reason that Socrates makes a point of comparing not just the artist with the skilled person, but the *good* artist with the *good* skilled person.⁵

Though this argument may serve to show that art, being significantly less versatile than skill, cannot be reduced to it, it does not tell us more definitely what art itself is. This is what, in effect, Ion now asks Socrates:

I have nothing to say in opposition to you on that, Socrates, but of this I am conscious, that with regard to Homer I, among men, speak the finest, and am at no impasse, and everyone tells me that I speak well, but not with regard to the others. Therefore see why this is. (533c)

Socrates' answer constitutes the second section of this dialogue, but, leaving that for later, let us look at section three.

III. ION, SECTION 3

At the end of section one, Ion does not object to Socrates' claim that Ion's rhapsodic ability is not due to skill, provided Socrates can satisfactorily explain this ability (533c). Socrates offers an explanation in section two, suggesting that artistic excellence is due to divine inspiration and madness, which Ion finally rejects, offering to prove by means of a performance that he is not mad (536d). Socrates declines this offer, since it would obviously prove nothing, their dispute being not as to the existence of Ion's ability but as to its source. Socrates had initially shown that art is not a skill or science (which may imply that it is therefore non-rational, i.e., “mad”) by

showing that the artist cannot apply his principles wherever he chooses, as the technician or scientist can. He now takes that analysis one step further, showing why it is that the artist cannot do this: he cannot claim true understanding of his subject, and therefore his art cannot be based on principles of knowledge. In this section we encounter arguments that are familiar to us from other dialogues: the challenging of the artist's claim to wisdom or superior knowledge, and, suggested throughout, the famous view of the artist as imitator, culminating in Socrates' likening of Ion to “Proteus taking every shape” (541e7).

Socrates begins his attack by suggesting that Ion cannot speak well on all subjects in Homer, if he is not adept at all the skills Homer speaks of (536e–537a). If Ion's rhapsodizing is a skill or science, and therefore based on principles that can be learned, i.e., knowledge, it must involve knowledge of the subjects about which he speaks. Socrates, to be sure, does not insist that there must be subjects in Homer that Ion does not understand; his point is not that the artist *cannot* understand his subject, but that he does not *necessarily* understand it—any such understanding would not be by virtue of his art (540d–e). He challenges Ion to find one in which there is no specialized expert whose skill or science makes him better qualified than the rhapsode to explain and judge Homer's treatment of it. Not surprisingly, it turns out there there is no such subject: there is always some specialized skill or science which understands any particular subject better than the art of rhapsodizing possibly could. Thus they consider chariot driving, medicine, and fishing (537a–539d), without Ion's being able to claim an understanding of any of them which rivals that of their skilled practitioners.

Since Socrates, as he demonstrates, has no trouble in showing which passages in Homer would be suitable for the prophet to pass judgment on, why cannot Ion show which are suitable for the rhapsode (538d–539e)? Obviously the challenge is unfair, since, on this analogy, the only answer Ion could make is: the (non-existent) pas-

sages in which Homer speaks of rhapsodizing. But it is important to see that Socrates is not merely diddling Ion: he is, rather, pursuing the consequences of Ion's claim that art (rhapsodizing) is cognitive, like skill or science. The attempt to treat art in the same way as the "other" skills reduces to absurdity.

Ion realizes that something has gone wrong, and tries to retrieve his position. He now says that all passages are suitable for the rhapsode to judge. No doubt in some sense he is right, but he is unable to make the necessary distinction. Not seeing quite where the difficulty lies, he tries to cling stubbornly to this position that has already been shown to be untenable. Socrates then asks him, "Don't you remember that you said the rhapsode's skill is different from the charioteer's?" (540a)—a question which serves not only to renew the refutation but also to remind Ion, by the phrase "the rhapsode's skill" (*tēn hrapsōidikēn technēn*), that the root of the problem is Ion's insistence that rhapsodizing is a skill on the model of, for example, chariot driving. If Ion were willing to admit that art is a different order of enterprise from skills such as this, there would be no need to make them mutually exclusive in this way. Ion fails to notice that and is easily flushed from his position once again by Socrates, and is once again in full retreat. He is forced to surrender steersmanship and, for a second time, medicine from his jurisdiction, and—evidently feeling increasingly humble—is willing to settle for claiming to know what a slave would say. But even this is taken from him, for as soon as the slave does anything, such as herd cattle or spin wool, the rhapsode is once again ousted by some expert (540a-d).

Finally Socrates lures Ion into making his last stand. He asks the devotee of the author of the *Iliad* whether he would know what sort of things a general ought to say to his troops. The desperate Ion sees this as his last best hope and rushes to this position, holding it at all costs, even when he finds himself faced with assuring Socrates that he, Ion the rhapsode, is far and away the best general in Greece (541b). But Ion

sees his position is untenable and when Socrates accuses him of not revealing what the subjects are at which he is so adept (541e), he does not protest.

Socrates then delivers an ultimatum. If Ion really does possess skill or science, then he must have been capable of answering Socrates' request if he wished; and his not doing so, after promising he would, must be construed as dishonesty and injustice. Like Proteus, he sought to escape by taking every shape, escaping finally in the guise of a general. Therefore, either he does not possess skill or science, and is instead divinely inspired, or else he is unjust. Socrates tells him to choose whether he would rather be considered unjust or divine. Ion accepts Socrates' terms and chooses divinity (541e-542b).

As in the *Republic* with the example of the poet, Socrates here shows by the example of the rhapsode that any pretension the artist may have to wisdom or superior knowledge is unjustified. Otherwise, as Socrates' remarks suggest, why are artists so often inarticulate about what it is that they are doing and unable in many cases to give a better account of themselves and their art than Ion did?

Ion might have countered Socrates' argument by claiming that the wisdom of the artist is genuine but non-conceptual, and does not therefore lend itself to conceptual linguistic explication. Or he might have claimed, as Socrates does in the *Republic* (428b-d), that wisdom does not mean specialized expertise but a synoptic view; he might argue then, that although his knowledge is deficient to the expert's in any particular field, what counts is rather breadth than depth, and that he may therefore claim superior wisdom of a sort. To the first claim Socrates might reply that a non-conceptual wisdom is not akin to skill or science, is therefore not "rational" in their sense, and could accordingly be described as a wisdom that is non-rational or "mad." It is only art's claim to wisdom on the model of science that Socrates opposes. As for the second claim, it might prove hard to defend if Socrates asked how a synopsis composed of deficient elements could be of much

value. But in this case what right does philosophy have to claim to be cognitive? Can it not be said of philosophy, too, that each of its fields is better understood by a specialist who devotes all his time to it—art by artists, politics by politicians, human nature by rhetoricians, and so on? Furthermore, could one not use the same argument to show that any skill or science which has subdivisions must be non-cognitive, since there would be a specialist for each of the subdivisions that constitute the whole? Thus it might be argued that a general practitioner of medicine cannot really be said to have medical knowledge, because in any given medical field there will be an expert more knowledgeable than he.

The cases, however, are not parallel. The general practitioner does have genuine medical knowledge in that he has studied the principles of medicine, but chooses to concentrate on the totality and interrelation of general principles rather than the details of one isolated branch. In so doing he performs a cognitive function different from that of any of the specialists, which is why he continues to thrive. Similarly, the philosopher requires knowledge of the various fields with which he deals, and studies them in order to bring these various pursuits together so as to understand their general principles and their relations to one another, and he thus performs a cognitive function distinct from any of the others. The case of the artist is different, however:

SOCRATES: And are you also a general, Ion—the best of the Greeks?

ION: You may be sure of it, Socrates, and I have learned that too from Homer. (641b)

Ion's notions about generalship were not derived from a study of warfare but from a study of Homer, who was not a general—nor even, perhaps, a soldier. He cannot, therefore, be said to possess the science of generalship but only derivative opinions about it, and this is evidently true of his acquaintance with the other sciences as well. This is not to deny that the artist can acquaint himself with such skills or sciences if he chooses—indeed, this is explicit (540d-e)—but rather to make the point

that such knowledge is not an essential component of art per se, as it is in the other cases. The most that is necessary for art is verisimilitude, not factual truth; and even verisimilitude can be dispensed with in certain art forms, such as in farces or non-naturalistic art. Factual knowledge may be desirable for art but not essential—it may make art more accurate and philosophically more enlightening but not more artistic, as Ion is a case in point.

One would get a one-sided and misleading view of Plato's attitude toward art if one read Socrates' attack on artists in *Republic X* without bearing in mind the esteem he shows for art (music, including poetry) in Book II (376e ff.), an esteem which he never abandons.⁶ In the same way, it would be misleading to remember the first and third sections of the *Ion*, in which Socrates criticizes the artistic pretension to knowledge, without bearing in mind the middle section, in which he balances the two negative sections with a positive characterization of art. The claim to divinity that Socrates offers Ion may be somewhat ironic in the context of the conclusion, but in the second section Socrates has shown in what sense it is justified and serious.

IV. ION, SECTION 2 (THE AUDIENCE)

We have seen that the third section casts artists in the role of imitators of a reality they do not understand. Though not explicit, the conception of art as imitation is clearly implicit and seems to have been already in evidence by Plato's time.⁷ This does not mean that "imitation" exhausts the significance of art, however, and that Plato sees art as nothing more than the mirror to which he maliciously compares it in *Republic X*. Imitation or mirroring are very ordinary affairs, but there is something extraordinary and uncanny about art. It is this uncanny aspect that section two focuses on at some length.

SOCRATES: When you are speaking epics well . . . are you then in your senses, or are you beside yourself? And doesn't your soul, being inspired, think that it is present at the actions of which you

speak, whether at Ithaca, or Troy, or wherever else the epics hold?

Ion assents, adding:

When I am telling anything pitiful, my eyes are filled with tears; but when it is frightening or formidable, my hair stands up from fear, and my heart leaps. (535b-c)

If art is a kind of imitation, it is one which does not merely mirror but transports us into another world. So much that, judged by the ordinary standards of the physically present world, our behavior during an aesthetic experience appears incomprehensible and "mad." Socrates conjures up the picture of Ion reciting sad and frightening passages from Homer: dressed in gorgeous clothing, a golden crown perched upon his head, standing amid twenty thousand admirers who not only are not trying to take away his crown or colorful clothes but will shortly be giving him their money, Ion—who is not shy—weeps and trembles with fear. Such a man, Ion must admit, is not in his senses (535d).

Thus, too, absorbed in an art gallery, would our behavior be judged sane by someone who understood only that we are staring at colors on a wall? It would miss the point also to interpret concert going as an interest in seeing people puffing and blowing and waving their arms about, and hearing the sort of sounds they make—although from a purely physical point of view that is certainly what it is. Nor would it seem sane if, becoming melancholy from reading of Dora's death in *David Copperfield*, we explained that we were saddened at the death of someone who never existed. Similarly, those who weep or tremble at movies are not generally convinced or comforted by assurances that they are watching only actors' pretense, nothing "real." It is something real, but real in an extraordinary sense, so that there is something ludicrous about the "ordinary" fact that prosperous, happy people, sitting comfortably in a theater, enjoying oral gratification with popcorn, candy, or tobacco, weep tragically over the non-existent troubles of non-existent characters.

The uncanniness of art does not stop here. When Socrates asks Ion whether he is

aware that he transmits his own reactions to the audience, he replies that he is:

For I am constantly looking down from my stage upon people weeping, or with formidable looks, or amazed with what is spoken, For I need to pay close attention to them, so that if I make them weep I shall laugh on receiving their money, but if I make them laugh I myself shall weep at losing their money. (535e)

This is surely paradoxical. How can Ion be, as he said only ten lines earlier, transported into another world—the mythical world of Ithaca and Troy—and yet be so intensely and calculatingly aware of this one? It does not mean that Ion is a fraud or hypocrite, insincere in his earlier claim to ecstatic transport, for it is a fact that performing artists must be as closely in touch with their audience as with their source material: their function is to mediate between the artist and the audience, and this cannot be consummately done without their being intensely aware of and sensitive to the audience. Moreover, it is at the very time of performing that the performer is at his best and most sensitive to the artist he is interpreting; the presence of the audience often inspires him to new heights by intensifying for him the aesthetic experience in which he is actively participating. This being the case, the performer's involvement in the physical world of the theater and in his professional duties does not detract from his involvement in the art work, as one might at first expect, but on the contrary increases it.

Why should this be? Is this paradox meant to indicate something about the nature of art? It was suggested earlier that Ion functions in this dialogue in the dual roles of artist and audience, and that, as artist, he is meant to be representative of artists in general. Can we say as well that as audience he is representative of audiences in general? To answer this we must determine whether the "self awareness" which is inseparable from the performer's professional encounter with the art work is also inseparable from that of the audience; and, if so, whether this is only a necessary evil or, on the contrary, that it somehow enhances the aesthetic experience.

In the first place there is the obvious fact

that moments exist during any aesthetic experience, during which something like total absorption and self forgetfulness seem to occur, and these moments are the ones we most value. But this is true of the performer as well, and the constant reference he makes to his audience occurs in flickering conjunction with this absorption. As for the question of self awareness on the part of the audience in general, we may first observe that it does in fact occur, leaving undecided for the moment whether it is only an unfortunate imperfection in the aesthetic experience or, as with the performer, an essential feature of it. At an art gallery we are for the most part not unaware of other people, the pressure of the floor against our feet, our movements, the design of the building, hunger or fatigue, and—not least important—our memories, attitudes, hopes, and plans that the work may call to mind or illuminate. At a concert or film we shift in our seat, deliberately postpone coughing until a propitious moment, wage surreptitious battles with our neighbors for the arm rest, are aware of the acoustics and architecture, the performers and audience, and, again, of our own memories, attitudes, hopes, and plans. And during other kinds of aesthetic experience analogous situations obtain: we find a constant flickering of our mind between the world of art work and the here and now world of our personal affairs.

The question arises again: Why should this be? Art works, as corporeal, require sensory awareness, thus admitting the possibility of sensory distraction which brings us back to ourself. But a more fundamental factor seems to be that the art world itself *intrinsically* seeks ourselves out, makes us self conscious, and thus only *derivatively* calls our attention to the physical world surrounding us.⁸ Although the kinds of physical distraction mentioned earlier would thus appear irrelevant and undesirable, they can now be understood as, in part, consequences of a self awareness that is demanded by and essential to the aesthetic experience. The world of the art work is constantly applied, made relevant, and assimilated to ourselves, and somehow illuminates, or even transfigures our memories,

attitudes, hopes, and plans. This is why the aesthetic experience is not merely escapist but edifying, and not only a rapture from without but also intensely personal and our own. It also explains the paradoxical fact of the *Ion*, that not only does the self awareness required by the performer's profession fail to prevent him from becoming absorbed in the art work, as we might expect it to do, it even seems to enhance this participation, since the performer is very likely the most intense and appreciative audience of the art work. If it is a function of the art work to apply itself intimately to ourselves, the heightened appreciation of the work by the performer is more readily comprehensible, since his personal affairs, his world, are more immediately commensurate with the world of the art work, because more inseparable from it, than are those of most of us.

Thus, when Plato calls attention to the paradoxical nature of Ion's activity, it is revelatory of something about the aesthetic experience in general not of something fraudulent about Ion. The performer, to be sure, is a special case, in that his function as audience is entwined with an additional creative function not shared by the audience in general; but the fact that the self awareness required by his profession is not incompatible with—and even enhances—his absorption in the art work, is indicative and representative of something that holds true between the art work and audience generally.

Art, then, is not merely imitation, for it infuses our world in such a way as to transform and ennoble it. But how? What is there about the world of the art work that can transmute our "ordinary" world? For one thing, the world of the art work is already a transformation, rather than duplication, of ordinary experience. In this section where Socrates is putting forth his own view of the value of art, rather than attacking art on the basis of Ion's view, he offers a simile of the artist much more revealing than the likening of him to Proteus the imitator:

For the poets tell us indeed that plucking their lyrics from springs flowing with honey, out of certain gardens and glades of the Muses, they

bring them to us like the bees, and fly like them. And what they say is true. (534a-b)

The comparison of the poet to the bee, together with that of the repository of his verse to honey, cannot but be suggestive. Between Proteus and his models, or the mirror and what it reflects, obtains only the most arbitrary and external of relations; but the relation between the bee and honey is intrinsic and necessary. A bee bringing us honey (unlikely though that event may be) is not bringing us a sample or copy of nature, but rather a transformation of nature which the bee itself has wrought. The same role is ascribed to the artist when he is compared to a bee, gathering his art from rivers of honey: his works are taken not ready-made from ordinary experience, but only from the fruits of his own catalysis.

Only this can explain the extraordinary quality of art—extraordinary not only in its effect on us but also, as we saw in the first section, in the act of creativity that brings it about. Were the artist's realm no more than that of ordinary experience, there is no reason why skill or science would not be appropriate and adequate. Its extraordinariness explains why, for example, we read the *Iliad* differently than we read a history text.

V. ION, SECTION 2 (THE ARTIST)

To consider the art work as a transformation of ordinary experience may explain why it can transform our ordinary world, but itself is in need of explanation. What sort of transformation does the artist effect in the creation of the art work? What principle can he employ if not one of skill or science, but somehow non-cognitive and "extraordinary?" In the metaphor of the bees, the streams of honey are found in the realm of the Muses, and it is the Muses that are the subject of Socrates' discourse here. They are the gods of whom Socrates says: "... those beautiful poems aren't human nor from men, but divine and from gods; and poets are nothing other than interpreters of the gods, possessed by whichever one possesses them" (534e). Art is not a human

skill or science but a divine allotment (536c),⁹ furnished by the Muse who possesses us or, if we are interpretive rather than primary artists, by the Muse possessing the artist by whom we are inspired and through whom the allotment is thereby transmitted to us (and ultimately to the audience), as the power of a magnet is transmitted through a series of iron rings (533d-e, 535e-536b).

Left in these terms, as Ion is content to allow Socrates to do, the source of the artistic power of transformation would remain hidden in theological mystery. Socrates gives two hints, however, which direct our thoughts to a philosophical alternative, both of which are present in the following passage: "... the lyric poets compose these beautiful (*kala*) lyrics when they are not in their senses; but when they enter into harmony and rhythm they become Bacchic and possessed" (543a). One is the concept of entering into harmony and rhythm (*embōsin eis tēn harmonian kai eis ton hrythmon*), which is here seen as the catalyst by which artistic creation occurs; the other is the concept of beauty, which is never explicitly brought into the discussion, but which has been constantly kept before our mind as a persistent leitmotif since the beginning of the dialogue,¹⁰ and especially in the present speech where it occurs eight times.

The concepts of beauty, rhythm, and harmony all had cosmic significance for Plato;¹¹ they pertain to the inmost essence of being. Although there is perhaps no dialogue as early as the *Ion* in which these suggestions are developed, there was ample precedence in the teachings of the Pythagoreans and others. It would require a detailed examination to attempt to elaborate the implications of harmony, rhythm, and beauty—which are not, after all, explicit themes of the *Ion*—but some general observations on the Platonic conception of beauty would be helpful. Rhythm and harmony, in turn, might provisionally be regarded as functions of beauty.¹² For instance, if we can regard beauty as a certain unity of diverse elements, perhaps harmony can be understood as the relation of these

parts to the whole, and rhythm as their relation to one another.

Just as there is an ambiguity in the *Ion's* attitude toward art—criticizing it in the first and third sections from the criterion of skilled and scientific knowledge, and praising it in the second section from that of divine revelation—not surprisingly there is a parallel ambiguity in the meaning of *kalon* (beautiful).

In the first and third sections it seems to mean, without exception, something like “accurate” or “knowledgeable.” The following exchange is typical:¹³

SOCRATES: Would you, or one of the good prophets, be able to give a finer (*kallion*) explanation about whatever these two poets say about prophecy that is the same, and whatever is different?

ION: One of the prophets. (431b)

Here *kallion* obviously means “more knowledgeable.” Unquestionably, Ion could give a more attractively eloquent or prettier explanation (and would be the last to deny it); the prophet, however, has a much greater fund of knowledge by which to explain and interpret what Homer says about prophecy, and this is what would make his account finer (*kallion*). It is this sense of *kalon* also which is consistently indicated throughout section three.

The ambiguity in the meaning of *kalon* is introduced in the statement with which Ion prompts section two: “I have nothing to say in opposition to you on that, Socrates, but of this I am conscious, that with regard to Homer I, among men, speak the finest (*kallist'*) . . .” (533c). Ion is thus willing to concede that his knowledge (skill or science) does not seem to amount to much according to Socrates' analysis, yet he remains convinced that he is the finest (*kallist'*) speaker about Homer. Socrates can supply the explanation Ion demands only if he can show that there is some sense of *kalon* that is not equivalent to “knowledgeable” in the previous sense. Accordingly, he shows that there is a beauty (*kalon*) that stems not from factual knowledge (skill or science) but from divine inspiration:

For all the epic poets who are good speak all

these beautiful (*kala*) poems not by skill, but by being inspired and possessed. And similarly the lyric poets who are good, just as the Corybantes dance when they are not in their senses, so too the lyric poets compose these beautiful (*kala*) lyrics when they are not in their senses. . . . Therefore, since it isn't by skill that they compose poetry and say many beautiful (*kala*) things about their subjects—as you do about Homer—but by a divine allotment, each is able to compose beautiful (*kalos*) poetry only about that to which the Muse has impelled him. . . . For they don't say these things by skill, but by a divine power; since, if they knew how to speak beautifully (*kalos*) about one by skill, they would be able to do so about all the others. (533e–534c)

There is a sense of *kalon*, then, which has its source in divine inspiration rather than human skill and science. Socrates' description of the artist as relaying the Muse's power, as iron rings relay the power of the magnet, suggests that art is “imitation” in a twofold way. To the extent that art presents itself as skill or science, it is a mere imitation of nature; but seen in terms of what is distinctive about art, it is an imitation of the divine. The artist may indeed translate (imitate) nature into words or colors or tones, but he is also a translator (*hermēnēs*: 534e4) of the gods. It is this twofold sense in which artists are imitators that gives rise to the ambiguous attitude, found in the Platonic dialogues, toward art. So far as art claims to understand the various subjects it deals with, such understanding is always subordinate to that of the skilled or scientific expert in the field—the imitator must always take second place to the originator. But seen as a translator of the divine into human media, the role of artist is exalted. Beauty understood as factual truth belongs to the expert, but understood as divine truth belongs to the artist, and this is the source of art's rivalry with philosophy.

If the imitation of nature furnishes art with its representational character, the imitation of the divine furnishes it with “harmony and rhythm,” and it is in this second characteristic that the distinctiveness of art lies. When we say that some work of art “works,” we are not referring to its factual accuracy but to the crystallization of its facets into a cogent harmonic and rhythmic

unity. This sense of beauty is the essential one in art, for it is certainly possible to regard an art work as beautiful even if it is representationally "inaccurate."¹⁴ It is possible, for example, to sing false statements to a beautiful melody or, put more radically, to create a beautiful poem out of false sentiments. In such a case we might distinguish between, for example, harmonic beauty and representational falseness; but though it were representationally false, one might still say that its harmony, as beautiful, must convey some sort of truth—i.e., that there is something "true" about beauty. That beauty and truth are thus somehow convertible has, indeed, been widely and often maintained, and it is very likely due to this convergence of meanings that the Greek word for beauty, *kalon*, developed the derivative sense of "factual truth" which we have seen it display in the first and third sections of the *Ion*.

Beauty in art, then, is not equivalent to prettiness or pleasantness. We might call a great tragedy or grotesque painting beautiful, while not claiming that either is in any normal sense pleasant. This is certainly the position of Plato, who is clearly no hedonist in aesthetics. Thus, in the *Ion*, the most frequent example of beautiful art is the *Iliad*, which is hardly a pretty or pleasant work, depicting as it does the most awful war of its time, full of cruelty, treachery, and scenes of blood, gore, and oozing brains.

This primary sense of beauty, which we have just interpreted as "divine truth," is developed in the *Ion* no further than its mythological characterization as "the utterances of the gods." The meaning of "divine truth" is, however, explored in certain other dialogues in a way that is illuminating to the present discussion, and which therefore merit our attention. It is always somewhat risky, in the case of Plato, to interpret one dialogue in the light of another, or to examine passages out of context, but in this case, at least, the passages are fully commensurate with the implications of the *Ion*, and may function as indications of the way those implications may be elaborated

rather than as doctrines imposed upon the *Ion* from elsewhere.

IV

In the *Phaedrus* Socrates explores the theme of truth—not, however, in the sense of factual correctness that is the province of the dianoetic and sober skills and sciences, but the "divine" truth that is apprehended only in a non-discursive, non-sober, and, therefore, "mad" intuition (244a–b ff). This is depicted as the Plain of Truth (*to alētheias pedion*: 248b6), where truth has the noetic sense of the visibility of things as they are in themselves—a sense which must be presupposed by the discursive notion of correctness, since a correct proposition presupposes a certain access to its subject. What is here visible in itself is essential being (*ousia ontōs ousa*: 247c7), of whose primary forms, such as beauty, temperance, justice, and wisdom, beauty is the only one that can be experienced directly through our senses. Accordingly, beauty is the one immediate perception that can prompt our mind to ascend to (recollect) an awareness however faint of truth and essence (249e–250d). Thus the function of the Muses, who provide man with the power of producing beauty, may be seen to be connected with philosophy (259b–d).¹⁵

The basis for this connection is Plato's conviction that beauty is a sensuous reflection of the primal order underlying the whole of reality. If we understand beauty in this way, one effect of beautiful art would be, by means of its harmony and rhythm, to illuminate its subject in the light of the underlying unity of experience, so as to bring it into a subtle relation with this unity, and thus reveal in it a significance and meaningfulness that would otherwise be lacking. This would explain the sense of "meaningfulness without any definite meaning" which the art work tends to convey. In the *Ion*, the ordering principle thus underlying reality is represented by the gods, among whom it is the function of the Muses to infuse the artist with the harmony and rhythm of this divine truth and, through him, infuse all who participate in

the work, as a magnet infuses an iron ring with its own nature, and through that ring infuses still other rings. Through artistic beauty we all become filled with the divine spirit (533e4 ff.), uplifted with an intimation of unity and a mysterious sense of significance.

Plato's ambivalence toward art stems from his recognition that the importance of art, as interpretation of the divine, cannot be overestimated, together with his conviction that the representational content of art, as imitation of nature, is all too often based on ignorance and error. The danger of art consists in the fact that these two elements are inseparably joined in a single experience, so that except perhaps in certain mixed forms, such as words sung to music, it is virtually impossible to distinguish between them in practice: the representational element in an art work exists only in the harmony and rhythm of its representation, and the harmony and rhythm of an art work exist only as the harmony and rhythm of a particular representation.¹⁶ The particular rhythm and sound of the words in a poem are inseparable from their meaning; the particular assemblage of colors and shapes of a painting are inseparable from the subject; the particular rhythm, harmony, and tempo of a piece of music are inseparable from its mood; and so on. Because of this inseparability, the beauty of harmony and rhythm tends to make one receptive to the sentiments expressed, which is one reason, for example, music was introduced into religious ceremony. Nevertheless, the beauty of harmony and rhythm has no necessary connection with the truth or falsity of the sentiments, as rhetoricians, propagandists, and advertisers have often demonstrated.

Thus in the *Republic* (601a-b), Socrates observes:

Then in this way, I think, we shall say that the poetic man colors each of the skills with names and phrases, although he does not understand them and only imitates them. So that he seems—to others like himself, who observe only from words—when he speaks in meter, rhythm, and harmony, he seems to speak very well, whether about shoemaking, generalship, or anything else;

such a great fascination do these things by nature possess. Indeed, when the statements of the poets are stripped of the colors of music, and are spoken by themselves, I think you know how they appear.

¹ A. E. Taylor, *Plato* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1956), decides that "Little need be said about this slight dialogue" (p. 38), and most seem to agree with him, to judge by the scant attention it receives in books on Plato, histories of philosophy and of aesthetics, and journals.

Since this was written, an interesting study by Allan Bloom has appeared: "An Interpretation of Plato's *Ion*", *Interpretation*, I (1970): 43-62.

² *Technē* and *epistēmē* appear to be used interchangeably in the *Ion*; see esp. 537d5-e1, 538b3-6.

³ See G. M. A. Grube, *Plato's Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1958), pp. 179-80, and note.

⁴ Although Socrates does not elaborate the example of literary criticism, he introduces it as an instance parallel to the other types of art criticism, by noting the existence of "a whole that is the skill of poetry," and he thereby distinguishes it from the non-skill (art) of rhapsodizing (532c8-10 and context). It is therefore surprising that the rhapsode of the *Ion* is often taken to be equivalent to a literary critic, and Socrates' critique of the rhapsode as a critique of literary criticism (e.g., Craig La Drière, "The Problem of Plato's *Ion*," *JAAC*, X (1951): 29; Roslyn Brogue Henning, "A Performing Musician Looks at the *Ion*," *Classical Journal* LIX (1964), 242; Jerrald Ranta, "The Drama of Plato's *Ion*," *JAAC* XXVI (1967): 219). There was, in fact, a separate tradition of literary criticism in ancient Greece, entirely distinct from art forms such as rhapsodizing (see George Saintsbury, *A History of Criticism*, vol. 1, (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1900), 9-17; J. W. H. Atkins, *Literary Criticism in Antiquity*, vol. 1, (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1934), Chap. 2; Rosemary Harriott, *Poetry and Criticism Before Plato* (London: Methuen, 1969); also G. M. A. Grube, *The Greek and Roman Critics* (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 8-9. It is Socrates and Plato, not Ion, who are the literary critics.

⁵ The artist is qualified as "good" at 530b9, c2, 533e6, 8, 535a5, b2, 536e2, 540e8, 541a3, 6, 7, b2; the skilled person at 531b6, 532a3, b3, e8, 533b2, 8, 541a4, 5, b1, 4.

⁶ E.g., *Cratylus* 406a; *Phaedrus* 248d, 259d; *Timaeus* 47c-e; *Laws* 673a.

⁷ "This conception of art as imitation does not seem to have originated with Plato (See Finsler, pp. 11)": Grube, p. 202, n. The reference to Finsler is to *Platon und die aristotelische Poetik* (Leipzig: Spingatis, 1900).

⁸ Since art is thus tied to the sensuous, and to the individual and personal, it can never remain in the realm of the purely intelligible and universal, as philosophy can; and for Plato this was surely a sign of its inferiority.

⁹ *Theia moira*; also at 534c1, 535a4, 536d3. Cf. *Meno* 100b2-3.

¹⁰ During the first substantive exchange of the dialogue (530b5-d3), variants of *kalon* occur four times; at the end of the dialogue they occur three times in the last seven lines; and they occur frequently throughout the body of the dialogue as well.

¹¹ With regard to "beauty," see the next section of this essay; with regard to "harmony and rhythm," see, for example, *Timaeus* 47c-e, *Republic* 401d-402a.

¹² Cf. *Republic* 401d-e.

¹³ Cf. 531a7. These two are the only occurrences of *kalon* in section one although there are four in

the prelude (530a-d), where its meaning varies between "knowledgeable" and "beautiful." In the third section it occurs at 538a7, b2, 540b7, c2, all in the sense of "knowledgeable." There are also four occurrences in the conclusion (541e-542b), where the meaning again varies.

¹⁴ As Socrates regards Agathon's speech in the *Symposium* (198b3 and d3-6).

¹⁵ Cf. *Cratylus* 406a; also *Phaedo* 61a, *Republic* 401d-402a, *Laws* 689d, *Timaeus* 47c-e.

¹⁶ This obviously bears a resemblance to the analysis of art in terms of form and content. Plato, however, did not use these terms, and we should be careful to avoid attributing to him aspects of that later theory which he himself does not introduce.