

Poets and Other Makers: Agathon's Speech in Context

Suzanne Stern-Gillet
THE UNIVERSITY OF BOLTON

Agathon's speech in Plato's *Symposium* is commonly dismissed as a piece of insubstantial rhetoric. This, I hope to show, is a mistake. The mistake, as I see it, lies in a failure to recognise the pivotal role that Agathon's presentation of Erōs as a universal *poiētēs* plays in the dialogue. Admittedly, Agathon's claim is both improbable in itself and incompetently defended. Yet, for all its shortcomings, it is a claim that Diotima will later endorse by reformulating it at a crucial stage of her own argument. By her reformulation and, still more, by her development of Agathon's initial claim, Diotima will provide Alcibiades with a major element in his encomium of Socrates. Later still, at the close of the dialogue, Agathon's own words will find an echo in Socrates' puzzling parting shot.

What precisely is Agathon's conception of Erōs? How is it defended? These questions will be addressed first. Once Agathon's various claims regarding the 'poetic' nature of Erōs have been clarified, their impact on the ensuing speeches can be assessed, and their significance for Plato's poetics considered.

I. AGATHON: ERŌS AS POET AND MAKER

The ambiguity of poiein

In the last part of his speech (196 D 4–197 E 8), the part which I shall here concentrate upon, Agathon asserts that, like himself, Love is a poet (*poiētēs*). Presumably to mitigate the smugness of this claim, Agathon adds that Love should not be thought of as a run of the mill poet. For Love, so he says, possesses *sophia* (wisdom, 196 D 5 and 197 A 2), and is therefore *sophos* (wise, 196 E 1). A few lines later, he will also tell us that Love is *agathos* (good, 196 E 4). How should we interpret these two claims? Are we to understand *sophia* and *sophos*, as well possibly as *agathos*, to denote no more in this context than "skill" and "skilled" in *poiēsis*, *poiēsis* which Agathon, in common with his contemporaries, views as a branch of *mousikē* (sc. *technē*)? If that is all that Agathon implies, need we take his claim about Love's poetic skill to be anything other than a vacuous assertion on the part of a vain and

precious belletrist who likes the idea of sharing, at however modest a level, in the god's activity? No doubt, this is partly what it is. But I shall argue that, in the context of the dialogue as a whole, it is also something else. I shall argue that Agathon's claim introduces a theme that Diotima will pick up in her own speech, to give it theoretical expression.

The theme in question is that Erōs is a *poiētēs*, which here means a maker, a maker whose extraordinary skill, as presented by Agathon and later by Diotima, lies in making others make. Put into modern terminology, the claim is that Love motivates gods and humans to achieve success in areas in which they would not otherwise have succeeded. Thus Agathon, most notably, commends Erōs for being the driving force (cf. ἡγεμονεύειν) behind the invention of the various *technai* by lesser deities (197 A 6—B 3). Since minds, divine as well as human, are themselves sources of agency, it follows that Love's making—or poetic—activity (*poiēsis*) is both direct and indirect. Love's causation is direct in so far as it is under his skilful prompting that a person in love undertakes certain activities. This means that whichever activity a person in love is minded to undertake has indirectly been undertaken by Love. How Love can exert such double power of agency, Agathon never tells us with any amount of precision. At times, as we are about to see, he uses the language of teaching, at others that of physiological impulses, and at yet others that of desire.

Agathon introduces his theme by noting the effectiveness of Love's impulse. Love, so he claims, can make (*poiein*) anyone into a poet (a *poiētēs*), even those who had been entirely lacking in poetic ability (*amousos*) before (196 E–3). Agathon's deliberate play on the common root of *poiein* and *poiētēs* may well strike the casual reader of the dialogue as little more than a self-indulgent pun, coupled with a literary allusion to a well-known Euripidean line.¹ But the casual reader would be wrong so to dismiss Agathon's word play. Within the wider context of the dialogue as a whole, this seemingly trivial pun foreshadows Diotima's presentation of Erōs as a *daimōn*.

Within the narrower context of Agathon's own speech, this word play introduces the theme of the motivating force of Erōs. The extravagant claim that Erōs 'makes' poets is best interpreted as flowing from Agathon's stated intention of not leaving unmentioned any aspect of Love's *sophia* (196 D 5–6). As it turns out, Agathon will fulfil this intention by outlining the range of application of Love's *sophia* rather than by describing its nature. First, he praises Love's excellence as a poet (*poiētēs*). At this point, his complacent reference to his own craft may seem to suggest that Love's wisdom lies exclusively in the field of poetry (*mousikē*). Although this would be a likely claim on Agathon's part, this is not quite the claim that Plato makes him express at

1. Euripides, fr. 663 (*Stheneboea*): "it seems that Erōs teaches a poet even if there is no music in him before," as translated by K. Dover, *Plato: Symposium*, 128

this point. As the consecutive clause makes clear, Agathon presents Love's making as pedagogic in nature (196 E 1–2). Love, he claims, “makes” a poet in the sense that he is the impulse that drives people to write poems, even if they had not previously shown any talent for poetry (196 E 1–3).

This is the point at which the ambiguity in the use of *poiētēs* is introduced. Although *poiētēs* normally means a writer of verse, the word is here taken to refer to a “maker,” namely Erōs, who can make anyone into a poet. This ambiguity in the use of the word is to continue in the next two clauses. In the first, we are told that ποιητῆς ὁ Ἔρως ἀγαθὸς ἐν κεφαλαίῳ πᾶσαν ποίησιν τὴν κατὰ μουσικὴν (“Erōs is good as a poet/maker mainly in respect of all forms of poetry/making that fall under the heading of *mousikē*,” 196 E 4–5).² The ambiguity of *poiētēs* and *poiēsis* in Agathon's usage poses problems for the translator. Do *poiētēs* and *poiēsis* here mean “poet” and “poetry” or do they mean “maker” and “making”?

If they mean “poet” and “poetry,” Agathon's statement is tautological, probably even doubly so since, on this interpretation, the lines in question should be rendered as: “Love is good as a poet ... in respect of all forms of poetry that fall under the heading of *mousikē*.”³ But then how should we translate ἐν κεφαλαίῳ? If we keep this tautology (single or double), ἐν κεφαλαίῳ, whether understood in a restrictive or a summative sense, is entirely redundant.

If, on the other hand, *poiētēs* and *poiēsis* mean “maker” and “making,” the statement is no longer tautological, in so far as it provides a measure of information. Admittedly, the information provided (i.e., “Love is a maker”) might have seemed puzzling if the immediate context had not made its meaning reasonably clear by specifying the range of Love's making. So it is that in the previous two lines, we are told that Love can *make* anyone write poems. So it is also that in the next clause, introduced by an explanatory *gar* (196 E 5), Agathon picks up, not on Erōs' own proficiency as a poet, but, once again, on a transmission of his power, justified by what may well be the earliest explicit use of the principle “*nemo dat quod non habet*.” Love, Agathon is intent upon proving, is “poetic” also in areas which have nothing whatsoever to do with music and poetry. Presently, he will name several fields in which this is so. The context of the lines 196 E 4–5, therefore, supports the translation of *poiētēs* by “maker” and of *poiēsis* by “making.”

2. Here and after, translations not attributed are my own.

3. The second tautology depends on whether *mousikē* is here used to denote “any art over which the Muses preside, esp. poetry sung to music” (L.S.J., *s.v.*, I.1 [p. 1148]) rather than, more generally, “art or letters” (L.S.J., *s.v.*, II). Since Agathon had earlier expressed the intention of honouring his own craft of tragic poetry, we may take it as a virtual certainty that, in the context of his speech, *mousikē* does denote “music and poetry.” Hence it is almost certain that his statement is to be taken as doubly tautological.

A second problem of interpretation revolves around the precise translation of ἐν κεφαλαίῳ (196 E 4). ἐν κεφαλαίῳ is often rendered by “in short.”⁴ This rendering would here have the disadvantage of excluding from Love’s ‘making’ any aspects of his wisdom other than *mousikē*. But, as we have seen, it is not Agathon’s intention to exclude them. Furthermore, since these fields have not so far been mentioned, there is at this point nothing as yet for ἐν κεφαλαίῳ to summarise. I therefore render it by “mainly,” a meaning that lies well within its semantic range.

The ambiguity in the use of *poiein* is to remain unresolved. Although the context favours the rendering of *poiētēs* and *poiēsis* by “maker” and “making” respectively, and although ἐν κεφαλαίῳ is most naturally translated in such a way as to support this interpretation (i.e., as “mainly”), it should nevertheless be recognised that Agathon’s argument trades on the ambiguity that he has built into his concepts of *poiētēs* and *poiēsis*. On the one hand, according to current linguistic usage, *poiētēs* and *poiēsis* mean “poet” and “poetry.” On the other hand, by right of etymology—*poiētēs* derives from *poiein*—they also mean, more widely, “maker” and “making.” It is precisely this semantic extension, legitimised, so to speak, by etymology, which generates the ambiguity in Agathon’s use of *poiētēs* and *poiēsis*. Whoever ποιῆ is therefore a poet, a ποιητής, and his activity, whether literary or not, can therefore be called ποίησις. Love’s capacity to turn habitually prosaic persons into poets, therefore, is but one example of his aptitude to enable others to do that which they had not previously been able to do. The ambiguity which lies at the core of Agathon’s concepts of *poiētēs* and *poiēsis* is precisely what will enable Diotima later to develop her own, philosophical, argument on the omnipresence of Love in human lives.

Agathon’s own, immediate, reasons for celebrating Love’s skill as a maker, and especially a maker of poets, however, are hardly likely to be philosophical. It may be that the thought pleases him that his recent victory in a dramatic competition was a sign of Love’s favour. It would also be in character for him to trot out the platitude that love can cause otherwise perfectly ordinary people to wax lyrical about all sorts of things. But, being Agathon, he has to dress up both vanity and platitudes. He does so by putting forward extravagant claims on Erōs’ behalf.

Admittedly, Plato’s Agathon is a muddle head. He reasons as he goes along, that is hardly at all. Although he uses appropriate conjunctions and particles of transition, his argument is made up of a number of uncoordinated jumps. Yet, for all his confusion, Agathon succeeds where Eryximachus had failed,

4. See, e.g., C.J. Rowe, *Plato: Symposium, edited with an introduction, translation and commentary*.

namely in raising questions in our minds. He prepares us for Diotima's revelations.

To describe Love's capabilities, Agathon will first use the terminology of teaching. Love, he says, who can turn the prosaic into the poetic, can therefore be described as a teacher or a poet (*poiētēs*) in the extended sense of the word: "what one either doesn't have or doesn't know, one can't give another person or teach anyone else" (196 E 5–6, tr. Rowe, slightly modified). The principle "*nemo dat quod non habet*" furnishes Agathon with the major premise in a reasoning destined to prove that Love himself possesses the *technē* of *poiēsis*:

Loves teaches the prosaic to be poetic;
 One cannot teach a *technē* that one does not possess:
 Therefore Love possesses the *technē* of poetry. (196 E–6)
 Q.E.D. (for Agathon, if not for others)

The implication of this syllogism, with which I have obligingly supplied Agathon, has to be that Love himself possesses the capacity to compose poems. According to Agathon, therefore, Love is a poet (*poiētēs*) in the narrow, non eccentric, sense of the word. Significantly, Agathon will not draw a similar inference from Love's ability to inspire others in the invention of *technai* such as weaving, archery and government. Agathon will not suggest that Love himself is a master weaver or a nonpareil statesman. Ironically enough, he will not even claim that Erōs is himself an accomplished archer.⁵ Only in the case of poetry, it seems, does Love pass on something of his own capability to those he empowers. To what extent does this difference in treatment suggest that Agathon viewed poetry as significantly different from other *technai*? Alas, there is not enough evidence in his speech to tell one way or another. From a modern scholarly point of view, this is all the more unfortunate since his answer to this question might have shed some light on his speechwriter's own, notoriously tangled, views on the matter.

Love's Teaching and Love's Touch

Agathon's use of the terminology of the classroom to eulogize Love throws up a fresh oddity in his speech:

5. The first appearance of this metaphor in the extant literature is in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, 548, a play which he is likely to have started shortly before leaving Athens for exile in Thessaly in 408. Since it was in 416 that Agathon won first prize at the Lenaian festival, any knowledge on his part of *Iphigenia at Aulis* has to be ruled out. The metaphor itself, however, could well have had currency before Euripides used it in this particular play. For the date of Agathon's victory, see A. Pickard-Cambridge, *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*, 38.

... do we not recognise that whoever has this god as his teacher (διδάσκαλος) turns out famous and conspicuous, but whomsoever Love does not touch (Ἔρως μὴ ἐφάψηται) stays in obscurity? (197 A 4–6, tr. Rowe, modified)

It is a feature of Agathon's speech that the agency of Love is repeatedly described in terms and metaphors of tactility. Love, he had said earlier, sets his abode (τὴν οἶκησιν ἴδρυσθαι, 195 E 4–5) in the souls of gods and men, touches the softest amongst them (ἄπτεσθαι, 195 E 7–8), and enfolds them (περιπτύσσειν, 196 A 2–3).

No doubt, Agathon's use of these metaphors is meant to echo Pausanias' earlier claim on the appropriateness of accepting sexual favours in return for the teaching of true excellence. We may even speculate that Agathon's words are likely to have struck his fellow diners as a pretty acknowledgement of the teaching he had received from his older lover.

If, however, Agathon's intention had been so to acknowledge Pausanias' teaching, he would, by the same token, have disregarded Socrates' earlier warning that wisdom cannot be passed on by physical contact:

It would be a fine thing, Agathon, if wisdom were the kind of thing that would flow from the fuller to the emptier of us two, when we touch each other, like the water which flows from a fuller cup to an emptier one through a woollen thread. (175 D 3–7)

The fact that the very same warning is sounded at the end of the dialogue shows its significance for Plato. Indeed, the description of Socrates' rebuff of Alcibiades' sexual advances will no doubt have been meant as, amongst other things, a rejection of the conception of Love's teaching by contact that had earlier been put forward, in various ways, by Pausanias, Agathon and Alcibiades.⁶

Teaching, "Touching" and Inspiration

Even if one were to interpret Agathon's claim concerning Love's divine touch as a colourful simile for what tends nowadays to be called inspiration, the conception of teaching as physical contact that this simile presupposes would still be profoundly un-Platonic. Teaching and inspiring are poles apart in Plato's philosophy. In the Socratic conception of teaching, as put forward in the *Meno* and the *Theaetetus*, teaching consists in reviving knowledge in, or imparting cognitive skills to, a learner who actively collaborates in the process.⁷ Inspiring, by contrast, relies upon the use of non rational means to produce an effect upon another who receives, more or less passively,

6. A similar point is made in K. Sayre, *Plato's Literary Garden*, 97–105 and 110–11.

7. *Meno*, 87 B–C; *Theaetetus*, 201 A 7–C 7.

whatever is pressed upon him. Inspiration is an undeserved and therefore gratuitous gift.

So much at least is clear from the *Ion*, where poetry is presented as the paradigmatic field of inspiration: the finest poetry, Socrates is made to claim in that dialogue, is written by poets when they find themselves possessed by a Muse.⁸ Verbs such as *katechesthai* (in the passive voice), *enthusiazein*, or even *bakcheuein* are repeatedly used to describe the process of poetic composition. *Didaskein*, in Socrates' own preferred sense of the word, is never used. In the *Phaedrus*, too, poetic inspiration is presented as a form of heaven-sent possession (κατακωχή or μανία) which stimulates a poet to rapt and passionate expression in the composition of all kinds of poetry (245 A 1–3).⁹

There is more to the issue, however, than a mere description of the poetic process. If Plato never varied in ascribing great poetry to divine inspiration, he varied in his assessment of the poet's state of mind at the time of composition. In the *Ion*, the poet is presented as a brainless hierophant, innocent of any *technē* and therefore entirely dependent on his particular Muse for the composition of fine poems of a specific genre (533 D 1–535 A 2). In other words, the poet is as undeserving as the Muse is capricious. An interpreter (*hermeneus*) of his inspiring deity, the poet may well be, but this does not make his message especially worth hearing. Indeed, in so far as the poet, through the intermediary of the rhapsode, communicates his own state of intoxication to his audience, he may even be described as an agent of irrationality.

In the *Phaedrus*, by contrast, Plato describes the poet's state of mind in broadly positive terms. He does acknowledge the existence of a *technē* of poetry, although he denies that it alone can account for the composition of fine poems (245 A 5–8). *Technē*, Socrates is made to claim in that dialogue, must be complemented by divine inspiration. As for the poet, rather than being branded a brainless and irrational bard, as he is in the *Ion* and book IV of the *Laws*, he finds himself, in the *Phaedrus*, being praised for his possession of a delicate and pure soul. The divine gift of poetic inspiration, therefore, far from being gratuitous, is deserved. Lastly, the gift itself is presented as wholly beneficent since it enables poets to instruct (*paideuein*) future generations in the mighty deeds of ancient times (245 A 3–4).

8. See also *Laws* IV, 719 C 1–8.

9. Throughout this paper, I refrain from expressing assumptions concerning the chronology of the dialogues. Although it seems likely that the *Symposium* pre-dates the *Phaedrus*, it is by no means certain that the *Ion* is an early dialogue, as is commonly assumed. For philological reasons to reject this particular assumption, see A. Rijksbaron, *Plato: Ion*, 1–8. For (some) exegetical arguments to question it, see S. Stern-Gillet, *Plato's Ion*, forthcoming, Cambridge U Press.

So much for Plato. Agathon's own ambiguous use of *poiēsis* comes again to the fore when, to show the full extent of Love's sphere of influence, he moves from *mousikē* to animal reproduction, from the high-falutin' to the down-to-earth. He introduces his point as a rhetorical question:

... as for that other type of creation, of all living creatures, who will refuse to accept that it is Love's wisdom by which all living things come into being and are born? (196 E 6–197 A 3, tr. Rowe)

Love's sphere of influence, it seems, in Agathon's scheme of things, ranges from Homer's poetry to the mating calls of animals. Unlike Agathon's previous claim, this one is clear, simple, even obvious; it has, if one may say so, the facts of life in its favour. Furthermore, the sexual impulse, as here described by Agathon, has one feature in common with poetic composition, as earlier presented: both are characterized as a force that comes from outside, bidden or not, bestows its favour, and departs as unexpectedly as it has come. Such indeed may have been Agathon's vague meaning when, earlier in his speech, he had said of *Erōs* that it "passes through the whole soul, first, and then passes out again without our being aware of it" (196 A 2–4). No *technē* is involved in this aspect of Love's activity.

Love and Desire

However, Agathon does not leave matters there. To demonstrate the power of Love, he changes tack one more time, introduces the conceptual apparatus of desire, and brings it to bear on *technē*. The elenchus that Socrates will presently direct at Agathon for his handling of the concept of desire has made this the best-known part of the encomium. At 197 A7–8, his self-confidence still undented, Agathon equates desire (*epithumia*) with love, thereby positing a premise that will be his undoing. How indeed could he possibly square this premise with his earlier claim that *Erōs* is the youngest of the gods, and king of them all (195 A 1 and C 5)? Taken together, premise and claim commit Agathon to the wildly implausible thesis that only from the moment when *Erōs* appeared amongst them was desire for the beautiful kindled in the gods. But implausibility, as we are soon to learn from Socrates, is but a minor flaw in Agathon's encomium.

Desire, so Agathon insists, could not arise as long as the hateful bond of necessity (*anagkē*, 195 C 3–5 and 197 B 5–7) held sway over the gods. *Erōs*, once he had "taken his abode in the characters and souls of the gods" (195 E 4–5), enabled them to organize their own affairs. Moved and taught by him, the gods invented all manner of *technai*, thereby enhancing their own lives and those of human beings. To *mousikē*, which had previously been mentioned, Agathon now adds archery, medicine, prophecy, metalworking, weaving, and

government. The very invention of these *technai*, he intimates, is proof of Love's beneficent influence on the lives of both gods and humans.

Unfortunately for him, Agathon fails to realize that, in this, his third and last presentation of Love's power, he has undermined the whole burden of his speech up to that point. For desire presupposes the perception of a lack, perception of a lack implies failure of self-sufficiency, and failure of self-sufficiency is, in turn, incompatible with the all round perfection that he claims for Erōs.

The failure of Agathon's last argument prompts Socrates' two-part elenchus. In the first part, Socrates leads Agathon to acknowledge that he had disregarded the logic of his basic concepts. Love, Socrates explains, is (what we would call) a two-place predicate in so far as it cannot but have an intentional object, which it strives to possess. As for desire, it is necessarily focused on what the desiring agent perceives as a lack.

In the second part of the elenchus, Socrates uses these elementary points to correct the last substantive claim in Agathon's encomium, his identification of love and desire. Surprisingly enough, neither here nor elsewhere does Socrates question Agathon's personification of love as the god Erōs, and his consequent assumption that what is true of Erōs is true of love. Instead, Socrates exposes the incoherence that lies at the heart of Agathon's claim by showing him that, if Love (Erōs) is love and desire of beauty, and if desire cannot but be of what one lacks, it follows that Love (Erōs) loves and desires 'what he lacks and does not have' (201 B 1). Agathon is forced to accept Socrates' conclusion that "Love (Erōs) lacks beauty" (201 B 4).

The stage is now set for Diotima's entrance.

II. DIOTIMA: DAIMONIC MEN AND OTHER MAKERS

Diotima will first give Socrates a dose of the very medicine that he has just been administering to Agathon. She brings two conceptual points to his attention. The proper object of love, the priestess first points out, is that which is worthy to be loved, namely "the truly beautiful" (τῶ ὄντι καλόν, 204 C 4). To the conative element that Socrates had identified in the concept of love, she thereby adds a normative dimension. The norm is objective in so far as "what is truly beautiful" is, by implication, contrasted with what is beautiful merely in the eye of the beholder. This objective norm will later constitute a crucial premise in her demonstration that the ultimate object of love is Beauty "in itself and by itself" (211 B 1). Diotima's second conceptual adjustment consists in pointing out to Socrates that Erōs is more correctly conceived as "that which does the loving" (τὸ ἐρώων) than as "that which is loved" (τὸ ἐρώμενον, 204 C 1–3). "That which does the loving" is striving to reach "that which is worthy of love"—such is the as yet unvoiced conclusion that hovers over the opening section of Diotima's argument.

Diotima's famous allegorical account of Erōs' birth is a vivid and colourful expression of her second conceptual point. Her sharp awareness of the logic of desire leads her to deny Erōs the divine status that Agathon had been pleased to claim for him. No longer the youngest and best of all the gods, or even a deity, Diotima's Erōs is a *daimōn*, sharing in both the divine and the human orders (202 D 13–E 1). Because he perpetually suffers from lack, of one sort or another, Erōs finds himself in a constant state of desire.

Diotima's next step is to draw an analogy between Erōs and human beings. Like Erōs, we, human beings, she says, wish always to possess the fine things that we lack (205 A 5–7). This makes lovers of us all, always. The conclusion is paradoxical, and Diotima is aware of it. How can it be, she asks rhetorically, that such a crucial aspect of human nature has remained unrecorded in current linguistic usage? By way of an explanation, she draws on the semantic range of *poiētēs* and *poiēsis*, the very point that Agathon had made in his own speech (205 B 8–C 9).

“Love” and “lover,” so she contends, are words that have become restricted, in common usage, to the emotional, and even sexual, relationship of one person with another, whereas the true meaning of the word, so she assures her disciple, covers a whole range of speech and activity. To support her thesis that linguistic practices are contingent upon common usage and can therefore sometimes be at variance with etymology, which she takes to be the true bearer of meaning, she invokes the following example. Like *erōs* and *erastēs*, she holds, *poiēsis* and *poiētēs*, which apply by right to a wide range of human activity, have been semantically restricted to one domain only. In its most general form, she asserts, *poiēsis* covers any production of being from non-being, whereas in common parlance the word has been restricted to the production of songs or poems:

οἷσθ' ὅτι ποιήσις ἐστί τι πολὺ· ἡ γὰρ τοι ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος εἰς τὸ ὄν ἰόντι ὁτῶρον αἰτία πᾶσά ἐστι ποιήσις, ὥστε καὶ αἱ ὑπὸ πάσαις ταῖς τέχναις ἐργασίαι ποιήσεις εἶσι καὶ οἱ τούτων δημιουργοὶ πάντες ποιηταί.

Ἀληθῆ λέγεις.

Ἄλλ' ὅμως, ἡ δ' ἡ, οἷσθ' ὅτι οὐ καλοῦνται ποιηταὶ ἀλλὰ ἄλλα ἔχουσιν ὀνόματα, ἀπὸ δὲ πάσης τῆς ποιήσεως ἐν μόνιον ἀφορισθὲν τὸ περὶ τὴν μουσικὴν καὶ τὰ μέτρα τῷ τοῦ ὅλου ὀνόματι προσαγορεύεται. ποιήσις γὰρ τοῦτο μόνον καλεῖται, καὶ οἱ ἔχοντες τοῦτο τὸ μόνιον τῆς ποιήσεως ποιηταί.

You're aware that *poiēsis* includes a large range of things: after all, what causes anything whatever to pass from not being into being is all *poiēsis*, so that the activities that belong to all the *technai* are in fact kinds of *poiēsis*, and their practitioners are all poets.

True.

All the same, she replied, you're aware that they are not called poets, but have other names; one part has been divided off from *poiēsis* as a whole, the part concerned with music and verse, and is called by the name of the whole. This alone is called *poiēsis*, and those to whom this part of *poiēsis* belongs are called poets.

(205 B 7–C 9, tr. Rowe, slightly modified.)

Diotima makes the issue appear far simpler than it is. To begin with, the lexical phenomenon that she appeals to is more complex than her words suggest. Although it is true that in pre-Platonic classical Greek, *poiēsis* can mean “making” or “fabrication,” this usage is rare, being mostly confined to Herodotus (3.22.13) and Thucydides (3.2.2.2). Furthermore, it seems very possible that it was Plato himself who later actively spread this generic use, to the extent that most of the examples listed under that rubric by Liddell, Scott and Jones are drawn from his writings.¹⁰ Whether *poiētēs* was used before Plato to refer to anyone but the writer of verse is a moot point. Admittedly, in the *Cyropaideia* (I.6.38), Xenophon writes of a *poiētēs mēchanēmātōn* (a maker of stratagems). But was the *Cyropaideia* written before the *Symposium*? Probably, but not certainly. All in all, therefore, it would appear that Plato has made Diotima exaggerate the extent of the linguistic phenomenon that she reports.

If so, why did he do so? The likely reason is that he wanted backing for the comparable generic meaning that he was making her claim for *erastēs*. Yet, in so far as analogies can only illustrate arguments, as opposed to grounding them, the support is meager. But Diotima is a hierophant as well as a philosopher, if not more so. Rather than expecting her to deal exclusively in arguments, therefore, we may also look elsewhere for the significance of her little lexical excursus.

The excursus, so I shall argue, fulfils a double function, one of which is literary and the other philosophical. From a literary point of view, it links Diotima’s speech to Agathon’s, thereby enhancing the structural and thematic unity of the dialogue. Rather than a theory of her own invention, Diotima’s presentation of Erōs as a mediator between the human and the divine orders is meant to strike the reader as a coherent expression of ideas that had earlier been airily broached by their host. The full significance of Agathon’s non-philosophical description of Erōs as a universal *poiētēs*, indirectly responsible for the making of all manner of things, from poems to woven cloth to live offspring, is revealed only retrospectively. Interpreted from the vantage point of Diotima’s speech, it can no longer be viewed as the mere diversion that it had seemed at first approach. What the reader had taken to be a parody of the Gorgianic style of a feather-brained young dramatist is in fact, in more ways than one, a foil to Diotima’s own definition of *poiēsis*. Its function in the dialogue is now seen as that of providing Diotima with an analogy in support of her own claim concerning the omnipresence of love in human lives. In spelling out the semantic assumptions that Agathon had left unvoiced,

10. On Plato’s use of *mousikē* and the derivatives of *poiein* to denote poetry, see P. Vicaire, *Les mots désignant la poésie et le poète dans l’œuvre de Platon*.

Diotima transforms his flowery but vacuous claims on Love and *poiēsis* into a highly theoretical conception of love as a universal motivational factor.

From a philosophical point of view, Diotima's excursus fulfils a double function. Specifically, it counter-balances the disparagement of the poetic function that we find in the *Ion*, the *Gorgias*, book X of the *Republic* and book IV of the *Laws*. More generally, it sanctions the use of non-rational modes of cognition in the pursuit of religious aims. By ascribing these views to Diotima, a woman and a priestess, Plato was able to avoid giving them Socratic approval and therefore, indirectly, his own.

In treating *poiēsis* in the wide sense of the word (*sc.* "making") as a genus whose species include *poiēsis* in the narrow sense of the term (*sc.* "poetry"), Plato is assuming (205 B 8–C 9) what he denies in the *Ion* and the *Gorgias*, namely that poetry is a *technē*. But Diotima's implicit inclusion of poetry amongst the *technai* carries ambivalent implications. Although the classification enables Plato to recognise that there is something that poets uniquely know, it nonetheless appears to relegate them to the rank of *dēmiourgoi* in so far as it puts them on a par with shoemakers, medical men, temple builders and all those whose professional activity is based on specialized knowledge. Should it then be concluded that, in the *Symposium*, the recognition of the epistemic credentials of poetry comes at the cost of denying its uniquely creative value? To this question, with due qualification, I shall give a negative answer, drawn from the concept of the daimonic which Diotima introduces to differentiate between two kinds of *dēmiourgoi*.

Daimones, who are many and various (πολλοὶ καὶ παντοδαποί, 203 A 7), Diotima had said earlier, are go-betweens who interpret (*cf.* *hermēneuein*, 202 E 3) gods to humans, and humans to gods. In so doing, they fulfil the important mission of ensuring "that the whole is closely bound together" (ὥστε τὸ πᾶν αὐτὸ αὐτῷ συνδεδέσθαι, 202 E 6–7). Close to *daimones*, although not participating in the divine nature, she had continued, are daimonic men (*andres daimonioi*), so called because they are experts (*sophoi*) in the *technai* of divine interpretation. Prophecy, divination, magic, ability to perform sacrifices and to cast spells, as well as knowledge of appropriate priestly rites, enable daimonic men to fulfil some of the hermeneutic function of *daimones*.

It is this specialized hermeneutic capability which sets daimonic men apart from the practitioners of other, entirely mundane, *technai*. Here is how Diotima draws the opposition between the hermeneutic and the banausic *technai*:

θεὸς δὲ ἀνθρώπῳ οὐ μίγνυται, ἀλλὰ διὰ τούτου πᾶσα ἐστὶν ἡ ὁμιλία καὶ ἡ διάλεκτος θεοῖς πρὸς ἀνθρώπους, καὶ ἐργηγοροὶ καὶ καθέδουσι καὶ ὁ μὲν περὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα σοφὸς δαιμόνιος ἀνὴρ, ὁ δὲ ἄλλο τι σοφὸς ὢν ἢ περὶ τέχνας ἢ χειρουργίας τινὰς βάναισος.
(203 A 1–6)

God does not mix with humankind. No: all communion and conversation of gods with humans, both when we are awake and when we are asleep, is through the intermediary of the daimonic. So it is that he who is an expert in such matters is a daimonic man, whereas he who is an expert in any other matter, be it in the *technai* or in handicrafts of whatever kind, is of the common sort.

Whether awake or asleep, goes the parenthetical clause above (203 A 3–4), human beings can receive divine messages. The immediate and natural assumption is that Diotima is here referring to dreams, and that daimonic men are those who can identify portents in dreams. But her meaning may taken to be wider than this, to encompass the reception of divine messages by persons who either find themselves in a less than fully conscious state, or suffer a temporary loss of their mental faculties, or operate below the threshold of rational control, or indeed are the passive objects of some form of divine possession. Well-known examples of such cases include the Pythia and other priestesses, followers of the Corybantic rite, and Bacchantes.

Poets do not figure in Diotima's list of *andres daimonioi*. Yet, Plato was not averse to attributing daimonic properties to them. In the *Apology*, the *Ion* and the *Meno*, he unquestioningly accepts the traditional association of poets with seers and soothsayers.¹¹ The above-quoted passage of the *Symposium* offers further evidence of this association, as well as a reason for it. Diotima's description of the mediating powers of *andres daimonioi* looks back (or forward) to the characterization, in the *Ion*, of the poet as a possessed go-between, through whom God speaks and addresses human beings (534 D). To see how close the two dialogues are on this issue, we need only consider Socrates' description, in the *Ion*, of the state of mind of the poet at the time of composition:

οὐ γὰρ τέχνη ταῦτα λέγουσιν ἀλλὰ θεῖα δυνάμει, ἐπεὶ, εἰ περὶ ἑνὸς τέχνη καλῶς ἠπίσταντο λέγειν, κἂν περὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπάντων· διὰ ταῦτα δὲ ὁ θεὸς ἐξαιρούμενος τούτων τὸν νοῦν τούτοις χρῆται ὑπερέταις καὶ τοῖς χρημαφοῖς καὶ τοῖς μάντεσι τοῖς θείοις, ἵνα ἡμεῖς οἱ ἀκούοντες εἰδῶμεν ὅτι οὐχ οὐτοὶ εἰσὶν οἱ ταῦτα λέγοντες οὔτω πολλοῦ ἄξια, οἷς νοῦς μὴ πάρεστιν, ἀλλ' ὁ θεὸς αὐτός ἐστιν ὁ λέγων, διὰ τούτων δὲ φθέγγεται πρὸς ἡμᾶς.

... it is not mastery that enables them to speak those verses, but a divine power, since, if they knew how to speak beautifully on one type of poetry by mastering the subject, they would be able to do so for all the others also. *That's why the god takes their intellect away from them when he uses them as his servants, as he does prophets and godly diviners*, so that we who hear should know that *they* are not the ones who speak those verses that are of such high value, for their intellect is not in them: no, *the god himself is the one who speaks, and he gives voice through them to us.* (534 C 5–D 4, tr. Woodruff, modified)

11. *Apology*, 22 A 8–B 6; *Ion* 534 C 7–D1; *Meno* 99 C–D.

Far from being competent in a *technē* specific to their calling, poets, in the *Ion*, are presented as mere channels through which the gods address mortals. Being no more than interpreters of the gods (cf. 534 E 4–5: οἱ δὲ ποιηταὶ οὐδὲν ἄλλ’ ἢ ἑρμηνῆς εἰσὶ τῶν θεῶν), poets are not even granted the full authorship of the resulting poems.¹²

The value that is placed on the hermeneutical role in the *Ion* is diametrically opposed to the value that is given to it in the *Symposium*. In the former dialogue, Plato takes the hermeneutic office of poets as a ground for denigrating them. Even the epithet *entheos* (inspired), which he there repeatedly uses to describe poets, is laden with derogative connotations. In the *Symposium*, matters stand otherwise: the evaluative connotations carried by *hermēneuein* and its semantic associates are reversed. As the lines 203 A 1–6, quoted above, testify, Diotima holds that it is a fine thing to be an interpreter of the gods, since it is to share in Erōs’ own daimonic office. By whatever means the hermeneutic function is stimulated—and it is there granted that it may be through non-rational means—its outcome is much to be prized. So much at least emerges from Diotima’s distinction between *andres daimonioi* and *banausoi* [*dēmiourgoi*], and her later inclusion, in veiled terms, of Socrates amongst the first group (203 A 4–6 and 203 D 5–8).

Such combination of terminological parallels and shifting evaluative connotations highlights the profound ambivalence of Plato’s attitude to poets since he could in one dialogue (*Symposium*) praise as wise *poiētai* those he dismisses as frenzied and irrational bards in another (*Ion*). This striking evaluative shift shows that in the *Symposium* Plato defends an intermediate position on the cognitive value of poetry, halfway between the negative characterisation of poetry defended in the *Ion* and the fully and explicitly positive view presented in the *Phaedrus*.

12. See also the *Laws*, book IV: “There is, O lawgiver, an ancient saying—constantly repeated by ourselves and endorsed by everyone else—that whenever a poet is seated on the Muses’ tripod, he is not in his senses (*ouk emphrōn*), but resembles a fountain, which gives free course to the upward rush of water; and, since his art consists in imitation, he is compelled (*anagkadzetai*) often to contradict himself ... and he knows not which of these contradictory utterances is true” (719 C 1–8, tr. Bury). Be it noted that although in both the *Laws* and the *Ion*, Plato denies that the inspired poet is “in his senses,” he none the less grants him the possession of a *technē* in the *Laws*, a possession that he had denied him in the *Ion*. Furthermore, even within the context of a single work, Plato wavers on the issue of the cognitive worth of poetry since, in book III of the *Laws*, he goes as far as presenting inspiration as a guarantee of historical truth: “being divinely inspired in its chanting, the poetic tribe, with the aid of the Graces and Muses, often grasps the truth of history (*alētheian gignomenōn*)” (682 A 3–5, tr. Bury).

III. ALCIBIADES: IN PRAISE OF SOCRATES

The account given above of Agathon's and Diotima's speeches helps, in turn, to clarify one of the more puzzling features of Alcibiades' encomium of Socrates.

When Alcibiades describes the effect that Socrates produces upon his listeners, he makes striking use of the vocabulary of possession. Thus he recounts being entranced (cf. 215 C 5 and D–6, κατέχεσθαι and ἐκπεπλήγμενος) by Socrates' words, as others are possessed by the "power that comes out of Marsyas' mouth" (215 C 1–2), even when mediated through the mediocre rendering of a third-rate flautist. The trance of the Corybantes, Alcibiades further claims, is nothing compared to what he experiences when listening to Socrates (215 E 1–2): his heart leaps, he weeps—and he is not alone, everyone else reacts in the same way (215 E 2–4). Being at the receiving end (cf. 215 E 5, πάσχειν) of Socrates' daimonic speech, Alcibiades reports, is like being under a spell. His assent is forced out of him (cf. 216 A 4–5, ἀναγκάζειν), so much so that he is little better than a slave to Socrates' words.

Taken only so far, Alcibiades' description of the mesmerizing effect of Socrates' speech is a pretty exact match for Socrates' own account, in the *Ion*, of the ecstasy that the recitation of poetry induces in the audience. There, too, Socrates speaks of possession; there, too, he highlights the passivity of poet and audience when receiving the divinely poetic word through the rendering of inspired rhapsodes; there, too, he compares the poet's audience to Corybantian worshippers, who dance themselves senseless.¹³

But the truth of the matter is that, for all their similarities, the two accounts differ in one crucial respect. Far from generating mindlessness and thoughtlessness, Alcibiades notes that ecstatic enslavement to Socrates' words induces moral shame in him. Under Socrates' influence, he is brought to realize the extent of his self-neglect. So it is that, while the poet's words, in the *Ion*, induce mindlessness, Socrates' words, in the *Symposium*, prompt heightened self-consciousness. While the poet's compositions, in the *Ion*, causes his listeners to become *ecphrones*, to take leave of their senses, Socrates' daimonic discourse, in the *Symposium*, improves the souls of those who hear it by prompting them to turn upon themselves and engage in self-scrutiny.

Once again, therefore, we note that while the evaluative charge that Plato places on the daimonic is mostly negative in the *Ion*, it is entirely positive in the *Symposium*.

13. For a discussion of the vocabulary of possession in Plato's *Ion*, see Stern-Gillet, "On (Mis)interpreting Plato's *Ion*," 177–82.

IV. AN UNRECORDED ELENCHUS

When Socrates is present, however, few conclusions can ever be drawn in black and white. The above conclusion is no exception.

At the close of Alcibiades' speech, the party breaks up. A number of guests, including Aristodemus, fall asleep. When he wakes up, at dawn, he sees that Socrates is still conversing with Agathon and Aristophanes, who are about to nod off. As he recalls the scene:

τόν οὖν Σωκράτη αὐτοῖς διαλέγεσθαι καὶ τὰ μὲν ἄλλα ὁ Ἀριστόδημος οὐκ ἔφη μεμνηῖσθαι τῶν λόγων – οὔτε γὰρ ἐξ ἀρχῆς παραγενέσθαι ὑπονουσάζειν τε – τὸ μέντοι κεφάλαιον, ἔφη, προσαναγκάζειν τὸν Σωκράτη ὁμολογεῖν αὐτοὺς τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἀνδρὸς εἶναι κωμωδίαν καὶ τραγωδίαν ἐπίστασθαι ποιεῖν, καὶ τὸν τέχνη τραγωδοποιῶν ὄντα <καὶ> κωμωδοποιῶν εἶναι. (223 C 6–D 6)

Well, Socrates was conversing with them; Aristodemus said he didn't remember the rest of what was said—for one thing he hadn't been there from the beginning, and for another he was nodding off—but the gist of it, he said, was that *Socrates was also forcing them to agree that it belongs to the same man to know how to compose comedy and tragedy, and that he who is a writer of tragedies by technē is also a writer of comedies.* (tr. Rowe, modified, my emphasis)

Whatever interpretation is put on the puzzling second part of this sentence, it needs to take account of the disclaimer voiced in the first part: Aristodemus' account, we are told, may not have been wholly accurate since, by his own admission, he was befuddled with sleep at the time. Hence it could well be that Socrates did not *quite* say what Aristodemus seems to remember him saying. From that point onwards, therefore, the reader intent upon closure must engage in speculation.

However, the text provides clues. The use of the verb προσαναγκάζειν, for instance, in the above sentence, and of ἀναγκάζειν, three lines later, is significant. While Alcibiades had described the power of Socrates' speech as working its effects on the emotions and the conscience of his interlocutors, Aristodemus presents it as compelling their reason. Furthermore, Socrates' provocative claim may be taken to refer back to the words spoken by Agathon in 196 E 4–5: ποιητῆς ὁ Ἔρως ἀγαθὸς ἐν κεφαλαίῳ πᾶσαν ποίησιν τὴν κατὰ μουσικὴν (“Love is good as a maker mainly in respect of *all* forms of making that fall under the heading of *mousikē*”). Lastly, in speaking the lines 223 D 3–6, Socrates is made to assert what he denies in the *Ion*. Since poets, he says here, do not possess a *technē*, they are not able to excel in more than one genre of poetry:

Therefore, as it is not by *technē* that, when dealing with their various subjects, they [poets] make and speak the many fine things that they do, as is so with you when you are dealing with Homer, but as a result of a divine dispensation, it follows that each one

of them is capable of succeeding in only the one thing that the Muse has impelled him to, one dithyrambic poetry, another encomia, another choral poetry, another epic, and another iambic verse. In other genres each of them is useless. (534 B 7–C 5)

Commenting on the discrepancy between Socrates' claim at the end of the *Symposium* and the above quoted lines of the *Ion*, Kenneth Dover wryly notes: "... reconstruction of the form it [i.e., Socrates' argument in 223 D 3–6] might take is a useful exercise for students of ancient philosophy."¹⁴ Unfortunately, Dover himself did not undertake this tantalizing little exercise. Here, for what it is worth, is my version of it.

The lines in question, so it seems to me, are best interpreted as alluding to the issue, central to Plato's poetics, of poetry's cognitive status. In the *Symposium*, as we saw, it is consistently assumed that poetry—*poiēsis* in the narrow sense—is a *technē*. In the *Ion*, as we also saw, this assumption is challenged. The whole issue, of course, is of especial concern to the addressees of Socrates' present remark, Agathon and Aristophanes, who are both poets but cultivate only one literary genre each. Socrates, therefore, could anticipate that the claim that he was about to put forward would meet with resistance on their part. Readers of the dialogue, therefore, are not surprised to learn from Aristodemus that Socrates had to "force" (προσαναγκάσειν) his point upon them. Clearly, had it not been for the sleepiness of the opposition, a Socratic elenchus would have been under way.

In my fictional reconstruction of it, the elenchus proceeds as follows. Socrates begins by securing the assent of Agathon and Aristophanes to the proposition that poetry is a *technē*. Heavy-eyed, they both nod in agreement. Socrates then points out, using terminology and arguments familiar from the *Ion*, the *Meno*, the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias*, that a practice cannot be classified as a *technē* unless it meets certain criteria.¹⁵ One of these criteria is compliance with rules and principles that are specific to the *technē* in question and apply throughout its entire field. Since it is a matter of definition that rules and principles are general or, at least, amenable to generalization, it follows that they can be extrapolated from an example of the *technē* in question and applied to the production of another example of it.

Socrates then brings this conceptual point to bear upon the case at hand. If poetry is to rank as a *technē*, he infers, any poetic composition must exemplify some at least of the principles that differentiate poetry from all other *technai*. By now, Agathon and Aristophanes have grown suspicious but are prevented by drowsiness from second-guessing the direction that Socrates' argument is taking. They remain silent, thus enabling Socrates to press his

14. Dover, *Plato: Symposium*, 177.

15. For a list of the criteria, see Stern-Gillet, "On (Mis)interpreting Plato's *Ion*," 182–90.

advantage by drawing the practical consequences of his premises. From the rule-governed nature of *technē*, it follows that competent exponents of any particular genre of poetry should be able to turn their hand to any other particular genre of poetry. As indicated by his use of ἐπίστασθαι in 223 D 4, Socrates considers that the extrapolation of rules from a poetic genre and their application to another is a matter of cognitive expertise. Do Agathon and Aristophanes possess such expertise? To this question, which hangs in the air as the elenchus unfolds, a negative answer suggests itself.

Sensing blood, Socrates is now about to clinch his argument: no writer of tragedies who does not also write comedies, he asserts, can claim to possess the *technē* of poetry, and no writer of comedies who does not also write tragedies can claim to possess the *technē* of poetry. This proposition puts him in a position to trap our two playwrights in a dilemma. Because neither of you will renounce the claim of possessing a *technē*, he tells them, you cannot limit your expertise to a single genre. You, Agathon, must, in all consistency, write comedies. You, Aristophanes, must, in all consistency, write tragedies. However, if you persist in cultivating only one dramatic genre, your claim to possess the *technē* of poetry cannot be sustained.

At this stage of the morning after the night before, even this informal little dilemma is beyond Agathon and Aristophanes. As for Socrates, who knows what may have been in his mind at the time? Was it that there is, after all, no *technē* of poetry? Or might it have been that each poetic genre has its own *technē*? Socrates was never one for closure.¹⁶

16. An earlier version of this paper was read at the *Fifth Symposium Platonicum Pragense* in 2005 and is scheduled to be included in its proceedings, to be edited by A. Havlíček and M. Cajthaml. Thanks are due to Denis O'Brien, Anne Sheppard and Christopher Strachan for their willingness to engage constructively with some of the issues discussed in the present, more elaborate, version of the initial paper.

WORKS CITED

- Burnet, John, ed. *Platonis Opera*. 5 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900–1903.
- Bury, R.G. *The Symposium of Plato, edited with introduction, critical notes and commentary*. Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1909.
- Denniston, John D. *The Greek Particles*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954.
- Dover, Kenneth J. ed. *Plato: Symposium*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- Hackforth, R. *Plato's Phaedrus, translated with Introduction and Commentary*. Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1952.
- Liddell Henry G., Scott, Robert, Jones, Henry S. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940.
- Pickard-Cambridge, A. *The Dramatic Festivals of Athens*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953.
- Rijkbaron, Albert. *Plato Ion Or: On the Iliad*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007.
- Rowe, Christopher, ed. *Plato: Symposium, edited with an introduction, translation and commentary*. Warminster: Aris and Phillips Ltd, 1998.
- Sayre, Kenneth M. *Plato's Literary Garden*. Notre Dame, Indiana: U of Notre Dame, 1995.
- Stern-Gillet, Suzanne. "On (Mis)interpreting Plato's *Ion*." *Phronesis*, vol. XLIX, no 2, 2004.
- Vicaire, P. *Les mots désignant la poésie et le poète dans l'œuvre de Platon*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964.
- Woodruff, Paul. *Plato: Two Comic Dialogues: Ion and Hippias Major*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983.

