

## Interpreting Plato's *Io*

The plot of the dialogue appears straightforward. Socrates sets out to prove that rhapsodes, rather than having *technē*, are divinely inspired, and in the end, we see that Io is obliged to agree. On this impressionistic reading, Plato would appear to be a traditionalist, presenting poets as they had long portrayed themselves, as mouthpieces of the Muse. The question immediately arises, however, why Plato would devote an entire dialogue to what is little more than a traditional truism. A further unavoidable but unsettling question is why the arguments Socrates provides are so appalling, even by the standards of a Homeric poet.

The apparent simplicity belies a precise and exacting sophistication from the outset. Socrates and Io meet as if by chance in Athens, and the opening exchange does not seem out of the ordinary until we begin to consider the motivations behind what is said. Io is intent on appearing good to his audience of one, while Socrates withholds, and then diminishes, the praise Io thinks he deserves. Socrates at first pretends not to know that Io has recently won prizes for rhapsody at the prestigious Asclepieia in Epidaurus, and takes more interest in the existence of rhapsodic competitions there than in Io's victories. He then appropriates Io's glory by emphasizing that Io, as a citizen of the Athenian-controlled city of Ephesus, competes on behalf of Athens, and further undercuts his success by expressing the hope that Io will bring glory to Athens at the upcoming Panathenaea, in which he is evidently intending to compete. Socrates, evidently already aware of the character of the rhapsode, strings Io along by providing just enough praise for him to feel, if he so chooses, that it is worth continuing the conversation since he appears good to his audience, while at the same time offering enough of a corrective for him to recognize, if he so chooses, that striving for reputation is folly.

Io, with mock humility and in the traditional stance of Homeric poets, places his trust in the will of a god that he will win first place at the Panathenaea (530b4). In reality, he relies on his undisputed ability to influence the judges; but Socrates will exploit this apparent reliance on divine power to undermine Io's claim to a *technē*.

That rhapsody is actually a *technē* is implied by Io's observation that the Asclepieia includes competitions not only in rhapsody but in the rest of *mousikē* as well. The feminine singular adjective is usually taken to agree with an understood *technē*, making rhapsody an

aspect of a more general *technē*, and therefore a *technē* itself. However, there is no compelling reason, beyond common usage, to assume that the feminine noun described by *mousikē* is *technē*. It could, for example, be *dunamis*, a “power”, which is how Socrates interprets it in the current conversation, since the literal meaning of *mousikē* as “pertaining to the Muse” is exploited by Homeric poets themselves when they bid the goddess sing through them.

At this early stage, however, Socrates appears to accept that rhapsodes possess a *technē*. He claims to envy their *technē* for three main reasons: (1) their bodies are ornamented and they themselves appear most fine; (2) they spend time among all the poets, the good ones, and especially with Homer, the best and most divine of poets; (3) they thoroughly learn not only the utterances of Homer, but also his *dianoia* (530b5–c1).

It would seem that all Greeks of the Classical period regarded Homer as a historical figure, although the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and several other works attributed to Homer are the products of centuries of oral tradition. Even the poems in their final form may not have been the work of one poet; the modern scholarly consensus is that several decades intervened between the writing down of the *Iliad* and the writing down of the *Odyssey*, around the second half of the eighth century. It is clear that the poets who arranged each poem in its final form may well have had an overall intent, as declared in the initial lines of each poem, but we cannot escape the fact that the poems are a patchwork of earlier smaller poems. Socrates appears to assume that Homer has an overall intent, not only in each poem, but throughout the entire corpus. It cannot be decided here whether Plato or his Socrates discerned an overarching intent in Homer; but Plato’s Socrates says this to Io, who does not object, suggesting that we are to understand that Io claims that he understands the intent of Homer. What Io does say of his own volition, a little later, is that he has worked hard on the intents (plural) of Homer, which is actually more in line with modern Homeric scholarship. Nowadays, the Homeric poems tend to be picked apart into perceived earlier and smaller poems by different, unknown, poets.

By claiming to envy the rhapsodes, Socrates is able to raise points which Io may take to be objects of admiration, but which Socrates merely wants him to register as the

conversation progresses. Appearing to be good is not the same as being good. Io, as we have seen, wishes to appear most good, and Socrates once again detracts from his reputation by including all rhapsodes among those who appear most fine. To admire rhapsodes for basking in the glory of the poets, or simply for enjoying their company, is also to trivialize the immense effort required to learn tens of thousands of lines of poetry by heart. This effort appears almost as an afterthought in Socrates' list of things to envy, when he introduces the third point. Yes, the rhapsodes thoroughly learn the utterances of Homer, that is, the lines themselves; but more importantly, they learn Homer's *dianoia*.

This "thinking-through", or intent, is the term at the heart of the dialogue. To orient the reader, it may be said already that Io's intent is to appear expert and best at interpreting Homer's intent in one or other episode, to the extent that he can perform the piece with the correct emotional effect on an audience. The intent of Socrates, by contrast, is to change how Io thinks, from a form of thinking-through which is geared to making him appear the best, to the dialectical and beneficial form of thinking-through. Socrates shows himself to be well-versed in Homer, but he evidently has no desire to appear good to his audience by expounding the intent of Homer or anyone else.

In his explanation of the rhapsode's *dianoia*, Socrates states that a good rhapsode must know what the poet means, and must become an interpreter of the poet's *dianoia* for the listeners. The emphasis here falls on the purpose of interpretation: rhapsodic interpretation is not for the rhapsode's direct benefit, but for the audience. The indirect benefit to the rhapsode lies in appearing most fine, which we now see is not limited to physical ornamentation, but extends to the rhapsode appearing just as *sophos* as the poet. All these points are gradually stripped from the agency of the rhapsode (and the poet) as the conversation progresses.

Io now has a chance to respond: "What you say is true, Socrates. For me, at any rate, this aspect of the *technē* (sc. mastery of the *dianoia*) has required the greatest effort, and I think that I speak best of all men about Homer, so that neither Metrodorus of Lampsacus nor Stesimbrotus of Thasos nor Glauco nor anyone else ever born has been able to say so many and such fine *dianoiai* about Homer as I do." (c7–d3). He begins by reasserting what Socrates had trivialized in his *technē*, then corrects the impression that all Homeric rhapsodes appear

equally excellent, and ends with a statement which reveals, by his use of the plural, that his notion of *dianoia* is indeed restricted to the compartmentalized interpretation of individual passages for an audience, rather than to a holistic grasp of an entire poem. “Saying intents” sounds strange even in the Greek, but *Io* means that he is reciting the episodes with the appropriate performative embellishments, which only a rhapsode who understands Homer inside out would be able to do.

From what he now says, we might think that Socrates wants to hear *Io* perform a piece of Homer: “You speak well, *Io*; it’s clear you won’t begrudge me a demonstration” (d4–5). *Io* manifestly takes this to be Socrates’ intention: “And indeed it is worth hearing, Socrates, how well I have ornamented Homer! To such an extent that I think I am worthy to be crowned with a golden crown by the Homerids” (d6–8). *Io* is not so much boasting as already beginning his demonstration, an act of self-promotion. His goal is to impress Socrates with not only his acknowledged but also his anticipated reputation: he predicts that he will be judged the best by what he evidently considers a prestigious guild of Homeric rhapsodes at the Panathenaea, thereby returning to himself the glory of winning the first prizes Socrates had also wished him to acquire, but for Athens.

Socrates, however, stops him in his tracks: “And indeed I shall make time to listen to you at some point, but now answer me just this much. Are you terrific at Homer alone, or also at Hesiod and Archilochus?” (530d9–531a2). Had Socrates wished to examine *Io*’s understanding of Homer’s *dianoia*, he would surely have accepted the demonstration, especially since it was he who had asked for it. He evidently has no need of such a performative display. This is our first indication in the dialogue that Socrates is interested in *Io*’s capacity for a different kind of *dianoia*.

The opening question of Socrates’ interrogation begins a concerted attack on *Io*’s claim to have the rhapsodic art (*rhapsōdikē technē*). As we shall see, the concerted attack takes the form of repeated claims that the poets and the rhapsodes, together or singly, lack *technē* at the very moment that they are performing, with a variety of spurious arguments in support of these claims. This first movement (531a1–531b11) effectively treats *Io*’s *technē* as an art of judging (*technē kritikē*), although this is never made explicit. As Socrates presents

the matter, the ability to distinguish better and worse performances within a given field entails possession of that field's *technē*. It is the possessor of the mathematical art who can judge who is good or bad in mathematics; it is the possessor of the medical art who can judge who is good or bad in medicine. On this model, a distinct *technē kritikē* is not merely redundant but impossible, since judgement (*krisis*) collapses into possession of the judged person's *technē*, be it mathematics, medicine, or anything else. By this criterion, the rhapsode is of course less competent to judge than the practitioners in any of the domains touched upon in the poems. Socrates thus shifts attention, without argument, from rhapsodic performance (including diction, style, form, pathos, bathos, and related features) of a poet's work, to the technical content of what is said by characters or described by the poet. Interestingly, Socrates secures Io's assent at each step of the enquiry.

It is already a foregone conclusion that the rhapsode will be inferior in judging what is said about any particular *technē* to any practitioner of that *technē*. Socrates hardly needs to add the point that poets touch on a wide range of *technai*, necessitating a competence in all these *technai* which no one (apart from Plato's Hippias, the expert Jack-of-all-trades in *Hippias Minor*) could attain. We may note in passing that Homer does not discuss anything, whether technical or not. Rather, it is either a character in a poem who may say something technical, or a poetic description which may touch upon a subject that could be assigned to a *technē*. Homer in general is an amalgam of the heroic tradition of oral poetry, rather than a product of the other arm of oral poetry, commonly known as "wisdom literature", of which Hesiod is a prime example. It should be noted that Io objects neither to the rhapsode's characterization as a judge, nor to all poetry being treated as "wisdom literature".

Rhapsody seems to have been shown not to be a *technē*, although Socrates has actually shown only that it is not a *kritikē technē*. He continues, however, with the same criterion, to argue the same point yet again, while subtly adding other observations. An expert in a given *technē* would be able to judge all poets alike with respect to that *technē*. Io is unable to do so. He is terrific (*deinos* 531c2, 532b3) at interpreting Homer, yet entirely unable to engage with other poets, indicating that he lacks all the *technai* relevant to the subjects they treat. By sleight of hand, Socrates has allowed Io to believe that he does have

some power of judgement with regard to Homer's use of *technai*, but that this ability is not due to *technē*, since he cannot judge how other poets speak regarding the same *technai*.

Simply because the rhapsode shows no interest in poets other than Homer, Socrates again reaches the extreme and false conclusion that Io lacks any *technē* whatsoever. More precisely, Socrates claims that Io cannot speak with *technē* and *epistēmē* in regard to Homer, since, if he possessed an art of poetry (*technē* ... *poiētikē* 532c7–8), he would be able to speak in regard to all poets alike. Here, Socrates collapses the various *technai* touched upon by poets into a single *technē* of poetry, as if this were an art of arts; he also appears to expect a rhapsode to be able to recite any poet at all with the same standard of interpretation which he shows with Homer. Io's ready assent to this conclusion (b8–c10) shows that he is more concerned with preserving his status as the best interpreter of Homer - a status which Socrates appears to reinforce by calling Io terrific and the best at it - even at the expense of appearing not to possess any *technē* whatsoever.

The analogy with mathematics, on which the argument depends, breaks down at a crucial point. The mathematician does not judge how others speak about mathematics, but whether what they say is correct; the object of judgement is the content itself. By contrast, the rhapsode would not judge, were he to do so, the technical correctness of what is said by a rhapsode, but its quality and effectiveness as the basis for performance, whether his own or that of another. Furthermore, the *poiētikē technē* just mentioned by Socrates concerns the composition of poetry, while the *rhapsōdikē technē* pertains to the performance of that poetry, in both cases, irrespective of the technical accuracy of the poem's contents; but Io appears not to notice.

Having purportedly established that Io possesses neither *technē* nor *epistēmē*, Socrates asks whether Io would like an explanation. Io readily, even enthusiastically, agrees, remarking that he enjoys listening to "you *sophoi*", thereby implicitly aligning Socrates with the sophists. He appears to expect an enjoyable discussion of his excellence, rather than a rebuke for lacking all *technē*.

Socrates immediately reflects the epithet of *sophoi* (= experts at a *technē*) back upon Io and the rhapsodes more generally. They, he suggests, are the *sophoi* (despite lacking

*technē*, the very point Socrates is arguing for) along with the poets whose works they perform, whereas he himself is but a simple man, capable only of stating the truth plainly (as if truth is not a basic element in any *technē*). This statement, not opposed by Io, confirms that Io basks in the reflected apparent expertise of Homer, while in fact all he should claim credit for is his interpretation of the poetry for its emotional effect on the audience. Socrates sophisticatedly presents himself as a plain speaker of truth, while implying that poets and rhapsodes do not deal in truth without embellishment, leaving it unclear whether they deal in embellished truth or in no truth at all.

Io presents his self-glorifying observation as a problem, that he is excellent at interpreting Homer but bored by other poets and their interpreters. Socrates exploits the opportunity to claim once again that Io does not have a *technē* of rhapsody, by offering to explain the principle that someone who possesses a *technē* would be able to judge the merits of anyone at that *technē*, and not just one individual, even if it is Homer. Having offered to provide an explanation, however, Socrates provides only examples from two other *technai*, painting and sculpting, and Io, as respondent, agrees that no one in either of these two fields would be at a loss for words when judging any painter or sculptor. Whether this is actually true is not called into question. Even were it the case, a painter or sculptor should be compared with a poet, not a rhapsode, while an art critic of painting or sculpting would have been a better analogy for a critic of poetry, but again, missing the way that a rhapsode actually judges poetry for the sake of the performance of that poetry.

Still, this is good enough for Io, who once again accepts that he does not possess a *technē*, so long as he appears to Socrates to be an excellent rhapsode. Io himself reemphasizes that he is conscious of being *kallistos* (most fine) concerning Homer, and is left with the unresolved question why he can speak so well about Homer, yet has nothing to say about other poets. On both points, his excellence in interpreting Homer and his inability to interpret other poets, he appeals to what “all other people” say (533c5–8). Io is concerned not only with appearing good to the many, but with appearing the best to them in his limited field, and he is again prepared to appear to lack a *technē* so long as Socrates continues to admire him.

Socrates now purports to explain Io's strange fixation on Homer, but actually only exploits the fixation, like a broken record, to demonstrate once again that Io lacks *technē*. He provides what can only be described as a poetic account in prose of poetic and rhapsodic activity, employing poetic idioms in a haphazard and often absurd manner, held together only by the central claim that the poet lacks *nous* precisely at the moment of composition, and the rhapsode lacks *nous* precisely at the moment of performance.

The first movement (533c9–e5) of this poetic account emphasizes that Io does indeed speak well, but that his ability is due not to *technē* but to a divine power (*theia dunamis*) which comes to him from the poet and moves (*kinei*) him. To illustrate this, Socrates compares the process to a magnet attracting iron rings, providing them with the same attracting power: the Muse similarly inspires others to inspire others. We should note that Socrates delivers this account in the manner of a poet, albeit in prose. He announces that he is “coming, about to reveal”, adopting the performative tone of a priest in a mystery ritual. In speaking thus, Socrates places himself in the role of the poet and Io in that of the rhapsode being invited to judge him, as if the very process he describes were being enacted before us.

For a brief orientation before we continue with the account, I should say that Socrates himself is not without *nous*: his *dianoia* consistently guides the exchange, even if only to claim repeatedly, with questionable proofs, that Io lacks *technē*. His apparent dialectical intent in the conversation is consistent, as the constant repetition of the claim appears to be an attempt to make Io aware of the tension caused by wishing to appear excellent to an audience determined to see nothing of value in him, not even a *technē*, were he indeed to be an empty vessel controlled by the Muse, rather than an expert who has worked hard at his *technē*. Io recognizing the dissonance would be a step in the right direction, but beyond this, it would seem that Socrates is attempting to expose Io to a simple and explicit but extended *dianoia*, with a view to activating Io's own *dianoia* which until now has been employed only in the effort to make Io appear to be an expert, through memorizing and thinking through Homeric episodes in such a way as to perfect the performance of them for the delectation of admiring audiences.

Socrates evidently fails, since Io will continue to think of how he appears to others

even at the end of the dialogue. It would seem that instead of recognizing the dissonance set up between his own need to appear good and Socrates' repeated claim that he lacks *technē*, Io judges Socrates' account as he normally does, by paying attention to each argument or episode for its performative effect, missing entirely the consistent dissonant *dianoia* of the account. That Io does eventually reject Socrates' claim that the rhapsode lacks *technē* is not due to Io thinking through the whole account, but to his lived experience that he does actually have *technē*.

Returning to the account, we may appreciate Socrates' attempts to use poetic imagery as a device to persuade Io that he lacks *technē*. The poets are shown not to have *technē*, and the magnet analogy connects the poets' lack of *technē* with the rhapsodes' lack of *technē*, while incidentally ignoring any differences between the two types of *dianoia*, the creative intent of the poets, and the performative interpretation of that creative intent by the rhapsodes, whose own intent is appearing good to audiences.

Socrates explicitly adduces the good poets themselves as witnesses: "For all the producers of utterances, the good ones, speak all these fine productions not out of *technē* but being god-within (*entheoi* = inspired) and possessed" (533e5–8). Divine inspiration accords with what the poets themselves claim, and Io has no reason to dispute it. Poets do not, however, claim that divine inspiration and *technē* are mutually exclusive. One might even argue that gods could grant mortals any *technē* they wish to bestow upon them, as in the case of Artemis whose divine favour bestows upon Hippolytus expertise in hunting, or Calypso whose powers grant Odysseus the ability to build a raft, or Athena who inspires Penelope to excel at weaving. Io has every opportunity to object to the notion that divinely inspired mortals necessarily lack *technē*, but this seems to be beyond the purview of his *dianoia*, which judges not the truth, but the performative quality, of what is said.

It is at any rate not by any divine power that Socrates attempts to activate Io, but by a carefully constructed rhetoric. The oft-repeated claim that poets do not speak by *technē* is by this stage familiar, and Io offers no resistance to the flattering alternative. Among the many points that Io fails to notice, however, are the implications of Socrates' restriction of the claim to the "good" poets. He notices, of course, the argument's claim that, as a good -

indeed excellent - rhapsode magnetized by a good poet, he too would lack *technē* when he performs; but he does not notice that precisely this restriction to only the good poets leaves open the possibility that bad poets may operate by *technē*. The obtrusive qualification is logically unnecessary, but rhetorically powerful: it allows Io to assent, but it also introduces an obvious flaw into the argument. Socrates is thus rhetorically successful but dialectically unsuccessful, for the flaw is there to be noticed, and Io does not notice it. When the exercise fails, Socrates does not remark upon it, but moves on to other arguments. The failure reflects well on the dialectician, who has made a genuine attempt to engage his interlocutor, but badly on the rhapsode, who is so wrapped up in his concern with appearing the best that he temporarily accepts divine inspiration as the cause of his excellence rather than following the logic of the argument.

Socrates' poetic account imitates a Bacchic frenzy as he piles image upon image in a densely saturated sequence whose contradictions are not incidental but constitutive of the demonstration (533e6–534b3). The poets, the good ones, are called “melody-producers” (*melopoioi*), suggestive of honey-producers (*melitopoioi*), and are later likened to bees gathering pollen, but not before being compared to Bacchantes drawing honey and milk from rivers, which bees notoriously do not do. The poets are likened to dancing male Corybantic performers only for the comparison to shift immediately to possessed women in rivers. Toward the end of the passage the poets themselves are said to be possessed by Bacchus, but before the sentence is complete the grammatical subject slips to the “soul”, which is now said to produce. At every level - imagery, gender, agency, syntax - the account destabilizes itself.

The main point is repeatedly asserted: the poets produce their finest works when “not in their right mind”, that is, when lacking *phronēsis*. Yet no coherent reasoning is offered. Rather, Socrates performs a demonstration of senselessness under full control, constructing an argument out of mutually inconsistent images, all purportedly testifying to the senselessness of poetic production. He attributes to the poets “this, which indeed they themselves say” (534a5–6), and then immediately presents the contradictory honey-gathering images, which in fact strip the poets not only of *technē* but of any productive causality. The honey already exists; the bees or Bacchantes merely collect it.

Most striking is Io's silence in the face of this display. Socrates is "interpreting" the poets in a manner that invites objection from anyone attending to the argument. From Io's point of view, however, Socrates is indeed giving an "interpretation", which as a rhapsode he judges on outward effect. Socrates reduces poetic diction to plain prose, is himself far from ornamented, unlike the rhapsodes he claims to envy, and fails to produce any rhapsodic emotional response. What escapes Io is that Socrates is not attempting to move him emotionally, but to provoke reflection. Socrates has beneficial intent. He is exposing the implications of the poets' professed claims. Io, by contrast, hears only the performative intent or intents of the speaker, and of course is moved inasmuch as he appears to be admired.

Socrates then advances to a more explicit level of absurdity by treating poetic metaphors with deliberate and alarming literalness. The poets, he claims, speak the truth when they liken themselves to bees: they are a light "thing" (*chrēma*), winged, capable of flight. Their lightness is explained by the temporary absence of *nous* (534b3–6). Once again, Socrates makes the claim that the poet produces only when out of his mind, but is incapable of producing when in possession of his rational faculties. Socrates exploits binary thinking to force what ought to be an intolerable alternative: either the good poet is creative but senseless, or rational but barren. The argument is constructed so as to irritate the *nous* into activity.

Io's *nous*, however, remains unaffected by the logic of the presentation. He hears only that he continues to appear good to his audience. The good poets are divinely inspired - so they themselves claim, and Socrates' argument proceeds entirely from their own words - and he, as the best of the Homeric rhapsodes, shares in that inspiration. Io's untroubled *nous* can do what it normally does with any non-Homeric rhapsode, and nod off. The demonstration fails in its primary aim, but not unexpectedly. Socrates has prepared for this outcome and is ready to press the argument further.

Now divine allotment is interpreted by Socrates literally as the Muse allotting to each good poet a particular genre: dithyrambs, encomia, song-and-dance, epic, iambs. In accordance with Socrates' general tactic of devaluing Io's reputation wherever possible, Io's epic is way down the list, almost as if it is an afterthought, but Io seems to be happy to have it

mentioned at all. Socrates' argument is that if poetry were a *technē*, its possessor would excel at all genres alike (534b7–c7). Once again, he is exploiting the false claim already used earlier, that one who knows a craft must know everything about that craft. It is a simple sophistic trick to infer from expertise in only one species a lack of expertise in the genus of that species, then remove the qualifications and declare an expert to be an ignoramus.

At the end of Socrates' speech, we finally discover why Io has made no objection during this absurd account. When asked whether what has been said is true, he affirms that it is: "For somehow you touch my soul with your words, Socrates, and the good poets seem to me to interpret these things to us from the gods by divine allotment" (535a3–5). Io's response is not an engagement with the argument, but an expression of its effect upon him.

Since Io accepts that the poets interpret the gods, and that rhapsodes interpret poets, Socrates now invites him to agree that rhapsodes are interpreters of interpreters. Io readily assents: "Absolutely!" (a9–10). He shows no concern for the fact that the activity of the poet, as just described, is entirely unlike that of the rhapsode. The poet is presented as an empty vessel, devoid of agency, through whom a god supplies utterances; but Io is not an empty vessel when he is performing. The rhapsode must labour at his *technē*, mastering not only the words but the means of deploying them so as to produce the appropriate emotional response in an audience. Thus it is, as Io himself will soon point out (e1–7), that at the very moment he is performing, he remains sensitive to the emotional mood of the audience, since his earnings are at stake. This is the action of a man in complete command of his faculties.

It is initially surprising, therefore, that Io goes along with Socrates' claim, that the rhapsode is not himself when he adopts the persona of Odysseus or Achilles in order to move his audience (b1–d7). It is the emotion of the character he interprets which is transferred to the audience (d8–9). As we have seen, Io agrees, noting that this is the most important part of his profession (e1–7), although Io's description of his continual observance of the crowd belies the claim that he is not himself when he adopts the persona of a Homeric character. Pretending to accept Io's acknowledgement that he is not himself at such times, Socrates seizes the opportunity to return to the magnet analogy and insanity, observing that the audience Io has just mentioned forms a third link in the chain (e7–8), which previously had

been only from a god, to a poet, to a rhapsode. The overt purpose of this return is to align the relation between rhapsode and audience with that between god, poet, and rhapsode. This appears plausible until one reflects. The rhapsode is the origin of the emotion conveyed to the audience. The god, by contrast, is said to be the origin of the poetry which issues from the mouth of the mindless poet, but that poetry does not thereby transfer itself to the rhapsode. Io knows all too well that he has had to learn the lines with great effort, and to determine for himself how to produce the appropriate emotional effect. Any attempt to assimilate the rhapsode to the poet in this respect must therefore collide with the realities of professional practice. Io accepts this diminution of his agency because Socrates appears to admire him as an explicitly good rhapsode, and as divinely inspired, and perhaps because Io is enjoying the performance.

Since Socrates has failed to activate Io's critical reasoning yet again, he now pulls out all the stops by offering an excessively elaborate and increasingly incoherent revision of the magnet analogy. What was once a single magnet becomes as many magnets as there are Muses, to which poets are attached, or rather linked as with chains, rendering the original magnet image redundant, if not positively confusing. Each chain consists of a poet, rhapsodes, and audiences suspended from one another, while other chains, running at an angle, introduce the various performers associated with the spectacle, such as dancers and their instructors. An analogy ought to clarify; this one obfuscates. It purports to explain why Io is concerned only with Homer, but does so by imposing a rigid exclusivity upon poets, rhapsodes, and audiences alike which plainly does not correspond to reality. Even if Homer has his dedicated rhapsodes, audiences are not exclusively devoted to him.

The account is interwoven with the repeated assertion that Io speaks about Homer not with *technē* and *epistēmē* but by divine allotment and possession (536c1–2), and that he is a terrific praiser of Homer not with *technē* but by divine allotment (d2–3). This may create the impression that Socrates has demonstrated that Io lacks *technē*, but no such demonstration by way of refutation or necessity has in fact been given. As already mentioned, the account sounds more like an attempt to make Io question the mutual exclusivity of *technē* and divine inspiration, given the many poetic examples Io should have been able to recall of the divine

bestowal of *technē*.

How does Io respond to this extended poetic display? “You say well, Socrates, but nevertheless I would be amazed were you to speak so well that you would persuade me that I praise Homer when possessed and raving mad. I think I wouldn’t appear so to you were you to hear me speaking about Homer” (d4–7). Io’s response implicitly distinguishes two senses of “speaking well”. He invokes the standard rhetorical sense, according to which speaking well is a *technē* of persuasion, when he claims that Socrates has failed to convince him. Yet he still concedes that Socrates “speaks well”. This can only refer to the manner of the discourse: the incoherent assemblage of recognizably rhetorical elements such as vividness, elaboration, and poetic imagery, and no doubt the fact that Socrates appears to praise Io. Socrates speaks well as a prosaic rhapsode “interpreting” the poets and allowing Io to appear very good; but, according to Io, Socrates speaks badly as an orator. In fact, Io should have been persuaded by the several images and arguments vouched for by the poets themselves had the content been of any concern to him. He is not persuaded simply because he has the experience of being a rhapsode, and knows that he is not possessed or raving mad when he performs.

The rest of the dialogue returns to the claim that a rhapsode has none of the *technai* pertaining to subjects raised in the Homeric poems. Io gives ground on all other *technai*, but insists that he has the *technē* of the military general. This is easily if unphilosophically refuted by appeal to the fact that many subjects of Athens are generals in the Athenian army, while Io has never been approached. It suffices to note that Io struggles to the very end to maintain the vague feeling that he has a *technē*, albeit the wrong one. Socrates persuades him that he has no *technē* at all by means of a coercive dilemma, effective only because Io is governed by appearances. Having accused Io of deceiving him when he claimed that he would exhibit the *sophia* of Homer (he never did claim that), Socrates declares that either Io has *technē*, and is therefore wilfully withholding benefit and therefore a wrong-doer, or he lacks *technē* and is therefore innocent of wrongdoing, and moreover divinely inspired and possessed. The final words of the dialogue make the point explicit (542a7–b4): “Choose then whether you wish to be regarded by us as an unjust man or a divine one.” “It makes a great

difference, Socrates. For it is finer by far to be considered divine.” “So you have this far finer thing among us, Io, of being a divine, not a technical, praiser regarding Homer.” Thus the dialogue ends as it began, with the appearance of a demonstration where none has been given, and with Io persuaded not by knowledge, but by what seems finer. That he is persuaded that he does not have any *technē* when performing is not the point of the dialogue. Before a different audience, Io would still maintain that he possesses the *rhapsōdikē technē*, and indeed the other *technai* touched upon in Homer, which he believes he must understand in order to give an authentic performance. We may suppose that no other admiring audience would insist that a divinely inspired Io must lack all *technē*. Not only would this be considered offensive, but it would also be incorrect, as already observed. Many a god has inspired a mortal with the granting of a *technē* or two.

What, then, is the point of the dialogue, assuming that it has one? We may agree that there are no philosophically compelling arguments in it. The recurring theme, almost to the point of tedious repetition, is Socrates’ claim that Io excels at performing Homer not by *technē* but by divine allotment. Every argument seems to be designed to make this point, although none actually proves the claim. It is the claim itself, repeated so often, that gives the impression that it has been established.

Nor are the explicitly poetic sections any more satisfactory. They form an amalgam of poetic cameos which, taken together, produce a larger picture that is either absurd or impossible. This contrast helps to bring into focus the difference between the approaches to Homer adopted by Io and by Socrates. Io’s single-minded intent (*dianoia*) is to appear good to an audience through what he considers to be a faithful interpretation of Homer’s episodic intentions (*dianoiai*). Socrates, by contrast, operates with an equally single-minded intent (*dianoia*), but a dynamic one informing a living conversation, to activate a similar intent (*dianoia*) in his interlocutor. This is an intent to arrive at truth and an understanding of how to be good, as opposed to appearing to be good. For his intent to have any chance of success, Socrates must already be familiar with his target. Plato provides clear indications that Socrates does indeed have prior knowledge of Io, his provenance, career, and mindset. The banal questions Socrates asks at the beginning of the dialogue are Plato’s way of showing us

that Io is far from unknown to him, although he pretends not to be too familiar with his outstanding success as a rhapsode. That is part of Socrates' strategy of praising not Io but others, and of questioning Io's claim to a *technē*, all the while paying lip-service to his "terrific" ability in order to ensure that Io remains engaged in the conversation in some way, thereby allowing Socrates to expose him to more tension at the level of intent.

Socrates systematically strips Io of agency, expertise, and even *technē*, replacing them with the empty distinction of being a conduit for Homer's Muse. The arguments are not meant to persuade, but to maintain the tension between Socrates' apparent admiration for Io and his rejection of Io's intrinsic ability. It is left to Io to remain content with baseless words of praise, or activate his critical *nous* to begin to face the dissonance.

The reader may feel that Io and Socrates are both extreme characters, bordering on the unrealistic. Socrates displays an almost uncanny ability to know everything, while dissembling to the point of appearing to know very little. Io, by contrast, is so preoccupied with reputation that, so long as Socrates appears to admire him as an outstanding rhapsode, he is content to be regarded as divinely inspired rather than as possessing the *technē* he not only claims but clearly possesses. Socrates is in control of his intent, and is concerned with assisting others to control their intent, for actual good, and not apparent good; he would appear to the Many to lack all intent, as he appears to have no ambition or *technē* to speak of, and wastes his time confusing and annoying anyone he meets. Io appears to the Many to be successful at his *technē* to the extent that he appears to be an expert at everything Homer appears to be an expert at. He appears to have a memory for conversations to rival Socrates, but while Socrates uses his to compare and contrast everything said with a view to improving himself and others, Io does no more than recite lines of Homer in the performative style and emotion he regards as appropriate and effective, as befitting Homer's intent for that passage, with a view to moving his audience emotionally, and winning prizes, his criterion for success at appearing good. Thus the characters appear to be polar opposites in terms of their *dianoia*, but would appear to the Many to be polar opposites in terms of expertise, Socrates appearing to have none, Io appearing to have all, insofar as Homer is considered to have all. Neither character changes during the conversation.

Such extreme and rigid characterisations indicate that Io and Socrates function as *deigmata* (detailed concrete instances) of *paradeigmata* (minimally concrete representations) of *eidē* (abstract sub-aspects) of a single *idea* (general aspect) informing the entire dialogue. The *paradeigmata* are the Dialectician and the Rhapsode, corresponding to the sub-aspects of the *idea* of *dianoia*:

- Actual *dianoia*: a consistent and coherent thinking through of everything, which necessarily leads to the elimination of inconsistencies, the arrival at truth, and an understanding of the Good and associated concepts. The experienced Dialectician is also aware that actions need to cohere with understanding, and this involves activating others to think dialectically.
- Apparent *dianoia*: the Rhapsode does apply his *nous* intensely, but only to succeed at interpreting what he regards as the intent of Homer in his performances for the futile end of appearing good to the Many, judged by the many prizes he wins. The failure to contrast and compare the inconsistent *dianoiai* (Homeric intents) leaves Io actually harmful to the Many, since he spreads the falsehoods of Homeric poetry in such an entertaining and emotionally satisfactory way that the *nous* of his audiences has no incentive to become intellectually stimulated.

The result of the meeting of such *paradeigmata* is a scenario in which the *deigmata* would be regarded by the Many (were they to be watching) as the opposite of what they actually are in terms of intellectual and moral ability. Socrates appears to be a confused fool occasionally attempting to play the rhapsode, while Io appears to be a man rich in the words of the greatest of the poets, Homer, who lavishly bestows upon his audiences the Homeric insights they crave.

We may imagine Plato's dialogue to stand to the reader much as a Homeric poem stands to Io. A doctrinal reader approaches the dialogue as Io approaches Homer, intent on extracting and displaying authoritative meanings from individual episodes and arguments. Plato, however, challenges such a reader through the character of Socrates who challenges Io. By creating a dialogue in which the author challenges the reader of that very dialogue, Plato turns the act of reading itself into part of the drama. This strategy is as risky as it is ingenious,

since the reader remains free to misconstrue the intent of the internal critic no less than that of the dialogue as a whole. Despite what the reader may think, Plato does not intend to present a set of hard and fast opinions to be passively received, but an intellectual challenge in which a succession of increasingly absurd or incoherent *dianoiai* should compel the reader to engage in actual *dianoia*, whereby the entire dialogue would be addressed holistically and reflexively. *Io* is therefore not merely a dialogue about *dianoia*, but an exercise in *dianoia*, intelligible only to a reader willing to use real *dianoia* and think through the entire exercise to a coherent end.