Plato on Poetry: Imitation or Inspiration?

A passage in Plato's Laws (719c) offers a fresh look at Plato's theory of poetry and art. Only here does Plato call poetry both mime ˆsis ''imitation, representation,'' and the product of enthousiasmos ''inspiration, possession.'' The Republic and Sophist examine poetic imitation; the Ion and Phaedrus (with passages in Apology and Meno) develop a theory of artistic inspiration; but Plato does not confront the two descriptions together outside this paragraph. After all, mime ˆsis fuels an attack on poetry, while enthousiasmos is sometimes used to attack it, sometimes to praise it. The explanation evidently lies in Plato's understanding of drama, which in the Laws has grown more precise, from simply the presentation of characters to the presentation of multiple characters engaged in dramatic conflict.

In Book 4 of Plato's Laws, while telling legislators how to present laws, the Athenian Stranger leading the conversation contrasts lawmakers with poets. This comparison appears as an aside, deep within Plato's longest work, and not surprisingly it has played a minuscule part in discussions of Platonic aesthetics. But in one respect this passage stands out among everything Plato wrote about poetry. The Athenian imagines how a poet might speak of a law. According to an ''ancient tale'' told by poets themselves, ''a poet, when seated on the Muse's tripod,'' is ouk emphro ˆn ''not of sound mind.'' The poet resembles a fountain that lets water rush forth freely (719c). So far, so good. This sounds like things we find in other dialogues: the Ion and Phaedrus extensively, but also the Apology and Meno. In those dialogues the goodness of good poetry does not result from skill or knowledge in its author, or not from that alone. Muses or other deities have taken over the minds of those poets, who then write in an enthousiazo ˆn ''possessed'' state; ''inspired''; in what Socrates in the Phaedrus calls mania ''madness'' (245a). This idea of insane creativity has become familiar not only to Plato's readers but even as a commonplace among people ignorant of Plato, visible in the cliche ´ about a fine line between genius and insanity. The Athenian continues. An inspired poet is forced, te ˆs techne ˆs ouse ˆs mime ˆseo ˆs ''his profession being mime ˆsis,'' while creating people who are set against one another, ''to speak frequently contrary to himself.'' Dramatic characters take opposing sides and state contradictory ideas. The poet does not know ''whether these, or the others, of the things said are true.'' Lawmakers must not be permitted to make legal pronouncements in the same way (719c–d). Again, Plato's readers recognize the ideas. The tricky word mime ˆsis is sometimes translated ''imitation'' (the traditional if misleading choice), sometimes ''representation'' or ''emulation''; often left untranslated. Plato's Republic

puts mime ˆsis at the heart of its discussions of poetry, both in Book 3 during the dialogue's first attacks on poetry (392c–398b), and again when Socrates returns to the attack in Book 10 (595a–608a). Plato's Sophist investigates mime ˆsis as a phenomenon not restricted to poetry (235d–236c, 264c–268c) and the poet who practices imitation appears fleetingly in the Phaedrus (248e). But it is the Republic that plants mime ˆsis at the heart of theories about poetry and other art forms. The concept had some currency outside the works of Plato. Xenophon (probably before Plato) depicts Socrates explaining artistic mime ˆsis (Memorabilia 3.10); Aristophanes (certainly before Plato) used the word in his comedy Frogs to connote deception (line 109), and identified the process with playwriting in Thesmophoriazusae (156). Aristotle, writing largely against Plato, puts mime ˆsis at the beginning of his Poetics (1447a15–26), a work focused on tragedy. (See Golden 1975; Pappas 1999; So ¨rbom 2002: 23–5; Verdenius 1962; on early history of mime ˆsis Halliwell 2002; So ¨rbom 1966). Thus the Laws is reiterating a charge against the poets. It calls mime ˆsis a techne ˆ ''profession, skill'' as Republic 10 does (601d). And as the Republic does, it identifies mimetic poetry with the poetry that comprised drama, especially tragedy. Here is one dimension of Plato's aesthetics in a nutshell, then. What can be classified as aesthetics in the dialogues covers beauty on one side, the theory of art on the other; and it pays to keep those topics apart, given that they have almost nothing to do with one another for Plato. His respectful treatments of beauty almost never mention art works, while on the subject of poetry and painting and other arts there are at best hints that the works might be beautiful. This article will cover the Platonic theory of art, not aesthetics as theory of beauty. (For the aspects of Platonic aesthetics not treated here see Pappas 2008). Among the arts poetry comes in for the most scrutiny, and a variety of charges. Plato's discussions of poetry enter aesthetics, and cast their long shadow over the subject's later history, when they flower into these two theoretical terms seen at Laws 719c, imitation and inspiration. 2. How striking that Laws 719c pits poets against legislators, considering that the Meno finishes by conflating the statesman, oracle-chanters and soothsayers, and every breed of poet. We call them all ''divine'' and ''divinely inspired,'' Socrates says. They are ''possessed by the god,'' so they can say many true things without knowing what they are talking about (99d). For that contrast alone the passage in Laws is worth meditating on. Plato no longer wants to imagine political leaders out of their heads the way poets are. But what really makes the passage in Laws stand out is something more profound and startling. Despite how frequently Plato speaks of divine possession in poets, and despite how often he speaks of poets' mime ˆsis, only this paragraph in all his works speaks of both. Plato has nearly reached the end of his life. The Laws already addressed the question of poetry and song, and it will return to poetic

composition and poetry's place in education (668a–673a, 801a–804b, 810a–812a, 816d–817e); Plato still incorporates theories of poetry into his political philosophy. (For another dimension of legislation's relationship to poetry in the Laws see Meyer 2011). But why this glancing comment that for all its brevity unites the two themes dominating Plato's discussions of poetry? Why do the dialogues never bring the two themes together on any other occasion? And if imitation and inspiration could not be brought together elsewhere, what has changed about Plato's interpretation of one concept or the other to make them compatible here? Common sense suggests one answer why imitation and inspiration should not go together. Some people are better than others at mime ˆsis in the performative sense, at acting like a person. They can improve their ability to mimic, and in Plato's Athens as in many places today, skilled performers earned a living practicing their craft. Mime ˆsis is a techne ˆ, as this and other passages call it. You can explain it perfectly well as a product of human skill with no need to appeal to gods. People don't walk out of the cobbler's shop in comfortable new shoes saying, ''The gods must have guided the shoemaker's hands.'' One problem with such an approach is that mime ˆsis does not remain stably identified with acting skill. Already in Republic Book 3 the word sometimes describes what actors do, sometimes what playwrights do (Havelock 1963). The obvious prima facie contrast between humanly-trained actors and divine inspiration collapses. What the actor does might register as a teachable skill; what the poet does is exactly what the Muses had always been invoked to explain. Book 10 further multiplies the meanings of mime ˆsis. Now it also describes the activity of a representational painter (598b), and in another way a process taking place inside the souls in a tragedy's audience (602b; see Harte 2010). In the end Platonic mime ˆsis means too much more than impersonation to be either clearly compatible or clearly incompatible with divine inspiration. And in particular, Plato's desire to call the process ignorant undermines the other sense of it that his dialogues voice, that mime ˆsis rests on skill or expertise. 3. The Republic begins its analysis unaudaciously. Socrates has been proposing constraints on the stories that children grow up hearing. He legislates much of Greek mythology out of existence, then turns to the lexis ''diction'' in which these stories have been told (392c). There is narration in the third person with no characters speaking; drama, which contains nothing but characters' speeches; and mixed poetry containing both narration and quoted speech (392d–393c). Socrates focuses on quoting another person's words, first defining that as the authorial activity of composing characters' speeches, then slipping into a discussion of acting. In both cases, producing the mime ˆsis of a person entails ''hiding yourself'' and ''pretending to be someone else,'' so that mime ˆsis implies deception and inauthenticity (393b–d). (See Dyson 1988 for a full treatment). The first

argument is flimsy. The poet who is (in some sense of being) both himself, and some character he is imitating, violates a founding principle of the city, that no one performs two different tasks (394d–395c; see 370b–c). But Socrates abandons this argument to describe another problem he associates with the same process. Impersonating people can make you take on their behavior, so playing the part of a vicious character makes your character worse. This apparent digression grows to become the main argument, packed with examples of the people and things that a young guardian should not act like (395c–397b). The caution against acting like someone bad is not as naïve as it first looks. Why shouldn't performing the part of irritable Oedipus make you see your own irritability as more natural to you? In 2008 Heath Ledger spoke of having been destabilized by playing the psychopathic Joker in The Dark Knight; this essentially Platonic observation was treated as a reasonable description of his experience. Now however it is the actor's work and not the poet's that brings the bad effects of impersonation, as if what the poet did was unobjectionable. Anyway the argument in Book 3 condemns the impersonation of bad, lowly, or otherwise unseemly characters. Socrates allows the loophole that one might still depict a virtuous man. When he returns to mimetic poetry in Book 10 he refuses to allow for such exceptions. Virtuous roles do not play well on stage (605a). Book 10 goes about its critique more radically, advancing two claims:

1. Mimêsis imitates or produces appearance alone, not the truth about things (595b–602c). 2. Mimetic poetry arouses the soul's worst feelings (602c–606d).

Socrates argues that the two claims are related: (1) causes (2). This putative connection gives Plato's readers the most trouble: identifying the epistemically inferior part of a person – that in you that falls for illusions and makes mistakes – with what is ethically inferior, in Plato's words the part of your soul that irrational emotions come from. Of course (2) is the claim that calls for political action. Learning that an activity contains illusions does not make people outlaw it. But when a society perceives certain music, clothing, or drugs as causes of uncontrollable feelings, the case for banning that stuff is already under way. In part Plato's argument for (2) turns on a version of the tragic paradox, that situations like being in the audience of a tragedy let us take pleasure in what are normally unwanted feelings of grief, pity, and fear. The audience participates in disabling its own rational capacities for assessing behavior, and despite being unreal the tragedy arouses those real passions that socialized people suppress. The epistemic inferiority of mimêsis is harder to summarize. Arguing for (1), Socrates compares poetry to painting and diagnoses the inadequacy of representation in painting. (For particular issues involving Plato and Greek painting see Keuls 1978). Socrates

argues on independent grounds that poetry has no knowledge to transmit (598d–601b), a fact that supports the analogy by making both kinds of imitation empty. The analysis of painting develops two tripartitions or three-place rankings, meant to display the low status of mime ˆsis. First the relative reality of three objects: Form of table or couch made by god; table or couch made by carpenter; image of table or couch made by mimetic artist (596a–598d). A second triad compares three people's ways of experiencing a single object, a flute or bridle, which one might use (with knowledge), make (based on correct opinion), or imitate (in ignorance) (601c–602a). On both scales mime ˆsis comes out worst. (Belfiore 1984; Demand 1975; and Halliwell 1988 offer extensive discussions). Three questions dominate the large scholarly literature about Book 10: • How does the epistemic inferiority of imitation make it psychologically toxic and therefore an ethical danger? • Is the psychological mechanism that explains the soul's corruption through illusion compatible with Book 4's analysis of soul into reason, spirit, and desire? • How does the metaphysical and psychological analysis that indicts imitation in Book 10 square with the more straightforward argument in Book 3 about impersonating inferior characters?

The difficulty of going from (1) to (2) can seem insurmountable on some exegeses of Book 10, which highlight the discrepancy between epistemological and ethical critiques (Nehamas 1982). One attempt at supplying an argument finds empathy at work: the mimetic appearance elicits a connection to suffering tragic characters that unsettles the audience member's character (Halliwell 2002: 72–97). This is a version of the tragic paradox, and plays up the similarity between Books 3 and 10, the phenomenon of being ''drawn into'' another person's experience. On another interpretation the illusoriness of the imitated appearance is more inherently at fault. Pleasure, what drives and feeds the lowest part of the soul, is already diagnosed in the Republic as apparent pleasure. So just because a mimetic work generates illusions it feeds the part of the soul, the ignoble part, that thrives on the pleasures of illusion. Thus a mimetic work strengthens the part that reason had been keeping under control, thereby unbalancing the soul's discipline (Moss 2007). It is clear from these examples that answers to the first interpretive question about Book 10 lead straight to the third question, regarding Books 3 and 10 together. And, especially on some explanations of Book 10 and the errors in imitation, the second interpretive question also comes into play. Does the Republic's three-part psychology function in Book 10 as it had in Book 4, or did Plato construct some other soul-structure to explain artistic imitation? On one reading Book 10 develops a new, two-part division of the soul not necessarily recapitulating Book 4's divisions (Janaway 1995); more

interpreters equate the two parts distinguished in Book 10 with reason and desire (Reeve 1988); variations on this latter reading are also possible. (For recent treatment of this question see Singpurwalla 2011). Meanwhile a broader debate over the Republic's psychological theory, a debate widely engaged these days, threatens any application of Book 4 to Book 10. Increasingly many interpreters deny that Book 4 really divides the soul into distinct parts (see e.g. Shields 2010). Different human motives must not be seen as distinct agents inside the soul and potentially at war with one another. But Book 10's critique of imitation calls for a cognitive disagreement between soul-parts that snowballs into the disappearance of psychic control. Without a substantive psychological theory that persists through the Republic, this critique loses its foundation. Both to illuminate the relationship between illusion and the dangerous desires, and to clarify how Plato sees the soul's internal structure, these debates would profit from turning back to the late pages of Book 9. Socrates contrasts the best kind of soul with the worst, the latter dominated by unruly appetites and fed by deceptive appearances (587a– d). Surprisingly few interpreters draw on these pages immediately preceding Book 10, but the debate in its present form would find much useful material there. For Book 9 distinguishes unseemly desires (emanating from the soul's worse parts) from the good desires proper to reason, on the basis of their respective objects. What the just and rational soul wants are objects of knowledge, real things, while the depraved soul seeks mere illusions of pleasure, ''shadow-paintings'' (583b, 586b). But this association between appearances or images and the soul's ignoble motives amply prepares the way for the attack in Book 10 on the artistic processes that generate images. After all this talk of Plato's attack on poetry it may be worth adding that if imitation had nothing attractive about it at all, Socrates would not be bothering to spell out its bad qualities. When Socrates dismisses the beauty in poetry as fleeting (601b), that concedes the existence in it of some attractiveness. The attraction sounds magical. Book 10 refers to the ke ˆle ˆsis ''charm'' in mimetic works (601b), and Socrates admits that ''we'' are ke ˆloumenois ''bewitched'' by it (607c). We need a medicine (595b) that will work as an epo ˆide ˆ ''enchantment, counter-charm'' (608a). Like the English ''charm,'' ke ˆle ˆsis generally means attractiveness, specifically a magical effect. Book 3 turns the imitative poet away from the city with language suited to a scapegoat ritual – mock veneration followed by expulsion (398a) – as if the poet threatened to pollute the city, thus again attributing supernatural powers to someone who writes dramatic parts. Magic has intelligence behind it, and these allusions to sorcery identify skillfulness in mime ˆsis, as Plato's Sophist also does when it calls the practitioner of imitation a sorcerer (235a). No question that poets are ignorant; yet they have the savvy it takes to make you think they know something. They deceive the unwary (598b–

c). Socrates speaks of the tragic playwright's sophia ''wisdom, cleverness, skill'' (605a). A sorcerer might stand against the divine order, especially when the sorcery draws on those earthborn creatures – Python, Gorgons – that the Olympian gods once vanquished (Luck 52). And Republic 10 sets practitioners of mime ˆsis collectively against gods. The artist who fabricates appearances of things is introduced as a false god (596c–e) and ranked at the bottom of the tripartition of makers, occupying the opposite extreme from the Form-making god. The second tripartition too can be read as a religiously-inflected critique, for according to familiar Greek myths the first user of both flute and bridle – hence the hidden personage at the top of the second tripartition – was Athena (Pindar, Pythian 12, Olympian 13). Then the ignorance of the imitator signifies his exclusion from the techne ˆ-knowledge that she first imparted to humans. Does opposition to the divine order contradict inspiration? That might explain why Plato generally does not attribute both mime ˆsis and divine possession to poets. But then it invites the question how he could have combined the two attributes in Laws 719c. 4. Platonic inspiration has Greek antecedents just as Platonic imitation does, with the telling difference that few literary authors before Plato spoke of mime ˆsis, whereas some version of inspiration appears much earlier and more broadly in Greek culture. Indeed the first of two principal questions about Platonic inspiration is the question of its newness: • How far does inspiration in the dialogues differ from traditional beliefs about the Muses? Related to this question, and implicating Plato's worries about traditional religion, is a more general issue: • Does inspiration make poetry good, or is it mainly a negative claim demonstrating the ignorance of poets?

In one respect there is nothing new about artistic inspiration in Plato. If inspiration means that either talent or information comes to the poet from a divine source, then for the Greeks that thought is as old as the Muses. Homer, Hesiod, and other early poets spoke of learning from the Muses or of the Muses' bestowing talent upon a poet (Murray 1981). The continuous element in the tradition is that poets do not belong in the customary economy of teacher and student (as the poet Phemius says at Odyssey 22.347– 348). For Plato as for his predecessors, poets did not learn the things they say by any standard means. The condition that Plato calls enthousiasmos or mania goes beyond simple help from a Muse to the degree that it becomes an ecstatic impassioned state, more possession than inspiration. The poet loses responsibility for the poetry in a way that would have baffled Homer or Hesiod. Is Plato doing no more than drawing an obvious conclusion from archaic appeals to the Muses, namely the conclusion that what you take on authority you do not know for yourself? Or is the Platonic ecstasy an experience his predecessors could not have understood (Murray 1981)? The

narrower reading might be the more negative one. If Platonic inspiration essentially re-presents the traditional process as a denial of poets' claim to knowledge, it is functioning to condemn them. As something new and reminiscent of an oracle's fits, however, inspiration would cloak poetry in the mantle of conservative religion. (On this question see Ledbetter 2003; Tigerstedt 1970). In the Apology Socrates surely means to exclude poets from rational discourse. He is recounting how different groups of Athenians failed his cross-examinations. He went to the poets who produced the finest works, and observed what people still observe, that these gifted authors had nothing to say about what they had written. Almost anyone present could explain the poems better; Socrates concludes that some god is at work. The poets produce their wise poems not through sophia ''wisdom'' but thanks to nature and enthousiazontes ''divinely inspired'' (22a–c). This is all very well for the inspired verse, but it makes the versifier a poor excuse for a rational being. Inspiration explains the poets' striking absence of wisdom. In the Ion Socrates comes to the figure of the poet by questioning the rhapsode Ion about his performances of Homer. (Rhapsodes traveled among classical Greek cities reciting and interpreting episodes from the epics). Ion confesses his lack of interest in any poet but Homer. His affection and his expertise are idiosyncratic, confined to Homer (531a–532c), and Socrates kindly proposes that Ion possesses no techne ˆ (583d). By this proposal he means, he says, that the Muse first takes over the poet, wielding a power like a magnetic stone's (533d). Homer is one of many poets who channel the power of a single Muse, as iron rings attached to the magnet become magnetized themselves (533d–534a). And just as more iron rings can hang from the ones touching the magnet, so too rhapsodes like Ion feel the Muse's power flowing through their chosen poet to them. More iron rings hang from this second group, being in Ion's case those audience members who hang on his words and share his attachment to Homer, even at this remove experiencing the Muse's divine power (535e–536d). The Ion's interpreters do not always emphasize how unwelcome divine possession initially sounds to Ion. He objects. He is not deranged when he performs (536d)! Socrates convinces him with the choice between knowledge and divine possession. Ion can't steer a chariot or heal a wound (538b–d), but if the epics contained knowledge about such matters he would have to have learned them. Homer is ignorant in all specific ways, and Ion along with him. All right then, Ion says at last. He is divinely possessed (541e–542b). Socrates assures Ion that the divine presence is finer than any skill. But he toys with Ion so much throughout the dialogue that we might accuse him of having traded worthless inspiration for Ion's relinquishing all claims to expertise or knowledge. This cynical reading is too strong; Socrates does see positive value in inspiration. It is true that his long speech about the magnetic Muse insults poets: Tynnichus of Chalcis was worthless except

for his ode to the Muses (534d–e), and poets generally are ''hollow'' (534b). But then this ode of Tynnichus's is one of the best ever written, proof of the Muses' strength. Depending on whether you find Socrates ironical or earnest, you will consider the divine possession he proffers either a sly euphemism for Ion's irrationality, or a hypothesis meant to account for the merit that some poems have. (Representative interpretations include Janaway 1992; Pappas 1989; Partee 1971; Woodruff 1982). And whether by large steps or small ones the idea has moved away from poets' learning facts or picking up the knack for a good phrase. When the Laws' Athenian claims to be citing an ancient story that poets tell, he is distorting the tradition (Woodruff 1983: 8). The essential fact here is Ion's idiosyncratic preference for Homer. This fact falsifies Socrates' image of a magnet. Why does the magnet simile speak of orderly lines of rings hanging from the magnet instead of what really happens, that rings cluster and clump together against the magnet and one another? Because Socrates insists on keeping each rhapsode attached to but one poet and every audience member loving a single rhapsode (Pappas 2008). He plays up this idiosyncrasy that Ion confessed to because it implies that readers and audiences desire not truth, only the skewed take on the truth communicated by a singular poet. Medical potions do not interest them at all, yet Homer's account of a potion enthralls them. To lack general knowledge is only ignorance, often blameless. To turn knowledge away, preferring someone's individual perception over facts of the matter, is irrational. In Plato's Phaedrus Socrates clearly praises divine madness (244a–c). It is not only poetry at stake: Socrates calls poetry one species of the mania that gods sometimes bequeath upon humans, another species being love and yet others giving human beings the power to lead religious rituals or see the future. (See Ferrari 1987; Tigerstedt 1969). Speaking of divine madness in the Phaedrus, Socrates does not display the irony or contempt that are so much in evidence in the Ion. Here he honors the speech about love that he made in an inspired state. His sober-minded speech only slandered the god oflove (242b–d). What helps Socrates praise irrationality is that the Phaedrus does not set inspiration against human skill. The madness he speaks of complements techne ˆ here, adding fire to the dry wood of knowledge rather than compensating for its absence. The divinely favored are also the expert. It's only that more than skill and knowledge is needful. 5. This much about Plato's treatment of poetry represents widely-held readings of his dialogues. The question that began this article is also uncontroversial, for Laws 719c really does ascribe both imitation and inspiration to poets, and in fact no other passage does. Accounting for the reconciliation of the two concepts in this passage, on the other hand, takes us into less certain territory. Mime ˆsis has not suddenly become godlier or more worshipful; and inspiration is still distinct from knowledge. The following section will have to expand on

a few sentences to find the crucial change at work in this new statement. At Laws 719c inspiration amounts to (1) sitting on the Muse's tripod, (2) not emphro ˆn ''of sound mind,'' and (3) resembling a fountain whose flow you permit to gush upward. The water imagery is not new, having appeared in poets before Plato as a metaphor for flowing speech (Murray 1981: 95). The Muse's tripod is no ancient story at all. Apollo, not the Muses, had a tripod, and it was the priestess who sat on it to receive his insight and produce her oracular chants (which significantly were in verse in Plato's time, if not later: Plutarch, On the Pythian Oracle 5, 7). Yet from Plato it is an old point, for like other passages already touched on – Apology 22c, Ion 534b–d, Meno 99c, Phaedrus 244a–d – this one assimilates poets to seers and priestesses (Murray 1981: 94; Maurizio 1995: 77). The poet is ouk emphro ˆn exactly as the Ion says that the reveling Corybants are (534a), using the word with which the Greeks often referred generically to any ecstatic celebrants overcome by a god's power. Meanwhile this poet (4) practices mime ˆsis, which (5) is his techne ˆ, and (6) consists in his making people situated oppositely to one another. In a word, the mimetic poet practices a professional skill that consists in writing dramatic parts. The Athenian Stranger presses to his conclusion. The poet (7) ''frequently speaks contrary to himself'' and (8) ''does not know whether these things, or the others, of the things said are true.'' Something in the combination of traits just catalogued prevents the poet's words from rising to the minimum level of articulate or conscious speech. The last claim cannot be analyzing mime ˆsis. If stating both sides of an issue (7) rendered you ignorant concerning the truth (8), Plato's dialogues would demonstrate his philosophical ignorance. Therefore (8) does not follow from (7), even though (7) does seem to be a straightforward inference from (6). The reasoning that proceeds from (7) to (8) works much better if it draws on the poet's inspiration, as (2) and (3) understand that state. Being a professional, the poet represents opposed claims, but as a recipient of the Muse's power lacks the capacity to say which of the two claims is true. You can put this down to lacking mental soundness, or to the effect of this mental abdication, that the mind's self-censorship slackens letting anything whatsoever come out, the words like an undammed stream. From the fact that I write both a sentence and its negation, it does not follow that I lack the ability to tell which one is true. But if I am both divinely possessed and moved to produce contradictory claims, I cannot even accidentally announce the truth. Inspiration does not save poetry now but joins in the argument against it. The upshot is that Plato has turned conflict into contradiction. When Prometheus says Zeus will never destroy him, and Hermes answers that one hears such statements from people in a maddened state, the dramatic conflict makes perfect sense (Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound 1053–5). But if you picture Aeschylus asserting, ''Zeus will

never destroy me, and these are the thoughts of one who is raving,'' he is talking a nonsense of contradiction. Conflict is in turn part of Plato's description as it had not been in the Republic. Indeed, when Republic 10 does raise the specter of conflict, the individual is ''conflicted,'' of two minds about how to behave; tellingly that passage never mentions disagreement between persons (603c–604e). In this respect the common subject of drama distracts from an important difference between these two assessments of mime ˆsis. Republic 3 sought to make acting as such the danger in drama, but could only muster a feeble argument against the poet's being jack-of-all-trades, and then a restricted argument about impersonating unfit characters. The new element at Laws 719c, namely (6), adds what the Republic had not commented on, that tragedy's characters talk at cross-purposes and against one another. It is as if the Republic took the original sin in tragedy to have been committed before Aeschylus, if we trust Aristotle's history of tragedy's development when he writes, ''Aeschylus was the first to raise the number of actors from one to two'' (Poetics 1448a15–19). Before Aeschylus, tragedy must have contained a single actor speaking to the chorus. Legend calls Thespis the first poet to produce and perform in this kind of tragedy, so Republic 3 is taking tragedy's essence to consist in the Thespian art of adopting someone else's identity. (On that art see Plutarch Solon 29.4–5). Certainly the arguments work as well against Thespis as they do against the later Aeschylus or much later Euripides. But Aeschylus with his multiple actors made disagreement within a script possible and important. Writing the Laws Plato might have come to believe that this feature of tragedy caused the trouble, not the bare depiction of a human being but the depiction of two or more of them, speaking together and against one another. Even if a single dramatic part were excused on the grounds that the Muses inspired it, the polyphony in Aeschylean tragedy made a defense of the genre impossible. And so, while ostensibly coming to a weaker conclusion – not expelling poets, only denying they are lawmakers – the Laws attacks tragedy for a feature that rings truer than tragedy's presentation of vicious types. Poetry continues to lose its alleged ancient quarrel with philosophy, while philosophy devotes itself to eradicating contradiction. Best of all, the two potent accounts of poetry that the dialogues have proposed can both be true at once.