Adverbial Play in Plato's *Ion*

David Roochnik
Boston University

This paper explores Plato's use of a particular part of speech, the adverb, in a single dialogue, the *Ion*. With it I hope, first, simply to reinforce a conviction most readers of the dialogues already share: Plato is a consummate literary artist who uses his medium brilliantly. Second, and more important, this one case illustrates how Plato is able to utilize his literary skill in the service of his larger project, namely raising philosophical questions.

What follows focuses on the use of adverbs and adverbial constructions that (mainly) modify inflections of *legein* in the *Ion*, a dialogue which explores the "old quarrel" between philosophy and poetry.[1] I demonstrate that there is a consistent pattern to the way Plato has Socrates and Ion use their adverbs and how this pattern, once uncovered, draws the reader into the crucial question of the dialogue: Is it philosophical or poetic language that constitutes the perfection, the highest achievement, of the human capacity for *logos*?

Consider the following passages:

T1: 530b2. After Ion explains that he has won first prize at Epidaurus, Socrates says to him, *eu legeis*, literally "you speak well."[2] While this is an innocuous colloquialism, which can be translated as "congratulations," it also encapsulates the basic question of the dialogue: What exactly does it mean to speak well?[3] Is it when one recites the words of Homer in splendid, rhapsodic enchantment, or when one uses the plain words of philosophy in the attempt to articulate the truth?

T2: 530b10-c6. Socrates asserts, without argument, that it is incumbent upon the rhapsode to understand the "thought" (*dianoia*), and not only the words, of the poetry he sings. The rhapsode must be an interpreter (*hermênea*) of the poet's

thought. This he cannot "do well" (*kalôs poien*: 530c5) unless he knows (*gignôskonta*) what the poet means (*legei*).

Socrates' assertions provoke a question: Has he, as many commentators have suggested, imposed an exaggerated and inappropriately epistemic demand upon the rhapsode?[4] In other words, why must the rhapsode know the meaning of the poet's words in order to perform his task "well?" Furthermore, what does the ever-flexible *kalôs* mean in this context? At first glance, no more than *eu*. But its meaning also tends towards the aesthetic. In order to recite "beautifully," why must the rhapsode understand what Homer means? Even further, what do "mean" and "know" and "understand" (*ekmanthanein*: 530c1) mean in this context?

T3: 530c7. In a master stroke of irony, Plato has Ion respond to Socrates by saying, *alêthê legeis*: "you speak truthfully."[5] Ion, the rhapsode, describes and so evaluates Socrates' statement on the basis of its truth content, while Socrates, the philosopher, demands of Ion that he speak *kalôs*. Again, Ion's response is colloquial, but through the adverbs, an issue is being articulated: How does the poet or the rhapsode speak "well?" How does he do his job "beautifully" (or "well" or "admirably" or "finely")? By speaking the truth? Or by giving a moving, convincing, electrifying performance whose connection to the truth is far more tenuous?

T4: 531a1-b9. Socrates asks Ion, "are you clever only about Homer, or about Hesiod and Archilochus as well?" Only Homer, answers Ion. What about those passages where Homer and Hesiod say the same things about the same subject? In that case, Ion would "expound them similarly."

Socrates continues this line of questioning. When Homer and Hesiod say different things about, for example, prophecy, who is able to expound what they say "more finely" (*kallion*: 531b5), Ion or one of the good prophets? One of the prophets, Ion answers. Socrates asks, "And if you were one of the prophets, and if you were able to expound the things they say similarly, wouldn't you know how to expound the things they say differently?" (531b7-9).

The point Socrates makes here is one he will later elaborate (see **T5**, **T9**, and **T13** below). If persons A and B speak about the same subject X, they can do so either similarly or differently. If they do so differently, then only the expert in subject X can successfully "expound" what A and B have to say. So, for example, if Homer and Hesiod both speak about prophecy, and do so differently, then it is only the trained prophet who can "expound" both their statements.

It is clear that by "similar" and "different" Socrates refers *only* to truth content. By his lights, what A and B say can be reduced to propositions that are either true or false. For example, Homer and Hesiod might both say that prophets read the paths of flying birds. This is true, and so they speak similarly. Homer might say that prophets read the livers of goats, while Hesiod might counter that they read the kidneys (which, let us assume, is false). In this case, the two statements are different, and only one of them is true. It is the trained prophet, and not Ion, who will be able to "expound" what they have to say. In this context, which has been thoroughly engineered by Socrates, "expound" means to tell whether a statement is true or false.

This is a strange way to approach the art of the poet. A poet might say, "prophets read kidneys," not simply in order to make a factually accurate statement about prophecy, but in order to say something fitting or beautiful in its context. Since it is possible in some cases that false statements, or errors, may well be fitting or beautiful, a good exposition or interpretation of the passage need not be restricted to determining whether its statements are true or false. Socrates, however, seems to insist that it be so restricted. In this sense, he imposes upon the discussion an excessively epistemic notion of poetry, for at the outset he seems to equate "speaking well" with "speaking truthfully." If this is in fact what he does, then he is precisely begging the question that the "old quarrel" demands to be debated.

T5: 531d12-e3. "Therefore, my dear friend Ion, whenever many men speak about number, and one man speaks best (*arista*), will someone be able to identify who it is that speaks well (*eu*)?" Yes, and this will be the person who can also identify who speaks badly (*kakôs*: 531e2), namely the person trained in arithmetic.

When A and B speak about number, and do so differently, it is only the person knowledgeable in arithmetic who can correctly identify who speaks well and who does not. Once again, Socrates equates "best" or "well" with "truthfully." The only job left to the rhapsode is identifying what is true and false in the poem. To reiterate: through stipulating the meaning of this series of related adverbs, Socrates establishes the rules of, and thereby dominates, his examination of Ion.

T6: 532c2. The refutation of poor Ion's claim to possess an "art" of, or "expertise" (*technê*) in, rhapsodizing – a claim Socrates puts into his hapless mouth (530b7) – continues. Only if one can identify and speak about both those who speak badly and those who speak well on a given subject, can one claim to understand or have mastered that subject. Ion claims to be able to speak only about Homer, and not about poets such as Hesiod and Archilochus. Indeed, says Ion, "I simply doze off" (*atechnôs nustazô*) whenever the discussion is about another poet. This is sure evidence, according to Socrates at least, that Ion has no real *technê*. "It is clear," he says, "that you are incapable of speaking about Homer with expertise and knowledge" (*technêi kai epistêmêi)* (532c7). It is equally clear that Plato's use of *atechnôs* ("simply"), which without accentuation would

be indistinguishable from *atechnôs* ("without expertise" or "artlessly"), is a pun.[6]

What Socrates has done is effectively rendered the adverbial construction *technêi kai episêmêi* equivalent to such positive adverbs as *eu* and *kalôs*. To speak well or beautifully is now equivalent to speaking with *technê*. To speak badly is to speak *atechnôs,* ("without *technê*"). At least according to the philosopher.

T7: 532d6. After Ion has described him as wise, Socrates responds, *bouloimên an se alêthê legein*: "if only you were speaking truthfully." Socrates' words echo Ion's earlier use of the same phrase (530c7, 531d3, 532a8). It seems likely, then, that Socrates is subtly rebuking Ion. From the perspective of the philosopher, the rhapsode is in no position to identify what is true or false. Ion has been overly ambitious in thinking he has the capacity correctly to attach the privileged adverb *alêthê* to the verb *legein*.

T8: 532d8. It is, says Socrates, Ion and the other rhapsodes and actors who are and say things that are really wise (532d6). By contrast, "I," says Socrates, "say nothing other than the truth." Here Socrates substitutes *t'alêthê* for *alêthê*, but the difference is inconsequential. He reserves the privileged adverb for himself. He maintains the equivalence he has imposed on the discussion: speaking well equals speaking truthfully.

Socrates finalizes his refutation of Ion's claim to having a *technê* with a series of examples. When someone is clever at determining and articulating whether a given painter paints well or not, he is capable of commenting on any painter whatsoever. It is similarly true when someone is clever at explaining whether a sculptor does well or not. The point, again, is this: when someone is truly knowledgeable about a given field, he should be able to comment on anyone who enters that field regardless of whether the work is good or bad.[7] Ion claims to be knowledgeable about poetry. But he can speak only about Homer, and not poets he takes to be inferior, like Hesiod. Therefore, Ion's description of himself as he listens to lesser poets, *atechnôs nustazô* (532c2), is (if we disregard the accents) exactly accurate.

T9: 533c5-7. How is it, the now puzzled Ion asks, that about Homer *kallist' anthrôpôn legô*, "I speak more finely than all men," and that everybody says that "I speak well" (*eu legein*)? In other words, now that he has been shown that he lacks expertise, Ion seems genuinely perplexed about the source of his own success.

T10: 533e6-534d1. Socrates responds to Ion's perplexity with a lengthy speech describing the inspiration of the poets. Good poets, he says, do not speak "by

533e6). They are full of god, out of their minds, possessed by the electrifying power of the Muse.[8] Socrates' evidence for this is the following: each poet is restricted to producing only works of a single genre. An epic poet produces only epics, a lyric only lyrics, and so on. If poets possessed a genuine *technê* in (or of) poetry, then, since a *technê* provides expertise in an entire field, they would be able to produce works in all the genres. Socrates states his principle: "if about one [subject] they know well (*kalôs*) how to speak with expertise (*technêi*), they would know about all the rest" (534c6-7).

Socrates' point here extends the one he has been making all along. When someone possesses "technical" knowledge, he gains mastery over the entirety of the field. This the poet, as well as the rhapsode, fails to do, for he is restricted to the individual genre in which he works. (Or, in Ion's case, to the individual poet with whom he is fluent.) This is sure evidence that they do not have technical knowledge, and their successful productions are therefore the result of non-epistemic inspiration.

What is astonishing about this passage is that Socrates gives the poets credit for a rather sophisticated understanding of themselves. They *admit* that they are inspired when they describe themselves as follows:

T11: 534b1-3. "Poets tell us that they gather songs at honey-flowing springs, from glades and gardens of the Muses, and that they bear songs to us as bees carry honey" (534b1-2). As such, they quite appropriately use a poetic simile to say who they are. For this reason, Socrates says of them, "they speak truthfully" (*alêthê legousi*: 534b3). The use of the adverb here is another stroke of brilliant irony. The poets speak truthfully, but only when they describe themselves poetically. They speak truthfully, but only in tacitly confessing their incapacity to speak the plain truth and admitting that they are not philosophers.

T12: 534d8. Sure proof that poets are inspired and do not produce their work by means of a *technê* is provided by the case of Tynnichos. He had never produced a poem worth mentioning until one day he came up with the paean that is now on everyone's lips. Such a spontaneous and unexpected act of creativity must, just as he himself says, "simply" or "artlessly" (*atechnôs*) "be an invention of the Muses." Again, the adverbial pun is unmistakable: Tynnichos' unreproduced work was the result of the Muses' inspiration and so was produced without technical expertise.

According to Ion, Socrates speaks "well" (*eu*) in describing the poets' inspiration. But he does not speak so well that Ion would agree with him that he is "out of his mind" when it comes to speaking beautifully of Homer. And so Socrates is forced to refute Ion once again, and here Plato's adverbial play becomes most pronounced.

T13: 537c3. First, Socrates asks, "which of the subjects that Homer speaks about do you speak about well (*eu*)? Surely not all of them?" (536e1-2). Yes, says Ion, he can speak well about them all. What about the passage in which Nestor offers some fine points about chariot-driving to his son Antilochus? "Who knows better, Ion, whether Homer speaks these lines correctly (*orthôs*), the doctor or the chariot driver?" (537c1-3). The chariot driver, obviously, for he has the *technê* of chariot-driving.

This is the most critical, and potentially objectionable, substitution of adverbs. Ion claims to speak "well" about all passages in Homer. Socrates takes "speak well" to mean to "speak correctly," that is, to decide if Homer speaks correctly. And the person who can do this, the master of correctness, is the man with the proper *technê*, for he can judge the truth of Homer's assertions about chariot-driving. But of course the same question raised above must be asked again: is the ability to determine what is correct equivalent to "speaking well" about Homer? Is speaking well equivalent to speaking with technical expertise? According to Socrates, it seems to be.

T14. 538b1-3. Who knows better (*kallion*) whether Homer "speaks finely" (*kalôs legei*) or not about chariot-driving? The chariot-driver, of course. Yet again, the meaning of *kalôs* has drawn extremely close to that of *orthôs*: the chariot-driver knows whether Homer speaks with technical accuracy about his subject.

T15. 538c4-5. The doctor, and not the rhapsode, is able to "determine finely" (*diagnônai kalôs*) whether Homer "speaks correctly" (*orthôs legei*) about medical matters.

T16. 538d5. The fisherman, and not the rhapsode, is better able to judge whether Homer "speaks finely" (*legei...kalôs*) about fishing.

Through the examples above, Socrates' principle becomes plain: he who possesses technical knowledge about a specific field can judge whether Homer speaks well or badly, *eu* or *kakôs* (538e4). This is a result of the equivalence Socrates has foisted upon the discussion, namely "finely" equals "correctly," *kalôs* equals *orthôs*. Since the obligation of the rhapsode is to speak *kalôs* about his poet, he fails. Indeed, it is implied by the passage that the poet himself does not speak "finely," for he does not speak "correctly," with technical accuracy.

These adverbs have told a little story. Through his character Socrates, Plato exhibits his preference for philosophy over poetry. This is hardly surprising. But what is worth noting is how Socrates manages to state and insinuate his preference. Through Socrates' repeated substitution of adverbs, Ion unwittingly plays with a stacked deck. If speaking well is speaking correctly, if interpreting a poem well is determining which of its propositions are true and which false, if

poetry can be reduced to an encyclopedia of technical information, then the rhapsode is in no position to speak finely about the poet, and the poet himself is relegated to a status decidedly inferior to the philosopher. But it is precisely these assumptions that need to be questioned in order to adjudicate the "old quarrel" between philosophy and poetry, to determine what is ultimately the finest form of human *logos*, and this neither Socrates nor Ion explicitly does. Perhaps the only excuse for Socrates' shameless manipulation of Ion is that through his playful treatment of the adverbs, Plato invites the reader to ask the very questions that the participants in the dialogue seem to ignore.

Notes

1 This phrase comes from *Republic* 607b.
2 My Greek text is Burnet. Translations are my own.
3 Andrew Miller suggests "congratulations" (2).
4 W. C. Guthrie (205) makes just this charge. To some extent, it is answered by T.F. Morris.
5 I consistently treat this phrase as an adverbial accusative.
6 David Roochnik discusses this pun at length.
7 Rosamond Kent Sprague effectively explains this theme in the *Ion*.
8 E.N. Tigerstedt presents the most thorough discussion of this passage.

Works Cited

Bloom, Allan. *The Republic of Plato*. New York: Basic Books, 1968.
Burnet, John. *Platonis Opera* III. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1903.
Guthrie, W.C. *A History of Greek Philosophy* IV. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975.
Miller, Andrew. *Plato's Ion*. Bryn Mawr: Bryn Mawr Commentaries, 1984.
Morris, T.F. "Plato's *Ion* on What Poetry is About," *Ancient Philosophy* 13 (1993): 265-272.
Roochnik, David. "Plato's Use of ATEXNVS." *Phoenix* 41 (1987): 255-63.
Sprague, Rosamond Kent. *Plato's Philosopher-King*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1976.
Tigerstedt, E.N. *Plato's Idea of Poetical Inspiration*. Helsinki: Societas Scientarum Fennica, 1969.