

# Living Tradition: Plato, Eliot, and Poetics of Presence

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## I

The written or spoken word has always been enigmatic—complex, elusive. As readers we are conscious that words are suggestive of more than we apprehend, and when we speak or write this consciousness can be maddening. We exclaim with Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock: 'It is impossible to say just what I mean!' <sup>1</sup> But we persevere.

The enigmatic character of words is most apparent in poetic language. Poetry, like certain modes of theological speech, evokes an origin beyond the poet. '[N]either the speech of poets nor that of apostles', writes the theologian Oliver Davies, 'can be said to be ordinary speech, but both are forms of human talking which are powerfully under the sway of some other power or license'. <sup>2</sup> Poets report a compulsion to write, as though their words originated beyond themselves and moved under another's direction. Elias Canetti describes the poet's feeling of negation. '[W]hen he feels that he has nothing of his own, that he is not himself, does not know what he himself is, his concealed powers begin to stir'. <sup>3</sup> Eliot expresses a similar sentiment. 'The progress of an artist', he writes, 'is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality'. <sup>4</sup> The artist 'surrenders' his conscious intellect, allowing another presence to speak through him.

In this short essay I want to suggest that the intuition of presence is sufficiently familiar to writers and readers to deserve sustained reflection; and to approach the problem through a speculative comparison of two writers—it is tempting to say, two philosopher-poets—both central to the Western tradition and acutely sensitive to modes of poetic presence. Plato's early dialogue *Ion* represents poetry as a medium of presences, in which poets are inspired by the voice of a god or Muse. In the twentieth century T. S. Eliot's poetics restated the intuition of presence in a way that, as I will argue below, is continuous with Plato and the Platonic tradition.

But the value of this speculative comparison is not primarily in its contribution to our reading of either Plato or Eliot—it is, at most, only suggestive in this direction. In comparing these two writers, and their response to the sense of presence they both detect in poetry, I argue that both Plato and Eliot conceive of this presence as the origin of poetic inspiration; that both affirm that the reader owes piety to this presence; and that these poetics of presence are what make it possible to speak of a 'living' tradition.

Before proceeding with the essay, I want to say something about my choice of

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- 1 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', *T. S. Eliot: The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 16. Hereafter cited *CPP*.
  - 2 Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2001), p. 177.
  - 3 Canetti, *The Conscience of Words*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (London: André Deutsch, 1986), p. 36.
  - 4 Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', *The Egoist*, 6 (September 1919); in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: vol. 2 The Perfect Critic, 1919-1926*, ed. Anthony Cuda and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 108. 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' is hereafter 'TT'. This volume of the *Complete Prose* is *CP2*.

primary texts and the relationship that I am postulating between Plato and Eliot. The argument will be more intelligible if its limitations are confessed at the outset. I have restricted my use of Platonic texts to the *Ion*, which concisely illustrates the problem I want to consider: what I am calling the poetics of presence. The *Ion* is by no means representative of Plato's opinions on poetry, which vary in different dialogues, and of which I have no wish to offer a complete account.<sup>5</sup> Most significant of the texts omitted here is the *Republic*, in which Plato develops his theory of *mimesis*, and notoriously expels the poets from his ideal city. My use of Eliot's work, too, is very partial. I have restricted the the consideration of his poetics to two early essays, 'Reflections on Contemporary Poetry' and 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. Again, I do not say that these essays taken together are an adequate statement of Eliot's poetics, only that they are sufficient for the purpose of this essay, offering a concise statement of the points in question.

Although Eliot studied Plato as a graduate student, I am not concerned here to argue for Plato's direct influence on his poetics. It is enough to establish that substantial affinities can be identified in their thought. That the study of Plato left an abiding stylistic impression on the young poet is confirmed by Eliot himself. 'I spent three years, when young, in the study of philosophy. What remains to me of these studies? The style of three philosophers: Bradley's English, Spinoza's Latin, and Plato's Greek.'<sup>6</sup>

## II

In Plato's early dialogue *Ion*, Socrates falls into conversation with Ion, the celebrated rhapsode, a professional reciter of Homer and other early Greek poets. With revealing candour he claims to 'speak more beautifully than anyone else about Homer'. No one else 'past or present could offer as many beautiful thoughts about Homer as I can'. But Ion's prowess has an important caveat: he can speak beautifully only of Homer. 'When someone discusses another poet I pay no attention, and I have no power to contribute anything worthwhile: I simply doze off'.<sup>7</sup>

How, asks Socrates, can this be? To speak beautifully on any subject—poetry, or sculpture, or arithmetic, or whatever—implies clear rational knowledge. We speak well about a subject only when we have mastered it. And if Ion can speak beautifully of Homer, a poet among other poets, he should have sufficient mastery of his subject to at least 'contribute [something] worthwhile' on any poet being discussed. Yet Ion is by his own admission unresponsive to all poets but Homer.

This dilemma rules out the possibility that Ion has mastered his subject rationally. 'Anyone can tell', Socrates exclaims, 'that you are powerless to speak about Homer on the basis of mastery. Because if your ability came by mastery, you would be able to speak about

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5 Moreover the *Ion* itself, although a relatively short dialogue, is a very dense text. An excellent analysis of its many previous interpretations can be found in Suzanne Stern-Gillet's 'On (mis)interpreting Plato's *Ion*', *Phronesis*, vol. 49, no. 2 (2004), pp. 169-201.

6 Eliot, *To Criticise the Critic and Other Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), pp. 20-21. Eliot refers to the Oxford philosopher F. H. Bradley, the subject of his undefended doctoral thesis *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*.

7 *Ion*, 530c-d, 532c, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1997), p. 938, 940. Plato is cited throughout from this complete English edition. Hereafter cited *PCW*.

all the other poets as well'.<sup>8</sup> Ion's power is of a different order. It is inspiration: he is moved to speak beautifully by the presence of a god.<sup>9</sup> Socrates illustrates Ion's inspiration using the metaphor of a magnetic stone's power to move iron rings:

As I said earlier, that's not a subject you've mastered—speaking well about Homer; it's a divine power that moves you, as a “Magnetic” stone moves iron rings. ... This stone not only pulls those rings, if they're iron, it also puts power *in* the rings, so that they in turn can do just what the stone does—pull other rings—so that there's sometimes a very long chain of iron pieces and rings hanging from one another. And the power in all of them depends on this stone. In the same way, the Muse makes some people inspired herself, and then through those who are inspired a chain of other enthusiasts is suspended.<sup>10</sup>

Socrates' metaphor invites us to read Ion's power of speaking beautifully as a consequence of his inspiration by a compelling presence—a presence equivalent to the stone's magnetism. There is a presence behind Homer's poetry that possesses Ion as he recites. Ion's beautiful recitation transmits the same compelling power to his audience, who are drawn to the inspired rhapsode as inevitably as iron to a magnet. And the presence behind and within the poetry is that of a god or Muse. 'The middle ring is you,' Socrates tells Ion, 'the rhapsode or actor, and the first one is the poet himself. The god pulls people's souls through these wherever he wants, looping the power down from one to another'.<sup>11</sup> Poetry is a theatre of presence. 'The god' inspires and possesses the poet, rhapsode, and audience, in a descending 'chain' of compulsion.

So Ion is unable to speak beautifully about any poet except Homer, because it is through Homer, and Homer alone, that this 'chain' descends to him. Ion is 'possessed by Homer' in the moment of his recitation. No other poet possesses him, and consequently he has no power to speak of them. He must be silent—or 'doze off'.

On this view, poetry depends entirely on divine possession and inspiration. There is no conscious art of poetry: 'it is the mantic voice of the Muses' which speaks through the poet, who is not a rational craftsman but 'an instrument played on by supernatural forces'.<sup>12</sup> To create poetry the poet must abandon his intellect and surrender to divine possession; must submit, in Eliot's words, to 'a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality'.

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8 Ibid, 532c, p. 940.

9 The assumption of divine presence is embedded in the word 'inspiration'. Its figurative meaning of 'a breathing or infusion into the mind or soul' points back to the literal sense of the Latin verb *inspirāre*, 'to blow or breathe into'. In the tradition following Genesis 2:7 the act of 'inspiration' is 'the breath of life'. 'And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul'. The coincidence invites us to think speculatively of poetic 'inspiration' as an analogue of divine creation. I do not want to follow that line of speculation here, but it is salutary to keep in mind that any talk of 'inspiration' inevitably has theological as well as poetic implications.

10 Ibid, 533d-e, p. 941.

11 Ibid, 536a, p. 943.

12 George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 43.

For a poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and goes out of his mind and his intellect is no longer in him. As long as a human being has his intellect in his possession he will always lack the power to make poetry or sing prophecy. Therefore it's not by mastery that they make poems or say many lovely things about their subjects (as you do about Homer)—but because it's by a divine gift—each poet is able to compose beautifully only that for which the Muse has aroused him. <sup>13</sup>

Socrates points to Tynnichus of Chalcis, who 'never made a poem anyone would think worth mentioning, *except* for the praise-song everyone sings, almost the most beautiful lyric-poem there is'. If poetry were mastery—if Tynnichus were employing his own rational craft—he could make beautiful poems at will. But it is not so. 'In this more than anything', Socrates reflects, 'I think, that the god is showing us ... these beautiful poems are not human, not even *from* human beings, but are divine and from gods; that poets are nothing but representatives of gods, possessed by whatever possesses them'. <sup>14</sup>

Plato's poetics in the *Ion* imply a necessary piety owed by the poet to the god who possesses and inspires him. An honest poet, like Tynnichus, will confess in humility that his verses are 'an invention of the Muses'. <sup>15</sup> And a rhapsode like Ion, along with his enraptured audience, owes piety not only to the god, but also to the poet through whom the 'chain' descends and the god is made present. His power to 'speak beautifully' depends absolutely on the god. The notion of a poet or audience owing piety to the originating presence behind poetry may seem utterly archaic. We—you and I, a twenty-first century readership—are inclined, I suspect, to dismiss such piety as uncritical and pre-modern. Yet the poet to whom I now turn was as radically modern in his verse and criticism as any European or American writer of his day. T. S. Eliot, no less than Plato, held the poet to be possessed by a presence not his own.

### III

At the outset of his career, at a time when he was developing the first sustained outline of his poetics, Eliot wrote a short review article, relatively neglected by later scholars. 'Reflections on Contemporary Poetry' begins with a persuasive but strangely disconcerting account of presence and possession. Of course it differs—how could it not?—from Plato's account in the *Ion*: we would look in vain for recourse to 'the god' or 'the Muses' in Eliot's review. The presence he intuitively finds in poetry is that of the 'dead author', for whom the reader or 'young writer' develops 'a feeling of profound kinship, or ... a peculiar personal intimacy'. This 'feeling' of presence, Eliot continues,

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<sup>13</sup> *Ion*, 534b-c, p. 942. Here Socrates approaches the celebrated poetics of the *Phaedrus*. Poetry originates in 'possession by the Muses', who drive the poet into 'a Bacchic frenzy of songs and poetry'. No poet can succeed without this divine madness. 'If anyone comes to the gates of poetry and expects to become an adequate poet by acquiring expert knowledge of the subject without the Muses' madness, he will fail, and his self-controlled verses will be eclipsed by the poetry of men who have been driven out of their minds'. *Phaedrus*, 245b, *PCW* p. 523.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 534d-e.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 534e.

may overcome us suddenly, on first or after long acquaintance; it is certainly a crisis; and when a young writer is seized with his first passion of this sort he may be changed, metamorphosed almost, within a few weeks even, from a bundle of second-hand sentiments into a person. The imperative intimacy arouses for the first time a real, an unshakable confidence. That you possess this secret knowledge, this intimacy, with the dead man, that after a few or many years or centuries you should have appeared, with this indubitable claim to distinction; who can penetrate at once the thick and dusty circumlocutions about his reputation, can call yourself alone his friend: it is something more than *encouragement* to you. It is a cause of development, like personal relations in life. Like personal intimacies in life, it may and probably will pass, but it will be ineffaceable.<sup>16</sup>

Eliot's language implies a moment of violent transfiguration. The reader is 'overcome', 'seized', 'changed, metamorphosed almost'; 'it is certainly a crisis'. And this 'crisis' is brought on by possession.<sup>17</sup> A strange meeting takes place: the reader's encounter with the presence that inheres in poetry, the presence of the 'dead author'. True, this figure is neither god nor Muse. But Eliot attributes to the 'dead author' an originating power, comparable to the inspirational 'possession' described in the *Ion*. What is still more striking, the 'dead author' is a presence to whom the 'young writer' owes a debt of piety for this gift of inspiration.

Consider the role of the 'dead author'. Eliot writes of 'intimacy' and 'secret knowledge', as though the 'young writer' were being initiated into an esoteric rite. The 'young writer' gains an 'indubitable claim to distinction', a power to 'penetrate at once ... thick and dusty circumlocutions' and to read in the 'unshakable confidence' of 'profound kinship'. Through this possession ('when a young writer is seized') he becomes the perfect reader and interpreter of the 'dead author', just as Ion becomes Homer's inspired rhapsode—he can 'speak more beautifully than anyone else about Homer'—through the descending 'chain' of possession.

But whereas Ion is a rhapsode, a reciter of Homer's poetry, Eliot's reader, 'seized' by the presence of the 'dead author', is thus inspired to write poetry of his own. 'We do not imitate', he writes, but 'we are changed; and our work is the work of the changed man; we have not borrowed, we have been quickened, and we become bearers of a tradition'.<sup>18</sup> I will say more about 'tradition' below; here, I want to note Eliot's subtle metaphor. 'Quickened' indicates that the artist is 'made living or lively; animated, revived, stimulated'. It is related

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16 'Reflections on Contemporary Poetry', *The Egoist*, 6 (July 1919); *CP2*, pp. 66-67. Hereafter 'RCP'.

17 Note that Eliot's use of the word 'seize' licenses my reading of the 'young writer' being possessed by 'the dead author' in a way comparable to the possession of the poet or rhapsode in Plato's *Ion*. The first and second senses of the verb 'to seize' listed in the *OED* are 'to put in possession' or 'to be in possession of'. 'Seize, v.', *OED Online*, Feb. 2016. In a much later essay, 'Religion and Literature', Eliot writes explicitly of how an 'author takes complete *possession* of us' [emphasis added]. *Selected Essays*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London: Faber and Faber, 1951).

18 'RCP', p. 67.

to quickening, 'the first perceptible movements of the foetus during pregnancy'.<sup>19</sup> To say that the 'young writer' is 'quickened' implies that he is inspired by the 'dead author'. He surrenders himself and lets the originating presence of the dead poet speak through him.<sup>20</sup> As Socrates says in the *Ion*, the 'young writer' 'is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired'.

The 'dead author' is not, crucially, an impersonal source or origin. Eliot's language speaks directly of 'passion' and 'personal intimacies', even of friendship. 'You', he writes—you, the 'young writer' possessed by the 'dead author'—'can call yourself alone his friend'. Eliot's poetics imply that the 'young writer' owes a kind of piety to the presence that has 'seized', 'metamorphosed', and inspired him, exactly as one would owe a duty to a benevolent 'friend'. Joseph Conrad defines art itself as 'a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect'<sup>21</sup>. Eliot's poetics, I suggest, express the poet's attempt to 'render the highest kind of justice' to the 'dead author' whose inspiration is the originating presence behind his own poetry. And the poet's rendering of 'justice' or piety to 'the dead poets his ancestors' consists in the act of writing itself. The background to Plato's poetics in the *Ion* is one in which poetry has profound religious significance. An inspired poet or rhapsode would compose and recite to honour 'the god'.<sup>22</sup> So too, for Eliot, the 'highest kind of justice' or piety that one poet can render to another is to respond to the inspiration of his presence, to write; and conversely, the lowest sacrilege—the true sin against the spirit, if you like—is to feel the 'quicken[ing]' of inspiration and yet fail to respond, to refuse the obligation that the 'dead author' has laid upon you.<sup>23</sup>

#### IV

What I have called the poetics of presence, as we find them outlined in Plato and Eliot, begin with an intuition familiar to many readers and writers. We now and again encounter a voice—a mode of expression or point of view—in poetry, or perhaps in any genre of literary, visual, or musical art, that seems to us so fluent and insidious, that we are compelled to attribute to it a commensurate sense of presence. In the *Ion*, and in Eliot's early essays, this presence is the origin of poetic inspiration. It takes possession of the audience—the reader, the 'young writer'—'seiz[ing]' them, and 'quicken[ing]' their own

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19 See 'Quickened, adj.', and 'Quickening, n.', *OED Online*, Feb. 2016. It would be the rewarding task of a more substantial essay to extend the comparison of Plato and Eliot's poetics by investigating this obstetrical metaphor. The 'dead author' who 'quickens' the 'young writer' may be likened to a Socratic 'midwife'. See *Theaetetus*, in which Socrates compares his role to a midwife's, insofar as he presides over the 'birth' of wisdom. '[M]y art of midwifery is just like theirs in most respects. The difference is that I attend men and not women, and that I watch over the labour of their souls, not of their bodies'. 150B-c, *PCW*, p. 167. Another possible direction would be a comparison with the *Symposium*. According to Diotima, a poet is 'pregnant', and gives birth in proximity to beauty. 206C-e, *PCW*, p. 489.

20 See 'TT'. '[W]e shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of [a poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously'. *CP2*, pp. 105-106.

21 Preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* (Oxford: OUP, 1984), p. xxxix.

22 See Elizabeth Asmis, 'Plato on Poetic creativity', in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), p. 359.

23 See Eliot's essay 'Ben Jonson', in which he explicitly associates reading with the urge to write; and that by writing we are doing justice to the writers who have inspired us. '[A]ppreciation', Eliot writes, 'is akin to creation, and true enjoyment of poetry is related to the stirring [quickening] of suggestion, the stimulus that a poet feels in his enjoyment of other poetry'. *TLS*, 930 (13 November 1919); in *CP2*, p. 150.

poetic voice.

This way of understanding the *fons et origo* of poetry implies a distinctive way of reading and writing. It implies, in Eliot's words, that we 'become bearers of a tradition'. Or, to revert to Socrates' metaphor in the *Ion*, that we feel ourselves to be a link in the 'chain' of divine possession that descends to us through the poet. In either case, we become aware that the practice of reading and writing involves us in an 'intimacy' with a presence to whom we owe a kind of piety, and that the act of writing—or, in the *Ion*, simply reciting—fulfils this obligation.

What Eliot calls 'tradition' is animated by this intuition of presence. Tradition lives in the 'intimacy' between the writer or reader, and the presence of 'the god', the Muse, or the 'dead author'. And tradition is extended—we become its 'bearers'—when we respond to this presence by writing for ourselves. Without an intuition of presence and possession such as we find in Plato and Eliot, the notion of tradition would be lifeless and oppressive. Tradition would be mere dead-weight. It is this lively sense of encountering another presence—a presence that 'change[s]' and 'quicken[s]' us—that makes tradition itself dramatic and vital. Tradition is constantly 'modified', 'altered', and 'readjusted', because it lives in these elusive moments of 'intimacy'<sup>24</sup>.

Hence we may speak, as I do in my title, of a living tradition. If the word, written or spoken, remains so maddeningly enigmatic, it is perhaps because we feel acutely the difficulty of articulating the presences we intuit there. And if we persevere in 'the intolerable wrestle | With words and meanings', it is perhaps because we know ourselves obliged to 'render the highest kind of justice' to those presences that haunt and inspire us.

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<sup>24</sup> See 'TT', p. 106. 'The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted'. *CP2*, p. 106.

<sup>25</sup> Eliot 'East Coker', *CPP*, p. 179.