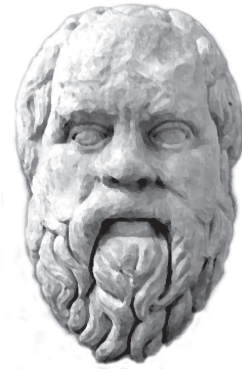


## SOUND AND SOCRATES

Once we see the rich array of techniques that poets use to fill their lines with sounds, and once we learn the names of these techniques and begin to notice them for ourselves in poems, we reach a strange point. On the one hand, we have gained real knowledge, but on the other hand, this knowledge has brought us to a new threshold of perplexity. Yes, these techniques are real and poets use them to write poems, but ...



1. How do poets decide which techniques to use for a particular poem?
2. Why are certain sounds so right for certain ideas?
3. You could know all of these techniques but not be able to use them poetically; what turns standard technique into true poetic art?

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates explains to the jury that he undertook his quest for truth in obedience to the oracle of Apollo at Delphi, who proclaimed Socrates the wisest man of Athens. After interrogating experts in many fields, Socrates believed he had gotten Apollo's meaning:

But the truth of the matter is probably this, that real wisdom is the property of God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little value.

If Socrates is right, then our exploration of the facts of poetry will be illuminating to a point, but only to a point. The truth of poetic genius will lie somewhere beyond all details of poetic technique. We can label the techniques that Dickinson used without understanding how she did them. We approach her poem only after it is written; she approached it before she wrote it, and as she wrote it. The two views are very different.

We have learned much, but it has made us more humble.