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ART AND RHAPSODY IN PLATO’S *ION*

Abstract

The relationship which Plato had with poetry was never the best one can have. The same thing can also be said about rhapsody and the rhapsodes. Plato has real doubts whether rhapsody, along with poetry is an art or not and if the rhapsode and the poets really possess a *techne*. The short Socratic dialog *Ion* raises the question whether the rhapsode possesses an art, a real understanding of what he says about poetry or not; if the rhapsode really possesses an art then what exactly would it consist of? Plato suggests that rhapsodes do not get to the knowledge of poetry, “they do not attain to the clearness of ideas” but they are just under divine inspiration (which in this context expresses only the irrationality of the poetic process). Even if Ion can speak beautifully about Homer he doesn’t possess an art because he is not able to speak the same way about any other poet; whereas to have a *techne* implies to have knowledge over the whole of an art.

Key words: Poetry, rhapsody, *techne*, knowledge, art, inspiration

Introduction

Ion is probably the shortest dialog which Plato wrote and like other platonic dialogues there were doubts whether it was written or not by Plato. It was said that the rhapsode Ion is just a dim caricature and that Socrates’ arguments against him are not worthy for Plato’s thinking. Nevertheless, it was not enough to assert that *Ion* is not an authentic platonic dialog and according to Penelope Murray’s *Plato on Poetry*, most of the scholars assign it to the period around year 399, after Socrates’ death and so belonging to the early Plato’s period. Moreover, as a general aspect about *Ion*, in this dialog we can find some of Plato’s first opinions about poetry and by sustaining its authenticity, some of the ideas raised here are in agreement with the latter platonic dialogs (such as *Republic*, *Phaedrus* or *Menno*), where Plato also deals, more or less, with poetry.

Being an earlier platonic dialog *Ion* is as much as the others, a combination of earnest and jest, by the end of which no final result is reached. Stressing more upon the idea that *Ion* is an earlier, Socratic, dialog it is helpful to pay attention to

what Terry Penner writes about what seems to be particular for this period¹. First of all, the Socratic dialogues tend to be short or at least shorter than the others. Then, related to an idea expressed earlier, these dialogues have a bantering tone, being also optimistic and extroverted. A third characteristic will be that in the Socratic dialogues we don't really find a positive result. Until this point it can be said for sure that *Ion* is a Socratic dialogue, being very short, having an amusing tone given by the irony of Socrates and by some silly answers given by Ion which reveals ignorance and naivety. Moreover, by the end of the dialogue we cannot say for sure that we have a clear answer to what poetry and rhapsody deals with as arts or if Ion really understands Socrates' arguments, in order to explain the specificity of his *techné*. A fourth characteristic of the earlier dialogues, worth to mention here, is that most of them have an ethical content. This aspect can be also found in *Ion*, but this fact will get clearer later on.

Content

The dialogue opens with the returning of the rhapsod Ion from a contest which took place in Epidaurus where he won the first prize at the festival of Asclepius. Ion is greeted by Socrates and from here the dialogue, which consists in a conversation between just these two characters begins. Socrates congratulates Ion and tells him about his admiration for rhapsodes who have the opportunity to spend their time in the company of the best poets, such as Homer and to learn not just their poetry but also their thoughts. In Socrates' opinion, one cannot be a good rhapsode if he does not understand also the meaning of the poet's lines. Without understanding the meanings the rhapsode is unable to interpret the poets to his audience. Ion agrees with that but he admitted that he is a good rhapsode, probably the best of his time, just when it comes to Homer. But here Socrates has an objection. If two poets, Homer and Hesiod expressed themselves in the same way, would Ion not be able to interpret Homer's verses and also those of Hesiod? More general, if these two poets say different things about the same subject (so one is right and one is wrong), Ion would know how to explain why Homer is right which is explaining, at the same time, why Hesiod is wrong. In this respect, Ion as a rhapsode, should be skilled not just in Homer but also in other poets. To this argument Ion answers that he himself is not able to react or speak because it is about other poet, and not Homer. Socrates' response is immediate: if poetry is an art which forms a whole, then one single rhapsode should be able to judge all the poetical productions (as is the case of the one who knows painting, sculpture and all forms of music). But Ion confesses he is unable. Consequently Socrates concludes that

¹ Terry Penner, "Socrates and the Early Dialogues", in Richard Kraut (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 125.

Ion possesses no art or knowledge. Ion admits Socrates' argument but he is still sure that when it is about Homer he feels that he is endowed with such a talent. Socrates explains this single ability of Ion, which is not an art but just some kind of divine inspiration, by using the metaphor of the Heracleian stone, the so called magnet. The magnet attracts iron rings and also puts its power in the rings so that to have the same power as the magnet, to attract other rings. The magnet provides power for the whole chain. In other words, the rhapsode derives his mysterious power from the poet, who is in his turn inspired by his Muse. In our case, Homer is under god's direct influence and consequently Ion as a rhapsod, is the interpreter of a single poet, Homer. Ion is delighted by the thought of being inspired and he agrees the general idea that the rhapsode is the interpreter of the poet. He also admits that poets bring them, the rhapsodes, poems by divine distribution as messages from the gods. In this respect, Ion totally admits that if poets are messengers of gods, rhapsodes are the messengers of poets thus they are the messengers of messengers.

Socrates speaks then about the emotion which Ion feels when he recites Homer, affirming his believe that Ion is possessed, mad and without intelligence in those moments. It is a proof that the rhapsode himself is de-possessed of reason when he receives the inspiration from god. Ion refuses Socrates' conclusion. He sustains, on the contrary, that he is neither crazy nor possessed when he speaks about Homer. Moreover once inspired, he gives part of this to the spectator and transmits the same force which comes from the Muse. This possession by god explains the fact that a poet could compose only a certain verse genre and that a rhapsode, like Ion, could recite only Homer's verse. The specific character of this inspiration confirms the fact that the rhapsode's talent is not related to some kind of art, but to a divine favour.

The last part of the dialog consists of a debate whether rhapsody (and poetry) is an art or not, meaning whether it possesses an individual value or not. Socrates decides to study with Ion some passages from the Homeric poems which reveal successively the competence of the charioteer's art, the doctor's art, the fisher's art and the fortune teller's art. Even if these things can be found in the Homeric poems Ion cannot claim that he is more specialized then a charioteer, a doctor or a seer. Still, Ion maintains that he understands as well as a general the art of generalship. To Socrates proposal of professing as a general and not just as a rhapsod in Greece he answers that he is a foreigner and he wouldn't be accepted in this function. This reason is not accepted by Socrates and he concludes that Ion is either a wrongdoer or a divine human being. Ion accepts the last alternative without thinking what this implies and thus he admits that he is only an instrument in the hands of the god possessing no knowledge and consequently no art. Socrates' irony wins over Ion but still there is no clear answer to the question: is rhapsody an art or which are the elements which gives it (as well as poetry) the status of being an art?

Possessing (or not) an art

The first step in trying to clarify this is to understand which is the exact meaning of art for the old Greeks. The term “art” was not as limited in meanings as nowadays when it refers just to “fine arts”. The Greeks didn’t have any linguistic or conceptual distinction between fine arts and crafts. The Greek term, *techne* can be also translated as craft or as any kind of skill involved in producing something. Moreover, art was not something which could be totally separated from morality². This takes us to the general idea that the Greeks didn’t separate concepts such as beauty and goodness. If something was beautiful then it was also good. A delimitation of what the aesthetics realm contained was made later in the eighteenth century by Alexander Baumgarten with his *Aesthetica*³. A real craftsman was able to understand his *techne* as a whole. The concept of *techne* gathered anything from poetry, painting, shoemaking or shipbuilding.

Techne implies knowledge about its object and as a general distinction arts are differentiated by their specific functions (537c). The arts are distinct from each other and related to objects which are also specifically different (537d). An art should be seen and understood as a whole in order to sustain that somebody possesses it. Moreover, as it was mentioned before, for the ancient Greeks fields like medicine, horseracing, backgammon or prophecy were also arts and the men who could speak best about them were the ones who possessed *techne*, meaning, the ones who had knowledge over the whole of his *techne*. In this respect, poetry and rhapsody should also be arts, and the poets and the rhapsodes should have the same skills as any other craftsman has upon his art. This is the first weak point observed by Socrates when he analyses Ion’s skills as a rhapsod. If Ion is a real rhapsod he should be able to speak about every poet as well as he speaks when it comes to Homer. Even Ion admits this and more than this he is also proud of it (531a). But still, he claims that he as a rhapsod possesses an art, even if his art is limited to Homer. As B. Jowett observes in his introduction to *Ion*: “The concentration of the mind on a single object, or on a single aspect of human nature, overpowers the orderly perception of the whole”⁴. To have a logical perception of the whole implies to have knowledge and Plato suggests in *Ion* that poets and rhapsodes do not get to the knowledge of poetry, “they do not attain to the clearness of ideas”⁵. Socrates uses induction in order to show Ion that he lacks art and knowledge. He resorts to the examples of prophets (531b), painters (532e), sculptors (533b) and

² Penelope Murray (ed.), *Plato on Poetry*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 1.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

⁴ B. Jowett, M.A., *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated into English with analyses and introduction, Oxford University Press, 1964, p. 101.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

musicians (533c). These all are arts and the people who can speak best about them are obviously the prophet, the painter, the sculptor and so on. They possess an art, they can see things as a whole and they can distinguish between what is best and what is worse about their crafts. They can also talk about different things concerning their subject. It should be the same with rhapsody but Ion admits that he cannot say why Homer is better than Hesiod and why when somebody speaks about another poet than Homer he is unable to pay attention or to say something worth mentioning (532c). In other words, possessing an art means to have the ability to discern between who speaks well and who does it worse about his matter (332c) and Ion cannot speak or interpret different poets even if they discuss the same subjects as Homer does. At this point Socrates concludes: "It's clear to everyone that you're unable to speak about Homer with art and knowledge. For if you could, you'd be able to speak about all the other poets too. The art of poetry is surely one whole is it not?"⁶

But why is that Ion claims, even if he admitted that he cannot speak about other poets, that he still possesses an art thou limited to Homer (533b)? Is this possible, according to what it was said about what possessing an art implies? How can Ion speak so beautifully about Homer though? And even Ion is anxious to find out that (533c).

Being under divine inspiration

Socrates uses the metaphor of the Magnet stone in order to explain Ion why his abilities as a rhapsod do not depend on knowledge. This is a turning point in the dialog because the topic moves from debating just Ion's skills to the more general idea of poetic inspiration. The Magnet cannot just attract the rings but it also puts its specific power in them so they can have the same attribute as the stone. A long chain of rings can be created but still the power comes from the stone that keeps them suspended (533d). This analogy creates the context for Socrates to sustain that we can also speak about a chain, a hermeneutical one let's say, which starts from The God (or the Muse) and ends with the listeners. Between them we can find the poet and the rhapsod. The poet gains his inspiration to write a poem directly from his Muse. But through this inspiration some others are also possessed (533e). The one just next to the poet is the rhapsod and he achieves his inspiration through poet's divine apportionment. So, the poets and the rhapsodes do not speak through knowledge about their subject matter. They are possessed by a divine power and even more, they seem to be mad and not using their intelligence anymore (534b).

⁶ R.E. Allen, *Plato*, translated with comment, Yale University Press, 1996, p. 12.

The idea that poets are the ones who bring messages from the gods by divine apportionment seems to be an eulogium for the poets and thus *Ion* is happy to maintain that. But still, this does not mean that poetry or rhapsody are arts. The poet is the interpreter of the God and the rhapsod is the messenger of the messenger (535a). So, the rhapsod is the second ring of the chain and consequently the spectator is the last ring of the chain. But even if they receive the "power" from one to another it is the Muse "who draws the soul of men through all of them in whatever direction he may wish"⁷. Thus, *Ion* is under the direct influence of Homer and by this he is not skilled to praise him by art or knowledge but only through divine apportionment (536d).

As it was underlined earlier, by introducing the Magnet metaphor in the dialog, Socrates opens the more general platonic theme of poetic inspiration. And this is probably the major theme of *Ion*. The poetic inspiration is not a new notion, only introduced by Plato in the Greek culture. Before him poetry was seen as a divine gift which the Muses bestow or teach⁸. Even from Homer we find that he invokes the Muses, the daughters of Memory, to assist him during the composition of the poems. In this context the stress is upon the special relationship between the Gods and their chosen ones, so nothing about the nature of the creation process. What Plato brings new here is the idea of the irrationality of the poetic process⁹ and from here the incompatibility of inspiration, as a decisive aspect for poetry, with *techné*. A suggestive statement made by Socrates can be found in line 535b where it can be read: "For a poet is a delicate thing, winged and sacred, and unable to create until he becomes inspired and frenzied, his mind no longer in him; as long as he keeps his hold on that, no man can compose or chant prophecy. Since, then, it is not by art that poets compose and say many beautiful things about their subject [...] but by divine apportionment"¹⁰.

The theme of inspiration is presented in *Ion* as the only possibility of describing the common nature of the rhapsode and the poetry and of explaining how these two distinguish themselves from a technical competence, from a *techné*. To the competence which is related to all the objects of a genre, Socrates substitutes a form of predilection that exists between the rhapsode and the poet and, more important, between the poet and the Muse¹¹. The poet writes under the effect of a divine force which is exterior to him so that the primary effect is that of being deprived of his reason and being made to say all that the Muse that animates him wants. Plato's insistence on underlining the fact that the poet does not write while

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

⁸ Penelope Murray (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

¹⁰ R.E. Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹¹ Monique Canto, *Platon, Ion*, Flammarion, Paris, 1989, pp. 47-48.

possessing his reason excludes the existence of a poetic art as a technique of the produced effect.

The idea of divine poetic inspiration, on different levels of meaning is partially touched upon by Plato in other dialogs, too. For instance, *Ion* expands on the idea from *Apology* where Socrates tells us about poets that they compose their work not by wisdom but by some kind of natural disposition, genius and divine inspiration (*Apology* 22 b-c). Just like diviners or soothsayers, the poets know many beautiful things but they are incapable to judge and to speak with wisdom about their writings, even if it is about the most elaborate passages from their own works. In *Meno* (99d) it is also suggested that the poets, together with the diviners and prophets are “being possessed of God and filled with His breath, in which condition they say many grand things, not knowing what they say”¹². The idea of poets who don’t possess knowledge about what they are saying can also be found here.

An important discussion concerning poetry can also be found in the well known dialog *Republic*. In brief, Plato begins by saying that poetry has, or it should have, the role to induce itself in the children’s and not only, soul. Thus, poetry has a moral attribute in a state. The poets have the duty to present the truth about the Gods and the Heroes so that to serve as an example of goodness for the people. They must present only the good individuals or the good deeds in order the people to imitate them. In this respect, poetry is just a form of imitation (*mimesis*), but in a moral way. The poet must imitate the morally good speech and just to narrate the other things¹³. The result of the poetry, as a moral influence, should be seen in the afterwards listener’s attitude (this reminding about the listener in *Ion* who is the last ring in the chain of divine inspiration).

The role of the divine possession and of inspiration in the poetic creation is also developed by Plato in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, but in these two cases poetry is associated with love and defined as a form of delirium, the philosophic nature of which permits the access to the knowledge of the Form of Beauty. Hence, poetry is not radically deprived of all forms of access to reality and truth. Love is the motivational force for the poetic creativity. On the other hand, the legitimacy of the poetic creation, due to its connection with the divine, is emphasised in the *Symposium* or *Phaedrus* by Plato more than in *Ion*¹⁴.

The philosophical sense that could be somehow deprived of human reason, which is a condition for the inspiration of a superhuman wisdom, does not seem to be presented in *Ion*, as Monique Canto suggests¹⁵. We would be tempted to recognize in the inspiration theme that *Ion* proposes a form of plausible explanation of

¹² B. Jowett, *op.cit.*, p. 300.

¹³ Richard Kraut (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 347.

¹⁴ A more detailed discussion is to be found in Monique Canto, *Platon, Ion*, Flamarion, Paris, 1989, pp. 47-50 and in Richard Kraut (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp.334-337.

¹⁵ Monique Canto, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

the poetic production. But only in the Symposium and Phaedrus can we find a philosophical foundation of inspiration which connects delirium with love and with the moment of acquiring knowledge.

The object of rhapsody

The last part of the dialog is dedicated to the following problem: if poetry and rhapsody are true arts then they should possess their own subjects. Poetry and rhapsody should be defined by their matters, just like every other art is. Ion claims that he is able to speak well about every topic that Homer treats (536e). Now, taking a little glance to what a rhapsode is supposed to be, Ion seems to have some truth in his claim. Socrates defines the competence of a good rhapsode by saying that it is strongly connected with knowing the poet's way of thinking and not only his verse. This function makes the rhapsode an interpreter of the poet for the auditory (530c). Such a competence concretises in the capacity of saying numerous beautiful things about Homer. Pressed by the Socratic questions, Ion admits that he is capable of explaining any subject related to Homer and prove that what Homer describes is false or true. This characterization of rhapsody matches neither what we know about the antique rhapsody nor the interpretative activity which Ion seems to have undergone.

As we can read in Monique Canto's analysis on *Ion*¹⁶, the development of rhapsody beginning with the 7th /6th centuries depends on many factors. Perhaps the type of interpretation proposed by the rhapsode led to the development of a form of self-interpretation of epic poetry, present especially in the Homeric poems. As some passages from the Iliad show (those presenting a glossary of god names), the exegetic elements which speak about an ancient allegorical practice, belong to the epic poetry. The presence of these allegories in the Homeric poems allow the explanation according to which the interpretative activity of the rhapsodes consists, among others, of searching the hidden meanings of some particularly obscure verses. But it is also possible that the interpretation of the rhapsode responds to some more concrete needs. Ion presents himself as a specialist in Homer and shows his competence publicly or pretends that he is able to answer all the questions that he would be asked.

The rhapsodes practiced their art during the contests which were organized for the first time in Athens on the occasion of the Panathenees. It also seems that Pericle has proposed a decree in 442 which established the status of mousikes agon. The rule was that the rhapsode started to recite from Homer from the point where the previous one stopped. So, the rhapsode, a personality poetically endowed with the ability of interpreting the poet's verse, found himself in charge with recit-

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

ing, explaining, paraphrasing the poetic texts in an attempt of continuing what originally was the self-interpretation of the poet and of responding to the public need of explanation.

It is hard not to draw here a parallel between the rhapsodes and the sophists. Just like the first ones, the rhapsodes also depend, in a way or another, on the reaction of the auditory. Situated between the poet and the spectator, the rhapsode interprets and transmits what the poet writes. The weak point here, the thing which relates the rhapsode to the sophist, is indicated even by Ion. At 535-e he says: “I have to pay close attention to them [the spectators]: because if I make them cry, I’ll later laugh myself for the money I make, but if they laugh, I’ll myself cry for the money lost”¹⁷. According to this latter issue Ion has a lot in common with the sophists. Just like them, he pays attention to the reaction of the crowd because depending on this he will earn money or not. As we know, Socrates didn’t see the sophists with good eyes first of all because they were claiming that they are the wisest people and that they use their rhetoric just in order to improve the human life. Secondly, they do not seem to possess a real craft as long as they change their arguments and their way of putting things according to the public. Here rhapsody and rhetoric (the sophists’ “craft”) come together. They share the same aim, namely that of flattering the audience. But there is another thing which connects the two, related with the claiming of wisdom and upon which Socrates develops his final argumentation against Ion.

Even if he agreed with Socrates upon poetry and rhapsody, Ion demands that he still possesses an art when it comes to Homer. Thus, he believes that there are no subjects in Homers work upon which he cannot speak well (536e). The type of competence demanded by the rhapsodic art (at least as far as Ion is concerned) is that of knowing Homer’s thinking. But for Socrates “Homer’s thinking” covers a content impossible to define, because it should represent an accumulation of particular pieces of knowledge, different from one another and which the rhapsode, in the Socratic conception should judge if the poet treats well. No matter if Homer speaks about fortune telling, medicine or fishing, the conceptual content of the rhapsodic *techné* should include the technical knowledge which reveals each of the three competences. In this respect, Ion admits, one by one, that even if he is “specialist” in Homers texts a charioteer can speak better about chariots (537c), a doctor about the medicine art (538c), a fisher about fishing (538d) and the seer about his art (539d). The man who has a certain competence in each of the Homeric passages, is better than the rhapsode in appreciating the value of the things Homer speaks about. At this point, the question about what is that makes the rhapsody an art comes naturally. Socrates puts it in this way: “I picked out from the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* what sorts of things concern the seer, and the doctor, and the fisherman. Since you’re so much more experienced than I am about Homer, Ion,

¹⁷ R.E. Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

will you in this way also pick out for me what sorts of things belong to the rhapsode and the rhapsode's art? What does the rhapsode consider and judge beyond the rest of men?"¹⁸ At this challenge Ion answers to Socrates that he understands the art of the general, present in Homers writings, as well as anyone. But this seems to be just a trick that Ion makes. It is obvious that not the rhapsode is the most appropriate one to speak about military strategy but a general. He breaks the rule which says that an art should have a definite subject matter that distinguishes it from the other arts. Here, strategy belongs to the art of the general and it is not something specific to rhapsody even if we can find it in Homer's poems. If Ion really possesses the art of rhapsody, he cheated on Socrates by not saying what his art consists of. The last definition of rhapsody (which relates it with strategy) does not satisfy the specificity law which demands that the objects of two distinct arts must also be distinct. But still, even if we supposed that Ion possesses the art of the general he should be not only the best rhapsode in Greece but also the most skilled general. Obviously he is not, and the reason why he didn't appoint general, that he is not an Athenian, just takes us closer to the idea that Ion doesn't really possess an art. If Ion does not possess the art of rhapsode, his attitude is easier to be explained. In this case, it is clear that the reason, for which Ion cannot say what kind of art rhapsody is, comes from the fact that this is not an art. Consequently, the rhapsode possessed by the divine favour, resembles a divine human being. But as Socrates puts it, this is not really a compliment for Ion's skills. Socrates doesn't stress upon the divine apportionment of the poetry and the rhapsody. What really matters on Socrates' demonstration is that rhapsode's activity does not depend on *techné*.

An attempt at drawing a conclusion about art would clarify what Plato (Socrates) wants to transmit. If rhapsody were what Socrates demands, it would become an impossible art. In fact, if it is true that Homer approaches all kinds of subjects, the rhapsode, according to the model proposed by Socrates, possesses a huge technical knowledge (interpreter of the fortune teller, the fisherman, the doctor, the coacher and even the general). He appears to be a universal savant. But this universal competence of rhapsody is impossible. First of all it is an impossibility revealed by Socrates at the end of the dialog. If Ion is at the same time general and rhapsode, how could he accept to remain a simple rhapsode while he can have a higher function, the most prestigious both culturally and politically? Obviously he cannot be a general because he does not possess this art and even if we admit that he possesses it this comes from the fact that he is a rhapsode, which is absurd.

This impossibility of the rhapsodic art is connected to the philosophical definition of *techné* given by Plato (or Socrates) which states that arts are specifically distinct from one another and are related to also different categories of objects. If an art had the same competence as an other art it would mean that these two arts are identical and distinct from the rest of the arts. This theoretical defini-

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

tion of *techne* has an immediate consequence: an art cannot be related to many relevant categories of objects belonging to various arts; particularly, an art which presents itself as an art with multiple competences could not be an art. In this respect, rhapsody cannot deal also with the art of the general, as Ion sustains, because it is not its competence to speak about it as well.

If Ion were “technically” able to treat a certain subject, taken from Homer’s poems, he could also treat the same subject present in other poet’s verse. It was shown by Socrates that Ion does not have these abilities. Moreover, what Ion says about a passage by Homer which approaches a certain particular technique is equivalent with what a specialist would say about it, which is also not valid, according to what it was said before about what a real *techne* is supposed to be. Thus, Ion cannot support any of these statements and thus, it results once again that he doesn’t possess an art.

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