

Inspiration from the gods in Plato's *Ion*

Introduction

Some weeks ago a friend of mine started to read the *Ion* by Plato which I believe is his shortest dialogue. Although I've been perusing the same author for some time now and was aware of the existence of this text, for one reason or other I had bypassed it. Being so short, it was easy to hide in the large tome I have of Plato's collected works which by the way is **Plato Complete Works** edited by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, 1997) and is used here. Besides, the *Ion* is one of his earlier works¹ and is overshadowed by the likes of the **Republic** and **Phaedo**. As for my friend, in addition to reading the *Ion*, he started watching some videos on You Tube for a better comprehension, this being his first exposure to Plato. That prompted me to do the same.²

Quickly I discovered that the *Ion* is more complicated than at first glance. Quite a lot is packed into such a short dialogue! In a way it was unsettling to follow *Ion*...the man himself speaking...because he resembled the way a some people boast of their talent or expertise. Even if it's well deserved, there's something unsettling about flaunting what you know. With this in mind, it was easy to see that it was *Ion*'s Achilles heel. His boasting was a prime, indeed succulent target for Socrates.

While it was entertaining as well as educative to watch how Plato demolished *Ion* almost without him know it, what really caught my eye was the part dealing with inspiration from the gods. I especially liked his image of three rings being joined together. The first or the source is the Muse, the second is the rhapsode or someone like *Ion* who interprets Homer and the third is the audience. The last ring, if you will, has to listen to this interpretation of an interpretation. The excerpt (533d-536d) at hand is what this smallish document is all about.

Not long ago I did something similar to what we have here revolving around one sentence from the **Republic**. That is to say, I went through several pages line-by-line having cushioned that sentence before and after so as to get a better handle on the text. Behind this approach was a desire to get as close as possible to the way Socrates

¹ The phrase "earlier works" can be a turn-off since generally we prefer an author's more mature productions. However, after having resisted the temptation to pass over the **Ion**, it turned out to be valuable for giving insight into Plato's mind and relationship with Socrates.

² There are a number of good videos out there not just on **Ion** but concerning other dialogues plus Plato's thought in general. The one my friend and I thought quite good for an introduction is only about 6-7 minutes long: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCGL7pvWYI4>.

things. However, it turns out to be somewhat artificial, even contorted. Who knows. It may be a baby step on the way to cranking out something more responsible for the interested reader. All in all, one should approach this from the vantage point of *lectio divina*, the slow, deliberate perusal of a text usually associated with Scripture. While the **Ion** certainly isn't scripture, like the rest of Plato's dialogues its contents are worthy of close consideration due to their lasting impact on our society.

As the text moves on, there are instances when the same word appears. In order to avoid giving the explanation over again, the word will be followed by +.

The Text

Socrates: I do see, Ion, and I'm going to announce to you what I think that is.

A response to Ion's boastful claim in the paragraph just before the one at hand where Ion claims to speak of Homer in a way far better (superlative of *kalos*: of fine quality) than anyone else. However, he's honest enough to limit his expertise to that poet, not others. As the dialogue progresses, that doesn't satisfy Socrates. Ion concludes by telling Socrates to examine (*horao*, to see) what that means. Socrates replies in the sentence at hand that he's prepared to expound upon what Ion had just claimed, the verbal root *phaino* or to show, to manifest which is prefaced with the preposition *apo-* or from.

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. (That's what Euripides called it; most people call it "Heracleon.")

Techne is what this discussion is all about, rendered here as subject. It also includes cunning, skill, the means by which something is made. You get the sense that Socrates is pointing out to Ion a quality he has had but never realized; rather, it's something in which he participates and cannot claim as being his own and hence mastered, this rendered by the preposition *para* (beside, in the company of) with regard to the second person singular, "you." I.e., *techne* is not beside you, as it were.

Instead of *techne*, it's a question of a divine power when it comes to speaking well (*eu*, adverbial form of *agathos*, good) about Homer. The noun is *dunamis*, the capacity to do something modified by *theios* or divine. With regard to Ion, it moves him, *kineo* also to set in motion. It does this as follows: a stone which the tragedian Euripides calls a magnet which here goes by the proper name of its source, Magnesia moves iron rings. Similarly, it's called "stone of Heraclea," a place now in Turkey.

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.

In addition to pulling these rings (*ago*, to lead, carry, convey and *daktulis* also a signet) provided they're made of iron, it puts power in them, *tithemi* or to set, to place prefaced with the preposition *en-* with regard to *dunamis* +. Such *dunamis* has the ability to pull the other rings (the number isn't given), *ago* +. This results in a very long chain of iron rings, the verb *artuno* basically as to arrange, to prepare with regard to this string. Though not explicit, it's assumed that the *dunamis* in the stone is more or less equal with regard to all the rings thereby making this one formidable object.

And the power in all of them depends on this stone.

The *dunamis* + at hand depends upon this stone, *anartao* also as to suspend. *Lithos* often refers to a stone of some value.

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.

Houto or *houtos* is an adverb also rendered as thus, to such an extent and is an important link between the Muse and the magnetized rings above. Note that it's with the untranslated *de* which sets up a contrast. Though one Muse is mentioned here, in actuality there were nine of them...goddesses...who symbolized the arts and sciences and source of artistic expression. *Entheos* or literally in-God or inspired which elevates this transmission to the divine realm.

The *de* with *houto* is not balanced off, if you will, by *men* which here is rendered as "then" in order to show the connection with persons who similarly are now *entheos* +, the verb being *enthousiazo* or possessed by the divine. Such is the nature of the string or chain (*hormathos*) which is now strung out, the verbal root *artao* or to fasten prefaced with the preposition *ex-* or from.

You know, none of the epic poets, if they're good, are masters of their subject; they are inspired, possessed, and that is how they utter all those beautiful poems.

With regard to epic poets, none are considered good (*agathos*) despite being master of their subject, *techne* +. Instead, they are both inspired and possessed, *entheos* + and *katecho*, the latter meaning to possess as well as to occupy. Such is the

source of their utterances of their beautiful (*kalos* +) poems.

The same goes for lyric poets if they're good: just as the Corybantes are not in their right minds when they dance, lyric poets, too, are not in their right minds when they make those beautiful lyrics, but as soon as they sail into harmony and rhythm they are possessed by Bacchic frenzy.

What was just said with regard to epic poets, the same applies to lyric poets ³. The negative of *emphron* is used, literally in the mind or *phren* actually the midriff or parts about the heart. This happens when they are dancing and make beautiful (*kalos* +) lyrics. However, once they quickly go on (*baino* prefaced with *em-* or *en-*, in) into both harmony and rhythm (*harmonia* and *rhuthmos*), they're possessed by Bacchic frenzy, *katecho* +. As for Bacchus, that's the Roman name for Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, fertility and agriculture.

Just as Bacchus worshipers when they are possessed draw honey and milk from rivers, but not when they are in their right minds—the soul of a lyric poet does this too, as they say themselves.

No, when once they launch into harmony and rhythm, they are seized with the Baccic transport and are possessed—as the baccants when possessed, draw milk and honey from the rivers but not when in their senses ⁴.

The preposition *eis* or into is with the two nouns *harmonia* and *rhuthmos*. The former applies to a means of joining or fastening whereas the latter, measured motion or time as well as proportion. The instance of drawing (*katecho* +) of both milk and honey from rivers...impossible in and by itself...can be done only when a person is not in his or her senses, the negative with *emphron* +.

For of course 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, flying like bees.

A poet or *poietes* may be defined as one who makes (*poieo*). In the case at hand such making effects the impossible as noted in last sentence. That is to say, there are springs of honey from which songs may be gathered, *drepo* more as to pluck. These belong to the Muses. In the manner of bees, such person bring us songs, *phero*

³ Epic poets tend to produce long poems whereas lyric poets focus more on thoughts and emotions with regard to a given person. As for the Corybantes, they are represented by a kind of inspired people and subject to Bacchic frenzy. They are attendants of Rhea or Cybele, the mother of the gods worshiped in Phrygia.

⁴ In this instance I prefer the Hamilton and Cairns rendition from **The Collected Dialogues of Plato** (New York, 1961).

as to bear or to carry. Such bearing is more along the lines of flying, *petomai*.

And what they say is true.

Despite being short, this is a significant statement. Socrates agrees with what we could call a mythic presentation.

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.

Three characteristics of a poet or *poietes* which is characterized by the following: *kouphos*, *ptenos* and *hieros* or light as well as nimble, winged or ready for flight and divine. Such a person can't produce poetry (*poieo* +) unless the following three are realized:

- 1) inspired or *entheos* + or literally in-god or in-divine.
- 2) *ekphren*: compare with *emphron* above where *phren* is the midriff or parts about the heart.
- 3) *noos* or mind is no longer in the poet; also applies to heart and soul.

As long as a human being has his intellect in his possession he will always lack the power to make poetry or sing prophecy.

Here the intellect or *noos* (inferred, not mentioned), usually highly valued, is rendered as a *ktema* or something in the poet's possession which signals something not good, that it will be a hindrance. That is to say, he won't have the capacity (*adunatos* or lack of *dunamis*) to make poetry or to sing prophecy, *poieo* + and *chresmodeo*.

Therefore because 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: one can do dithyrambs, another encomia, one can do dance songs, another, epics, and yet another, iambics; and each of them is worthless for the other types of poetry.

A contrast mastery and a divine gift or *techne* + and *lego* with regard to that which is *kalos* + or the ability to speak about beautiful things. To the latter which is a divine gift (*moira* also as part, portion or fate) belongs being aroused by the Muse, *hormao* or being set in motion. The adverbial form *kalos* or beautifully, in a fine manner, is used.

You see, it's not mastery that enables them to speak those verses, but a power, since if they knew how to speak beautifully on one type of poetry by mastering the subject, they could do so for all the others also.

Again, a contrast which here is between *techne* and *dunamis*, both +. Note the insertion of the adverbial *kalos* + with regard to mastering the subject, the root *histemi* or to stand prefaced with the preposition *epi-* or upon.

That's why the god takes their intellect away from them when he uses them as his servants, as he does prophets and godly diviners, so that we who hear should know that they are not the ones who speak those verses that are of such high value, for their intellect is not in them: the god himself is the one who speaks, and he gives voice through them to us.

This sentence fleshes out in greater detail why the god takes away the intellect or *noos* + belonging to a poet. The verb is *exaireo* or to take from or away (*ex-*), such removal, if you will, being a sign of the poets becoming subservient to the god, *hupertes*, literally an under-rower. Such is the case with prophets and diviners, *chresmodeo* + and *mantis*, also as seer or prophet.

The best evidence for this account is Tynnichus from 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, and simply, as he says himself, "an invention of the Muses."

The noun for evidence is *tekmerion* also as sign or token. Tynnichus is noted for songs in honor of Apollo as well as a poem entitled "invention of the Muses," *heurema* being that which is found, a windfall.

In this more than anything, then, I think, the god is showing us, so that we should be in no doubt about it, that these beautiful poems are not human, not even from human beings, but are divine and from gods; that poets are nothing but representatives of the gods, possessed by whoever possesses them.

Endeiknumi or literally to show in (*en-*), an action done by the god so as to leave no doubt. *Distaszo* is the verb where *dis-* represents the number two and hence division. I.e., the beautiful (*kalos* +) poems just noted have no human origin but are divine and thus from the gods, *theios* +. In sum, poets are simply representatives of the gods, *hermeneus* also as interpreter, one who expounds. As for possessed and possessing, the verb is *echo* or to have prefaced with the preposition *kata-*, i.e., to hold

down.

To show that, the god deliberately sang the most beautiful lyric poem through the most worthless poet.

A contrast between the superlative of *kalos* + and *phaulos*, also as common, trivial.

Don't you think I'm right, Ion?

Alethes or true.

Ion: Lord yes, I certainly do. Somehow you touch my soul with your words, Socrates, and I do think it's by a divine gift that good poets are able to present these poems to us from the gods.

Nai with *Dia*, indeed or truly, this being another name for Zeus. *Hapto* or to touch, to fashion with regard to *psuche* (life, spirit of a person) through words, *logos* usual word as expression which fits in nicely with *hapto*. A *moira* + which is divine through good poets can present their creation from the gods. The verb at hand is *hermeneuo* or to interpret, to expound. Note the preposition *para* or with, alongside the gods.

Socrates: And you rhapsodes in turn present what the poets say.

Another use of the verb *hermeneuo* + with respect to rhapsodes.

Ion: That's true too.

Alethes + or true.

Socrates: So you turn out to be representatives of representatives.

Hermenes and *hermeneuo* +.

Ion: Quite right.

Pantapasi: from the adjective *pan* or all which here is doubled.

Socrates: Hold on, Ion; tell me this.

Echo + or to have.

Don't keep any secrets from me.

Apokrupto or to hide.

When you recite epic poetry well and you have the most stunning effect on your spectators, either when you sing of Odysseus—how he leapt into the doorway, his identity now obvious to the suitors, and he poured out arrows at his feet—or when you sing of Achilles charging at Hector, or when you sing a pitiful episode about Andromache or Hecuba or Priam, are you at that time in your right mind, or do you get beside yourself?

At hand is the issue of Ion's effect as a rhapsode upon spectators. The verb is *ekplesso* or to drive out of (*ek-*) one's senses by sudden shock. This is with regard to those who are described as *theaomai* or viewing as spectators, also to see clearly.

So when Ion is thus engaged as on stage regarding characters as Odysseus, etc, Socrates asks whether he's in his right mind or does he get beside himself, *emphron* + and *exo* (outside) *sautou*.

And doesn't your soul, in its enthusiasm, believe that it is present at the actions you describe, whether they're in Ithaca or in Troy or wherever the epic actually takes place?

Ion's soul or *psuche* + being caught up in enthusiasm makes him (Ion as rhapsode) believe he's present in the actions he is describing, *pragma* also as deed, matter or affair. The verb is *enthousiazo* or to be possessed by that which is divine, to be in ecstasy.

Ion: What a vivid example you've given me, Socrates!

Tekmerion + or sign, token modified by *enarges*, visible, palpable.

I won't keep secrets from you.

Apokrupto + or to hide.

Listen, when I tell a sad story, my eyes are full of tears; and when I tell a story that's frightening or awful, my hair stands on end with fear and my heart jumps.

Lego is the verb at hand with regard to several types of stories and connotes picking out one that is appropriate for the situation at hand.

Socrates: Well, Ion, should we say this man is in his right mind at times like these: when he's at festivals or celebrations, all dressed up in fancy clothes, with golden crowns, and he weeps, though he's lost none of his finery—or when he's standing among millions of friendly people and he's frightened, though no one is undressing him or doing him any harm?

Emphron + or in the mind is a reoccurring theme here given Ion who functions as a rhapsode.

Is he in his right mind then?

This sentence is implied as part of the one before it, *emphron* implied but not noted.

Ion: Lord no, Socrates. Not at all, to tell the truth.

Dia + and *taletes* or *to aletes* +.

Socrates: And you know that you have the same effects on most of your spectators too, don't you?

Ergazomai: to work in the sense of to labor.

Ion: I know very well that we do.

Kalos + or adverb.

I look down at them every time from up on the rostrum, and they're crying and looking terrified, and as the stories are told they are filled with amazement.

Sunthambeo: to astound with, *sum-*

You see I must keep my wits and pay close attention to them: if I start them crying, I will laugh as I take their money, but if they laugh, I shall cry at having lost money.

Echo or to have with the preposition *pros-* which is indicative of direction

towards which along with the adverb *sphodra*, exceedingly.

Socrates: And you know that this spectator is the last of the rings, don't you—the ones that I said take their power from each other by virtue of the Heraclean stone [the magnet]?

The spectator or *theates* is the third ring or *daktulios*, the Muse being the first and the *rhapsode* being the second, the one who is in between. *Dunamis* + or the capacity to do something derives (*lambano*, to take) from the magnet.

The middle ring is you, the rhapsode or actor, and the first one is the poet himself.

Two rings: *mesos* or rhapsode and first is the *poietes* + which is the Muse.

The god pulls people's souls through all these wherever he wants, looping the power down from one to another.

The god or *theos* as first ring pulls the *psuche* + of each person, *helko* also as to drag through everything he wishes (*boulomai*). He does this by looping power or *dunamis* + from one to the other. The Hamilton and Cairns translation reads here “transmitting the attractive force from one into another.” The verb is *anakremannumi* or to hang up, to suspend and fits in well with the image of the three rings as being connected with each other.

And just as if it hung from that stone, there's an enormous chain of choral dancers and dance teachers and assistant teachers hanging off to the sides of the rings that are suspended from the Muse.

Note *hosper* or just as which serves as a connector with regard to the verb *anakremannumi* + where the Muse is the first ring. Compare with *exartao* or to stretch out (*ex*, from) with regard to the other participants who seems to be auxiliaries or the like with regard to the rhapsode.

One poet is attached to one Muse, another to another (we say he is “possessed,” and that's near enough, for he is held).

Another example of *exartao* + with regard to a poet, this equivalent to being possessed, *echo* + prefaced with the preposition *kata-* or do, literally to have down.

From these first rings, from the poets, they are attached in their turn and inspired,

some from one poet, some from another: some from Orpheus, some from Musaeus, and many are possessed and held from Homer.

First ring = first poet: are attached as well as aspired, the two verbs *enthousiazo* and *artao* (both +) being as one. At the same time they are distributed between Orpheus and Musaeus while many are both possessed and held from Homer, *katecho* and *echo* (both +). The former was a legendary musician and prophet whereas the latter was equally legendary as polymath, philosopher, historian, prophet, seer, priest, poet and musician.

You are one of them, Ion, and you are possessed from Homer.

Another reference to the verb *katecho* + showing its importance with regard to being connected with the Muse.

And when anyone sings the work of another poet, you're asleep and you're lost about what to say; but when any song of that poet is sounded, you are immediately awake, your soul is dancing, and you have plenty to say.

A contrast between being asleep and at a loss for words, the latter (*aporea*) as without means or resources. Compare this with being awake, dancing and ready to speak much: *egeiro*, *orcheomai* and *lego* + with *euporeo* or to prosper.

You see it's not because you're a master of knowledge about Homer that you can say what you say, but because of a divine gift, because you are possessed.

A contrast between *techne* + with *episteme* (acquaintance with a matter) and a *moira* + which is divine. This *moira* is because Ion is possessed, the noun *katokoche*.

That's how it is with the Corybantes who have sharp ears only for the specific song that belongs to whatever that song; but they are quite lost if the music is different.

As for Corybantes, see footnote #2. Contrast the adjective sharp with being at a loss, *oxus* and *katecho* + which connotes being held back.

That's how it is with you, Ion: when anyone mentions Homer, you have plenty to say, but if he mentions the others you are lost; and the explanation of this, for which you ask me—why it is that you have plenty to say about Homer but not about the others—is that it's not mastering the subject, but a divine gift, that makes you a wonderful singer of Homer's praises.

A contrast between mastery and a gift which is divine or *techne* and *moira*, both +.

Ion: You're a good speaker, Socrates.

Lego + with the adverb *eu*.

Still, I would be amazed if you could speak well enough to convince me that I am possessed or crazed when I praise Homer.

At hand is being *katecho* + and *mainomai*, the latter as to be driven mad by a god. The way Socrates phrases this seems intended to put Ion on edge which is what this dialogue is about and a fitting conclusion to this modest document.

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