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New Strategies for Reading Plato's *Ion*

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Abstract. How should we read Plato's *Ion* today? In this paper, the authors present the strategy of contextualisation that they have developed in their recent edition, translation and running commentary of the dialogue. They approached the text by means of a twofold contextualisation: an exhaustive analysis of all the available textual evidence, on the one hand; an extended cultural contextualisation of the encounter between Socrates and Ion, a probably fictional rhapsode specialised in Homer, on the other. Read against the background of ancient institutions and history it draws upon, this short dialogue reveals more philosophical freedom and originality than it is usually granted. The *Ion* lays the principles of a Platonic philosophy of practices and turns the dialogue form into a flexible genre of writing apt to test all practices with respect to their intrinsic claims to knowledge. The dialogue's literary form is akin to the point of view of the *idiōtēs*, the ignorant lover of knowledge, Socrates.
Keywords: the *Ion*, *tekhnē*, rhapsody, Plato, Homer.

We would like to share some of the "strategies" we have developed in order to produce our new edition, translation and commentary of Plato's *Ion*.[1] If one word could sum it up, it would be the word "context". Overwhelmed by a huge amount of literature,[2] this small dialogue has long suffered from one-sided interpretations: its whole discussion had to be focused on demonstrating either that poetry is not even an

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[1] Ferroni, Macé 2018.

[2] For a survey of the literature on the *Ion*, see Capuccino 2005.

art, or that poetry is divine inspiration. The latter interpretation caused further confusion, supposing that the *Ion* could have been the ancestor of the romantic idea of inspiration.[3] We thought this dialogue could benefit from a fresh reading, in a new light, which we sought for by restoring the dialogue to its textual, historical and cultural context. This renewed perspective would give our reader a better chance of having a comprehensive glance at the different grounds on which Plato, still a young man, built this short dialogue *On the Iliad* (as the traditional subtitle runs). Plato's intervention in the Athenian culture of Homeric recitations in the early fourth century had to be understood in the light of the ancient agonistic culture of the rhapsodes, along the lines of G. Nagy's exploration of the matter[4].

The first step had to be the constitution of the critical text, founded, for the very first time, on an exhaustive analysis of all the available textual evidence, and a new translation. The second step was to develop a commentary that would draw on a stronger cultural contextualisation, to understand the philosophical meaning of staging an encounter between Socrates and a probably fictional rhapsode specialised in Homer — a specialisation in tune with the Panathenaic festival's where Homer, as we know from Lycurgus, was the only poet to be sung[5]. This strategy has led us to find in the *Ion* a new outlook on the meaning of the dialogue form as the best genre of writing for a philosophy of practices.

1. *A new text*

The complete text of Plato's *Ion* is attested by four primary manuscripts (Venetus Marcianus App. Class. IV, 1 = **T**; Vindobonensis Suppl. Gr. 7 = **W**; Vindobonensis Suppl. Gr. 39 = **F**; Marcianus Gr. 189 = **S**) to be inserted in a bipartite *stemma codicum* presenting two opposing couples, **T W** vs. **F S**. The independence of **S** (an important manuscript that was part of Plethon's and Bessarion's collections) has already been

[3] For a critical assessment of this perspective, see Stern-Gillet 2004.

[4] Cf. Nagy 2002.

[5] Lycurg. *Or. in Leocratem* 102.4–5; cf Nagy 2002: 60–61.

suggested for the *Hippias Minor* by Bruno Vancamp (1996), and for the *Ion*, by Albert Rijksbaron, in his excellent commented edition of the dialogue (2007). We provide a new demonstration of the validity of this hypothesis, which we believe can now be taken on as a safe assumption.

As for the apographs, no less than eighteen manuscripts are to be included in the offspring of Venetus **T**, whose family is therefore by far the largest one; two manuscripts derive from **W**; two from **F**; **S** is the only primary source lacking any extant direct or indirect copy. The manuscript tradition of the *Ion* is completed by three manuscripts containing short excerpts from the dialogue, Ambrosianus 329 (F 19 Sup.), Escorialensis X.I.13, Bruxellensis 11360–63, and by some sources presenting *compendia* of Platonic passages. Among them, one should mention at least Maximus Planudes' *Collectanea*, a unique Greek prose anthology attested by five manuscripts and prepared by the great Byzantine scholar for his students in the late 13th century.

All of these textual witnesses have been (mostly autoptically) examined and collated. Our critical apparatus takes into account all significant readings attested by the Medieval tradition (besides all the primary manuscripts' *lectiones*, we have included several interesting readings, mostly conjectures, taken from the apographs) and several selected conjectures proposed by modern (from Ficinus onwards) scholars. The (not so many) quotations made by ancient authors (especially by Proclus and Stobaeus), the *scholia*, and, of course, the two extant humanistic Latin translations of the dialogue (prepared in Florence, in the second half of the 15th century, by Lorenzo Lippi da Colle Val d'Elsa, and by Lippi's more famous friend, Ficinus), have also been carefully taken into account. The reader is therefore, we believe, provided with all the data s/he needs to check the validity of our editorial choices; we have, however, chosen to fully justify most of them (that is, the most significant ones) in a separate section of our Commentary, specifically devoted to the philological/linguistic discussion of the problems presented by our analysis of Plato's text, which becomes particularly interesting and (philologically speaking) demanding when the editor of Plato must face the difficulty of dealing with the Homeric quotations.

From a methodological point of view, it is actually mandatory not to forget that we are editing the text of Homer quoted by Plato, the one that Plato knew, and not necessarily the *original* Homeric text. This is why sometimes the editor of the *Ion* must choose, when establishing the text of the Platonic dialogue, a reading that is clearly *worse* than the one attested by the *direct* Homeric tradition. This particular "crossing over" of different textual traditions is one of the elements deeply characterizing the cultural, literary, philosophical and philological context of our work. The constitution of the critical text has been employed as the very ground for a new translation and reading of the dialogue.

2. *Cultural context as a way of reading the* Ion

Can there be something as "too much Plato"? Plato's *Ion* has indeed suffered from being too much read against the rest of Plato. For a long time, we could not decide whether this small dialogue was too seriously Platonic to really be Platonic (as, for instance, Wilamowitz originally thought it was the tedious work of an epigone, too serious about being respectfully Platonic),[6] or too playful to be anything than a youthful and parodic exercise of the master (as Goethe thought and Wilamowitz found out later in his life).[7] The only chance for the *Ion* to be taken seriously was to be considered as a mediocre defense of Platonic ideas better displayed in the *Republic* (the art of poetry is not a real art, based on knowledge) or in the *Phaedrus* (poetry is divine inspiration).[8] But this only happens because we are so eager to find ideas in the *Ion* that remind us of other Platonic dialogues, as if we did not think that this dialogue could stand on its own. As a result, we often deny the *Ion* the time and space it requires to unfold its philosophical art. We thought a different kind of contextualisation, originating from the text itself, could restore to it its freedom.

[6] Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1907: 12, n. 17.

[7] Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1919: 1.130–132 and 2.32–46. For a good summary of options on the authenticiy and the dating of the *Ion*, see Flashar 1958: 2–16.

[8] A good presentation of this double temptation is to be found in Moore 1974: 421–424.

The dialogue has characters and a plot, it opens on an encounter, which is supposed to have happened some day, in some place. Socrates meets Ion, on his way back from the festival of Epidaurus, where he won all the prizes, with high expectations to win as many at the next Panathenaic festival. The discussion on the art of strategy, at the end of the dialogue, will give us clues as to when this encounter is supposed to have taken place, sometime before 412, when Ephesus was still allied to Athens, and before it changed sides, helping Sparta to overcome (Ephesus served as a naval base for the Spartan fleet). We have read Socrates' mention of several generals who remained faithful to Athens even after their cities defected as a sharp irony against the Ephesian, an added pleasure for the Athenian reader of the *Ion* in the late 390s, when Ephesus restored relations with Athens.[9]

Now, if we turn back to the beginning, we need to make sure we know what these festivals were, what specific contests Ion entered and won, since he received several first prizes.[10] They are probably the kinds of contests we might be able to identify from the inscriptions regarding the Panathenaic festival: cithara and citharodia, aulos and aulodia, probably rhapsodia and parodia, maybe sunaulia (playing the aulos in a group).[11] To know that a rhapsode could be able to win several prizes, not only rhapsodia, but maybe also singing with the cithara or to the aulos, and also playing these instruments, is a key element to understand his practice. Were the poems sung to the sound of the cithara? Was a rhapsode trained in all these practices? We should note that all these practices will also be gathered by Socrates as part of a more general "poetic art" (ποιητική),[12] within the framework of a suggested model to understand the epistemic claim of the rhapsode. Context already leads us into the philosophical argument.

[9] On dating the *Ion*, see Ferroni, Macé 2018: xxi–xxiii and 121–123.

[10] *Ion* 530b1: Τὰ πρῶτα τῶν ἄθλων ἠνεγκάμεθα. We follow Rijksbaron on the idea that the plural is to be understood as a plural, see Rijksbaron 2007: 113–114.

[11] *IG* II² 2311. Regardings doubts on some of these categories, including rhapsody (the inscription can't be read where we should read rhapsody), see comments by H.W. Parke (1977: 35), G. Nagy (2002: 48–49), A. Rotstein (2012: 102–106).

[12] *Ion* 532c8.

Socrates immediately goes on to offer the Homeric rhapsode a laudative description of his art.[13] The description is like a Homeric portrait of a hero, as beautiful inside as he is outside.[14] The rhapsode is beautiful as he enters the scene all geared up, ready to say the words he knows by heart. Socrates adds: this performance requires not only to know the verses by heart (τὰ ἔπη ἐκμανθάνειν), but also the thought of the poet (καὶ τὴν τούτου διάνοιαν),[15] so that the rhapsode becomes the interpreter of the thought of the poet for the audience (ἑρμηνέα δεῖ τοῦ ποιητοῦ τῆς διανοίας γίγνεσθαι τοῖς ἀκούουσι).[16] Is the portrait sarcastic? Maybe, but what matters so far is that Ion accepts it, because the rhapsode is going to turn down almost all the other descriptions of his art offered by Socrates throughout their conversation. There is also something to be noted about the way Ion understands Socrates' suggestion. One might read it as a description of what the rhapsode's performance requires: to perform right, you need to understand the thought that guided the poet, you must catch out the intention in the verses and communicate it clearly to the audience. As far as Socrates's description goes, there is no need to go beyond the practice of performing in front of audiences at festivals: the actor has to know the thought of the poet to be a good actor. But look at Ion's answer. Ion says Socrates is right, because the greatest efforts the rhapsode has to put into his own practice go into learning to *speak about* Homer (λέγειν περὶ Ὁμήρου).[17] He claims he could even outperform the so-called "Homeric professors",[18] Metrodorus of Lampsacus, Stesimbrotus of Thasus, Glaucon. This is a clear contrast to Xenophon's *Symposium* where the same authors are listed as wise men who know how to decipher the hidden meaning, the ὑπόνοια under the words: Niceratus had to pay for the lessons of Stesimbrotus to get to this, because no rhapsode could have provided it for

[13] *Ion* 530b5–6: Καὶ μὴν πολλάκις γε ἐζήλωσα ὑμᾶς τοὺς ῥαψῳδούς, ὦ Ἴων, τῆς τέχνης.

[14] See our commentary on this, Ferroni, Macé 2018: 47–51.

[15] *Ion* 530b10–c1.

[16] *Ion* 530c3–4.

[17] *Ion* 530c9.

[18] See Richardson 1975.

him, since they only know the words, and not the deeper meaning.[19] But Ion is saying that he also speaks about the poems and comments upon them. Is this a different activity to the recitations that got him the best prizes? The question can even be raised about the meaning of ἐπαινέω (and the cognate ἐπαινέτης), which is capable of having three different meanings depending on context: 'to praise', 'to recitate' or 'to quote'.[20] Some commentators think that rhapsodic performances at the Panathenaic festival could have included sequences of "speaking about" the text.[21] But there are several difficulties to be raised against this possibility:[22] the fact that the testimony of the *Hipparchus* describes the way the rhapsodes would recitate Homer one after the other, without interruption, thus weaving continuously the dress of the Goddess;[23] the description by Xenophon of rhapsodes who only know the words by heart (and ignore the deeper allegoric meanings) is more plausible if the performances did not include such display of knowledge. A solution could be that the rhapsodes would display their exegetical knowledge on other occasions. We introduced a hypothesis to defend this idea in the commentary: we will come back to this later.

3. *Three hypothesis to understand the rhapsode's art*

Socrates endeavours to understand what Ion pretends to know, and to do so, he offers him several ways of understanding his own practice. Three different models are going to be offered to Ion, and three times Ion will not recognize his practice in the mirror that Socrates is handing him.

The first sequence (530d9–533c8) explores two models for the practice of the rhapsode. The first model is more adapted to the practice

[19] Xenophon, *Smp.* 3.5–7.

[20] See Nagy 1999: 98, quoting Pindar for the meaning of 'to praise' (*O.* 4.14: αἰνέω; *P.* 2.67: ἐπαινέω) and Plato (Ὅμηρον ἐπαινεῖν, *Ion* 536d, 541e2) for the "technical meaning of recitation by the rhapsodes". But in Nagy 2002: 27, the same occurrences at 536d6 and 541e2 are understood as meaning 'to quote'.

[21] See Velardi 1989: 18–19, 23.

[22] See our commentary, Ferroni, Macé 2018: 55–56.

[23] Ps.-Pl. *Hipparch.* 228b5–c1; see on this Nagy 2002: 43–48.

of "speaking about". We can call it the way of the "encyclopedic commentary", the kind of "speaking about" Homer the Homeric professors would develop: erudite commentaries unfolding allegoric interpretations or explanation of grammatical difficulties, or examination of the arts and crafts evoked by the poems. The *scholia* also bear example of such concerns, explaining a word or explaining, for instance, why Homer says that in the Laestrygonian country the paths of Night and Day are close (because, some suggested, gadflies attack cows during the day, so you'd better get your sheep out in the day and pasture cows at night).[24] Socrates suggests that poems deal with an encyclopedic collection of things: origins of the gods, phenomena happening in the whole universe, relations between gods, between humans, between gods and humans, for instance war.[25] If to explain each verse of the poem involves explaining how such things are talked about in it, then we will turn to those who can best explain the subject matter of a given verse, e.g. divination, medicine, etc.

This encyclopedic approach will be further examined in the third section of the dialogue. The second route explored in this first sequence suggests another basis for Ion's art of explaining and also practicing his art: the way of a general "poetic" art, which is set apart from the art of painting and the art of sculpting, and gathers the art of the cithara, the aulos, citharodia and rhapsody. Socrates seems to understand this poetic art as both practical and critical: when you know how to perform, you can also tell a good performance from a bad one, and you can say it. Note that all the arts gathered in the general poetic art are the performing arts of the Panathenaic festival. Moreover, Socrates states that they all go together: you don't know one without knowing the other (533b5–c3). Thus the epistemic unity of the arts of the festival is founded and based on the very existence of a general poetic art — performing and judging performances belong to the same people.

So what about Ion? Why can't he recognize his own practice in any of these two models, Homeric professor or Panathenaic performer and

[24] *Scholia Vetera* 10.86, see Pocock 1958.

[25] On the encyclopedic dimension of the poems, see Havelock 1963: 61--86.

judge? Simply because neither the encyclopedic nor the poetic model will allow for Ion's specialisation. On the one hand, if you know about gods and divination, about being a sailor or a soldier, then you will know how to explain verses about these things no matter who wrote them, Homer, Hesiod or Archilochus. And, on the other hand, if you know when a song has been well composed or performed, you will be able to know this, whoever wrote it or performed it. How could Ion be operating on any one of these two models and lose his ability to comment on poetry whenever we leave Homer and turn to any other poem? It is important to note here that at no time do Socrates and Ion decide that any of the two models are wrong or false as such. Ion's own practice simply doesn't fit with any of them. But nobody says that the seer explaining a page of Homer or a performer of citharodia performing or judging a performance do not have a τέχνη.

The second sequence (533c9–536d7) introduces another model: exaltation (ἐνθουσιασμός) and possession (κατοκωχή, 536c2), through the image of the pieces of metal gathering in a chain under the influence of a magnet. The model, this time, is especially conceived to allow for Ion's specialisation — a rhapsode or a dancer might be taken into a chain of people possessed by a single god or muse. The individualisation of the relation to one god is highlighted by the comparison with possession practices (one is possessed by one god and not another, and one will not be cured before the exact god is identified, as must also be identified the special tune by which the possession is triggered). So this could work, but Ion himself will eventually dismiss the model, telling Socrates that it does not fit with the state he is in when he performs or comments on Homer. The gain of this sequence is, however, not null, since the exaltation model allows Ion to recognize something about his practice — when both the singer and the audience are transported into the action and made to feel exactly the emotion the verses should inspire: fright, joy, tears, etc. It is a beautiful page (535c4–e6), where the author uncovers a mechanism at the root of dramatic mimesis, without even uttering the word μίμησις. What is described here would be better understood as a kind of projection — being projected elsewhere

together, taken where the action takes places and thrown into the corresponding emotion. We are not in Athens anymore, we are on the battlefield of Troy. This would not be the effect of τέχνη, but of possession — but again this does not entail that the performer does not have some τέχνη before the possession takes place (see *Ap.* 22b9–c2 and 22d4–e1: Socrates can say that poets are exalted by the gods and still have some τέχνη).

So these two sequences offer three different ways to look at the kinds of practices that belong to the Muses: an intriguing attempt at an encyclopedic approach to the poems; a poetical art respecting the structure of the contests offered to Athena and a possession model that draws on cults associated with Dionysos. Encyclopedia, τέχνη or possession: the amplitude of choices seems to condemn the rhapsode who could not make his practice fit in either one of the models. Ion is condemned, but not the practices of commentators and performers of the arts, understood whether as an art or as a possession.

4. *Imitation of the sophists. The art of the dialogue form*

The third sequence (536d8–541d7) takes us to a new place and gives us the answer we have been looking for: what is the context in which one could talk about the poems if it is not during the recitation itself? We suggested that here Socrates and Ion start conversing in the way that Isocrates reports some of his friends saw a group of sophists do "a little before the great Panathenaic festival (μικρὸν δὲ πρὸ τῶν Παναθηναίων τῶν μεγάλων)".[26]

> Ἀπαντήσαντες γάρ τινές μοι τῶν ἐπιτηδείων ἔλεγον ὡς ἐν τῷ Λυκείῳ συγκαθεζόμενοι τρεῖς ἢ τέτταρες τῶν ἀγελαίων σοφιστῶν καὶ πάντα φασκόντων εἰδέναι καὶ ταχέως πανταχοῦ γιγνομένων διαλέγοιντο περί τε τῶν ἄλλων ποιητῶν καὶ τῆς Ἡσιόδου καὶ τῆς Ὁμήρου ποιήσεως, οὐδὲν μὲν παρ' αὑτῶν λέγοντες, τὰ δ' ἐκείνων ῥαψῳδοῦντες καὶ τῶν πρότερον ἄλλοις τισὶν εἰρημένων τὰ χαριέστατα μνημονεύοντες.[27]

[26] Isoc. *Panath.* 17.6. See Ferroni, Macé 2018: 55–56.

[27] Isoc. *Panath.* 18.1–8.

> For some of my friends, having met me, related to me how, sitting together in the Lyceum, three or four of the sophists of no repute — men who claim to know everything and are prompt to show their presence everywhere — were discussing the poets, especially the poetry of Hesiod and Homer, saying nothing they might have come up with themselves, but merely recitating verses from these authors and repeating from memory the cleverest things which certain others had said about them beforehand.[28]

Isocrates describes gatherings where sophists discuss Homer and Hesiod, but also start recitating them like rhapsodes, and add comments about them. Here the friends of Isocrates say the comments made are not even original, maybe because the sophists they saw were not very good. But we get at least four very interesting pieces of information:

> — sophists gather in the Lyceum and they discuss Homer and Hesiod;
> — they do so before the great Panathenaic festival, the one during which we suppose the great rhapsodic contest on Homer happened, the one Ion would very much want to win;
> — they do so in two ways: they quote and they comment;
> — many before them have been commenting on these poems so that the vulgar sophists can just repeat what they heard from others.

The sophists are not the first. They are imitating others. They quote by heart and they comment. We have here exactly the kind of context where Ion could have shown his ability to comment even better than Metrodorus. Why do the sophists gather before the great Panathenaia, a festival that would have attracted the best rhapsodes of the Greek world? Maybe they imitated the rhapsodes not only in their art of quoting any part of the text by heart, but also in these very gatherings. What better occasion could rhapsodes like Ion have had to show off their "commenting" skills? They could have seized the occasion of being gathered for the big festival to meet with fellow rhapsodes and discuss the text. Those are the kinds of meetings that the protagonists of Xenophon's *Symposium* might have never heard of and that the

[28] Translation by George Norlin (1929) modified.

sophists imitated. And now Plato is imitating all of them, staging a discussion on Homer between Socrates and a Homeric rhapsode, where both of them play the game of quoting by heart before making their comments!

Their conversation on Homer follows the encyclopedic approach to poetry and takes on the subject of τέχναι in Homer. Each time, the doctor, the charioteer, the seer is recognized as the one who will know how to explain the verses on the art of medecine, chariot-riding or divination. Explaining this point leads Socrates to draw from Nestor's presentation of the art of chariot-riding two fundamental principles of a philosophy of τέχνη, recognized as ἐπιστήμη: we call the first the principle of ontological specification of sciences, the second, the principle of functional specification of the arts. According to the former, if two sciences have the same object, then they are the same science; according to the latter, τέχναι, in so far as they are sciences, have an object, which is their function, their ἔργον. The implicit outcome of this discussion is that an encyclopedic commentary of the poems cannot be performed by a single person. It would have to be done by a chorus of specialists, each of them coming to the foreground when his or her own knowledge is needed. Or it would have to be conducted by someone who would accept, like Socrates, to present himself or herself as an ἰδιώτης (532e1), weaving the speeches of experts without being one, only trying from time to time to put together what common or general principles can be drawn from the observations made by competent people.

What does this say about the art of the dialogue? We follow an inquiry made by an ἰδιώτης who only knows that there is knowledge to be found in all kind of forms, even the most practical, and that there are also claims to knowledge that do not work. Most of the time, the latter will be recognized by the way they deny the very limitation of true knowledge — one only knows how to talk truly about the very limited thing one knows about. As soon as we leave the boundaries of safe limited knowledge, we should considered ourselves as ἰδιῶται, only trying to gather the type of general truths ἰδιῶται can hold, since there are some, as we learn from the *Ion* 532d8–e1 — the above prin-

ciples are such truths. Ion fails to see that his activity crosses over the boundaries of safe knowledge, aiming at too much in his encyclopedic ambitions on Homer and too little in his limitation to a single corpus (Homer does not delimitate the boundary of a recognized knowledge).

The art of the dialogue as Plato writes here is designed to address people with a claim to knowledge and ask them about their practice. It is a good literary form to let people speak for their own practice — it thus respects the principle of ontological and functional specification of knowledge. In the *Ion*, this art is conducted with an original method of offering several models for representing the type of knowledge that could be found in a given practice. And again, thanks to the dialogue form, the person speaking for one domain is the one who answers. In the present dialogue, Ion rejects most of Socrates' propositions. We could imagine another rhapsode accepting them: imagine one who would like to be recognised as a good knower of how a song must be composed or performed… and therefore also claim, on the encyclopedic level, to be the best at commenting the passages of Homer where somebody sings or recitates, for instance Demodocus. The dialogue offers a medium space where all claim for knowledge is invited to accept a picture of itself that could be shared with non-specialists and choose a place where we could make it fit in the big puzzle of human sciences and practices, on a proper well-delimited spot or in an awkward situation crossing boundaries, which is where Ion eventually finds himself. And we understand that its literary form is akin to the point of view of the ἰδιώτης, the ignorant lover of knowledge, Socrates. Plato enters philosophy with a new kind of writing flexible enough to confront all claims to knowledge without having to assume any in his own name.

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