



Plato's Socrates on Poets in Work *Ion**

Ulrich Wollner

Abstract: In the first part of the paper the author explicates the content of the term τέχνη and warns of impossibility of the simple identification of this term with the term of “art”, which is used by the modern languages. Subsequently he briefly tries to clarify the position of the poets in the antic Greek society. In the last part the author investigates the status of the poets in Plato's work *Ion*, and demonstrates through it that Plato's aim was to point at their privileged social status, which was not justified. In the paper the author analyses the ways and arguments that Plato's Socrates uses for achieving this aim.

The fact, that the character of Plato's dialogue *Ion* is confrontational, is generally accepted. Plato confronts Socrates' ideas with the opinions of the rhapsode Ion.¹ I suppose, however, that the cardinal, although hidden aim of Plato's endeavour was not the critique of the rhapsodes, but the poets themselves. What is Plato's reason for criticising the poets? Was he annoyed by the content of their work or was it the status they were privileged within the Greek society? In the following lines I am going to search for the answers on these and further questions.

1 Meaning of the Hellenic term τέχνη

Before I approach the analysis of the status of the poets in Plato's work *Ion*, I am going to pay attention to the problem of content that the Ancient Greeks attributed to the term

* This paper is a revised translation of my article: (Wollner, 2006).

¹ The term “rhapsode” (ῥαψωδός): is a compound of the terms ῥάπτω, which translated literally means “to sew together”, “connect” and ᾠδή, which could be translated also as singing. See: (Liddell – Scott, 1996: 1565 and 2030).

τέχνη. Modern languages translate this term as “art”.² Originally, the Ancient Greeks used this term to determine the whole handwork, which has clearly defined field of activity, uses knowledge, follows general rules and always leads to the same results. After certain time, the term τέχνη was used not only for determining every „trade“³, but also for „fine arts“, even mathematics and medical science. This fact means that there was no difference between “art” and “handwork” in Ancient Greece. To be said in other way, the term, which would be used to denote the “fine arts” only, like architecture, painting or sculpture, without referring to “the crafts“, the Ancient Greeks did not know.

Apart from the mentioned aspect, David Roochnik emphasizes that the term τέχνη was important for the Ancient Greeks also because of the reason of their using it for denoting true knowledge. Only τεχνίτης, the one who possessed τέχνη, could be considered as wise man (σοφός – Roochnik, 1996: 18). That means that the criterion, according to which somebody could be considered as wise, was τέχνη. This condition could be applied also to disciplines, so each and every discipline, which wanted to acquire social prestige, had to be regarded as τέχνη. On the basis of mentioned, it can be stated that τέχνη warranted social and epistemic legitimisation not only for an individual, but also for a discipline.

2 The Status of poetry in the Hellenic society

The Ancient Greeks used the word ποίησις to denote each production (manufacture, creation) and the term ποιητής to denote not only a poet, but every producer (Liddell – Scott, 1996: 1429). The poets were, similarly to the doctors and the builders, viewed as “scientists” and “specialists”, which means that they were attributed special knowledge (τέχνη). According to the common notion of the Greeks, the privileged status held the poets, who were considered as the most typical representatives of wisdom (σοφία). This was the reason, why it was obvious for them to consider everything, what a poet expressed, as an unchallenged truth. They did not regard him only as a poet; he was also a teacher for them.⁴ In what sense? Gilbert and Kuhn explain – for a Greek at that time, dramatic poems⁵ were not only exciting stories uplifted into the world of fantasy, but also textbooks of theology, war or statesmanlike

² French *l'art*, German *die Kunst*. Paul Woodruff uses the translation of the term τέχνη as “skill”. See: (Woodruff, 1982: 137, 144). See also Dodds (Dodds, 1959: 190).

³ I highlight the terms “trade” and “fine art” with quotation marks to distinguish their modern understanding from the term of Ancient Greeks τέχνη.

⁴ Plato himself in his work *Lysis* represents the generally accepted opinion that for the Greeks poets are fathers of wisdom and leaders (*Lysis*, 214a).

⁵ Mostly the poems of Homer and Hesiodos.

arts.⁶ People wanted to learn from the poets, because the Greeks were convinced of them that the truth about gods, future lives or world's function could be found nowhere but in the works of dramatic poets (Gilbert – Kuhn, 1965: 35). To be said in a simple way, the public saw a collection of universal world wisdom in the poets' work. The poets did not portray only theological or "metaphysical" aspect in their works, but they also held pieces of knowledge from various disciplines, and simultaneously they set paradigmatic manners of behaviour by way of the examples of heroes' deeds. Thereby they formed a set of obligatory norms for everyday pursuance and behaviour, a kind of "instructions" or "moral codex". That means that people did not see poetry as a source of entertainment only, but on the contrary, the listeners, with the aim to be instructed, concentrated more on the ideological content than on the aesthetic facet of poems.

3 Plato's Socrates about the poets

Plato's Socrates refused to assign the poets that kind of social status, which I depicted above. This was the reason, why he tried to disprove the generally accepted sentiment, according to which the poets are the possessors of *τέχνη*. What was the way of his method?

3.1 What is the competency of poetry according to Plato's Socrates?

Plato's Socrates defines two kinds of competency of poetry – one is broader, it could be said general, the latter is narrower. Let's start with the explication of the first mentioned one. According to Socrates, the themes that were most frequently elaborated by each and every poet, were the themes of war (*περὶ πολέμου*), of how people deal with each other in society – good people and bad (*περὶ ὁμιλιῶν πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἀνθρώπων ἀγαθῶν τε καὶ κακῶν*), of relationships between ordinary folks (*ἰδιωτῶν*) and craftsmen (*δημιουργῶν*), of the gods (*περὶ θεῶν*), how they deal with each other and with men, and of what happens in heaven (*περὶ τῶν οὐρανόων*), and in hell, and of the births of gods and heroes (*γενέσεις καὶ θεῶν καὶ ἡρώων* – *Ion* 531c-d). It is clear from the mentioned facts that Plato's Socrates presents poetry in a traditional sense, as a kind of universal knowledge. A poet supposes, under the influence of this universalism and exceptionality of his status in the Greek society, that if he deals with some kind of knowledge or skills in his work (*τέχνη*), he automatically becomes an authority in that field. According to Plato's interpretation, the poets were persuaded that they possessed universal knowledge, as they managed to speak competently about everything. In this

⁶ Moreover, the purpose of Homer's eposes was to keep the identity and the sense of solidarity of the heterogeneous Greek ethnic group.

connection, there arises one question: Do all the poets possess the same universal knowledge? Plato's Socrates states that the poets speak on the same subjects, but not equally well⁷ (*περὶ γε τῶν αὐτῶν λέγειν, ἀλλ' οὐχ ὁμοίως* – 532a).

Let's proceed to the narrower competency of poetry. According to *Ion*, a rhapsode possess (and a poet as well) the knowledge of: “My opinion, anyhow, is that he'll know what it's fitting for a man and or a woman to say – or for a slave or a freeman, or for a follower (*ἀρχομένῳ*) or a leader (*ἀρχοντι*)”. (*Ion*, 540b). That means that a poet does not stake a claim for universal knowledge, but he keeps the influence on society and its social organization in his own competency. To be simply expressed, the poets dominate socialization (*παιδεία*), particularly the mutual relationships among various social units within the state (*πόλις*).

3. 2 Setting the methodical claim

In order to be successful when negating the social convention concerning poets, Plato's Socrates sets the methodical claim: Anybody who dares to speak about some matter, he must be capable of thinking about the matter⁸ (530b-c). What does it mean? To be simply said, man must possess knowledge about the matter he wants to speak about. When can we state that an individual has acquired the knowledge about the matter? Just in case he knows (possesses) particular *τέχνη*, because, as Woodruff alerts to, man with *τέχνη* can explicate what he does in his profession and what is necessary to a certain goal (Woodruff, 1982: 145) and it is only in this case when a man can be considered as a professional⁹ (*τεχνίτης*). In this context it is necessary to remind that there does not exist one universal *τέχνη*, possession of which would lead to acquiring universal knowledge. On the contrary, there exist amount of *τέχναι* and each of them has its own specific meaning, which is determined by its subject matter. So then, how do we learn? According to Socrates: “...the same profession must teach the same subject (*αὐτῇ τέχνῃ τὰ αὐτὰ ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι γιγνώσκειν*), and a different profession, if it is different, must teach not the same subjects, but different ones” (*Ion*, 538a) and so, what we learn by mastering one profession we won't learn by mastering another (537d). Then, one *τέχνη* expresses knowledge of particular things and other *τέχνη* expresses the knowledge of other things. From this reason it is obvious that a specialist of a particular *τέχνη* – for example

⁷ In this context, Plato's Socrates expressed his opinion that Homer is the best poet and most divine of all the poets (*Ὁμήρω, τῷ ἀρίστῳ καὶ θειοτάτῳ τῶν ποιητῶν* – 530b-c).

⁸ To be expressed in a negative way: “Then a person who has not mastered a given profession will not be able to be a good judge of the things which belong to that profession, whether they are things said or things done” (*Ion*, 538a).

⁹ In the dialogue *Lysis* Plato again argues for professionalism (*Lysis*, 210a-b).

a carpenter – is not able to master the content of themes that come under the competence of other τέχνη, by means of the content of his own τέχνη theme, for example medicine.

So, if a poet supposes that he possesses ultimate abilities and knowledge, it is necessary to explore their characters, because to speak to the point about something is the aim of τέχνη. If a poet possessed ultimate τέχνη, he should be able to define the subject field, which he is more entitled to judge than a representative of any other profession. However, the art of the poets (also the art of the rhapsodes) does not have its own subject matter; there are other kinds of knowledge related to the specific field that compete with it. This fact implies that the performance of a poet cannot be related to any specific kind of knowledge:¹⁰ “Therefore because it’s not by mastery that they make poems or say many lovely things about their subjects ... if they knew how to speak beautifully on one type of poetry (καλῶς ἠπίσταντο λέγειν) by mastering the subject, they could do so for all the others also (περὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπάντων).” (*Ion*, 534c). It can be stated that according to Plato’s Socrates the poets do not know the subject they write poetry about, so they do not possess ultimate knowledge of any particular field. A poet possesses τέχνη that signifies he also possesses no ultimate knowledge¹¹ (ἐπιστήμη). For the purpose of proving the truth of his statement, Socrates refers to the affirmation of Tynnichus from Chalcis, who was only once able to create something outstanding – “paion” (παίωνα) – the most beautiful lyric-poem. This lyrical poem is the proof of the fact that if the poet had created this exceptional work on the basis of mere skill (τέχνη), he would have been able to do so anytime before or after that (534d-e).

It implies from the mentioned above that poetry does not belong to art, because it cannot be fitted to the term of τέχνη as a kind of production based on skills and rules.¹² So, Socrates opposes the opinion that a poet is a skilful artistic master who spontaneously creates in the agreement with τέχνη. Since a poet is a specialist of no particular τέχνη, he is not competent to judge, who is truthfully speaking about any of them. Moreover, a poet is not able to know, why is his poem as it is, he is not able to describe the way of creating it (how he proceeded; Woodruff, 1982: 145-146). Thus, Plato’s Socrates denied the poets the social and

¹⁰ A statement with analogical connotation can be found in Plato’s work *Apology*: The poets and politicians know nothing about the things they speak about (ἴσασιν δὲ οὐδὲν ὧν λέγουσι – *Apology*, 22c).

¹¹ Too, Xenophon’s Socrates similarly speaks about rhapsodes: “Do you know of any set of people sillier (ἡλιθιώτερον) than rhapsodes?” “No by Zeus,” said Nikeratos, “not in my view.” “Plainly,” said Socrates, “they don’t comprehend the deep meaning (ὅτι τὰς ὑπονοίας οὐκ ἐπίστανται).” (*Symposium*, 3.6-7) In my opinion Euthydemus in Xenophon’s work *Memorabilia* expresses general opinion of the young people about the rhapsodes: “...the rhapsodes are accurate as to the verses, while being themselves quite the simpletons (ἡλιθιώτερον).” (*Memorabilia*, 4.2.10).

¹² According to Tatkiewicz, Plato understood poetry as a work of inspiration, not as a work of skill – and this attitude did not differ from the public one. For the Ancient Greeks, art was something that could be learnt, poetry something that could not be learnt (Tatkiewicz, 1985: 44).

epistemic legitimacy resulting from *τέχνη*. Apart from this, can a poet professionally express his opinion to some question? A poet can only draw conclusions on poems, and that is why he is entitled to judge the question whether Homer's poetry is better than any other.

3.3 How is poetry created?

As I have just pointed out, the poets, according to Socrates, do not create under the influence of professional skill (*τέχνη*). So, how do they create then? Plato's Socrates comes up with the theory of the "poetic inspiration": "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 (*νοῦς*) 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 (*χρησιμωδεῖν*)." (*Ion*, 534b). From the mentioned it implies that a poet is not able to create unless his intellect vacates space for divine (it is also analogical to rhapsodes).¹³ An adjective "divine" could lead us to an assumption that Plato considered poetry-based intuitive knowledge to be put above rational one. But is this assumption true? No, it is not and the reason is that according to Socrates, god deprives the poets of their intellect (*θεὸς ἐξαιρούμενος τούτων τὸν νοῦν*) (534d) and their inspiration is, comparing to wisdom, possessed (*κατεχόμενος*) or crazed (*μαινόμενος* – 536d) and absence of common sense¹⁴ (535d). Moreover, the influence of Muse is, according to Patočka, a sign of god's presence, but it is not a sign of promotion of man, because this "divinity" includes abandoning of one's own self. "God's power" although speaks and acts through a rhapsode (before him through a poet), but without mixing it together with his character, and so promote him to a higher level (Patočka, 1991: 89). "The divine essence" comes and goes away without leaving any permanent trace in one's self, without changing his character and his attitude to life.

However, let's come back to the question: how do the poets create? Or put in another words: can be poetic production considered as a creative process? According to Plato's Socrates, the poets do not create, they find themselves in something like a state of ecstasy and possessed (*κατεχόμενοι*)¹⁵ by god¹⁶ (533e), in a state of "losing their selves".¹⁷ The poets do

¹³ According to Plato's Socrates, when a rhapsode recites poems, he is out of his mind and he is in ecstasy – his soul is in the state of divine enthusiasm (535b-d). Ion agrees with this appraisal (535d).

¹⁴ In the original text: (*φῶμεν, ὃ Ἴων, ἔμφρονα εἶναι τότε τοῦτον τὸν ἄνθρωπον*).

¹⁵ Plato uses the term "possessed" (*κατέχεται*) and its derivations in other passages, too (for example 534e, 536a).

¹⁶ It is analogical in the case of the composers of songs, who also create in ecstasy (534a).

¹⁷ In this context, it is necessary to emphasize that when Plato's Socrates speaks about "obsession", "madness", he does not mean madness in the pathological sense of this word, but he means approaching of

not know what they are doing; they are in some kind of soulful state, temporarily controlled by “higher power”, which after all means that the creator is god himself. To be expressed by the words of Plato’s Socrates: “...beautiful poems (τὰ καλὰ ποιήματα) are not human, not even *from* human beings, but are divine and from gods (θεῖα); that poets are nothing but representatives of the gods (θεῶν); that poets are nothing [else] but representatives of the gods (ἐρμηνυῆς εἰσιν τῶν θεῶν)...” (*Ion*, 534e). This implies that a poet never speaks out of special knowledge (τέχνη), but due to the effect of “divine power”, by which he is dominated and moved. Thus he becomes a passive indicator of this power, he becomes its tool.

I have concluded that according to Socrates, the poets are the gods’ interpretators and the rhapsodes are the poets’ interpretators. The rhapsodes only interpret the ideas of the poets, and they interpret the ideas of gods. The last component of this imaginary chain is the spectator (535e). But the rhapsodes and the spectators are even getting further from the original source of inspiration than the poets. For better understanding, Plato’s Socrates introduces an analogy with a magnet, which magnetizes metal rings and at the same time it puts its power into them, by means of which they can have an effect on the other things and so can magnetize them (535e-536a). So, the Muse (Μοῦσα) turns some people into poetry enthusiasts and attracts other enthusiasts through them as a magnet does. This magnet is god, who by means of the poets and subsequently the rhapsodes attracts human souls.¹⁸ However, it is not always one and the same god, each poet can be possessed by a different god, by another Muse.

Conclusion

Finally, it is necessary to emphasize that Plato, in the work *Ion*, does not want to discredit poetry, even though he stresses its irrational, even mystical character, which has little in common with reason. Plato’s main aim is to strictly separate poetry from special knowledge (τέχνη), and also from wisdom (σοφία). He shows that the essence of poetic creation is different from the essence of philosophical one, and that is why we should not look for skills and knowledge in the works of poets, but in the works of philosophers. Poetry is a peculiar world, an individual existence, which is distant from ultimate knowledge. This is

“higher power”, which affects on a poet and then he gets into the state similar to the state of trance or ecstasy and he “blows out“ from himself poetry inspired by gods.

¹⁸ A poet (a rhapsode, too) impacts on the emotional side of the spectators by his work (535d-e), and so he suppresses the rationality in thinking. Plato condemned this facet of art, especially poetry, in the dialogue *Lysis* (*Lysis*, 206b), too. In this context I want to point to the fact that the conclusion of Xenophon’s *Symposium* proves similar effect of art (in this case a theatre performance) on the emotional side of people (*Symposium*, 9.3-7).

the reason, why the poets do not possess universal knowledge, nor they have the right to influence the social status.

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Ulrich WOLLNER, MA, PhD.
Department of Philosophy
Faculty of Humanities
Matej Bel University
Tajovského 40
974 01 Banská Bystrica
Slovakia
e-mail: wollner@fhv.umb.sk