PLATO, POETRY AND CREATIVITY

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The subject of this paper is poetic creativity as it features in various Platonic works: the nature and source of creativity, as well as the way in which it differs from the activity of philosophy. I shall argue that Plato gives us at least three quite different models of poetic creativity. One can be extracted from the Ion and the Meno, another from the Symposium and a third from the Gorgias and Republic VI. The main focus of this paper will be on the model given in the Symposium where Diotima talks of how such poets as Homer and Hesiod succeeded in creating works that would secure them everlasting memory (209a–d). This passage has not received the attention it deserves within discussions of Platonic poetics, and it is all the more interesting when juxtaposed with the more familiar account of poetic creativity found in the Ion.

1. Model One: Theia Moira in the Ion and the Meno

The Ion

Ion is a rhapsode who boasts of his ability to perform Homer and to expound his meaning. Socrates appears to envy the rhapsode, but is puzzled as to why he is able to speak so well about Homer but not about any other poet. In the first main section of the dialogue (531a–533c), he argues that Ion does not actually have any skill or understanding of what Homer said; if he did, he would be just as impressive on any poet who dealt with similar topics. The central section (533d–536d) then gives the explanation for Ion’s peculiar ability: he is in receipt of a divine gift (theia moira). Socrates describes this as a form of possession in which Ion is temporarily driven out of his mind; it is not Ion who speaks, but the god who uses him as a mouthpiece. Socrates’ repeated insistence throughout this passage that the rhapsode speaks as one possessed makes Ion uneasy:

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1 I agree with Kahn (1996), 103 that Plato uses the words epistêmê, sophia and technê interchangeably in this dialogue. See also Harris (2004), 193, n.12.
he still wants to see himself as speaking with understanding and skill. So in the third and final section of the dialogue (536e–542b), Socrates provides a further argument to show that this is not the case.

Although most of the Ion is concerned directly with rhapsody rather than poetry, this does not make it tangential to the topic of poetic creativity. The account of divine inspiration given in the central section does shift the spotlight onto poets, for a while at least. Of prime importance to the whole passage is the magnet analogy: just as a loadstone attracts a metal object, it also implants the same power in that object to attract another, until a whole chain is formed. So the god (or the muse) makes the poet inspired, and the poet in turn inspires the performers (including rhapsodes), who do the same to their audiences. Having introduced poets as the closest link to the muse at 533e, Socrates continues to talk specifically about them until 534b. He then reintroduces the figure of the rhapsode, but still keeps the poet in the spotlight until the end of the passage (cf. e.g. 534c). So, although he introduces divine inspiration to explain something about Ion, everything he says applies also to the poets.2

Before we turn to theia moira directly, we need to consider the content of the technê or understanding that Socrates is at pains to deny to rhapsodes and poets. What is beyond doubt is that in his view they lack any understanding of the actual topics that feature in their poems. The diverse range of examples given in the dialogue includes divination (531b & 539b–d), politics (531c), religion (531c–d), chariot driving (537a), fishing (538d) and medicine (538c). Socrates shows no interest in the possibility that the poet might have a specific and unique understanding of literary composition, and Ion makes no allusion to such a skill in his or the poets' defence.3 The assumption of the dialogue is that poets pretend to an understanding of 'first order' topics (e.g. of politics and religion), rather than of how to talk about them, and are therefore competing on the same terrain as the true expert (technikos), but without any understanding.

2 Some would say even more so: Ledbetter (2003), 91 thinks that the influence of the god is stronger over the poet than over the rhapsode. There has been a tendency in the literature to argue that not only does the account of divine inspiration apply to the poets, they are the dialogue's real focus (or target); even that the hapless Ion is merely a stand-in for Homer: see e.g. Méridier (1931), 13, Tigerstedt (1969), 25, Murdoch (1972), 9, Woodruff (1983), 6 and Kahn (1996), 107–108. For our purposes, we do not have to go to this extreme; all that matters is that the ascription of theia moira (and with it the denial of technê) applies at least as much to the poets as to Ion.

3 Janaway (1995), 14–35 argues that Socrates does not actually deny such technê, merely that it is the source of whatever is beautiful (kalon) in what they say.