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Plato's *Ion*: Art as an Act of Hermeneutics

Abstract: The dialogue *Ion* is one of Plato's most controversial works. The disagreements among historians of philosophy regarding this work are caused primarily by doubts about this dialogue's authenticity, which have been more or less resolved recently in favor of Plato's authorship. However, this dialogue carries within itself one even more complex and almost insoluble problem - the actual interpretation of the author's content and message. Each researcher of this work understands that Plato, through the mouth of Socrates, in this dialogue, makes a riddle for Ion and calls on him and a reader of the dialogue to solve it. However, this riddle, expressed in the myth of the Magnesian stone, is so polysemantic, consists of so many semantic layers that everyone who studies this work has the opportunity to solve it in his own way. The present article attempts to focus on the problem of the essence of art as a hermeneutic act. Plato views creativity exclusively as a hermeneutic process. For him, it is a chain of interconnected and interdependent elements, where each participant acts as an interpreter of the previous one. Plato builds an extremely ambiguous model of the creative process. The author (artist) must be simultaneously intellectually passive to perceive knowledge coming from outside through inspiration and hermeneutically active to interpret this inspired knowledge.

Keywords: the hermeneutics of art, hermeneutics of music, philosophy of art.

"Whoever begins to conduct philosophical inquiry with Plato can be sure that he or she is on the right path" (Szlezak 1999, 2).

Only one of thirty-six dialogues in Thrasyllus' canon has a title of a literary work in the thematic addition (ἀπὸ τοῦ πράγματός). This dialogue is *Ion*, and in the canon, it is called *Ion*, or *On the Iliad*. It is unclear what prompted Thrasyllus to give such a name to it, for there is almost nothing in this dialogue about the *Iliad*. There are some references to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but they are all of an auxiliary nature only. This dialogue's central theme is the idea of interpretation and the nature of this interpretation, namely hermeneutics.

In this dialogue, Socrates examines the nature of interpretation from different angles, proving himself a true hermeneut. Throughout the dialogue, the hermeneutic theme manifests itself in indicator words and

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phrases: “apprehending his (the poet’s A.Ī) thought and not merely learning off his words... since a man can never be a good rhapsode without understanding what the poet says. For the rhapsode ought to make himself an interpreter of the poet’s thought to his audience” [530c], “expound” [531a, 531b], “good poets interpret to us these utterances of the gods... act as interpreters of interpreters” [535a], “a knowledge of different things” [538b], “what he means by this, and whether it is rightly or wrongly spoken” [538d]. All these concepts reflect the hermeneutic spirit that lives in this dialogue.

After the introduction, which is remarkable for its geographical allusions and mythological references, Plato puts a rather strange monologue into Socrates’ mouth. This monologue is odd in several ways: it is strange in its suddenness - Plato leads the reader into the deep waters of wisdom at once, without preparing. It is also strange in its brevity, which seems unusual after short welcoming remarks. But even more, it is strange and remarkable in its content. Socrates tries to turn the attention of Ion from the outside of the rhapsodic art (the dress of the rhapsodist, memorizing poetry, etc.) to the inner - to the fact that the rhapsodist must above all “delve into the idea, comprehend and interpret it”, that is, to the hermeneutic side of art:

I must say I have often envied you rhapsodes, Ion, for your art: for besides that it is fitting to your art that your person should be adorned and that you should look as handsome as possible, the necessity of being conversant with a number of good poets, and especially with Homer, the best and divinest poet of all, and of apprehending his thought and not merely learning off his words, is a matter for envy; since a man can never be a good rhapsode without understanding what the poet says. For the rhapsode ought to make himself an interpreter of the poet's thought to his audience; and to do this properly without knowing what the poet means is impossible. So one cannot but envy all this [530bc].

This speech of Socrates is also interesting for its form, which musicians call One-theme’s Rondo. Here, two episodes on the theme of hermeneutics are held together in a monolithic construction by three pillars - a recurring refrain with the theme of Socrates’ “envy” (at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end). Interestingly, this miniature form foreshadows and hints to the reader about the composition of the entire dialogue that is ahead of him, which is generally built on the same principle. The three main speeches of Socrates, Plato places at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the dialogue, and each of them has its own function: the initial one introduces the reader to the theme of the conversation, the final one summarizes what has been said, and the central one (both in position and in meaning) expresses the essence of artistic and hermeneutic relations, the formula of

which is proposed metaphorically in the famous myth of the Magnesian stone. Plato places this myth as a most precious crystal in the very center of the work and frames it with completely exquisite twists of dialogue.

Usually, the myth of the Magnesian stone is understood as a theory about the nature of creative inspiration, and the most zealous debates are on the topic only of whether this nature is irrational or not. Russian philosopher Losev answers the adherents of the irrational approach like this: “At first glance, it may really seem that here we are preaching exclusively only ecstasism, that is, irrationalism. This is completely wrong” (A. F. Losev 2000, 556). In fact, the idea of the artistic inspiration’s irrationalism as a bright flash overshadows the main idea that Plato expounds here, in this myth. He very carefully prepares the reader during the entire previous conversation of Socrates with Ion. So, Socrates brings Ion to why he, the rhapsodist Ion, speaks better about Homer than about other poets. Ion himself does not understand this and expresses his bewilderment. Socrates explains to him: “this is not an art in you, whereby you speak well on Homer, but a divine power, which moves you like that in the stone which Euripides named a magnet” [533d]. And then Socrates unfolds this myth before Ion, during which it becomes quite apparent that the nature of artistic inspiration for Plato is hermeneutic from the very beginning to the end, because: “the poets are merely the interpreters of the gods... And you rhapsodes, for your part, interpret the utterances of the poets... And so you act as interpreters of interpreters” [534e-535a]. It turns out that this whole chain of the creative process is one sequence of the several hermeneutic acts: poet interprets the “will of God,” rhapsodist “interprets the interpreter-poet,” listener “interprets the interpreter of the interpreter.” Thus, in his myth, Plato creates a chain of interpretation, which we can call a hermeneutic chain or a hermeneutic vertical.

Hermeneutic Vertical

Plato’s hermeneutic vertical is structured as follows: God¹ - author - performer - listener. This is precisely the vertical, the rigid vertical, in which the creative and hermeneutic movement is one-way and carried out from top to bottom. That is, the active role of the interpreter, the reverse movement from the interpreter to the author, or the dialogue between them, on which the hermeneutics of Dilthey and Schleiermacher will later insist, is not envisaged by Plato. Also, the Platonic formula does not provide for equal co-creation between the inspirer and the inspired. Therefore, when we talk about the vertical of art that Plato offers us, we must first ask the following question: who, in essence, is the author of a work? Not only Plato, but the entire culture of Antiquity says that the true Creator of any work is God. It is a work of art: “directly invested by the gods, and this is

not a metaphor ... but a genuine belief. Homer and Hesiod cannot take a step without Apollo and the muses, and so it is for all the Greek poets. Moreover, like Pindar, each of them can rightfully call himself a 'prophet of the muses', so that it is no longer he who sings, but the muse itself, he only forms this singing with chorus and lyre" [Nem. III 10] (A. F. Losev 2000, 97). Starting with the invocation of the God, deity, muses with a request for inspiration, the ancient Greek epic song revealed God's existence in almost every line. God was a constant in the epic.

And what of the poet? If we take the relationship God - Author, Plato assigns a relatively passive role to the poet, where he must submit to the true Creator. Plato gives a formula for the relationship between two creators: the Creator in the world of Ideas - God and the Creator in the world of substances - a poet. However, this is not an equal partnership. This is the formula of the leader and the led, and this formula is the most crucial condition of creativity for Plato. In the dialogue, metaphorically, Socrates is also perceived as the leader and Ion as the led. Socrates shows the way, leads Ion to the goal, asks heuristic questions. Knowing the answer in advance, Socrates "takes the hand" of Ion and leads him along the shortest and most promising path to the answer to the main question, and this answer he foresees to receive from Ion and gets it at the end of the dialogue.

The poet's value as a personality and his functionality are very ambiguous in Antiquity. On the one hand, we know that poet was extolled in Ancient Greece and that poets gave religious revelations; we know that poets are hermeneutists of gods and that they are "prophets": "in order that we who hear them may know that it is not they who utter these words of great price when they are out of their wits, but that it is God himself who speaks and addresses us through them" [534d].

An ancient poet is a prophet through whom God speaks. Nevertheless, he is also a person who sacrifices his own human voice to materialize the voice of God through himself. Moreover, if, following Plato, we proceed from the fact that poetry is the transmission of knowledge and that the poet is the transmitter, then, in essence, the poet's personality ceases to be important to Plato and us. This is another side of the poet's life in Antiquity, which the Middle Ages later borrowed as the central position concerning the phenomenon of the author.

The hermeneutic vertical in medieval theology was as follows: God (author) - text - interpreter. This structure is developed mainly in theological hermeneutics, and here the most important thing is that the writer, as an author, is almost completely negated. God dictates the sacred text to a receiving person (theory of divine dictation), and God is recognized as an author. Moreover, the writer's personality has absolutely no meaning and interest from hermeneutics' point of view. The writer here becomes a pure

transmitter. Its only value lies in the fact that it somehow² becomes the most suitable transmitter for this purpose. This is the primary position of medieval Europe concerning the phenomenon of the author. In Antiquity, and Plato in particular, an ambiguous situation arises, when, on the one hand, in the relationship between God and the author, the role of the author is almost completely negated, and on the other hand, in the relationship between author and interpreter, the author (Homer) is deified, elevated to the position of God. In this connection, the author-interpreter, the interpreter's role, the performer, in this case, the actor, receives a fascinating light in Plato.

The whole dialogue takes place in the mood of Socrates' irony towards Ion. Socrates makes fun of Ion, plays with him in words and concepts, pushes him to a thought, to an answer. In creating a first in the history of philosophy, Plato created a conflict between a philosopher and poet, vividly and clearly showing the inequality of the positions of Socrates and Ion. Moreover, this attitude repeatedly casts the rhapsode down to such boundaries when his absence becomes possible not only in the dialogue but even in the whole concept of the hermeneutic vertical. This is due to several factors at once. First, a rhapsodist, like an author, but to an even greater extent, is an intermediary; that is, he is somewhere in the middle of the hermeneutic process.

Furthermore, for Plato, the hermeneutic vertical is an act's sequence of the truth's transmission. And with each subsequent act, distortions of the truth can take more severe and irreversible forms. Therefore, getting rid of the rhapsode link in this hermeneutic chain can only mean relief from another, unnecessary interpretation that adds new and otiose meanings to the truth expressed in the work. Plato's attitude towards rhapsodes could be further enhanced by the fact that rhapsodic art was relatively new in the era of Plato's Greece. It was only "in the 7th - 5th centuries BC aoidos singers are replaced by rhapsodists" (Sobolevsky 1946, 78). It was at that time, during the late stage of the development of the ancient epic, that performance was separated from authorship. Until that time, aoidos in its person united the author and the performer, negating misinterpretation risks.

When the rhapsodes appeared, and the performing arts were professionalized, the problem of interpretation arose. Therefore, Plato's Ion was perceived as an alien, falsely and forcibly introduced an element into the hermeneutic process. He interfered. He was just a tribute to the times, a popular actor who was loved by the crowd, who cared more about looks: "your person should be adorned and that you should look as handsome as possible" [530b], "in all the adornment of elegant attire and golden crowns" [535d] than about what he said. Moreover, Plato in the dialogue repeatedly opposed the appearance of the rhapsode, his own dress [530b] and how

well he had “embellished Homer” [530d], to the meaning that is expressed in the work in the form of divine truth and which the rhapsode cannot or does not want to be involved with. Thus, Plato shows the shift of emphasis from internal to external, from content to form, and to the shortcomings of the entire hermeneutic process, which are caused to a greater extent by this.

Another category, the last element in the hermeneutic chain, is a reader, or listener and spectator in Plato: “And are you aware that your spectator is the last of the rings which I spoke of as receiving from each other the power transmitted from the Heracleian lodestone?” [535e] Here, the paradox of the situation lies in the fact that a text (like any work of art and literature) is created for him, for that person who must perceive it. However, in essence, philosophy, in this case, is very little interested in this abstract, historically indistinguishable, and almost mythical reader or listener. He plays a secondary, even tertiary role in the Platonic hermeneutic composition. Because that reader may not be in this structure. There is an author (we found out that it is God in Plato), and there is a text that was materialized from a pure idea. Furthermore, this is a self-sufficient consistency, so much self-sufficient that it becomes unimportant not only how the reader will interpret this text, but even whether the reader will come to this text or not. The text does not change its meaning and its value.

The meaning of a text at Plato is exceptionally significant. Even though the text is present in the relations between all participants in the hermeneutic process, theoretically, in this structure, only one position could be assigned to the text - between God and the author. Then this whole composition would look like this: God - text - author - interpreter - spectator. However, Plato rejects any kind of definition of the text. Moreover, Plato avoids using the concept of a text and any of its synonyms and terms that can somehow materialize this concept and make it plastic, visible and tangible, and therefore easily accessible to the reader. The question arises: how is it possible not to use a single category denoting a text in a work that, in general, is devoted to the text and its understanding? It seems downright incredible. First, he rejects a text's concept as a text, that is, from its formal and material understanding. At the beginning of the dialogue, Plato opposes verse to intention, that is, form to content. Socrates says: “apprehending his (Homer-A.Ī.) thought and not merely learning off his words” [530c]. It seems that Plato is not interested in the text at all, but only in the meaning expressed in the text and the interpretation of this meaning.

Second, Plato does not want to speak directly about the text. Plato wants to talk about understanding, not so much of text as of the author, Homer. Plato exists and wants to exist in such a paradigm when creation is eclipsed by the Creator, and it is not the form of the Creator's revelation that is important, but the meaning revealed in the creation. Because the form is

unstable, the form is perishable, and the form is deceptive. Plato does not trust text as a written medium. In one of his letters, he says: “and for this reason, no man of intelligence will ever venture to commit to it the concepts of his reason, especially when it is unalterable - as is the case with what is formulated in writing” (Plato 1903, [343a]). Plato supports here a relatively widespread idea about the impossibility of writing true knowledge and the rigidity of the written medium. Of course, the Pythagorean prohibition on written philosophical doctrines was eventually overcome, and therefore, we now can read ancient literature in the form of written texts. However, questions regarding the problem of written expression as the materialization of an idea were not finally resolved in Antiquity.

Conclusion

The dialogue *Ion* is the first work of ancient Greek philosophy in which the problem of the nature of the hermeneutics of art is illuminated, and its theoretical model is deduced. This dialogue’s appearance is historically and philosophically justified because Plato answers the very relevant questions and which philosophy was eager to receive. Therefore, the dialogue *Ion* can be considered a work, in the highest sense satisfying the needs of general hermeneutics and hermeneutics of art at the initial stage of their development.

What themes does Plato cover in this dialogue? In general, the entire problematic of the dialogue could be reduced to two major themes, which in their essence carry qualities that are not only contradictory but mutually exclusive - these are the importance of realizing the need for the hermeneutics of art and its impossibility as an act of a human will.

Importance of realizing the need for the hermeneutics of art

Hermeneutics’ relevance as a way (perhaps even the only way) of interaction with philosophical and artistic works was first realized by philosophy in Socrates and Plato’s era. There were several reasons for this. First, at this time, knowledge (philosophical and literary) began to go beyond verbal expression limits, which is named “acousma” in the Pythagorean tradition. Written texts appeared and became publicly available, because of which they lost their sacredness. Second, they became open to different interpretations. Thus, if we take as an axiom Plato’s assertion that God speaks through a poet and affirms the truth in the created work, then we must admit that there can be only one, reflecting that truth, interpretation. All other interpretations will be different from that truth and thus false. The text, cut off from its creator and hence from the only correct interpretation, loses its connection with the truth at the very moment when

it begins its life on a written medium. Thus, the written text becomes a kind of obstacle to the hermeneutic transfer of its meaning.

Another such obstacle is the rhapsode, which was included in this chain historically quite late, at about the same time when epic works began to be recorded and perceived (by philosophy) in this chain rather inorganically. It is inorganic precisely because a rhapsode is an alien element in this chain; he is not needed. He creates an unnecessary, most often false interpretation. Besides, rhapsode, with all his appearance and all his activities, brings in so much form that this diverts attention from the content, and therefore from the meaning, and sidelines them. Philosophy, of course, could not accept this at that stage of its development.

All these historically new phenomena had put philosophy before the need to understand these problems. Philosophers, in particular Plato, were engaged with these issues and offered some answers. However, here philosophy ran into one obstruction that it could not overcome – the established belief in the impossibility of art as an act of a human will.

Impossibility of art and hermeneutics as an act of a human will

The belief that true art is always initiated by the higher powers exists as long as art itself. These ideas about the possibility of transmitting true knowledge only on the condition of divine presence in this work had a very stable meaning both in Antiquity and especially in the Middle Ages when they turned into a ramified theory of the divine inspiration of sacred texts.

Concerning the ancient idea of the divine inspiration of creativity, special attention should be paid to the following: a) for an ancient philosopher, there were true art and not-true art. Not-true art was always created on the initiative of man. It could not be compared with true, divine art, which was initiated by some higher power: “A convincing proof of what I say is the case of Tynnichus, the Chalcidian, who had never composed a single poem in his life that could deserve any mention, and then produced the paean, which is in everyone’s mouth, almost the finest song we have, simply - as he says himself – ‘an invention of the Muses.’ For the god, as it seems to me, intended him to be a sign to us that we should not waver or doubt that these fine poems are not human or the work of men, but divine and the work of gods [534de]. Moreover, since Plato further says that: “the poets are merely the interpreters of the gods” [534e], we understand that b) the poet in the process of creativity becomes a kind of an instrument that is involved in the creativity by a higher power. Since the higher and the leading (God) presupposes the lower and the led (poet), the poet’s passivity as a creative principle was a natural and desirable state. Another state, not only desirable but necessary, was c) the poet’s madness. Plato shows that true art is impossible within the boundaries of reason: “a poet is a light and

winged and sacred thing and is unable ever to ignite until he has been inspired and put out of his senses, and his mind is no longer in him: every man, while he retains possession of that, is powerless to ignite a verse or chant an oracle” [534b]. Here one may get the mistaken impression that madness is a state of a person that is already present in him and thanks to which God chooses him for art. According to Plato, God first chooses a person endowed with reason (a gift, in Plato), then he takes this mind away from him and endows him with the ability for poetic prophecy (also a gift): “And for this reason God takes away the mind of these men and uses them as his ministers, just as he does soothsayers and godly seers, in order that we who hear them may know that it is not they who utter these words of great price, when they are out of their wits, but that it is God himself who speaks and addresses us through them” [534cd]. Plato does not doubt that the poet (or rhapsode) creates in a mad state, for how can he be in reason: “when in all the adornment of elegant attire and golden crowns he weeps at sacrifice or festival” [535d]. It is worth noting that a spectator is also driven to the same insane state [534d]. Here we again come across the idea of the chain of art, in which all the constituent elements must have a qualitatively identical state, be “congenial” to each other. This is necessary in the highest degree because art in Plato is an act of understanding and interpretation. After all, every element of this chain is an “interpreter” of the previous element. Furthermore, the central meaning of Plato’s message, expressed in the dialogue and in the myth of the Magnesian stone, is that any break in the hermeneutic chain means an interruption of the artistic process. Therefore, art for Plato is undoubtedly a hermeneutic act, basically carrying the phenomenon of understanding and interpretation.

Notes

¹ In *Ion*, Plato uses the following concepts to define the creative principle: God, gods, muse, muses.

² Both in Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, the condition for this was considered the coincidence of the author’s personal properties (mainly moral) with divine creative energy.

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