

Russell's Anthology of Greek Prose

Text 24: The poet's inspiration (Plato)

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a) Source:

Ion 533C-535A.

b) Background (synopsis quoted from Russell's book):

"In Plato's ION, Socrates punctures the pretensions to knowledge of the Homeric rhapsode (i.e. reciter) Ion. In this long speech he talks about poetical inspiration and the features of it which show that it is not a rational activity or a τέχνη, but a "god-given" and so inexplicable thing".

c) Language comment:

Difficult, especially the long comparison 18-22, as it includes an anacolouthon. Also in line 12 there is a difficult accumulation of genitives, some of them genitive absolute, some of them not. The syntax in this selection is really difficult. The comparison with the iron rings is relatively easy, but the comparisons with bacchants and other people affected by some kind of divine ecstasy are difficult.

d) Content:

Socrates exposes that ability in composing is not a technical skill that can be learnt, but a divine inspiration. First he uses a simile of magnetic stones, and then he moves on using similes of people who can carry out certain activities only when inspired by the gods, but not when they are in a normal state. This produces a kind of specialization in composers, each one of them specializing in only one aspect of the art, and he proves it with a perfect example at the end.

e) Distribution of content:

(numbers refer to the lines in the printed edition)

1-4:	Introduction.
5-13:	Simile of the magnets.
13-25:	To compose, poets must be possessed.
26-30:	If not, they can't do anything.
30-37:	Muses give just one quality.
37-42:	Gods speak through poets.
42-46:	The best evidence: this poet.
47-53:	Gods show this on purpose.

f) Notes for help:

1) *καί...καί...γε*: emphatic, "I do see and indeed I am come"

1) *ἀποφανόμενος*: ex. of fut. partcp. of purpose (MSS *ἀποφαινόμενος*, ?rightly).

2) *τοῦτο ὄν*: the word *τέχνη* is its predicative complement; we should have expected the *τοῦτο ὄν* to be in feminine, agreeing with the gender of what is going to come, or at least the participle, following it immediately.

2) *ἔστι...οὐκ ὄν*: = *οὐκ ἔστι*. Note emphasis, with word-order to contrast *τέχνη μὲν οὐκ...θεία δὲ δύναμις*: "this is certainly not a skill, your ability to speak well about Homer, it is a divine power". [3 ref. back to 532c]

4) *τῇ λίθῳ*: fem. of specific types of stone (fem. -*ος* type, cf. *ἡ νῆσος*).

7-9) *ὥστε* + inf., then *ὥστε* + indic.: why the difference? Note perfect in 10 of completed action.

8) *ἔπερ*: supply *ποιεῖ*.

8) *ἄλλους ἄγειν δακτυλίους*: epexegetic (ie. explanatory) of *ταῦτόν ποιεῖν*: "to do the very same thing as the stone does, namely to attract other rings".

9) *σιδηρίων*: pieces of iron (not quite a hendiadys with *δακτυλίων*, though clearly the rings are iron as well).

10) *ἤρτηται*: perfect with augm. in the role of reduplication; another case in next line.

10) *πᾶσι ... τούτοις*: dative, governed by general sense of the phrase *ἡ δύναμις ἀνήρτηται*, 'for all of these iron rings the power...'

12) a series of genitives quite confusing, because ἄλλων ἐνθουσιαζόντων is a genitive absolute disconnected from the former genitives.

12) ἄλλων ἐνθουσιαζόντων: take with ὄρμαθος: effect of word order?.

13-22) see Russell on long, loose sentence. In 13-16, οἱ τε in 13 is paired with καὶ οἱ in 15; there are sense-pauses in 14 at ἀγαθοί and κατεχόμενοι. In 16-18 asyndeton introduces comparison to corybantic dancers, ὥσπερ ... οὕτω καί ... In 18 ff. the indefinite temporal clause (ἐπειδάν + aor. subjunctive ἐμβῶσιν, from ἐμβάινω) has its main verb βακχεύουσι, but then instead of a second main verb after καί, we have a participle, κατεχόμενοι (referring back to οἱ μελοποιοί), and after the long parenthetical comparison (ὥσπερ ... οὔσαι οὖ) Plato changes the construction (anacolouthon), so we never get the plural verb we expect in agreement with (οἱ μελοποιοί) κατεχόμενοι. Instead the subject changes to the singular τῶν μελοποιῶν ἢ ψυχῆ. This is "confusing to read" (Russell), reflection of its own meaning ("reader carried away by a stream of words", Murray).

16) οὐκ ἔμφρονες ὄντες = "not being conscious".

20) ἀρύω: it may mean "to take water off someplace" or "to drink".

21) ἔμφρονες: as in line 16, but in positive, it means "being conscious".

22) δήπουθεν: cf. δήπου, "of course"; tone of surprise or irony, Denniston 268.

24) sense-pause after δρεπόμενοι.

25) οὕτω: i.e. like the bees.

27) οἷός τε: sc. ἐστι (so too in 32).

27) πρίν: observe that it's not followed by an inf., as the main sentence is negative.

28) sense-pause after ἔκφρων.

27-9) temporal clauses: οὐ πρότερον ... πρίν ἂν ... + subj., neg. μή: "not until": used after negative main clause, with ref. to future. (πρότερον acts as a forerunner of πρίν, WS 2440).

28-9) similarly ἕως ἂν + subj., before the main clause with negative ἀδύνατος.

29) τοντί: deictic iota.

30) ex. of ἅτε + partcp., causal, "inasmuch as".

30) οὐ τέχνη: contrasting with 31-2 ἀλλὰ θεία μοίρα. cf. 35.

31) ὥσπερ σύ...: understand πολλὰ λέγεις καὶ καλά.

- 32) τοῦτο: as often, looks ahead, to relative ἐφ' ὃ.
- 32) οἷός τε (ἐστίν).
- 32) ἕκαστος: singular after plurals in 30.
- 32) ἐφ' ὃ = "towards which".
- 33-4) accusatives after ποιεῖν above.
- 34) τὰ ἄλλα: acc. of respect.
- 36-7) καὶ ἄν = καὶ ἄν, understand ἠπίσταντο (Russell): present remote condition, with imperfect indic. in protasis, imperfect indic. (understood) with ἄν in apodosis.
- 38) ὑπηρέταις: "as servants"; predicative (lack of article; cf. Russell).
- 40) εἰδῶμεν: pres. sub. οἶδα.
- 41) πολλοῦ: gen. with ἄξια.
- 41) the use of μή in a relative clause instead of οὐ gives a conditional meaning.
- 43) μέγιστον δὲ τεκμήριον: understand e.g. παρέχεται (but cf. common use of τεκμήριον as an independent clause, 'now the proof of it is this')
- 44) ὅτου: gen. (= οὔτινος, cf. 50) after μνησθῆναι (aor. infin. μιμνήσκομαι). "which one might regard as worth remembering/mentioning" (pot. ἄν + opt.).
- 44) ἀξιώσειεν: aor. optat.
- 45) σχεδόν τι: "more or less", "almost".
- 46) Μοισᾶν: note lyric Doric gen. pl. (in quotation).
- 47-8) ἵνα w. subj., neg. μή, purpose clause.
- 49) ἀλλὰ θεῖα καὶ θεῶν: "but are divine and belonging to the gods": parallel to οὐκ ἀνθρώπινα ... οὐδὲ ἀνθρώπων in previous clause.
- 50) ἐρμηνῆς: nom. pl. form in earlier Attic, incl. Plato. Later -εῖς. Goodwin 266.
- 50-1) ἐξ ὅτου (for form cf. on 44) ἄν ... κατέχεται indefinite clause, ἄν + subj.
- 50-51) the whole sentence would have been ...κατεχόμενοι ὑπὸ τούτου ἐξ οὗ ἄν ἕκαστος... so, the agent has been ellided and the relative has been transformed into an indefinite relative.
- 52) ἦσε: aor. of ἄδω.