

# Milk and Honey: Plato's Take on Inspiration in the *Ion*

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THOMAS LEDDY

**Abstract:** Is “inspired” just another word for “creative” or “brilliant” or even just “motivated,” or does it describe something else? Given a secularized worldview, can we recover for the idea of “inspiration” something that goes beyond this? Beginning with a comparison of Book X of the *Republic* and the *Ion* I argue that the “milk and honey” and the related “bee” passages in the *Ion* provide the interpretive key to the dialogue which, in turn, provides us with an alternative model for the appreciation of nature, everyday life, and interpretation itself: a model that neither Socrates nor Plato would have accepted, but which they inspire.

*Keywords:* Plato, inspiration, *Ion*, interpretation, everyday aesthetics

Socrates claims that *Ion* does not have art, but merely inspiration. But what is inspiration? To stackle this question we need to first look at the ways the word is normally used today.<sup>1</sup> The common current meaning of “inspiration” is some person or thing that motivates actions that are creative, or at least good. So a student might say that her mother is her inspiration and mean that her mother is an ideal she looks to when seeking motivation. This popular use of the term is far from the idea of “divine prompting or guidance” that is the word’s earliest English meaning, and equally far from the Platonic idea of inspiration as possession by a god.<sup>2</sup> It is closer to the idea of anything that prompts exalted thoughts or creative activity. But it is not quite the same even as that since it can be as simple as whatever sparks interest or appeals. A student might say that she is inspired to help others by some other person’s actions. But this simply means that these actions motivate her. She sees this person as an ideal she wishes to imitate. So, it seems we have not only secularization of an originally religious idea but also the transformation of that idea into something quite ordinary. Is “inspired” just another word for “creative” or “brilliant” or even just “positively motivated,” or does it describe something else? Can we recover for the idea of inspiration something that goes beyond this?

Plato’s *Ion* is often read in conjunction with Book X of the *Republic*. In both, the poet is represented as someone who does not really know anything, and certainly does not know what he claims that he knows. In the *Ion* the rhapsode suffers from a similar criticism. In both dialogues we have a series, or, better, a hierarchy with God or gods at the summit. In the *Republic*, God is the creator of the ideal bed, the carpenter is the maker of the bed in the world of appearances, and the painter is maker of the painted bed, i.e. the imitator. In the *Ion*, the God or the Muse is the first magnet,<sup>3</sup> which then gives its power to the poet, who is the second magnet, who, in turn, inspires the rhapsode. The audience, the fourth magnet, is four removes from the Muse. That the poet is in direct communication with God or Muse, puts him or her in the same place structurally as the craftsman (and not the poet) in the *Republic*.<sup>4</sup>

There are some differences between the *actions* involved in the two sequences as well. In the *Republic* the carpenter’s bed is a copy of the ideal bed, and it, in turn, is imitated by the painter’s bed. In the *Ion*, there is only one process: inspiration, which is passed down from one magnet to the next.<sup>5</sup> Also, inspiration is different from imitation. One can imitate with skill, whereas no skill is involved in inspiration. Inspiration is more magical or magic-like: the inspired person participates in the source of inspiration. He or she is *as if* “one with” that source.

But that would be putting it from our modern secular perspective. Socrates, by contrast, insists that when a person speaks in an inspired manner the God is using him or her as a medium. Yet Plato is ambiguous about this because sometimes he has Socrates speak of the poet as *interpreting*, and not just *channeling*, the God. There is a great difference between *interpreting* something, which allows for some autonomy on the part of the interpreter, and being a mere mouthpiece.<sup>6</sup> We can also say that the experience of inspiration is, for the inspired person, a religious experience, whereas the act of imitation would be secular, mechanical, and solely for the purpose of entertainment. Also, whereas imitation can involve detachment, where only the surface form of the original is captured, inspiration seems to pass on its inner essence. The poet passes his inspiration from God or the Muse to the rhapsode, and the rhapsode to the audience. Further, unlike imitation, possession by the gods involves a highly imaginative experience. Ion, for example, is ecstatic, out of himself, in the sense that, when reciting the *Iliad*, he almost believes he is in ancient Troy. This out-of-body imaginative experience is not described in the *Republic* account of the imitator.<sup>7</sup> These all might be good reasons not to interpret the earlier dialogue in terms of the later, as often happens.

It is also interesting and paradoxical that Socrates, although putting down Ion as merely inspired, saw himself as inspired in some way. In the *Apology* he often refers to a personal *daemon*, and there is a passage in the *Symposium* that implies that he is occasionally possessed by this inner spirit. Also, he praises wisdom in the *Apology* and says that he has no real knowledge. So, perhaps he sees himself as like Ion in being inspired by a god: having no knowledge, and yet having a *sort* of wisdom. However, Socrates also asserts that, although the poets and Ion may have wisdom, *he* is only interested in truth and knowledge, which would be inconsistent with his position in the *Apology* that he has no knowledge, although perhaps he has a kind of wisdom.

So what is inspiration? It is described as being out of one's mind. There are many ways in which one can be out of one's mind, ranging from the relatively innocent moment of being so engaged with an aesthetic object as to forget oneself, to the more scary experiences of being deluded, obsessed, crazy, manic, or insane. Socrates speaks of it in terms of Bacchic possession, a very specific kind of religious experience associated with intoxication, death and rebirth. He refers to the poets as "like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus but not when they are in their right mind." (534a)<sup>8</sup>

So, what is it to "draw milk and honey"?<sup>9</sup> This involves a kind of positive ecstatic moment when river-water, *as-experienced*, takes on a quality that is metaphorically intensified. This is similar to a description Edward Bullough once offered in explicating his concept of psychic distance. He spoke of experiencing a fog at sea as "a veil surrounding you with an opaqueness as of transparent milk, blurring the outline of things and distorting their shapes."<sup>10</sup> Along similar lines, we can say that the Bacchic maidens are "out of their minds" in the sense that they engage in a radical form of distanced or imaginative seeing.<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, the Bacchic way of seeing is quite different from that of Ion when he recites Homer. His "out of himself" experience entails entering into a fictional world in which he seems to be "among the persons or places" of which he is speaking.<sup>12</sup> The proof of this, at least in his mind, is that his eyes are filled with tears when he tells tales of pity, and his hair stands on end when he tells tales of horror. To the audience, he appears "weeping or panic-stricken." These are distinctly physiological responses to Homer's imagined scenarios — very unlike seeing water as honey or fog as milk. Moreover, Ion's *object* is to see similar emotions in the faces of his audience — thus to assure financial success. In short, with Ion, ecstasy is as much a physiological phenomenon controlled by practical need as an imaginative one. By contrast the poets, as well as the Bacchic maidens, transform the natural world itself, or rather the world-as-experienced, and it is implied that they cannot control this.

Socrates then notes that lyric poets "tell us that they bring songs from honeyed fountains, culling them out of the gardens and dells of the Muses; they, like the bees, winging their way

from flower to flower..."<sup>13</sup> He goes on to endorse this view insofar as he refers to the poet as holy.<sup>14</sup> Such a poet is *active* in the sense that he or she goes from one source of inspiration to the next. In this metaphor at least, the sources of inspiration are natural, although these gardens and dells are controlled, created or perhaps only inhabited by the Muses. Perhaps Socrates is hedging his bets on the divine possession hypothesis.

Indeed, the metaphors for inspiration evolve dramatically over the course of these paragraphs. The magnet metaphor is quite automated, where each magnet simply gets all of its power and meaning from the previous one.<sup>15</sup> The Muse is a dominant magnet that swings all of the rest. The figures swinging from the Muse, which in theatrical performances included choreographers and musicians as well as the poet, seem like puppets. By contrast, the metaphor of milk and honey describes an extreme change of perception under the influence of Dionysian enthusiasm. And the metaphor of the bees in gardens is different again since it gives the poets an autonomy they cannot have under the magnet metaphor.<sup>16</sup> Rather than being swung to and fro by the Muses they are now roaming about in a land perceptually transformed by their enthusiasm. This land has "gardens and dells" and "honeyed fountains." The fountains are perhaps the flowers themselves, i.e. sources of nectar.<sup>17</sup> So, like bees, they collect this nectar and convert it to their equivalent of honey. The poet, then, *positively* understood by Socrates in this case, is someone who is able to take a radical aesthetic approach to nature, being actively inspired by what he sees and hears.<sup>18</sup> Poets bring songs from fountains and other natural phenomena which they experience in an intensified way that is both imaginative and sensuous.<sup>19</sup>

It is at this point that Socrates famously says, "The poet is a light and winged and holy thing."<sup>20</sup> The poet is holy in being able to find the divine in nature and in everyday life, including "the actions of men." Socrates admits that there is invention in the poet, but he also insists that this only occurs when the poet is "inspired and out of his senses." At this point, the language swings back to domination by the mechanical metaphor of possession.<sup>21</sup>

Of course the view I am presenting is inconsistent with the surface message of the *Ion*, the message also described in the standard interpretation, which is simply that poets and rhapsodes are deceivers in pretending to have knowledge when they only have inspiration, a kind of second-best sort of wisdom that can only be of value if one seriously believes in gods.<sup>22</sup> Yet at another level, when we focus on the milk and honey and the bees texts, Socrates becomes an advocate of Dionysian forms of experience (at least for the moment), ones that also involve a form of active engagement that is highly imaginative; and that, for example, entails encountering nature and life in an intoxicated or intoxicated-like way, seeing it as with heightened significance.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, this experience of water as milk and honey, or of dells as filled with nectar to be sampled and collected, is a kind of entering into another world, similar to what happens when Ion seems to enter into the world depicted by Homer. In both cases there is a kind of magical transfer of the self. However, as I mentioned earlier, the poet and rhapsode are also different in that Ion's movement is associated strongly with physiological reactions to strong emotion both in himself and his audience, and the poet's with transformed perception combined with active searching and collecting. This may indicate a sharp division for Plato in his treatment of the two.<sup>24</sup> The rhapsode's transformation is presented in a way that is not to be admired, whereas the activity of the bee-like poets *is*. Again, this is not the same as the aforementioned reading of *Ion* in which the inspired person simply becomes a spokesperson of the God, as like a medium in a séance, a reading that is certainly *intended* by Plato but only on the surface level.<sup>25</sup>

### Interpretation

Now connect all of this to theory of interpretation. At the beginning, Socrates asks Ion, in his typical way, to explain the art of being a rhapsode. The conclusion of the story is that Ion has no art at all but is inspired by Homer, as Homer is inspired in turn by the Muse. Thus Ion is simply

a spokesperson or a conduit, as Homer is. Yet Ion himself, at least at the beginning of the dialogue, sees his art as one of interpretation. This includes not only the capacity to give interpretive readings, but also to interpret what Homer means and to evaluate his writings. As Ion says, interpretation has been “the most laborious part of my art” (530c). He observes that this involves being able not simply to recite Homer but to speak about him, which he believes he can do better than anyone. Socrates *himself* had understood Ion’s task as not merely to memorize Homer’s words but to be able to “understand the meaning of the poet” and interpret his mind to the audience. To interpret well, then, requires that the rhapsode understand what Homer means. But perhaps it is more than that: perhaps the act of interpretation is like that of the Dionysian poet in that it transforms what is perceived.

Ion peculiarly insists that he can interpret Homer and Hesiod equally well when they agree but not when they disagree. We then find him agreeing with Socrates that a good prophet is a better interpreter of what each poet says about divination than he is. It seems to us (at least today) that Socrates is confusing the interpretation of the meaning of poets (for example, when they say something about divination or fishing) with evaluation of the truth of what they say (e.g. about divination or fishing). He seems to think, strangely, that to understand Homer is to understand whether or not what Homer or a Homeric character says about something, for example military tactics, is true. Yet, if this were what the dialogue came to in the end, it would not be worth very much at all. It would simply be based on a mistake. Of course what Socrates wants to say is that neither Homer nor Ion has a subject-matter proper to himself that he can be said to understand well. The fact that Ion probably is able to say better what Homer’s intended meaning was counts not at all. But perhaps “intended meaning” is not a viable option here either.

Could Plato be deliberately feeding us a bad theory of interpretation through Socrates (i.e. that the proper interpreter of every passage is the specialist in the art referenced) so that we could reflect more deeply on the nature of interpretation itself? Are we expected to come up with a better theory of interpretation, one that has a Dionysian element as well as an Apollonian one, to use Nietzsche’s terms? Could the passage on milk and honey be telling us something about interpretation too?

Socrates has implicitly offered or at least suggested an alternative theory of interpretation, one that does not see it as a rule-following activity in the way the art of being a doctor or a charioteer might be, but as emphasizing a radically different kind of perception, similar to that of the inspired poet.<sup>26</sup> To understand this different kind of perception we need to look once again at the metaphors he uses: milk, honey, fountains, bees, and so forth. This raises a question of whether or not he himself isn’t like a poet, and even a rhapsode, in being inspired and in inspiring, at least in these passages. After all, we have the story of his personal daemon in the *Apology*. This is the paradox: Plato has Socrates make fun of poets and rhapsodes as having no real knowledge of the sort that doctors and charioteers have, and yet Socrates (and hence Plato) waxes lyrical when talking about poetic inspiration, as though this were a good thing and even suggesting that interpretation of poetry via inspiration is valid.

In contemporary theory of interpretation the view that inspiration plays an important role in interpretation is usually discounted. Some authors believe that we need to accurately transcribe the intended meaning of the author, some bring in social and historical context, etc. But what about creative interpretation? What about inspiration? What role does it play?<sup>27</sup>

Socrates describes the poets as being like Bacchic maidens who, to return to our quote, “draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus but not when they are in their right mind.” As I have argued, the interpretation of this passage is the key to the dialogue, not only to its theory of inspiration but to its theory of interpretation. Both the good poet and the good interpreter are like ecstatic religious participants who perceive mere water as something transformed, as something with an aura of significance. They are “not in their right minds,” but maybe in a good way.<sup>28</sup>

But let's set aside the idea promoted by Socrates that poetry and literary interpretation are just the work of God himself, and focus on the way in which this alternative works against current views of literary interpretation *and* current views of the aesthetics of nature, both of which shortchange the ways in which creative imagination transforms the field of perception. Ion says, "I am persuaded that good poets by a divine inspiration interpret the things of the Gods to us," the things of the Gods being simply the things of the world perceived as transformed in the way the river was transformed into milk and honey for the revelers. After this, how can one take seriously Socrates' surface message that the works of poetry should be replaced with tracts on medicine, charioteering, and other crafts?

*San José State University, California, USA*

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> There is of course a simple way of understanding the Greek word "entheos" (translated as inspiration) in this case, i.e. as possession by a God, thus eliminating many of the associations we have today with the word "inspiration." Our associations are to some extent mediated by romanticism and by Shelley's romantic-inspired translation of the *Ion*. (see Stern-Gillet) Shaper for example quotes extensively from that translation. (See also Shelley's 'A Defense of Poetry'.) Our concept of inspiration is also influenced, by Freud and Jung, with the unconscious, whether individual or collective, replacing God as the source of inspiration. My own view is closer to Shelley's. I grant that Stern-Gillet has scholarship on her side as far as Plato's conscious intentions are concerned: but I see Shelly's reading and my own as uncovering hidden forces within Plato himself. In a sense Plato has been taken over by the God in writing the main speech of Socrates, and so his position here cannot be seen as straightforward sarcasm. This allows for the possibility of Plato inspiring a view of inspiration that is distinctly unPlatonic if, by Platonic, we mean what we get from an orthodox reading of Plato. Stern-Gillet believes that *theia moira* is just "elegant camouflage for the dearth of explanation." (195) I think that it is a recognition that the vision of the poet transforms the world into something divine or divine-like, i.e. the river becomes milk and honey in that it transcends the ordinary.
- <sup>2</sup> "inspiration" *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1993) p. 1381. This is the first meaning given, coming from Middle English. The second meaning is "prompting the mind to exalted thoughts, to creative activity"; the third is "undisclosed prompting from an influential source to express a particular viewpoint"; and the fourth is "a sudden brilliant or timely idea." The word "inspire" (*ibid.*) comes from old French and is related to breath: its Middle English meaning is "of a divine or supernatural agency: impart a truth, impulse, idea.." or to "animate with a (noble or exalted) feeling...."
- <sup>3</sup> Could Plato be referring to Thales? From Aristotle we have the story of Thales that he "apparently took the soul to be a principle of movement, if he said that the stone has soul because it moves iron." *On the Soul* 405a 19-21. Since Aristotle also suggested that for Thales "all things were full of gods" it might be assumed that Thales believed in a kind of pantheism. Sometimes his view is called hylozoism. It would make sense that Plato would begin with a metaphor that evokes the preSocratic physicists with hylozoist tendencies and then move on to more complex metaphors of inspiration.
- <sup>4</sup> This is consistent with an overall more positive attitude about poetry in *Ion* than in *Republic*.
- <sup>5</sup> You would think that the power would weaken or change in some other way from one magnet to the next, but nothing is explicitly said about this. Note however that whereas the poet is inspired to create by the Muse, and the rhapsode is inspired to perform or at least is inspired in his performance by the poet, the audience is not inspired to do anything other than to enter into the imagined world prepared by the poet. One could say that the audience is taken out of its mind just as the rhapsode and the poet are. So the difference may be due simply to our word "inspired" which can be applied to the poet and rhapsode but less so to the audience member (except perhaps afterwards if the audience member uses her theatrical experience as inspiration for her own creative activity.)

- <sup>6</sup> When Socrates says that rhapsodes are only “interpreters of interpreters” (535) isn’t that different from saying that they are just transmitters of the same meaning. An interpreter interprets: gives his or her own rendering of the meaning of something. The interpretation might be inspired, but that does not make it simply a copy. Commentators in general have taken the magnet metaphor to be the dominant one, but in fact whenever we have a series of metaphors in Plato, the last one is considered the most sophisticated: I shall argue that the sophisticated one is the metaphor of the bees.
- <sup>7</sup> Possession and “out of his mind” are often understood by commentators to indicate that Ion, and rhapsodes in general, and poets in general, are considered to be literally mad, insane. Thus when Ion balks at being seen as possessed this is because he does not want to be seen as insane, although this would not explain why in the end he prefers to think of himself as inspired by the Gods, though lacking techné. Has he forgotten that being inspired means being insane? Nickolas Pappas appears to take this line in his “Plato’s “Ion”: The Problem of the Author,” *Philosophy*. 64:249 (1989) 381-389. Pappas however seems to be confusing knowing from one perspective (i.e. from that of Homer) with a form of insanity. This seems to me a lack of recognition that, as Nietzsche taught us, all knowledge is perspectival. Of course Plato would join Pappas on this point in most cases. The interesting thing about Plato is that there is also an undercurrent that goes against this. Pappas thinks that if Ion perceives everything through Homer’s eyes he misperceives the world, and yet how can anyone fail to see everything through someone’s eyes, usually their own? So, do we all misperceive the world? Alternatively, one could say that the world becomes more animated for Ion when he sees it through Homer’s eyes than when he sees it through his own or through Hesiod’s. Pappas complains that Ion’s acquaintance with Homer rules out knowledge of what Homer is talking about. (385) Surely this is wrong: he knows very well what Homer is talking about when Homer is talking about a charioteer: what he does not know is what an expert on charioteering would say on the same topic. He knows what Homer is trying to do with the charioteering passage, and how that passage fits into the overall story and vision Homer is developing at that point in the epic. Homer is not interested in charioteering as such, and neither should be Ion. To say that knowing about Homer leads to not knowing about the world assumes that there is a perspective-free world, a God’s eye perspective on the world, and that the world is not known precisely through perspectives. Pappas is assuming that knowing what Homer thinks about something, and searching for the truth, cannot be part of the same thing. He writes, “On every important issue he turns his back on a search for truth, preferring to know only what Homer thinks about the issue.” (385) Of course the Phaedrus puts the idea of madness in a positive light (Phaedrus, 245): “There is a third form of possession or madness, of which the Muses are the source. This seizes a tender, virgin soul and stimulates it to rapt passionate expression, especially in lyric poetry, glorifying the countless mighty deeds of ancient times for the instruction of posterity. But if any man come to the gates of poetry without the madness of the Muses, persuaded that skill alone will make him a good poet, then shall he and his works of sanity with him be brought to naught by the poetry of madness, and behold, their place is nowhere to be found.” This quote comes from Morris Henry Partee “Inspiration in the Aesthetics of Plato” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 30:1 (1971) 87-95, 92. It is interesting and surprising that the madness of lyric poetry is represented as glorifying noble needs of the past and instructing posterity.
- <sup>8</sup> (48-49) “Ion” in *Art and Its Significance* Stephen David Ross ed. [Jowett translation] 534A. The Lamb translation of 534a is “just as the Corybantian worshippers do not dance when in their senses, so the lyric poets do not indite [make or create] those fine songs in their senses, but when they have started on the melody and rhythm they begin to be frantic, and it is under possession—as the bacchantes are possessed, and not in their senses, when they draw honey and milk from the rivers—that the soul of the lyric poets does the same thing, by their own report. For the poets tell us, I believe, that the songs they bring us are the sweets they cull from honey-dropping fountains.” The term translated by Lamb as “not in their senses” is perhaps better translated as not in one’s mind. It should also be observed that “milk and honey” plays an important role in Biblical and Near East traditions: See Jonathan Cohen “Why Milk and Honey,” <http://www.uhmc.sunysb.edu/surgery/m&h.html>.
- <sup>9</sup> This passage is absolutely central to understanding the dialogue and its theory of interpretation. And yet it is neglected by several authors even when they are supposedly giving complete accounts of the dialogue! Jacques Antoine Duvoisin in his “Art and Inspiration in Plato’s Ion” *Literature & Aesthetics* 19:1 (2009) 17-31 never mentions the honey passage and only mentions the bees passage in passing. See also Bloom, Allan. 1987. “An Interpretation of Plato’s Ion.” In *The Roots of Political Philosophy: Ten Forgotten Socratic*

- Dialogues*, ed. Thomas Pangle, 371–95. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. [From 1970] and Russon, John, “Hermeneutics and Plato’s “Ion”” *Clio*. Sum 95; 24(4): 399–418.
- <sup>10</sup> Edward Bullough, ““Psychical Distance” as a Factor in art and an Aesthetic Principle,” in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology* ed. George Dickie and Richard J. Sclafani (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1977) 759.
- <sup>11</sup> Perhaps an even better analogy can be found in Heidegger’s treatment of the Greek temple in his “The Origins of the Work of Art.” Heidegger argues that the erection of the temple transforms the world around it, giving a shining, intensified and holy quality to the raging sea, the rain, the rock that supports the temple, the materials out of which the temple is made, and even the light and air. For Heidegger, it is when the great work of art, e.g. the temple, is “set up” that the holy emerges. God only plays a role insofar as the statue of the god in the temple is itself the central work of art in the complex, transforming the whole.
- <sup>12</sup> Rana Saadi Liebert in “Fact, Fiction and Plato’s *Ion*.” *American Journal of Philology*, 131: 2, Summer 2010, pp. 179–218, argues that the *Ion* is the first text to develop a concept of fiction.
- <sup>13</sup> (49) (543b) The Lamb translation is “in certain gardens and glades of the Muses—like the bees, and winging the air as these do. And what they tell is true. For a poet is a light and winged and sacred thing, and is unable ever to indite until he has been inspired and put out of his senses, and his mind [nous] is no longer in him: every man, whilst he retains possession of that, is powerless to indite a verse or chant an oracle.”
- <sup>14</sup> It should be observed though, as I develop in the next footnote, that most contemporary scholars read this not as endorsement but as irony. I find it hard to believe that Socrates would use the word “holy” in an ironic way here.
- <sup>15</sup> “Mechanical” may not be the best word here. Reading Russo’s analysis of the magnet metaphor it appears much more complex, and as I suggested above, it is less mechanical than the role of imitation in the *Republic*. Although I do not agree with Russo’s conclusions he gives yet further reason not to read the *Ion* just in terms of the *Republic*.
- <sup>16</sup> By not recognizing the development of metaphors, and only focusing on the magnet metaphor, Pappas misses the humanism of Socrates’ theory of inspiration. He writes that Plato “invents the blind magnetic attraction between poets and their audiences to explain what would motivate a man like Ion. These divine powers are no praise for poetry; they are to account instead for its inhumanity.” op. cit., 386.
- <sup>17</sup> The blog “Dido’s Tears” [blogger unknown] has a wonderful collection of later uses of the bee metaphor, mainly in Roman writers. <https://didosteers.wordpress.com/351-2/>. Some examples are: “Lucretius (99–55 BCE), *De rerum natura* 3.10–12: “From your pages, as bees in flowery glades sip every blossom, so do I crop all your golden sayings.” Horace (65–27 BCE), *Carmina* 4.2.27–32: I, “after the way and manner of the Matinian bee, that gathers the pleasant thyme with repeated labor around the groves and banks of well-watered Tibur, I, a humble bard, fashion my verses with incessant toil.” Seneca (54–39 BC), *Epistulae morales* 84, letter to Lucilius (“the ancient document most often identified with humanist literary theory” – Kathy Eden, “The Renaissance Rediscovery of Intimacy.” p. 41) “We should follow, men say, the example of the bees, who flit about and cull the flowers that are suitable for producing honey, and then arrange and assort in their cells all that they have brought in; these bees, as our Vergil says, pack close the flowing honey, And swell their cells with nectar sweet.” It is worth looking at the blogger’s other examples as well.
- <sup>18</sup> Cynthia Freeland (2010) observes a similar use of metaphors from nature in the *Phaedrus* in her “Imagery in the *Phaedrus*: Seeing, Growing, Nourishing,” *Symbolae Osloenses*, 84:1, 62–72, DOI: 10.1080/00397679.2010.501198.
- <sup>19</sup> Note that *Ion* himself is not just a massive magnet passing on the same power from Homer to his audience. As Liebert observes, “Whereas previously he had conceded to a passive experience of his own performance, now he asserts his selfmastery over the poetic event and distinguishes himself as performer from the audience he enraptures (535d–e)” (201).
- <sup>20</sup> This is widely considered the most famous quote from the dialogue. Although it was much discussed up until the 1950s, it has pretty much fallen out of favor since then. Craig LaDrière’s “The Problem of Plato’s *Ion*,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 10:1 (1951): 26–34 marks a kind of turning point. He says that the dialogue is remembered especially for the speech that culminates in the quote, i.e. from 533d–534, but then argues for a shift of focus. He notes that the speech is usually taken to be both rhetorically and dialectically the center of the piece. This is actually my view: it turns out that I am seeking to revive a perspective that was dominant seventy years ago and that has lost favor. He also observes that it was thought that Plato’s motive was to present this view of poetry. Of course this is what he rejects. It is hard to know what Plato’s motives were exactly. I argue in this paper that Plato’s motives are at least ambiguous.

- LaDriere's position seems to be that this was a view that, as Socrates puts it in the dialogue, was commonly set forth by "the poets themselves" (534A) and thus is not Socrates' own view. This leads LaDriere to believe that Plato is attacking the theory of inspiration and seeking to replace it with something else. My view is that Plato seems to be enjoying himself too much in describing the theory, that the description is just too rich and beautiful, to be seen as something being set up for simple rejection. Dialogues are like plays: they present competing positions and, unlike treatises, do not necessarily take a position of their own. LaDriere thinks that the dialogue was considered "a slight dialogue" by scholars like A.E. Taylor because it was on a low-level topic, i.e. the nature of poetic inspiration. A. E. Taylor, *Plato* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1956), 38. The notion here is that the topic of poetic inspiration degrades the dialogue's importance. This idea clearly comes out of the era of positivism and early analytic aesthetics (a late blooming of positivism) that is associated with a reaction against all forms of romanticism: the humanities at this time were seeking to be more science-minded, and talk about inspiration was embarrassing to this new project. It is a 'serious dialogue' according to LaDriere because deals it with the question "whether a scientific method is available for criticism." (26) That is not at all what makes it serious for me.
- <sup>21</sup> Dorit Barchana-Lorand in her "A Divinity Moving You': Knowledge and Inspiration in Plato's *Ion*." in Alison Denham ed. *Plato on Art and Beauty* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) would agree with me that Plato is at least ambivalent about the poets and even presents them in a positive way in the place discussed. I would agree with her that "as if to compensate for [lack of argument] Plato provides the reader with affectively compelling images of striking and seductive poetic richness...Socrates himself is transfigured, becoming something like a poet himself..." which is why *Ion* responds that Socrates' words have touched his soul. (97) I also agree with her that "the transfiguration is only temporary...following the soliloquy, Socrates abruptly reverts to his usual manner of speech and critical posture, now developing the less attractive image of divine inspiration as a kind of 'muse-driven madness.'" (97)
- <sup>22</sup> A standard contemporary view is what I would call "the sarcasm thesis," which claims that Plato is not serious or is at best half-serious when he attributes something divine to the poets: cf. Suzanne Stern-Gillet "On (Mis)interpreting Plato's "Ion"," *Phronesis*, 49:2 (2004): 169–201. For her, referring to the poets as divine is a backhanded compliment. Although this line is at first plausible, it assumes that Plato is an unambiguous rationalist, a point that has been contested by many scholars over the last century, although, again, more often in the period more than fifty years ago.
- <sup>23</sup> Nietzsche's relationship to this is complicated. Although in *The Birth of Tragedy* he portrays Socrates as a hyper-rationalist, he clearly gets his idea of the Apollonian/Dionysian duality in part from Plato. It is arguable that Socrates in this dialogue himself has these two sides, and that, ironically, therefore, *Ion* itself meets Nietzsche's conditions for tragic art, i.e. that it involves both the Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies. Commentators who stress the rationalist Socrates at the expense of the Dionysian Socrates seem to be suppressing the later. It is interesting that the poets are not in their right minds when they make their beautiful songs because they fall under the power of melody and rhythm: being inspired and possessed is associated with the power of music. Plato then would agree with Nietzsche that the Dionysian is in some way closely associated with music, or at least music of a particular sort.
- <sup>24</sup> See Silke-Maria Weinick, "Talking about Homer: Poetic madness, philosophy, and the birth of criticism in Plato's 'Ion'." *Arethusa* 31:1 (1998) 19–42 for a similar view.
- <sup>25</sup> Liebert (op. cit.) says "Socrates condemns poetry for conjuring up a non-existent reality, and *Ion* (as well as the audience) for behaving as if it actually existed in the present." But does Socrates really condemn poetry for this? Or is he mainly just condemning *Ion*, the rhapsode, for making this into mainly a physiological thing: a transfer of hair stood on end and tears in the eyes, all for the purpose of making money. Moreover, whereas the rhapsode conjures up non-existent reality, in the case of Homer, a mythological world of heroes, the lyric poet radically transforms our own world.
- <sup>26</sup> There are powerful arguments, to be sure, that can be addressed against this position. LaDriere in particular would argue that the alternative form of interpretation practiced by *Ion* is either (1) a puppet interpretation, since the real inspiration is that of the poet, or (2) impressionist interpretation with no real cognitive value. It could be argued that *Ion* does give his recitations something of what I have called aura insofar as he adorns or beautifies Homer with his interpretation, but that, again, this has no cognitive value. The idea is that *Ion*'s beautiful thoughts about and praises of Homer are of no value because they are not grounded on science. In response, it could be argued against (1), that the puppet/magnet view of inspiration is superseded by the perception of milk and honey view and then by the bees gathering nectar view, the



last of which does allow agency not only on the part of the poet but on the part of the interpreter. As for (2), the dichotomy between mere impressionist interpretation on the one side and scientifically valid criticism on the other is doubtful because it is doubtful that either extreme is ever achieved. What is clear, however, is that the scientific approach Socrates himself offers, it patently ridiculous, so much so that Plato himself could not have taken it seriously. Thus some sort of non-scientific criticism which involves inspiration in much the way poetry does can be the only viable option for Plato. Ion's form of criticism involves a "dance of the soul" 536 b-c which is clearly superior to that of the charioteer assessing Homer's account of Priam's advice. I find especially offensive even the idea that the dialogue had a "doctrine" and that criticism be based on "valid scientific generalizations."

<sup>27</sup> I have addressed this issue in "Overcoming Dualism: Textual Meaning Discovered and Invented," *Interpretation and Meaning in Philosophy and Religion* ed. Dirk-Martin Grube (Leiden: Brill, 2016) and earlier in "Creative Interpretation of Literary Texts," Chapter Sixteen, *The Idea of Creativity* ed. Michael Krausz (Brill Academic Publishers, 2009) 293-311.

<sup>28</sup> Note that the passage shows indirectly an intense interest in the aesthetics of nature, one not usually recognized in the ancient Greeks. The idea presumably is that nature is properly understood aesthetically when it is perceived in the way the Bacchic maidens would perceive it: transformed. I develop a view of appreciation of nature that incorporates a transcendental dimension (without any commitment to theism) in my unpublished paper "The Synthesis/Cycle View of the Aesthetics of Nature" which was delivered at the American Society for Aesthetics, Pacific Division meeting, Asilomar, 2016.