POETIC INSPIRATION: PLATO AND EARLIER CONCEPTIONS

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I. Introduction

In *Laws* IV, Plato makes a statement concerning the poets:

> Παλαιὸς μῦθος, ὦ νομοθέτα, ὑπο τε αὐτῶν ἡμῶν ἀεὶ λεγόμενός ἐστι καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις πᾶσι ξυνδεδογμένος, ὅτι ποιητής, ὁπόταν ἐν τῷ τρίποδι τῆς Μούσης καθίζηται, τότε οὐκ ἔμφρων ἐστίν, οἷον δὲ κρήνη τις τὸ ἐπιὸν ῥεῖν ἑτοίμως ἐᾷ, καὶ τῆς τέχνης οὔσης μιμήσεως ἀναγκάζεται ἐναντίως ἀλλήλοις ἀνθρώπους ποιῶν διατιθεμένους ἐναντία λέγειν αὐτῷ πολλάκις, οἶδε δὲ οὔτ᾽ εἰ ταῦτα οὔτ᾽ εἰ θάτερα ἀληθῆ τῶν λεγομένων.[1]
>
> [There is] an ancient saying, O lawgiver, constantly repeated by ourselves, and endorsed by all others, that a poet, whenever seated upon the Muses' tripod, then is not in his senses, but [is] like some fountain [which] readily permits the flow of drinking water, and since his art is imitation, he is often forced to contradict himself (lit., "speak against himself"), creating characters opposite to one another in disposition, and he knows neither if this one of the utterances is true, nor another one.[2]

While this passage is interesting for a variety of reasons,[3] it is its presentation of its position as a παλαιὸς μῦθος that will be the topic of this paper.[4] In "Furor Poeticus: Poetic Inspiration in Greek Literature before Democritus and Plato,"[5] E. N. Tigerstedt argues that we should not be so quick to accept Plato's statement, even though Plato seems to make it unreservedly. Tigerstedt's argument is more detailed and complex by far than the argument that will be made in this paper, which, while drawing on Tigerstedt's work, will seek to focus on a handful of specific texts.

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[1] Robert Gregg Bury, *Laws*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 304. This section is in *Laws* 719c-719d.

[2] This translation is my own.

[3] For example, the fact that this is the only place in his corpus that Plato mentions the concepts of inspiration (ἐνθουσιασμός – in this passage, represented by the phrase οὐκ ἔμφρων ἐστίν) and imitation (μίμησις) concurrently makes it important in piecing together Plato's complicated views on the poets. For this passage in particular, see Nickolas Pappas, "Plato on Poetry: Imitation or Inspiration?" *Philosophy Compass*, 7: 669-678. For general comments regarding Plato and the poets, see the introduction to Penelope Murray, *Plato on Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[4] I would be remiss here not mentioning the work of another individual in a very similar vein: Glenn W. Most, "What Ancient Quarrel between Poetry and Philosophy?" In Pierre Destrée and Fritz-Gregor Herrmann (Eds.), *Plato and the Poets* (pp. 1-20) (Leiden: Brill, 2011). Plato's offhand use of the word "ancient" in regard to sayings and conflicts is not without skeptics, even aside from the passage in the *Laws* discussed in this paper.

[5] E. N. Tigerstedt, "Furor Poeticus: Poetic Inspiration in Greek Literature before Democritus and Plato," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1970), pp. 163-178.

Plato presents a view of poetic inspiration that is typified by the quote above: the poet is not in control of his faculties but is merely a mouthpiece for the gods. This position is put forth most clearly in Plato's *Ion*, which will be used to construct a conception of Plato's position to use as a foil for earlier sources. A brief examination of several texts from authors like Hesiod and Bacchylides will follow, establishing that Plato's παλαιὸς μῦθος may not be so universal after all. Finally, Plato's positive comments in the *Phaedrus* regarding inspiration and madness will be discussed in light of the alternative views of poetic inspiration found before Plato's conception became dominant.

II. Poetic Inspiration in Plato's *Ion*

In *Ion,* Plato argues that the poets do not speak by τέχνη, and compares them to the maenads of myth who can only draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus:

> For all the good epic poets utter all those fine poems not from art, but as inspired and possessed, and the good lyric poets likewise; just as the Corybantian worshippers do not dance when in their senses, so the lyric poets do not indite 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 bacchants 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.[6]

> 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 is no longer in him: every man, whilst he retains possession of that, is powerless to indite a verse or chant an oracle. Seeing then that it is not by art that they compose and utter so many fine things about the deeds of men—as you do about Homer—but by a divine dispensation, each is able only to compose that to which the Muse has stirred him, this man dithyrambs, another laudatory odes, another dance-songs, another epic or else iambic verse; but each is at fault in any other kind. For not by art do they utter these things, but by divine influence; since, if they had fully learnt by art to speak on one kind of theme, they would know how to speak on all.[7]

[6] Harold North Fowler and W. R. M. Lamb, trans. 1925. *Statesman. Philebus. Ion.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), 421. This section is in *Ion* 433e-434a. I have chosen to quote English translations of the rest of the passages in this paper (rather than translating them myself) since they are less essential to the main argument and many are rather lengthy.

[7] Ibid., 423. This section is in *Ion* 434b-434c.

Without being possessed, just like the maenads, the poets are entirely without ability; all of their speech stems from the Muses, and thus τοῦτο μόνον οἷός τε ἕκαστος ποιεῖν καλῶς, ὃ ἡ ἐφ᾽ Μοῦσα αὐτὸν ὥρμησεν.[8] To Plato, all types of poets follow this pattern (rather than, say, epic and didactic poets alone being inspired, with more individualistic lyric poets writing from τέχνη). This view is not entirely negative (at least relative to Plato's complete scorning of the poets in *Republic* X), and in fact Plato goes on to speak positively of the poets as dispensers of divine wisdom:

> 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.[9]

In this way, in *Ion*, Plato treats poets as little more than conduits for divine words – not a position entirely devoid of honor, but one that is entirely devoid of personal τέχνη.[10]

III. Poetic Inspiration in Several Earlier Sources

It would impossible to make mention of all or even the majority of the occurrences of poetic inspiration or passages dealing with the relationship between poets and the Muses before Plato. However, since all this paper has set out to do is show that Plato's statement about how the Greeks viewed poetic inspiration is not necessarily as universal as he presents, we will concern ourselves with a few passages that cast doubt upon its universal acceptance.[11]

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[8] Ibid., 422. This section is in *Ion* 434c and is the Greek text of part of the second English quote from above.
[9] Ibid., 423. This section is in *Ion* 434c-434d.
[10] There is, of course, the question of whether or not *Ion* really represents "Plato's views on poets." Apart from the *Laws* passage quoted above and *Republic* X, Plato makes mention of the poets in, for example, the *Apology*, *Symposium*, *Meno*, and, as we shall see below, *Phaedrus*. The two contrasting presentations are that of inspiration/ ἐνθουσιασμός – as in *Ion* here – and imitation/μίμησις – as in *Republic* X. For a discussion of this, see Penelope Murray, "Inspiration and Mimēsis in Plato," *Apeiron*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Dec 1992): 27-46.
[11] There are indeed many other passages that could be used. The article mentioned in the introduction (Tigerstedt, "Furor Poeticus: Poetic Inspiration in Greek Literature before Democritus and Plato") – the article upon which this paper is loosely based – mentions, among others, the case of Demodocus in *Odyssey* VIII (p. 168), and devotes some time to addressing statements that Pindar makes (possibly about himself) with respect to the Greek conception of a μάντις (pp. 173-175) – whether they in any way support Plato's statement, or whether scholars using Pindar to support poetic possession are misusing the epinician poet.

Scenes of Poetic Initiation; Poetry as a "Gift"

While scenes of poetic inspiration became somewhat of a *topos* in later writers,[12] Hesiod's initiation scene in the *Theogany* is the first and best-known exemplar (and it certainly qualifies as παλαιὸς, at least relative to Plato).

> One time, they taught Hesiod beautiful song while he was pasturing lambs under holy Helicon. And this speech the goddesses spoke first of all to me, the Olympian Muses, the daughters of aegis-holding Zeus: "Field-dwelling shepherds, ignoble disgraces, mere bellies: we know how to say many false things similar to genuine ones, but we know, when we wish, how to proclaim true things." So spoke great Zeus' ready-speaking daughters, and they plucked a staff, a branch of luxuriant laurel, a marvel, and gave it to me; and they breathed a divine voice into me, so that I might glorify what will be and what was before, and they commanded me to sing of the race of the blessed ones who always are, but always to sing of themselves first and last.[13]

In saying that the Muses breathed (ἐνέπνευσαν) a divine voice (αὐδὴν θέσπιν) into him, it seems somewhat of a stretch to interpret the aorist verb as anything more than simple past: Hesiod does not seem to be saying that whenever he is speaking as a poet the Muses ἐνέπνευσαν… μοι αὐδὴν θέσπιν (as a repeated action), but that this was a single occurrence, and thereafter he was in possession of an αὐδὴν θέσπιν. This interpretation is made all the stronger by the tangible gift of the staff – a physical sign of his poetic gifting.[14] The "prophetic" undertones in this passage are ultimately unrelated to the

[12] For example, Arkhilokhos is described as having an encounter with the Muses in the Mnesiepes inscription, evidently obtaining a lyre in exchange for a cow. Interestingly, Hipponax – another poet known for ἴαμβος – is also thought to have a sort of poetic initiation scene – see Douglas E. Gerber, *A Companion to the Greek Lyric Poets* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 83-84, and also Ralph M. Rosen, "A Poetic Initiation Scene in Hipponax?" *The American Journal of Philology* 109, no. 2 (1988): 174-179. I mention both of these examples not because poetic initiation is unique to poets of ἴαμβος, but because Arkhilokhos and Hipponax – both writers of graphic sexual narratives and ψόγος poetry that often uses base, low language – are not who one would typically think of when mentioning poetic initiation, and especially inspiration. The sweeping grandeur of Homer's epic seems to dominate in Plato's discussion of the poets' relationship with the Muses, but according to the *Ion* passage quoted above, even the iambic poets are inspired. It makes one think of how Plato's waxing eloquent about poets as sacred mouthpieces of the gods might be interpreted by ancient audiences of poets writing obscenities!

[13] Glenn W. Most, *Theogony; Works and Days; Testimonia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 5. These are lines 22-34 of the *Theogany*.

[14] The gifting of a physical object is one of many conventional elements that this passage in Hesiod shares with other texts dealing with a poet's or prophet's call: see M.L. West, *Theogany* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 159-161.

question of whether or not Hesiod in in his senses when composing poetry, although they are somewhat puzzling inasmuch as the *Theogany* does not contain any overt prophecy.[15]

This scene of poetic initiation treats poetic ability as a gift – something that comes through the Muses, to be sure, but something that the poet "has" – a concept that comes up often in other authors. For example, In Arkhilokhos fr. 1, Arkhilokhos says that he is a follower of Ares, Μουσέων ἐρατον δῶρον ἐπισταμενος[16] ("knowing the lovely gift of the Muses"). In the fragmentary beginning of Sappho 58, Sappho mentions [ἰοκόλπων] κάλα δῶρα[17] ("the beautiful gifts of the violet-bosomed [Muses]").[18] Unless someone wishes to argue that a δῶρον Μουσέων really means sometime possession by the Muses, then what we have is gifted poets working together in some manner with the Muses – the source of their gifting – in their composition.

Poetic Contests

Further evidence that poetic gifting was not always seen as possession is poetic contests that accompanied athletic games. One older reference to these again comes to us from Hesiod, who in the *Works and Days* says

> For never yet did I sail the broad sea in a boat, except to Euboea from Aulis, where once the Achaeans, waiting through the winter, gathered together a great host to sail from holy Greece to Troy with its beautiful women. There I myself crossed over into Chalcis for the games of valorous Amphidamas—that greathearted man's sons had announced and established many prizes—and there, I declare, I gained victory with a hymn, and carried off a tripod with handles. This I dedicated to the Heliconian Muses, where they first set me upon the path of clear-sounding song.[19]

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[15] For a discussion of this passage and Hesiod as a supposed prophet, see E. N. Tigerstedt, "Furor Poeticus: Poetic Inspiration in Greek Literature before Democritus and Plato," 171-173.
[16] David A. Campbell, *Greek Lyric Poetry: A Selection of Early Greek Lyric, Elegiac and Iambic Poetry* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1967), 1.
[17] Felix Budelmann, *Greek Lyric: A Selection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 40.
[18] The text is unfortunately fragmentary around this reference to the gift of the Muses. It would be logical for the missing verb in the first sentence to be an imperative exhorting the girls to "pursue" or "seek" the gifts of the Muses – in which case this passage would provide evidence that Sappho viewed poetic gifting as something in which the poet played a part ("pursuing" the gifts) rather than some sort of ecstatic possession.
[19] Glenn W. Most, *Theogony; Works and Days; Testimonia*, 139-141. These are lines 650-659 of the *Works and Days*.

Quite simply, it makes little sense to have poetic contests if poetry has nothing to do with τέχνη. On what basis could different poets be judged higher than others if all were equally inspired by the gods? Plato's insistence in *Ion* that poets say nothing of worth save that which is said when possessed makes an interpretation along the lines that some poets were "more inspired" than others unworkable. Even more problematic, the different levels of poetic capacity displayed in these contests is a direct reflection upon the Muses – if the Muses are in full control of the poor and mediocre poets as well as the excellent and praiseworthy ones, what does this say about their own abilities?

Invocations of the Muses

Finally, poets' frequent invocation of the Muses is difficult to reconcile with a view that the poets were entirely divorced from their own words. Starting with Homer,[20] poets frequently make appeals to the Muses in their works, including them as if a conversation were going on, a collaboration of sorts. In Bacchylides 15, for example, Bacchylides asks a question of his Muse directly: "Μοῦσα, τίς προτῶτος λόγων ἄρχεν δικαίων;"[21] Speaking of the proem of the Odyssey, Penelope Murray states that "The relationship here envisaged between the poet and the Muse is an intellectual one – the Muse is asked to communicate with the bard, not to send him into a state of ecstasy – and it would be a mistake to interpret these invocations as evidence for the view that the bard takes no part in composition."[22] Murray goes on to argue quite strongly that the original relationship between the poet and the Muse was that of the poet deriving external knowledge from the Muse, but not falling into ecstasy or being

[20] For example, *Iliad* 1.1-7; 2.484-87, 761-62; 11.218-20; 14.508-510; 16.112-13 and *Odyssey* 1.1-10. See Elizabeth Minchin, "The Poet Appeals to His Muse: Homeric Invocations in the Context of Epic Performance." The Classical Journal 91, no. 1 (1995): 25, footnote 1. This work is self-avowedly more focused upon the performative aspects of the poets' invocation of the Muses than the question of inspiration, but it contains many references to passages of relevance.

[21] This text comes from the Bacchylides 15 photocopy we were given in class. I could not figure out what work it ultimately came from.

[22] Penelope Murray, "Poetic Inspiration in Early Greece," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 101 (1981): 96. Pages 96-97 of this article explicitly cover the relationship between the poet and his Muse.

possessed by them, concluding that "poetic creativity depends both on inspiration and conscious effort."[23]

IV. Inspiration and Madness in Plato's *Phaedrus*

More than simply concluding that not everyone considered the poets to be possessed, the last section (particularly the last subsection) outlined a relationship between the poets and the Muses, one of communication without concomitant ecstasy. It is profitable to briefly examine this relationship in light of Plato's sketch of the inspired philosopher in the *Phaedrus*.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato repeats his earlier rejection of poetic τέχνη and characterization of poets as mere conduits of divine words, saying

> And a third kind of possession and madness comes from the Muses. This takes hold upon a gentle and pure soul, arouses it and inspires it to songs and other poetry, and thus by adorning countless deeds of the ancients educates later generations. But he who without the divine madness comes to the doors of the Muses, confident that he will be a good poet by art, meets with no success, and the poetry of the sane man vanishes into nothingness before that of the inspired madmen.[24]

However, Plato goes on to define a fourth kind of possession – that of the inspired philosopher – which is taken to be clearly superior to the third kind that applies to poets.

> And therefore it is just that the mind of the philosopher only has wings, for he is always, so far as he is able, in communion through memory with those things the communion with which causes God to be divine. Now a man who employs such memories rightly is always being initiated into perfect mysteries and he alone becomes truly perfect; but since he separates himself from human interests and turns his attention toward the divine, he is rebuked by the vulgar, who consider him mad and do not know that he is inspired.
>
> All my discourse so far has been about the fourth kind of madness, which causes him to be regarded as mad, who, when he sees the beauty on earth, remembering the true beauty, feels his wings growing and longs to stretch them for an upward flight, but cannot do so, and, like a bird, gazes upward and neglects the things below. My discourse has shown that this is, of all

[23] Ibid., 97.
[24] Harold North Fowler, Martin Schanz, and W. R. M. Lamb, *Euthyphro; Apology; Crito; Phaedo; Phaedrus* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 469. This section is in *Phaedrus* 245a.

> inspirations, the best and of the highest origin to him who has it or who shares in it, and that he who loves the beautiful, partaking in this madness, is called a lover.[25]

Difficult to grasp at first glance, Plato's praise of philosophical inspiration centers around the philosopher's ascension towards the divine, as opposed to the poet's static possession.[26] Kathryn Morgan explains it thusly:

> Rather than being invaded by an outside force, the mind of the philosopher leaves the mortal world. The process of recollection allows him to use his memory to come as close as he can to the Forms that inhabit the place beyond the heavens… It is this that makes him "possessed": mnemonic closeness to the Forms, not anything sent from the gods. To recollect, therefore, is to be ἔνθεος, and this does not mean that the divine thing you have in you is a god.[27]

Insofar as the philosopher flying up towards the Forms is a two-way relationship with the divine (Plato does give the Muses Calliope and Urania to the philosopher in *Phaedrus* 259), we may note that this fourth kind of possession does not sound so much unlike the non-ecstatic relationship with the Muses that earlier sources appear to attribute to the poets. There are differences to be sure – the philosopher being more overtly concerned with wisdom, for example – but overall, the similarities are apparent enough that if one were for a moment to ignore Plato's other critiques of the poets, one might be forgiven for identifying the poets as a certain brand of inspired philosopher who happened to focus on wisdom as it was found in stories of old.[28]

V. Discussion

One might protest that only passages that seem to contradict Plato's statement were chosen for examination in this paper, but that is exactly the point. Plato's statement is strong enough that it does

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[25] Ibid., 481-483. This section is in *Phaedrus* 249c-249e.
[26] Cf. Morriss Partee, "Inspiration in the Aesthetics of Plato," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Autumn, 1971): 90. "The poet of the *Ion* contributes nothing to the ascent of his soul; the Muse takes total possession of him. The philosopher, however, clings to his memory as a guide back to the higher realm."
[27] Kathryn Morgan, "Inspiration, recollection, and mimēsis in Plato's Phaedrus," In A. Nightingale and D. Sedley (Eds.), *Ancient Models of Mind: Studies in Human and Divine Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 54.
[28] At least in the case of the epic poets like Homer.

not seem to allow for the possibility of other views. All that is necessary to show that Plato's assertion that his statement about poetic inspiration is a Παλαιὸς μῦθος… ὑπο τε αὐτῶν ἡμῶν ἀεὶ λεγόμενός ἐστι καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις πᾶσι ξυνδεδογμένος is not entirely true is a single counterexample from among οἱ ἄλλοι πάντες.

This paper examined several counterexamples in the form of scenes of poetic initiation, poetic contests, and invocations of the Muses. Any one of these would have been sufficient to make the claim that Plato perhaps overstated the generalizability of his statement, but taken together, one wonders why he made the statement so strongly to begin with. Moreover, Plato's discussions of the inspired philosopher in the *Phaedrus* paint a picture of an intellectual relationship with the inspiring divinities not unlike how some earlier authors appear to have conceptualized the relationship between the poets and the Muses, making Plato's criticism of the poets as talentless receptacles of possession, eloquent and thoughtful as it is, perhaps little more than the knocking down of a straw man of Plato's own creation.

On the other hand, there is the distinct possibility that Plato's statement is not so unjustified given the prevailing understanding at the time of his writing. It is always difficult to pin down exactly how familiar ancient authors were with each other's works, and even assuming Plato read a number of sources that were not clearly supportive of a possessed-poet point of view, the fickleness of intellectual opinion is such that he may have in fact been perfectly justified in stating that his view of poets in *Laws* IV was endorsed readily by all in his sphere of contact… even if a few generations earlier, something completely different was held to be true. One might then quibble with Plato's use of the word παλαιὸς, but at this point we would be making an entirely different argument.

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