

Plato's Ion and the Psychoanalytic Theory of Art

It is a commonplace that Plato's psychological model is similar in significant ways to that posited by psychoanalytic theory. Furthermore, as Micaela Janan (1994: 7) notes, "Plato, Freud, and Lacan all explicitly theorize a connection between desire and creative art." In this paper, I tease out the implications of Janan's observation in respect to the Ion, and suggest that it in fact adumbrates a psychoanalytic theory of poetry.

In the Ion, Socrates argues that great poetry is produced, performed, listened to, and even interpreted in a state of inspiration or possession. This is why poets can write masterpieces, even though they have no technical knowledge of the subjects they handle, and also why enthusiasts can discourse brilliantly on such poetry, despite their comparable ignorance in these areas. The dialogue has frequently been read as a critique of poets' claims to wisdom. But what is it, then, that the poet conveys and that inspired rhapsodes, like Ion, are able to talk about?

Julia Kristeva (1984) draws on psychoanalytic theory to describe the nature of poetry and its relation to ordinary language. In brief, she understands poetry to be an irruption of unconscious processes, which she labels "semiotic," into language, which is governed by strict logical and linguistic conventions that Kristeva (following Lacan) calls "the symbolic." Borrowing a term from Plato's Timaeus, Kristeva calls the domain of unconscious processes the chora (p. 25), a mobile set of operations that "precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality" (p. 26). In poetry, the chora intrudes upon and transgresses the symbolic order, without, however, reducing it to "'romantic' folly, pure madness" (p. 82).

Plato's Socrates suggests that the inspired poet "cannot compose until he is possessed and out of his mind," and he compares the poet with Corybantic dancers (534; trans. Russell). The suspension of reason is analogous to the semiotic process of the chora. The poet's song is comprehensible, nevertheless, and can be subjected to criticism by experts in the several arts. But such experts will be able to speak only on those aspects of the poem that pertain to the symbolic, in Kristeva's terms, that is, the organized, rational bits. Do these parts exhaust the meaning of a poem? What, then, does Ion interpret so brilliantly in his inspired exegeses of Homer?

Plato may be implying, I suggest, that Ion's speech is neither Corybantic madness nor the logic of the rational mind, but a kind of discourse -- corresponding to Kristeva's account of modern literature -- that mediates the two extremes: an example, that is, of what she calls a "text," in which the drives "triggered within the chora" intersect with the symbolic "in an endless rhythm" (p. 99).

References

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