

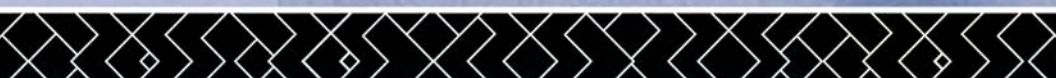
# Psychoanalytic Criticism

Theory in practice

Elizabeth Wright



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# Psychoanalytic Criticism

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AVAILABLE AS A COMPLETE SET: ISBN 0-415-29116-X

Elizabeth  
**Wright**

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 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1984 by Methuen & Co. Ltd

This edition first published 2003

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

270 Madison Ave, New York NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

Transferred to Digital Printing 2005

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-415-29143-7

*For my daughter and son*

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## General editor's preface

It is easy to see that we are living in a time of rapid and radical social change. It is much less easy to grasp the fact that such change will inevitably affect the nature of those disciplines that both reflect our society and help to shape it.

Yet this is nowhere more apparent than in the central field of what may, in general terms, be called literary studies. Here, among large numbers of students at all levels of education, the erosion of the assumptions and presuppositions that support the literary disciplines in their conventional form has proved fundamental. Modes and categories inherited from the past no longer seem to fit the reality experienced by a new generation.

*New Accents* is intended as a positive response to the initiative offered by such a situation. Each volume in the series will seek to encourage rather than resist the process of change, to stretch rather than reinforce the boundaries that currently define literature and its academic study.

Some important areas of interest immediately present themselves. In various parts of the world, new methods of analysis have been developed whose conclusions reveal the limitations of the Anglo-American outlook we inherit. New concepts of literary forms and modes have been proposed; new notions of the nature of literature itself, and of how it communicates, are current; new views of literature's role in relation to society

flourish. *New Accents* will aim to expound and comment upon the most notable of these.

In the broad field of the study of human communication, more and more emphasis has been placed upon the nature and function of the new electronic media. *New Accents* will try to identify and discuss the challenge these offer to our traditional modes of critical response.

The same interest in communication suggests that the series should also concern itself with those wider anthropological and sociological areas of investigation which have begun to involve scrutiny of the nature of art itself and of its relation to our whole way of life. And this will ultimately require attention to be focused on some of those activities which in our society have hitherto been excluded from the prestigious realms of Culture. The disturbing realignment of values involved and the disconcerting nature of the pressures that work to bring it about both constitute areas that *New Accents* will seek to explore.

Finally, as its title suggests, one aspect of *New Accents* will be firmly located in contemporary approaches to language, and a continuing concern of the series will be to examine the extent to which relevant branches of linguistic studies can illuminate specific literary areas. The volumes with this particular interest will nevertheless presume no prior technical knowledge on the part of their readers, and will aim to rehearse the linguistics appropriate to the matter in hand, rather than to embark on general theoretical matters.

Each volume in the series will attempt an objective exposition of significant developments in its field up to the present as well as an account of its author's own views of the matter. Each will culminate in an informative bibliography as a guide to further study. And while each will be primarily concerned with matters relevant to its own specific interests, we can hope that a kind of conversation will be heard to develop between them: one whose accents may perhaps suggest the distinctive discourse of the future.

TERENCE HAWKES

## Acknowledgements

My thanks are due to the following for their help: Marilyn Butler and Ann Jefferson for patiently reading the whole manuscript and offering invaluable criticism and suggestions on its general coherence and intelligibility; Geoff Bennington, John Forrester, Peter Henninger and Richard Klein (Oxford) for giving specialist advice on selected portions; Samuel Weber for reading an earlier draft and encouraging the project; Terence Hawkes for his meticulous reading of the finished product, for suggesting many minor improvements and demanding (and I hope getting) more clarification on certain sections; Janice Price of Methuen for helpful and encouraging letters throughout. Most of all, I would like to thank Edmond Wright for his unstinting availability whenever (that is constantly) there was a critical issue to be untangled, and for his philosophical expertise in helping me to keep to a consistent viewpoint.

My work has been greatly stimulated by participation at annual conferences organized by the Research Centre for Psychoanalysis and Literature of the University of Kassel.

The staff of the following libraries have aided me considerably during the time this book was conceived and written: the Taylor Institution, the Bodleian Library, and the library of the Tavistock Centre.

I would like to thank the editor of *Poetics Today* for permission to use material based on a review of a book by Christian Metz.

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I am grateful to Girton College and to Trinity College, Cambridge, for granting me leave at exactly the time when I needed it.

E.E.W.

*Girton College  
Cambridge*

There was once a red-haired man who had no eyes and no ears. He also had no hair, so he was called red-haired only in a manner of speaking.

He wasn't able to talk, because he didn't have a mouth. He had no nose, either.

He didn't have any arms or legs. He also didn't have a stomach, and he didn't have a back, and he didn't have a spine, and he also didn't have any other insides. He didn't have anything. So it's hard to understand whom we are talking about.

So we'd better not talk about him any more.

*(Daniil Kharms 1974)*

# I

## Introduction

The purpose of this book is to give a critical overview of what has become a very wide field: the relationship of psychoanalytic theory to the theories of literature and the arts, and the way that developments in both domains have brought about changes in critical practice. Psychoanalysis addresses itself to the problems of language, starting from Freud's original insight concerning the determining force within utterance: he draws attention to the effects of desire in language and, indeed, in all forms of symbolic interaction. The language of desire is veiled and does not show itself openly. To read its indirections, to account for its effects, is no simple matter. What is at issue?

Psychoanalysis explores what happens when primordial desire gets directed into social goals, when bodily needs become subject to the mould of culture. Through language, desire becomes subject to rules, and yet this language cannot define the body's experience accurately. What is of peculiar interest to psychoanalysis – some would say peculiar in the sense of both special and bizarre – is that aspect of experience which has been ignored or prohibited by the rules of language. Words fail to match it but it is actual none the less. The energies of this desire become directed outside conscious awareness, attaching themselves to particular ideas and images which represent unconscious wishes. *Wunsch* in Freud's terminology has this special sense, as desire associated specifically with particular images,

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whereas 'desire' is better retained for those underlying energies which are not yet bound to specific aims.

Only through its effects do we come to know the unconscious: through the logic of symptoms and dreams, through jokes and 'Freudian slips', through the pattern of children's play, and most crucially in the mutually affective relationship which human beings develop as a consequence of their past total helplessness and dependence on another person. These emotions, regenerated in the analytic situation, may be taken as evidence that no experience the body has is ever totally erased from the mind. In the unconscious the body does not take the social mould, and yet the conscious mind thinks it has. On the basis of clinical evidence psychoanalysis has built up a theory of how this difference comes about. It hypothesizes that there are certain stages of socialization each of which have their own problems of invasions from the unconscious. The joint recreation on the part of patient and analyst of the earliest stages in the patient's development is to be taken as evidence that no phase of development is ever totally outlived, no early satisfaction wholly surrendered. The neurotic and psychotic disorders which bring human beings to the consulting-room symptomatically speak of the mismatch between bodily desire and sexual-cum-social role.

None of this as yet can be scientifically proved, despite the efforts of the founder. If science is given a positivist definition, psychoanalysis cannot count as one of the physical sciences. What psychoanalysis has to offer therefore cannot be assessed without raising the problem of what a science is or can do. It is through its implicit questioning of traditional philosophic theories of how knowledge is acquired that psychoanalysis makes its most interesting contribution. Accounts of 'the standing of psychoanalysis' (Farrell 1981) continue to take for granted that psychoanalysis must situate itself in relation to other modes of knowledge and to 'common sense', and that therapy is the yardstick by which theory is to be measured. On the contrary, psychoanalysis is a theory of interpretation which calls into question the 'commonsense' facts of consciousness, facts which it maintains can only be reconstructed after the event. The assumption of a plain objectivity susceptible to a rigid true/false analysis is itself open to question. Science may

continue to be reliable without necessarily accepting that labelling and measuring can do justice to that to which they are applied. The progress of science has been marked by revolutionary changes in the understanding of concepts, leading to definitions that are incompatible with those they replace, not merely falsifications of them (Kuhn 1970). At the most basic level of science, quantum physics, the question of interpretation emerges irrepressibly. Science is itself a highly interpretative activity, and it is as a science of interpretation – that is, in part, as a science of science – that psychoanalysis must be viewed (Foucault 1974, p. 373; see pp. 160–1 below). This is not to say that the theory must be accepted uncritically. The emphasis must be on the interpretative force of the theory instead of on a simplistic true/false analysis of what are highly subjective phenomena. There is a positivist error in thinking that subjective phenomena cannot be objectively studied. The effects produced in a body by its perilous entry via language into culture take the form of repetitions and patterned interactions from which laws can be derived, thereby making the unconscious a legitimate object of a special science (Althusser 1977).

This book tries to show in what way Freudian theory has been and still is part of an ongoing debate. As a body of knowledge acquired in the clinical situation it is itself open to more interpretation. One might consider whether it should focus on liberating the self in its efforts to achieve pleasure and avoid unpleasure (instinct- or id-psychology); whether it should strengthen that part of the self capable of social adaptation (ego-psychology and its offshoot, object-relations theory); whether it should centre on the division of the subject in language (structural psychoanalysis); or whether it should openly serve a revolutionary purpose by opposing and accusing social institutions (anti-psychiatry). All these positions are paralleled by the changing relations in literary theory and critical practice.

If there is a single key issue it is probably the question of the role of sexuality in the constitution of the self, and crucially, how this sexuality is to be defined. This raises the question why we should still be bothering with psychoanalytic theories of sexuality in the context of literature and the arts. Critics from Kenneth Burke and Lionel Trilling onwards have warned against it while



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at the same time hallowing the process by which psychoanalysis can be made literary. This now familiar theme has been taken up again in a recent collection of critical essays on Freud:

Freud's principal literary speculation is not to be found in the familiar psychosexual reductions that tend to characterize his own overt attempts at the psychoanalysis of art. [It lies] instead in his notion that the very mechanisms of the mental agencies are themselves the mechanisms of language.

(Meissel 1981, p. 2)

This kind of declaration is usually intended to protect literature and art from the unwary psychoanalytic critic who would ineptly perpetrate psychobiography and all manner of vulgar Freudianisms on the innocent art-object. Freud has anticipated this objection. 'It may be', he writes in his analysis of Jensen's story *Gradiva*:

that we have produced a complete caricature of an interpretation by introducing into an innocent work of art purposes of which its creator had no notion, and by so doing have shown once more how easy it is to find what one is looking for and what is occupying one's own mind.

But, he argues, even if the author was unaware of the work's 'rules and purposes', 'nevertheless we have not discovered anything in his work that is not already in it. We probably draw from the same source and work upon the same object, each of us by another method' (Freud 1953, IX, pp. 91 and 92).

Author and reader are both subject to the laws of the unconscious. To concentrate on 'mechanisms' without taking account of the energies with which they are charged is to ignore Freud's most radical discoveries: it is precisely the shifts of energies brought about by unconscious desire that allow a new meaning to emerge. A desexualized application of psychoanalytic criticism, a confining of it solely to the mechanisms of language – whether as an example of the plenitude of ambiguity (New Criticism and its offshoots: the 'work' of an author) or as a set of perpetually shifting ambivalences (deconstruction: the 'workings' of language in a 'text') – does not engage the full explanatory force of psychoanalytic theory. An essential point is missed. Psychoanalytic theory brings out the unconscious aspect of

utterance through its concentration on the relationship between sexuality and social role. Clinical practice has borne out to what extent sexuality, in its wider Freudian sense, is the component of intention, how all utterance is concerned with the satisfaction of the needs of bodies which have become socialized. The literary text, the work of art, is a form of persuasion whereby bodies are speaking to bodies, not merely minds speaking to minds. The plays of Samuel Beckett graphically present us with images of bodies, or parts of bodies, sometimes comically, sometimes desperately, struggling to channel their desire through speech. Conversely, the theatre of Antonin Artaud assaults us with images of the body's violent refusal to become entrapped in language. Creative activity can here be seen as a material process, with both author/actor and reader/viewer implicated as desiring bodies.

This emphasis upon the bodily aspect of art poses a problem for psychoanalytic criticism because it neglects the public and the social. It is a problem with which psychoanalytic aesthetics battles intermittently on two fronts: first, there is the worry as to how the work of artistic merit is to be distinguished from the 'work' involved in the construction of dreams or fantasy; second, there is the question of regarding the work as 'text', no longer the property of a single author, but produced in a network of social relations. Each of these questions is concerned with the part that consciousness (whether true or false) plays in the creative process, and the way ideology affects the reading and writing of texts: the language of desire has both a private and a public aspect and that is why the literary and artistic work is a 'text', the proper reading of which is no simple matter.

Though psychoanalytic criticism is irresistibly drawn to those texts that are classified as literature (and art), it has not been able to provide a satisfactory theory of aesthetic value, but then neither has any other approach. It contributes rather to an understanding of the creative process, both before and in language, and this has implications for aesthetics. Beginning with Freud, this account deals with those psychoanalytic theorists who have been the main contributors to the criticism of literature and the arts, either directly or indirectly (through their work being taken up by others). Included also are theorists

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(Derrida, Foucault) who have had an effect on psychoanalytic criticism.

The outline follows a historical course, though like Freud's famous sequence of sexual maturation, no stage ever totally supersedes another. On the contrary, recent French contributors have tried to merge an id-centred approach, focusing on the emotions attached to the sexual drives, with the abstract linguistic one of structural psychoanalysis. Tracing out a sequence of development in chronological order does not therefore imply that there is a necessary logical order. Such a method merely enables me to give as clear as possible an exposition of the field while still leaving room for critical appraisal. The aim will be to show how psychoanalytic theory and practice, not always working in concert with each other, have contributed to the theory and practice of criticism. There are four variables here, which makes for a complex set of interactions. At the same time I shall attempt to trace out the ideological assumptions that underlie successive developments in both theory and practice. Though the overall aim is exegesis, which must include showing what is of worth even where there are deficiencies, there will be an underlying and unconcealed attempt to point to what has now emerged as the most valuable aspect of psychoanalytic criticism.

My criteria derive from a three-fold scheme: first, I see psychoanalytic criticism as investigating the text for the workings of a rhetoric seen as analogous to the mechanisms of the psyche; second, I argue that any such criticism must be grounded in a theory which takes into account the relationships between author and text, and between reader and text; and third, I argue that these relationships be seen as part of a more general problem to do with the constitution of the self in social systems at given moments in history.

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