

A language of the unconscious and the enervation of the text

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Summary

The parallel between literary theory and psychoanalysis made by way of linguistics suggests that the psychoanalytic symptom, as an utterance of the language of the unconscious, speaks in a distinctively poetic style which formally and practically approximates the utterances of literary language, the poem and the text. However, an examination of the extent to which the symptom can be seen as an expression of an unconscious language, and the literary text as an instance of a rhetorical or poetic one, indicates that each is better understood as in opposition to the linguistic. Only if the text and the symptom are understood as the re-implementation of a material or perceptual logic necessarily at odds with that governing language as a system can literature and psychoanalysis be recognised as both epistemologically privileged and programmatically radical.

Opsomming

Die parallel tussen literêre teorie en psigoanalise via linguistiek, suggereer dat die psigoanalitiese simptoom, as 'n uiting van die taal van die onbewuste, in 'n kenmerkende poëtiese styl spreek wat formeel en prakties na aan die uiting van literêre taal, die gedig en die teks kom. Tog toon 'n ondersoek van die mate waarin die simptoom gesien kan word as 'n uitdrukking van 'n onbewuste taal, en die literêre teks as 'n voorbeeld van 'n retoriese of poëtiese uiting, dat albei beter begryp word as teenstellend tot die linguistiese. Slegs as die teks en die simptoom verstaan word as die herimplementering van 'n materiële of persepsionele logika, wat noodwendigerwys ingaan teen dit wat die heersende taal as 'n sisteem reguleer, kan literatuur en psigoanalise erken word as sowel epistemologies bevoorreg as programmaties radikaal.

1 Introduction

One of the most explicit disciplinary links between literary theory and contemporary psychoanalytic thought is attributable to the substantial debt each owes to linguistics. Literary theory arose in close historical and conceptual conjunction with linguistics and could well prove unthinkable without it. And psychoanalysis, certainly in so far as it has entered into the wider philosophical context of European debate today, has only done so largely by way of the linguistic reading traditionally associated with Lacan and now often called "French Freud".

Because of the extraordinary productivity of the triangle which aesthetics, linguistics and psychoanalysis form, reservations about the role any one of them plays should not be entered into lightly. However it is clear, as much from aesthetic modernism's practical critique of realism as from analytic philosophy's "nominalist" re-reading of psychoanalysis, that linguistics no longer functions as a positive third term in the triangle. Instead it is now possible to see the common position occupied by the literary text and the psychoanalytic symptom as stemming from the distance both take from the approach and procedures which apparently made their alliance possible.

What continues to unite psychoanalysis and literature is revealed by way of a careful delimitation of their relation to language as an object, and by implication, to linguistics as the method of its examination.

The parallel between literary study and psychoanalysis made by way of linguistics turns on the belief that the psychoanalytic symptom as an utterance in the language of the unconscious speaks in a distinctively poetic style; one which formally and practically approximates the utterances of literary language; the poem and the text. Similarly, because both the poem and the symptom speak in a voice more elaborate and mysterious than ordinary communication, the analyst and the literary critic share in a joint, essentially interpretive task.

More precisely, psychoanalysis and literary study are akin because symptoms and texts belong to a common class, that of disguised or non-literal utterances, which it is the business of literary theory and the metapsychology to define, and the analyst and literary critic to interpret.

2 The poetic language of the unconscious

The linguistic position in psychoanalysis can most economically be presented by way of the work of Paul Ricoeur. In an early paper ("The conflict of interpretations") Ricoeur (1974) presents the classic linguistic formulation of psycholanalysis as a "semantics of desire" and at the same time substantiates the basic proposition that "psychoanalysis is interpretation from beginning to end". (1974: 66)

In contrast to romantic conceptions of the unconscious, Ricoeur argues that the Freudian unconscious can be known, that is, is amenable to interpretation as an essentially linguistic form of intelligibility, because the "ideational representatives of the instinct remain on the level of the signified and are therefore permissibly homogeneous with the empire of speech" (1974: 105).

In formulating an approach to the unconscious in these terms Ricoeur correctly wishes to rescue the Freudian object from its characterization as some inspired but inchoate bodily force, and place it instead into a position in which the role of language is undisputed. The unconscious then, at least in so far as it is encountered at all (in the dream and its analogues), is in essential respects a communicative event. More specifically, Ricoeur describes the symptom as a symbolic utterance where the notion of the symbol is restricted to "double or multiple expressions whose semantic feature is correlative to the work of interpretation that explicates their second or multiple meanings" (1974: 13).

For Ricoeur then, psychical productions can be understood, not only upon the model of the linguistic sign but also upon the model of the symbol, as that class of sign in which the same (sensory) signifier takes on at least two concepts or meanings, that is signified. In other words, Freud's object is thought of as having "a style" which can therefore be analysed along lines strongly suggestive of an established variant within language: the rhetorical or poetic account derived from the double repertoire of language, that is, its traditional capacity to take on two forms of operation; the first denotative or literal and the second connotative or figurative.

This early formulation is therefore one which makes a direct connection between a poetic and a symptomatic language by using resources readily available within linguistics to account for an alternative form of language use.

However, in a later article, one more obviously appropriate to the Freudian project (entitled "Language and image in psychoanalysis") Ricoeur (1978) retracts the view that the drive, because it remains on the level of the signifier, is wholly homogeneous with language. In a passage of considerable epistemological interest he writes:

That these unconscious, complexes should have an affinity for discourse, that they are sayable in principle, is not to be doubted. Therefore the psychoanalytic situation itself establishes a semiotic aspect. Moreover, that the phenomena thus brought to light are governed by relations of motivation that here take the place of what the natural sciences define as a causal relation . . . none of this proves that what thus comes to language – or better, is brought to language – is or must *be* language. On the contrary, because the level of expression proper to the unconscious is not language, the work of interpretation is difficult and constitutes a veritable linguistic promotion." (Ricoeur, 1978: 312)

Ricoeur therefore proposes that the level of expression proper to the unconscious is not in fact language on the grounds that the psychical material out of which dreams are made is not words but images which also lack the logical relations appropriate to the syntax of natural languages. If dream-thoughts are, or become, dream images then condensation or displacement far from instantiating linguistic processes are "built on the ruins of them" (1978: 313).

Crucially, however, while acknowledging both the ruins and that which they are ruins of, Ricoeur is unwilling to make a decisive break with the linguistic. For although he replaces a linguistic reading of the workings of the dream with a non-linguistic one he does so by way of a happy alternative; that of a semiotics of the image, which does not oblige him to abandon his commitment to those unmotivated relations which he opposes to the casual variety characteristic of natural science. While the image becomes the locus of the semiotic dimension which is only partially linguistic and fundamentally figurative, Ricoeur's new visual language of the unconscious is nevertheless a language in all essential respects:

I think it is mistaken to believe that everything semiotic is linguistic. At the same time however, it is also an error to believe that the image does not arise from the semiotic order. (1978: 311)

While Ricoeur himself points out that we should not confuse the semiotic with the linguistic the issue devolves upon what the semiotic order to which he refers might be, and whether a semiotic characterization captures what is essential to the Freudian account of the symptom.

To count as an appropriate object for a semiotic analysis, its province must minimally be a system and one which preferably allows three inter-related distinctions to be drawn. Firstly, it must sustain a distinction between "langue" and "parole", or that between a surface, particular instance as a

well-formed utterance and the general structure or body of rules which govern all well-formed instances. Secondly, it must be possible to identify within the system both a paradigmatic and a syntagmatic axis, that is, a horizontal organization of the rules of combination for particular signs and a vertical organization governing their substitutability. And thirdly, the signs or items making up this system must consist of an identifiable perceptual or material item, the signifier, in a more or less regular relation to an associated concept or meaning, the signified.

In considering whether the psychoanalytic symptom or the dream can be understood in these terms, the Freudian text which Ricoeur has in mind and which best lends itself to this assessment is "The interpretation of dreams" (1900a).

Ricoeur's use of the term semiotic is clearly derived from the dreams status as a visual, hallucinatory presentation of a proposition. More specifically, his discussion of a by now famous set of symbols (usually representing parts of the body or sexual acts) such as neck-ties, nail-files, sticks, umbrellas and sabres, all of which represent the male-organ, provides at first glance, the necessary lexical items or signs theoretically supportable by a dictionary. In addition, Freud's account of the dream-work, especially the major operations of condensation and displacement appear to supplement this symbolic lexicon with a type of grammar, one which can and often has been closely associated with Saussure's syntagmatic and paradigmatic or Jakobson's metaphoric and metonymic axes.

However, on closer examination these tempting parallels reveal not the similarities but the differences between Freud's account and the necessary features of either a lexicon or a grammar. Freud's symbols differ markedly from those regularly encountered as part of the rhetorical armature of a language, and it is the violation of what is essential to a grammar rather than the operation of one which best characterizes the dream-work.

The Freudian relation between the penis and the neck-tie, for example, is not that encountered in double-meaning rhetorical expressions where, ignoring other differences, say a rose, allows for both flower as denotation and beauty as connotation. Likewise, the skull in Holbein's painting of "The ambassadors" is both an anatomical remnant and a symbolic rendition of mortality. By contrast, in the Freudian symbol a procedure which is after all necessary if disguise is to be possible, operates long an unlikely and unsuspected route, one suggestive of neither the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified (the linguistic sign), nor a connotative/denotative operation (the traditional symbol).

Instead, as Freud's work as a whole illustrates, in the dream and symptom we are confronted with a logic of an entirely different variety; one in which both the manifest or literal and the symbolic aspects of the neck-tie are set aside in favour of one dominant and essentially unlikely material or perceptual parallel between the two objects; their overall shape.

In fact, all Freud's dream symbols and symptoms operate in this distinctively non-linguistic way. In the "Little Hans" case, for example, Freud explains this extraordinary operation as that characteristic of the logic of the

infantile researchers, a way of proceeding, which allows for the substitution of two items as manifestly different as say, baby and faeces, simply because each of these issues from an (apparently) similar part of the mother's body (Freud, 1909: 235).

What we are left with is a "symbol" perfectly consonant with the psycho-analytic project as a whole, that is of a set of objects defined by their distance from, not their proximity to, the operations (be they rhetorical or not), encountered within linguistic experience.

An examination of condensation and displacement, as the supposed parallels of a grammar, yield similar results. The dream images of the manifest content disguise the propositional content of the latent, precisely because a proposition (which requires two axes operating at right angles to produce the grammatical sentence or well-formed utterance) is undercut or overlaid by an illicit move which threatens the verticality and horizontality of the paradigm and the syntagm. David Lodge's (1977: 66) exemplary replacement of "keels ploughing the deep" for "ships crossing the seas" is a useful example of the implementation of metaphor and metonymy, but it is not something in the "language" of the dream or the symptom. And it remains questionable, especially since the advent of literary modernism, as to whether a set of rhetorical operations alone can convey anything characteristic of poetry either.

A more cogent account of how the symptom functions is to be found in a paper, somewhat misleadingly for our purpose, entitled "Freudian explanation and the language of the unconscious" (1978), in which A.C. Danto demonstrates that the symptom, while it is made possible by language is not a phenomenon within it, but is the product of a particular relation between the functioning of perceptual or material values within language and those outside it.

Briefly, Danto argues that irrational actions or symptoms are possible because of two distinct ways in which material or perceptual properties may be deployed and produce effects (1978: 329).

In order to make this demonstration, Danto begins with a number of instances drawn from literature, psychoanalysis and anecdote. For example, he refers to a person who has a symptomatic fear of red satin stemming from a slippage across the phonetic properties of the word "satin" as he heard it in childhood. This irrational fear is attributed to an early event in which on being asked what was lying on the stair, the child misheard the answer as "a piece of Satan". Given the child's religious education a fear of Satan (but not of – satin), would be appropriate.

In the same vein, he refers to the British general who on having captured the Indian territory "Sind", despatched a message which read "Pecavi" which means "I have sinned". Danto also includes the renowned example in the "Rat-man" case where the analysand is only able to account for his obsessional jogging – associated with, but not wholly explained by, a wish to lose weight – when he recognizes that the rival for his love, her English cousin, is called "Dick", which shares the identical sound as the word "dick" meaning

“fat” in German. The Rat-man’s jogging is therefore explained by Freud as the result of his wish to “get rid of Dick” (1909: 69).

While Danto’s interest and focus is on the symptom, what is important in his demonstration is the understanding that the symptom is made possible by precisely the same conditions within language which allow it to sustain joking, punning, or poetic forms. Crucially, it is the very underdetermination of the relation sound to meaning (material to conceptual properties) which makes a language (a doubly-articulated system) possible, which also allows for the return which we call symptoms or poems. In other words, because the items which make up language have physical properties which in so far as it is a language, play a part in its procedures different from that which they play in perception, it is possible to disguise (and yet satisfy) a proposition and to produce an intelligible event some distance from that in a natural language. Danto therefore articulates in philosophical terms what Freud knew and Ricoeur suspected.

If we return to “The interpretation of dreams”, Freud argues that the relation of the dream as latent content to manifest content takes the form of a picturing of the wish as proposition; the dream itself is thus a picture-puzzle or to use Freud’s term, a “rebus”, and “the interpretation” of the dream is therefore not an interpretation in the usual sense but rather a solution, a process more closely aligned to that involved in solving a riddle or catching a joke.

Freud demonstrates that the precondition of both disguise and partial satisfaction of the wish is the fact that the propositional form in which the wish is formulated may operate in pictorial terms. Because the dream is in hallucinatory mode in which the sleeping psychic apparatus is returned to the perceptual forms of memory rather than to the propositional forms of language (or the intentional form of rational action), the relation between picturing and conceptualizing occurs spontaneously. For example, if the dream-thought linguistically encoded in the present tense propositional form characteristic of the repressed wish were to be formulated as “I (wish to) see you”, then a dream which takes the form of a woman putting on eye-makeup at the *sea*-side where a *ewe* grazes on a near-by hillside could be solved by sounding out the homonyms *I/eye*, *seel/sea*, and *you/ewe*.

In extending this account to cover other instances in Freud, Danto demonstrates that just as it is possible to picture a proposition in the dream it is possible to enact it upon the body, as in the case of the schizophrenic girl deceived by her lover who distorts and twists her face and eyes as the concretization enactment of the German term “Augenblick” (Freud, 1915: 203).

The point is not only that it is always possible to re-institute the material features of the sign in accordance with the procedures which govern their organization in perception, (that is by way of observable similarities and differences) but also that in severing the signifier as it would operate in language from the material values which operate below the level of its organization as an object of perception, its relation to meaning is necessarily severed.

The distortion associated with both linguistic and semiotic accounts of the symptom occurs because the essential relation of *negation* or *violation* of the normal procedures is itself disguised by the suggestion that we may produce a semiotics of the symptom or a grammar of poetry. What is then crucially hidden is that a natural language or rational action is organised at the expense of perception on the one hand and the pleasure principle on the other. The means by which both of these are produced is not as the rhetorical mode suggests, as an elaboration and intensification of similar and acceptable alternative procedures, but is made possible by the spontaneous (or chosen) return to those repressed ordinary language or rhetorical operations with which they are necessarily in conflict.

The contribution made by Danto is significant, not because it devalues the role of language in the unconscious, but because of an important recasting of it from a positive to a negative position, one which has far-reaching consequences for an understanding of literature and most especially, literary modernism.

3 The unconscious of poetic language

If psychoanalysis's relation to linguistics has in recent years been a close one, then that between linguistics and literary theory has been so close as to make it almost impossible to assess.

However, three important linguistically derived positions can be isolated. The first, often regarded as inaugurating literary theory, is the structuralist project associated with the work of Propp which traditionally takes the form of a search for the deep structure of a corpus of narrative works and is often paralleled to Chomsky's transformational grammar where the rules or competence which make every performance possible, are sought. Secondly, and no less renowned, is Jakobson's attempt to define the nature of a literary use of language by way of a derivation from Saussurian linguistics focusing on the form of the sign. Finally, there is the fairly recent attempt on the part of Speech-Act theorists to define the aesthetic in terms of the effects naturally produced by an alternative communicative or discursive contract between sender and receiver.

Of these positions, the first and the last are the most problematical at least in relation to literary theory's earliest ambitions. Propp's work on the folk-tale, for example, while it has the very interesting consequence of illustrating how a limited number of formal operations may be used to account for a body of some two hundred tales, remains a contribution to an understanding of the rules governing a particular genre which may (or equally may not), have been literary. Just as transformational grammar establishes the rules for the production of a well-formed English sentence, so Propp delimits the operations required to produce a well-formed folk-tale, but the question of the folk-tales' literariness remains unresolved, leaving his contribution as one made to narratology but not necessarily to *literary* narratology.

Similarly, the Speech Act theorists shift the task of defining literariness to that of a definition of the preconditions for, and effects produced by, fiction.

If anything, it is fiction itself, and not necessarily of the literary variety, which exists "on the margins of discourse" (Smith, 1978).

These approaches although complementary, side-step what is surely essential and most problematic in the literary theoretical project, and that is "literariness" itself.

The most useful and significant contribution remains the classic endeavour associated with Jakobson, productive precisely because it is an attempt to define literature as a specific use of language both below the level of genre, and independent of the question of truth.

Despite the title of Jakobson's most famous paper "Linguistics and poetics" (1960), and its obvious implication that it is the nature of poetic "language" which Jakobson intends to examine, the poetic event which the principle of axial equivalence defines is distinctive, like the Dantonian symptom, precisely because of the distance it takes from ordinary language utterances.

This recognition that what is definitive of literature is a return of the signifier which, in so far as it is rigorous, circumscribes the role of the signified and the referent, is programmatically expressed in aesthetic modernism. Literary modernism, the project of the return of language to its materials traditionally associated with *Tel Quel*, explicitly proclaims that its status as radical stems from the fact that it implements a new form of intelligibility not that of the sign.

As Julia Kristeva's project is explicitly Freudian in inspiration, it can be taken as exemplary here. In the classic early paper ("The system and the speaking subject") (1974), Kristeva makes it clear that her critique of what she calls the semiology of systems is done by way of psychoanalysis (1975: 49). Here she argues that one major phase of semiology – that running from Saussure to Peirce – is over, primarily because the possibility of a semiology of signifying practices is both literally and epistemically limited by what she calls the Freudian revolution.

If traditional semiology conducts its analysis of signifying systems on the basis of a conception of the act of meaning production modelled on the transcendental ego cut off from the body, this unconscious and history, it must now be replaced, Kristeva suggests, by a procedure she calls "semanalysis" (1975: 50). Poetic language certainly in so far as it is revolutionary, demands a semanalysis (rather than a semiotics of systems) because it draws an explicit distinction between the "phenotext", that which presents itself to phenomenological intuition, and the "genotext", an articulation of the drives constrained by the social code but crucially, not reducible to the language system. And it is the necessary but repressed presence of the genotext within the phenotext that poetic language affirms.

In contrast to ordinary language, poetic language is marked by a set of deviations from grammatical and semantic rules by way of the implementation, perhaps more accurately the re-implementation, of an alternative procedure. In the place of meanings, poetic language produces effects which shift the phenomena of language-as-system back towards their phonetic base and consequently, towards the drive-governed basis of sound production. This operation is supplemented by a further proliferation of effects produced

on the level of the signifier which are regularly excluded by ordinary language operations.

Despite the differences in terminology, the content of Kristeva's account of poetry closely parallels Danto's account of the symptom. Like Danto's explanation of what is distinctive to the symptom and a prerequisite for its capacity to function as disguise, Kristeva's explanation of what is revolutionary in poetic language is seen to stem from its commitment to values of an essentially economic and material form.

In a way once more reminiscent of Freud, Kristeva too makes it clear that the logic and processes emerging in poetry and those which make signifying practices possible, are not variants or refinements of each other but are necessarily in conflict. Just as in the Freudian metapsychology, the relation between primary and secondary process operations and subsequently between the agencies in the second topography is one of conflict, so ordinary language utterances are achieved only at the expense of the drive and the signifier. The psychoanalytic symptom and the literary text can therefore both be aptly described as a return of the repressed, even though only one is at the heart of a sublimation.

4 Conclusion

A careful account of the role of language in the unconscious, coupled with an attempt to sever literary or poetic from ordinary language, has important consequences. In confusing literature with rhetoric and attributing a language to the unconscious much that is distinctive and all that is revolutionary in the contributions made by literary practice and psychoanalysis is lost.

Literature is confined to its rhetorical and representational forms, a more or less predictable (albeit honorific) expression of resources available within language and culture; advocating, representing or criticizing that which is nevertheless within experience. And madness or irrationality becomes no more than an extreme or distorted variation within it. As a result, changes in the forms of literature and what counts as madness reflect historical changes and are instructive only because of their unusual beauty, perspicacity, or extremity.

By contrast, the delimitation of the role of language in the symptom and in the poem allows literature and psychoanalysis to claim the privileged status which Foucault accords them at the end of "The order of things" (1973).

No longer confined to the side of culture the literary text and the psychoanalytic symptom are free to assume their rightful place at the intersection between culture and nature, tracing the limits of what may at any time enter into knowledge and experience; active reminders not only of the content of the repressed but more important, of the necessary form which this repression takes.

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