Lacan: An Adapted Approach to Postmodern Language

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Abstract: The following paper sets out to highlight the interconnectedness between philosophy and language through a demonstration on how Lacanian psychoanalysis can add texture to literary analysis. Because discourse is in constant flux, it is only natural that adapting a suitably compatible interpretive methodology becomes the norm for the study of language and literature. Unfortunately, adjusting one’s methods of literary critique according to the type of text to be analyzed is far from common practice. In the hopes that this issue might be discussed in further depth, this paper argues that a psychoanalytical approach to literary analysis is particularly well-adapted for the postmodern genre.

1. Introduction

The transition from modernism to post-modernism carries with it a new set of interpretative methodologies which, in the spirit of Saussurian linguistics, includes a structuralist approach to the analysis of the signifier. Based on the idea that the signifier holds primacy over the signified, Jacques Lacan was able to apply Saussure’s semiotics to the fields of psychoanalysis and literature as demonstrated in his seminar on The Purloined Letter by Edgar Allen Poe. Be this as it may, in order for the psychoanalytical approach in literary analysis to be efficient, Lacan also pointed out the need for the writer to engage in parole pleine, or “full speech” characterized as being free of contrived language. This freedom is contrary to what post-modernist Jean-François Lyotard describes as the “metanarrative”, an artifact of highly-contrived, modernist language and thus resistant to psychoanalysis. Because of modernist language’s rigid, teleologically-oriented structure, I will argue that a Lacanian approach to literary interpretation is particularly well-adapted for the post-modern genre.

2. Saussurian Semiotics and Lacan

In his Course in General Linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) formalized his theory that language consists of a series of signs called “signifiers” (signifiants), verbal or visual symbols used to represent ideas or concepts. According to his premise, each signifier is intrinsically linked to one or more corresponding concepts which he designated as the “signified” (signifié). Language production is thus the result of the combination of both the signifier and the signified in order to create meaning (signification).

Despite the apparent simplicity of his theory, Saussure demonstrated that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, and that the link between the linguistic symbol and that which it represents is largely a matter of chance. To demonstrate how these seemingly random signifiers coincide to create meaning, Saussure gives the example of the French word boeuf and the German word Ochs which have both come to designate the same thing (an ox) within the confines of a relatively small geographical area:
“There is no internal connexion, for example, between the idea ‘sister’ and the French sequence of sounds s-ö-r which acts as its signal. The same idea might as well be represented by any other sequence of sounds. This is demonstrated by differences between languages, and even by the existence of different languages. The signification ‘ox’ has as its signal b-ö-f on one side of the frontier, but o-k-s (Ochs) on the other side.”

The arbitrary nature of signifiers – whether verbalized or written – leads me to believe that discrepancies may occur between the signifier and the signified. Due to the polysemous nature of signifiers, the signified concepts which are evoked will vary depending on the message’s sender or receiver. Because what is meant is not systematically the same as how it is interpreted, any number of misunderstandings may arise. In his essays on aesthetics, Hegel seems to support this supposition, declaring that a signifier may take on multiple, sometimes metaphorical meanings:

“The lion, for example, is taken as a symbol of magnanimity, the fox of cunning, the circle of eternity, the triangle of the Trinity. But the lion and the fox do possess in themselves the very qualities whose significance they are supposed to express. Similarly the circle does not exhibit the endlessness or the capricious limitation of a straight or other line which does not return into itself […]”

Lacan also proved to be particularly sensitive to the polysemy of signifiers. Borrowing from Saussure and Hegel’s linguistic philosophies, Lacan supported the argument that – by no fault of the speaking subject – a given signifier may yield any number of possible signified. According to Lacanian theory, this would make it virtually impossible for a speaking subject to relate a signified to his interlocutor exactly as he understands it. Lacan demonstrates this concept by presenting the following schematic:

The diagram essentially contains two terms: the term above the bar, which Lacan associates with the signifier, and the term below it representing that which is signified. At first glance, the meaning of the linguistic unit is clear. Coupled with the image of the two doors, the signifiers “ladies” and “gentlemen” used together in this fashion indicate a very specific meaning: the men’s and ladies’ restrooms, side by side.

“Here we see that, without greatly extending the scope of the signifier involved in the
experiment—that is, by simply doubling the nominal type through the mere juxtaposition of two terms whose complementary meanings would seem to have to reinforce each other—surprise is produced by the precipitation of an unexpected meaning: the image of two twin doors that symbolize, with the private stall offered Western man for the satisfaction of his natural needs when away from home, the imperative he seems to share with the vast majority of primitive communities that subjects his public life to the laws of urinary segregation.”

However if one were to imagine the same signifiers “ladies” and “gentlemen” without the accompanying doors to represent that which is signified, meaning becomes much more subjective. Thus “ladies” and “gentlemen” might come to mean any number of things associated with these particular signifiers, e.g., an audience composed of men and women, the first three words of a speech, etc. Thus, meaning largely depends on a subject’s interpretation of the signified, and not on the speaking subject’s ability to manipulate signifiers.

Based on the principle that 1) it is impossible to convey perfect meaning, and 2) signifiers precede the subject, i.e., a person is born into a world of signifiers, and therefore cannot produce them, Lacan concluded that it is, in fact, the subject which is determined by the signifier, not vice-versa. Not only does this argument give credence to the precept that the signifier takes precedence over the signified, but also that signifiers give meaning to other signifiers with relation to their presence and position in a chain of signifiers. The meaning elicited by the signifying chain in the above diagram would be quite different if one of the two signifiers were missing or if the order were instead reversed to “gentlemen” followed by “ladies”.

In order to represent the signifier’s ascendancy over the signified, Lacan introduced the following algorithm:

\[
\begin{align*}
S \text{ (signifier)} \\
S \text{ (signified)} 
\end{align*}
\]

This formula demonstrates that a subject’s discourse (S) represents a chain of signifiers accompanied by their corresponding signified concepts (s) which is transferred to another speaking subject during the act of communication. Therefore, what is transferred from one subject to another is not the highly subjective signified, but rather the signifying chain. The reason for which a signifier holds primacy over the signified is that a single signifier has the power to evoke as many different signified as there are people in the world to give it meaning.

3. Structure of the Unconscious Mind

The theory that thoughts are structured like a language isn’t new. As early as the 3rd century B.C.E., Plato demonstrated in a dialogue between Socrates and Theatetus that thought is nothing but non verbalized speech, and speech is just verbalized thought. While deliberating the “Third Puzzle of False Belief”, Socrates asserts: “I for one call opining speaking, and opinion a stated speech; it’s not, however, before someone else any more than it’s with sound, but in silence before oneself.” In Philosophy of Mind, Hegel also supports this idea that words, and therefore language, is necessary to the thought process:
“Words thus attain an existence animated by thought. This existence is absolutely necessary to our thoughts. We only know our thoughts, only have definite, actual thoughts, when we give them the form of objectivity, of a being distinct from our inwardness, and therefore, the shape of externality, and of an externality, which, at the same time bears the stamp of the highest inwardness. The articulated sound, the word, is alone such an inward externality. To want to think without words […] is therefore a magnificently irrational procedure.”

Concurring with Plato and Hegel, and underlining the crucial role words play in the definition of thought, Saussure states that thoughts would be nothing but a “swirling cloud” of confusion if it were not for linguistic structure to give it shape:

“Psychologically, setting aside its expression in words, our thought is simply a vague, shapeless mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed that were it not for signs, we should be incapable of differentiating any two ideas in a clear and constant way.”

In spite of arguments founded on the principle that thought and language were inextricable from one another, thought was still conceived as being invariably monolithic. It wasn’t until Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* that a formal distinction had been made between conscious and unconscious thought.

The conscious mind (Cs), described by Freud as the sentient part of the human psyche, occupies a relatively small portion of the psychic apparatus. The unconscious mind (Ucs) on the other hand, is defined as everything that escapes perception by the Cs. and is comparatively more significant in terms of mental activity than the Cs. According to Freud, the Ucs is not only the source of all impulses and drives, but it is also responsible for dreams, parapraxes and lapsus, all of which have major incidence on the Cs.

The elaboration of the unconscious mind’s inner-workings was a breakthrough in more ways than one. In the same manner that philosophers and linguists had previously deemed thought to be structured like a language, Jacques Lacan also considered Freud’s unconscious mind to be structured like a language. Greatly influenced by the linguistic theories of Saussure and Jakobson, Lacan put forth the argument that the unconscious is composed of a chain of signifiers, much like a chain of utterances in vocalized speech, which are brought to the conscious realm through the act of enunciation. Thus, Lacan imagined two signifying chains: one unconscious (S₂) consisting of potential utterances that might pierce through the barrier from the Ucs to the Cs, and the other conscious (S₁), representing the actual flow of discourse:
Despite the apparent separateness of the two signifying chains, the individual linguistic units of the $S_2$ meet $S_1$ during speech. However because the speaking subject does not always have conscious control over the arrangement of signifiers in $S_1$, an unanticipated linguistic unit from the $S_2$ is sometimes represented in a verbalized speech. A well-known example of an unconscious representation is a lapsus, also known as a Freudian slip, which sometimes represents itself unexpectedly in the discourse of a speaking subject.

The identification of these unconscious manifestations in discourse is the principal objective of psychoanalysis. Through close analysis of a patient’s discourse, a psychoanalyst is able to gain a deeper understanding of the patient’s unconscious mind by rendering conscious that which has been repressed:

“Psychoanalysis will bring the repressed in mental life to conscious acknowledgement, and every one who judges it is himself a man who has such repressions perhaps only maintained with difficulty. It will consequently call forth the same resistances from him as from the patient, and this resistance can easily succeed in disguising itself as intellectual rejection, and bring forward arguments similar to those from which we protect our patients by the basic principles of psychoanalysis.”

Even if psychic impulses are repressed from the conscious mind, they do not lie dormant in the unconscious. Symptoms of repression include various forms of neuroses such as obsessive compulsive disorders whose manifestations are oftentimes revealed in the conscious. Uncovering these repressed unconscious representations can assist the psychoanalyst in finding a cure for the patient’s underlying neuroses or psychoses which brought them to seek psychoanalysis in the first place.

4. The Cathartic Method

One of the ways in which Freud was able to reveal repressed unconscious representations in discourse was through a technique popularly known as “the talking cure”. Coined by “Anna O” – a patient of Josef Breuer, Freud’s family doctor – the talking cure was considered by Freud to be effective in the treatment of hysteria. The technique, not unlike the notion of “free association”, requires the patient to say out loud whatever comes to her/his mind no matter how insignificant or superficial it may seem. By encouraging the patient to concentrate on putting neurotic or psychotic experiences into words, the uninterrupted
narrative flow allows the psychoanalyst to reconstruct the patient’s unconscious mind. Focusing on unconscious representations revealed during discourse, the psychoanalyst is able to perceive lapsus or other manifestations of the unconscious which may escape the patient’s field of perception. At the discretion of the psychoanalyst, these unconscious representations are in turn brought to the patient’s attention who will ideally be able to understand the root of an undesired behavior. According to Freud, becoming familiar with the exact nature of these neurotic and psychotic behaviors makes it possible for the patient to suppress them. 17

The success of the talking cure, also known as the cathartic method, 18 depends on the patient’s ability to put thoughts into words through the free assembly of signifiers. Through extensive research on the connection between the spoken word and the idea it represented, Freud argued that the organization of words, as well as their subsequent verbalization, have a direct link not only with cognition, but also with kinesthetics. 19 In their analysis 20 of the case of “Anna O.” – a patient of Breuer suffering from acute hysteria – both Freud and Breuer recognized the therapeutic benefits of the cathartic method. During the course of her hysteria, the patient essentially repressed the anguish of her father’s death into the Ucs, the cathexis of which resurfaced as a series of somatic manifestations. The patient’s symptoms, ranging from partial paralysis to severe coughing, completely disappeared toward the final phases of her treatment, much to the surprise of Freud and Breuer. They later attributed the patient’s cure to her verbalized reenactment of emotionally charged scenes associated with her father’s death, in the same manner as Aristotle remarked on the soothing effects of catharsis. 21

Further elaborating on Freud’s relationship between thoughts and words, 22 Lacan perceived the Ucs. as being comprised of individual signifiers. Combining Saussurian linguistics and Freudian psychoanalysis, Lacan’s perception of the unconscious mind expounded on the ‘word-presentations’ mentioned by Freud in The Ego and the Id. 23 Whereas Freud conceived the Ucs. as containing “thing-presentations” that could be verbalized in the Cs. only by their subsequent passage through the pre-conscious (Pcs.), Lacan demonstrated that these “thing-presentations” already behave like signifiers without first having to filter through the Pcs. Lacan points out that the Ucs is manifested not only in speech through unconscious lapsus, but also in dreams, qualified by Freud as “the via regia to the unconscious”. 24

Because dreams both contain verbal cues and take on characteristics of linguistic tropes such as metaphor and metonymy, Lacan reasons that the unconscious must be structured like a language. To support this theory, he likens metaphor and metonymy to two functions of Freud’s dream-work: condensation and displacement, respectively. 25 According to Lacan, metaphor behaves like condensation in that a signifier belonging to a particular signifying chain can be substituted with a new signifier from a different signifying chain in order to be reassigned a new meaning. Thus, metaphor appears both in narration and in dreams when a signifier-word is attributed a meaning other than that which is normally associated with it. For example, in the sentence, “You are my sunshine”, sunshine is not used in a conventional manner; it is given a new signifier which is in turn related to the qualities of the subject you. You may be “bright”, “warm” or “dazzling” – possible adjectives to describe both you and sunshine – but you cannot really “be” sunshine. The economy of metaphor is therefore able to condense these adjectives into the single word, sunshine, in the same manner that repressed psychic representations are condensed into metaphors found in dreams. In this way, condensation acts as a censoring agent to protect the ego from images, drives or impulses that it has repressed. Closely related to metonymy, dreams can also be censored through displacement. Instead of compressing images, drives or impulses into a metaphor as is
the case with condensation, displacement disguises unconscious representations by replacing a repressed signifier in a signifying chain with another signifier from the same chain. This implies that the signifier that has been replaced in the signifying chain is related to the new signifier, as is the case of metonymy which uses only one part of a thing to describe the whole thing. For instance, in the sentence, “Five green berets were deployed”, green berets is understood as referring to soldiers specially trained to carry out commando operations, and not to the actual head gear that these particular soldiers wear.

It would appear that, like language, the unconscious is governed by the relationship between individual units, in much the same way that words are governed by the rules of grammar and tropes to create meaning. In this respect, not only are unconscious and conscious signifiers similar to one another, but Freud’s cathartic method further corroborates their equivalence. With the assistance of a psychoanalyst, the “talking cure” brings unconscious drives, impulses and the images they create to the conscious realm through psychic discharge, which in the context of psychoanalysis, takes on the form of verbalized discourse. Instead of remaining confined to the Ucs and surfacing in unexpected or undesired ways through psychotic or neurotic behaviors, unconscious cathexes are channeled into language which, as Freud pointed out in “Words and Things”, is closely related to somatic activity. If unconscious cathexes can be converted into speech instead of into debilitating behaviors, then the connection between elements of the Ucs and those of the Cs can be clearly established.

5. Language, Psychoanalysis and the Purloined Letter

It is reasonable to suggest that spoken and written language are both regulated by more or less the same rules of linguistic structure. Just like in verbalized discourse, the written word must follow the same rules of grammar and syntax. Thus, in light of what has been mentioned concerning the trajectory of the signifier from the Ucs to the Cs, it is possible to imagine that a writer’s unconscious representations can pierce through the psychic barrier between the Ucs and her/his written text; the transition from spoken to written language is not extreme. Given that dreams, lapsus, parapraxes, and jokes (Witz) – modes by which unconscious representations are inadvertently revealed – are orally transmitted from the patient to the psychoanalyst, it is imaginable that these same representations can be transmitted textually from the writer to the reader.

From this point of view, the reader assumes the role of the psychoanalyst as an interpreter of discourse, and the writer now becomes the analysand engaging in catharsis. The talking cure is henceforth transformed into a writing cure. To illustrate this new role assigned to writers, English novelist Graham Greene takes into consideration the psychological benefits of writing by using textual discourse as a medium for cathartic purging:

“Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those, who do not write, compose, or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear, which is inherent in a human condition.”

This goes to show that when a reader picks up a book, they are really faced with two texts: a superficial one which is presented to the reader as the product of a writer’s contrived, conscious message, and another which is hidden from the reader, a product of the writer’s unconscious. The unconscious signifying chain which appears in literature is therefore censored in much the same manner that repressed drives, impulses and images in the free associations are let loose during catharsis. In order to read between the lines of this underlying discourse, a psychoanalytical approach to literature assists the reader.
in identifying the unconscious manifestations present. Emile Benveniste, a French linguist known for his work on Saussurian linguistics and their manifestations in the unconscious mind, explains this double language existing in signifying chains:

“Beyond the inherent symbolism in language, the subject unknowingly produces his own symbols that come about as much from what he says as from what he doesn’t. Whatever a subject’s role in a story, psychoanalysis will provoke the onset of another story in order to explain the nature of his motives. [The analyst] therefore considers discourse to be a medium for a second “language” with its own rules, symbols, “syntax”, and which provides a glimpse into our deepest psychic structures.”

Sharing Benveniste’s perspective on the psychic manifestations of double language, Lacan asserts that this double language, the hidden message in discourse, is the objective for which language aims. Reminiscent of Bakhtin’s heteroglossia, double language implies a necessity for repetition, always reformulating an interlocutor’s message in order to maximize its potential for being understood on another interlocutor’s “conceptual horizon.” Thus, psychoanalysis acts as a method of interpretation, further multiplying potential signification in a signifying chain. According to Lacan, what is important in this dialogic context is not the actual information being transmitted, but what is evoked by it.

“It can be observed that the more language’s role is neutralized as language becomes more like information, the more redundancies are attributed to it. This notion of redundancy originated in research that was all the more precise because a vested interest was involved, having been prompted by the economics of long-distance communication and, in particular, by the possibility of transmitting several conversations on a single telephone line simultaneously. It was observed that a substantial portion of the phonetic medium is superfluous for the communication actually sought to be achieved. This is highly instructive to us, for what is redundant as far as information is concerned is precisely what plays the part of resonance in speech. For the function of language is not to inform but to evoke.”

From the Lacanian perspective, The Purloined Letter by Edgar Allen Poe essentially demonstrates the act of repetition in what Freud designates as the repetition automatism (Wiederholungszwang). In Poe’s short story, beyond the superficial account of a queen’s scheme to recover an incriminating letter, a psychoanalytical interpretation reveals that in the letter lie several layers of meaning through the continual reappearance of the same letter. It is important here to understand that the story’s “letter” represents not only the actual letter, but also the letter in the alphabetical sense which Lacan metaphorically assimilates to the Saussurian signifier. As discussed earlier, the inherent polysemy of both the signifier and the letter leads to numerous possible signifieds. As such, Poe’s Purloined Letter demonstrates the meaning of the letter from the point of view of various characters in the story’s plot. For the Queen, the letter represents death. Due to the sensitive nature of the letter’s contents, the Queen considers the letter to be a death warrant if the King is made aware of its existence. For the Minister, the letter represents opportunity. Taking possession of the Queen’s letter affords Minister D— the opportunity to blackmail the Queen in exchange for political promotion. For Monsieur G—, the Prefect of Police, the letter also represents political promotion. Charged with a mission by the Queen to secure the letter, the Prefect does everything in his power to ensure its recovery, but to no avail. Finally, for Detective Dupin, the letter represents a puzzle to be solved, not to mention a cash reward. The Prefect offers fifty thousand francs to anyone able to produce the letter, which Dupin finally succeeds in doing,
and for which he is duly compensated. As is demonstrated throughout the story, the same signifier, the letter, repetitively appears and reappears. According to Freud, the tendency to repeat a painful situation – as is the case of the letter’s continual reappearance in the story, since it represents the death of the Queen – is an unconscious reaction whose origins are not consciously known to the patient, but which can be brought to the patient's attention through psychoanalysis in order to break the cycle of undesirable behavior:

“The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. Thus he acquires no sense of conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been communicated to him. He is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past.” 32

Obviously, the reader who uses the psychoanalytical approach cannot intervene in the life of the author to help the author overcome the compulsive behavior identified in the author's written discourse, but at least it provides a unique perspective on the author’s state of mind during the writing of a piece of literature. The psychoanalytical point of view, at first glance banal, contributes to the analyst’s overall understanding of a piece of literature. For example, the continual reappearance of the Queen’s letter and its eventual fading thanks to Dupin’s detective work in *The Purloined Letter*’s plot indicates Poe’s desire to revisit a traumatic incident in his life of which he might not have been consciously aware. This compulsion to repeat a particular signifier – such as the letter related to the Queen’s death – is possibly linked to the tuberculosis of which Poe’s wife Virginia finally succumbed in 1847.33

Lacan takes his analysis of *The Purloined Letter* one step further by treating the story’s letter as a signifier. The most important detail concerning the letter is not necessarily its contents, but what effects it has on the subject, that is to say, how characters react to the Queen’s imminent death. As such, Lacan demonstrates how the letter controls the movements of the story’s characters, further corroborating his thesis that the signified, i.e. the letter’s contents, is subservient to the signifier itself.

6. Postmodernism and *Parole Pleine*

*The Purloined Letter* is just one example of how psychoanalysis can offer a dynamic contribution to literary analysis. It is true that the interpretative techniques developed by the field of psychoanalysis can be applied to literature of various time periods and cultures;34 however it is my theory that this particular mode of literary analysis is especially well-suited for the investigation of postmodern literature. In light of Lyotard’s conception of teleology and the role it plays in postmodern philosophy, the unfettered discursive flow so characteristic of postmodern literature is not unlike Lacan’s *parole pleine* inspired by Aristotle’s catharsis or Freud’s talking cure. Because of the postmodern author’s lack of concern for exacting literary structure, they are more apt to produce the free associations so important to successful psychoanalysis.

One of the forerunners of postmodern philosophy, Jean-François Lyotard criticizes the “metanarrative”35 as being a type of discourse whose ultimate objective is to incarnate meaning in a more or less perfect way. For Lyotard, a metanarrative is an all-encompassing discourse which aims toward establishing a discursive superstructure with a definite teleological goal. For Lyotard, teleology plays an important role in defining metanarratives because the postmodern condition, contrary to modernist thought, has not
attempted an end-all-be-all explanation of the cosmos. From the Greek terms _telos_ (end) and _logos_ (discourse), teleological thought supports the idea that a final goal is first established, and only then is it followed by measures which are taken to achieve this goal; that is to say, form follows function. An example of a teleological stance might include the suggestion that people have eyes because it was preordained that they needed to be able to see. An opposing view to this example suggests that people have eyes simply because that is how they happened to evolve, a perspective reminiscent of Darwin’s theories of natural selection or Aristotle’s treatise _On the Parts of Animals_. Thus, the metanarrative is a concept that postmodernism resists.

If one is to accept the divergence between the notion of teleology and Lyotardian philosophy, then the parallel between Freud’s cathartic method and postmodern thought cannot be denied. While modernism targets a well-structured, teleological metanarrative, postmodernism allows the author of the narration to “show through” to the reader. In this way, modernism is teleological in that it sets out with a well-defined goal in mind: a structured metanarrative rooted in the formalism it inherited from the didactic post-Victorian era. Postmodernism, on the other hand, can be understood as modernism’s less structured cousin, since it gives the author freedom to play a role in her/his own stories in much the same way that the talking cure encourages a patient’s uninhibited speech. As David Lodge points out, “postmodernism” can be defined by what it is not – and, as its name implies, it has clearly left modernism behind:

“In the experimental fiction of our day that is sometimes called ‘post-modernist’ these conventions – such as the omniscient and intrusive authorial narrator – are retained in exaggerated and parodic forms […] The emergence of the modernist novel of consciousness is often described in terms of a shift of emphasis from ‘telling’ to ‘showing’.”

Marking the distinction between modernism and postmodernism, Lodge demonstrates that while both are expressions of the author, postmodernist literature allows the author to emerge, for better or for worse, to reveal her/himself to the reader. At the same time, modernist literature is a conscious narrative, and thus contrived, impeding potential unconscious representations to seep through to the reader. As Freud remarks, the less inhibited the patient, the more effective a psychoanalytical approach will be:

“Of the greatest importance is whether or not there was an energetic reaction to the affecting event. By reaction we mean here the whole set of voluntary and involuntary reflexes – from tears to acts of revenge – into which, as experience shows, emotions are discharged…The hurt person’s reaction to the trauma really only has a fully cathartic effect if it is an adequate reaction…talking itself is the adequate reflex, it might be a complaint or the declaration of a tormenting secret (confession!).”

In light of Lacan’s application of psychoanalytical methods to the literary interpretation of _The Purloined Letter_, it would appear as if the cathartic method contributes not only to the fruitful interaction between the psychoanalyst and the patient in a clinical context, but also to a reader’s better understanding of what an author writes. One condition of the effectiveness of such a literary interpretation would be what Lacan describes as _parole pleine_, or “full speech.” Like Freud’s idea that speech must be as unreserved as possible in order to increase the probability that an unconscious representation will not go unnoticed, Lacan asserts that _parole pleine_ is a goal to be attained in psychoanalytical transference:

“[In] psychoanalytic anamnesis, what is at stake is not reality, but truth, because the effect of
full speech is to reorder past contingencies by conferring on them the sense of necessities to come, such as they are constituted by the scant freedom through which the subject makes them present.”

7. Conclusion

Clearly, the facility with which parole pleine is accomplished varies from subject to subject, from text to text. As has been demonstrated, the postmodern text is more forgiving of an interpretive approach based on psychoanalysis since this type of literature is traditionally more contemptuous of the teleological metanarrative. In spite of this obstacle to modernist thought, the seeking out and identifying the signifier or signifiers which have escaped the conscious mind still offers a precious glimpse into the subject’s unconscious mind. The trajectory of the letter, as has been demonstrated in The Purloined Letter, lets key information slip into the hands of the analyst.

Both the conscious as well as the all-too-neglected unconscious side of the discursive coin must be taken into account in order to render a well-rounded literary analysis. This is why it is necessary to be able to read between the lines. What is on the surface of the signifying chain is oftentimes nothing but a superficial account of what Lacan calls parole vide, or “empty speech” in which all subjectivity has been removed. Unfortunately, the even-keeled conscious shell encasing the psychic defenses of the speaking (or writing) subject is difficult to penetrate, but with vigilance on the part of the analyst (or reader), and the ability to transcend affective inhibitions on the part of the patient (or writer), parole pleine can be achieved, and a new layer of meaning can be revealed.

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Notes


3. Ibid. , p. 67-68.


6. Ibid. , p. 304. “A signifier is what represents the subject to another signifier.” Note that a subject can be interpreted here as being a speaking subject (sujet parlant) or a conceptual subject.


11. Freud, Sigmund, “The Interpretation of Dreams”, in *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, (Translated by Dr. A. A. Brill), Modern Library, 1995, p. 149-520.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 513. Regarding the function of the Cs: “The philosophers, who became aware that accurate and highly complicated thought-structures are possible even without the co-operation of consciousness, thus found it difficult to ascribe any function to consciousness; it appeared to them a superfluous mirroring of the completed psychic process. The analogy of our Cs system with the perception-systems [sense organs] relieves us of this embarrassment.”


18. From the Greek verb *kathairein*, “to purge”, Aristotle used the term catharsis to describe the evacuation of pent up psychic energy through exposure to some forms of art such as theater or music. This pent up energy, analogous to the symptoms found in hysteria, is basically the same technique Breuer used in his treatment of “Anna O.” Cf.: Aristotle, *Poetics*, (translated by Francis Fergusson), Macmillan, 1961, p. 35.


34. This is demonstrated quite well by this collection of Anglophone short-stories each of which is followed by a psychoanalytic interpretation. Cf: Badonnel, Patrick et Claude Maisonnat (avec la collaboration d’Alice Clark), *La nouvelle anglo-saxonne—Initiation à une lecture psychanalytique*, Hachette supérieur, 1998.


36. “In some birds, the legs are very long, the cause of this being that they inhabit marshes. I say the cause, because nature makes the organs for the function, and not the function for the organs.” Cf.: Aristotle, *On the Parts of Animals*, (Translated by William Ogle), University of Adelaide E-Book, website consulted on 11 April 2006 at: http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/parts/.


39. “[Henry] James inaugurated the modern or, as it is sometimes called, the ‘modernist’ novel in England, a kind of fiction which, in pursuit of a more faithful representation of reality, attenuate or eliminated altogether the authorial narrator.” Ibid., 185.


**Works Cited**


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