

## Notes Towards a Reading of the Textual Unconscious

### To re-open the question: some theoretical considerations

The relationship between literature and psychoanalysis has never been an easy one. Given Freud's own acknowledged indebtedness to and ongoing engagement with literature, it was at the very outset a close relationship, too close for comfort, perhaps, as the fundamental affinity has also generated a certain power struggle, or even – some would argue – a colonizing urge, evidenced in the very concept of 'application', which is all-too-commonly used to place Psychoanalysis in the position of a meta-language.

Within the wide spectrum of psychoanalytic approaches to literature, ranging from the initial engagements of Freud and Jones to extremely sophisticated structural parables, none has been more discredited or derided than the approach through authorial subjectivity, which often produces highly speculative, pathology-oriented readings, and – most problematically – tends to reduce the literary text into a clinical case study.

Paradoxically, perhaps, the de-authoring and de-authorizing drive of poststructuralist theory (most notably signaled by Barthes' diagnosis of the "Death of the Author") has opened up new ways of looking at the relationship between psyche and text, and new modes of psychoanalytic engagement, where the question of authorial subjectivity is no longer a simple premise, but the constitutive question of the text.

Having articulated this elusive form of textual presence as 'heterobiography' elsewhere, let me begin with a brief summary of this concept (Erdinast-Vulcan 1995). When a fictional text is scanned for autobiographical traces, the distinction between the ontological status of the historical subject who has authored the work and that of the fictional characters 'within' the work is usually acknowledged. The former is perceived as related to the latter through echoes and reflections: fictional renderings of historical events; textual representations of 'real' psychological states of mind, relationships and dilemmas. The edges of the text, the borderlines separating the somatic from the semiotic corpus, the real-historical from the fictional, are thus carefully preserved and accentuated.

The conception of *hetero*-rather than *auto*-biography is, first and foremost, a breach of these boundary lines. It offers a reading of "a text without edges", to use the Derridean phrase, probing the jurisdiction of frames and borderlines, where "the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins, the signatures, the referential realm outside the frame" are no longer hermetically sealed

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off from each other (Derrida 1979, 83–4). “Heterobiography” calls for a different reading strategy: rather than a quasi-archaeological project which aims to disclose the “figure behind the veil”, the hidden presence of the historical author in his fictional work, the strategy would focus on a peristaltic, wave-like movement of desire, anxiety, or other affects between the different textual strata, cutting across the borderlines between the textual and the historical subject. Rather than a one-to-one correspondence of “life” and “fiction”, we would look for an isomorphic relationship – an echo or a ripple effect – which boils over the edges of both text and subject. It is in this echo-effect that we can perceive the workings of the textual unconscious.

### **Approaching the textual unconscious**

It should be noted at the outset that the proposed approach is based on the irreducible singularity of literary texts, and avoids pre-given psychoanalytic categories and labels, and does not involve a mechanical application of analytical/critical procedures. The best model for the proposed approach is Freud’s brief “Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing Pad’” (1925). The ‘Mystic Writing Pad’ is a children’s toy, still available in the market and still endlessly fascinating nearly a hundred years later, consisting of a thin sheet of clear plastic which covers a thick waxen board. The user can write on it with any pointed instrument, a stylus which presses through the sheet of plastic and makes a faint indentation in the wax below which appears as a dark trace through the plastic. When the plastic sheet is lifted away from the surface of the waxen tablet beneath, the dark traces disappear; the pad is clean again, like a blackboard just wiped off. The Mystic Writing Pad can thus receive an infinite number of markings, and still retain its receptive capacity. But unlike other erasable surfaces, the mystic writing pad retains the traces of previous markings as indentations on the waxen surface below the transparent plastic sheet. For Freud, this ‘mystic’ or magical quality of the toy is analogous to the workings of the perceptual system, which receives sense impressions from the outside world, but remains unmarked by those impressions which pass through it to a deeper layer where they are recorded as unconscious memory. Thus, “the appearance and disappearance of the writing” is similar to “the flickering-up and passing-away of consciousness in the process of perception” (Freud, p. 230).

This Freudian conceit has been probed and expanded by Derrida who turned it into a paradigm for his refusal to acknowledge the boundary lines between psyche and text (Derrida 1966; 1978). My own interest in the mystical writing pad is rather more literal, as I would try to articulate a psycho-textual equivalent of the manner in which the writing on the pad becomes visible as a dark trace at the point of contact between the two surfaces. Far from a neat formula or a procedure, this approach places a heavy demand upon the reader, who must attend to the singularity of both the text and the subject in question. Rather than apply or superimpose ready-made psychoanalytic concepts and rather than switch on an interpretative meta-language – this approach entails a close listening to the specificity, the dynamic interaction, and the multiplicity of voices in the text.

**References**

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