

ELIZABETH WRIGHT

Psychoanalytic
Criticism
A REAPPRAISAL



SECOND EDITION

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A Reappraisal

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Elizabeth Wright

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For Ella, Maya and Louis, who may never read it

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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 *Ministories*

Preface

In preparing a new version of this book, I have had to make some difficult decisions: what to retain, what to revise and what to add. I posed myself certain questions and it might be useful to answer them in terms of guiding the reader of the first edition, who might wonder where to look for the updating. The question I first asked myself was whether I had dealt fairly with the key figures, psychoanalysts and critics, whom I took to represent this field.

I decided that my presentation of Freud was still useful as far as it went, since one can only revise Freud through the readings of others, this being where the changes are to be found. Looking at his distinguished followers and the apostates, I decided I had done less than justice to Jung, Klein and Winnicott, and more than justice to Deleuze and Guattari. I dealt with this both by adding new material and by shifting points of emphasis, in some cases making substantial revisions (Jung, for example). I have also revised the chapters on classical and post-Freudian criticism, where the old material was no longer sufficiently relevant and has been overtaken.

The second question for me was what to do about Lacan, since I had largely focused on Lacan up to the mid-sixties, where the main emphasis was on the determining force of language rather than on that which causes language to fracture. Since these two aspects of Lacan are in dialectical relation rather than one displacing the other, I decided not to change the Lacan of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, but instead to allow the Lacan of the Real to dominate some of the later additions to the book (in particular sections 9.2 and 9.3, but also parts of 10).

As a consequence, the greater part of the new material is in the second half of the book, where I have turned to those psychoanalytic critics who

have cast a suspicious eye on artistic productions high and low. Here psychoanalytic criticism moves into the realms of dance, music and popular culture. For example, the remarkable work of Slavoj Žižek is only just beginning to be placed in a psychoanalytic context, psychoanalysis having been slow to incorporate his findings into its domain. Finally, I have now included a part specifically assigned to feminist psychoanalytic criticism in order to give due place to its pioneering endeavours and complex trajectories. The feminist critique of the cinema, for instance, documents the particular struggles of women inside the constraints of representation.

I hope that in making these revisions and additions I have extended the range of my explorations in a way which includes the whole book. For it seems to me now that all psychoanalytic theories, from whatever ideological direction they come, are about the symbolic appropriation of that which is heterogeneous, inexpressible, unrepresentable, radically other. Even more than before, it is important to suspect the functions that art is performing within the culture, including popular culture. In this respect the notion of aesthetic ambiguity, confined to a humanist perspective in some portions of the book, can become a new dialectic constantly wary of rigid colonization from any quarter, thus calling for an aesthetics of suspicion.

Introduction

The purpose of this book is to give a critical overview of what has become an ever-wider field: the relation of psychoanalytic theory to the theories of literature and the arts and the changes in critical practice that developments in both domains have produced. This practice now takes place in an end-of-century milieu in which attitudes to psychoanalysis have sharpened into oppositional stances: on the one hand, over the last ten years there has been a spate of virulent and visible attacks on psychoanalysis, and Freud in particular; on the other hand, paradoxically, studies informed by psychoanalysis have burgeoned and thrived in the academic institutions. The political status of psychoanalysis is thus a controversial issue with broad implications. This new edition endeavours to include the insights of psychoanalysis itself that would contribute to the understanding of these shifts in ideology.

Psychoanalysis addresses itself to the problems of language, starting from Freud's original insight regarding the determining force within all utterance: he draws attention to the effects of desire in language and in all forms of symbolic interaction. The language of desire is veiled, does not show itself openly: to read its indirections, to account for its effects, is no simple matter. Political life is no exception: it does not all take place at the level of the newspaper headline. What is at issue?

Psychoanalysis explores what happens when primordial impulse is directed into social goals, when bodily needs become subject to the demands of culture. Through language, desire is constituted and 'subjects' come into being, yet this language cannot define the body's experience accurately. What is of peculiar interest to psychoanalysis – some would say peculiar in both senses, 'special' and 'bizarre' – is that aspect of being which is ignored or prohibited by the laws of language. Words fail to

catch it but it is real 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, memory traces which take on the form of indestructible fantasies.

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 structures of children's play, and, most crucially, in the mutually affective relationship which human beings develop as a result of their past total helplessness and dependence on another person. These feelings, revived in the analytic situation, may be taken as evidence that no experience the body has is ever totally obliterated 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 experience psychoanalysis has built up a theory of how this divergence comes about. It hypothesizes that there are certain recurrent stages of socialization each of which has its own problems of invasions from the unconscious. The joint re-creation on the part of patient and analyst of the patient's life-development graphically reveals that no phase is ever totally outlived, no early satisfaction wholly surrendered. The distress and suffering which bring human beings to the consulting room symptomatically speak of the mismatch between bodily desire and sexual-cum-social role.

None of this 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 philosophical theories of knowledge that psychoanalysis makes its most distinctive contribution. Attacks on its scientific status continue to take for granted that it must situate itself in relation to other modes of knowledge and to 'common' sense, and that therapy alone is the yardstick by which the theory has to be measured. On the contrary, psychoanalysis is a theory of interpretation which calls into question the commonsense facts of consciousness, which it maintains can only be grasped after the event. To this degree psychoanalysis is itself a theory of knowledge in which the notion of a plain objectivity susceptible to a true-false analysis is open to question. Science may continue to be reliable without our necessarily accepting that labelling and measuring can do justice to what they are applied to. Its progress 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. At the most fundamental level of science, quantum physics, the problem of interpretation emerges irrepressibly. Science itself is a highly interpretative activity, and it is as a science of interpretation – that is, in part as a science of science – that psychoanalysis is to be regarded. Which is not to say that the theory must be accepted uncritically.

This book tries to show in what way Freudian theory has been and still is part of an ongoing debate, although it is taking a much less decorous form than hitherto. Aside from the foregoing attacks on it as a theory and clinical practice, there is also considerable controversy within the psychoanalytic institution about certain endemic issues, which the book treats in historical sequence. Should psychoanalysis concentrate on uncovering the energies of the drive in its pursuit of its aim (instinct- or id-psychology)? Should it strengthen that part of the self capable of social integration (ego-psychology and its off-shoot, object-relations theory)? Should it focus on the division of the subject in language (structural psychoanalysis)? Should it openly serve a revolutionary purpose by opposing and accusing social institutions (anti-psychiatry)? All these positions are traceable in the changing scene of modern critical theory. Finally, and this was absent from the first edition of this book, what can psychoanalysis reveal about collective fantasies and their historical determinants, as evidenced in literature, the arts and popular culture? In particular, feminists have looked to psychoanalysis – even if not necessarily with an approving eye – for a theory of the subject that would release them from the constriction of patriarchal representations. This crucially involves an intensifying of the suspicion of that view of art which wants to regard it as entirely separate from other social practices, having a privileged language of its own.

If there is a single key issue it is probably the question of the role of sexuality in the constitution of the subject and, crucially, how this sexuality is to be defined. This raises the question why we should still concern ourselves with psychoanalytic theories of sexuality in the context of the arts. Critics from Kenneth Burke and Lionel Trilling onwards have warned against linking art and neurosis while at the same time hallowing the ingenious mechanisms of the unconscious within the creative process. This kind of attitude usually betokens the wish to protect the arts from the intrepid psychoanalytic critic who would ineptly perpetrate psychobiography and all manner of vulgar Freudianisms on the innocent art-object. But this does not take into account that author and reader are both subject to the laws of the unconscious and the fantasies it encodes. 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 new meanings to emerge. A desexualized application of psychoanalytic criticism, an attempt to confine it solely to the mechanisms of language – whether as an example of the plenitude of ambiguity (New Criticism and its off-shoots, the ‘work’ of an author) or as a set of shifting ambivalences (deconstruction, the ‘workings’ of language in a text) – does not engage the full explanatory force of psychoanalytic theory.

Psychoanalysis brings out the unconscious aspect of language 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 demands of bodies which have been socialized. The literary text, the art-object, the works of popular culture are forms of persuasion whereby bodies are speaking to bodies, not merely minds to minds. The plays of Samuel Beckett graphically present us with images of bodies or parts of bodies, comically and desperately struggling to channel their desire through speech. Conversely, the theatre of Antonin Artaud assaults us with the images of the body’s violent refusal to become entrapped in language.

This emphasis upon the bodily aspect of art poses a problem for psychoanalytic criticism because the public and the social are thereby neglected. Psychoanalytic aesthetics intermittently battles with this problem on two fronts: first, how the work of artistic merit is to be distinguished from the ‘work’ involved in the construction of dreams or fantasy; second, how the work as text is to be regarded, now it is 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 consciousness (whether true or false) plays in the creative process, and the way ideology situates 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.

Although in the past psychoanalytic criticism has been irresistibly drawn to those texts that are classified as literature and art, it has not come up with an adequate theory of aesthetic value, but then neither has any other approach. It contributes rather to an understanding of the creative process at the point of intersection between language and being, and this has implications for aesthetics. Beginning with Freud, this account deals with those psychoanalysts and critics who have been the main contributors to the criticism of literature, the arts and popular culture. Included also are theorists (Derrida, Foucault) who have made an impact on psychoanalytic criticism.

The outline follows a historical course, though like Freud's sequence of sexual maturation, no stage totally supersedes another. On the contrary, in recent times French psychoanalysts (for example, Kristeva) have tried to merge an id-centred approach focusing on the affect attached to the sexual drives, with a linguistic one taking off from 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 infiltrated 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 be suspicious of the ideological assumptions that underlie successive developments in both theory and practice.

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 relations between author and text, and between reader and text; and third, I argue that these relations should be seen as part of a more general problem to do with the constitution of the subject in the social as history proceeds.

PART I

1

Classical Psychoanalysis: Freud

1.1 Theoretical principles and basic concepts

Though the summary of Freudian theory given here cannot but be selective, it aims to indicate what sort of knowledge psychoanalysis has to contribute to the understanding of literature and the arts. The same mechanisms which Freud shows as determining in normal and abnormal behaviour come significantly into play when we are engaged in aesthetic activities of any kind. The theories which follow offer various explanations of how the unconscious functions in the production and consumption of the arts. This section will introduce the main concepts of psychoanalytic theory: the models of the psyche, the concept of repression, the role of the sexual instincts – their nature and place in Freud's theory of the unconscious, and the phenomena of transference.

Sigmund Freud (1886–1939) gives a genetic explanation of the evolutionary development of the human mind as a 'psychical apparatus'. He regarded such an explanation as providing a scientific basis for a theory of the unconscious, by which he relates it directly to the needs of the body. He looks at the mind from three points of view: the 'dynamic', the 'economic' and the 'topographical' (see Freud, XX, pp. 265–6 for a brief summary). These are not mutually exclusive interpretations but emphasize different aspects of the whole. All three are evidence of Freud's attempt to derive the mind from the body.

The 'dynamic' point of view stresses the interplay of forces within the mind, arising from the tensions that develop when instinctual drives meet the necessities of external reality. (The German word for these drives is *Triebe*, translated as 'instincts' in the *Standard Edition*, but because, as will be seen, they are to be distinguished from instinct in animals, it is now more usual to translate *Triebe* as 'drives', particularly when the