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978-0-521-38669-2 - Psychoanalysis and Fiction: An Exploration of Literary and Psychoanalytic Borders

Daniel Gunn

Excerpt

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## Introduction

MOST people who have put pen to paper will agree that writing is not always an easy, or in any obvious sense a pleasurable activity. The biographies of the great writers of this century tend to bear this out. The subject matter of these writers' work bears the traces of it too. Everywhere one looks in fiction one seems to encounter forms of negativity, ranging from difficulty through frustration and fixity to downright impossibility. Yet the very difficulty of the activity of writing seems to have goaded writers on. This amounts to enough of a conundrum to lead me to suppose that there must be something – beyond what is described and beyond the immediate lack of gratification offered – which writing *permits*, or *enables*. A curiously similar conclusion might be deduced from a cursory look at psychoanalysis. The idea of giving up one's precious time to go to someone's office and sit, or lie, talking, once or several times a week, whether one feels the inclination or not; not just talking, but talking about difficulty, about the unresolved bits of one's self and past; and this to a largely silent listener, whom one has to pay for the privilege! It might be hard to imagine anyone doing this voluntarily.

In fact, in this word 'voluntarily' a question is begged. It may be that one turns to fiction, or to psychoanalysis, not entirely from self-willed motives, and that they may allow a possibility – a field to open, or a mobility to be achieved – which elsewhere in life is unavailable. In his fascinating book, *In Search of a Past*, oral historian Ronald Fraser tells of how he encountered the limits of his own preferred mode of investigation when he had to enquire into his own past. He went back to the manor house where he had been brought up and interviewed the servants, maids and gardeners; formed a corporate picture of his origins, and of a world of money and privilege which had seemed to disappear with the Second World War. But this alone was not enough. Faced with a mental anguish which seemed to have its roots in his childhood, and faced with the responsibility of caring for his moribund father, he found he had to enter psychoanalysis, and there retell his early years. 'I want to be the historian of my own history', he says

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(p. 114). Psychoanalysis permits him to fill in some of the spaces left by the servants' accounts; fill them in with his own account of a past, based on his memories, but recounted – or discovered or invented – in the 'real' or present time of utterance in analysis. In the end, perhaps even analysis is not enough. For he also writes his book: his book which is both an oral history and a case history; which is, beyond that, a fiction of sorts, which subsumes both 'cases' and 'histories' – public and private – into a narrative to which he can put his name.

Why is this book of note here? The answer is threefold. It allows me to confirm that the reasons for entering the worlds of fiction and psychoanalysis do not always have much to do with choice. It makes clear that what may be 'got out of' them is not restricted to the possible negativity of their content. Finally, it offers an example of what I asserted in my preface – that the relation between psychoanalysis and fiction need not be one of rivalry or exclusiveness.<sup>1</sup>

In the title of the present book, the stressed word is perhaps the 'and'. In the course of my explorations, I shall encounter a broad range of apparent dualities, alternatives, or antinomies which will often turn out to be necessary paradoxes or complements. Psychoanalysis *and* fiction, as I wish my title to read; and as both may be – engrossed in negativity *and yet* dynamically enabling. Moreover, this conjunction is not the only important one in my choice of titles. For chapter 1 proposes 'Fathers and sons' – though this 'and' was a conjunction which was very problematic for Franz Kafka, on whom this chapter focuses. His relations with his father were highly strained; his confidence in his own ability to become a father was almost non-existent. Where Kafka is concerned, the more appropriate configuration might be 'Fathers *or* sons'. For one could be one or the other; but the movement from one to the other was almost unimaginable. Kafka's work is the very epitome of the immobility and impossibility mentioned above. There are lots of examples of this impossibility; hundreds of ways of detailing and analysing the causes for them. Yet behind them all there lurks a single question – and it is one which has more often been ignored than addressed. It asks: if this is what Kafka's fiction describes, what does it actually achieve? The answer to the question will involve consideration of Kafka, of course. It will also include consideration of the part the reader may play in the processes of his fiction.

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At the very time Kafka was writing, Sigmund Freud was considering another set of alternatives – that between love and hate. He had already ascertained in his work with dreams that the unconscious bore no allegiance to the principle of selection – either/or – preferring the combination: and . . . and. In working with the ‘Rat Man’ he confirmed that the principle could also hold sway in the affective life. An individual might be capable of intense love *and* intense hate, directed at a single person or object, without these two affects cancelling each other out. Of course, this complex of feeling, which was termed ‘ambivalence’, is not the only or necessarily the most important duality in Freud’s work. Nor is it necessarily most important in the present work. Where ambivalence is important, however, is in the way it yields a particularly well-focused example of the workings of an apparently non-logical complexity. And in addition to opening a way into an understanding of the structure of such a principle, it also gives some clues as to its genealogy.

It is in childhood, psychoanalysis suggests, that ambivalence is learned. Typically, the complex of feelings which constitute it has been seen to be one directed by children at parents. The two psychoanalysts, Serge Leclaire and Maud Mannoni, whose work I shall look at in some detail (in chapters 2 and 3), have added to this the consideration that parents may introduce their children to ambivalence, by directing its dual beam at them. I have noted that psychoanalysis may deal in negativity – in hate perhaps. In turn, it can also allow its patients to discover the opposite. In the analytic space, sustained by love (or ‘transference’), the patient may be able to gain access to words and desires from which he or she had been debarred, and through desire, to desire’s prime site, the body. If this is the case for the patient, is it the case for the analyst that the act of writing psychoanalytic texts opens a space which is somehow equivalent?

Through the work – the clinical practice and the writing – of Serge Leclaire and Maud Mannoni I shall try to develop a sense of the psychoanalytic space. I shall also, more indirectly, turn to the ideas of a more famous French analyst, Jacques Lacan. For Leclaire and Maud Mannoni are among the most renowned pupils of Lacan, and are sometime members of Lacan’s *Ecole freudienne de Paris*. Part of their importance derives from the fact that they have revealed certain of the clinical implications of Lacan’s work, and so have shown one of the fruitful ways in which the legacy of

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Lacan can be picked up and developed.<sup>2</sup> Where the theoretical perspective of Lacan is concerned, the two areas – clinical practice and children – are of special interest and importance. The reason for this has partly to do with the way Lacan's ideas have been diffused and assimilated (particularly in Britain). I believe most readers will have some familiarity with Lacan, if only the name and the reputation. One of the things that is best known about him is that he was particularly concerned with language and its functioning. He is also known for his great fondness for speaking – very abstrusely – to a rarified, intellectually formidable audience. His theories, as a consequence, have often been seen to have more relevance to an elite, quintessentially adult, Parisian milieu (or to academics) than to the milieu more typical of British analysts and their clients. The work of Leclaire and Maud Mannoni helps to redress this tendency. For in it they show how Lacan's theories – his theories of language – can be of vital use when the analyst is confronted by intense need or desperate deprivation – in autistic or psychotic children, for example. They show the radical importance of language and utterance in what Freud's patient 'Anna O.' appropriately called the 'talking cure'.

My enquiry into clinical practice will at times take me some distance from literature. But as my attention will constantly be upon the possibilities language can open, my literary concerns will never disappear. (If from time to time I enlist aid from the work of Roland Barthes, it is partly because few have done more than he to show the ways in which various fields of enquiry overlap, and feed into each other.) In part II of the book, 'Play it again', literature is returned to directly, with the work of Marcel Proust and Samuel Beckett. Both writers seem, like Kafka, to be engrossed in variegations of doubt, immobility and obsessive repetition. Yet both allow a glimpse of the ways in which writing permits the opposite of what it declares. Proust's novel *A la recherche du temps perdu* may be a testament to failure and immobility (as I show in chapter 4). It may, conversely, be a monument of – and to – ambitious achievement. This is not a paradox to which readers will be indifferent. For at one time or another most readers will have felt daunted by the difficulty of Proust and the weight of his achievement. Proust manages to turn such difficulty and doubt into a cornerstone of his work. How exactly does he manage this? The attempt to answer this question will take me again towards a

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pair of apparent alternatives: between the 'I' which is telling his story, and the 'I' which is told: between the book being written and the one the narrator finds it impossible to write. I shall be led to the idea that these apparent alternatives compel a sort of re-writing, or re-reading, a form of repetition which is at the heart of the novel's structure. It is a repetition very different from the return of the past offered by the famous *madeleine*, or from the 'regaining' of the past which the final book of *A la recherche* proposes.

Repetition and return have been notions to the forefront of modern man's enquiries, as those familiar with Nietzsche or Kierkegaard will know. Freud also shared the preoccupation, and he seems never to have been quite certain if they were beneficent or malignant phenomena. As (in chapter 5) the ramifications of repetition are traced from the structure of Proust's novel through the local details of the narrative, it will be seen that such uncertainty may be appropriate, that apparent alternatives do again mask a latent complementarity. Marcel in love is a thoroughly repetitious business. Yet it is through monotonous repetition that a unique moment or person takes hold of him and the novel. In the case of Beckett, hardly a single one of his works does not tell, more or less directly, of some form of insistent repetition. But are the repetitions debilitating or enabling? Is there repetition of that which is identical, or is there rather a highlighting of difference? What is the nature of the temporality involved in repetition? And does repetition point towards some original moment of unity or always towards division and loss?

I should note here that I have not attempted to write a book of theory, be that theory philosophical, literary, or psychoanalytic. Such questions as are asked, even when as general or abstract as those above, are thrown up by the texts themselves, or thrown up, as it may be, by psychoanalysis, with its theory of the repetition compulsion. Despite this, I shall have recourse (in chapter 6 and at other points where the occasion seems to require it) to certain writers who are more adept at abstraction than myself. These writers are among the major spokesmen on such issues as preoccupied Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, and they are the more worth mentioning here as they are not famed for their helpfulness. Of them, Jacques Derrida, to whom I refer, and with whom I briefly take issue, is the best known. Gilles Deleuze and Maurice Blanchot, on whom I lean more heavily, are gradually becoming

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known to the English-speaking public (the former is a versatile philosopher, the latter a perspicacious literary critic). Though I shall only have a chance to glance at certain of their formulations, it is hoped that this may be enough to indicate, to those who are not already convinced, how valuable the insights of these two writers are.

Yet if I have not written a book of theory it is not solely because of my disinclination to abstraction. It is also because answers will most often be sought in the workings of the texts which have been seen to beg the questions: the texts, for example, of Proust, Beckett, and Freud. In the case of all three I shall try to delve back towards the original moment mentioned above (and implied in the heading to chapter 6). I shall do so because they require it, the repetitions and ambivalence in their work appearing to present the moment as structurally and emotionally crucial. Lived most typically in infancy or childhood, in company with the mother, it is a moment which is so early in the history of the individual as to make itself felt as original (or originating). Its intensity and completeness may suggest that the rest of life and of love is some pale imitation or inadequate repetition of it. Anyone who has ever felt nostalgic will have had intimations of such a moment, such a beginning. Life tends to affirm that nostalgia is always for something that never really existed; that one's intimations are mere fantasy; that all one has ever known is division, ambivalence and repetition. But what of writing? What does literature say? More importantly, what does it *show*? The evidence of Proust, of Beckett, and of Freud will be closely sifted, in the attempt to provide some answers. If this means I end with the notion of beginning, this is not entirely inappropriate, as beginnings and endings constitute a pair of terms whose complementarity will have concerned me throughout.

I suggested at the beginning of this introduction that writing is not always an easy or obviously pleasurable activity. Writers, particularly in this century, have sometimes been seen as taking revenge on their readers by rendering that reading inordinately difficult. Certain of those considered here – Proust, Beckett, Lacan, Blanchot, to name a few – are known for the problems they pose the reader: not just the ambitious reader who sets out to understand and explicate; but also the more modest reader who wants merely to read, to pass the eyes and attention over the words – beginning

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to end. However, I also suggested that steps into the worlds of fiction or of psychoanalysis may not necessarily be taken voluntarily. This is another way of saying that need, or urgent desire, has a place in these processes, and must have a place in an understanding of them. With strong desire, forms of resistance and difficulty nearly always go in tow. I hope that the reader will not have too many problems reading my own book – beginning to end. Yet I should not pretend that the obstacles facing the reader of writers such as Proust or Lacan are not real. The obstacles do not simply disappear once they have been addressed. Nevertheless, I hope that by the end of this book it will be clear why the obstacles and difficulties such writers pose may be justified, or even necessary. And I hope a sense will have emerged of how, by attempting to read, and in this way *share* these difficulties, one may in fact be resolving them – as far as is either desirable or possible.

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*Part I*

A family affair



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## § 1.0

WRITING, it should be clear, depends upon a certain mobility: the mobility of the writer, who keeps moving a pen across the page or tapping fingers on the keys. Reading depends upon the corresponding mobility of the reader, who keeps his or her eyes scanning the lines and pages and chapters. As one develops one's sophistication in either of the two related skills one may tend to forget this dependence; indeed it may even be that for the duration of writing or reading one *needs* to forget it (movement, like falling asleep, becomes difficult when one starts to think about it too closely). Yet there are at least three reasons why it is important in the present context to recognise such fundamentals. Firstly, because the writer I wish to discuss in this chapter seems to require such a recognition (as do those I turn to later, in part II). Secondly, because in chapters 2 and 3 I shall be turning to the work of psychoanalysts, which involves many for whom such movements have either become impossible, or have never been possible. And thirdly, because the recognition may encourage more careful consideration of the larger and more accomplished sorts of movement that writing both enacts and enables . . . The hand keeps moving, the eye keeps roving. The form of writing we call 'literature', for its part, may (we say) 'move' us. It moves us not only in ways achieved by other sorts of writing – to sign a petition or join a club, remonstrate or demonstrate – but also in ways less easily translatable into action in the world (unless that action be, perhaps, further writing).

The writers who most 'move' us may often be those who seem most to draw attention to the difficulty, or near impossibility, of primitive, vital forms of movement. I have in mind such writers as Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, and Marcel Proust. Consider, for a second, the beetle in *Metamorphosis*, trying unsuccessfully to lever itself off its shell; or Molloy with his crippled leg, trying vainly to cycle home; or Marcel, unable even to get started on his life-work for want of a subject. Consider how the precious lines of Kafka's

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prose seem to tax the reader's faith in their ability to get to a satisfactory ending (his novels were all 'unfinished'); the huge leap we seem required to make between every word of a late Beckett story ('Ping' or 'Enough', for example); or how often, in the course of reading *A la recherche*, a sentence which has lost us midway makes us wonder if we had not better give up altogether. Or consider, finally, what sort of image might link the three writers: a room, perhaps, a lifetime of work and suffering, played out within the confines of four walls . . . Yet their prose 'moves' us. It seems to achieve something far beyond that which it merely affirms: and far beyond that which may be stated, anecdotally at least, about it or its producers.

All three writers have been childless (as far as is known), and not only that but very self-consciously sterile. Yet all three are peculiarly preoccupied with birth and with the turning of the generations. I wish particularly to look at a form of mobility which centres around the parent-child axis, and to do this I shall turn first to Kafka.

In what way does Kafka's writing allow him to grapple, not with his own father or childhood, so much as with the interconnectedness of his own being-as-a-potential-father and his being-as-a-child? In what way does writing allow him possibilities not open in the rest of his life? In the attempt to develop and answer these questions, I shall call upon the help of other writers from the literary domain, while stepping also into the territory occupied by psychoanalysis, which, almost as much as literature, has addressed itself to the way one generation may hold down or move up against another. But first to Kafka, and to a moment that was to prove crucial in both his life and his work.

## § 1.1

On 2 June 1913 Kafka wrote a letter to Felice Bauer. There was nothing exceptional in this: it was one of several hundred he was to send her between September 1912 and October 1917. He had already been writing to Felice for ten months (letters which fill three hundred pages) when he chose to try to tell her some of what he saw as the significance of his short story 'The Judgement':

Can you discover any meaning in the 'Judgement' – some straightforward, coherent meaning that one could follow? I can't find any, nor can I explain