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978-0-521-02795-3 - Formalism and the Freudian Aesthetic: The Examples of Charles Mauron

Linda Hutcheon

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION



AS A LITERARY CRITIC, Charles Mauron is a figure whose value as an index to the major literary theoretical issues debated in our century equals, and indeed exceeds, his value as the inventor of *psychocritique*. His literary critical career began in the 1920s in England under the auspices of E. M. Forster, Roger Fry, and the Hogarth Press of Virginia and Leonard Woolf – a fact that the French have generally ignored, concentrating instead on his post-1950 formalization of the psychocritical method. However, in the mid-1960s, Mauron became embroiled in the now-famous Picard–Doubrovsky battle over the “nouvelle critique,” that is, over the importation of the frameworks from the social sciences into French literary criticism. For a brief time Mauron was alternately admired and condemned for the so-called rigor of his particular literary methodology derived from psychoanalysis. Today his work tends to be either ignored as out of fashion in France or rewritten – not without considerable distortion – in Lacanian terms.

Yet, before his rather late conversion (at the age of fifty or so) to Freudian psychology, Mauron was an aesthete and one of a particularly British sort. His two English books, both translated by his friend Roger Fry, and the series of articles that appeared in *The Burlington Magazine* (1925a – see Appendix A) and *The Criterion* (1927c, 1930, 1933a, 1935), translated by T. S. Eliot, bear the im-

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print of English as much as French aesthetic issues, as do the lectures that Mauron gave during his English university tours in the twenties, thirties, and forties. But even the relatively recent rediscovery of Mauron's work in North America has not resulted in any re-valuation of his method or its results. Nor has it brought about a reconsideration of the broader perspective that would place Mauron where he belongs: in the midst of that larger historical context of more than fifty years of diversity and tension in critical experimentation. What must be taken into account is the critical heritage of Mauron's British coevals, a heritage he absorbed almost by default, as his French formation was scientific and not philosophical. Those Kantian remains of art for art's sake led not only to Roger Fry's (and Mauron's) formalism, but also to that previously mentioned concern for the "sensibility" of the critic that T. S. Eliot as well as Mauron would manifest. The French symbolist inheritance of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound is also Mauron's. Those interests in aesthetic purity, in the unity of the arts, in music, in that bizarre union of intellectualism and an almost mystic suggestiveness are actually the materials for the experimental hypotheses of Mauron's first work, *The Nature of Beauty in Art and Literature*.

Together Fry and Mauron translated and published Mallarmé's poems, and in fact, Mallarmé was in some ways the unwitting spur to Mauron's moving beyond his early formalist and symbolist aesthetic formulations. Mallarmé's stress on craft and intellectual control acted as a challenge to Mauron, who had just been reading Freud and suspected the omnipotent control of the *unconscious*. Unlike Fry, his mentor, Mauron was seduced by Freud, as his *Aesthetics and Psychology* (1970a [1935]) bears witness. The attempt in this work, as its title suggests, is to separate and then reconcile the contemplative and the active impulses, or what Mauron saw alternatively as art and science, or aesthetics and psychology.

From 1935 on, Mauron clearly reflects the consequences of the modernist-inspired resurgence of both aesthetic formalism (in the visual and literary arts especially) and critical psychologism – both affectivist and expressive. The inherited (Kantian) nineteenth-century tension between criticism as description and as evaluation is transmitted here, in critical terms, in Mauron's constantly split allegiance: an allegiance, on the one hand, to the describing of the structures of the work of art itself and, on the other, to their elucidation in terms of the psyches of both the creator and the reader.

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The first half of this study investigates Mauron's formation, both in its particulars and in the general implications of each stage of his intellectual development, as he cast about for satisfactory answers to the various aesthetic questions posed by his contemporaries. His early training in science and his immense respect for the experimental method of Claude Bernard left their mark on all of his methodological structures. His increasing blindness sharpened his already remarkable memory to such an extent that the first step of his later psychocritical method (a mental superimposition of memorized texts) became almost easier for a blind man than for a sighted one. And it was his 1919 meeting with Roger Fry that inaugurated an early period of quite strict formalism, soon tempered by the discovery of Freud.

At first, however, Freud was problematic for Mauron, who wanted to posit a higher reality, a spiritual sensibility, to explain the existence of art and also to act as a counter to both the instinctive, libidinal unconscious and the "social" self of the artist. Despite his anti-Bergsonianism, Mauron was in effect willing to posit a superrational as well as a subrational force in the human psyche. For support in this endeavor, he turned to Jung and to the Eastern mystics. In his two series of essays, *Sagesse de l'eau* (1945) and *L'Homme triple* (1947), the attempt to reconcile the animal and the spiritual became a reworking of the old struggle to unite psychology and aesthetics, for by the early 1950s Mauron had begun to perceive the true value that Freud was to have for him.

The second part of this study begins by investigating psychoanalysis as the objective science that studies the most subjective of realities – the human psyche. Or so it appeared to Mauron. Abandoning his (in some ways) quite traditionally philosophical, tripartite (spiritual, social, animal) concept of the mind, Mauron turned to Freud, and then to Ernst Kris, Leopold Bellak, and finally Melanie Klein and the Anglo-Saxon school of object-relation theorists, in his attempt to reconcile those haunting polar opposites that he could no longer ignore, whether he formulated them in terms of aesthetics and psychology, or of the work and the man, or of the contemplative impulse of art and the active impulse of science. His eclectic borrowings from various psychoanalytic theories were melded into what he named *psychocritique*, a four-step objective method for studying the unconscious structures of a work of art and, thereby, of the author's psyche. Even Mauron's early work,

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however, reveals a search for objectivity in the judgment and elucidation of literature. The working assumption behind such a search seems to be a confidence in an ordered mode of knowing, ultimately one that can lead to a codification or systematization of method and results. This impulse, added to his scientific training and his early association with Roger Fry's formalism, prepared Mauron for the acceptance of one particular system, one particular ordered and structuring body of knowledge – psychoanalysis. Yet in this very choice lie the seeds of the renewal of the tension of Mauron's earliest work, the tension between aesthetics and psychology.

Freud's system, as its more negative critics have delighted in pointing out, can be seen as an amalgam of eighteenth-century deterministic rationalism, romantic irrationalism, and nineteenth-century biologism. When adapted to literary criticism, no matter how carefully, it can open the door to expressive and affective theories of criticism that both tend to value subjectivity and intuition as keys to knowledge. Mauron was, however, personally predisposed as well to these latter possibilities. His fascination with the Eastern mystics grew directly out of his early distrust of pure rationalism and his appreciation of Bernard's and Poincaré's accounts of the role of intuitive insight, even in such codified systems of knowledge as experimental medicine and mathematics. But by 1950, with the publication of his *Introduction à la psychanalyse de Mallarmé* (1968a [1950]), the only psychocritical work that has been translated into English, Mauron had formalized *psychocritique*, one of the first methodical applications of psychoanalysis to literature.

Mauron's avowed aim for *psychocritique* was to increase our knowledge of literary works by isolating and then studying textual structures the origin of which was attributed to the "unconscious personality" of the author. It never denied the existence or significance of consciously intended or constructed textual structures or meanings; nor did it underestimate the force of influences, be they viewed historically or in terms of language. In fact, as Mauron constantly repeated, *psychocritique* was meant to be only a partial, supplementary critical mode, complementary to the analysis of the consciously elaborated artistic structures and of the conscious personality of the author that is undertaken by traditional or, in France, "classical" literary criticism. Although Mauron postulated the creative liberty of the *poet*, he preferred to limit the impressionistic freedom of the *critic*. Placing himself always in the position of what

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he called the “man of science,” he revealed his early roots as a chemist in his insistence that the point of view of empiricism, that is, of the experimental method, demands that the critic acknowledge three variables within the poet’s free act of creation: milieu, language, and the artist’s personality. To each of these variables corresponds a systematic study that offers a scientific method of approach: history, linguistics, and psychology. Although the links between art and the social sciences of language and history had been generally accepted, the traditional resistance to the aesthetic–psychological connection was seen as a critical failing by Mauron, for to him psychology was as objectively valid, in experimental and clinical terms, as the other two sciences. Therefore he situated his invention of the psychocritical method within that same context of a need to synthesize art and science, aesthetics and psychology.

In order to complement the traditional critic’s investigations into the conscious thoughts and structures of the artist and his work, Mauron turned to theories of psychoanalysis to support his view of the unconscious, internal, or latent source of the external or manifest form and content of the work of art. This theoretical choice meant that he had to postulate two things: first, that there is an unconscious that all men possess and constantly express, and second, that this psychic structure is reflected in the work of art and is therefore analyzable by an adaptation of psychoanalytic methods to literary criticism. Although he claimed for psychoanalysis the same objectivity of observation, the same clarity of methodology and validity of hypothesis as any of the other human sciences – including philology and history – Mauron did not fall into the reductionist trap of confusing the art work with either a dream or a symptom. Scientific psychology offered, he felt, insights into imaginative fantasies, into the creative process, and into ego–object relations that the literary critic ignored at his peril. For Mauron, the unconscious of the artist was indeed accessible through his text, for it was the unconscious that sought to establish connections within the essential discontinuity of the personality. Freud’s studies of the manifest–latent structures of dreams, therefore, provided only one analogue of the possible analyzable bridges between the conscious and the unconscious.

Mauron was aware, however, that the *methods* of psychoanalysis, unlike its *insights* into the psyche’s structures, must be adapted for use by the practicing literary critic whose interest is more in the

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form and meaning of the work than in the diagnosis of the author. With no patient on a couch to analyze, with no free associations to work with, the critic must instead substitute a textually based method, one that Mauron felt should seek to unite the advantages of the analysand's free associations (the voluntary suspension of conscious control) and of the vigilance of the analyst (ready to seize upon repetitive structures). The method Mauron invented is one of a mental superimposition of texts, which he compared (as did Freud for his own dream-condensation process in *The Interpretation of Dreams*) to Francis Galton's superimposing of photographs to reveal common morphological traits within a family. Here, however, the texts must be more or less known by heart and, to use Mauron's image, "écoutés ensemble." The importance of this image lies in its first signaling of the relationship between Mauron's blindness and the methodology that he developed.

It was not fortuitous that his first extended psychocritical trials were on the work of Mallarmé – on poems he in fact did know by heart, as he had worked on their translation with Roger Fry before blindness set in. He even provided the individual commentaries to the poems in the Fry volume (1938a [1936]). If the texts were memorized, the critic could indeed let his conscious attention "float"; he could permit the works to lose their distinctive individuality, and he could then allow coincidences to suggest themselves as he called the texts to mind, though in no particular order. This text-critic relation was the adaptation of the patient's free associating in analysis. The parallel to the role of the vigilant listening analyst was that of the same critic who then took hold of these enigmatic, intuitively discovered coincidences and, while still eschewing interpretation, objectively noted their textual existence and then decided whether the source was likely to be conscious or unconscious (for only the latter would concern him further). An example will best illustrate how this important decision was reached. In *Des métaphores obsédantes au mythe personnel* (1962; 129n), Mauron offered the results of his superimposing of Mallarmé's "Le vierge, le vivace . . ." (a) and "Toast funebre" (b)

(a)

- (1) Vierge
- (2) Hante, fantôme

(b)

- Vierge héros
- Spetres

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(3) les vols qui n'ont pas fui	les mots qu'il n'a pas dits
(4) le cygne d'autrefois	cet homme aboli de jadis
(5) se souvient	souvenir
(6) magnifique	magnifique
(7) n'avoir su chanter	muet
(8) blanche agonie	attente posthume
(9) par l'espace infligée	l'espace a pour jouet
(10) horreur	horreur
(11) fantôme	hôte de son linceul vague
(12) songe	songe
(13) mépris	méprisé
(14) vêt	linceul

Some of these items are more or less direct lexical echoes (1, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12, 13); others are semantically connected (2, 4, 7, 11, 14); some are syntactically parallel (3, 4); yet another operates by what might be called similar figurative mechanisms (8). In other words, the links are not merely of one sort, though Mauron himself never analyzed the types or levels at which they exist. What was important for him was that the context of these two poems precludes any voluntary conscious source of these connections: The poems are about different and not at all similar views of the poet. Thus, Mauron felt he could posit a latent unconscious (or common repressed) source of the identities perceived at these different textual levels.

The next task of the psychocritical method was to note the repetitions of these orderings or groupings of what he called "obsessive metaphors" (though, as noted, they are by no means all, technically, metaphors). These "networks of associations" "resonate," another common auditory image in the blind Mauron's criticism. For example, in Mallarmé's poems he noted that the associations group themselves in five verbal constellations: death, combat, triumph, grandeur, and laughter. For Mauron these networks came to represent unconscious groupings, *within the psyche*, of relations to internal and external objects; that is, they are attempts at creating a unified vision of the inner fragmented world, as described by Melanie Klein. But in Mauron's work as a whole, the important role of the perception of systems of relations in art took root well before his discovery of the Anglo-Saxon school of object-relation theorists in the 1950s. Its source was in the formalism that Mauron espoused in the 1920s as a result of that contact with Roger Fry,

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for whom the aesthetically significant feature of all art lay in its formal relations, in what he called its “harmonic principle,” its rhythm, its architecture, and not in its manifest content or its representational subject matter. In fact, when translating Mallarmé with Mauron, Fry wrote to Kenneth Clark that even Mallarmé’s most private associations “are so constant that you can gather their meaning by comparing different examples.” Although this prefiguring of the psychocritical method makes evident the formative influence of Fry’s structural orientation, Mauron’s formalism *did* take its final form only after the discovery of Melanie Klein, for it was by means of her theories of projection, of the internalization of desired objects, and more generally, of the dynamic nature of psychic interrelations, that Mauron was able to make dynamic those more static Freudian associative networks or systems of relations singled out by the process of textual superimposition.

Mauron’s studies of Racine (1949b, 1950, 1955b, 1968b [1964–5], 1969 [1954]) and then of Baudelaire (1957c, 1961b, 1966a, 1967c [1966], 1968c [1966]) gradually led him to this realization of the nonstatic interrelations between what he saw as a constant (the unconscious personality of the author) and inevitable temporal change. He perceived not only a latent textual unity at an unconscious level, but also now saw the succession, the order of works as created by a writer, as having a significance that thematic criticism (especially of the Geneva school) ignored. He felt that a psychic “force field” was created by the associative networks, one of conflicts, anguish, and defenses that become affectively polarized into mythic figures, which then act out dramatic roles within dynamic, rather than static, structures. These figures he saw as representing Kleinian internalized objects and identifications, as presenting both desires and objects of desire. In other words, there is an obsessive fantasy underlying the networks of obsessive images, and this fantasy is a dramatic representation of the dynamic structures of the psyche and their interrelations. To this fantasy, Mauron gave the name of “personal myth”; this acts as a kind of filter through which psychic energy must necessarily pass and which, therefore, is shared by both the conscious and the unconscious. In order to buttress this new entity with scientific theory, Mauron turned to the psychoanalytic works of Ernst Kris, where he discovered the concept of the creative process operating as an oscillation between the different psychic levels. Translating a somewhat abridged version of

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the Orphic myth into psychoanalytic language, Mauron reworked Kris's theory of art as a regression in the service of the ego into terms of the artist's controlled and reversible descent into the hell from which the madman, on the other hand, does not return.

The artist's personal or fundamental myth does endure, but evolves constantly from the moment of its formation (at the time of artistic vocation, usually in adolescence). By means of this dynamic but constant structure, Mauron could account, he argued, for such things as influences: At a certain point in an artist's life, a mode of expression or thought corresponds to a partial project of psychic integration of his personal myth with his conscious vision of the world. For the poet, Mauron postulated, art becomes a kind of Kleinian autoanalysis, an attempt to link the dissociated fragments of the personality. This probable interaction of the "personally" mythic and the lived provides the basis of his theory of the creative ego in its battle with the social ego. The undue interference of the one upon the other in the poet's life could spell disaster – in either existential or aesthetic terms.

Mauron's early interest was in lyric poets (such as Mallarmé, Nerval, Valéry, and Baudelaire), whose works lend themselves quite easily to superimpositions revealing networks of associated obsessive metaphors. However, the discovery of the dramatic nature of the personal myth made natural and inevitable the subsequent extension of his method to the study of dramatic and epic works. The four epics of Mistral, for example, are shown to reveal a progressive dramatic myth whose original configuration Mauron first studied quantitatively in 1955. (He actually calculated percentages of "affective words" associated with characters and with natural phenomena.) But it was with his first full study of drama, *L'Inconscient dans l'oeuvre et la vie de Racine* (1969 [1954]), that the full critical possibilities of the personal myth as a dynamic, evolving, but lasting structure became apparent to Mauron. As in the discussion of the influences on Mallarmé, Mauron was here able to account for Racine's choice of the subjects for his plays, again by means of a theory of the interaction of conscious and unconscious psychic forces, funneled through the personal myth. He was also able to propose a psychic reason for *Mithridate's* (materially) central place in Racine's *oeuvre* and for the dramatist's final renunciation of the theater.

Here, the progression from text to author that is implied in the

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psychocritical steps – from superimposition to discerning associative networks and then to the underlying mythic figures and their dramas within the author’s psyche – becomes overt, though it had in fact been so earlier in his *Introduction à la psychanalyse de Mallarmé* (1968a [1950]), as the title itself suggests. Although Mauron originally intended biographical materials to act as only a final check or control on his interpretations of the obsessive metaphors and their configurations, his postulation, first of the personal myth, of the conscious–unconscious oscillation within the creative process, and then of the creative and social egos, made the biographical element of obvious importance in his criticism. Though he always argued that elucidation of the text was the aim of *psychocritique*, the “unconscious personality” or the personal myth, which provided the source of the latent unities and structures perceived, obviously also interested Mauron. Although he never confused this personal myth with the externally observable character of the author, Mauron rarely hesitated to hypothesize about the psychic results of traumatic events on an author (for instance, of the death of Mallarmé’s mother and sister) or about the dynamic interrelations of desire and desired objects, of the splitting of good and bad objects, in a Kleinian sense (for example, the prince–buffoon antagonism in Baudelaire’s verse).

It was only with his attempts to carry out a *psychocritique* of Molière’s work (1964a) that Mauron was forced into a broader perspective, compelled to acknowledge both manifest generic structures in a work of art and the possible aesthetic function of the unconscious of the reader or audience. When he discovered that Molière’s theoretically unconscious personal myth’s patterns coincided with the general character and plot structures of comedy in general, Mauron undertook a psychocritical study of the comic genre as a whole – seemingly unconvinced, by the way, of the psychic or literary relevance of *tragedy*’s basic plot forms to his earlier study of Racine. Mauron’s formalism was never one that dealt with generic or linguistic structures. Using Freud’s work on the *Witz* and on play, as well as Jung’s concept of a collective unconscious manifest in archetypal situations, Mauron attempted to account for the *public*’s constant psychological response – laughter – to type plots, as this was obviously the response the author of comedy sought to provoke. His hypothesis was that the answer lay in the work of Melanie Klein and Anna Freud on the defense