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

Linda Hutcheon

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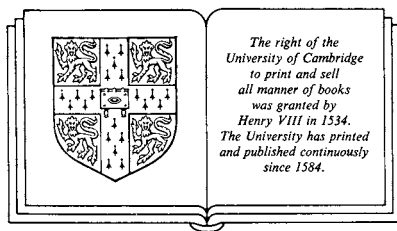
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Formalism and the Freudian aesthetic

The example of Charles Mauron

LINDA HUTCHEON



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Preface



THIS IS A study with a double focus: In the first place it seeks to chart the parallel reevaluation of both formalism and psychology in twentieth-century literary criticism by using the work and career of the French critic Charles Mauron (1899–1966) as both a diachronic and a synchronic scaffolding. Using a structure of biography and literary history, it investigates Mauron’s rather odd position both inside and outside two different critical contexts, the French and the English – a position that makes his work a particularly revealing kind of reflection of the diverse critical trends and tensions of our age. As a product of modernism, Mauron was aware of and open to the seeming contradictions of both formalist and psychoanalytic aesthetic theories, although for ultimately different reasons: He was both a literary critic, intent upon investigating the forms and structures, as well as the meaning, of literary objects, and an aesthete, concerned with the nature of the aesthetic experience, of the conditions of mind related to the production and comprehension of those objects. Mauron is best known as the formulator of a psychoanalytic approach to literature for which is reserved, in the French language and in this book, the name *psychocritique*. The full account of the genesis and development of this approach that will be provided in the Introduction has been deemed necessary, for it is only in the light of this final product that the stages in Mauron’s development take on their particular

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significance: They reveal his attempts to solve a personal dual allegiance, to “objective” science and to “subjective” art, and they also serve as one characteristic manifestation of what some would call a “paradigm,” in an extension of Kuhn’s sense, of a generally shared dichotomy that governs our literary critical thinking even today.

That paradigm forms the second focus of this study. With Mauron’s work still firmly in the center, the broader general context is that of the very contemporary – and yet enduring – theoretical issue of the designation of literary criticism as an objective or as a subjective activity. The English liberal humanist tradition has felt threatened recently by the attempts of continental semiotics and structuralism to put criticism on a more objective basis. Why the paranoia? Or, perhaps the question should be: Why the threat? There is a feeling today that criticism, in order to have validity as an institutionalized professional activity, must involve more than an innate appreciation of ineffable beauty or exquisitely fine moral vision on the part of the critic. But surely all so-called traditional criticism is not just an elitist, impressionistic exercise? And surely, too, structuralist and semiotic approaches go beyond sterile, pseudoscientific descriptions of form at the expense of all human content or meaning?

This battle – often fought, on both sides, with the double-edged weapons of rhetoric and reduction – represents more than just a modern clash of the cultural temperaments and tastes of England and France. The persistent resistance to some kinds of formalism in literary studies should be looked at in the context of the post-romantic aesthetic heritage. And the French infatuation with what the English reject must be seen as what it is: a very recent phenomenon, perhaps a reassertion of a version of Cartesian faith, but certainly a reaction against both a dominant metaphysical aesthetic and a predominantly historical and philological critical orientation. Charles Mauron’s work over a period of forty years belongs to neither the French nor the English tradition, but can cast interesting lights on both precisely because of this. The relative lack of success of his psychocritical method in France, a country that has since embraced the theories of Jacques Lacan with such fervor, points to the very foreign nature of Mauron’s Freudian formalism. Trained in France, but as a scientist, Mauron first began to think about art under the influence of the British formalist art critic Roger Fry.

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Like his mentor, Mauron sought a way to unite the two interests of his life: art and science. Both men thought that science would offer some objective means of approach to aesthetic objects. Just as the logical positivists were trying to move philosophy away from metaphysical speculation and toward analytical activity, so Mauron fought the metaphysical domination of one branch of philosophic inquiry, aesthetics. He wanted to introduce into aesthetics what the positivists were introducing into logic: the methodology and precision of science, the determination of meaning by tests of empirical observation. Such was the theory. In practice, Mauron's criticism, like Fry's, was scientific only in a very loose and metaphorical sense. There were no real experiments, despite the liberal use of the language of the experimental method. And so there was no quantitative measuring of results, and finally no universal scientific laws. What there was, at least in theory, was a scientific attitude of rational impartiality. After his first work, beauty was not Mauron's main aesthetic focus. For him, aesthetics was redefined as a science that treated of the conditions of sensuous perception; aesthetics became a form of psychology that examined empirically the nature of artistic creation and judgment. He sought to separate what in England had been united as the "mental and moral sciences." From there, with the help of the theories of Sigmund Freud, Mauron could finally formulate *psychocritique*. Psychoanalysis, or "scientific psychology," was for Mauron the validating authority needed to give meaning and significance to both his formalistic method and his theory of creation and response. The result, he argued, was objective literary criticism and an "empirical aesthetic."

Mauron's concept of the empirical was not really that of the English philosophical tradition. If anything, it was closer to that of American pragmatism: Mauron believed that the value of his analyses could be measured by their correspondence with so-called experimental results. His hypotheses, he felt, could be verified by empirical means. In this, he was perhaps most like the semiotician Peirce in his basic underlying assumptions. But the resemblance stops there. The method of literary analysis Mauron came to propose was in no way semiotic; nor, despite the claims of recent commentators, was it structuralist. It was also not Lacanian or deconstructivist, though related to both. It was, however, formalist, and from this and from the belief that psychoanalysis was an experimentally valid science came the sources of Mauron's claim

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that *psychocritique* was an objective methodology. But what exactly does this word “objective” mean in this context?

Today’s theoretical debates have made it almost impossible not to be self-conscious about using the terms objective and subjective as applied to literary criticism. The mind’s eye should see these words in quotation marks throughout this book, for the reader must continually remind himself or herself of the modern distrust of a distinction that Nietzsche (in *The Birth of Tragedy*) claimed to be of “no value whatever” in aesthetics. Yet, in *The Language of Criticism* (1966), John Casey has convincingly argued that the “objective–subjective dichotomy” has been the central dilemma of English criticism since Wordsworth. The last one hundred and fifty years, he believes, have produced only a series of failures to solve this dichotomy, mainly because of what he sees as an inadequate and even mistaken philosophy of the emotions that has demanded a choice be made between accepting literary response as subjective and seeking a scientific account of it. The habit of some literary critics – including Mauron – of using scientific language to describe aesthetic production and response is no guarantee of their theories’ objectivity: Eliot’s famous use of “catalyst,” “medium,” and “fusion” in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” does not really mask the subjective or romantic implications of his image.

Without disputing at all Casey’s argument about English criticism, I still find myself uneasy about those terms that even he initially placed in quotation marks. We can no longer assume, even in science, the objectivity of the observing mind. And since Hegel, the terms “object” and “subject” have themselves become problematic. In literary criticism too, who is going to decide, for instance, which is more objective: the application of an external “scientific” frame of reference (linguistics, psychoanalysis) or the rigorous, internal, formal analysis of structures within a work of art? Both methods lay claim to objectivity. Usually, today, a critical method that pretends to this status will argue that it is scientific and descriptive. What is meant by science is, however, rarely defined. Certainly science does not merely describe; it interprets its findings. The problem becomes how to go from textual description to interpretation. Usually some grid is applied to the descriptive findings, often one with scientific pretensions itself – anthropology or linguistics or psychoanalysis. These social or, as the French say, “human” sciences are often called upon to lend what is sometimes,

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in effect, only a spurious air of scientificity and objectivity to the interpretation, as if to suggest that the text itself demanded that particular orientation of reading.

Today the subjective and objective extremes are often discussed in terms of impressionism and formalism. As modern critical concepts, both of these could be said to have their roots in the theories of “art for art’s sake” and Kant’s “purposiveness without purpose.” As its name suggests, formalism presumes the precedence of form over content, at least in critical discussion. It does not deny that content exists, but chooses to limit its focus to the *ordering* of the content. In other words, form is the system of relations of parts within the work of art itself. In literary criticism, this may suggest an argument for the autonomy of art, in the sense of its liberation from the need to represent “reality,” be it moral or phenomenological. But to place the locus of aesthetic value on form is not to deny content, or its significance, as the detractors of formalism insist. It is true, however, that the intent of the artist regarding the meaning or function of his work is considered irrelevant to most formalist critics.

Modern critical impressionism also flourished in the last century among the same art for art’s sake purists. Their interest in the “sensibility” of the critic, in his openness to beauty, could be seen as the precursor of Eliot’s special trust in the poet as critic and even of F. R. Leavis’s faith in the critic’s intuitive response to art, free from formulated criteria of judgment. However, psychologists, scientists, mathematicians, and others have all argued that intuition is in fact the basic intellectual act at the origin of all more complex and objective rational structures. Even if this is so, the trusting of intuition alone remains the source of that definition of critical impressionism as interpretation that lacks public reference. Criteria of judgment and selection do exist, but in the form of personal, intuitively perceived norms. This is what critics like Leavis are often accused of today, usually by formalists who fail to see that the exercise of value judgments is perhaps an implicit part of the entire critical enterprise – even if only in the selection of the text to be examined or described.

The terms formalist and impressionist are often used as pejorative labels for critics who “limit” themselves to form or to personal response. In this study, they are intended to be merely descriptive of two general critical approaches. Formalism calls for, first of all,

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the ordered description of the internal relations of a work of art. Unlike structuralism, it does not depend on a linguistic orthodoxy; in this sense, it is intrinsic, not extrinsic. Insofar as it describes the patterns of a work of art, formalism could be called an empirical approach. If we can speak of criteria of judgment here, they would be the coherence and unity of the work itself. Although critical impressionism often pretends to be purely inductive, there are actually unspoken (perhaps because intuitive) norms, which are in this way extrinsic to the work of art. The result is less descriptive than evaluative. In both cases, however, the hermeneutic activity is similar. Interpretation is carried out according to some chosen orthodoxy, some set of rules that provides an authority, tacit or acknowledged. In this sense, all criticism is deductive, or “judicial,” to use Wellek’s and Warren’s terminology.

If the chosen orthodoxy is an organized body of knowledge, a science, or a philosophical system, we are more likely to accuse the criticism of being deterministic or a priori, especially if its hermeneutic grid feels as if it has been “imposed upon” the text. The choice of orthodoxy and its appropriateness to the text examined would seem important considerations. Charles Mauron came to adopt and adapt what he accepted as a scientifically validated orthodoxy – psychoanalysis. The reasons for this choice are to be found in a conflict in his early work between, on the one hand, his formalism and his trust in the scientific method, and on the other hand, an impressionistic, almost mystic trust in his intuitions as a reader of literature. The particular appropriateness of his choice lies in the fact that psychoanalysis itself can be seen as that most paradoxical of sciences, one that claims to offer an objective account, by means of inductive, empirical investigation, of the most subjective of human faculties, the unconscious. It is not surprising that Mauron should, therefore, be drawn to Freud as an authority to validate both his formalistic method of *psychocritique* (the empirical description of textual structures or networks of associated images) and his interpretation of those formal relations in terms of their unconscious origins in the psyche of the artist.

In addition to this, his early formalist concern for discovering scientifically the “Unity and Diversity in Art” (the title of his first published work in aesthetics) came to be tempered by an increasing respect for that which could be perceived only by what he called the critic’s “antennae” – in other words, for details that often defy

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historical or textual “proof.” As he wrote in “Mallarmé et le Tao”: “Mais l’expérience humaine dépasse largement et sans cesse le domaine étroit des certitudes ou mêmes des hypothèses scientifiques. Le simple et déjà si mystérieux sens esthétique tressaille en nous à des messages sans justification historique.” With the discovery of Freud, Mauron could then argue that these messages were definitely not to be ignored, for their formal patterns worked upon the critic’s unconscious and, in fact, derived from, and therefore revealed, the artist’s unconscious. *Psychocritique’s* concern for this level of message was what psychoanalysis served to validate but what actually existed, from the start, in all of Mauron’s inquiries into the formal structures of art intuitively perceived by the critic’s antennae. And this was to be the basis of what Mauron called his empirical aesthetic, his Freudian formalism.

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