

Introduction: Strangers to Ourselves: Psychoanalysis

Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan

A picture of the human mind as a unified whole that can achieve full awareness of itself has been central to western thought since the seventeenth century. The "cogito" or thinking self defines our humanity and our civility, our difference from animals chained to blind nature and uncontrollable instincts. In the early part of the twentieth century, the assurance of that self-description was disturbed by Sigmund Freud's book, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), which described a discovery that would become the centerpiece of a new discipline called psychoanalysis. His discovery was that the human mind contains a dimension that is only partially accessible to consciousness and then only through indirect means such as dreams or neurotic symptoms. The "unconscious," as he called it, is a repository of repressed desires, feelings, memories, and instinctual drives, many of which, according to Freud, have to do with sexuality and violence. In subsequent books and studies such as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, "A Case of Infantile Neurosis," *Three Essays on Sexuality*, *The Ego and the Id*, and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud argued that our mental lives derive largely from biological drives, that the highest achievements and ideals of civilization are inseparable from instinctual urges toward pleasure, constancy, and the release of excitation and energy. As each child grows and enters first the family then society, he or she learns to repress those instinctual drives and the conscious desires they instigate and to mold aggressive and sexual impulses as well as an initially grandiose sense of self to the demands of life with others. Repression is essential to civilization, the conversion of animal instinct into civil behavior, but such repression creates what might be called a second self, a stranger within, a place where all that cannot for one reason or another be expressed or realized in civil life takes up residence. This, for Freud, explains why people experience what he calls "uncanny" feelings of doubleness that consist of a sense that something strange coexists with what is most familiar inside ourselves. It also explains why we compulsively repeat certain gestures, desires, experiences, and self-induced situations that might be quite distressing but also compellingly unavoidable. We cannot help but do so because they are brought about by forces and drives within ourselves over which we exercise very little conscious control because they arise from something or somewhere that is beyond our control - the unconscious.

Freud discovered the unconscious by studying patients with neurotic symptoms which pointed towards unresolved conflicts between unconscious inclinations or

feelings and the repressive demands of the ego or conscious self. He noticed that such patients engaged in behavior that frequently embodied desires or fears (persistent phobic anxiety about animals, for example) whose repetitiveness suggested that the patient was in the grip of something outside his awareness or her control. Freud borrowed from his teacher Josef Breuer a method of analysis whereby patients would say whatever came to their minds regardless of how seemingly meaningless or unimportant. In this way, he found that patients divulged thoughts and feelings that had been kept repressed in the unconscious and hidden from the patient's own conscious view. One patient, for example, experienced a recurring fear of animals that turned out, through his free associations or thoughts, to refer to his childhood fear of his father, something he had repressed and forgotten.

In studying his patients, Freud realized that the unconscious often expresses itself in the form of dreams, since at night during sleep, the vigilance of the repressive ego in regard to unconscious desire is stilled. Dreams, Freud found, express wishes or desires that cannot find expression in waking life precisely because they are at odds with the requirements of the ego, which itself merely registers the requirements of the larger society. Unconscious wishes can find expression in dreams because dreams distort the unconscious material and make it appear different from itself and more acceptable to consciousness. The "dream work" displaces unacceptable material onto acceptable images, condenses several different though related unconscious elements into a single image, and turns drives into their opposites, so that they can elude censorship. A dream about not being able to serve a smoked salmon dinner to a friend might turn out to have nothing to do with dining but instead might refer to a wish not to help the friend gain weight and become more attractive to one's husband, who that very day, before the dream, mentioned how attractive he found the friend to be precisely because of her plumpness.

A similar process is at work, Freud discovered, in neurotic symptoms. They frequently displace desires, or anxieties, or drive energies that are unconscious onto expressive activities or compulsive thoughts. Such symptoms perform a variety of transmutative procedures on unconscious material, from compromise formation (the construction of an indirect expression that allows release of unacceptable drive energy while nonetheless honoring the imperatives of repression) to inversion (the conversion into its opposite of a desire or impulse). For example, someone raised in a strongly religious way that proscribes sexual activity may perform forbidden sexual acts ritualistically so as to seem to be respecting the norm while nonetheless attaining satisfaction. Or someone who feels great animosity toward a cold and distant mother may convert that feeling into its opposite, a fantasy that all women are themselves hostile and therefore unworthy of his love.

Other important terms in the study of symptom formation are fixation, splitting, introjection, and projection. Anxiety about entry into an adult world perceived as threatening of a too fragile sense of self or anxiety that awakens either troubling memories or drive energies will propel some people to fixate at an early state of development. They will remain attached to early forms of emotional life and sexual activity that are usually surpassed in the transition to adulthood. In some instances, for example, people who fear the passage to genital sexuality will continue to find gratification from other parts of their bodies or other activities than genital sex. Splitting is a way of dealing with anxiety by dividing the object of anxiety in two, one bearing all the negative feeling while the other embodies all the positive feelings

one wishes to substitute for the anxieties the object or situation provokes. Children may, for example, direct all of their aggression or hostility toward one parent while idealizing the other, and such splitting may be as much a response to the trajectory of their own drive energies as to external parental behavior. Finally, introjection and projection are terms used to describe how the self shapes itself by adapting models from outside itself and externalizes its own feelings by assigning them to others. If introjection brings in something from someone else, creating an ideal of that person within oneself, projection throws out something from within oneself and makes it seem as if it is a trait of someone else.

Freud spent most of his life studying the boundary and the dynamic movements between the conscious self or ego and the unconscious, which he later came to call the id. The id is the site of the energy of the mind, energy that Freud characterized as a combination of sexual libido and other instincts, such as aggression, that propel the human organism through life, moving it to grow, develop, and eventually to die. That primary process of life is entirely irrational, and it cannot distinguish images and things, reasonable objects and unreasonable or socially unacceptable ones. It is the secondary processes of the mind, lodged in the ego and superego or conscience, that bring reason, order, logic, and social acceptability to the otherwise uncontrolled and potentially harmful realm of the biological drives. But, according to Freud, the drives of the unconscious, though repressed, can never be quelled entirely. They emerge in dreams, and, when the rational part of the mind fails to handle them successfully, in the seemingly irrational behavior that is neurotic symptomatology (the fears, unjustified anxieties, and compulsive behaviors that indicate something out of joint in a personality). When conscious control breaks down altogether and drives and unconscious content are expressed directly, without any mediation by consciousness, one is in the realm of psychosis or schizophrenia, which Freud distinguished from neurosis by saying that neurosis maintains the relationship to an external reality while in psychosis that relationship breaks down altogether.

Freud insisted that sexuality was evident throughout life, from childhood on. The energy of sexuality is far from exclusively genital; it can also be anal or oral, Freud noted, and it can also be displaced onto fetish objects or substitutes that replace early desired objects with ones that avoid anxiety or are responses to trauma. In one famous case study, Freud analyzed an obsessional neurotic (known as the "Wolf Man" because of a dream he had about wolves in a tree staring at him) who developed a sexually invested fondness for military dress and regimen in response to early traumatic experiences regarding his sexual identity. His anxiety provoked him to displace his sexual drive away from human objects and onto fetish substitutes.

At the core of Freud's sexual theory is the so-called "Oedipus Complex," something Freud believed all children experience as a rite of passage to adult gender identity. As befitted his time, Freud was primarily concerned with the Oedipal trajectory of the male child (hence Oedipus rather than, say, Clytemnestra or Medea). All male children, Freud argued, experience an early attachment to the mother that is sexual in nature. Only the father's intervention, separating mother from child, prevents incest. All civilization is founded on the prohibition expressed in the father's intervention. The male child learns to give up his initial "pre-Oedipal" desire for and attachment to the mother; instead, he identifies with the father (instead of longing to be the father with his mother) and learns to desire other women than the mother. He becomes an adult male heterosexual (Freud's implicit norm).

Similarly, the female child experiences an early desire for the father which takes the form of a simultaneous desire to *be* her mother, to take her place as the father's sexual object, but she too learns to relinquish that desire and to identify with her mother and to seek other objects outside the family. The crucial process in gender formation is identification, the molding of a self from equations made between oneself and external objects through the internalization of images or models of those objects.

Psychoanalytic theory after Freud divides into two strands, one called object relations, the other neo-Freudianism. While object relations theory favors a model that does without instincts almost altogether and concentrates instead on the way the self interacts with its social world, especially the initial world of primary caretakers such as the mother, neo-Freudian theory in the work of Jacques Lacan especially argues that the instinctual drives and the unconscious are more essential to psychoanalytic work than the ego, which Lacan sees as a mirage that can never fully know and master the unconscious.

The theory of identification, which places greater emphasis on social relations at the expense of the instinctual drives, was especially appealing to the object relations school of psychoanalysis that came into being after World War II in Britain and America and is associated with such names as Melanie Klein, D. W. Winnicott, and Margaret Mahler. It is concerned less with the battle between the ego and the instinctual drives, a notion that some of the theorists reject outright, than it is with the way the relations between the child and its objects, especially the mother, during the pre-Oedipal period, shape its personality. The contours of self-identity are given or shaped by that primary relationship, by whether or not it is distant, cold, and frustrating, for example, or overwhelming and engulfing. The child's ability to separate successfully from its primary unity with the mother by building self-boundaries and appropriate mental representations of an external object world will determine what kind of personality he or she will possess - be it one yearning for fusion with objects that never fully satisfy its yearning or one dominated by a feeling of being compelled to flee from relationships that threaten to overwhelm its fragile self-boundaries.

Unlike Freud, object relations theorists consider the ego to be a major part of (if not the entire) personality. How it manages to construct an internal world for itself made up of introjected fantasy objects or projections of destructive feelings onto the world during the "pre-Oedipal" stage of development is more important for such theorists than the later Oedipal stage of passage into adult gender identity. Some consider the original separation from the mother to be a primary frustration that can never be assuaged; life's longings are defined by its schema. Others like Margaret Mahler see the relation to the mother more positively as providing a "beacon" that allows the child to emerge into the world from a primary symbiotic state. And others like Melanie Klein see the child constructing a world for itself through fantasies that allow it to distinguish its destructive from its affectionate feelings through introjection/projection and the splitting between good and bad internal objects. For a child, the mother consists of "part objects" like the breast or the face. Ultimately, the child learns to engage in "reparation," the restoration of whole objects and good relations that its own destructive impulses sundered during the process of separation, individuation, and growth. While object relations theory has been criticized for at times advancing an overly optimistic picture of "adaptation" of a debatably coherent "self"

to an unproblematic "environment," it has also inspired such pathbreaking work as Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*, a study of pre-Nazi literature that locates the origins of Nazism in a particular psychological formation that perceived women, communists, and Jews as external equivalents of internal boundary-threatening urges that had to be either violently expelled or regimented.

Neo-Freudianism enjoyed great popularity in France in the 1960s and 1970s and continues to be a viable school of literary criticism. In the 1950s and 1960s, Lacan developed a structuralist theory of psychoanalysis based on the linguistic theory of Saussure. Against object relations theory, Lacan argues that the ego is constructed through imaginary percepts and narcissistic fantasies, and it remains blind to its determination by the drives, the unconscious, and its placement and construction in/ by language. Before language assigns us an "I," we possess no sense of self. It is language that gives us identity (while simultaneously taking it away in the sense of something pre-given or internal). The unified self posited by object relations theory is an illusion. The child begins as fragmented drives, percepts, and attachments that eventually congeal into an imaginary identity at the "mirror stage" of development. It is through the child's original symbiotic relationship with the mother that he/she develops a false narcissistic sense of unity. The child assumes the mother is himself, and his primary desire is for her desire (of him). Desire and its realization only appear immediate, however, and what Lacan calls the Real, an impossible wholeness of self, plenitude of desire satisfaction (*jouissance*), and continuity of signifier and signified or word and object, is never possible. The mother is a congeries of part objects (*l'objet petit a*) and partial fulfillments like the breast, and the whole we imaginarily seek and imagine we have when we construct egos for ourselves is merely a way of concealing from ourselves the initial fissure or *beance* that separation from her installs permanently within our being. Indeed, our being is not founded on the mythic identity of the ego; rather it is founded on what Lacan calls our initial lack-of-being (*manque-d-etre*), the initial experience of being ripped out of an original imaginary fullness of being and separated from the object - the mother - that provided us with it. More real is our overdetermination by the drives, the unconscious, and the Symbolic Order of our culture, the social languages that identify us and lend us identities, all of which exceed consciousness and never assume the form of knowable or conscious identity (which, for Lacan, is always fantasmatic). Our identity is given to us from outside, and we are constitutively alienated. The imaginary or narcissistic character of all desire merely conceals this basic fault, this radical alterity or otherness, in human existence.

The mirror stage of dyadic symbiosis with the mother must be left behind as the child develops and enters that social world. The shattering of it occurs when the child is confronted with the father's "no," which is to say, with the incest taboo that declares the mother an inappropriate object. The child then learns to accept his/her place in the Symbolic Order, that symbolic language which assigns social roles and dictates proper behavior in society. That order is like a language, since it is defined as relations between terms (mother/father, mother/son, etc.) and by a lexicon that assigns meaning or identity according to the binary opposition of presence or absence (of terms). With the initiation of the Symbolic, the original desire for the mother is repressed, and Lacan compares this to the way the signified is made absent by the signifier, and is always beneath the bar in Saussure's algorithm: S/s. The acceptance of repression and the entry into the Symbolic is itself comparable to language in that

once one learns to name something, one accepts separation from it; by naming, one sacrifices the object, since the presence of the sign/word is the absence of the signified thing. The naming of objects separates one from them. The arrival of the Symbolic and the shattering of the Imaginary thus consists of the installation of a combined linguistic/psychological separation of the child both from its initial object, the mother, and from the undifferentiated matter of natural existence. We learn to be social, to have social identities, by learning to say no, to sacrifice or give up both the initial contact one has with the natural world and with one's first human objects. The mother's body is barred, and the desire for it is placed under the bar of the signifier and enters the unconscious. The small "o" other or initial object becomes the large "O" Other of the symbolic unconscious; it acquires meaning as what one cannot have and as that whose absence dictates the form of all subsequent desires, all the signifiers we pursue as hoped-for fillers for an initial unfillable absence. That bar can never be crossed, and all our desires throughout life will consist of attempts to come to terms with this separation, our "lack-of-being." The other side of the bar can enter our consciousness only in the form of substitutes, as metaphors that can indicate it only as/in its absence because the unconscious can never be present to the mind (except through substitute signifiers). Similarly, all desire is inherently meta-phoric, inherently a matter of a substitute object that stands in for the initially absent mother object, and because no metaphor can embody what we ultimately desire when we desire anything, we are condemned to slide along a chain of signifiers each of which is a metonymy, a part standing in for the whole we (always) miss. Thus, unlike object relations theory, which assumes a whole self is possible that would be transparent to itself and would be defined by a healthy ego, Lacan thinks that we are constitutively split from ourselves and that we can never possibly attain wholeness in the world of objects. That is a delusion of the ego (and of ego psychology, he would add, somewhat polemically). What we can learn is to accept frustration and to come to acknowledge the lack that defines our being. We exist in a chain of signifiers of desires that never arrive at the Real, the ever absent cause of desire which is the undifferentiatedness of nature, something we can never have access to from within society except through signifiers that distance it (substitute for it) as they name it.

Psychoanalytic literary criticism begins with Freud himself, whose "The Uncanny," in part a reading of Hoffman's horror story "The Sandman," can be said to inaugurate the critical genre. Freud notices that literary texts are like dreams; they embody or express unconscious material in the form of complex displacements and condensations. The same rule that he prescribes for dream interpretation, however, also applies to literature: it is not a direct translation of the unconscious into symbols that "stand for" unconscious meanings. Rather, literature displaces unconscious desires, drives, and motives into imagery that might bear no resemblance to its origin but that nonetheless permits it to achieve release or expression. Literature, as fiction, might even be said to demonstrate these very processes of representation-through-indirection at work. For Freud in "The Uncanny," fear of castration takes the form not of a literal image, but of a metaphoric substitute that displaces the protagonist's anxiety onto a fear of losing his eyes, a fear that is available for interpretation only because language displays the latent connection.

Freud and many later psychoanalytic critics were concerned with what they thought was the primary anxiety of patriarchal culture, the male child's fears as he moves from presexual childhood to sexual adulthood, a trajectory that necessarily

crosses the sexual relationship between his mother and his father. All of Nathaniel Hawthorne's fiction, for example, might be read in this light as embodying the Oedipal conflict between a son and a threatening father (as between Reverend Dimmesdale and Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter*). As object relations theory shifts attention toward the pre-Oedipal realm, however, so also does later psychoanalytic criticism focus more on the relational dynamics of psychosexual development and on children's relations to their mothers in patrocultural cultures that assign child-rearing work to women. Klaus Theweleit in *Male Fantasies*, for example, studies the representations of violence against women in literature by German ex-soldiers from World War I who would eventually become major supporters of Nazism and interprets them as expressions of hostility against mothers. The literary works are characterized by images of fear in regard to women perceived as being too powerful, fear that is displaced onto anxieties about having one's self-boundaries overwhelmed by a "red flood" of Bolshevism. Nazism would be the German response to that political threat of communist revolution, an erection of a rigid social order that was the equivalent of the psychological defense these males constructed to guard themselves against personal dissolution, what Theweleit calls "body armor." Theweleit sees the relation to the mother as more determining of these men's psychological identities than that to the father, who tends to be a peripheral figure in the literature. At stake in the literature is not an ego that does battle with a paternal superego or with unconscious urges for pleasure that meet repression; rather the literature depicts a self that never fully formed, never acquired a healthy relation to the world, because of abusive child-rearing practices in German society at the time. It is this that accounts for the enormous representational violence against women who might be construed as similarly maternal and similarly abusive of self-identity.

Lacanian criticism shifts attention to language and sees it and the unconscious as almost identical. Human desire is carried by signifiers which stand in for a lack that can never be filled in. It is in the signifiers then, in language itself, that the unconscious, what of the unconscious one can know, resides. Processes of signification of the kind that are frozen temporarily in works of literature constitute the human subject and determine the shape of its life - whether one neurotically and repetitively pursues the same signifier of a possibly completely fulfilled desire (a particular kind of sexual partner) or whether one renounces such pursuits and accommodates oneself to a more mundane destiny, for example. Such fulfillment is, of course, for Lacan, an impossibility; so literature always enacts the way the chain of signifiers simply eternally displaces an end to signification, the arrival of a real referent that would be the fulfillment of desire and the end of its displacement along a chain.

For example, Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms* hinges on a play on words in the title. About a wounded soldier who has an affair with a nurse who dies in the end while giving birth to their child (itself stillborn), *Arms* is about both bodily "arms" (as in the sexual embrace) and military "arms" (as in the guns that wound Jake, the hero). He wishes to escape from the military into the arms of the maternal Catherine, but he is obliged to say farewell to her arms in the end. The novel maps out the trajectory of development as Lacan describes it: the male child must learn to renounce the imaginary moment of fulfilled desire with the mother in order to accept separation and to enter the Symbolic Order. The bifurcating meanings of "arms" indicate a split in the narrative subject (the narrator shifts from "we" to "I" throughout) that testifies to the split within all human subjectivity between the

conscious self and the unconscious that determines that self and between the desiring self and the ultimately impossible fulfillment of that desire (in a return to the mother's arms). The imaginary identity (of self/(m)other) must be given up, and separation (the duality of meaning implied by the fact that one can only have metaphors and not real things or complete fulfillment) accepted.¹

Note

- 1 See Ben Stoltzfus, *Lacan and Literature: Purloined Pretexts* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), from whom we purloined this reading of the novel.