

“Knowing” the mystery: against reductionism

A statement about psychoanalytic literary criticism¹

Literature and other art forms are among the main means by which adults can get assistance in continuing their emotional education. The problem of whether these forms are used to confront experiences, or to avoid them, lies at the heart of the relation between art and the art- appreciator. I want to describe three distinct mental orientations toward aesthetic experience, which govern the way we make contact with works of art and consequently determine or limit what art can do for us.

The first of these is Linguistic Behaviourism, in which the basic assumptions of some cultural ethos are rigidified in to propaganda, resulting in impoverishment of imagination. At the moment, in literary criticism, this is exemplified by Structuralism and Deconstruction.

The phantasy behind Structuralism caricatures itself: once upon a time (it goes) there was an Author-God who was hiding away meaning in the form of a “secret” inside his artwork, which was a kind of fortress protected by a scholarly organisation of old-style academic guardians. “Once the Author is removed”, said Roland Barthes in *Image Music Text* (1977), “the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile.” Literature is “no longer protected” (inaugural lecture, 1977).

Structuralism deposes this supposed Author-God and establishes a ruling oligarchy of literary critics, who explain the “sign-system” governing cultural “codes” within which literature must now be interpreted. It is presented as an heroic enterprise restoring the status of “underprivileged” relationships in literature, and, in the manner of all pseudo-sciences, offers *explanations* rather than descriptions of phenomena. The codes, which of course merely express the mentality of their users, are treated as irrefutable facts of nature, through which the critic can uncover the “real” messages embodied in the writer’s unconscious assumptions, language, culture, and society. To support this, authoritarian and mechanistic views of the psychoanalytic process, such as the Lacanian, are employed: working under the aegis of a Big Daddy cultural god who lays down “the Word as the Law” (Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, 1977).

Pioneering linguistics has often observed that the surface grammar of a culture is secondary and sometimes even antagonistic to the *expressive* power of language, derived from its “deep grammar”, where meaning is generated, as opposed to instructions or information merely being transmitted. This distinction between symbol-for-

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mation and sign-convention is dismissed by Structuralism, which, in its “revolutionary” way, sets the clock back by making its object (as Tzvetan Todorov wrote) “the literary discourse rather than works of literature, literature that is virtual rather than real” (“Structural Analysis of Narrative”, *Novel*, No. III, 1969).

With the “return to close reading” of Deconstruction, the “intractable forces” which enslave the critic take on a sophisticated slipperiness. As Jonathan Culler puts it:

The demonstration that critics attempting to stand above or outside a literary domain in order to master it are caught up in the play of forces of the object they seek to describe—its tropological and transferential ruses—does not imply that deconstructive readings can escape these intractable forces. (Culler, *On Deconstruction*, 1983)

The mastery of the critic now consists not in his stable scientific viewpoint (as in original Structuralism), but in his acceptance of the “intractable forces” of the sign-system which masters him and consequently gives him that “paradoxical” self-mastery. Constantly aware that someone else may be coming along to deconstruct him, he pre-empts this manoeuvre by deconstructing himself - “sawing off the branch on which one is sitting” is a description which Culler accepts.

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Inevitably in this process, the hapless critic becomes what Barthes calls a “plaything” in “the war of fictions (jargons)”, “the dummy in the bridge game” (*The Pleasure of the Text*, 1976). His identity is swept aside by the critical hierarchy who have given him his pack of cards, text and buzz words. He proceeds in the hope that so long as he keeps talking and presses the buzz words frequently enough, he will be carried along by the stream of slogans which (in Derrida’s pun on “*différance*”) “differ and defer” all around him. If he does not lay down the slogan the slogan may be laid on him, by the punitive gods of propaganda. Hence the frantic sense of panic to remain at the forefront of fashion, by means of the prefix “post” if nothing else (post-structuralist, postdeconstructionist, postmodernist). And though the buzz words of five years ago were “signifier”, “signified” and “demystification”, it is not impossible that those of five years hence may be “mystery” and “unknowing” (George Steiner, “A New Meaning of Meaning”, *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 November 1985). But the mentality of the word-buzzer, the linguistic behaviourist, remains the same.

AN EXAMPLE OF the blindfolding quality of propaganda may be seen in a passage of “close” literary analysis in Jonathan Culler’s *The Pursuit of Signs* (1981). To illustrate the thesis that all structure is imposed by ways of reading or cultural codes external to the text, Culler gives the “ungrammaticality” of “My love is a red, red rose” (sic): “readers suspend the reference to actual roses but do so in favour of a reference to the woman’s precious and fragile beauty.” He concludes that “The interpretation of ‘my love is a red, red rose’ is based on the recognition of a code.”

The question is, why is the line misquoted (twice)? The poem is not difficult in a

lexical or syntactical sense. “My love is like a red, red rose” is the first line of one of the simplest and most famous lyrics in the English language. It is difficult in an *emotional* sense: a reader who is already committed to the code (whether personal or cultural) in which flowers, women, beauty and weakness are all tied up together, will be unable to see that the line expresses strength and quality of passion, not preciousness or fragility. He will be unconsciously forced to observe, not the actual words of the poem, but some substitution which fits his reductive framework. He “covers” the text with a code of his own (“covering” being one of Barthes’ words for a critical metalanguage). Misquotation is an odd basis from which to discuss “ungrammaticality”, but the rhythm alteration caused by the misquotation helps to disguise the way the word “dread” is hidden in “red, red” - the terror which is integral to passionate experience, and part of what the woman symbolises in this poem. This deconstruction of “My love is like a red, red rose” illustrates clearly how propulsion by propaganda, and scrabbling for little bits of evidence to support an ideology, not only leads to poor scholarship, but also prevents literature from being used for learning from experience.

The nearest the behaviourist critic comes to an insight is in his sad and deep-rooted self-contempt. His double message is: “You’re a helpless robot only you don’t know it; I’m a robot and I do know it.”

In *The Genesis of Secrecy* (1979), Frank Kermode lamented the impotence of academic criticism’s “hermetic tricks” in the face of the enigmatic text’s “mystery or secrecy”: “our sole hope and pleasure is in the perception of a momentary radiance, before the door of disappointment is firmly shut on us.” His lament was that no key was available which would open all the doors at once—the ultimate interpretation. But he did not expose the impoverished viewpoint which, like Casaubon in *Middlemarch* with his “key to all mythologies”, regards literature as a sort of fortified institution guarding a “secrecy” in the first place; nor did he distinguish between mystery and secrecy, but regarded them as synonymous. Yet it is the mentality of the secret-seeker which invites Linguistic Behaviourism, taking advantage of a void in academia’s self-knowledge.

This intrusive voyeurism is continuously analysed and exorcised by creative writers. Shakespeare dramatised it through Polonius, who sets off to “find/ Where truth is hid, though it were hid indeed/ Within the centre”, and Hamlet condemns the hermetic procedures of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern who try to “pluck out the heart of my mystery.” Milton imaged it in the little devils who “Rifled the bowels of their mother earth/ For treasures better hid”. As a mode of denying mental pain and avoiding real experience, it is an eternal aspect of the human condition.

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The reductions of behaviourism appeal to the provocativeness of the aged hippy in the cultural world. But a far more seductive and widely accepted species of reductionism is represented by the mentality of soft-centred humanism. “Softhumanism”, as it could be called, is characterised by its air of benevolent maturity, its good intentions towards art, and its radiant complacency. It bewails the delinquency and intolerance

of Structuralism, and functions instead under the aegis of a comforting Big Mummy goddess of culture. The underlying phantasy of softhumanism is that cultural experience is equivalent to playing with a soft toy. This must be carefully but indulgently monitored according to the British regulations for toy safety, in a confined play-space purpose-built for the imagination." The life of phantasy is "only natural", and when a suitably watchful, really "adult" eye is kept upon it, there is nothing to be afraid of, because nothing can happen.

IN A RECENT REVIEW of a book by Charles Rycroft, Rosemary Dinnage said that artists had been "scared away" in the past by psychoanalysis's attitude to the imagination. Freud was "dark and pessimistic" about phantasy-life, but now, "As Rycroft says, Winnicott's enlargement of psychoanalytic theory to allow a real place for imagination and culture is the most important step in this field for thirty years" ("Out of the in-fighting", *Times Literary Supplement*, 13 September 1985).

Certainly, the Winnicottian theory of the "potential" or "transitional" space in cultural relationships is one of the most influential and exemplary amongst psychoanalytically-oriented softhumanists. In essence, this "intermediate area of experience . . . which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.)" is a halfway house between infantile "fantasy" and adult "shared reality" (being the sum of other people's phantasies) which is too harsh to be fully accepted (D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 1971). This quantitative compromise between two poles of delusion is taken to be an ideal model for creative experience. Relationships with art are seen as a type of necessary indulgence, an extended sucking of the blanket or the teddy bear, which has to be allotted appropriate time and space-not too little and not too much. They provide "relief" from "the strain of relating inner and outer reality", for mental health depends on "loyalty to a delimited area of society, perhaps the local bowls club."

The blanket, the bowls club, the safari park-these are the implicit theatres for imaginative activity offered by softhumanist imagery, in lieu of passionate involvement. The "intermediate area" would appear to be something no liberal, hard-working, theatre-going, child-raising intellectual could possibly object to: how grateful we should be for this vision of imminent "relief", of "retreat for relaxation", which we can attain by playing with our mental teddy bears, using our imagination just like the artists do! Strange that somewhere at the back of one's mind is an odd sense of dissonance with the image which actual artists and poets seem to have of their imaginative activity. Instead of Winnicott's "neutral zone" where one can be safely "lost in play", Milton has some peculiar idea of a "void and formless Infinite", a "flight/Through utter and through middle darkness borne", and a place where "celestial Light" "plants eyes" and irradiates "the mind through all her powers."

If only Milton had *known* that the imagination is a place for retreat and relaxation, he need not have been so worried about Satan or those other internal gods of hate who tore the poet Orpheus to pieces. Yet the "enlarged" vision of softhumanism assumes that artists are "scared" (rather than just bored and despairing) of having

their work “explained away.” So committed is it to ensuring that imagination stays in its place, as a decorative relic of something we need no longer be ashamed and afraid of, that the possibility of internal disturbance and passionate response remains safely outside its sphere of conception.

Few are the works of literature which have escaped interpretative reduction to a “play between” such familiar alternatives as imagination and reality; nature and culture; perversion and normality; infantile wishes and adult rationality. The essence of the softhumanist mentality is to take a pair of long-established but unsatisfactory conceptual poles and to reduce the work of art to an interplay or compromise *between* them. An inevitable offshoot from this is the phantasy that the reader or viewer “completes” the artist’s work, which has been left in a sort of unbalanced limbo, not so much from incapacity as from a touching recognition that he needs a really cultivated recipient, in order to “feel real” (Winnicott).

Unconscious denigration of the artist’s passionate and revolutionary symbolic creations has liberated many connoisseurs from the frustrations of uncreativity. Peter Fuller, for example, in *Art and Psychoanalysis* (1980) - backing his argument with Ernst Gombrich, Winnicott, and Marion Milner’s *On Being Unable to Paint* - associates the inability to draw with a heightened cultural sensibility which has difficulty conforming with old-fashioned standards of object representation, owing to a new recognition of “a critical phase in the infant-mother relationship” in our times.

Gombrich himself, in *Meditations on a Hobby-Horse* (1963), describes the “wobbly glass” technique of perception, by means of which the “cultural institution” can enable “mature art” to grow. It is the “institution” of art connoisseurs who prescribe what is and is not an “aesthetic attitude”: “We find repellent what offers too obvious, too childish, gratification. It invites regression and we do not feel secure enough to yield.” When the artist paints a picture which is too “soft” or “perfect” (by which Gombrich seems to mean “pornographic”), the critic can correct it by literally putting a piece of wobbly glass in front of it, so converting it into mature “crunchy” art: “We have to become a little more active in reconstituting the image, and we are less disgusted.” This is how the connoisseur “shares in the artist’s secret”; while the self-critical artist, with a mature sense of the consumer’s demands, knows to “apply the wobbly glass” himself.

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ONE SEARCHES IN VAIN for a real alternative to these endless shifting manoeuvres of relativism and compromise, based on their model of infantile pre-genital (oral and anal) gratification. Softhumanism is characterised by prefixes such as “un- , de-, re-”, indicating a thorough backwards and forwards mastication, until the wobbly glass reflects satisfactorily and the work of art is tailored to fit cultured consumption. In the words of Anton Ehrenzweig: “The ego rhythm of differentiation and dedifferentiation constantly swings . . . between the inside and outside worlds” (*The Hidden Order of Art*, 1967). The artist is seen as veering between psychotic fragmentation and a mature realisation of his anal preoccupations.

This balancing process is known in softhumanist jargon as “playfulness”: a term structurally equivalent, for this mentality, to “demystification” in Structuralism. The ultimate standard is “maturity”, which is synonymous with “acceptability”. But the point and function of art is to be *incompletely* mature, so that there is still room for the audience to be playful. Thus according to Meredith Anne Skura (*The Literary Use of the Psychoanalytic Process*, 1981), our duty “as professional readers” is to set up “a body of alternative meanings . . . out of which we carve our final, acceptable meanings “namely, those which correspond to “the light of sophisticated, adult ways of thinking.” For, as Peter Fuller points out, “non-theological explanations are now possible” for irritating notions such as “transcendence”, “mysticism”, etc., so that at last we can “understand the aesthetic in a materialist fashion”.

Shelley said that poets are “the unacknowledged legislators of the world”; but mature readers understand that he simply didn’t know how to locate his cultural experience. Instead, the salvation of civilisation has arrived in the person of the soft-centred psychoanalyst or critic, who knows the “real place for imagination and culture” (Rosemary Dinnage), and can show the artist the way to the local bowls club. In this way, art can be explained and experience be avoided. Our well-balanced professional interpreters can use the wobbly glass of interpretation to excavate the “acceptable” meanings from art’s primitive material. That is: they know, and can tell us, just how much and how long and where we may suck our “transitional” blankets, without ourselves becoming unacceptable.

THE QUESTION ARISES, is there any alternative to reductionism in its various forms? In academic criticism, the distinction is rarely made between ideas and ideologies. It is usually assumed that interpretation, or the imposition of an ideology of some sort, is inevitable and the only way to *write about* a work. Declarations of engagement in non-interpretative, non-evaluative forms of criticism are regarded with condescension, as evidence of the inability to recognise one’s own pet ideology. This is so even though there is a general agreement that one’s felt awareness or emotional experience of literature is in some way a *different thing* from a formulated interpretation, however comprehensive or up-to-date this may be.

Alignment with the “mystery” of art is distinct both from verbal excavation of the “secrecy” and from benevolent compromise. The cognitive implications of an authentic relationship with art are antithetical to those of linguistic behaviourism and of idealised passionlessness, for both critic and reader. “One day men will learn to think of sanity as an aesthetic achievement”, prophesied Adrian Stokes hopefully in 1964. By “sanity” I take him to mean “health” in the sense of the mind’s capacity for development, the ability to digest food for the soul and hence for thought-processes to operate. In this context, the idea of “the aesthetic” refers to the area of creative, passionate relationships, whether within the fine arts or psychoanalysis, intimate personal relations or whatever. Aesthetic experience - the ability to enter into passionate response in some field of communication in life - and the capacity for mental devel-

opment, belong to the same realm of mental life.

In literary criticism, as in related activities, the mentality of symbolic congruence, or alignment with mystery, is more difficult than any form of hermeneutics both intellectually and emotionally, though in a sense based on art's openness. Its underlying metaphor, by contrast with the automatism of behaviourism and the spineless shiftings of softhumanism, is the generation of *new realms* of meaning, through a pattern of dynamic tensions. In Coleridge's words, it "dissolves in order to recreate". The new space which is envisaged is not the compromising "potential space" of softhumanism, but Keats's "vale of soul-making". The rhythm of its creation is not an alternating but a progressive one of development and reformation, as in Byron's "feeling of a former world and a future".

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This is an area of mental life which, though essentially and universally part of the human condition, is modelled most clearly by the artist. As Susanne Langer pointed out, the artist's central characteristic is the "intuitive recognition of forms symbolic of feeling, and his tendency to project emotive knowledge into such objective forms" (*Feeling and Form*, 1953). She adds: "The great cognitive value of symbols is that they may present ideas transcending the interpretant's past experience." Through the artist's capacity to enter a symbolic relationship with his subject, a container for meaning is evolved which transcends any preconceptions. And the point about symbolic relationships is that they are themselves generative, not static. They present, as Langer puts it, the "life" of ideas, the "matrix of mentality", a dynamic psychic network through which the responsible reader or viewer may also transcend his previous knowledge. Artistic form, potentially at least, generates artistic reception, from the context of passionate response.

THE USUAL ACADEMIC CONCERN with "accounting for" the art-form does not engage with the problem of *seeing* that form in the first place. The kind of observation which art requires is an intimate involvement, an act of partaking, and also an act of being taken. In "The Luxury and Necessity of Painting", Adrian Stokes wrote:

The great work of art is surrounded by silence. It remains palpably 'out there', yet none the less enwraps us; we do not so much absorb as become ourselves absorbed. (*Three Essays on the Painting of Our Time*, 1961)

The complementary movements of exploring the inside of the art-object and at the same time being explored oneself, then returned to the outside again, are dramatised by Keats in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." This "envelopment and incorporation" (Stokes) is the process of artistic cognition. Yet art is often, perhaps usually, not known in an artistic way; as Langer says of the daydreaming listener to music - he goes away with "no musical insight, no new feeling, and actually *nothing heard*".

This is the plight not just of the literary critic encased in a reductive framework,

but also of the general reader who finds it difficult to hold in his mind the total art-symbol, which has at some level moved him deeply, in a way which enables real thinking to take place. In terms of real hearing and real seeing, both ideologies and daydreams constitute what Coleridge called “superinduced” preconceptions. The problem lies in the mental restructuring which passionate congruence demands of the percipient. Passion, unlike a single emotion, is inseparable from Form - from pattern, dimensionality, and the organic rhythm which Langer describes as “the preparation of a new event by the ending of a previous one.... Everything that prepares a future creates rhythm.” In order to align himself with the mystery of the art-symbol, the appreciator has to allow its rhythm-its developmental logic to carry him into a “new event” in the life of his mind.

Everyone agrees that there are “no rules” for this process of authentic recognition when - in Emily Brontë’s words - “the ear begins to hear and the eye begins to see”; when “knowing about” something is (in the words of Wilfred Bion) superseded by “an act of faith in the formless infinite” (*Attention and Interpretation*, 1970). But the mental stance which Keats defined as “negative capability”, and which leads to the type of receptive perception that poets call inspiration, has been recognised by others as transcending the standard softhumanist polarity of “thought” versus “intuition”, and establishing the aesthetic foundation of, creative mental activity as a thing-in-itself.

Thus Langer describes the musician who strives to “think music”, driven by a sense of “moral obligation towards the Idea”: the “Idea” being the “fundamental form of the piece” which makes a live link between composer and performer. Donald Meltzer describes the strenuous anxiety of the analyst who tries to “hold” the patient’s dream in his mind while allowing it to “evoke a dream” in himself, rather than immediately interpreting and packaging it: “we should strive to match the poetic diction of the dream . . . with a poetry of our own”, by “putting order” not into the dream itself, but into “the confusion in our own minds” (*Dream Life*, 1984). Adrian Stokes stated the problem of creative art criticism in the terms of recalling and holding the “feel” of a dream which is also “the ‘feel’ of our own structure”:

Appreciation is a mode of recognition: we recognise but we cannot name, we cannot recall by any effort of will: the contents that reach us in the terms of aesthetic form have the “feel” of a dream that is otherwise forgotten.

Creative “recall” is achieved not by superinducing interpretations, but by describing the “feel” of a work as it takes shape and shapes our own mental structure: following the directives of its deep grammar rather than its academic surface grammar. The viewer who “contemplates and follows out” these dynamic lines which draw him both inside and outside the art-object becomes (Stokes continues) “in touch with a process that seems to be happening on our looking”. This process is identification with the commanding form of the art-symbol, the underlying Idea, the governing matrix of passion which directs all its tensions and motifs. In creative criticism the “deep-laid

symbol” of Form (Stokes) is *presented*, through an answering symbolic form, rather than substituted by a reductive framework. It is a process not of symptomatic or egocentric self-expression but of self-knowledge in the making.

In essence, what the creative critic does is to feed from the artist, in much the same way that Stokes describes Turner feeding and being fed by his painting, “pressed up against the visionary eye” (*Painting and the Inner World*, 1963). He follows the movements of the artist, not in the literal or technical sense of how he painted or wrote it, but in the abstract or essential sense of “thinking the music” of its psychic rhythm. He allows the structure of his mind to develop in response to the governing Idea. In this way he learns to hold the “dream” which is otherwise disturbing and dislocating to a non-reductive mentality.

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Art’s mystery, as opposed to secrecy, responds only to passionate congruence through answering symbolic structures. It requires authentic experience on the part of the appreciator-not in the past, not in the sense of “knowing about”, but in the sense of coming-to-knowledge at the time of response. Then each time the mystery becomes “known”, vision expands, and the generative guiding function of poetry as the legislature of the world is fulfilled.

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