Poetry and phantasy

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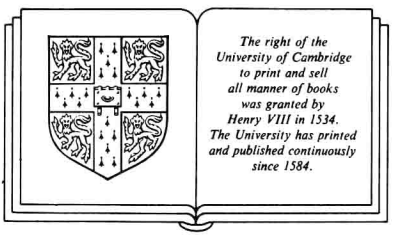

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CONTENTS

I

POETRY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

Then as th'earths inward narrow crooked lanes
Do purge sea waters fretfull salt away,
I thought, if I could draw my paines,
Through Rimes vexation, I should them allay.
John Donne, 'The Triple Foole'

A strip of parchment, part of MS Rawlinson D.913 in the Bodleian Library, contains twelve medieval lyrics. One of these is now called 'The Maiden in the Moor'. It was a popular, secular song, and has been dated as between 1330 and 1360 (see list of texts). The text is very much a modern construction, the manuscript giving it in prose and without spelling out the repetitions after the second verse. 'Well' means good, 'mete' means food, the 'primerole' is the primrose; 'chelde' is not chilled but a Southern form for cold; 'welle spring' is 'not a "well" in the modern sense (which would suggest human habitation) but the source of a stream'; 'bour' does not imply a place closed with foliage but means simply a lady's chamber (Burrow 1977, p. 3):

Maiden in the mor lay,
In the mor lay,
Sevenight fulle ant a –
Sevenight fulle ant a –
Maiden in the mor lay,
In the mor lay,
Sevenights fulle ant a day.

Well was hir mete,
What was hir mete?
The primerole ant the –
The primerole ant the –
Well was hir mete,
What was hir mete?
The primerole ant the violet.

Well was hir dring,
What was hir dring?
The chelde water of the –
The chelde water of the –
Well was hir dring,
What was hir dring?
The chelde water of the welle spring.

Well was hir bour,
What was hir bour?
The rede rose ant the –
The rede rose ant the –
Well was hir bour,
What was hir bour?
The red rose ant the lilie flour.

The poem does not fit together. Why should a virgin live on a moor for a week? And why should the text, having told us three times that it was a week, suddenly add it was a week and a day? Why should she eat primroses and violets, and how can these be good food? We can understand drinking springwater as good (it is now marketed in expensive bottles, even in Britain) but it is disconcerting that her 'bour' or bedroom should turn out to be red roses and lilies. And what about the form of the poem, the questions and answers which stay alive now only in the oral tradition of schoolchildren? It begins with a statement in verse one but, after starting verse two with a statement, moves without anticipation into a question ('What was hir mete?'), half answers the question, repeats the statement and the question, and then completes the answer to the question. Even if this is simply an oral convention, incremental repetition,

The chelde water of the –
The chelde water of the –
. . .
The chelde water of the welle spring,

the uncompleted meaning or *aposiopesis* becomes a kind of innuendo which leaves other *words*, unspoken words, floating in the gap opened up before the closure of the last line. What words?

After remarking how open the text is, D. W. Robertson says it 'makes perfectly good sense' if it is given a patristic reading, in terms of the teaching and symbolism of the Church fathers ('the number seven indicates life on earth', 1950, p. 27). E. Talbot Donaldson cites Robertson's interpretation but says 'I cannot find that the poem, as a poem, makes any more "sense" after exegesis than it did before'

(1970, p. 151). A reading which drew on the psychoanalytic tradition would be able to suggest two lines for inquiry. One might propose that nature and landscape in the poem represent the maternal body (in dreams, 'landscapes . . . are invariably the genitals of the dreamer's mother', Freud *SE* v, p. 399) in which case the maiden appears to be narcissistically closed in on herself and the satisfaction of her own needs. Another might stress that the maiden is spoken *about* in the poem, either by a speaker who asks and answers their own questions or in a dialogue between two speakers. If this is a dialogue between two men (and it is not certain), then the text will take its place along with many others which envisage a woman as an object in exchange between two men ('Well was hir bour, / What was hir bour?'), an effect analysed by Freud in his account of dirty jokes (*SE* VIII, pp. 97–100). Either psychoanalytic reading would supplement the location of the text in a traditional ideological context by which women are construed in relation to nature (eating flowers, sleeping in them) while men are seen to partake of culture (talking about women).

The problem of reductiveness

There is now no alternative to reading literature in some relation to psychoanalysis, a fact increasingly recognised among most of those concerned with literary study. To those who respond to any mention of psychoanalysis in application to literature with McEnroe-like cries of 'You cannot be serious', I can only reply by asking them to suspend their disbelief. This, initially, for two reasons. One is that conventional literary criticism already assumes a psychology for the human individual, and a questionable psychology at that, as I shall argue shortly. A second is that psychoanalysis, perhaps because it seems to be so threatening to received opinion, has often been misrepresented and misunderstood. Accordingly, the first two chapters here will be general and theoretical discussion, beginning with the issue of whether psychoanalysis as a framework for reading poetry is inevitably *reductive*.

Conventional literary criticism, for all its pluralism, generally retains the historical author as centre for its theoretical framework. In so doing it commits itself to a psychology and a view of 'Man'. When F. R. Leavis writes that someone 'is a poet because his interest

in his experience is not separable from his interest in words' (1972, p. 17), a number of assumptions are being made. The poet stands outside language and outside his own experience able to take an interest in both from a point beyond them. This poet is conceived in terms of a self-consciousness fully present to itself and thus able to inspect its own experience, experience in which there is no hidden or unconscious quality. Proceeding on this basis literary criticism must see poetry in terms of what psychoanalysis describes as the levels of the conscious and the pre-conscious – in this psychology there is no room for the work of the unconscious. And, as source and author of his poetry, the poet is simply taken for granted. He is there and, one has to add, a man.

Psychoanalysis undeniably aims to put the human subject in question, to see 'Man' as a variable construct rather than something given. Yet often psychoanalytic writing came to the discussion of literature in a reductive way which did not challenge but rather confirmed inherited notions about 'Mankind'. Instead of referring to conscious and pre-conscious intentions it referred to the (supposed) unconscious intentions of a text's historical author, thus leaving conventional ideas about authorship untouched. One of the first critical texts to break with this is Roland Barthes's essay on 'Racinian Man'. Barthes's analysis refuses to compete with the 'excellent psychoanalytic study of Racine, by Charles Mauron' and avoids 'inferring from the work to the author and from the author to the work'. Instead its intention is to attempt from the texts themselves to reconstruct 'a kind of Racinian anthropology, both structural and psychoanalytic' (1964, p. vii). So the way is opened for a return to what – it is argued – is the main conception of aesthetic texts in psychoanalysis: not as expressions by an author but as occasions for phantasy to be shared by a reader.

Anne Clancier's *Psychanalyse et critique littéraire* lists seven kinds of psychoanalytic approach to literature (see 1973, p. 39):

1 the study of the author considered as individual to be psychoanalysed;
2 the study of the process of creation as a form of play, day-dream or night-dream or joke;
3 the study of literature treated as a form of interpretation to which psychoanalysis can supply its discovery of a deeper meaning beneath the apparent meaning;
4 the study of the reader, whose identifications and pleasure may be analysed;
5 the study of fundamental symbols;

6 the psychoanalysis of the hero or heroine in a narrative, novel, or play;
7 the study of genres in relation to wit, day-dream, the uncanny.

These seven kinds (see also Wright 1984) really amount to four, as Terry Eagleton has suggested:

> Psychoanalytical literary criticism can be broadly divided into four kinds, depending on what it takes as its object of attention. It can attend to the *author* of the work; to the work's *contents*; to its *formal construction*; or to the *reader*. (1983, p. 179)

According to this categorisation, the present study attends to 'the work's *contents*' and its implied effect on 'the *reader*' rather than 'the *author*' or 'its *formal construction*'. Saussure's linguistics breaks down the common sense notion of words by distinguishing between the signifier and the signified, that is, between the level of the shaped sound and that of the concept or meaning, a distinction in effect between the means of representation and the represented. My earlier book on poetry, *Poetry as Discourse* (1983), was directed at the level of the signifier in poetry and argued that in the poetic tradition from the Renaissance on, the formal features of poetic language, especially rhyme and metre, were organised so as to draw attention from the poem to 'the poet', to give the effect of an individual voice 'really' speaking. Intended in many ways as a sequel to this previous work and relying frequently on its analysis of the formal properties of the tradition, *Poetry and Phantasy* will be directed mainly at the level of the signified in poetry and at the poetic text considered as a potential vehicle for phantasy. Although ultimately a conceptual distinction between signifier and signified must remain arbitrary in relation to the working of any particular text (the issue of the particularity of the text will be taken up again in the concluding chapter), it becomes less arbitrary and more justifiable when texts are grouped together, as they will be here. It will be argued that the poetic tradition's commitment to voice and individualism in its formal properties is carried through at the level of meaning.

A willingness to mobilise psychoanalysis in the study of literature is always felt to risk being reductive, and this is an issue that must be confronted at once. The charge of reductiveness presumes (not without some warrant in the past) that the psychoanalytic tradition sees its relation to literature as corresponding to that between reality and appearance so that the specific effect of literature is dismissed as a mere appearance beneath which psychoanalytic interpretation dis-

covers the real meaning. This presumed relationship has had different consequences according to whether it has been understood in terms of truth or in terms of the nature of literature, and they will be discussed separately here.

On the question of truth, psychoanalysis has been considered reductive in so far as it has claimed to be an absolute metalanguage able to speak the truth denied to its object, literature, and against which literature can be 'read off' as symptom or illustration. However, to invoke psychoanalysis at present does not provide any guarantees of truth – far from it. Terry Eagleton (for example) says that 'What Freud produces, indeed, is nothing less than a materialist theory of the making of the human subject' (1983, p. 163). But such belief – one that goes no further than underwriting the theoretical possibility of psychoanalysis – must be measured against the scepticism of Karl Popper (for example), who writes:

> And as for Freud's epic of the Ego, the Super-ego, and the Id, no substantially stronger claim to scientific status can be made for it than for Homer's collected stories from Olympus. (1969, p. 38)

Psychoanalysis has not yet achieved the impersonal status of a scientific discourse, and this is signalled by the fact that it is still equated very much with the work of a single author, Sigmund Freud. For the purposes of this present study the scientific status of psychoanalysis has been bracketed.

Even if the truth (or otherwise) of psychoanalysis is put to one side, there is still the question of the 'strategic' effect of psychoanalysis on literature – what it enables or prevents literature from saying. It is felt that the nature of literature is betrayed when it appears within the purview of psychoanalysis. This sense of reductiveness is discussed forcefully and succinctly in Shoshana Felman's introduction to *Literature and Psychoanalysis* (1977, pp. 5–10), which will be taken here as a typical statement of the position.

Felman announces two possible views of the connection between psychoanalysis and literature. In the first, psychoanalysis regards itself as occupying 'the place of a *subject*, literature that of an *object*' (p. 5), a relation like that of Hegel's master and slave such that psychoanalysis claims authority as 'the sole window' (p. 8) through which we perceive reality. Accordingly, 'the psychoanalytic reading of literary texts precisely *misrecognizes* (overlooks, leaves out) their literary specificity' (p. 6). In the second view, that of the literary critic,

'literature is a subject, not an object'; and, since 'literature tells us that authority is a *language effect*' (p. 6), literature will tend to deconstruct the fantasy of authority borne by psychoanalysis, by showing that 'psychoanalysis itself is equally a body of language' (p. 6). From this basis Felman's project is not to reverse the supposed mastery of psychoanalysis over literature but to displace it, avoiding 'the very structure of the opposition, mastery/slavery' (p. 7).

There are, I believe, two related errors here that represent very well the widespread feeling that psychoanalytic readings are reductive. The first is the assumption that literature somehow exists 'in itself' as literature, as a subject, as something that tells us (for example) that 'authority is a *language effect*' (p. 8). But literature does not exist like that; it always exists as an object produced and reproduced in interpretations and contexts of reading (whether these are explicitly acknowledged or not) and is silent – cannot tell us anything – outside these. And since a text 'can always mean *some thing* to someone else' (Ray 1984, p. 142) and never loses the capacity to exceed any given reading, then *all* readings are reductive, all inevitably misrecognise the specificity of the literary text. As André Green points out in a defence of psychoanalytic readings, 'No interpretation can avoid constraining the work, in the sense that it necessarily forces it into the frame provided by a certain conceptual approach' (1979, pp. 19–20). The full text 'in itself', outside interpretation, is an impossible object.

A related error now appears. For if literature does not say anything apart from the power of the various discourses in which it is produced, then Felman's either/or cannot apply, that is, either the authority of psychoanalytic readings or literature 'in itself' which deconstructs that authority. Instead the choice is between the competing power and effects of the *different* discourses in which literature is produced at a given conjuncture (to affirm that a text is produced in the present is not to renounce the fact that the text so produced is always a historical text historically inscribed). In the prevailing circumstances of literary criticism the main option is between the institutionalised power of the conventional mode of interpretation and the challenge of various kinds of more radical criticism.

This argument does not exhaust the problems associated with the couple psychoanalysis/literature, starting with the reminder, 'But psychoanalytic theory is itself a text'. Thus, even if one explicitly brackets out the truth or falsity of psychoanalysis and even if it is

conceded (as I think it must be) that all literary analysis constructs its object, the text, in terms of another discourse that inevitably stands apart from literature as a metalanguage, what are the limitations of psychoanalytic discourse in literary criticism? Rather than overload theoretical introductions at this point, I merely note these problems here to defer their discussion to the last chapter. We can still move forward on the basis that an application of psychoanalysis is better than the prevailing tradition.

Though under growing attack, conventional literary criticism continues to be deployed as the dominant discourse within which literature is constructed and where it takes on its meaning, force and consequence. Four features of this can be singled out. (1) Its method is impressionistic, self-contradictory and inexplicit (see Widdowson 1982, chapters 9 and 10). (2) It closes down the literary text by ascribing the work/play of meaning in it to the 'complex experience' of a supposedly full human subject, the historical author. (3) In accepting the category of 'experience', both in relation to the author and to the content of literature, it repeats uncritically the everyday assumptions of 'common sense'. (4) And, finally, in doing this, conventional literary criticism practises a conservative politics since it treats gender relations as natural, given, unalterable. On these four grounds the reading of literature determined in conventional criticism is strongly reductive and so, it can be argued, a psychoanalytic reading is both preferable and perhaps less reductive:

(1) Because it takes scientific discourse as its model, the psychoanalytic tradition offers a consistent, systematic and precise conceptual organisation. Although the rigour of this coherence entails the risk of premature closure, it carries by the same token the advantage of being unmistakably *explicit*, and consequently is a discourse that puts itself in question rather than presumes itself as given, along with 'common sense'. In the conventional account, literature is already seen as pre-eminently fictive, as fantasy. For example, as a first move in defining literature Helen Gardner's *In Defence of the Imagination* cites with approval C. S. Lewis's view that 'In reading great literature I become a thousand men [*sic*] and yet remain myself' (1982, p. 35). If in its way the prevailing account is correct to approach literature with the common sense notion of fantasy as fictional escapism, there may be at present no alternative to trying to deconstruct this by rethinking it systematically in terms of what psychoanalysis promises to analyse as phantasy.

(2) In denying the full and unified subject, in asserting that the subject and 'experience' are not given but constructed as an effect of the process of the unconscious, psychoanalysis conceives the subject as layered in an interaction multiply determined or overdetermined between different levels and mechanisms in the psyche (the 'stages' of oral, anal and genital; the Oedipal transition; the dynamic of ego, super-ego and id; the economy of the pleasure principle and the death drive). Correspondingly, an analysis of literature in terms of phantasy, far from being closed, is strictly interminable and cannot be brought to an end which is other than provisional. It should be recalled that in introducing a discussion of *Hamlet* in connection with the Oedipus complex in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud states that 'all genuinely creative writings are the product of more than a single motive . . . and are open to more than a single interpretation' (*SE* IV, p. 266).

(3) Literature is concerned with the 'personal', to be sure, and psychoanalysis is at present uniquely capable of deconstructing 'personal experience', translating it into a different set of representations, other components, such that it may be exhibited at a distance as made up rather than ready made. No other discourse, for example, is so effectively available to defamiliarise the experience of 'being in love' (see below, chapter 4).

(4) Books, even books of criticism, are written at particular conjunctures, and at the present one literary study can no longer honestly discuss texts and ignore questions about gender. It would be hard to answer those who would deny this, who might complain, for example, that picking up Leavis earlier for writing unreflectingly of the poet as 'he' was tendentious and absurd. Psychoanalysis is particularly adapted to interrogate literary texts regarding questions of gender. The text which did most to put psychoanalysis back on to the agenda while introducing it into a field where one might least expect it, Juliet Mitchell's *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, asserts that 'psychoanalysis is not a recommendation *for* a patriarchal society, but an analysis *of* one' (1975, p. xv). In concurring with this I would argue that a psychoanalytic reading can show literature sustaining and reinforcing traditional versions of identity and sexuality in areas and aspects of the text that remain invisible – and so beyond challenge – in any other mode of criticism.

Set out so far briefly and somewhat polemically, these positions need to be justified in detail. And already a new objection to

psychoanalysis has been opened up, in the reference above to patriarchal society and so to the social meanings of literary texts: meanings which a concern with the unconscious appears to deny.

After the question of reductiveness, the next criticism made of any psychoanalytic literary study is that it must be unhistorical. The unconscious, so this familiar argument runs, is eternal, an unchanging feature of 'human nature', and so any fraternisation with Freud must lead to an anti-historical position, or one whose time scale is so hugely Darwinian, covering perhaps the whole history of the species, as to be effectively anti-historical. A main aim of *Poetry and Phantasy* is to counteract this presumption. In proposing to understand poetry as a form of phantasy it will seek to show that in poetry phantasy is made available to others in an intersubjective and social form. The project is to test the hypothesis that a poem may embody a historical form of phantasy, one that cannot be understood adequately either from the side of ideology alone or from that of phantasy alone.

The rest of this chapter and the whole of the next will go on to explore a theoretical basis for this assertion, firstly by approaching it from the side of psychoanalysis, secondly by reviewing work on the relations between psychoanalysis and historical materialism, the concept of ideology and that of the unconscious. And then the argument will be pursued through close examination in chronological order of a number of different texts from a series of widely contrasted historical conjunctures within a continuous poetic tradition: a poem from Ovid (as a point of contrast to the tradition) and an imitation of it from Donne, poems from the medieval period of courtly love, Augustan and Romantic poems, some representing Victorian poetry and Modernism. The basis for this revisionist history, the view that poetry needs to be understood as a form of *social phantasy*, could be summed up like this: a little psychoanalysis turns one away from history while a lot brings you back.

The interpretation of dreams and the interpretation of poems

We cannot avoid some recapitulation of fundamental concepts in psychoanalysis, material that may be new for some readers but not for others. There is no harm in retracing what may be familiar ground. Psychoanalysis as a theoretical system (for reasons it itself

explains) is particularly susceptible to misrepresentation. There is for example the popular misrecognition which repeats the term 'subconscious' – one Freud had abandoned even before writing *The Interpretation of Dreams* – instead of 'unconscious'. Presumably the notion of a subconscious, with its associations of a submarine, implies material which lies submerged but which can easily be brought to the surface; and so the term resists the much more radical notion of an unconscious which is dynamically opposed to the consciousness in which it appears only as a symptom. Again, a distinction such as that between instinct and drive, central to psychoanalytic thought, is far too often ignored and can bear repetition even at the risk of an expositional tone. In addition, however, this review will try to define more clearly the particular way phantasy expresses itself in poetic texts as distinct from other forms in which it may operate.

For psychoanalysis the term *phantasy* (German: *Phantasie*) has a precise meaning that the ordinary usage 'fantasy' does not. It specifies: (1) an imaginary scene or narrative (2) in which the subject is present (3) but a scene altered or disguised (4) so that it may fulfil a wish for the subject. Phantasy turns ideas into narratives, for in dreams it has as its effect *'the transformation of a thought into an experience'* (*SE* XV, p. 129, italics original). But literature has always done this.

The concept of phantasy applies to both unconscious phantasies, such as occur in night-dreams, and waking phantasies as in day-dreams. Susan Isaacs proposed that two spellings should discriminate *fantasy* ('conscious daydreams, fictions and so on') from *phantasy* ('the primary content of unconscious mental processes', cited Laplanche and Pontalis 1980, p. 318) but the proposal has not succeeded because the unconscious is active in day-dreams as well as in night-dreams, and there is a clear continuity between them ('such phantasies' as day-dreams 'may be unconscious just as well as conscious', *SE* IX, p. 156). This means that as phantasy a poem has an unconscious effect for a reader as well as a conscious meaning. The necessary distinction between dream and poem lies not with the concept of phantasy but elsewhere.

The phenomenon, the object, which psychoanalysis seeks to analyse, occurs at a frontier between nature and culture where *Instinkt*, the organic functions of the body studied by biology, enters signification in the form of unconscious drive or *Trieb* (unfortunately the *Standard Edition* loses the distinction by translating both terms as 'instinct'):