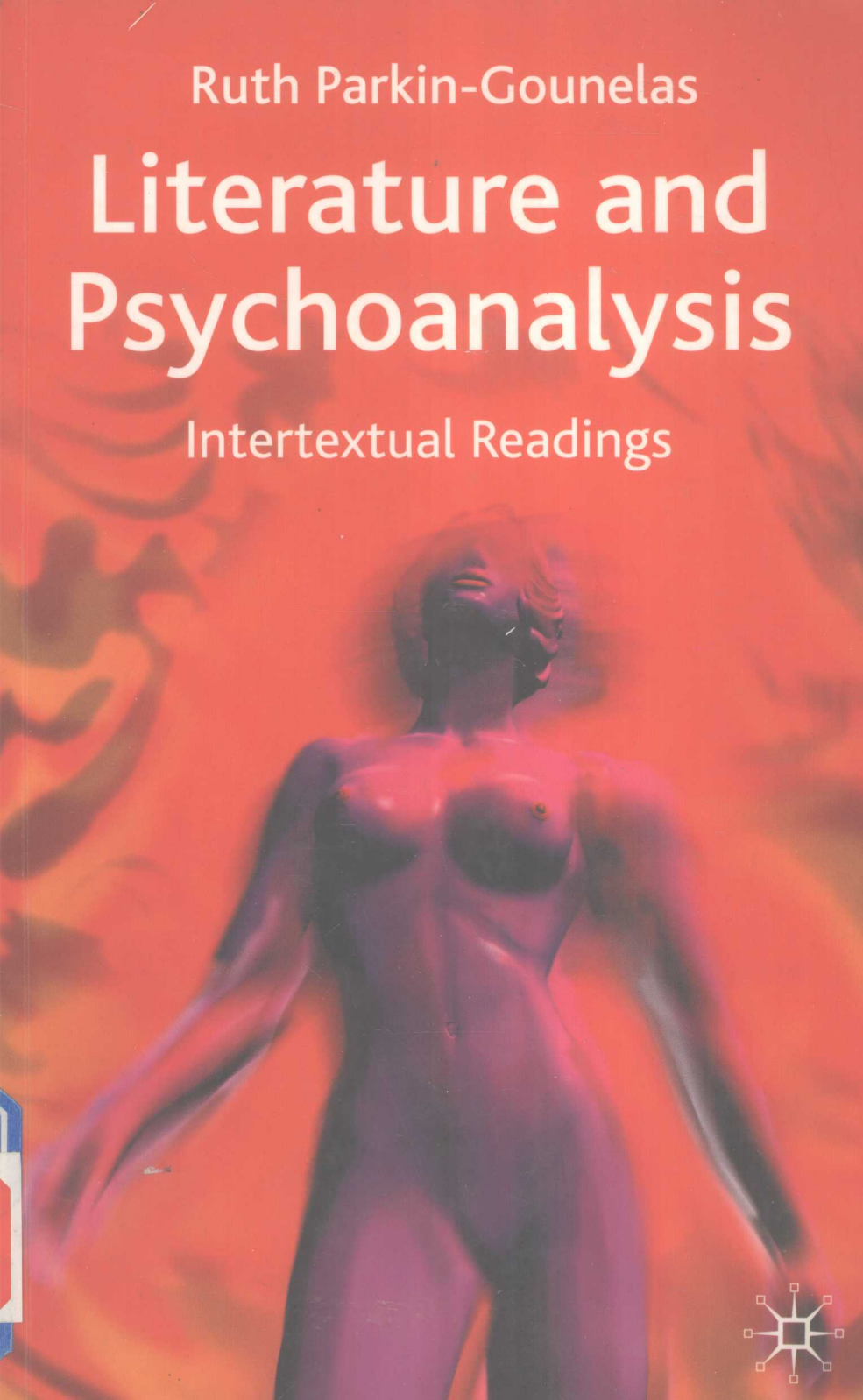
Ruth Parkin-Gounelas

Literature and Psychoanalysis

Intertextual Readings



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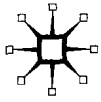

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Preface

Literature and psychoanalysis. The conjunction of these two disciplines has allured and worried literary criticism since Freud's first inspired but often clumsy literary analyses a hundred years ago. Recent decades have seen a further acceleration in the convergence of the two, now evident in the way the vocabulary of each permeates the other at every level. On the one hand, psychoanalytic ('scientific') writings, most famously Freud's case studies of Dora or the Wolf Man, have become the object of 'literary' scrutiny, with focus on features such as narrative strategy, symbolic patterns or repressed subtexts. At the same time, certain styles of psychoanalytic writing, Lacan's in particular, have drawn attention to their own signifying operations in ways reminiscent of the most 'literary' of practices. On the other hand 'literature', now attracting the obligatory scare-quotes, has become increasingly loath to separate itself off from other disciplines which impinge upon it, whether these be 'science' or the law, the visual arts or popular culture, and has proved itself resistant to containment within purely aesthetic boundaries. At the beginning of this long process of convergence, Freud himself worried that his work read like fiction and lacked the 'serious stamp of science' (PF 3: 231).[1] For their part, in the early years, literary writers and critics such as Virginia Woolf held the new science at arm's length and insisted that its findings, though 'interesting' to 'the scientific side of the brain', were dull and irrelevant to 'the artistic side' ('Freudian Fiction' 153). Nowadays, however, with a postmodern discourse more likely to celebrate a blurring of boundaries between disciplines and the interlocution of all 'texts', there seems little justification for worrying about the differences between the two fields when they clearly have so much in common.

Fundamental to this shift has been the linguistic revolution of the twentieth century as mediated, in particular, by structuralism and deconstruction. Freud's intuitions about the implication of words in psychic processes, investigated in Chapter 1 here, were to prove enormously suggestive to his successors in different fields of cultural

analysis, generating an array of insights that have become like cultural sign-posts for our age: '*the unconscious is structured like a language*' (Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts* 20), 'textual pleasure' (Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*), the unconscious as made up of 'memory traces' which constitute a form of 'psychic writing' (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 213). Psychoanalysis, as Nicolas Abraham points out, has brought a 'radical semantic change' to signifying practice ('The Shell and the Kernel' 83), to which he gives the name 'anasemia', a reconceptualization of the unconscious sources of signification. Between the 'I' and the 'me', he writes, the subject of self-conscious reflexivity and the object of reflection or representation, lies a 'founding silence' which is the mark of the unconscious (84). This book will attempt to argue that the role of a psychoanalytic literary criticism is to explore the ways in which the silences and gaps in texts, the unconscious in all its inaccessibility, can be approached through a range of different psychoanalytic concepts or structures which the Freudian revolution has engendered: desire, the object, abjection, the uncanny, the death drive, and so on. These structures offer ways of describing the effects of or the processes that intersect with the unconscious. They should not, however, be confused with its definition, which has had the tendency to elude the various attempts to fix it – from Coleridge's theory of the unconscious as a vital, creative faculty, to Jung's Collective or Impersonal Unconscious, to (most influentially of all) the Freudian and post-Freudian unconscious as a set of phantasies and desires which have undergone repression and which must always be different from their conscious or cultural manifestations.

Like Melanie Klein after him, Freud described the workings of the unconscious in figurative, even mythic terms, usually as a battle for supremacy between instinctual forces, to which he gave different names at different times – such as the ego and the id, or the life and death drives. For exemplification, as everyone knows, he turned to literature, and found there corresponding conflicts – the Oedipus complex in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the uncanny in E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman'. And then these in turn he formulated into myth-like structures to found a whole psychoanalytic system. From the start, the exchange between the two disciplines was direct.

When it came to the 'application' of psychoanalytic theory to the reading of literary texts, however, it was discovered that the process involved was very different from that which takes place in the clinical

situation. Clearly, automatic symbol hunting ('a phallus at every lamppost') was not going to take things very far. And Ernest Jones, who was one of the first to undertake a sustained Freudian literary analysis with his *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949), came up immediately against the problem that the literary character has no life before the first page (Jones 17). Given that psychoanalysis knows no present divorced from the past, that 'fresh experiences, however novel, are always assimilated by the unconscious mind to older ones' (18), the process of analysing textual rather than real-life human characters must always be partial and speculative. The work of art, as André Green puts it, 'can say nothing more than is incorporated in it', and 'remains obstinately mute, closed in upon itself' (Green, *Tragic Effect* 18–19). This is not to say, however, that it cannot, like the analysand, put up a set of defences against its interpretation. As we shall see in the following chapters, defences such as repression, reversal, splitting and denial may act as significant nodes of revelation. Nor is it to say that the processes of free association and transference, crucial to the analytic reaction, cannot occur in written texts, as recent psychoanalytic criticism in the reader-response tradition has shown. If it can in a strict sense 'say nothing more' than itself, the literary text can certainly be 're-said' in the process of dynamic exchange between text and reader, meaning and desire.

With everything that has been said in recent years about 'textual desire', a shift of critical attention has been effected from the analysis of author or character (or their conflation) in the text to that of the text itself as signifying structure.[2] According to a Lacanian reading, to write or to read is to enter a Symbolic order where meaning and desire are mediated through trans-individual structures of otherness which both possess and dispossess us at the same time. Language, as we shall see, institutes a relation of being to loss, loss of meaning (the non-coincidence of the signifier with the signified), which symbolizes a loss of primary unity with the first 'other', the mother, in the Oedipus complex. Desire follows the direction of signification – ever onwards towards that which escapes it.

In what follows I will attempt to test out ways in which different configurations of post-Freudian psychoanalytic theory, from sources as diverse as Lacan, Klein, Riviere, Kristeva, Abraham and Torok, and Bion, provide structures through which to read literary texts. The high profile of psychoanalysis and of Freud himself in literary studies at the turn of the twentieth century owes much to the discovery that it

is not a question of the 'application' of psychoanalytic insights to a body of literary texts, a practice which leaves each ultimately separate, but rather, as Shoshana Felman has pointed out, their 'implication' one in the other (*Literature and Psychoanalysis* 5–10). Each can be seen to have developed in relation to the other and can now be described as intersecting in ways that change the dimensions of both. Many studies now exist which provide summaries and assessments of psychoanalytic theory. The purpose of this study is to explore the practice as much as the theory of reading psychoanalysis with literature. Paradigmatic intertextual readings will be offered: Freud with Ishiguro, Lacan with Milton or with Derek Walcott, Joan Riviere with Woolf, and so on. Some texts are treated comprehensively and in depth – examples here are the 'abjectal' reading of Beckett's trilogy, which occupies the whole of Chapter 3, or the analysis of *Dracula* through the death drive in Chapter 8. Others, such as *Othello*, or Plath's 'Daddy', are referred to briefly to illustrate a specific psychoanalytic phenomenon.

Perhaps inevitably, my choice of literary texts has sometimes followed the contours of Freud's own experience, whether that be his choice of literary texts for analysis or the cultural events that shaped his thought. *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet* and Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' are re-examined within the Freudian canon and reassessed in the light of more recent developments. Freud's contemporaries – such as Wilde, Bram Stoker, Strindberg, Woolf, and later contemporaries such as Beckett and Auden – provide a rich source for intertextual analysis, for all their often open hostility to his findings. The same is true, to a lesser extent, with Lacan, whose theoretical insights, however, tend to dominate this study. The theoretical shift that occurred between the style of literary analysis available to Freud in the first decades of the twentieth century and that in which Lacan participated in the 1950s–70s is a fundamental one, assuming a radical change in reading strategies which will be examined in the pages that follow. While Freud put it, for example, that Shakespeare was a 'great psychologist' (qtd. in Meisel and Kendrick 333), for the Lacanian critic Slavoj Žižek, it seems more appropriate (let alone playfully paradoxical, in true Lacanian style) to say that it is 'beyond any doubt that Shakespeare had read Lacan' (*Looking Awry* 9). These two positions act as the poles between which this book will operate and into which must also be inserted a whole series of alternative psychoanalytic and literary discourses, from Klein's to Kristeva's, and from Barthes' to Derrida's.

A final word, however, about the charge of ahistoricism, the eliding of historically specific determinants, that Žižek's deliberately outrageous statement seems to invite, and which has certainly often been levelled against psychoanalytic literary criticism itself on many occasions. A powerful reply to this charge has been given by Julia Kristeva, who like many others recently has paid close attention to Freud's speculative analysis of the origins of social behaviour, in *Totem and Taboo* (1913; PF13: 43–224). At the beginning of human history, Freud argues, primitive people sought to master their mental conflicts by projecting them on to the environment and enshrining them in taboos or laws (against parricide and incest, in particular). Now, in a later stage of human development, it is our task to 'translate' these laws back into psychology in order to understand how we have constructed our world in different ways at different cultural and historical moments.

The social/ Symbolic order, Kristeva argues, 'corresponds' to the structuration of the human psyche as speaking subject, a word she favours for its avoidance of any cause–effect relationship between the psychic and the social. In the challenge that lies before us in a postmodern age, defined by her as the 'great demystification of Power (religious, moral, political, and verbal') (*Powers of Horror* 210), psychoanalysis has a crucial role to play as translator of cultural (and literary) practices into their psychic correspondents in order to understand how change may be effected. If in a sense the two (the psychic and the cultural) can be seen as different languages, which when transposed the one into the other must incur the loss involved in all translation, the gain from their conjunction must be not merely a change in the status of each individually, the way each discipline is prepared to re-define itself in relation to the other, but the production of a new discourse which I have called, following Kristeva again, intertextual. Texts, she wrote in 1969, are constructed as 'a mosaic of quotations', so that 'any text is the absorption and transformation of another' ('Word, Dialogue and Novel' 37). 'Literature *in* Psychoanalysis' (in the sense that a patient is 'in analysis'), or 'The Psychoanalysis of Literature' , might have been better titles for this study, were they not so awkward as phrases. The test, however, must ultimately be in the practice, not in the theorization of their conjunction.

R. P.-G.

Contents

1

Representing the Unconscious

When Samuel Beckett re-wrote the founding statement of Genesis with the famous words 'In the beginning was the pun', he was being less iconoclastic and more Freudian than he would have cared to admit. A generation on from Freud, Beckett shared with many writers of his time an anxious defensiveness about the encroachments of the Viennese sage's insights that intersected with his own in many ways. Beckett's character Murphy, to whom this statement is ascribed via the narrator, would probably have wanted to follow it by the question: 'the beginning of what?' But origins are not Murphy's strong point. He is more interested in (*non*) *sequiturs*, in what follows – 'on, on!', as Beckett's characters keep goading themselves. The famous quip is itself followed by a punning *non sequitur*: 'In the beginning was the pun. And so on' (*Murphy* 41).

Myths of origin and their implications in language, however, lie at the heart of the Freudian project. This chapter will concern itself with both beginnings and puns, though not with Samuel Beckett, who will return in a later chapter. Freud was of the generation that still believed in the possibility of discovering origins. Darwin's *Origin of Species*, published three years after his birth in 1856, was an important lifetime model for Freud in the radical possibilities of grand new systems which change the way we think. Darwin's 'origins' (of life) may have seemed to go much further back than Freud's. In fact, Freud was to find that his investigations into the origins of individual mental disorders, and consequently of the human psyche as a whole, would lead him on his own journey into human 'prehistory', into the origins of human social organization.

But his starting point, like Darwin's, was with specific empirical evidence, with an attempt to define human psychology in neurological

terms. At the same time he was beginning to experiment on a very different level, in listening to hysterical patients talk, surmising in the process that language may be the key to the understanding of the psyche. This was in 1895. Thirty-five years later, in the early 1930s, Jacques Lacan was embarking on his own case studies in Paris. He was to classify his patients, women convicted of attempted or actual murder, as paranoiacs, and from this would develop a theory of paranoid modes of cognition and discourse which would introduce an indispensable linguistic element into the psychoanalytic project.

Lacan's impact on contemporary cultural and critical theory, and in particular on the concept of the human subject as the effect of language, has been so profound that it is impossible to imagine its development without him. In turn, Freud's impact on Lacan was so far-reaching that it has become impossible to disentangle them – or, at least, to read Freud today entirely free of Lacan's mediation. In postulating the subject as the effect of language rather than its cause, Lacan claimed to be doing no more than reformulating the major elements of the Freudian corpus, distilling its essence. A 'return to Freud' was a conveniently authoritative shield for the young medical intern anxious to carve out his own space against the reactionary forces of Parisian psychiatry. This presumption was boosted by an unusually eclectic range of reading at the time, enabling him to translate Freudian theory into cultural terms. In philosophy he was reading and studying Spinoza, Jaspers, Nietzsche, Husserl, Bergson, Hegel and Heidegger.[1] Ferdinand de Saussure, whom Lacan and others generally consider the founder of modern linguistics, was to be of crucial importance in the definition of subjectivity and signification.[2] And the surrealist movement from the beginning provided an important model for the encounter between the aesthetic and analytic processes, as I shall show later. These three disciplines, fuelled by a re-reading of Freud, were to produce in Lacan's writing a series of radical formulations of the subject and the signifier which have had a crucial influence on literary criticism over the past twenty-five years.

THE TEXT OF OUR EXPERIENCE

> Freud regarded a study of languages and institutions, of the resonances, whether attested or not in memory, of literature and of the significations involved in works of art as necessary to an understanding of the text of our experience. (Lacan, *Écrits* 144)

In the late 1920s, a heated debate took place in psychoanalytic circles over the most appropriate training for psychoanalytic practice. Freud came down on the liberal side of the acceptance of 'lay analysts', those with no medical training, stating his case as follows:

> analytic instruction [should] include branches of knowledge which are remote from medicine and which the doctor does not come across in his practice: the history of civilization, mythology, the psychology of religion and the science of literature. Unless he is well at home in these subjects, an analyst can make nothing of a large amount of his material. ('The Question of Lay Analysis' [1926]. PF 15: 349).[3]

Being able to 'make something' of the speech of patients involved hermeneutic skills whose sophistication it was left to Lacan to define. The move from a general prerequisite of literary sensitivity (to nuance, the reading of symbol and allegory, and so on) to that of the ability to read 'the text of our experience' took him, at the outset, back to the origins of the modern concept of subjectivity in Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). In challenging the Cartesian *cogito* on the first page of his first major psychoanalytic work, 'The Mirror Stage',[4] Lacan set about reversing the Enlightenment practice of regarding the ego as centred on the perception–consciousness system, as present to itself through self-reflection. 'Our experience shows', he said, 'that we should start instead from the *function of méconnaissance* [misrecognition] that characterizes the ego in all its structures' (*Écrits* 6).

In listening to his hysterical patients in the 1890s, Freud had been confronted by the reality of a speech divided against itself, and on the basis of this 'radical heteronomy that Freud's discovery shows gaping within man', as Lacan put it (*Écrits* 172), had postulated the theory of the unconscious. Chapter 6 will examine in detail the way the construction of the condition of hysteria at this time laid the foundations of the psychoanalytic definition of subjectivity as not only divided against itself but also a matter of 'make believe', an assumption of fabricated personalities or masks. Literature was working towards similar ends. That consummate self-fashioner Oscar Wilde, a slightly older contemporary of Freud's famous hysterical patient Dora and like her a victim of conflicted personalities and sexualities, propounded an aesthetic of masks and appearances that refused the commonplace assumption that they are a mere cover for a truth or