

“Psychoanalysis and Revision of Oedipal Reality”

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J. Hillis Miller observes that the novel as a genre consists of three fundamental principles: they are “temporal form, interpersonal relations, and relations of fiction and reality”(31). Among the three, the third seems to me the most important, because the question is not only about the relation between the novel and reality, but, more generally, it is about the relation between literature and reality, and also fiction and reality.

My point about this issue is that any fictional form, writing or else, always depends on some presumed reality, and at the same time always tries to deny the validity of the presupposition. It is the relation of incessant revision, and does not settle at either of the opposing tendencies.

The word “reality” here does not mean the unique and proper reading of a novel, or any factual information about society which is obtained after reading a novel. In this sense, it is a conception quite different from, for example, what is called “masterplot” by Peter Brook, who no doubt has in mind the existence of the legitimate reading of the plot of novel. On my view, reality holds a virtual existence, which cannot be fully sensed but still cannot be eradicated. It does not mean the so-called “fact”, something that exists outside the text with no need for justification. Rather, it is a hypothetical opening that is to be modified incessantly, and nevertheless to remain a starting-point forever. The novel rests on this kind of reality for its framework, and on the other hand tries to free itself from its hermeneutical limit. It is an eternal oscillation, and one promising field of literary criticism is to investigate the orbit of this oscillation.

It is the investigation about cultural rhetoric or ideology, and in this sense, Marxist critics such as Fredric Jameson’s will keep being important to us, though their faith may appear much less plausible now.

In this essay, I will expound this conception of reality by means of referring to psychoanalytic literary criticism, which often deals with the fictional status of reality as a crucial problem. The reality rising from therapeutic interpretation is just as ambivalent and fictional as the Oedipal myth. Then, briefly at the end, I will consid-

er Jameson's notion of history and his critique of psychoanalytic criticism.

According to Lis Møller, we can divide psychoanalytic literary criticism into two groups: one is traditional, whose premise is "the idea of an original text, distorted through the author's poetic treatment, but nevertheless still retrievable"(111). Møller calls this attitude "textual archaeology." The other is more recently started under the strong influence of structuralism, and its representative figure is Jacques Lacan.

The difference between these two attitudes is obvious when we compare the traditional function of the Oedipal myth with a new turn given to it in the development of the Lacanian theory.

Here is Shoshana Felman's succinct account of how the Oedipal myth is taken by traditional psychoanalytic literary criticism:

Traditionally, the Oedipus complex is understood to mean the the literal genesis and the literal objects of man's primordial desire: an incestuous sexual love for the mother and a jealous, murderous impulse toward the father. In this view, what Freud discovered in the Oedipus is a universal *answer* to the question: What does man unconsciously desire? This answer guarantees a knowledge—of the instinctual content of the human unconscious, which can be found everywhere. Any Freudian reading is bound to uncover the same meaning, the ultimate signified of human desire: the Oedipus complex. (*Jacques Lacan* 103)

The interpretation of the Greek myth of patricide is not just an illustration of the castration-complex. Since that complex occupies the origin of the economy of our psychic energies, Freud says, it can be thought as the origin of all the mental activities, conscious or unconscious. When investigating different aspects of desire, Freud is always ready to give the same answer of the castration-complex, and it is not surprising because the complex assumes universal authenticity. Without prudent and scientific cautions against falling into blind faith, this universality may, and did, produce crude, dogmatic interpretations of the mind.

On the other hand, Felman observes:

For Lacan, the Oedipus complex is not a signified but a signifier, not a meaning but a structure. What Freud discovered in the Oedipus myth is not an answer but the structure of a question, not any given knowledge but a structuring positioning of the

analyst's own ignorance of his patient's unconscious. (*Jacques Lacan* 103).

The Oedipal myth remains central in Lacan's theory as well as Freud's, but what it represents is different. It does not provide the origin, but a structure, a particular type of network of relational positions. Accordingly, the emphasis is transferred from the signified to the signifier, and from the content to the surface.

Let us examine more about the implications of Lacan's way of taking the Oedipal myth, especially of his foregrounding the notion of the signifier, this time by examining the opposing ideas of content and manifestation. As Møller comments on Freud's reading of "The Sandman," Freud's way of reading always "presupposes the existence of a latent content behind the manifest text; his reading has as its basic premise the idea of a disjunction between the textual surface and the psychic depths this surface hides and yet betrays." (115) As we have seen above, the latent content Freud discovers in a given psychoanalytic story is always the same, the Oedipal complex and the psychic economy between the unconscious and its opponents. But Møller, a model reader of deconstructive interpretation, re-reads Freud's reading of the short story, and observes that Freud's reading implies the denial of his own belief in the legitimacy of content: Freud ultimately arrives at an understanding of the uncanny that calls in question the archaeological assumption that uncanniness derives from the latent content, the content which is to be uncovered by psychoanalytic interpretation (113). Here the content is deprived of its prerogative, the proper position of the origin, and the new domain of textual structure opens itself before us. It is the territory of difference, and the conceptions of identity and origin are subordinated to relational differences.

This does not mean, however, that difference replaces identity; rather, our position is that of being caught up in an eternal dizziness of whirling differences. Møller proceeds to conclude, "The implication is that the uncanny has no unequivocal origin; the source of the uncanny is neither the manifest element nor its latent content" (131). Here Møller seems to go beyond Lacan, even dismissing the elevation of the signifier; however, the signifier in Lacan's sense is defined only by the interminable sequences of displacement. As characteristic of structuralism, even the subject come to be an effect of the structure of lack:

The subject is the introduction of a loss in reality, yet nothing can introduce that, since by status reality is as full as possible. . . . When the subject takes the place of

the lack, a loss is introduced in the word, and this is the definition of the subject. But to inscribe it, it is necessary to define it in a circle, what I call the otherness, of the sphere of language. All that is language is lent from this otherness and this is why the subject is always a fading thing that runs under the chain of signifiers. For the definition of a signifier is that it represents a subject not for another subject but for another signifier.(193-94)

Thus, Lacan's notion of the signifier is necessarily connected with the chain of displacement, and it is an extreme form of differential reading.

In order to see more about the function of lack in recent psychoanalytical criticism, let us refer to Møller's re-reading of Freud's idea of primal scene. In the case of the Wolf Man, Freud's archaeological reading offers a reason for the patient's animal phobia; it is what is known as the primal scene. When he was a child, Freud suspects, the patient happened to see his parents having sexual intercourse, and that experience is transformed into the apparently groundless fear of wolves in the economy of the patient's psyche. The primal scene is the origin of the Wolf Man's repression, and of Freud's interpretation of the case as well. However, as the analysis goes on, again the origin is subverted. The status of the primal scene as an experience prior to any textual interpretation comes to be dubious. Møller concludes that:

the primal scene at the heart of the Wolf Man's infantile neurosis is the one thing that is not reproduced as a memory in analysis and which is at no point actually verified through the patient's recollections. The entire case story therefore depends upon a hypothetical construction that cannot be replaced by an authentic recollection. Freud's analysis revolves around an absence, a void, that can only be filled with a construction emerging from the analytical dialogue.(63)

The point is that the primal scene in itself was void of meaning, or rather it was the space of various potential readings. . . . The meaning and the impact of the primal scene were thus determined by subsequent material. His analysis has revealed an original traumatic scene from the primal period but a trauma only after the fact, that is, by deferred action.(65-66)

The archaeological priority of the origin is denied, and the origin is produced from the following interpretations, not before. She proceeds:

The case of the Wolf Man tells the story of that which is left unaccounted for in the archaeological version of reading in psychoanalysis; it brings to the center that which this version has marginalized. In so doing, *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis* installs a new figure: the archaeological metaphor is replaced by the metaphor of the *Zwischenreich*—or, in Book's translation, the "in-between." The primal scene "lies in-between." It is situated between the events of the past and the significant "re-transcription" of these events. It belongs within the differential space of *Nachträglichkeit*, which encompasses the dialogical space of analysis. (83-84)

Freud's own conclusion, or at least its implication, is not quite different from Møller's. His incessant revision of the account of the case indirectly subscribes to the differential nature of his interpretation (Møller 59).

The demystifying power of the notion of "in-between" does not stop until calling in question the status of the analyst: it is an "in-between" of the analyst and the analysand as well as that of fiction and reality. The Wolf Man's primal scene is an analytical construction that belongs to both of Freud and the patient simultaneously, without being fully possessed by either of the two (Møller 78). Moreover, it shows us an analytical structure to which every interpretation cannot help falling. If our reading of a text seeks for some privileged place in it, and absolutely we have to, the story of our interpretation necessarily consists of a twofold structure, which is characterized on the one hand by an interminable, open-ended story, and on the other by an archaeological story of closure. And this double structure can be no more than a provisional construction, which should be seen replaced by another hypothetical fiction (Møller 83). Psychoanalysis itself is one of the variations of the effect of this structure:

What is suggested, then, is that the analytical situation itself is submitted to the logic of *Nachträglichkeit*. The patient's self-observation in analysis is said to be nothing but "another instance of deferred action"; it was a belated interpretation applied, across a temporal gap of almost twenty years, to the infantile (nonrecollected) scene, and which, as the scene itself. (Møller 74)

This quotation makes it clear that the immense influence of psychoanalysis today rests on its particular semiotic system rather than its thematical claims to universality, with which only Freudians are concerned now (Jameson 65). Barbara Johnson observes the

same thing more extensively:

the act of (psycho-)analysis has no identity apart from its status as a repetition of the structure it seeks to analyze(to untie) . . . being only capable of finding itself. . . . Psychoanalysis is, in fact, itself the primal scene it seeks: it is the first occurrence of what has been repeating itself in the patient without ever having occurred. . . . Psychoanalysis is not the interpretation of repetition; it is the repetition of a *trauma of interpretation* called "castration" or "parental coitus" or "the Oedipus complex" or even "sexuality"—the traumatic deferred interpretation not *of* an event, but *as* an event that never took place as such.(142)

The thematical terms of psychoanalysis such as the primal scene, trauma, and the Oedipal complex transforms into the structural principles of interpretation which defines psychoanalytical practice of reading. Through the transference between the analyst and the analysand, the former repeats the latter's experience, and we cannot be sure of the real status of the key experience. Felman describes this repetition of in-between-ness as "a missed meeting with itself, a missed encounter with what returns" ("Turn" 178-79).

As a matter of fact, the novel is distinctly established as a genre different from poetry so that the reality it is sometimes for and sometimes against is not quite the same as that of poetry. In a word, the research on a novel is more likely to be done in the related investigations about its social background, while that on poetry to concentrate on the investigation of the poet's mind, and the poet's interpersonal, rather than social, relations. If we remember Miller's observation of the three structuring principles of the novel as a genre, the second point, interpersonal relations, is easy to emphasize in the research on poetry, and as a result, the third issue is easy to dismiss. Of course, I do not mean that only critics are responsible for this tendency, and poetry as a genre no doubt contains the elements that directs the general bearing of investigation. This is true of the novel. When we look back at the historical origin of this genre, it is obvious that the novel, as well as journalism and refined prose writing, has strong relations with the end of medieval religious mind and the development of the modern form of society. The reality which is presupposed by the novel tends to be a social one.

Therefore, when we think about the role of reality as a framework of presupposi-

tion for the existence of the novel, it is more convenient to refer to the idea of history, than, for example, the more limited intertextual reality of poetry explicated by Michael Riffaterre. If we apply the notion of differential reality to history, leaving aside for the moment a difficult problem of mediation, we will get the idea of history as an absent cause. As Jameson mentions, the notion is expounded by Louis Althusser and Georg Lukacs. According to them, Jameson says, history "is inaccessible to us except in textual form, that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political conscious" (35, 55). As a framework, history always exists, and works as the initial and hypothetical identity, and enables the subsequent chain of displacement, to which the notion of history itself is not invulnerable. The very moment we presuppose some kind of periodization such as Enlightenment, Victorian patriarchy or modernist fragmentation, another equally correct account of the period begins to be written.

Although I applied the psychoanalytic insights into fictionality to the status of history, and in doing so, treated history as one of the texts which crisscross a literary work, in fact this mediation is not without problems. Preceding the above quotation about the negative notion of history, Jameson insists:

The sweeping negativity of the Althusserian formula is misleading insofar as it can readily assimilated to the polemic themes of a host of contemporary post-structuralisms and post-Marxisms, for which History . . . is simply one more text among others. . . . We would therefore propose the following revised formulation: that history is *not* a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that an absent cause. (35)

As for psychoanalysis, Jameson admits that it is "the most influential and elaborate interpretive system of recent times" (61), but to his aim of interpretation in terms of the political unconscious, the Lacanian theory of desire as well as Freudian notion of wish-fulfillment is not collective enough:

What is more damaging from, from the present perspective, is that desire, like its paler and more well behaved predecessor, wish-fulfillment, remains locked into the category of the individual subject, even if the form taken by the individual in it is no longer ego or self, but rather the individual body. (68)

Jameson aims for a social hermeneutic, which transcends the category of the individual. He concludes:

Only the community, indeed, can dramatize that self-sufficient intelligible unity (or "structure") of which the individual body, like the individual "subject," is a decentered "effect," and to which the individual organism, caught in the ceaseless chain of the generations and the species, cannot, even in the most desperate Renaissance or Neoplatonic visions of hermaphroditism (or in their contemporary counterpart, the Deleuze-Guattari "bachelor machine"), lay claim. (74)

However, in spite of Jameson's persisting defense of his opinion that history is not a text, I am not fully convinced of its unique status. To put it another way, there seems to me no other reason to give the philosophy of history a particularly privileged position than the generic demands of the object. Why is it better to take history as a framework than, for instance, the development of author's imagination or philosophy? Similarly, Jameson grants the collective the unequivocal priority over the individual subject, criticizing the reverse tendency of withdrawal in Northrop Frye. But is it really impossible to begin with the investigation of individual psyche and make it throw a new light on community?

These questions, of course, are already anticipated in Jameson's argument, since his Marxism is far from the archeological pursuit of meaning; his idea of history is formulated by accepting and transcending the negative Marxism such as Lukacs's, which, to borrow Jameson's description, "is a simply the place of an imperative to totalize, and the various historical forms of Marxism can themselves equally effectively be submitted to just such a critique of their own local ideological limits of strategies of containment" (53). Therefore, even if he dares to declare that Marxism is the ultimate horizon which can alone offers an adequate account of the cultural past (19), his Marxism perspective does not necessarily deny the differential status of reality.

In other words, Jameson's seemingly dogmatic preference for community is willing to accommodate the remains of pluralism, which, without the material endorsement given by Marxism, might cast a serious doubt on the preference itself. Thus, what remains unsolved here is the relation between the pluralistic notion of reality, which the Lacanian re-reading of psychoanalysis provides, and the status of history as a framework, especially as a framework which is substantial and able to hold the content. For this, I will discuss on another occasion.

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