WHAT IS PSYCHOANALYTIC LITERARY CRITICISM?¹

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The history of psychoanalytic literary criticism is as old as psychoanalysis, but it has undergone considerable change since Freud’s famous readings of Hamlet (1900), the novels of Dostoevsky (1928), and the story of Moses (1939). The methodology of psychoanalytic literary criticism introduced by Freud and adopted by most psychoanalysts and non-analysts through the greater part of the 20th century is founded on the idea that writers create stories and characters that reflect their own unconscious psychology. A text is a mirror of the unconscious mind of the writer, much as dreams are creations of the unconscious mind that are disguised in order to escape repression (‘censorship’), thus gaining access to preconscious and conscious awareness (our remembered dreams). Through readings of this sort, psychoanalytic literary criticism brought established analytic formulations to bear on the text, for instance, constellations of feeling understandable in terms of the Oedipus complex, castration anxiety, the incest taboo, oral, anal, and phallic stages of psychosexual development, and the like.

The best known, and most widely studied, early examples of this type of formulaic Freudian reading are Ernest Jones’s (1949) reading of Hamlet (in which he concludes that Hamlet is unable to fulfill his duty to kill his uncle because that murder is too closely linked in his repressed unconscious to his forbidden oedipal wishes to murder his father and marry his mother); and Marie Bonaparte’s (1933) study of Edgar Allen Poe, which owed much to Freud’s (1908) “Creative Writers and Day-dreaming.”

As psychoanalytic theories of early childhood development grew more nuanced, so did the range of concepts that psychoanalysts used to decode literary texts. This resulted in readings that were no less formulaic in the way they made use of analytic concepts, but they did draw on a wider range of psychoanalytic ideas (for example, Phyllis Greenacre’s [1955] “The Mutual Adventures of Jonathan Swift and Lemuel Gulliver: A Study of Pathography” and Ernst Kris’s [1948] “Prince Hal’s Conflict”). Literary

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critics with an interest in psychoanalysis, but with little, if any, analytic training, and no experience at all as practicing analysts, followed suit, producing intelligent, but reductive readings (for example, Edmund Wilson’s [1948] reading of Ben Jonson’s The Alchemist as a play that Wilson believed to be a reflection of Jonson’s “anal erotic” personality).

This Freudian model of literary criticism may have peaked (among academic literary critics) with the work of Frederick Crews, who in his 1966 book on Nathanial Hawthorne, asserts: “All Hawthorne’s serious fiction amounts to a version of the same unconscious challenge; not one of his characters stands apart from the endless and finally suffocating [internal] debate, about the gratification of forbidden wishes … We must admire the art and regret the life” (pp. 270-271) of Hawthorne, who Crews concludes was tormented by the same “forbidden wishes” that plagued his characters.

Despite the fact that these types of readings lost much of their luster after Crews (who himself later renounced the psychoanalytic perspective), contemporary psychoanalytic literary critics continue to produce readings of literature based on the supposition that literary characters behave and think like real human beings; that fictional characters have unconscious psychological problems that the reader may identify and diagnose; and that the author and his characters share the same unconscious dilemmas.

Alongside classic Freudian accounts of author and character psychology, there emerged a set of psychoanalytic theories that addressed different, but closely related, aspects of psychoanalysis and its bearing on literary analysis. In Dynamics of Literary Response (1968), Norman Holland moves psychoanalytic literary criticism in the direction of “reader-response theory” — a field of literary theory that focuses on how readers respond to texts and the role readers play in investing texts with meaning. Holland makes use of a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective to understand the interpretive activity of readers. In a 1970 article, “The ‘Unconscious’ of Literature,” Holland reads Robert Frost’s poem “Mending Wall” not as a reflection of the author’s psychology, but as an appeal to the reader’s psychology. He views the poem as activating the unconscious fantasies and wishes of the reader (in this case, the reader’s unconscious fantasy of breaking down the wall between the self and the nursing mother).

Peter Brooks, in Psychoanalysis and Storytelling (1994), brings psychoanalytic concepts to bear on narrative theory, and Harold Bloom, in his seminal work The Anxiety of Influence (1973), links influence and authorial
anxiety to the Oedipus Complex. In response to Bloom’s theory of psychological influence, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (in “The Madwoman in the Attic” [1979]) develop their own feminist psychoanalytic theory of author psychology, arguing that female writers suffer from an “anxiety of authorship” born of their socially marginal and conflicted status as women writers.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Freudian framework became part of the fields of linguistics, structuralism, and semiotics, most prominently in the work of Jacques Lacan. Lacan’s post-Freudian framework was appropriated by semiology, structuralism, and post-structuralism, for example, in Barbara Johnson’s (1977) well-known reading of Derrida’s reading of Lacan’s reading of Edgar Allen Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter.” The result of this interpretive chain was, unfortunately, no less deterministic in its suppositions about the explanatory power of psychoanalytic ideas than the literary criticism derived from Freud’s and Ernest Jones’s application of psychoanalytic theory to the reading of literary works. Similar use of psychoanalytic concepts can be seen in the literary criticism and prose of several important twentieth century poets and fiction writers, including Conrad Aiken (1919), Robert Graves (1924), W. H. Auden (1962), and Randall Jarrell (1962, 1969).

Regardless of the particular form they have taken, these types of literary criticism are all held to be psychoanalytic because they either use a psychoanalytic conceptual framework to “understand” literature or they use literature to illustrate, expand upon, or upend established psychoanalytic formulations. In such literary criticism, a discreet set of “answers” to the puzzle of literary texts pre-exist the reading of the text.

In this essay we focus on a form of psychoanalytic literary criticism that is devoid of psychoanalytic formulations and the psychoanalytic jargon that often accompanies such psychoanalytic readings. The kind of psychoanalytic criticism we will discuss is unusual in that it makes no attempt to find or create a correspondence between literary form or content (for example, Hamlet’s tortured soliloquies) and psychological operation (for example, Hamlet’s unconscious attempts at resolution of parricidal and incestuous wishes and fears). It is a form of psychoanalytic literary thinking that is not psychologically explanatory, diagnostic, or therapeutic. Rather, it raises the possibility that one of the ways that a piece of literary criticism is psychoanalytic derives from its particular way of hearing and writing about literary
voice. This way of hearing and writing has its origins, we believe, in how practicing psychoanalysts are attuned to the patient’s voice, and their own, in a way that is unique to the practice of psychoanalysis.

In considering a form of psychoanalytic literary criticism divested of all the characteristics that have traditionally been taken as constitutive of psychoanalytic literary criticism, we will focus on a reading of a Robert Frost poem by Thomas Ogden (1998) (see Ogden, T., 1997a, 1997b, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2009a, 2009b for his readings of other literary works). In our discussion of the Psychoanalytic Literary Reader’s2 essay on Frost’s “Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be the Same” (1942a), we attempt to continue the ongoing (but unfinished) process of loosening the ties of analytic criticism to reductive psychoanalytic formulae, and to use what we know about psychoanalysis and literary studies to jointly consider how the analyst’s lived experience of the practice of psychoanalysis is reflected in how he thinks and writes about literature. In doing so, we hope to bring literary criticism and the practice of psychoanalysis into conversation in such a way that each discipline takes from the other some of its most essential and least evident qualities, rather than adopting primarily its most manifest and superficial components. This conversation will offer literary critics interested in psychoanalysis (as both a set of ideas and as a therapeutic process) a deeper and more nuanced sense of the forms of thinking that are integral to psychoanalysis; and will offer to psychoanalysts who are interested in literature

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2 We have chosen to use the terms Psychoanalytic Literary Reader (for which we have invented the acronym PLR) and the Literary Critic to refer to the psychoanalyst and the literary scholar co-author, respectively. (Benjamin Ogden’s published works of literary criticism include essays on the work of William Faulkner [B. Ogden, 2008], Samuel Beckett [B. Ogden, 2009], J.M. Coetzee [B. Ogden, 2010, 2011], Philip Roth [B. Ogden, 2012] and others.) We have elected to use these designations because they underscore the fact that the narrative “we” is both singular (in the sense that “we” reflects two or more people speaking with a single voice because they more or less share a point of view) and plural (in the sense that “we” is a pronoun that necessarily refers to two or more distinctly separate people with minds of their own, and ideas and sensibilities that are not held in common). The distance between our points of view is in movement throughout this essay and throughout the book as a whole. We believe that the tension between the voice of the PLR and that of the Literary Critic in the voice of the narrative “we” constitutes a good deal of what is potentially most alive and interesting about the book.
a clearer idea of the ways that literary critics attend to the demands of literature.

We believe that the distinctively psychoanalytic dimension of psychoanalytic literary criticism resides as much in the experience of the practice of psychoanalysis (and the particular form of listening and conversing that are central to it) as it does in psychoanalytic theory. In the analytic setting, analyst and patient are engaged in an effort to speak to one another in a way that is adequate to the task of creating/conveying a sense of what it feels like for the patient to be alive, to the extent that he is capable of being alive, at a given moment. We believe that for this to occur, the analyst must be attuned to what the patient is doing with language, as well as all that he is unable to do. Language is not simply a medium for the expression of the self; it is integral to the creation of the self (which is a continuing, moment-to-moment process). In the analytic setting, with its focus on talking as the principal means of communication, voice and language usage are among the principal ways in which individuals bring themselves into being, “come to life.” Voice, for the patient, is a medium for intended and unintended experimentation with different forms of selfhood, and for the development of a larger, more vital sense of self.

In order not to leave completely open to the imagination of the reader (who may not be a practicing analyst) what we have in mind by the psychoanalyst’s way of being with, listening to, thinking about, and responding to what is happening in the course of an analytic session, we will now present a selection from the analyst co-author’s psychoanalytic writing in which he describes his work with one of his patients. (This description of analytic work is based on a previously published clinical discussion [Ogden, T., 2010].) He writes:

As a child, Mr. C, a patient with cerebral palsy, had been savaged by his mother. In adult life, he became possessed by a “love” for a woman, Ms. Z. Over a period of eight years, Ms. Z twice relocated to a different city; both times the patient followed. Again and again, she tried to make it clear to Mr. C that she liked him as a friend, but did not want a romantic relationship with him. He became increasingly desperate, angry, and suicidal. From the outset of the analytic work, and frequently thereafter, the patient told me that he did not know why I “tolerated” him.
In our sessions, Mr. C would howl in pain as he spoke of the “unfairness” of Ms. Z’s rejection of him. When upset, particularly when crying, the patient would lose muscular control of his mouth, which made it very difficult for him to speak. Frothy saliva gathered at the sides of his mouth, and mucus dripped from his nose while tears ran down his cheeks. Being with Mr. C at these times was heartbreaking. I have only rarely felt in such an immediate, physical way that I was the mother of a baby in distress.

I believe that it was very important to the analytic work that Mr. C experience for himself over a period of years the reality that I was not repulsed by him even when he bellowed in pain and could not control the release of tears, nasal mucus, and saliva. It must have been apparent to Mr. C, though I never put it into words, that I loved him as I would one day love my own children in their infancy. For years, the patient had been too ashamed to tell me about some of the ways his mother had humiliated him as a child, for example, by repeatedly calling him “a repulsive, slobbering monster.”

Mr. C only gradually entrusted me with these deeply shamed aspects of himself. “She threw shoes at me from her clothes closet like I was an animal that she was trying to keep at a distance.” I said, “She was treating you like a rabid dog, and over time, you’ve come to experience yourself in that way.” In speaking and thinking these thoughts and feelings, the patient and I were trying out words and images to convey what had been to that point inarticulate emotional pain experienced primarily through feelings encrypted in bodily sensations, such as the sensations associated with his speech and gait. In trying to help Mr. C find words for his inarticulate feelings, I was not trying to help him rid himself of pain; I was trying to help him transform the medium in which he was experiencing his pain (from a bodily medium to a verbal one) in hopes that by doing so, he and I would be better able to think about his experience of himself, as opposed to his “showing it to me” or “dumping it into me” in order that I might experience some of his pain for him.

Several years into the work, Mr. C told me a dream: “Not much happened in the dream. I was myself with my cerebral palsy washing my car and enjoying listening to music on the car radio that I had turned up loud.” The dream was striking in a number of ways. It was the first time, in telling me a dream, that Mr. C specifically mentioned his cerebral palsy. Moreover, the way that he put it — “I was myself with my cerebral palsy” — conveyed a depth of recognition and an acceptance of himself.
that I had never before heard from him. How better could he have expressed a particular type of change in his relationship to himself — a psychological change that involved a loving self-recognition that contributed to freeing him from the need to perpetually attempt to wring love and acceptance from people disinclined to, or incapable of, loving him? In the dream, he was able to be a mother who took pleasure in bathing her baby (his car) while listening to and enjoying the music that was coming from inside the baby. This was not a dream of triumph; it was an ordinary dream of ordinary love: “nothing much happened.”

I was deeply moved by the patient’s telling me his dream. I said to him, “What a wonderful dream that was.” How different it would have felt to me, and I think, to Mr. C, had I said, “In the dream, you were the mother you’ve always wished you had, taking great pleasure in giving you — you as you are, a person with cerebral palsy — a bath, while singing beautiful music to you, her beloved child.” To have said this would have been redundant — we had talked a great deal about his wish that he had had a mother who loved him as he was. It would also have had the effect of taking his dream — his experience of being both a loving mother (to himself and other people) and a well-loved baby — and making it something of my own by putting it into explanatory language. Instead, I simply appreciated the love and beauty that he had experienced, not only in dreaming the dream, but also in telling it to me.

Some years later, Mr. C moved to another part of the country to take a high-level job in his field. He wrote to me periodically. In the last letter that I received from him (about five years after we stopped working together), he told me that he had married a woman he loved, a woman who had cerebral palsy. They had recently had a healthy baby girl.

We will return to this clinical vignette at various points in this essay to discuss the analyst’s particular ways of attending to language (both the patient’s and his own), but for now it suffices to say that this vignette reflects a way of listening and responding that is distinctively psychoanalytic (it is immediately recognizable as being different from all other forms of human relatedness).

As we turn now to a discussion of the Psychoanalytic Literary Reader’s essay on “Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be the Same,” we hope that it becomes clear that the way in which the PLR listened to and spoke with Mr. C is continuous with the way in which he reads and writes about Frost’s
poem. The vignette and the following discussion represent different expressions of the same psychoanalytic sensibility, a sensibility that gives the PLR’s literary criticism its psychoanalytic identity.

Here is the Frost poem that the Psychoanalytic Literary Reader discusses:

**Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be the Same**

He would declare and could himself believe  
That the birds there in all the garden round  
From having heard the daylong voice of Eve  
Had added to their own an oversound,  
Her tone of meaning but without the words.  
Admittedly an eloquence so soft  
Could only have had an influence on birds  
When call or laughter carried it aloft.  
Be that as may be, she was in their song.  
Moreover her voice upon their voices crossed  
Had now persisted in the woods so long  
That probably it never would be lost.  
Never again would birds’ song be the same.  
And to do that to birds was why she came. (Frost, 1942a, p. 308)

Here is the first section of the PLR’s response (Ogden, T., 1998):

The poem opens with the sound of good-natured chiding as the speaker, with mock skepticism, talks of a man who professed a far-fetched notion about birds that he actually seemed to believe. There is a slightly disowned intimacy in the speaker’s voice as he fondly, skeptically marvels at the capacity of the man to believe the unbelievable and speak these beliefs from a place in himself where there seemed to be no doubt. There is a feeling that what he believes he “believes … into existence” (Frost, quoted in Latham, 1966, p. 271). One can hear in the voice the pleasure taken in knowing someone so well over the years that even his old stories and quirky beliefs have become signatures of his being. (pp. 430-431)

What is striking about this kind of psychoanalytic literary reading is the rapidity and intensity with which the Psychoanalytic Literary Reader is
drawn to a personal connection with the voice of the poem. The privileged portal for the PLR’s efforts to get to know a piece of literature is the voice created in the writing. In the broadest sense, the PLR’s relationship to voice is unusually (perhaps excessively) intimate. In his introductory comments, the Psychoanalytic Literary Reader goes so far as to say of the Frost poem (and of a Wallace Stevens poem that he also discusses), “I have chosen these poems … because I am fond of [them] … and welcome the opportunity to spend considerable time with them in the process of writing about them” (Ogden, T, 1998, p. 429). The language here strongly suggests that the PLR’s experience of reading a poem is a personal one that is very similar to the way he approaches meeting a person, hoping that the visit will be a fulfilling one, both emotionally and intellectually. One has the impression that the PLR believes that if he is sufficiently attentive to what the writer is doing with language, he will get to know the poem at a greater depth in much the same way that he would get to know another person more intimately if he were to listen, with equal sensitivity, to how that person spoke. And, just as is the case with the experience of getting to know another person in a fuller, but never complete way, one is changed by the experience.

It is important to point out that although the PLR treats the experience of reading and responding to literature in a way that holds much in common with the experience of getting to know his patient, Mr. C, or anyone else, he is not so naïve as to believe that a literary work is the thinking and feeling state of the writer transposed into verbal form. Rather, the PLR treats the literary work as a creation, in the medium of writing, of a state of mind that the author has experienced in the past or is experiencing (perhaps for the first time) in the very act of writing.

For the Psychoanalytic Literary Reader, the author is not “dead” (as Roland Barthes [1968] argued in his seminal essay on authorship); he is present in the sense that his own range of human experience is the substrate for the experience he creates in the writing of the work. From what other source, the PLR asks, could the experience of writing (and reading) emerge? He firmly believes (in his discussion of Frost’s poem and in our discussions more than a decade later) that a writer cannot create in his writing what he is incapable of experiencing in his own life — an author, he contends, cannot write effectively about emotional experiences, he must write from them: they must be alive in the author.

The point we are trying to make here about the place of psychoanalysis in
literary studies is that the PLR treats voice as a reflection of human psychology. He believes that voice in literature conveys particular feeling states, and that these emotional states of mind can be heard and understood in the same way that feeling states can be heard and understood when they are spoken by a patient, or by any other person. The voice is not treated as entirely the product of rhetorical or structural strategies in form, or as the product of particular historical pressures. (This is not to say that such variables are out of bounds for the PLR, only that they are not the primary way that he thinks about literature.)

The Psychoanalytic Literary Reader, as an analyst whose life’s work is listening to the patient and himself, considers narrative voice in poetry and fiction in much the same way he would the voice of Mr. C or any of his other patients. He does so not as a means of accessing the author’s psychology. Rather, the analyst limits himself to a consideration of the effects of language, focusing on these effects as reflections of the feelings and ideas of fictional characters — imaginary beings whose origins in the author’s mind is undeniable (where else could they have come from?), but who are not symbolic messengers carrying in them the code for the author’s conscious and unconscious desires, fears, jealousies, and so on. Fictional characters and themes are not repositories for discrete aspects of the author’s unconscious mind, but are nonetheless imbued with certain qualities of thinking and feeling that derive from the psychology of the author. For the PLR, these qualities of thinking and feeling are communicated principally through the effects created in the medium of language.

To put this in other terms, if a psychoanalytic literary critic attempts, for example, to discern Robert Frost’s psychology from a poem, he pointlessly distracts himself and his readers from the text as a literary event. Literature, because of its unique formal (structural) properties, can open up new possibilities for thinking and feeling that could be evoked in no other way but in literary language (Attridge, 2004, 2005). The need to use a text to decode the author’s psychology, it seems, comes from the belief that for a psychoanalyst to learn from literature, or for a literary scholar to be properly psychoanalytic, he must try to move past the effects of language in the text into the unconscious psychology of the author.

It is not simply that conjecturing about author psychology in the ways we have described is guesswork and therefore ill-advised; worse, it is hostile to the sort of work that analysts can do best in their reading of literature.
because it is premised on a misunderstanding endemic to psychoanalytic literary criticism, namely, that an author’s psychology can be reduced to a distinct set of psychological concepts. So, if author psychology is for the most part off limits, then what the psychoanalyst, or the literary critic who wishes to be responsibly psychoanalytic, can bring to literature is a particular type of awareness of the relationship between voice, effects of language, and complex emotional states.

Still, it is not enough to say that the Psychoanalytic Literary Reader pays very close attention to voice and effects of language. After all, we all respond to the effects of language when we read. What marks the PLR’s reading as psychoanalytic is how he writes about voice and language, i.e. his own use of words in discussing his response to a piece of literature. In his discussion of “Birds’ Song,” he makes use of a particular way of writing about voice in which he is unusually brash in his treatment of voice without ever making the reader feel that he is being irresponsible in his attitude toward voice. That is to say, we think that in his reading of Frost the PLR is successful in executing a non-technical form of psychoanalytic reading, in that his reading manages to treat narrative voice as if it were the voice of a real person without ever leading the reader to feel that he has lost his awareness that the voice is not that of a real person. He manages to get deeply into the effects of language in a way that humanizes the narrator without making him exactly human. He has, moreover, created a way of writing about voice that conveys what is most alive for an analyst when working with a patient. We are interested here in looking at what kind of writing is necessary for a psychoanalytic literary reading to be successful, and how such a way of writing reflects what is unique to the experience of a practicing psychoanalyst.

We are, moreover, asking how the PLR’s lived experience as a therapist — as someone who listens and responds to voice in a way that serves a therapeutic role for the patient — is reflected in how he writes about literary voice. In what way is the PLR’s need to help his patients reflected in his writing about literature?

To respond to these questions, we return to the beginning of the Psychoanalytic Literary Reader’s response to the Frost poem:

The poem opens with the sound of good-natured chiding as the speaker, with mock skepticism, talks of a man who professed a
far-fetched notion about birds that he actually seemed to believe. There is a slightly disowned intimacy in the speaker’s voice as he fondly, skeptically marvels at the capacity of the man to believe the unbelievable and speak these beliefs from a place in himself where there seemed to be no doubt. There is a feeling that what he believes he “believes … into existence” (Frost, quoted in Lathem, 1966, p. 271). One can hear in the voice the pleasure taken in knowing someone so well over the years that even his old stories and quirky beliefs have become signatures of his being.

As the poem proceeds, the metaphor of narrator describing a man of strange, but deeply held convictions, is “turned” in a way that serves to gently invite a reader to take his place in the metaphor as he becomes the person to whom the “argument” is addressed, while the speaker becomes the man holding these odd beliefs.

There is delightful playfulness and wit in the speaker’s voice as he invokes flawed cause-and-effect reasoning to “explain” events occurring in a metaphor: the birds in the garden (of Eden), having listened to Eve’s voice all day long, had incorporated the sound of her voice into their song (as if time played a role in the mythic Garden). The strange “belief” in the creation of an “oversound” (a wonderful neologism) becomes an experience that is occurring in the poem, that is, in the changes taking place in the sound of the voice of the poem. (Ogden, T, 1998, pp. 430-431)

This passage is notable in that the PLR is both immediately drawn to voice and comfortable possessing only an incomplete knowledge of it. The phrase “The poem opens with the sound of good-natured chiding” immediately (perhaps prematurely) turns the reader into a listener (to paraphrase E. M. Forster [1927]). So strong is the PLR’s attraction to voice as a way of entering into the poem that the “good-natured chiding” is viewed as an effect of “sound,” not of the words or the syntax. There is no period during which the poem is taken as text; it begins as voice, and is intermittently linked back to its textual features. However, the diction, syntax, and overall voice of the PLR’s writing in these three paragraphs suggest an approach to voice that is comfortable being provisional, incomplete, uncertain, even conjectural. For instance, several sentences begin with the phrase “There is …” (“There is a slightly disowned intimacy …”) and “There is a feeling that what he
believes...”). Two sentences later, the PLR writes, “There is a delightful playfulness ...” Clearly, the phrase “There is” holds for the Psychoanalytic Literary Reader a preferred distance as well as an unresolved quality of his own narration that is for him what he believes to be the best way of couching his understanding of voice. “There is” typically is part of a confident statement, one of assurance. But in this passage, it is always tempered: “There is a slightly ...” and “There is a feeling that ...”

The grammar of the phrase “there is” reflects a particular orientation and attitude toward voice that we believe derives from what the psychoanalyst does with a patient’s voice and with his own voice in his effort to understand (up to a point) what is happening between them. It is likely that the PLR’s syntax in his literary writing reflects his conception of the effects of voice in his clinical work, which he treats as communications that can be truthful and also be partial, still in formation. (The PLR’s account of his work with Mr. C is descriptive in its tone and language structure, as opposed to being definitive, deductive or explanatory: “How different it would have felt to me, and I think to Mr. C, had I said, ‘In the dream, you were the mother you always wished you had, taking pleasure in giving you — you as your are, a person with cerebral palsy — a bath, while singing beautiful music to you, her beloved child.’”)

If the Psychoanalytic Literary Reader were simply a literary critic, and not a psychoanalyst as well, he might be perceived as hedging his bets, as being willing to state things as true while protecting himself from being found wrong in the end. As an analyst speaking to a patient (and himself) about voice, it is essential that he speak in a way that conveys sufficient conviction to merit consideration on the part of the patient; sufficient tentativeness to do justice to the complexity and elusiveness of voice; and sufficient humility in the face of all that he does not know about the forms of thinking and feeling that go on in both a psychological and a bodily way outside of his own and the patient’s awareness. These same qualities characterize the PLR’s voice when he writes about a piece of literature.

Of course, a psychoanalyst’s way of responding to and writing about a patient’s voice is shaped by the responsibility he feels to be of use to the patient and to the reader of his clinical writing. It is not simply that the analyst is attuned to human voice and effects of language by virtue of the “ear training” (Pritchard, 1991) he has accrued over the course of decades of listening to, and talking with, his patients, though this no doubt is part of the
story. What we are focusing on here is the idea that the analyst’s way of listening to and thinking about voice is inseparable from his therapeutic function. By therapeutic function we mean all of the fundamental components of an analyst’s care of his patient: his facilitating the patient’s development of a sense of self more grounded in himself (as opposed to being primarily reactive); his helping the patient become more capable of sustaining a broader range of feelings and richer forms of relatedness to other people who are experienced as separate from himself; his creating conditions in which the patient may develop ways of thinking that involve simultaneous, multiple perspectives on what is occurring in his internal life and his life in the external world; his helping the patient to be receptive and responsive to the truth of his emotional experience, and so on. What is distinctive about the psychoanalyst’s approach to language in the analytic situation is that, while he must never reduce his understanding of voice to impersonal psychological formulations, he also must never lose sight of the way in which voice reflects the particular, ever-changing, intrapsychic and interpersonal context in which voice is generated.

With this view of the analyst’s way of attending to voice in his clinical work in mind, we return again to the question: what are the ways of going about reading literature that are distinctively psychoanalytic? In responding to that question we begin with the belief that it is vital to acknowledge that the psychoanalyst’s understanding of voice — both in his work with patients and in his reading of literature — is shaped profoundly by the relationship between the expressions of self generated in language and the psychological and emotional states of the speaker. Without this thread that connects voice and human psychology, it would be impossible for the psychoanalyst to do his work as a psychotherapist. This thread connecting voice and the psychology of the person speaking is a hallmark of psychoanalytic literary reading and criticism.

But this thread connecting voice and psychology is not the only quality that is distinctive to psychoanalytic literary criticism. Voice, for the psychoanalyst working with a patient, is always accompanied by a “therapeutic valence,” that is, a desire to do productive analytic work with a patient during a session. Responding to communications cast to a large extent in the medium of voice requires of the analyst not only a well-trained ear, but as importantly, a way of using language that invents a way of communicating that is absolutely personal to that patient at that moment in the analysis.
Saying the same words to two different patients would be useless at best, and would probably undermine both patients’ feeling of being known by the analyst.

In his discussion of his work with Mr. C, the Psychoanalytic Literary Reader attends closely not only to qualities of voice and shifts in tone, but also to use of metaphor and witty, poignant understatement. For example, the PLR captures in his writing the great joy he takes in Mr. C’s metaphoric comparison in his dream of the songs sung on the car radio and the beautiful music of the sounds made by one’s well-loved baby. He was similarly moved by the endearing understatement in Mr. C’s use of the phrase “not much happened” to refer to the new-found experience of the extraordinariness of the ordinariness of love (including self-love) in his life. (It must be borne in mind that the dreaming of a dream is almost entirely a visual imagistic event, while the telling of a dream is almost entirely a verbal construction, just as telling a friend about a painting one saw is a verbal construction, not a visual one. The metaphor with which the PLR was so taken was a metaphor created not in images, but in words as the patient told his dream to him.)

The PLR responded to the telling of the dream, not with interpretation or explanation, but with a simply worded statement of appreciation that he could have said to nobody but Mr. C — “What a wonderful dream that was” — recognizing both the profound psychological changes that were reflected in the dream and the gift of words and feelings that the patient had made to the analyst (and, as importantly, to himself) in his telling of the dream. We have tried to capture in this discussion of the PLR’s clinical writing the importance of the analyst’s speaking in a way that reflects what is unique to a given moment of lived experience with another person.

We will now return to the Psychoanalytic Literary Reader’s discussion of “Birds’ Song,” this time focusing on the way in which psychoanalytic literary criticism of the sort we are discussing brings to bear on the reading of a text a “therapeutic urgency” (a need to be of psychological use to the patient) that is inseparable from the analyst’s internal pressure to speak to his patient in a way that is absolutely personal to the experiencing pair.

Holding in mind the clinical experience just discussed, we would like to look at another section of the PLR’s reading of Frost to examine how the therapeutic urgency he feels with his patients is reflected, in a transformed way, in his literary reading and writing. Here is the section of the Frost poem
that the PLR is addressing:

Moreover her voice upon their voices crossed
Had now persisted in the woods so long
That probably it never would be lost.
Never again would birds’ song be the same.

Here now is the PLR’s reading of these lines:

The voice here is a more personal voice filled with the effort to hold on to what is most valued (reminiscent of the tone of the words “For what I would not part with I have kept” in Frost’s [1942b] “I Could Give All to Time”). In “Birds’ Song,” what is most valued is a belief — a belief which in these lines is no longer a certainty — that poetry/this poem, is able to speak with an “eloquence” that reaches so deeply into human feeling and experience that it alters language itself and has persisted in the woods/words so long that “probably it never would be lost.” The “eloquence,” the ability of poetry to change the sound of language is only as potent as the ability of this poem to create the sounds of a unique voice that will never be lost to the reader.

The phrase “probably it never would be lost” quietly and unobtrusively conveys a remarkable depth of sadness. The word “probably” softly suggests a never openly acknowledged feeling of doubt about the permanence and immutability over time of the “oversounds” that are created in the course of a poem or of a life. As is characteristic of Frost, the line-ending words “never would be lost,” give the word “lost” the “final word” and, in so doing, undercut the claim for permanence in the very act of making the claim.

The voice in the line “Never again would birds’ song be the same” moves well beyond the wit and charm of the first part of the poem and beyond the bald assertion “she was in their song.” The line has the sound and feel of a memorial prayer. In these most delicate and unassuming of words (which contain not a single hard consonant sound), a sense of the sacred is evoked. It is a deeply personal sacredness that is filled with both love and sadness. The strength of the voice in this line keeps the declaration free of
sentimentality or nostalgia. The line conveys a sense of the poet’s attempts, in his making of poems, to create and preserve in the sound of his words something of the sounds of the past voices that have been most important to him: the voices of the people he has loved, the voices of the poems that have mattered most to him, the changing sounds of his own voice in the course of his life (both in speech and in the poems that he has written), as well as the sounds of ancestral voices that are not attributable to any particular person, but are part of the language with which he speaks and from which he creates his own voice and his poems.

At the heart of this response is the Psychoanalytic Literary Reader’s description of the particular sadness created by the language of the poem. In the poem, the narrative voice describes a scene in which one human voice (“the daylong voice of Eve”) is heard so fully and deeply, and for such a long time that it becomes imprinted in the voices of other living creatures. The narrative voice can hear in the voices of these living creatures traces of Eve’s voice. It is impossible not to hear the narrator’s unspoken wish that his own voice could find another living creature (and another “woods”) in which to persist after he dies. But, at the same time, it seems that the narrative voice will not allow itself to wish this fully for fear of having to confront the possibility that neither his voice, nor the voice of Eve will survive. For this reason he dashes the purity of the dream by saying, “probably it never would be lost.”

Through the form and voice of his own writing, the PLR “speaks” to the narrator in a way that, to our ear, is a response to the narrator’s anxiety, much as he responded to Mr. C’s emotional pain. The PLR seems to respond to the narrator as if the narrator needed assurance that he is not alone in his uncertainty and pain. He assures the narrator through the form and voice of his written response that their conversation as reader and poet (not unlike the conversation between analyst and patient) is the “woods”/“words” in which the narrator’s voice “never will be lost.” (Perhaps the PLR’s saying to Mr. C “what a wonderful dream that was” added to Mr. C’s voice an over-sound that led Mr. C to feel that “probably it never will be lost.”)

The PLR does this not through plain assertion, but by saying back to the narrator a transformed version of what the narrator has already said in language that is both drawn from the tones and rhythms of the narrator’s voice
and from a sensibility that is a unique creation of the Psychoanalytic Literary Reader’s mind and voice. The PLR echoes the word choice of the narrative voice with his own word choice, pairing the narrator’s “woods” with his own “words,” and the narrator’s “birds” with his own “bards.” The PLR, in so doing, echoes the narrator’s voice while also expressing what he alone hears in the narrator’s words. The PLR not only describes the narrator’s words and voice as “delicate and unassuming”; he writes about them in a way that is delicate and unassuming in its own way. A critic and a psychoanalyst must add something to what they hear, and in that way transform it. Otherwise, they are simply making echoes, and not offering “original response” (Frost, 1942c, p. 307).

The Psychoanalytic Literary Reader never interprets the poem, instead taking the delicate and unassuming approach of simply saying what “sound and feel” the lines have, what “sense” they convey. In this way, he draws the narrator into conversation, speaking with the imprimatur (the “oversounds”) of the narrator’s voice. The poet’s voice and the PLR’s voice are now “voices crossed” (and changed) in the shared experience (created in the PLR’s writing) of listening to one another.

The PLR’s form of response keeps alive the very real, and finally irresolvable, fear in the narrator’s voice about his own mortality and the mortality of his living voice — fears that are reflected so devastatingly in the use of the word “probably,” and in the elegiac but hopeful tones of the phrase, “Never again would birds’ song be the same.” The Psychoanalytic Literary Reader keeps this natural human fear alive in a way that seems to want to try to “to help the narrator” learn to live with the recognition of the finality of death and make something distinctly his own with this recognition. The PLR does so not by providing the narrator with unconvincing reassurance (“Don’t worry, I won’t forget you”), but by briefly allowing the narrator to hear reflections of himself (but not himself) in the voice of the PLR. Ultimately, the PLR’s writing captures something of the experience of two people making a lasting, though not eternal, impression on one another by means of the way they use words in talking together.

We hope that in distilling psychoanalysis to its least technical essence we not only dispense with the entrenched perception of psychoanalytic literary criticism as outmoded and inapplicable because it is little more than a bundle of hackneyed “solutions” to literary texts, but that, in a broader sense, we have added something to the evidence that the best writing and thinking
is that which is not pledged to any theoretical methodology, but is everywhere drawing on the capacity of language to express dimensions of reality (however complex and elusive) in clear and lively ways. We believe that in its clearest, most human, and least formulaic form psychoanalytic thinking holds the potential to once again become a significant part of how literary critics and scholars think about how writers go about using language to create the effects that constitute good literature.

REFERENCES:

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WHAT IS PSYCHOANALYTIC LITERARY CRITICISM?


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