

Anticipation: how does Literature Create its Limits through Reading and Writing?

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Abstract

In this paper we elaborate Lacan's theory on courtly love to establish a link between literature, psychoanalytic practice and psychoanalytic theory. Lacan himself had already established the link between courtly love and psychoanalytic practice as a way of working through the mourning for the structural lack in the Symbolic order. As such, both can be seen as an anticipation of anticipation: not the object itself is anticipated, but rather the anticipation of this object. Through the use of Stiegler's (2010) reinterpretation of the concept of the pharmakon we understand psychoanalytic theory and literature in general as attempts to work through this mourning by creating an anamnesis, a “long circuit” of knowledge in which the creators are implied with their own subjectivity. An analysis of Graham Swift's novel *Ever After* and of Italo Calvino's novel *If on a winter's night a traveler* demonstrate how this principle applies to the processes of writing and reading.

Keywords: literature, courtly love, psychoanalytic theory, pharmakon, epistemology

1 Introduction

From its humble beginnings, psychoanalysis has always had a particular relationship with literature and writers. As early as 1900 Freud uses literary material to illustrate the principles of dream creation in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1953 [1900]). He has frequently referred to literary authors to sustain his theories, has devoted papers to specific literary works such as Jensen's *Gradiva* (Freud, 1959 [1906]), writers such as Dostoevsky (Freud, 1953 [1928]) and the process of writing in general (Freud, 1959 [1908]). He uses literary greats such as Shakespeare, Goethe and Heine as a constant source of inspiration. Moreover, in *Studies on Hysteria*, one of the first works on psychoanalysis, Freud states the following: “I have not always been a psychotherapist. Like other neuropathologists, I was trained to employ local diagnoses and electro-prognosis, and it still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science. I must console myself with the reflection that the nature of the subject is evidently responsible for this, rather than any preference of my own. The fact is that

local diagnosis and electrical reactions lead nowhere in the study of hysteria, whereas a detailed description of mental processes such as we are accustomed to find in the works of imaginative writers enables me, with the use of a few psychological formulas, to obtain at least some kind of insight into the course of that affection.” (Freud & Breuer, 1955 [1895]). Lacan as well has always had a great affinity with literature and has dedicated one whole seminar to James Joyce (Lacan, 2005 [1975-1976]) in order to rethink the basic principles of his theory. We can safely state without fear of contradiction that psychoanalysts are more often than not ardent writers and avid readers. But what is the nature of this seemingly natural connection between a theory on the workings of the human mind such as psychoanalysis and literature in general? Is psychoanalytic theory just another form of fiction? And if this is the case, what is its stature as a science? In what follows we will develop an answer, albeit tentative, to these questions. To develop an answer we will explore the Lacanian perspective on the process of writing and reading.

In his fourth and fifth seminar, Lacan discusses courtly love and its writings. Lacan's conclusion is that the literary movement of courtly love and psychoanalytic practice anticipate the same objective, which is an endless repetition of an attempt to transcend the laws of the signifier. We will relate this process to the concept of the *pharmakon* as elaborated by the French contemporary philosopher Bernard Stiegler in order to establish a theoretical difference between psychoanalytic writing and literature. This will be illustrated by a reading of Graham Swift's novel *Ever After*. Next, we will illustrate how the same principles can be applied to reading through an analysis of Italo Calvino's novel *If on a winter's night a traveler*.

2 Lacan and Courtly Love

In his seminar on the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1997 [1959-1960]) Lacan discusses the poetry of courtly love and its relation to desire. In his teachings, desire is an effect of language. When the subject enters the Symbolic order, which is the total of language, cultural productions and stories, it loses a certain immediacy with the Real. This loss, which Lacan named the *objet a*, is what causes desire and motivates the eternal search for filling the lack created by language. His rather pessimistic conclusion regarding love implies that love is indeed always an unhappy love: the subject can never become one with his love object and relationships are always marked by the lack, for what one searches within the loved one transcends the individual and is impossible to obtain. This lack is structural and as such desire can never completely be satisfied.

When Lacan discusses courtly love, he calls it the scholastics of unhappy love, of the love for an idealized woman that one can never attain. The songs of the medieval French minstrels sing the praise of this desire that can never be satisfied by idealizing the woman and making her at the same time unavailable. However, courtly love does not aim to obtain something that lies outside its proper bounds. It is its own cause (Van Haute & Geyskens, 2010). Lacan states that courtly love, through a systematic and conscious use of the signifier, presentifies the ultimate truth of desire without ultimately denying it. Desire, as an effect of language, can never completely be satisfied. Within the bounds of the Symbolic order we will never find a signifier that fills the lack. We

can never say everything. Courtly minstrels sing the praise of this structural impossibility which allows them to surpass frustration. Lacan states that frustration implies that one believes that something can still fill the lack constituted by language – one just hasn't yet been able to obtain it (Lacan, 1998 [1956-1957]). However, the insight of courtly poetry is not definitive. As the frustrated subject keeps on seeking that which it is missing, the courtly minstrel sings unendingly the praise of this structural impossibility. Form and contents coincide here: the lack remains and he has to keep on singing its praise in a constant attempt to transcend it, which is not the same as to fill it. Whereas in frustration the subject anticipates to find the missing object, the courtly minstrel anticipates anticipation in order to surpass the pitfall of frustration which presupposes an object that is in its essence imaginary. In other words, in courtly love it is not the acquisition of the object of desire that is anticipated. Rather, what is anticipated is an endless anticipation of this object.

For better or for worse, we are no longer in the middle ages and the courtly minstrels have been replaced with Justin Bieber, Kanye West and the likes, which lack the subtlety of the traveling minstrel. Lacan asks himself which cultural activity has come to replace the poetry of the courtly minstrels and concludes that psychoanalytic practice could very well serve as a good candidate. Indeed, psychoanalytic practice also aims at working through the mourning for the loss of ultimate satisfaction through a systematic and conscious use of the signifier: through free association and transference, the patient has to find the words to construct for himself this ultimate truth.

This brings us back to the question we have posed at the outset: what is the common ground between literature and psychoanalysis? Before we formulate an answer to this question we will have to broaden the scope of Lacan's conclusions. Indeed, in our reading an answer as to which contemporary cultural activity replaces courtly poetry, or rather, is based on the same principle, should not just be psychoanalytic practice, but should also include psychoanalytic theory. To illustrate this point we will refer to contemporary French philosopher Bernard Stiegler's reinterpretation of the pharmakon, which is originally a concept introduced by Plato. Moreover, after having exposed a common principle underlying psychoanalytic practice and theory, we will demonstrate how literature is often based on the same process by a reading of Graham Swift's novel *Ever After*.

3 The Pharmakon as a link Between Theory, Practice and Literature

But first the pharmakon. This concept, which originates to Plato, was introduced to contemporary philosophy by Jacques Derrida in his text on *Plato's Pharmacy* (Derrida, 1993). To Plato, who, as a student of Socrates, was used to the oral transmission of philosophical teachings, the written word as hypomnesis, that is, as a form of artificial memory, is a pharmakon: that which takes care, but at the same time that which has to be taken care of in the sense that one should be careful of it. In Plato's case the written word aids the transmission of teachings, but it can also have toxic effects. Plato (1985) fears that man will no longer “exercise his memory” as he will rely on the written text. Moreover, he states that philosophers transmitting their teachings through the written word do not transmit “true wisdom, but merely its semblance”. They are in fact just

passing knowledge, and not teaching. Plato tries to suppress the toxic effects of writing as hypomnesis, by opposing the anamnesis: the autonomy of thought, the thinking “by itself”, which is the basis of all knowledge and which constitutes, according to Stiegler (2010), a form of transcendental memory. The difference between hypomnesis and anamnesis is in fact the difference between knowledge which exists independent of the individual, for example: knowledge that has been written down and is read by the letter, in other words, it is knowledge taken as dogma; and on the other hand knowledge where the individual participates in its creation and its transformation. However, whereas Plato opposes anamnesis as autonomy and hypomnesis as heteronomy, Derrida states that both processes constitute each other constantly.

Stiegler (*ibid.*) applies this concept to the construction of scientific knowledge and technological progress. In his reading, contemporary science accentuates the aspect of hypomnesis and ignores the aspect of anamnesis. It tries to constitute a knowledge that is independent of the individual, and true because proven according to scientific method which is also independent of the person that applies it. When applied as such to certain contexts, for example a clinical context, this can have disastrous and alienating effects. This effect can be observed in psychiatry: the scientific knowledge created by psychiatrists exists independent of the relationship between patient and clinician. In our reading, psychoanalysts such as Freud and Lacan try to keep anamnesis and hypomnesis in balance. On the one hand, they try to create the independent source of knowledge which can serve as a dogmatic knowledge, that is to say: as hypomnesis. On the other hand, Freud often proclaimed that every analyst should reinvent the theory with every patient and Lacan has always underlined the importance of Freud's own subjectivity in the creation of psychoanalytic theory. It will come as no surprise that many great analysts seem to rewrite the same theory over and over again. Freud has often revised his theory, as has Lacan. Winnicott and Klein have not only contributed to psychoanalysis, they have also rewritten it and their subjectivity cannot be distinguished from the theory itself either. What has once been their contribution to anamnesis can serve as hypomnesis for their pupils. When Lacan started his seminar, he opposed the interpretation of Freud by the ego-analysts, who took one part of Freudian theory as the “true Freud”, and reinstated the historical aspect in Freud's teachings: Freud's theory is to be taken as a contribution to anamnesis, as one long circuit in which the subject Freud is implied. In doing so, Lacan created his own long circuit, his own contribution to anamnesis. It is now up to the students of Lacan to do the same, and steer clear of the hypomnesic pitfall of taking one part of Lacan's teachings as the “true Lacan”.

These remarks apply to psychoanalytic theory. However, is there a real difference between the anamnestic progress of psychoanalytic theory and what happens in the psychoanalytic treatment? To some, such as the French philosopher Stéphan Mosès (2011), Freud's writings presuppose an interlocutor and as such, reinstate the dialogue in the written word. And let us not forget that Lacan's seminars, although a great number of them has now been published in book form, were exactly that: spoken seminars – the form of which he himself compares to a psychoanalytic treatment (Lacan, 1999 [1972-1973]). In this treatment the patient is invited to freely speak his associations. Through the process of free association he will recount the stories that make up his life over and

over again. Throughout this process, certain words, certain phrases or themes will reappear, often in different forms in a process Freud calls working through. Ultimately, this brings the patient, as is the case with the courtly poet, to work through the mourning for the structural impossibility to fill the lack and as such can transform, as Freud once said, neurotic unhappiness into normal unhappiness.

This process is very similar to the process we have described in regard to psychoanalytic theory. But the difference lies in the balance between anamnesis and hypomnesis. Through the relation between patient and analyst, a theory can be constructed. However, this theory relies much more on anamnesis than on hypomnesis. When this theory is generalized, it can be used as hypomnesis, but the patient is constructing his own contribution to anamnesis. In the end, this means that psychoanalytic treatment and psychoanalytic theory, through and ongoing repetition of formulating the structural impossibility, are both ways to anticipate anticipation as is the case with courtly poetry.

4 Anticipating the Ever After

We can now elaborate the common ground between literature, psychoanalytic theory and psychoanalytic treatment. We shall do this through a reading of Graham Swift's novel *Ever After* (Swift, 1992). This novel has been classified by some (Vanmaele, 2005) under neo-Victorian fiction. In this literary movement, Victorian themes are reinterpreted through postmodern discourse. In a way, Lacan can be seen as a neo-Victorian author. Although Freud subverted many Victorian certainties, his theory still bears the markings of the Victorian era. In his rereading of Freud, Lacan will ultimately subvert Freud's belief in the father as a guarantee for the Symbolic order, or what he calls: Freud's dream. According to Lacan, Freud applied the oedipous-complex as a master's discourse: implicitly, Freud assumes to possess the ultimate truth of the unconscious desire. In true postmodern vain, Lacan subverts this position in stating that the master is marked by the same lack as anyone who has entered the Symbolic order. Graham Swift's novel offers a similar reading of the same theme.

The story of *Ever After* is told from the perspective of Bill Unwin, a professor of English literature, after an attempted suicide. The book's story is not told in a linear fashion and so we learn gradually, throughout the novel, of the events preceding Bill's suicide attempt stretching back to his early childhood when his own father committed suicide. Following the suicide of his wife Ruth, Bill becomes the first incumbent of the Ellison Fellowship, a token of goodwill from his deceased stepfather, Sam Ellis, who never treated Bill as a son, but rather as a substitute for his own deceased brother. This fellowship permits Bill to work on the journals of Matthew Pearce, an ancestor of Bill, of whom he has obtained said journals after the death of his own mother. The book is written in such a way that the story of Bill intersects with passages from these journals, which recount Matthew Pearce's transition from a sound churchman to a convinced Darwinist. Being a surveyor, Pearce sought to familiarize himself with the works of Charles Darwin and Charles Lyell. As Freud once said: Darwin's work on the descent of man was one of the three narcissistic blows man had to endure (the other two being Copernic's theories on heliocentrism and Freud's own theory on the unconscious).

Consequently, Pearce starts to question his faith and struggles to keep his doubts under guard. However, following the death of his youngest son, Felix, Matthew's disquieting thoughts start to trouble him incessantly, leading to the revelation of his secret doubts which will ultimately end in the dissolution of his marriage as he no longer believes. In Lacanian terms we could state that Pearce has lost his faith in religion as a discourse of ultimate truth.

We see a similar loss of faith in the character of Bill Unwin, albeit on a more personal level. He learns from his stepfather, Sam, that the man who he always took to be his father was not his biological father. Consequently, Bill starts to question the motives of his father's suicide: was it because his mother told him that Bill wasn't his real son? While he had always reproached his mother of having an affair with Sam while his father was still alive and presupposing that this could have possibly lead to his father's suicide, Bill now has to face another version of the truth – none of them offering any certainty. Moreover, the death of his wife Ruth, an actress, for whom he gave up his career as a university lecturer to become her manager, leads him to question the everlasting power of love (*ibid.*): his continued attachment to his wife did not prevent him from attempting to kill himself, he doubts his loyalty when he contemplates replacing her, he hints at possible adultery on her part and finally, he is convinced that his encounter and subsequent life with her was mere coincidence. Bill loses all his certainties and is confronted with the typical postmodern project of the undermining of all kinds of authority and totalizing myths, leading to what Christian Gutleben calls an “aesthetics of indeterminacy”. In Lacanian terms we could state that Bill is confronted with the lack in the Symbolic order: there is nothing to ground the certainties he has built up throughout his life and the confrontation with the real deaths of his father, his stepfather, his mother and his wife in combination with the indeterminacy of the stories that make up his past make this painfully clear.

At the risk of sounding reductionist, we would like to state that the remarks made by Lacan concerning courtly love concern a great part of literature in general. What this book shows us, is not only part of the truth that is revealed by courtly love, psychoanalytic practice and psychoanalytic theory, but also the importance of repeated writing: Pearce writes, Unwin writes about what Pearce has written and ultimately writes his own life's story - and every time the same truth is being rewritten. It is a continuous attempt to work through the mourning of the structural impossibility created by the Symbolic order. The writer constantly anticipates anticipation. Whereas a psychoanalytic treatment can be seen as an anamnestic way of going about these truths, and psychoanalytic theory as keeping the balance between anamnesis and hypomnesis, literature can often be situated somewhere in between psychoanalytic treatment and psychoanalytic theory. It bears the marks of the author's own creation of anamnesis, but it does transcend the personal account of the neurotic. As a psychoanalytic treatment it taps into certain truths that need to be recreated over and over again through the process of anamnesis, but it also creates the possibility of a hypomnesis which permits psychoanalytic authors to use literature as a foundation for their own theories, which in turn is again a creation of anamnesis.

5 If on a Winter's Night a Reader

Thus far we have spoken of writers, their way of working through the mourning for the ultimate impossibility of the signifier and its relations to psychoanalysis. I would like to conclude by saying something about reading. Famous bibliophile Alberto Manguel, who has written several books on the subject of reading, states that the ideal reader is one who reads throughout the course of his life one big book (Manguel, 2011). At the time when Lacan was conducting his twentieth seminar the first publication of one of his seminars appeared in book form. After having read this seminar, which he had conducted ten years before, he states that what he had said at the time wasn't stupid and anticipated in a certain sense what he is stating in his twentieth seminar (Lacan, 1999 [1972-1973]). In our reading, this is an effect of the creation of anamnesis: through a systematic and conscious use of the signifier, Lacan creates a theory on the structural lack and its ramifications. This working through implies a repetition with variation on the same truth that can never be completely spoken.

This is also experienced when we read. When passing from one book to another, there are always elements that recur. The reading of one book will influence the way we read the next. In this way, reading can also be seen as an unending creation of anamnesis, as a working through of the mourning for the structural impossibility to fill the lack. In the end, we construct our own personal reading of this ultimate truth, which is in itself also a story. A book which illustrates this point majestically is Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (Calvino, 1997). In this novel you, the reader, are the main character. In the first chapter you go out to the book shop to pick up Italo Calvino's latest novel entitled *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Once you have returned you start reading it (this is the second chapter of the novel), only to notice that there has been a printing error: the first seventeen pages are being repeated over and over again. So you return to the book shop and explain the situation. The shop-keeper assures you that you are not the only one and that there has been a problem with the publisher. In fact, those first seventeen pages aren't by the hand of Calvino, but belong to another book by another writer. He'll be glad to replace your copy of Calvino's book with a correct one. However, having read the first seventeen pages, the story has gripped you and you would actually prefer a correct copy of *that* book, which is entitled *Outside the town of Malbork*. You return home with a copy, only to find that a similar error has occurred. Not only that, it also appears to be a whole other book. And so you return in search for a book that you weren't looking for in the first place. Chapters in which you, the reader, are the protagonist alternate with pages from the books you are allegedly reading. Throughout the novel you are being taken on a quest in the search for the book you never seem to obtain. Throughout reading you search for something that can never be found. However, as Manguel said, at the end it seems we have read one big book. Calvino surprises us when in the final chapter he offers us a reading of all the titles of all the books we have read throughout the quest, which reads as follows: "If on a winter's night a traveler, outside the town of Malbork, leaning from the steep slope without fear of wind or vertigo, looks down in the gathering shadow in a network of lines that enlase, in a network of lines that intersect on the carpet of leaves illuminated

by the moon around an empty grave, what story down there awaits its end?" Passing on from one book to another, which never happens haphazardly, the reader contributes to the creation of anamnesis with the help of the writer. And indeed, in the end, the conclusion of an amnesis, if there ever is one, is merely further anticipation, or as Calvino writes: what story down there awaits its end?

6 Conclusion

In this paper we have elaborated the relations between psychoanalytic practice and theory on the one hand and literature on the other. We started out by broadening the scope of Lacan's theory on courtly love. Lacan states that courtly love, by idealizing a woman that can never be attained, tries to surpass the laws of the signifier. These laws state that the Symbolic order, as the total of language and cultural activities, will always be marked by a structural lack. This lack is what causes an endless search for the missing object, for which a signifier can never be found in order to fill the lack. Relationships are also marked by this lack and as such love is always an unhappy love. Courtly poetry however tries to surpass these laws by singing their praise. As such, what is anticipated is not the missing object, but rather the anticipation of this missing object. According to Lacan, a modern day alternative to courtly poetry is psychoanalytic practice.

In order to establish a link between psychoanalytic theory and psychoanalytic practice we studied the concept of the pharmakon as that which takes care and has to be taken care of, in the sense that one has to be careful of it. Plato considered the written word as something which could have toxic effects because it creates a hypomnesis, an artificial memory. He opposes anamnesis as a way of constituting knowledge where the individual participates in its creation and transformation. However, Derrida states that both hypomnesis and anamnesis constitute each other constantly. Stiegler applies this idea to scientific theory and concludes that contemporary science has abandoned the anamnestic aspect in favour of the hypomnestic. In our reading psychoanalysis is a science that keeps the balance between hypomnesis and anamnesis intact. On the one hand it creates a theory that can serve as dogma, on the other it can not be understood independent of the subject that has written it (e.g. Freud, Lacan, Winnicott). As such, psychoanalytic theory can also be understood as an attempt to transcend the laws of the signifier: a theory on the structural lack that is constantly being rewritten without hope of ever formulating the last word on this subject.

Finally we have illustrated how these principles apply to literature in general through the processes of reading and writing. A reading of Graham Swift's novel *Ever After* taught us that the process of writing and rewriting constitutes another way of working through the mourning for the structural lack. Writers tap the same source analysts and analysants do, which makes them very apt to being cited by psychoanalytic authors who try to theorize this principle. Through a reading of Italo Calvino's novel *If on a winter's night a traveler* we have demonstrated how the same principle applies to the reading of books. Readers construct something throughout the reading of books which constitutes a source of knowledge in which they have participated and which is a story in itself.

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