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***Lacanian Theory and the Future***

***of Cultural Criticism***

All critical and interpretive activities, like the cultural artifacts upon which they operate, ultimately take their value from the difference they make in people's lives. Therefore, one of the most important functions - and perhaps *the* most important function - that cultural criticism can have is to identify, evaluate, and intervene in the *effects* that cultural phenomena have on *actual living and breathing human beings*. Up till now, most cultural criticism including and especially literary criticism - has made very little difference, directly or indirectly, in the lives of most people. Although we literary professionals acknowledge that historically certain literary works have made a substantial difference in the lives of some people - *Werther*, for example, precipitating a rash of suicides among European youth, or *Uncle Tom's Cabin* striking a powerful blow for the abolition of slavery - we rarely make such effects the focus of attention in literary studies, and we almost never ask what the effects of our critical activity itself might be outside the academy. On the contrary. We usually try simply to ignore or deny the inconsequential nature of our critical activity, while we perpetuate that inconsequentiality through curricula that emphasize consumption and analysis of literary texts as objects of knowledge, rather than systematic reflection on and intervention in the *effects* psychological, social, and political - that such texts might produce in those who receive and consume them.

Nor has literary theory, for all the difference it has made in the lives of some within the academy, made much difference outside the academy, for when it is pursued systematically at all, it is usually taken as a means of attaining knowledge about texts as such, rather than as a means of attaining knowledge about how to identify and intervene in the *effects* that these texts can have on the human subjects who encounter them. Even reader-response analy-

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sis and reception studies, which do focus on effects rather than on texts as such, provide no opportunity for intervening in those effects, because neither method adequately accounts for the role played by language in the structure and economy of the human psyche.

Lacanian theory provides precisely what these methods lack: a comprehensive model of the human subject that includes the most detailed account in existence of the roles played by different linguistic and discursive phenomena in human mental functioning. Because it allows us to understand how language affects a subject's psychic economy - including the desires and values and hence the actions of human subjects - Lacanian theory offers us the possibility of intervening in cultural affairs with considerably more efficacy than we have so far been able to do. A brief consideration of how, according to Lacan, language functions in the psychic economy will suggest how such intervention might be possible.

I'll concentrate on what I consider to be the two most important and fundamental ways in which language operates in and on the psychic economy and structure. The first has to do with how human subjects invest in and identify with certain words. For example, virtually all of us, early in our lives, identify ourselves as either a boy or a girl, and as the bearer of our proper name. The investment we have in such identifications with words can easily be seen from our reactions when someone uses our name disrespectfully, or calls us "girl" if we are a boy, or "boy" if we are a girl. Furthermore, we also identify with those words that designate attributes of these more fundamental word-identities. Most boys, for instance - and most men as well - want to be and do things that society has labeled implicitly or explicitly "for boys" or "manly."

Lacan emphasizes this identificatory function of signifiers in his statement that a signifier is what represents a subject for another signifier. The word "represent" here means not "to be a representation, a depiction, a portrayal, of the subject," but rather "to be a representative, a stand-in, an avatar, of the subject." Just as two countries, by their very nature, can never meet directly as such, but must always meet through their ambassadors, envoys, or elected officials - i.e., through their representatives - so too can individual subjects meet only through *their* representatives: signifiers.

The ramifications of this basic Lacanian principle for cultural studies are great. If, when I encounter another human subject, it is really our representatives, our signifiers, that are communicating

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and negotiating with each other, then whenever these representatives get together, my fate as a subject is in some way at stake. That is, what happens to us as subjects is determined by what happens to those signifiers that represent us - particularly the alliances they form with, and the wars they wage on, other signifiers.

The way in which these signifiers are deployed and manipulated thus accounts for much of the impact, both immediate and enduring, that discourses have. That is, the effect that a discourse has on us depends to a great extent on how our representatives fare in that discourse: do they carry the day, or are they subordinated, denigrated, or excluded from the proceedings entirely? Lacan observes somewhere that the basic function of language is to assure us that we are, and the major way that language does this is to allow us to circulate within circuits of discourse controlled by those signifiers that represent us. What we seek is a repetition of those signifiers that represent us. Discourses that offer this repetition give us a sense of security and well being, the sense that we have a definite identity, that we are significant, that our existence matters. Discourses that fail to provide this reassuring encounter with our representatives evoke, in contrast, feelings of alienation and anxiety and responses of aggression including rejection of, or indifference toward, the discourse. This effect is most easily observed in our responses to overt insults, which often bear quite directly on our sexual, racial, ethnic, class, or political identifications.

Discourses that we find persuasive - i.e., those that get us to change our position - are discourses that coerce us to give up some of our representatives in order to retain and solidify the services of others that are even more central to our identity. This process can be seen clearly in a text like Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail," where King deftly subverts identifications that his audience has with (or against) certain key signifiers by linking the signifiers in question with signifiers that the audience has identified even more strongly with (or against - as the case may be). For example, acknowledging that his audience will be opposed to his strategy of creating tension in Birmingham, King declares, "I am not afraid of the word 'tension.'" He then proceeds to destroy the opposition between the word "tension" and the ego ideal of his audience by allying "tension" with certain signifiers that his audience is strongly allied with: e.g., "constructive," "nonviolent," "growth," and "Socrates." King uses similar techniques in relation to words like "law," "civil disobedience," and "extremist." Of the latter, he says: "You speak of our activity in

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Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist .... But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love .... Was not Amos an extremist for justice .... Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel . . . . Was not Martin Luther an extremist .... And John Bunyan . . . . And Abraham Lincoln .... And Thomas Jefferson . . . ."

This letter of King's offers one of the best examples available of the impact that can be achieved through the deployment and manipulation of signifiers both allied with and opposed to the signifiers representing the ego ideal of one's audience. But while such manipulation of signifiers representing the ego ideal often accounts for much of the impact of a given text or discourse, an equally and often even more powerful force of discourse derives from its manipulation of a second very basic factor, which Lacan calls the object *a*: namely that part of our being that is precisely not represented by the signifiers we have identified with. At the very moment that we come into being as a subject by virtue of identifying with a signifier, we are solidified, petrified, by the signifier, reduced to being nothing more than the signifier that represents us. Thus, Lacan says, "through his relation to the signifier, the subject is deprived of something of himself, of his very life" (Hamlet 28). It is this lost part of life - the part that disappears behind the signifier - that is represented by the object *a*: "all forms of the object *a* that can be enumerated," Lacan says, "are the representatives" of "what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction" (Four *Fundamental Concepts* 198).

The most significant result, for our purposes, of this subjection to sexuality can be found in the effects produced by the cultural, Symbolic-order definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman. These definitions, which we embrace when we identify with the signifier "man" or "woman" (see *FFC* 204), effectively dissect our bodies and render parts of them dead to our enjoyment. That is, when one is represented (to oneself and to others) by the signifier "man" or the signifier "woman," one is prohibited - and in the great majority of cases, very effectively - from enjoying, or even using in specific ways, certain parts of one's own body and the other's body. This sacrificed enjoyment persists, however, and manifests itself in the partial drives - the usually muted and often

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surreptitious and even unconscious enjoyments that we get from those bodily parts and functions that are proscribed as focal points of enjoyment. Such enjoyments are usually sublimated and/or subordinated to the genital drive as aspects of sexual foreplay. This includes most oral, anal, scopic, and auditory activities for most people.

Now the objects of these partial drives - i.e., the objects *a*, or all the guises of breast, feces, gaze, and voice - are not only an occasion for surreptitious enjoyments; they also represent metonymically the totality of the being that was lost by the subject when it faded behind the signifiers that were elected to serve as its representatives in the ego ideal. Thus in addition to being the object around which the partial drives and their enjoyments turn, the object *a*, as the representative of our lost immortality and vitality in general, is the cause of all desire, desire being precisely a function of our lack of being. "Something becomes an object in desire," Lacan says, "when it takes the place of what by its very nature remains concealed from the subject: that self-sacrifice, that pound of flesh which is mortgaged in his relation to the signifier" (Hamlet 28). The most obvious instance of this function of the object can be seen in the phenomena of the fetish object and the collector's object, both of which are pursued by the subject as a way of filling up the lack of being.

The importance of the concept of the object *a* for cultural criticism is that it allows us to gauge the impact that cultural artifacts and discourses have on desire and enjoyment. The object *a*, along with the desire it entails, manifests itself in discourse as fantasy, where an instance of the object *a*, representative of that ineffable something that is lacking to our being, is mobilized in such a way that it activates our desire. Lacan's definition of fantasy as the "capture of the object in the dialectic of relations of the subject and the signifier" (unpublished Seminar on Desire and Its Interpretations, 1959-60, p. 93) indicates that in fantasy, the two radically different types of representative, representing the two sides of the split subject, come together and interact. And the object *a*, the representative of our lost being that is always present somewhere in the fantasy, has a particular bearing on the signifiers that represent the other part of our being, the signifiers of the ego ideal. A fantasy, that is, always invokes a particular signifier, or range or set of signifiers, to represent the subject.

The effect that a given discourse or text has on a human subject is thus a product of the way the discourse deploys and manipulates

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the representatives of both parts of the subject's being: the representatives of the ego ideal and the representatives of the objects of the drives, the objects *a*. And there are thus two basic types of effect that can result: the fantasy can either support and reinforce the representatives of the ego ideal, or it can oppose and subvert them. It supports them when its presence is linked with the presence of a signifier we have identified with - such as when gratification of thescopic drive (voyeurism or exhibitionism) is presented as concomitant with being a real "man" or a real "woman." For example, whereas exhibitionistic fantasies are usually incompatible with a conservative woman's sense of her identity - i.e., with her ego ideal - Mirabelle Morgan's account of the "total woman" meeting her husband at the door clad in nothing but Saran Wrap allows a conservative female reader to indulge in and even act out fantasies of exhibitionism, while yet maintaining her sense of identity as a very proper

woman. In such instances, both the ego ideal and the fantasy are reinforced, and both the subject's desire and her preexisting sense of identity are gratified.

In many cases, however, a fantasy will oppose and subvert signifiers of the ego ideal. It does this when the object *a* is linked with a signifier that is incompatible with one or more signifiers of the ego ideal. In such cases, one of two things can happen: either the ego ideal can prevail, in which case the fantasy is suppressed, repressed, or altered; or the fantasy can win out, in which case the ego ideal will undergo a change, with one or more of its old signifiers being decommissioned and new signifiers (which represent, in part at least, the object of fantasy, the object *a*) being elected in their place. Such would be the case were Mirabelle Morgan's conservative female reader to encounter a novel about a female stripper, where the exhibitionistic fantasy would be connected with signifiers totally incompatible with the signifiers of this reader's ego ideal.

Given this understanding of how discourse affects people, it is possible to sketch out a methodology that will allow us to gauge both the psychological and the political impact of a particular discourse and to formulate a strategy for intervening in that discourse either to reinforce or counteract its effects. To identify the most significant collective psychological effects that a work has on readers, we would need to take three steps: 1) identify manifest collective psychological effects, 2) identify the configurations of signifiers that produce these manifest effects, and 3) identify the more profound, economic or structural results that are produced by

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these same signifying configurations that produce the manifest effects.

Take Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as an example. We can accomplish the first step by searching for common denominators in critics' responses to the novella. One common response that we find is the touting of the supposed truth delivered by the novella that there are deep, dark forces in the human psyche that must be opposed if humanity as we know it is to survive and prosper.

Turning next to the particular signifying configurations in this work that promote this conviction, we note, among other factors, the narrative point of view, which draws the reader into identifying with Marlow and his ideal of the civilized European man who restrains his passions, does his duty, and finally achieves a modicum of repose. And we also note the mystery in which Kurtz is shrouded - a mystery produced by references to "unspeakable rites," "the horror," etc., which evoke in the reader both fascination with and repulsion toward whatever activities the reader imagines Kurtz to have indulged in.

Moving now to the third step, which involves identifying enduring changes in the psychic economy that these signifying configurations promote, we conclude that the ability of readers to acknowledge and attempt to work through their own drives is substantially inhibited by their simultaneous identification with Marlow's restraint and renunciation, on the one hand, and the confrontation, on the other hand, with their own repressed and therefore frightening and repulsive drives - the objects *a* - which they encounter projected onto the blank screen that is constituted by the mystery of Kurtz and his "unspeakable rites." Confronted with these two opposing forces, readers are offered only two choices by the novella: either acting out their drives (Kurtz's response in the jungle), which is unthinkable for most readers, or rejecting these drives through suppression or repression, which is Marlow's response and, apparently, Kurtz's final response - and also the response of many critics. The crucial point is that readers are offered no hint of the possibility of compromise or transformation of either drives or ideals - a possibility that psychoanalysis has demonstrated to be quite often both desirable and realizable.

Such an influence, if reinforced by other texts and discourses, can produce a significant and detrimental result in the psychic economy of subjects. In addition, a collective psychological result of this sort can have significant political repercussions as well. One political ramification of the psychological result just mentioned would likely

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be the promotion of a similar rejection of the object *a* and the drives when they appear at the center of social problems - a response that is evident today in the "Just say No" solution that is being applied to the drug problem, to teenage pregnancies resulting from premarital sex, to AIDS, and to any other activity where drives and desire threaten the laws and ideals of the Symbolic order.

This is a somewhat quick and condensed argument, but I hope it provides some idea of how a methodology of cultural criticism based on Lacanian theory might make it possible to surpass the largely ineffectual descriptive and condemnatory gestures that cultural criticism is for the most part still limited to. Such a methodology, I believe, should make it possible for literary studies in particular and humanistic studies in general to venture forth from their ivory towers and engage in a struggle where the stakes are not merely interpretive dominance and academic prestige but the more substantial sufferings and enjoyments of real human beings.

## Notes

1. Lacan, Jacques. "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet* (1959). Trans. James Hulbert. special issue ed. by Shoshana Felmann, *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977): 11-52.

2. \_\_\_\_\_ *Four Fundamental Concepts* (Seminar XI). Ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Norton, 1981.

3. \_\_\_\_\_ *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan*, Livre VI: Le desir et ses interpretations (1958-59). Unpublished, November 12, 1958-February 11, 1959.

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