

# Unconscious

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THE DIFFICULTY with this term is so great that it is already in the title of this essay. If the title read “The Unconscious,” then the term would be a noun—a substantive, a *thing*. But there is a good deal of controversy about this, and many argue that the unconscious is never a thing, nor a place, and that the term can therefore only be used as an adjective: for example, “unconscious activity” (but never “the activity of the unconscious”).

Similarly complex is the fact that to be “unconscious” can mean all sorts of things—anything from being asleep, to being in ignorance of something, to being in a coma, to having a certain kind of innocence, and so on. The way that the term will interest us here, however, is in its psychological sense: the idea that an individual has within him activities of which he is not aware. But in this statement, too, we run up against the two central questions concerning any notion of “unconscious”: (1) Is the unconscious a place or is it the activity of certain forces in the psyche and therefore not an “it” at all but rather a “how”? and (2) How can the existence of “unconscious” be ascertained in the first place since “it” is by definition something of which we are not aware? Both of these questions should be kept in mind as this essay progresses. At times we will be referring to “unconscious” as “it” (the word Freud actually uses in German to refer to unconscious means, in fact, “it”—*das Es*), but it must be stressed that such a usage stems from a syntactic difficulty and is not meant to imply that the unconscious is always a thing—or indeed, perhaps ever one.

Although we are proceeding here with the psychological sense of the term, that which is unconscious has been a problem for philosophy from the beginning. Human beings have always talked of “dark powers” forcing them to do things they did not intend; making them embark upon hopeless or incomprehensible missions in spite of themselves. Most religions are grounded in some notion of invisible powers in which one nevertheless believes, as are many myths. The idea of the unknown or unknowable in the mind of humankind is not a new one, and the concept of an unconscious can be made to dovetail nicely with certain theological beliefs.

Socrates had declared some knowledge hidden, “undetected by the soul,” and his method itself is described as *maieutic*—a bringing forth, in the manner of a midwife, of latent ideas or memories into consciousness. Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, and Aquinas, to name a few, all concerned themselves with aspects of human thought that are dormant and cannot be brought voluntarily to consciousness. But it was Descartes who made the statement against which what was to become psychoanalysis defined itself, for the French philosopher declared awareness to be one and the same as the mind: “By the term *conscious experience (cogitationis)* I understand everything that takes place within ourselves so that we are aware of it” (Ricoeur 1974, 101). This notion that everything mental is conscious, this certainty, is precisely what will be rejected by psychoanalysis, which will hold, on the contrary, that much that is mental remains hidden from us. But it should also be remembered that Descartes’ famous dualism—the cleavage he makes between body and mind—will be inherited to a large degree by future methods of thought, including psychoanalysis. Psychology (the general science of the psyche which existed well before Freud invented what he called “psycho-analysis”) takes this Cartesian dualism to posit a dual model of mind: the part which is known, and the part which is not. Descartes, in other words, is not as far removed from psychoanalysis as some would have us believe.

In the nineteenth century, then, there is a surge of renewed interest in that which is unknown in the mind, the “dark side.” Rousseau, Goethe, Hegel, Schelling, Coleridge, the early German Romantics as a group, all refer to something “unconscious,” although they do not necessarily use the term itself. As has often been pointed out, Schopenhauer’s notion of the “Will” as an unbridled, ubiquitous, and ineluctable force, is similar to what we now call “the unconscious.” Such a notion is found again in Nietzsche, who probably had more of an effect on Sigmund Freud than the latter was ever willing to admit.

The term “unconscious” already concerns philosophy, literature, psychology, and theology. It became a very popular concept in all of Western Europe with the publication, in 1868, of Eduard von Hartmann’s *Philosophy of the Unconscious*. In the 1870s, there were at least a half-dozen books with the word “unconscious” in their titles. Freud certainly invented neither the term nor the concept(s) of the unconscious. He spoke of it at a time when every cultured European was familiar with the word and, to a large degree, accepted its validity as a concept. Why do we then sense, especially in Freud’s early writings, the fear that the unconscious will be unacceptable to Freud’s readers? The only answer can be that, at the height of a Victorian age, Freud took a popular idea and declared it to be an inherently *sexual* one. This was a particularly vulnerable stance to assume because of the very definition of “unconscious”: that which, as the philosopher Paul Ricoeur puts it, cannot exist except in relation to some notion of what *consciousness* is. Ricoeur notes that the unconscious is something

that cannot be pointed at; it can only be "diagnosed," since its existence cannot be empirically ascertained. That is, the unconscious is by definition unseeable; its existence is inferred (rather than empirically demonstrated) by occurrences in life which are not consciously motivated. The idea of the unconscious therefore partakes of a type of transcendental idealism in Kant's sense: it is one way in which we talk about that which we are not given to know. To declare this unknowable to be sexual at its foundations is a provocative statement which is doubly open for attack because it cannot be substantiated. Freud's trouble (his fears were justified) stemmed then from his characterization of an abstract notion as inherently sexual, an unpopular view which he was unable to support except by speculation and by the existence of elements in daily life that are unexplained by consciousness: dreams, slips of the tongue, puns, amnesia, compulsions to repeat, denials, and, most significantly here, literature. But before we embark upon the way in which literature works for Freud, and for psychoanalysis, let us look more closely at Freud's actual presentation of his favorite notion, the unconscious.

Ricoeur's comment cited above has pointed to another difficulty: no understanding of the unconscious can exist without a concomitant definition of what is meant by "conscious." In other words, the irony is that the unconscious can only be described in, or understood in, the realm and the rules of "consciousness." Or, to put it another way: the unknowable is forever condemned to being described in terms of the known. (It should be noted here that Freud's term for the unconscious is *das Unbewusste*, literally, "the unknown." The relation to knowledge is less explicit in the English term.) The importance of this fact, that the unknowable is condemned to being understood in terms of the known, is the point at which psychoanalysis meets literary theory. For Freud will be "condemned" to describe the unconscious rhetorically, through analogies, metaphors, similes, etymological play, and anecdotes. And the way that future critical theory will choose to read those rhetorical tropes employed by Freud will ultimately, it will argue, tell us as much about the "economy" of rhetorical structures and the inner workings of narration as it will about the psyche.

Freud will also describe the unconscious as making itself manifest through "gaps"—unintended lapses in memory, slips of the tongue, puns and dreams, as just noted. Already, we have the implication that the unconscious is alogical and nonlinear, while consciousness is the converse of these. Put another way, we might say that the existence of the unconscious is inferred from what emerges at times in speech as non-sensical or as unintentionally *too* sensible. Such "characterizations" are not without importance, it should be clear, to problems of narrative and story-telling. But we will return to these considerations.

When Freud begins to talk of the unconscious, as we have said, he is forced to discuss consciousness as well. His first important paper on the subject is "A Note on the Unconscious in Psycho-Analysis" (1912). There, Freud divides the un-

conscious into three types: the *descriptive*, the *dynamic*, and the *systematic*. The descriptive unconscious is presented in the following way: that which is present in our minds is *conscious* (having a conversation); that which is not present but retrievable in memory is *preconscious* (the date I was born); and that which is latent and not retrievable by any act of conscious will is *unconscious* (a childhood fear which has been repressed). It will be noted that the descriptive unconscious lends itself to notions of cartography, and is indeed based upon Freud's "topographical" model of the mind.

$$\frac{\text{CS}}{\text{UCS}} \leftarrow \frac{(\text{consciousness})}{(\text{unconscious})} \text{ (repression barrier)}$$

This model will motivate the "topographic" metaphors found throughout Freud's writings: spatial notions of place and of "layers" in the mind. It is when Freud is alluding to the "descriptive" unconscious (which will henceforth in this essay be synonymous with the "topographic") that we get metaphors such as "regions of the mind," "map of the mind," "uncharted terrain," "unknown regions," the dream as the "royal road to the unconscious," and the unconscious itself as an antechamber leading to a sitting room (consciousness) which is carefully guarded by a sentry (the sentry is the personification of the repression barrier—the barrier that refuses unconscious thoughts entry into consciousness). In addition, it is in the discussion of this descriptive unconscious that Freud gives us a model such as the "mystic writing pad," a child's toy for writing and erasing which serves as an analogy for the mind and memory. In all of these metaphors and similes, the emphasis is on the spatial, almost as if there were a geography of the mind, with the unconscious lying as an area within it (indeed, in his earlier work, Freud tries to *locate* the unconscious in the psyche—see Freud 1951, 1:283–93). This notion of the unconscious, then, sees it as something close to being a "thing" or a "place." Here, the unconscious is a noun. The descriptive, or topographic unconscious, is the place of memories, thoughts, wishes, fears, and dreams. It can be defined as that which is absent from consciousness.

The *dynamic* unconscious is more of an energy flow than a "place." Freud, it should be kept in mind, began his work in the latter part of the nineteenth century and was very much a product of that period's notions of neurology and physiology. The reflex arc (for example: the involuntary jerk of the leg when the knee is struck) was Freud's model for human neurology: tension builds up and needs to be released, and this release is an involuntary action. Such a model has often been called "hydraulic" by critics, because the assumption is that stasis is pleasure and tension displeasure, which must find an outlet (so too, water seeks its own level, and will build up pressure if unable to find release). There are times, then, when Freud views the unconscious as a series of involuntary reflexes and an ebbing and flowing of energies. It is as if the unconscious were a throb-

bing energy center, active and busy, but hidden from the Subject's conscious mind. In other words, this model stresses that unconscious energy goes unperceived by the Subject; that just because the Subject is unaware that something exists does not mean that it doesn't (it is here that psychoanalysis refutes Descartes' assertion that all mental activity is conscious). Things can be going on in the psyche without the Subject having any knowledge of it. Freud's proof for this thesis is to point to what happens with a suggestion made to a Subject under hypnosis. The suggestion is carried out in a conscious, posthypnotic state, but without the Subject knowing why he is behaving as he is. For Freud, such posthypnotic behavior, for which the Subject has no conscious explanation, demonstrates the existence of an unconscious.

The major activity that characterizes the dynamic model is repression: the unconscious "contains" wishes and even information of which the Subject is unaware and which his "censor" (like the sentry at the door of the sitting room) strains to keep from the Subject's consciousness. Occasionally (like water exerting pressure against a weak wall) some of this unconscious energy will leak through the "repression barrier" and thrust its way into consciousness. But unconscious thoughts will always manifest themselves obliquely in consciousness: through dreams, slips of the tongue, puns, and so on. These are events that the Subject does not consciously "intend," and that he will assure any listener are coincidences or mere accidents. But for Freud, these "breakthroughs" into consciousness, disguised and distorted as they may be, are proof of the presence of unconscious activity. If the descriptive model for the unconscious is grounded in mapping metaphors, the dynamic model is couched in hydraulic metaphors: energy "flows," is "cathected" (attached to an object), and pulsates; repressed thoughts "build up the pressure," and at times put enough pressure on the repression barrier so as to "leak through"; drives "seek outlets"; desire is "displaced" or "transferred" to relieve the tension; traumas are relived over and over again (in dreams, even in daily life) to "relieve the tension" which the intrusion of the trauma into the unconscious has caused. To repeat, this model is hydraulic because it presupposes that tension is displeasure and will always find an avenue for release. The obverse side of this, again, is that stasis is pleasure. Freud's famous "death instinct" ("Thanatos" is the rather pretentious term used in English) is no more than a drive to return "to an earlier state of things," which in the case of the human organism is preorganic stasis. The dynamic model of the unconscious is an economic one, as it is often called, because it describes a system of control and exchanges: tension which builds up, seeking release into consciousness, in order to maintain a balance and stability, seen as "profitable."

The *systematic* unconscious is left rather vague in the early Freud (barely distinguished from the dynamic). In the 1930s, however, Freud will use this term to describe his "tripartite" model of the mind, which is a revision of the topographic model. The revised model, with its famous trio of *id*, *ego*, and *super-ego*,

insists that the ego is both part of the unconscious (now called "id") and part of conscious perception as well ("super-ego"). It is this revision of the model of the mind that will, in the 1950s, divide American from French psychoanalysis; for the former will embrace the tripartite model and move toward "ego psychology," for which that model allows. The French, however, led primarily by the analyst Jacques Lacan, will see this revision as a repression in itself of the unconscious as a concept in dialectical opposition to consciousness. The French will insist upon a "return to the real Freud" of the topographic and dynamic models. Lacan will further claim that the proof of the accuracy of Freud's greatest discovery, the unconscious, is that Freud represses it in his later work. By Freud's own definition, in his early work, the unconscious is that which is always repressed once discovered. So in "repressing" his discovery of the unconscious, Freud (in Lacan's view) is merely acting according to the laws he himself described as governing conscious thought. Already, then, one can see that the choice of models for the mind, and therefore the choice of metaphors and rhetorical devices used to describe psychic activity, are highly politicized in subsequent psychoanalytic theory.

If things such as metaphors and other verbal or literary devices (puns, analogies, figures of speech, tropes in general) are ways in which the unconscious manifests itself for psychoanalysis, then it should not be surprising that many literary critics have called language in general, and literature in particular, the unconscious of psychoanalysis. The strength of this point can be seen immediately when we consider that Freud turned to literature to exemplify his most cherished theory: the Oedipal conflict.

The irony inherent in the notion of "unconscious" is that, because it is abstract, it can be represented only in concrete metaphors or analogies. Literature and its myths function as some of the analogies for psychoanalysis—as extended metaphors. Literature, in the eyes of psychoanalysis, is like a dream, uncovering deep, otherwise invisible workings of unconscious activity. The story of Oedipus—the king who is searching for the source of his city's plague, and who does not realize that he is that source—was for the Greeks the problem of destiny versus human freedom. After all, an oracle at the birth of Oedipus declares that the infant will become a man who will murder his father and marry his mother. The more Oedipus strains to avoid his fate, the more he is caught in its web. But for Freud, the story of Oedipus traces the unconscious wish of every (male) child: sexual union with the mother and a concomitant elimination of the father, so as to take his place.

Freud had a great deal of difficulty fitting little girls into this schema, as one can imagine. The situation of little girls vis-à-vis their unconscious desires and their parents was a problem which Freud never fully understood. In particular, his insistence upon penis envy as a necessary part of the development of the female child created, and has continued to create, a great deal of controversy.

Karen Horney and Melanie Klein, for example, produced important psychoanalytic studies questioning the universality of penis envy. But Freud rejected the work of these analysts, calling them everything from wrongheaded to repressed. Moreover, Freud's refusal to depart from his Oedipal paradigm in the case of the female child led him to other unacceptable pronouncements: because the girl has no penis, she is already castrated, according to Freud, and thus is impervious to the threat the father makes (castration) upon the boy child. As a result, Freud argues, the female emerges very slowly from the Oedipal phase and therefore has a less developed sense of justice and is less "civilized" (that is, less aware of the taboos and constrictions which make for civilized behavior) than is the boy child. In short, Freud's insistence on imposing male paradigms on female psychic life goes far to explain his self-avowed failure with most of his female patients. One of the great questions remaining to psychoanalysis, he once wrote to his friend Fliess, was "What does woman want?" (*Was will das Weib?*)

When Freud turns to Sophocles' great drama, then, that text becomes like the "manifest content" of a dream in psychoanalytic terms. Like the dream, *Oedipus Rex* is a disguise which both hides and reveals a "latent" psychoanalytic fact, in this case, what Freud will call the "Oedipus complex." Here, then, literature serves as the unconscious for psychoanalysis, representing mythically, through its plot and characters, that which is repressed in conscious life. It should be added that Freud's interpretation of the drama is not so removed from the Greek one as might appear at first glance. For the Greeks, as for Freud, the problem for Oedipus is one of knowledge of the most vital kind: knowledge of the self. For what Oedipus discovers is that the "other" he seeks (the cause of the plague) is in fact himself. That there is, in short, a part of himself that he does not recognize. Here we see more than the fact that psychoanalysis owes its own major myths to literature. We see as well that notions such as "destiny," "fate," "self-knowledge," and the "other" are all interconnected as partaking of what psychoanalysis calls the unconscious.

But Freud's use of literature can also be highly frustrating to literary critics, because a reductive, facile psychoanalytic approach to literature can be used like a cookie-cutter to mold great works of literature into the shapes of psychoanalytic axioms. Literature is then viewed as incomplete unless psychoanalysis "decodes" it and shows what it "really" means.

Another potential problem with a psychoanalytic approach to literature is the idea that a text is only a symptom of an author's psychological state. For example, psychoanalytic critics have been known to claim that Goethe's *Faust* was written because the great German writer had problems with sibling rivalry. At its best, such an approach will ultimately tell us something about the author (his neuroses, obsessions, traumas, and so on), but it will tell us little about the text itself. Furthermore, one would be left wondering what to do with texts whose authors' lives are essentially unknown to us—Homer's *Iliad*, for example, since

we know almost nothing about Homer himself. Here, a particularly useless undertaking is often resorted to: the psychoanalysis of fictional characters. Fortunately, these reductive approaches are on the decline. As the philosopher Jacques Derrida has pointed out, once psychoanalysis has invented itself, it proceeds to "find" itself everywhere. Freud was a great student of literature, and would doubtless have been horrified by a good deal of what has been done to literary texts with what I am calling the "cookie-cutter" approach in psychoanalysis. But it is, unfortunately, simply the case that Freud's understanding of the place of literature for psychoanalysis encouraged such reductivism in the first place.

For an example of Freud's own contribution to such reductivism, let us consider his essay on "The Uncanny" (1917). This is a work that revolves around "The Sandman," a short story by the German Romantic writer E. T. A. Hoffmann. The protagonist of the story, Nathanael, is a young student who is obsessed with the fear of losing his eyes. This fear was inspired by the terrifying lawyer who worked for the family when Nathanael was a child. When the lawyer came to the house, Nathanael was told to go to bed. If he resisted, he would be told that the Sandman was going to come to snatch his eyes out and "feed them to his children on the moon." Thus the traditionally kindly figure of the Sandman—who is said to throw sand into children's eyes to help them go to sleep—comes to be identified with the ominous family lawyer in Nathanael's childish mind. Nathanael will spend the rest of his life fearing (and continually being in the presence of) "sandmen," men whose business is eyes in one way or another (e.g., an oculist, and an eyeglass salesman who also sells instruments such as telescopes and lenses). The hapless Nathanael will finally throw himself from a high tower to his death, apparently because he sees one of the "sandmen" below ordering him (or waiting for him?) to jump.

This story is "uncanny," says Freud, because Nathanael's fear of the "sandman" is at once incomprehensible and strangely familiar: it partakes, in other words, of the unconscious. Psychoanalysis will provide the explanation for this fear, says Freud, and thus neutralize the uncanniness of the story. Nathanael, Freud tells us, *thinks* that he fears losing his eyes; but that fear is the displacement (and disguise) for another, more fundamental, fear: castration. For Freud, the eyes are standing in for what they really represent: the male genitals. And why does Freud believe this? Partly, he says, because his clinical work has established a relationship between the eyes and the male genitals. But mostly, Freud believes this equation because he is basing his reading of the Hoffmann tale on his own psychoanalytic reading of Oedipus. For Freud, Oedipus performed the same displacement as Nathanael: upon learning the truth about himself, Oedipus gouged out his eyes. Freud sees this self-inflicted punishment as a substitute for the "proper" one: castration. So the unconscious belief (that castration is the necessary punishment) manifests itself (like all unconscious thoughts) indirectly (displaced) in the gouging out of the eyes. Freud takes this literary text by Soph-



ocles as a manifestation which hides the unconscious wish that lies "beneath" it. This method, and the particular equation which the Oedipus myth yields for Freud, becomes in turn the model for "reading" the Hoffmann tale. Nathanael's obsession with his eyes is in fact castration anxiety, says Freud; just as Oedipus' gouging of his eyes is really a castration substitute. Because this substitution is universal (for males, at any rate), Freud continues, the reader of "The Sandman" experiences the "uncanny"—that which has been long familiar (here, castration anxiety) but repressed and thus displaced as a fear of losing one's eyes. Now that we know this, Freud claims, the uncanny in the story dissolves. In a sense, psychoanalysis has explained it away. The text's neurotic symptom, it would seem, has been "cured."

This way of viewing fictional texts—as essentially symptoms, disguised shapes of unconscious fears or wishes—is frequently inadequate and unconvincing for students of literature. Moreover, there is something in the reader-critic that would like to *keep* some texts uncanny, and that resists the notion that any discipline (especially one outside of literary studies) can claim to "decipher" the "real" meaning of a text. Where would Edgar Allan Poe's work stand, for example, if psychoanalysis claimed to explain the uncanniness of Poe's stories by showing them to be a neurotic symptom? These are some of the possessive fears of the literary critics. But there is also a counter-worry to consider here: if critics become self-righteous in such possessiveness, they may commit another crime of reductionism; for if they do not want their own turf invaded, they will have to decide upon difficult issues of boundaries between disciplines. Where, for example, does literature end and criticism begin? What topics are permitted for the literary critic to discuss, and what are off-limits? What is "inside" and what "outside"? Literary theory has, after all, been able to find itself in psychoanalytic theory, so why shouldn't psychoanalysis be allowed to find its unconscious inside literature?

Let us consider one specific way in which literary theory has been able to find itself in psychoanalysis: the telling of a tale. Psychoanalysis, let us not forget, is in fact a clinical procedure, not merely a theory. This procedure in Freud's day was called the "talking cure." The patient tells the analyst what comes to mind, through free association. This telling in turn becomes a story: the patient's story as he or she is able to reconstruct it from the fragments of childhood memories. The very process of psychoanalysis entails the construction of a linear, cogent narrative; the recounting and piecing together of a life. The goal of analysis is to have the patient reconstruct a "better," more cohesive story as the analysis progresses. The analysis is narrative, and the analysand is the narrator. The analyst, it follows, assumes the role of reader of this narrative, for he or she is obliged to interpret what is said; to retain images and facts which recur and to assess their value and function within the narrative; to "read" dreams as if they were texts; in short, to reconstruct in turn the "plot" of a life as it is itself being constructed.

And too, the analyst must “read” the “subplot” of this narrative: the unconscious as it may be itself reconstructed from the disguises and displacements it assumes in the tale the patient tells.

If we can say that the goal of the analytic experience is to create a coherent and logical narrative out of a life, then we may add that the analyst plays the role not only of reader but also of critic. For the analyst must first “read” or interpret the narrative. Then he or she must persuade the analysand of the accuracy of his or her own, corrected, version and interpretation. Finally, the analyst may write up a “case study,” retelling the patient’s story and the story of the analysis itself. The case study is then the narrative of a narrative which attempts to persuade readers (in this case, other psychoanalysts, for example) of the accuracy of the reading. Perhaps psychoanalysis is not “outside” of literary studies at all, then. . . .

The previous section concerned both the history of the term “unconscious” and some of the ways that its uses can, or should, involve literature and literary theory. Narrative structure; rhetorical devices such as metaphor and simile; verbal patterns such as slips of the tongue, puns, jokes and “gaps”; the prominent use in psychoanalysis of certain literary texts such as the *Oedipus* of Sophocles—all of these describe facets of the bond between literary theory and the unconscious of psychoanalysis.

But it is with the work of the French psychoanalyst and theoretician Jacques Lacan that literary theory and psychoanalysis cease being separate enterprises, only occasionally sharing the same ground. Lacan sees literature and psychoanalysis as two systems which are part of the same project, that of at once seeking and affording glimpses into the hidden workings of human thought. This is not to say that Lacanian theory avoids all the pitfalls mentioned earlier of more “traditional” psychoanalytic approaches to literature. But let us first look at what Lacan sees as the issues and at what the stakes are for him.

As we have already noted, Lacan believed that Freud’s greatest discovery was the idea of the unconscious, as described by the descriptive, or topographic, model of the mind. The tripartite model, with its id, ego, and super-ego, is in Lacan’s eyes already a repression by Freud of his own discovery. To repeat Lacan’s view: since Freud’s unconscious is by definition something which is repressed, always repeating its own discovery of itself only to repress it yet again, the tripartite model is the demonstration of the force and truth of Freud’s initial discovery. This later model is revisionistic, in Lacan’s view, because the third term (super-ego) that is introduced functions as a synthesis of what had first been seen as an eternal dialectic between conscious and unconscious. For Lacan, such a synthesis tries to cover up the tension that Freud’s earlier model describes between the dynamic unconscious and consciousness. It is as if the sentry discussed earlier, standing between the antechamber of the unconscious and the sitting room of consciousness, had suddenly become a third, mitigating term—another architectural structure between those two “rooms” which combines the

best of both while concealing the unknown wishes of the first and the “acting out” of the second. That, in any case, is how Lacan might be said to view the later Freud.

The tripartite view also, for Lacan, ushers in ego-psychology (the direction largely taken by American psychoanalysis and scorned by Lacan), because it fosters and even cultivates the illusion (as far as Lacan is concerned) of the ego, or Subject, as an unfragmented entity; or of an ego that can be made “whole” through the healing powers of ego-psychology and its various therapies. For Lacan, however, the Subject is always split, roughly along the same lines as the topographic model implies. The Subject is constituted by a conscious, accessible mind and an unconscious, inaccessible series of drives and forces. That which is unconscious for the Subject is that which is unknown, alien (although fundamental) to him or her. For Lacan, therefore, the notion “unconscious” lends itself at once, and in turn, to the idea of *otherness*. Hence Lacan’s symbol for the Subject is  $\$$ —that which is eternally split within itself. Linked to this idea in Lacan is his concomitant notion that the Subject is constituted by something missing, which in turn creates desire. Desire is experienced by the subject as a *lack*, which he or she will strain, of course, to eradicate. Already, we can read in this a “hydraulic” view of the Subject’s mental activity, in the Freudian sense: Lacan’s argument is that the Subject, constituted as he or she is by a lack, will try to overcome the tension of desire with the achievement of stasis (pleasure, or the absence of desire). It is desire that makes humankind different from animals, the latter experiencing biological *need* but not psychological *desire*. The unconscious manifests itself, among other ways, by insisting upon filling the “gap” left by that which the Subject feels is lacking in him or her.

In Lacan’s firm view that the representation of the mind should remain the topographic one, we can see his insistence on a dialectical model: unconscious and conscious; Subject and object; desire and satisfaction; tension and stasis; and so on. The dialectic is important because it is here that we can see the great influence of Hegel on Lacan’s thought. Indeed, the master-slave relationship as presented in Hegel’s *Phenomenology* can be seen as the paradigm for Lacan’s idea of the constitution of the Subject. For Hegel, the master-slave conflict is born of the confrontation between two consciousnesses, each seeking to be recognized as primary by the other. Obviously, one will win and one will lose. The winner will become the master of the loser. The master is the one who will be recognized, and the slave will be the unrecognized Other whose sole purpose is to feed and generally sustain the master. Ultimately, in Hegel, the roles will subtly reverse themselves: the slave, because he is working, is a maker and a producer of goods who has a purpose. The master, because his victory allows for it, basks in inactivity; his only purpose is to consume the goods provided by the slave. (The use of the masculine pronoun is Hegel’s.) Thus the master is useless and must depend upon the slave for his existence. The slave, on the other hand, is only apparently suppressed: in fact, he is more independent and freer than the

passive master. This very sketchy and reductive rendition of Hegel should nonetheless give the reader an idea of how much Lacan depends on Hegel when rereading the Freudian unconscious.

In the situation just described, the term “consciousness” can easily replace that of “master”; and that of “unconscious” can stand in for “slave.” Consciousness, in other words, appears to be the master of the psyche: it is that which is *recognized* and which seems to determine psychic activity. The unconscious, meantime, like the slave, is repressed. But the unconscious works, while consciousness sleeps, and catches the latter unawares. The unconscious, further, will produce the materials which allow for the very existence and shape of consciousness. The unconscious, with its apparent repressed status, is in fact master, to which the conscious master is really slave. Without the material “goods” supplied to consciousness by the unconscious, the first has nothing by which—or with which—to function.

This Hegelian paradigm also applies, for Lacan, to the relationship between the Subject and the Other. As with master and slave, the dialectic between the two is not made up of discrete, noncontiguous parts. The Subject will (says Lacan) project his own desire onto the Other, and the Other will see himself in the Subject. This is not the place to go into all of the complex permutations of Lacan’s theories of Otherness. Suffice to say that Lacan exteriorizes the internal dialectic of conscious/unconscious with a parallel (and even, at times, identical) Subject/Other. Lacan’s famous maxim is that “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other.” One of the ways of reading this statement is along the lines suggested here: the unconscious is that which the Subject does not recognize to be himself, and which he experiences as other from himself. The way the Subject views, and projects upon, an Other will yield a clue concerning the Subject’s relationship to his unconscious wishes and desires. For Lacan, the unconscious is thus often in the place of the Other, the place where the Subject does not recognize himself. Thus the unconscious in Lacan becomes aligned with the problem of otherness: if the unconscious is that part of the Subject which he fails to recognize as one aspect of himself, the Other marks the place where the Subject refuses to recognize himself. Subject and Other, moreover, become mutually entangled; just as unconsciousness emerges as otherness within consciousness.

Another famous Lacan axiom is that “The unconscious is structured like a language.” In this statement, we see Lacan’s debt to linguistics. Here the two greatest influences on Lacan are the linguists Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson. Freud was himself greatly interested in language—particularly in etymology and philology—and Lacan often contended that had Freud had the benefit of modern linguistics he would have come to the same conclusions as Lacan did about the close relationship between language and the unconscious. In any case, Lacan’s first debt in this regard is to Saussure.

In his *Course on General Linguistics*, Saussure makes the famous statement that a linguistic *sign* unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image. The sound-image Saussure calls the *signifier*, and the concept he calls the *signified*. The example he gives is the sound-image “tree” (signifier) and the corresponding concept which is the idea, or picture, that the word conjures up in our minds when we think “tree” (the signified). Lacan will make constant use of these terms, even though he will alter the notion of the Saussurian sign a bit, as we shall see. Saussure claimed that meaning is generated by signifiers, not just in relation to their signifieds but also according to their position in the sentence in relation to other signifiers. So, too, Lacan will liken the unconscious to the movement of the signifier which generates meaning according to its place in the “signifying chain.” It is this view which allows for Lacan’s idea of the primacy of the signifier; what matters, in other words, is the meaning generated by the position of the signifier, not the usual meaning (signified) associated with it. We will return to this point a bit later in this essay.

Lacan combines the Saussurian sign and its parts with the work of the linguist Roman Jakobson. Jakobson (1956) had argued that there are two fundamental axes to language: metaphor and metonymy. Metaphor provides a word-*for*-word substitution, while metonymy is a contiguous chain, a word-*to*-word displacement. Metaphor is “semantic,” says Jakobson, and metonymy is “syntactic.” Lacan takes these axes to be the rhetoric of the unconscious. If we remember the Saussurian sign, it will be noted that it is a scheme which lends itself nicely to the Freudian topographic model of the mind:

$$\frac{\text{Signified}}{\text{Signifier}} \quad \frac{\text{Conscious}}{\text{Unconscious}}$$

Lacan will use Saussure’s model (upside down) and say that the topography of the unconscious is defined by the algorithm:

$$\frac{S}{s} \text{ (signifier over signified).}$$

Thus Lacan takes Freud’s topographic model and puts it into linguistic terms. When Lacan says that the unconscious is structured like a language, he means that the unconscious is constituted in the same way as the Subject’s innate capacity for language, which makes speech possible. There is an inherent structure in the mind which will allow for language acquisition, just as there is an inherent structure which will allow for the making of an unconscious. Metaphor and metonymy are such shared structures of language and the unconscious. Desire (unconscious desire) is never fulfilled; it is only displaced or substituted for, forming a “chain of signifiers,” which always (like the unconscious) leaves traces of itself but eludes us. It should be clear too, that the bar Saussure placed between the signifier and the signified, demonstrating that the two are of separate orders, is

very like the repression barrier separating consciousness from the unconscious in the topographic model. This is also an analogy that Lacan will insist upon.

If we now bear these two “maps” in mind, we can return to Lacan’s application of Jakobson’s theory. Metonymy, says Lacan (following the linguist) is a chain of signifiers that are horizontal, and do not cross the “bar” to the signified. Metonymy is the signifier of desire for Lacan. What is desired is always displaced, always deferred, and reappears endlessly in another guise. Desire, in other words, is the signifier that never changes, that can never cross the bar that marks the repression barrier. In spite of its apparent difference of meaning (the signifieds) in each case, each signifier in this chain has in fact the same meaning as the one before it: the lack which spells desire. Metaphor, on the other hand, is a vertical, noncontiguous structure, and is a system of substitution rather than displacement. For Lacan, who continues to use the Saussurian model, this can be shown by saying that one signifier can substitute as the signified for another signifier. The “bar” is not really crossed in this way, but it is overcome when the signifier (S) “drops down” into the position of the signified (s) for another signifier:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \frac{S}{s} & \searrow & \frac{S}{s} \end{array}$$

The point of going (briefly) into all of this extremely complicated discussion of Lacan’s ideas on metaphor, metonymy, and linguistics in general is to show that, for him, rhetorical figures provide the model for the way the unconscious works, and for the way it generates its signification.

It should be added that the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, which is itself grounded in Saussurian terminology and method, equally affects the way Lacan understands the rhetoric of the unconscious: as “deep structures” which create meaning through certain patterns of repetition and exchange. The patterns, and not the “official” meaning of each term, are what make for meaning, along with their intrarelationships. So, too, Lacan says that the movement of the signifier—its position—is what creates meaning; not the signified.

To demonstrate this last point, Lacan “reads” a story by Edgar Allan Poe, “The Purloined Letter.” The story concerns a certain letter which the queen has lost and which will incriminate her if it falls into the wrong hands. What Lacan points out is that the contents of the letter (its signified, official meaning) are never known to the reader. What matters rather is the *placement* of the letter—who has it, who doesn’t, and where it is hidden. The movement of the letter from hand to hand is like the chain of signifiers discussed above as metonymy. Lacan shows that each individual in the story is determined by his or her relation to the presence of the letter, not by its contents. In a similar manner, says Lacan, the Subject is determined by a lack which engenders desire. The desire is forever displaced and disguised as something else (as is the missing letter), and this is

evidence of repression. For Lacan, the Poe story shows us a "lesson" about the unconscious: the letter's itinerary, like the chain of signifiers, constitutes whatever subject is in its presence. When, at the end of the story, the letter has been returned to its rightful place and owner, the tension is relieved (to return to Freud's hydraulic language) and stasis (pleasure) is reached. The letter's circuit is then (for Lacan) like the displacement of the signifier; its return to its "sender" (the queen) is a fable of the notion that the unconscious always manifests its desire—frequently through displacement. "A letter," says Lacan, "always arrives at its destination." This can be interpreted to mean that the unconscious always attains its goal, even if by deferral. The unconscious is the "discourse of the Other" because the Subject does not know that he desires what the Other desires. That Other, as we have seen, is in Lacan the Oedipal drama (the father is the "real" Other); but it is also that part of himself which the Subject always fails to recognize (or misrecognizes, as Lacan says) because he does not know it is a part of himself: his own unconscious.

Lacan's views on literary texts have had great resonance in literary theory. His easy moves between linguistics, philosophy, psychoanalysis, literature, and anthropology, prefigure (and indeed, may have largely shaped) the similarly interdisciplinary turn taken by literary criticism today. Even critics who profess little if any interest in psychoanalytic theory apply, e.g., Saussurean terminology to literary texts much as Lacan did, or use certain words with a specifically Lacanian intent (words such as "symbolic" or "imaginary" or "mirror stage"). Lacan's impact on literary theory cannot be underestimated; nor his influence on such diverse thinkers as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Paul de Man, Fredric Jameson, to name just a few. And yet it should also be remembered that Lacan was first and foremost a practicing psychoanalyst, a clinician for whom every manifestation of human thought could be another clue to understanding the psyche. In this, as in many other respects, he resembles Freud. And as with Freud, the unconscious for Lacan represents a clinical problem, a force underlying the behavior of real, living and breathing patients; it is not only an abstract concept to be imagined in differing ways. If the literary critic is ultimately faced with the text, the practicing analyst faces the patient and the difficulties of the very concrete manifestations of desire which that patient's unconscious generates. "Unconscious" at the moment of such confrontations begins to mean and to matter in fundamentally separate ways.

These, then, are some of the ways in which the notion of an unconscious has come to have an impact on literary theory, philosophy, anthropology, and linguistics. At least, these are some of the ways that psychoanalysis has chosen to use such disciplines as a way of describing what is by definition indescribable: the unknowable part of the psyche and its activities which the term "unconscious" stands in for. We have noted that, because the unconscious is an abstraction, an invisible "place" in the mind, or an unseeable system of energy flowing

beyond consciousness, it is then condemned to being represented concretely through analogies and extended metaphors. But perhaps the converse is also true. Perhaps the unconscious is the way in which we imagine the unknowable and its hidden workings. Is it possible, then, that the "unconscious" is the twentieth-century version of the mythologies humankind always generates to explain the inexplicable, to chart the "unknown terrain" which ultimately remains mysterious in (and to) the psyche? It may be that when we discuss or describe the unconscious, we are revealing more about the human will to explore and explain precisely that which is unknowable and inexplicable than we are about any system or topography of the mind. To return to the idea which opened this essay, any discussion of the unknowable must perforce be born of the known, and therefore be nothing more than speculation. And yet, it may be that the way we speculate about the unknown will tell us in itself about the structures and patterns of the psyche, about its limitations and its prejudices.

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