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Aging and desire in a few novels

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Can we apply literature to psychoanalysis, as the French literary critic Pierre Bayard proposes, and instead on projecting a theory on literature, work the other way around and produce theory on the base of literary texts?[1] What this "applied literature" would try to achieve is not confirming well-known psychoanalytical theories, but bringing new and original insights to the field of psychology. In applied psychoanalysis the activity comes from psychoanalysis, and in Shoshana Felman's words "psychoanalysis occupies the place of a subject, literature that of an object". The relation of interpretation is structured as a "relation of master and slave", a dynamic encounter whose outcome is the sole recognition of the master. The function of literature is here "to serve precisely the desire of psychoanalytical theory".[2]

In "applied literature", theory is no longer something that helps us read and understand the text: theory is suggested by the text itself, in a unique and irreplaceable way, to help us discover what happens in the mind. In other words, theory is no longer an existing corpus of concepts that can be learned and applied to cultural products, but something virtual, that will or will not be understood by the reader.

Bayard's ideas about applied literature however do not implicate that the text becomes the master, or the *sujet-supposé-savoir*, the "subject presumed to know". Literature doesn't know, but it may expose a body of knowledge, because how could we assume that writers like Shakespeare, Joyce, Proust or Philip Roth have not themselves reflect upon psychological phenomena, and that they have not left behind in their work theoretical constructions based on those phenomena?

According to Bayard, the fundamental difference between applied literature and other reading theories inspired by psychoanalysis, is the question we ask the literary text. And of course there is not one answer available, but different answers that will depend on the question asked. This question is different from the one applied psychoanalysis confronts the text with, which is: *what are the unconscious meanings of the text?* Without underestimating or even denying that a text has indeed unconscious meanings, what "applied literature" tries to find is what new insights a literary text can bring to our reflexion on the working of the psyche. The question we may ask here is: *what can literature tell us about old age?*

The French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu describes creation of old age as an intense libidinal recharge caused by the perspective the artist or the writer discovers (sometimes after near-fatal illness) that he

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[1] P. Bayard (2004), *Peut-on appliquer la littérature à la psychanalyse?*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, pp. 43-45.

[2] S. Felman (1977), *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, New York: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 5-8.

still has time to work and to create. This happens at sixty, and again at eighty. At eighty, he feels great joy being still alive and capable of working, and having at least twenty more years in front of him (after a crisis, we always rethink life in term of twenty-years slices). This causes a splitting in the libidinal life: according to Freud, Eros and Thanatos use the same libidinal energy, but in this case the death drive is repressed or projected ("only other people die, not me") while the life instincts are liberated. There is a strong, often unconscious belief in the own immortality. For a very long time, we deny the possibility of our own death, or we project it to a far future. When death comes near, this denying ability is confirmed and becomes the source of renewed creativity.[3] At the age of 73, the French writer Albert Cohen publishes *Belle du Seigneur* and starts a second or even third literary career. A few months before his death, Picasso declares he will never die.

The characters created by older writers seem to illustrate this splitting of libidinal life, expressed in the anxiety to die and the will to survive. In contemporary novels, characters struggle with Eros and Thanatos and we see them accept – or not – the ordeals of old age and the metamorphosis, sometimes the disappearance of desire.

It is quite impossible to imagine what old age is when you are young. You have to witness the decay of your own body to grasp it. Something unusual happens then: while your remaining vitality tries to keep a distance from your weakening body, at the same time you may feel strong and even invulnerable. You are aware of the increase of signs that leed to unpleasant conclusions, but still you seem to be on the outside. You are not dying all the time: it happens in an invisible way (Philip Roth in *The Dying Animal*). The ability to live, the vital fluids, life itself, are slowly but steadily drained out of the body. As small parts of time escape life, leaving you forever, you still experience this nearly unnoticeable lost of vitality as a sign you are still alive (Tomasi di Lampedusa in *The Leopard*).

The only thing you understand about old people when you are still young, is that they carry the mark of their time, and by doing this you freeze them in time. But to be old doesn't mean that your past is frozen: it is still very much alive, and you are haunted by it and by the fulness of it as much as you are haunted by the fact that you are still alive. In fact you live two lives at the same time, both strong and intense: the old life, which you are forced to leave behind you but still exists, and the present life, which is a slow process of loss and mourning.

To show how these two lives are intertwined, the older character is often placed opposite a younger man. Because they are too frail to do the things they used to but still want to enjoy them, aging characters are compelled to live by proxy. "How do you like your brandy sir? – In a glass. – I used to like mine with champagne. I like to see people drink. You may smoke too. I can still enjoy the smell of it. Nice state of affairs when a man has to indulge his vices by proxy." (General Sternwood to Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*).

In *The Actual*, the old entrepreneur Adletsky, who is very old and small, so small he might just fly away into eternity, asks the narrator to observe social events in his place and discuss people and events with him. Living by proxy means to live through another person, and in a way the older man is like a vampire feeding himself with the younger man's fresher life.

One of the most described processes of aging is that you have to give up oral pleasures like smoking and drinking. In *La coscienza di Zeno*, a novel about to smoke or not to smoke, the hero is caught up in a strange dilemma: Zeno does not succeed in quitting his self-destructive but delightful habit, because in order to quit smoking, he has to smoke "the last cigarette", and this implies that he cannot quit because there will always be another last cigarette. The paradox is that to stop smoking, he has to go on doing it. Zeno even begins a psychoanalytic treatment, which fails to cure him of his addiction. He discovers that instead of the talking cure, he could start a writing cure, in which he will try to discover the roots of his "propensione di fumare", his propensity to smoke.

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[3] D. Anzieu (1981), *Le corps de l'oeuvre*, Paris: Gallimard.

There are major differences between Zeno's therapy or *fumo-analysis* and traditional psychoanalysis: it is based on writing instead of talking, it makes use of the pencil that presses on the paper instead of the airy vagueness of the spoken word, it creates something that is palpable and will not disappear, contrary to the free associations, which are as brief and easy to forget as dreams, or the smoke of cigarettes. It is, like Richard Klein writes in *Cigarettes are Sublime*, "vertical instead of horizontal".[4]

Being old means that time has changed your body in "a storehouse of artificial parts". The decaying body is the only story left, escaping death the only occupation in a life that used to be filled with work and love and all kinds of interesting events. The personal biography coincides with the medical biography. This causes a feeling of alienation towards the physical self. Old age is not even a merciless struggle, it's carnage. (Philip Roth in *Everyman*). Lucian Freud's paintings show the desperate, fierce and moving decay of bodies that once were beautiful. His famous selfportrait, naked with only his shoes on, is the artist's insolent response to a society addicted to youth and beauty.

There are two ways to escape the depression: concentrating on the death of others, and escaping in erotic fantasies. Philip Roth's character in *Everyman* finds peace in the graveyard where his parents are buried. But what most characters are looking for is the confirmation their erotic desires are still alive. The loss of vitality can be interpreted as a sign of life (in psychoanalytical terms we would say this is a defence, reversal into the opposite), but the intensity of erotic fantasies might be a mask for a decreasing of desire, for what Ernst Jones called *aphanisis*, the disappearance of sexual desire.

The older man's love for a younger woman is always restless and filled with fear and jealousy. "Jealousy. That poison. And without any cause what so ever. (…) On the nights she is not with me I worry like mad. (…) How do I know a younger man will not take her away from me?" (Philip Roth in *The Dying Animal*). Maybe this is one of the reasons why desire concentrates on reminiscence or takes the face of fantasy. Most of the times, desire is stirred up by a gaze, a glance. Don Fabrizio, the Leopard, watches the statue of a nymph and imagines how Neptune will kiss her secretly in the darkness of the Sicilian night. In Venice, Von Aschenbach watches the young boy Tadzio, but never speaks to him. In fact it is not the real Tadzio he has fallen in love with, but the image of beauty and the resemblance to a Greek statue. Tadzio is a projection of Aschenbach's aesthetic visions, he doesn't seem to have a life of his own. Garcia Marquez's ninety-year old hero only sees his young "melancholic whore" when she sleeps. She becomes an apparition and he can do with her whatever he wants to: change the colour of her skin or the colour of her eyes, the dress she wears, imagine how she lies sleeping. Instead of touching, love becomes watching.

This is the phase where desire begins to fade away, to disappear, to become a frozen image, and, though seemingly even bright and intense as it always was, less physical. Desire is reduced to its essence, maybe Lacan's *objet a*, which is not necessarily connected to the mother. Like Ethel Person remarks, desire is encoded in fantasy, and the real experience of the mother-child relationship should not be used to explain the origin of those fantasies, which are related to what she calls "sex print", a range of specific sexual fantasies invoked as a means of arousal.[5]

The literal meaning of the Greek term *Aphanisis* is "disappearance". Ernest Jones used it to mean "the disappearance of sexual desire". Lacan has modified the term substantially: aphanisis is not only the disappearance of desire but the disappearance of the subject, the fading of the subject. The subject fades or disappears in the face of desire and in the face of the object. For Lacan, the fear of the disappearance of sexual desire is connected to the fear of castration. However, literature shows that the fear of disappearance of desire is connected to the anxiety caused by the final disappearance.

The dance, as an esthetic pleasure and a mating ritual, tells us a lot about the fading of desire.

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[4] R. Klein (1993), *Cigarettes Are Sublime*, New York: Duke University Press.
[5] E. Spector Person (1999), *The Sexual Century*, New York: Yale University Press.

Maybe the dance is only experienced as a memory, a nearly forgotten souvenir of lust, lived in a time when the hero was still young. Dancing an *tango apache* with a tall, voluptuous woman in a mood so sensuous Garcia Marquez's hero can feel the blood rushing through her veins, suddenly becomes the sign of a fate impossible to avoid: desire and death, Eros and Thanatos. (Garcia Marquez, *Memory of my Melancholic Whores*).

Don Fabrizio, prince of Salina, wants to dance with beautiful Angelica, but not the mazurka to which she invites him: his joints wouldn't be capable of dancing such a lively, military dance. He prefers a waltz, and during the dance nearly conscious memories and feelings are awoken by Angelica's beauty and flowery scent.[6] After the dance, Angelica invites him to eat something with her and her fiancee Tancredi. Don Fabrizio refuses, conscious that when he was a young man, he wouldn't have liked an aged uncle to dine with him and his beloved. He thinks it's better to bore oneself than to bore other people. Here too, dancing brings back memory of youth, erotic encounters and pleasure. And after the dance reality returns, with the bitter feeling of loneliness and loss. (Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*).

Dancing can also be looking at the other dancing. "Dance for me", Coleman Silk asks his lover Faunia. He did it before, with Steena, and both times the music is Artie Shaw's *The Man I love*, and both times Coleman says the same words: "Where did I find you, Voluptas? How did I find you? Who are you?" But with Faunia the situation is different: Steena was ashamed of the erotic dancing, but while Coleman looks at Faunia, she looks back, she is the one who seems to lead, giving herself completely and escaping at the same time. (Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*).

In Irvin Yalom's *The Schopenhauer Cure*, we meet psychoanalyst Julius, who has a very serious illness and knows he will die soon. He describes the changes that take place in his mind and in his way of looking upon the world around him. Psychoanalysis cannot help him to make most of the time he still has left, as psychoanalysis also failed to cure one of his patients, Philip, who became a philosophical councellor. With Philip's help, Julius discovers that philosophy, especially the works of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, can have a stimulating effect in the therapy-group he has lead for several years. Philosophy is an inspiring addition to their never-ending conversation, and all of the group-members are stunned by the help they get from it.

Irvin Yalom stresses that by denying death, we misdirect our search for happiness. The true meaning of life lies in engaging in what we fear most, and confronting death is the key to living an authentic and happy life. This is in fact what Freud writes in one of his few articles about death, "On Transience" ("Vergänglichkeit", 1915), where he speaks about the important role of transience, because the limitation of the possibility to enjoy and be happy increases it's value.

Unlike the psychoanalyst, the writer is a person who has not been strongly influenced, even dominated by someone else's vocabulary. Maybe the insights he puts in his work could help us to fill in the empty spaces in psychoanalysis, the spaces where psychoanalysis does not work, like fear of aging and fear or dying. Each stage of life has its own somatic and psychic normality as well as its own pathology, and both are reflected in literature. According to Garcia Marquez's hero, being fifty is a decisive fase, because you discover that almost everyone is younger than you. Being sixty is intense and intensive, as you suspect there is no time left for mistakes. Seventy is terrifying, becomes you very well know this could be the end. But becoming ninety makes him aware that life doesn't simply pass by: "it is a unique opportunity to turn around on the barbecue's grille and bake the other side for another ninety years." (*Memories of my Melancholic Whores*).

The written fumo-analysis Italo Svevo describes in *La coscienza di Zeno* is a theoretical construction and a criticism of psychoanalysis. For Zvevo, the traditional analyst is fixated on the narcissistic atmosphere of the analysis, he wants to convince his patient that smoking is only a symptom of other, more funda-

[6] This scene is particularly beautiful in Visconti's film, where it gets far more attention than in the novel.

mental obsessive compulsive tendencies and complexes; he wants Zeno to recognize the fact that he only started smoking to compete with his father, whom he always saw smoking big cigares. Zeno's *fumo-analysis* is succesful where psychoanalysis failed: Zeno understands that he doesn't have to make the decision to quit. As he frees himself of the paradoxical logic of "the last cigarette", smoking looses his magic and he is able to stop.

On a more technical level, writing instead of traditional free-associating can also have its benefits. In *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, Michael White and David Epston stress the importance of narratives in therapeutic treatments. The stories we write about our lives introduce us to an intertextual world, where lives are situated in texts within texts. Every telling or retelling of a story is also a new telling that encapsulates and expands upon the previous telling.[7] What Michael White calls "storied therapy", which includes letters and all kinds of documents, is a form of therapy that privileges a person's lived experience and enables him/her to redefine his own relationship to the problems he encounters in his life, just like Zeno does in his written history of his obsessiveness about quitting smoking. Psychoanalysis may have been too fixated on the spoken word and the free-association and have therefore forgotten about the written word.

As the German psychoanalyst Gabriele Junkers remarks, many analysts have a strange aversion to working clinically with elderly people. There are different reasons for that. In psychoanalytic literature, the potential for development in the middel and later stages of life was only acknowledged in recent years. They are still under Freud's influence, who writes that "when near or above the year of fifty, the elasticity of mental processes on which treatment depends upon, is, as a rule, lacking: old people are no longer educable;"[8] There is also the transference situation, which is transposed so that they are inconsciously confronted with aging parental figures. The fear of death is a subject analysts are afraid to touch, and they often hide behind the hypothesis that the unconscious ignores death. Maybe my unconscious doesn't know about death anxiety because death doesn't exist in the unconscious, but **I** surely do. "The primitive dread of death resides in the unconscious – a dread that is part of the fabric of being, that is formed early in life before the development of precise, conceptual formulation, a dread that is chilling, uncanny, and inchoate, a dread that exists prior to and ouside of language and image." (Irvin Yalom in *Existential Psychotherapy*).

I think we can see literature as a kind of psychoanalysis, and psychoanalysis as a kind of literature, because both involve aspects of language, memory and fantasy that are strongly connected to each other. Looking at all there has been written about old age, one might be amazed by the fact that psychoanalysts seem to have so little to say about it, while aging has everything to do with psychoanalysis, with the economy of the drives, the control of lust, watching instead of doing, the disappearance of desire. Still, since 1920 less than 20 papers on the subject have been published in the *International Journal for Psychoanalysis*. In the seventies, Pearl King already asked for more research in this field.[9] She reminds us Abraham wrote that some of his most successful cures had been achieved with middle-aged patients. But in addition to clinical research, literature might offer a vast and fascinating corpus about experiencing old age.

LITERATURE

The Actual by Saul Bellow (published in 1997, Bellow was 82).
The Leopard by Tomasi di Lampedusa (published in 1957, Lampedusa was 61).
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[7] M. White, & D. Epston (1990), *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, New York: Norton and Company.
[8] S. Freud (1905), "On psychotherapy", in *Standard Edition*, 7, pp. 257-268.
[9] G. Junkers (2006), *Is It Too Late? Key Papers on Psychoanalysis and Aging*, London: Karnac.

The Dying Animal by Philip Roth (published in 2001, Roth was 68).
Everyman by Philip Roth (published in 2006, the writer is now 73).
The Human Stain by Philip Roth (published in 2000).
Memories of my Melancholic Whores by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (published in 2004, Marquez was 77).
The Schopenhauer Cure by Irvin Yalom (published in 2004, Yalom was 73).
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