

New psychology after 1920 is pseudo-psychology only to pseudo-intellectuals

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Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont revealed, in *Fashionable Nonsense* (1998), that much of what passes for brilliant among postmodern intellectuals is meaningless. However, one abuse denounced by them also infects their own work and the work of certain critics and book-reviewers in the field of psycho-criticism. This is the habit of dismissing valuable research as worthless without bothering to present any supporting arguments. Sometimes it is simply because it is ground-breaking and therefore unfamiliar. They do not even bother to face the fact that, in the case of transactional analysis and group behaviour theory, valuable new discoveries have been produced concerning certain literary texts that had not been brought to light by the use of other perspectives. Animated by an irrational fear of the new, they call it pseudo-psychology. They forget that what is now Freudian orthodoxy was once shockingly new.

Sokal and Bricmont accuse Kate Hayles of failing to provide arguments in support of her assertions (pp. 111-136), but they are blind to this defect in the work of writers they agree with, such as Carl Matheson and Evan Kirchoff. The latter claim, for example, that my work applying chaos theory to literature is “bizarre” and “tortured” but do not say how or why or provide any argument in support of this claim. My guess is that what they dislike about my article is its literary and imaginative character, which is unfamiliar to them. People with such narrow minds should stay away from interdisciplinary research, which requires imagination, intuition and insight, expressed in breadth of vision and a spirit of intellectual adventure, going beyond the metonymic to the metaphorical.

I propose this principle: “no condemnation without argumentation”.

In this paper I shall illustrate three modes of the new psychology: transactional analysis, group behaviour theory, and control theory.

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1. TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS APPLIED TO ZOLA

Following the movement towards ego psychology led by Freud, Anna Freud, and Erik Erikson after 1920, Eric Berne developed structural analysis in the early 1950s and transactional analysis in the late 1950s, and set out his approach systematically in 1961. Structural analysis segregates traumatically fixated ego states: Parent, Adult, Child. The Parent may be nurturing (sympathetic) or prejudicial (prohibitive); its function is to conserve energy and diminish anxiety. The Adult is organized, adaptable, objective. The Child may be adapted (compliant, withdrawing) or natural (rebellious, self-indulgent); its function is to motivate the Adult to obtain gratification. Transactional analysis studies social manoeuvres, from the most elementary to the most complex, i.e. from transactions through pastimes and games to scripts. A pastime is an engagement in which the transactions are simple and direct: when at least one of the parties has a hidden agenda, the pastime becomes a game. A script is a complex set of transactions that constitutes an attempt to repeat in derivative form a whole transference drama. Berne acknowledges his debt to Freud, but avoids his obsession with sex and castration.

One of the first uses of transactional analysis in literary criticism was Anthony West's excellent *Mortal Wounds* (1973), devoted to Madame de Stael, Madame de Charriere, and George Sand. Unfortunately, the approach adopted is purely biographical, which undermines the validity of the whole. In 1974, a student of mine, Scott Plummer, wrote a dissertation entitled *The Theatre of Molière: A Partial Transactional Analysis*. Unlike West, he used mostly the ego states of Parent, Adult and Child emphasized in the first phase of T. A., which Eric Berne called "structural analysis". In two articles published in 1985 I applied to *L'Oeuvre*, Zola's novel on the world of painters and painting in the Impressionist period, the notions of script, counterscript and incest taboo from transactional analysis and also that of undifferentiated group ego mass drawn from group behaviour theory. In 1996, another of my students, Jean-Michel Lanskin, published through the French publisher Minard his doctoral dissertation entitled *Le "scénario sans amour" d'une fille de joie: Analyse transactionnelle de Nana*. The contribution of transactional analysis to psychocriticism is as follows.

In Zola's novel *L'Oeuvre* (1886), the painter Claude Lantier commits suicide as a result of two scripts: a "deep" script derived from childhood perceptions of "how life is", based on experience of the relations with and between the child's parents, and a later psycho-social script imposed by an unresolved Oedipus conflict – exacerbated by an undifferentiated group ego mass – that subverts his artistic objectivity and integrity and dictates obsession and overwork that prove fatal to the artist.

Claude has a negative life-script based on a deprived childhood in which he was made to feel a burden and unwanted by his mother. Moreover, his mother's life and work were ruined by aberrant, uncontrollable sex, represented by the return of her first husband: Claude, by reaction, adopts a belief in sublimation and celibacy that becomes his counterscript.

Because of the inadequacy of Gervaise's fulfilment of his expectations of her as a mother, Claude imposes compensatory scripts on Christine. Gervaise had not been able to surround him with the maternal support he needed, so he eventually assigns to Christine, his lover, the role of Nurturing Parent. Gervaise, torn between two men, had also not been able to play the role of the "virginal" mother who is above sexuality, so Claude assigns this role also to Christine, a role facilitated by her verbal modesty. This role of substitute mother makes her subject to the incest-taboo, bringing loss of intimacy. However, in spite of Claude's explicit return to his counterscript of celibacy, he finds even the sublimated mode provided by painting slowly invaded by the deep, ineluctable drives of the sex-and-destruction script acquired in childhood by observing his mother's life.

The effect of this negative scripting is reinforced by the support and also the pressure coming from the undifferentiated group ego mass of his young friends, who want to break all the rules of

bourgeois art but at the same time to be accepted by the representatives of the bourgeois aesthetic. These incompatible goals lead to certain frustration.

Both negative scripting and the role of the undifferentiated group ego mass subvert creativity by provoking pathological excess of ambition and of work. This combination leads to his suicide in front of his last and most erotic painting.

2. GROUP BEHAVIOUR THEORY APPLIED TO PROUST

Modern family behaviour theory has established that difficulties in achieving psychological and emotional autonomy are often caused by excessive symbiosis with parents, family, or other groups, a situation commonly productive of schizophrenia. Clinical research into family relationships has shown that the greater the degree of emotional fusion with the mother, the greater the difficulty for the child to “differentiate a self” – that is, to achieve healthy autonomy, whether emotional, psychological or mental. The level of basic self (autonomous position stances, not negotiable in the relationship system) remains low, while the pseudo-self, acquired through the relationship and negotiable within it, tends to dominate. This pseudoself trades beliefs and principles in order to enhance its position within the relationship and thus earn love and security, and it is this pseudoself which fuses with others in an intense emotional field.

People whose level of basic self is low have no choice but continued pursuit of a close relationship for gratification of emotional needs. Fusion may take place not only with one other person (for example, the mother) but also with a group of people – typically, the family. Through such emotional fusion, great pressure may be exerted upon the self to abandon (or at least suspend) objectivity and accept the values and attitudes of what has been termed the “undifferentiated family ego mass”.

Modern family psychotherapy has also established that binary or two-person relationships are always basically unstable, and that the “molecule” or smallest building-block of any emotional system is the three-person grouping. This triangle is characterized by constant interaction between its elements. Now if we apply this knowledge to the study of literature we may postulate that the intersubjective triangle may be represented by any triad of objects, and that its internal motion may be represented by internal movement within the symbolic triad. Happiness experienced whenever a triad of objects is seen, especially when these are explicitly taken to suggest a triad of human beings (through anthropomorphosis), suggests the relief provided by “triangling-in” a third party characteristic of a person involved in a two-person relationship.

In describing his relationship when young with his mother, the Proustian narrator provides a uniquely detailed evocation of a classic case of symbiotic schizophrenia. He also suggests that the triad of belltowers at Martinville and Vieuxvicq contains mysterious laws and ideas, and he never reveals to us what they are. In the text on the belltowers, the latter are compared to birds, pivots, flowers, and maidens, in that order. It is when he finally achieves the anthropomorphosis of the three belltowers (as maidens) that he feels fulfilled and relieved, happy. In his later evocation of the triad of trees at Hudimesnil, we find that he omits the intermediate images and moves directly to the anthropomorphosis (witches, childhood friends). The continually changing relations within the triad may be seen in the movement from the symbiotic relationship between mother and child to the triad in which the child moves temporarily to the “outsider” position.

Proust’s fictional narrator is a schizophrenic who does not want to give up the pleasures of symbiosis which produce and perpetuate his condition. When, as protagonist, he is faced with triads, especially of vertical objects such as belltowers and trees, his manner of relating to reality leads him naturally to anthropomorphize them. This gives him pleasure in various ways: it reminds him of his pleasure-giving relationship with his mother, and it enables him to see in them an image of the “triangling-in” of a third party which can provide relief, if temporarily desired, from the

intense, symbiotic two-person relationship, which is necessarily unstable. A third source of pleasure is provided by the literary transposition of the triads: this enables him to trade a partial avowal of the truth (through anthropomorphous comparisons) for the right to claim that all the truth has been disclosed. “Writing-up” thus becomes a sort of alibi for the schizophrenic, who does not want to face the unpalatable truth that he really ought to free himself from the symbiosis which maintains him in his schizophrenic state.

Symbiotic schizophrenia is also manifested at the level of groups, and a brilliant example of undifferentiated group ego mass is provided by the clan Verdurin, which seeks actively to inhibit any independence of thought or action on the part of its members. It would be hard to imagine a more telling illustration of this principle.

3. CONTROL THEORY APPLIED TO THE ROCOCO

Control theory is based on the drive to tame the threatening Otherness of one’s surroundings. The determining effect of the birth trauma stems from the violent rejection of the infant by the mother’s body, which thrusts it out from the warm, dark, silent, liquid passivity of the nurturing womb through a passage of life-threatening compression and out into the cold, blinding, noisy, dry air and the necessity to breathe – such is the child’s first experience of rejection, of Otherness and of the environment outside the womb, which is alien, incomprehensible, and unpredictable. The result: a disorder neurosis and a drive to control.

Whereas Freud, who was obsessed with castration and paid little attention to female subjects, claimed that the infant views its faeces as a detachable part of his own body that he can give as a gift in a kind of surrogate autocastration, control theory views the faeces as symbolizing not the penis (females have feces but no penis) but an Other (representing a controlled environment): excretion, by showing the child that he can create an Other, has a twofold therapeutic function, since it involves both control of Self (through a mastery of the bodily function that helps to diminish the threatening unpredictability of life) and control of Otherness (through the production or “creation” of a visible, concrete Other). *This latter becomes part of the child’s environment, but is non-threatening because created by the child him/herself.* In fact, the experience of congestion/expulsion/relief makes excretion an analogue of the birth that the infant has experienced, only now he/she is in control; and the faeces, as a product of the activity, represent the new-born infant.

There are two categories of function in which the process of expulsion is preceded by congestion of the organism involved and followed by relief and satisfaction. These may be termed the category of the potential and ephemeral (ejaculation, menstruation, *parole*) and the category of the actual and permanent (excretion, childbirth, *écriture*). Only this second category is therapeutic. Contrary to the opinion of Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss and Derrida, *écriture* is superior to *parole* because it produces an externalized object that is concrete and visible and yet non-threatening because created by the Self. Of course, utilitarian writing is not therapeutic, only creative writing is.

I shall illustrate control theory by application to the rococo ethos of the early 18th century. In the rococo, the out-of-control narcissism of Louis XIV (the self-styled “Sun King”) and grandiloquence of the baroque were replaced by an aristocratic affectation of self-control that resulted in a blasé indifference, exemplified in Fontenelle and Chesterfield.

A *bel esprit* like Fontenelle sought to avoid the accusation of pedantry by the urbane elegance and nonchalance of his manner of expression, even a treatise on astronomy such as the *Entretien sur la pluralité des mondes habités* must purport to be introduced in the course of a desultory conversation with a beautiful marquise in the perfumed garden of a country château, her initiation into the endless mysteries of the universe must be represented as an elegant conversation-piece.

Madame Geoffrin writes of Fontenelle as follows: «Il n'avait jamais pleuré, il ne s'était jamais mis en colère, il n'avait jamais couru. Je lui disais un jour: Monsieur de Fontenelle, vous n'avez jamais ri? “– Non, je n'ai jamais fait ah! ah!” Voilà l'idée qu'il se faisait du rire.» Laughter was also thought undesirable by Lord Chesterfield, who went so far as to write to his son in the following terms: «Having mentioned laughing, I must particularly warn you against it: and I could heartily wish that you may often be seen to smile, but never heard to laugh while you live. [...] I am sure that, since I had the full use of reason, nobody has ever heard me laugh.»

This denigration of any expression of emotion results in the suppression of laughter and tears, passion and lyricism, and both the lyric and the epic withered on the vine. An extreme cult of self-control, whether individual or social (and in the rococo it was both), reflects an extreme and spiritually costly attempt to assuage the disorder neurosis resulting from the birth trauma and the concomitant conviction that the world that surrounds us is alien.

In this respect, the rococo is different both from the baroque and from Romanticism, and represents an extreme case of the triumph of metonymy in what I call symptomatic psychohistory, in which at any point in time the arts are viewed as symptoms of the condition of a society. The disorder neurosis is so extreme in the rococo that we have a society in serious crisis.

CONCLUSION

Transactional analysis, group behaviour theory and control theory have provided us with the concepts of script, symbiotic schizophrenia, triangling in, undifferentiated group ego mass, and disorder neurosis, and a new respect for écriture.

Group behaviour theory, for example, enables us to discover the nature of the mysterious laws and ideas mentioned by the Proustian narrator, to relate them to the psychological condition of the narrator, and to understand why the meanings had not been revealed to the reader. No other theory or system has explained both of these features of the text and the relationship between them. To reject such perspectives, which are based on clinical research, as pseudo-psychology is ignorant and irresponsible.

The same is true of the defense of the immorality of Proust's characters. The venal character of the love between Swann and Odette and between the narrator and Albertine is undeniable. To criticize such immorality is standard literary criticism, and to be upset by such criticism of immorality is possible only if one confuses the Proustian narrator with Proust himself. This despite the trouble Proust has taken to distinguish the narrator from himself, by changing the career of the father and the religion of the mother and by eliminating his brother. This is what is known as the biographical fallacy, denounced by Proust himself in *Contre Sainte-Beuve*.

Fear of the new may explain such errors, but it cannot justify them. And they are related to a more general problem. Closed minds are the bane of the literary community: we must remain open to the new, if the intellectual life is to remain an intellectual adventure.