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Unconscious Dissemblance:

The Place of Irony in Psychoanalytic Thought

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Pivot is published through Open Journal Systems (OJS) at York
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At the heart of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic project lies the problem of man's self-deception. Psychoanalysis has made commonplace the idea that we keep secrets from ourselves, and that we may wage war within our own bodies to guard these secrets. For Freud, psychoanalytic theory as a system of knowledge provided a set of interpretative techniques for analysing that which is denied or disguised by our unconscious dissemblance; and as a system of treatment, it aimed to loosen the lies we tell via the practice of free-association and the principle of unmitigated candour. Nineteenth-century hysteria, the prevalent discourse that informed Freud's psychoanalytic theory, showcases the variety of symptoms that communicate a conflict between the force of a desire and the undesirability of its expression.

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Freud's presentation of the case of Frau Cäcilie M. demonstrates with particular eloquence how unconscious dissemblance is worn on the body. Among other symptoms, this patient suffered from a violent facial neuralgia; Freud describes the deciphering of the symptom as follows:

When I began to call up the traumatic scene, the patient saw herself back in a period of great mental irritability towards her husband. She described a conversation which she had had with him and a remark of his which she had felt as a bitter insult. Suddenly she put her hand to her cheek, gave a loud cry of pain and said: 'it was like a slap in the face.' With this her pain and her attack were both at an end. (Freud, "Studies on Hysteria," 178)¹

¹ All Freud works cited are taken from *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volumes 1-24.

The symptom is mnemonic—it retains an element of a past experience which requires a form of conversion (in this case symbolization) in order to be communicable. For Frau Cäcilie M. verbal insults were, through symbolic conversion, the catalysts for fresh attacks of her neuralgia (178). Freud's intervention was to allow the patient to "assign her hysterical attacks to their right place in the past" (177). Crucially for the terms of this paper, this therapeutic act of assignment is significant less for its identification of a single cause than for its understanding of a fundamental process of transformation which takes place within the system of the unconscious. It is the mobility of cathexes, identified by Freud as one of the special characteristics of the unconscious, which permits the formation of the symptom. Thus we can read Frau Cäcilie M.'s conscious metaphoric trope "it was like a slap in the face" (it was *as if* I was slapped) as an echo of the primary psychical processes through which the cathectic intensities of ideas have already been mobilized (whether through displacement or condensation).² The unconscious, far from passively containing the patient's history, actively produces, represents, and dissembles it.

Freud's case studies catalogue how the body provides a symbolic site upon which such dissemblance can be played out. Ultimately, it is with the honest talk of psychoanalysis that Freud ventured to force psycho-somatic symptoms to confess their secrets. However, whilst the hysterics that came to lie on Freud's couch may have been apparent experts in naïve self-deception, one of the assumptions of this paper is that in a culture which is readily described as Freudian, such theatrical self-deceit no longer holds sway. This is not to say that contemporary man has become more honest, but rather that

² Freud names condensation and displacement as the characteristic operations of primary psychic process in his 1915 paper, "The Unconscious."

the problematic of deception now preoccupies him in different ways.

The theory and practice of psychoanalysis alters in accordance with the dynamics of the particular social and cultural context (just as it was initially informed by them). It is often suggested that the major difference between psychoanalysis as Freud practiced it and that which is practiced by his adherents and successors is the change in emphasis from treating symptoms to understanding persons as a whole. Not only does the contemporary psychoanalyst see a wide variety of types of patients—well beyond the classical character of the hysteric—but his therapeutic orientation is tied to what Anthony Storr (following Thomas Szasz) calls *problems of living*. Storr is keen to dispel the notion that “psychotherapy is primarily a kind of treasure hunt for traumatic incidents” (154). The image of the analyst as a detective whose investigative techniques are deployed to eliminate false leads misrepresents the therapeutic endeavour.

In this paper I work from the premise that the Freudian dialectic of honesty and deception challenges the order of authentic expression by positing unconscious processes of dissemblance as primary to the structure of the mind. I want to ask how we should position ‘authenticity’ when, as Adam Phillips has noted, “the unconscious spells the death of wholeheartedness” (viii). The device that will facilitate my reading of this association between Freud’s theory of the mind and contemporary culture is irony.

Irony

Etymologically, irony³ is derived from the Greek *Eironia*, meaning to dissemble. For a broader conceptual definition of irony, H.W. Fowler’s *Dictionary of Modern English Usage* offers

³ Though I am aware that irony is a multivalent and widely applied term in the fields of literature and philosophy, I will be situating it narrowly and within the psychoanalytic frame.

the following: "a form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear & shall not understand, & another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more & of the outsiders' incomprehension" (305). Fowler's definition of irony is perceptive because unlike other dictionary definitions it does more than stress a simple distinction between 'appearance' and 'reality'.⁴ The doubleness at the centre of this definition—doubleness of meaning and of audience—undermines the appearance/reality distinction, and the choice phrase "more is meant than meets the ear" correctly refrains from dictating just how much more, leaving the possibility of a central ambiguity at the heart of the ironic utterance. We shall see how this ambiguity becomes an ambiguity about the place of irony in psychoanalysis. There is a tendency in psychoanalytic thought to posit irony as an occasional strategy for living which recommends the patient consciously resolve to distance himself from his expressions of sincerity (since these are invariably not to be trusted). Whilst this strategy is no doubt a useful therapeutic tool, it is perennially in danger of misapprehending irony as a conscious training to deal with unconscious motivations, rather than as a production of the actual unconscious processes.

The alternative reading of irony suggested in this paper moves beyond an instrumental appreciation of irony as a distancing technique or a mode of conscious adaptation to a recognition of irony within the processes of the unconscious. The psychoanalytic phenomenon of transference (where the patient's past erotic attitudes are re-expressed in relation to

⁴ See, for example, the *O.E.D.* where irony is defined purely in oppositional terms as "A figure of speech in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed by the words used; usually taking the form of sarcasm or ridicule in which laudatory expressions are used to imply condemnation or contempt." Not only does this definition do little to distinguish irony from sarcasm, it also fails to accommodate any constructive possibilities that irony might entail.

the analyst) is central to this recognition and returns us to Fowler's conception of a double audience. At first it seems axiomatic that the analyst would take up the position of Fowler's knowing audience, that is, the position of the one who is aware of "the more" that is meant than meets the ear, and also of the one who is aware of the "outsiders' incomprehension." In the transference, the patient's affection or antipathy for the analyst is expressed with sincerity and yet the analyst knows that every such expression expresses something "more" (more than the declarative intention of the patient). However, although it is the analyst who 'knows' and therefore possesses the tools of irony, it is only through the patient's unconscious processes that the irony is operative. Who then is the ironist in the psychoanalytic setting? Because the analyst has to play a role in the patient's transference in order to reveal the irony of the unconscious processes, we suspect that the psychoanalytic reading of irony is ultimately more complicated than a form of superior knowingness.

The Alazon and the Eiron

The classical distinction between the Alazon and the Eiron is explored by Douglas Muecke in his critical work *Irony and the Ironic*. Muecke draws from Theophrastus's *Characters*, in which the Alazon and the Eiron feature amongst the thirty-strong cast of moral types. Irony (Eironeia), we are informed, cannot be understood thoroughly without reference to its counterpart Alazony (Alazoneia): "As scepticism pre-supposes credulity, so irony needs 'alazony', which is Greek for braggartism but in works on irony is shorthand for any form of self-assurance or naivety" (Muecke 4). Dissemblance is key for both characters; however, the Alazon's state of naïve unawareness—what we would call self-deception—is sharply contrasted with the Eiron's more sophisticated dissimulation. Whilst the Alazon is protected by a "façade of boasts", the Eiron conceals himself behind "evasive, noncommittal, self-depreciative masks" (35). It is telling that the common

translation for the state of Alazoneia is “fraudulence,” a condition to which, Muecke suggests, the Alazon is most vulnerable: “The Alazon in Theophrastus is only a boaster. But it is notorious that such people tend to deceive themselves more than those to whom they boast and come to believe their own inventions” (37). To the extent that the Alazon is taken in by his own symptomatology, he can be positioned as the victim of his own dissemblance. The Eiron, on the other hand, is conscious of his deceptions and wears his masks knowingly.

We can deploy these moral characters, with their alternative modes of dissemblance, in our discussion of irony’s place in Freud’s theory of the mind. Freud invites his readers to realise the extent of their self-ignorance: “What is in your mind” he tells us, “does not coincide with what you are conscious of” (“A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis” 143). He describes man in his natural element as one whose concealments, distortions, and disguises are not wilful strategies but blind behaviours. Indeed, the sites of Freud’s enquiries are precisely those behaviours such as jokes, dreams, and parapraxes that confirm this. I suggest then, that the Alazon—the naïve self-deceiver who falls prey to his own dissemblance—bears a constitutional resemblance to Freud’s archetypal patient: the 19th-century hysteric.

Prior to the experience of psychoanalysis, Freud’s patient, whilst no doubt confused and distressed by her symptoms, may nonetheless present herself *wholeheartedly*. Like the Alazon, she may consciously boast a faith in her own appearance (or a belief in her own sincerity) which the work of analysis will commit to undoing. This undoing does not reflect a dispositional cruelty on the part of the analyst, for if ignorance were truly bliss we might expect to see greater aversion to lying on the couch.⁵ Rather, it is precisely because

⁵ For an illuminating exploration of the pun “lying on the couch,” see John Forrester’s book entitled *Truth Games: Lies, Money and Psychoanalysis*.

psychoanalysis is expecting (and, arguably, accepting of) the many modes of human deception that it can unsanctimoniously speak of truthfulness. Freud states that “psycho-analytic treatment is founded on truthfulness”, and he attributes “a great part of its educative effect and its ethical value” to this fact (“Observations On Transference Love” 164).

We can situate Freud’s drive to enlighten the naïve self-deceiver within the framework of the psychoanalytic attack on human narcissism. When Freud insists that the ego “is not even master in its own house,” he is challenging the wholehearted Alazon and exposing his sincerity as illusional (“Introductory Lectures” 285). Freud places dissemblance—the bedrock of the ironic disposition—at the very centre of his theory of the mind, and in so doing, delivers an significant blow to the state of Alazoneia. But the question remains: what comes after Freud’s defeat of the Alazon; what persists in the wake of wholeheartedness? Does irony inevitably reign once psychoanalysis has made impossible a belief in one’s sincerity, and if so what are the consequences for the transformation of subjectivity?

The Conditions for Authenticity

I suggested at the beginning of this paper that the theatrical self-deceit of the 19th-century hysteric no longer prevails as the predominant sign of (psychological) deception in contemporary culture. This must, in part, be attributable to the “victory” of the Freudian doctrine. We are all now poised to identify and analyse, for example, the fateful slips of our tongues which reveal the distance and disconnect between conscious intention and unconscious motivation. Indeed, this particular parapraxis, which bears Freud’s name and is so assimilated into popular consciousness and public discourse, illustrates well the hypothesis that a Freudian culture leaves little room for the naïf. But we should remember with Phillip Rieff that “history changes the expression of neuroses even if it

does not change the underlying mechanisms" (339). I am suggesting here that although a Freudian cultural enlightenment forces us to confront the ontological fact of our dissembling unconscious, it cannot secure its removal. Rather, following Nietzsche's axiom (as Freud was perhaps disposed to do⁶) that "which ever way the victory inclines, it also implies a defeat" (131), our heightened awareness of such primary dissemblance only opens the door to alternative modes of adaptation such as suspicion, self-scrutiny, and ultimately, irony itself.

Positing dissemblance as a primary process activity accords with accounts of (late) modern culture characterized by an increasing emphasis on psychological authenticity.⁷ Detecting the authenticity of the other and making credible the presentation of an authentic self become more urgent once clean distinctions between truth and fiction falter. In other words, we can say that it is precisely when the possibility of credibility is under suspicion that we might expect to discern an unparalleled fervour for asserting it.

Lionel Trilling charts the rise and fall of sincerity and its historical usurpation by the term authenticity. This is an exegesis that he undertakes in order to consider the strength of the modern preoccupation with the ideal of authenticity and its embroilment in a contemporary culture marked by the inauthenticity of experience and selfhood. Sincerity for Trilling expresses a singleness and simplicity of self; the Alazon, believing of his deceptions, is perhaps archetypally 'sincere.'

⁶ It is not difficult to identify Freud's own appreciation of the Nietzschean insight: Schafer observes that when Freud referred to the saying that every advance is only half as great as [if] it appears to be at first, he was ... expressing an ironic vision of the analytic process (53).

⁷ The notion of a wholehearted engagement of character strikes a discord with the nomenclature of modern experience, which is discursively reflected in theories of social alienation; manifestations of "disintegrated consciousness"; the decentring of the subject; and a preoccupation with "masks" and "roles."

Authenticity, on the other hand, is conceived of as expressing “a more strenuous moral experience than sincerity, a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man’s place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life” (11).

Trilling identifies, in the guise of the analyst, that the cultural rise of sincerity is symptomatic of the increased anxiety about insincerity: who would claim to be sincere if the possibility of insincerity was not present? As we saw of the boasting Alazon, “such people tend to deceive themselves...and come to believe their own intentions” (Muecke 37). In Trilling’s analysis then, authenticity represents an attempt to consciously and masterfully incorporate the ambivalence to which the so-called sincere man was blind. Trilling’s analysis is exemplary in its illumination of what our literary and cultural practices look like when moral life is in the process of revising itself. However, we should note that the devaluation of sincerity that Trilling tracks is not rung-in by a singular or indeed a series of historical events; rather, there is an internal relation—a sort of prolepsis—that foreshadows the transformation. There is an important way in which his terminological shifts (sincerity to authenticity; authenticity to inauthenticity) can be made sense of without recourse to the external (cultural) conditions. The possibility of insincerity is inherent in the prosperity and prominence of sincerity itself, and, similarly, it is precisely the conscious and masterful attitude to authenticity that alerts us to the prospect of inauthenticity.

The paradox of authenticity that Trilling describes is both prefigured and exacerbated by Freud’s psychoanalytic project. In avowing dissemblance as *authentic* to the human psyche, Freud’s dialectic of honesty and deception articulates in structural terms what Trilling comes to evaluate in historical and cultural terms.

Two Psychoanalytic Readings of Irony

Having suggested that one implication of Freud's theory of the mind is that dissemblance is permitted an authentic status, I now want to think about some of the ways that irony might be dealt with in psychoanalytic literature before moving, finally and briefly, to some thoughts on how irony might converge with psychoanalytic truthfulness.

Freud was himself mindful of the difficulties that a dissembling unconscious might pose for the analyst. On the apparent revelation that our dreams withhold the truth, he anticipates his practitioners' despair: "'What!', they will exclaim, 'the unconscious, the real centre of our mental life, the part of us that is so much nearer the divine than our poor consciousness—it too can lie! Then how can we still build on the interpretations of analysis and the accuracy of our findings?'" ("The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" 165). But Freud reassures his imaginary interlocutors that the recognition of these lying dreams does not constitute any "shattering novelty" (165). He is reminding the reader that unconscious dissemblance is quite simply a psychoanalytic fact, and the analyst cannot take at face value his (ostensibly) most candid sources. Following from this, we should expect the analyst to have an appreciation for irony which is not limited to the conscious act. However, we might also anticipate, for reasons tied to the analyst's therapeutic orientation, an appreciation for unconscious irony to come into conflict with a stringent reality principle.

In his article "The Psychoanalytic Vision of Reality," Roy Schafer delineates four "visions of reality": the comic, the romantic, the tragic, and the ironic. Schafer is clear that from the therapeutic perspective, "increasing the reliability of the patient's reality-testing occupies a central position among the aims of psychoanalysis" (279). But he is more concerned to ask what the framing of reality looks like when

psychoanalysis is situated as “a special way of knowing about human existence and history” (280). Reality-testing is thus extended beyond the immediacy of a patient’s experience and the accuracy of her perception, to encompass a broader, metapsychological perspective. It is Schafer’s contention that the complex vision of reality inherent in psychoanalysis includes all four mythic modes. However, it is the tragic and ironic visions that are the *most* suited to the Freudian outlook:

The tragic vision, stressing deep involvement, inescapable and costly conflict, terror, demonic forces, waste and uncertainty, and the ironic vision, stressing detached alertness to ambiguity and paradox and the arbitrariness of absolutes, are related to the investigative, contemplative and evaluative aspects of the analytic process. (295)

Schafer goes on to identify the therapeutic possibilities of irony in the analytic work. He argues that the ironic perspective “results in the patient coming to see himself as being less in certain essential respects than he thought he was—less, that is, than his unconscious ideas of omnipotence and omniscience imply he is” (294).

A similar position is taken by Martin Stein, who, in his consideration of the inherent role of irony in analytic practice, describes the analytic situation as “fundamentally ironic, based as it is on the principle that conflict is inevitable in the human psyche as it is in life itself” (35). He goes on to state that the “mature form” of irony is ultimately a “means of dealing with the sadness inherent in the tragic aspects of life,” and proposes that once an individual recognizes that his internal conflict cannot be resolved in an absolute sense, an ironic stance towards his problems may enable him to transcend them (56). Irony is thus presented as a mode of adaptation, an appropriate response to the recognition that

life's fundamental ambivalences are irresolvable. For Stein, the patient would display an enhanced capacity for reality-testing if, when perceiving—or being confronted by—such ambivalences, she could adopt an ironic detachment from them. Importantly however, irony for Stein is not an all-pervasive quality; he states that “it is fortunate that most of what people do in their daily lives could not be carried out in a spirit of irony” (55). Irony is thus located as a voluntary and occasional mode which poses a threat against the demands of the everyday. Stein is certainly not alone in reading irony within the broader terms of modern cynicism. Indeed, his concern that the detachment implied by irony—the heightened awareness of one's self-representation—would lead to a form of paralysis is of particular concern to the psychoanalyst. Thus, Stein's disinclination to identify a more thoroughgoing operation of irony might be attributable to his commitment as an analyst to strengthening the patient's ego-system; he encourages the selective use of irony as a conscious technique for living.

Stein's position helps to clarify the investigative position of this paper: Does the analyst prescribe irony as a strategy for the individual (as a way of thinking about unconscious motivation), or does he go further and describe it as a mechanism of the unconscious? Or, in Shafer's terms, does irony enhance pragmatic reality-testing for the subject, or does it also frame the conditions for that reality-testing? This question of emphasis—irony as conscious application, or irony as unconscious mechanism—proves formative to the broad debate of cultural authenticity as well as to our understanding of Freud's project. To hold out the possibility of a modern day ironist who does not recognize the site of irony in the unconscious is to suggest that though the modes of self-deception are no longer theatrical or naïve (as with the *Alazon* or the hysteric), they are nonetheless structurally valent.

The psychoanalyst's cautionary regard for irony, on the grounds that it may engender a withdrawal of commitment from the everyday world, reflects an equivalent and long-established motif in socio-cultural discourse, namely that irony is both a cultural and individual symptom of 'modern inwardness'. Sociocultural critiques of the inward turn stress that the social has been usurped by the psychological, whether expressed in terms of the crisis of authenticity, the prevalence of narcissism, the decline of public experience, the retreat of authority, or the apotheosis of individualism. As Trilling's analysis alerts us, the shifts in our moral terminology from sincerity to authenticity and inauthenticity reflect a deepening of the inward turn that Freudianism is undoubtedly implicated in. And when this inward turn is read in culturally pessimistic terms, we are led to conclude that the Freudian defeat of the Alazon has ushered in a moral figure whose ironic disposition masks a crippling self-consciousness or an anxious introspection. There is, therefore, always a paradox at play in defining irony: on the one hand, as Schafer's presentation of the ironic vision conveys, irony requires a freedom *from* the self ("the patient coming to see himself as being less in certain essential respects than he thought he was" (294)); on the other hand, as implied by the thought that irony masks a crippling self-consciousness, irony suggests a servitude to selfhood.

Conclusion

We recall that Freud remarked of his own approach that the ethical value of psychoanalysis stems from the fact that it is founded on truthfulness. Rieff tells us that "by working through the layers of falsehood and fantasy to a superior accommodation to reality" (315), Freud's emphasis on "verbal honesty" and "ruthless talk" can be opposed to (and is preferable to) "psychological sincerity" (320). Extrapolating from this point, our concluding question asks how do

unconscious dissemblance and Freud's ethic of honesty converge?

At face value, truthfulness and authenticity make a self-evident pairing. But we have seen that the psychoanalytic process of demystifying hysteria (Freud's defeat of the Alazon) creates the possibility for a new complicity between truthfulness and inauthenticity. Thus, it becomes necessary to refine our idea of truthfulness to move beyond merely lifting the veil of 'false' appearance (false consciousness), to an understanding of the ineluctable process by which such appearances are produced. More than as a conscious mode of adaptation, we have seen how the figure of irony and ironic dissemblance are at work in the operations of the unconscious.

We can return to our original example to illustrate this point. It was noted that Frau Cäcilie M.'s conscious expression ("it was like a slap in the face") inscribes a representational difference (the *as if* quality) which already existed in the primary process activity of the unconscious. Freud's analytic work, rather than revealing in the patient's unconscious the literal occasion of a slap, or peeling back the layers of dissemblance to expose the ground of primordial truth, alerts us to the ironic processes through which the slap was symbolically constructed as a somatic symptom. We can conclude then, that if the patient acquires a 'truth' through psychoanalysis, it is less a substantive truth about her self, than a truth about how her self is dissembled into existence. ●

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