

## **Preliminary reflections on psychoanalysis and narratology**

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### **Abstract**

The author highlights analogies and differences between psychoanalysis and narratology. Particular attention is given to the various ways of understanding interpretation and the concept of character. The complexity of the analytic situation is highlighted, wherein two texts and two readers act on living material in perennial rewriting and transformation

**Key Words:** psychoanalysis, narratology, rewriting, transformation.

The analytical situation is characterized by a peculiar feature: it involves a variable of relevant importance in the form of the analyst's mind. One cannot therefore talk about either the patient or the method without bearing in mind the ever-present influence of the patient-analyst as a couple acting in the psychoanalytic setting. So, in order to approach the psychoanalytic experience scientifically, what is needed is not empirical or objective tools, but an understanding of the peculiarity of the analytic experience.

Without going into details here of the differences between various psychoanalytical models, one point they all share is that the meeting with the analyst and his mind transforms "unthinkable contents" but which express themselves as symptoms or suffering, or as forms of behaviour, into emotions and thoughts that can be described, which eliminates or at least alleviates the symptoms. Narratology is quite a different science from psychoanalysis but, in my opinion it can offer it, by analogy, useful tools for reflection. Narratology is based on the interaction between text and reader (in its early stages it focused on how the text functioned, as such but it) and now it admits a wide range of positions, from the most deconstructivist, which give highest importance to the reader's "power", to attitudes attributing more rights to the text itself, without detracting from the importance of the reader's inevitable subjective approaches in his reading strategies (Eco 1979,1990).

The psychoanalytical situation is much more complicated because it involves two texts and two readers, acting on living material that is constantly being, as it were, rewritten and transformed, but we can nevertheless borrow from narratological studies.

Psychoanalysis is a method for treating psychic suffering, which aims - when things go right - to complete the metabolisation of undigested bits of unsatisfactory or traumatic relational experiences by introjecting the method, to treat proto-emotions and proto-thoughts. Psychic suffering can thus be seen as resulting from an excess of small or large-scale traumatic situations that have generated more sensory or

proto-emotional stimuli than the person involved can “digest”. In severe cases, the distress comes from an inadequacy of the person’s apparatus for thinking the thoughts, which lags behind in its task of continuously reworking things<sup>1</sup>.

In even more severe cases, the suffering is caused by the apparatus not being able to form emotional pictograms (the alpha function), what Bion calls images of perceptive experiences (Bion 1962, 1963, 1965).

Psychoanalysis is not a form of narratology, therefore, but a treatment method involving the recognition and transformation of emotions.

### **What are the analyst’s tools ?**

All the tools come from the investigational fields of semiology, particularly narratology. Whatever model the analyst uses, the worlds he opens up are peopled by the cast of the “family romance”, with its internal objects, and by the current relationship between the analyst and the patient, and the personages narrating the tale.

The narrative weaving continues without cease during analysis and again - depending on the model used - the interpretations that prevail may be “strong” and with a clear-cut division, or open and unsaturated; the latter are polyvalent and permit the narrative development of the theme pushing out from the patient: constructions or reconstructions of childhood scenes, of fantasies, relational or involving the field of two people taking life in the analytical setting.

Even more significant is how all the things not even thought about yet, or those that cannot be thought about through projective identification - the exchange and acceptance of proto-emotions - start to push out, trying to find a way to present themselves as images; this is the path leading to their narration. Thus the “unthinkable” becomes a shared tale, through a series of emotional steps that end up giving a name to things the patient could not represent before.

Giving a name to things gradually makes the patient the narrator of the conscious mind - or dreaming awake or asleep - which serves the same purpose as analytical introjection. At some stage the shared narration is replaced by the active, stable function of an internal narrator, able to attach names, meanings and histories to what were previously just sensory-emotive “clumps”. These specific tasks of the internal narrator share many of the features that have been investigated and classified by narratology in recent years, starting from Umberto Eco’s basic text, *Lector in fabula*, which lays the groundwork for the semiology of any narrative work, in any context, in the reader/text interface - in our case the analyst/patient and/or thought/thinker.

### **On interpretation**

Psychoanalytical interpretation must inevitably be considered under the broad heading of “interpretation” in general, despite its highly specific features. The

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<sup>1</sup> By this apparatus we mean a person’s ability to handle thoughts, organize and mix them up, developing new implications and Gestalt, bringing them into focus, discarding or assembling them, like a child playing with building blocks.

question of “interpretation” was anyway not invented by the literary scholars of the last century, and in the West it is a product of the centuries-old debate on the Scriptures (Collini, 1995).

But considering just recent developments, the focus in narratology is on the nature of the meaning and the possibilities and limits of interpretation (Eco 1990), along the gradient I depicted earlier, depending on the reader’s role in producing meaning, right up to the theory of deconstructionism (Culler 1982; Derrida 1977; de Man 1983, 1986; Miller, 1980). This authorizes the reader to produce increasing amounts of meaning, to the point of uncontrolled, unlimited readings.

In this fanning out of unlimited rays Eco’s position (1990) on the limit of possible interpretations is fundamental; he points out that some readings are “overinterpretations”, and poses the question of the relations between the “rights of the text and the rights of their interpreters”. Eco also notes that saying that a text has virtually no limits does not mean that any interpretation should be allowed, and that between the author’s and the interpreter’s intentions lies the text’s intentions, which must be sought.

Some criteria have been indicated for tracing the text’s intentions:

- a) criterion of coherence (identifying the topic that enables one to establish the pertinent links);
- b) criterion of economy (not showing too much surprise following details that are not part of the system).

Interpretation in psychoanalysis has to aim at co-determining a continually shifting text, taking account of the interpreter’s attitude. Things were not always seen in this light. The structural approach (Arlow 1985) imagines the interpreter-analyst is in a neutral position, and has to bring to light an existing text that has been lost. The approach oriented more towards the patient’s inner world also leads us to believe that a neutral reading of that inner reality is in fact possible, with its internal objects and fantasies (Segal 1985). We have to await field theory to achieve co-construction and co-determination of what takes life in analysis. Baranger already saw the text as a function of the interaction between the analyst and the patient, and the emotive field they create within the analytical setting. In this view, the field (Baranger 1961-62, 1964, 1969; Ferro 1992, 1994) becomes the matrix of possible stories.

There is a literary equivalent to this in the debate that pitted Rorty (1989) with his *reader-oriented*, or pragmatic interpretation, against Umberto Eco (1990). Putting the question very briefly, Rorty maintained that any reading of a literary text was perfectly legitimate, because the text itself is a tracing that has to be fleshed out and brought alive, by any means. Eco countered this, saying that what mattered was not so much the *intentio lectoris*, as Rorty argued, but the *intentio operis*: the structure of a text contains certain elements that allow one reading but not another. The relational perspective in psychoanalysis places the work of decodification somewhere mid-way between Rorty and Eco’s positions. The underlying position is *reader-oriented*, in that any key can be used legitimately.

The emotive and relational context, however, makes Eco's approach more productive, as long as the guidelines selected for the reading are found in the text and in the context of the sessions, and not in the analyst's own preferred analytical categories.

The film by Alain Resnais *Smoking/No smoking* is a good example of this dual viewpoint; its plot relies on a series of narrative crossroads that take us forward to the next development, following a network of if/then choices: if personage A had done X, then this would have happened; if he had done Y then the outcome would have been different. At each branching of the ways we have a fresh doubling of the possibilities, following an amusing series of patterns looking ahead to the future and back at the past.

There is a clear difference between how the "possible worlds" of literary and psychoanalytical narration are managed. The opening gambit is vital to both, but in literature the possible worlds are all deviations that can be brought to life or dropped later in the text, as the plot has already been written, oriented, structured and concluded. These worlds, in other words, are "possible", only for the reader, immersed in a textual itinerary that creates a mysterious labyrinth, open as long as the reader has only partial knowledge. It is just a question of time, and as the textual voyage moves on, the possibilities and potential openings gradually close up.

In psychoanalytical narration, on the other hand, there is a real search for possible worlds, as the text is in the making; it is built up by two authors on the basis of a stimulating but delicate dynamic creative process, rich and precarious at the same time, but above all untrammelled by the need to reach a happy or any other precise ending. These are really "possible" worlds, open to future narrative (as the tale proceeds), to a pragmatic present (as the two subjects interact in the session) and to a personal past that has to be brought to the surface. Possible worlds in literature have to take account of pertinence, coherence, and legitimacy; psychoanalytical ones have no such bonds. Thus the practice of "aberrant decodification", meaning an approach to a text aimed at upturning or at any rate changing its author's intentions, is not common in literature, and is accepted only with great caution. In psychoanalysis, however, it is a routine tool used to make the patient's text say things the patient himself would never had said. Psychoanalytical narration is "exploited" with none of the philological, historical, esthetic and hermeneutic respect demanded by a literary text. There is another point I must make most strongly: in psychoanalysis there is a necessary asymmetry between the analyst's responsibility for treatment and the fact that he has to guarantee that the transformations achieved in the session move, to use Bion's terms, from beta to alpha, not just to confirm the analyst's own theories, but to enable the patient to think about things which had been unthinkable before. In the session the analyst has a heavy ethical responsibility: he is treating a person who is suffering, and the pathways of knowledge are tools for change in the direction of therapy.

## On characters

The concept of the character deserves further reflexion. How the character is considered in the “story-telling”, his status and function, is a specific problem. In narratology there is a traditional approach known as “psychologist’s criticism”, which studies the character and actions of literary personages as if they were real people one might meet in everyday life outside the novel. A more recent tendency, spanning from the Russian formalists to the various structural currents, makes an “objective” study of the literary text as an independent entity, and assigns value to the personage in the light of his position within the textual structure, and the role played in the plot.

A third approach lays the accent on the relation between the text, as the bearer of the author’s communicative intentions, and the reader, who is required to cooperate actively, doing much more than simply receiving and decoding the messages. The character acquires body and meaning in this encounter, renewing itself every time, drawing on what the text provides and the reader’s constructive contribution.

Taking a closer look at this last approach, I am reminded of a brilliant literary example, in Italo Calvino’s novel *Se una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore* (*If on a winter’s night a traveler*), where the narrative itself simulates the shifts in relations between text and reader, which makes every reading an authentic, fresh adventure. This leads me to reflect on the status of the characters brought to the surface in analysis, in the dialogue between the patient and analyst, seen from different theoretical positions. Following suggestions of a certain parallelism between the three narratological models mentioned earlier, but fully aware of the risk of arbitrary simplification, I have drafted a possible tri-partition for psychoanalytical models.

In the *Freudian structural model* (based on the second topic), the characters mentioned in the session mainly correspond to historical figures in the patient’s outer world, with whom he has experienced conflict and who have therefore become representatives of the conflict in his mind. As such they are repropounded in the transference, enabling the analyst to intervene in the patient’s inner drama. Reference to the *hic et nunc*, when caught by the analyst, serves mainly to clarify the nature of the inner conflict and the various roles of the patient’s id, ego and superego.

In the traditional *Kleinian model* there is a continuous, privileged reference to unconscious body fantasy, the true hero of analytical events, to which everything the patient says refers. Characters in the session correspond to the patient’s internal objects, animated and organized by unconscious fantasy propelled by primitive impulses. In the transference these internal objects are displaced and projected onto the analyst who has to try and recognise them and describe their specific attributes to the patient, so as to facilitate their reintroduction. The main aim of interpretation is to trace back from the personages manifested and their events to the patient’s original unconscious fantasies. Worth particular attention, in my opinion, is the *field model*, according to which the characters in analysis can be considered as aggregates of heterogeneous elements from the patient and analyst; they are related to the couple’s

mental functioning (Bezoari-Ferro, 1990). The field model takes full account of the meanings brought to light in the other two models, but lays more stress on the personage's role in expressing, or representing, things that come to light in the analytical experience and cannot yet be thought of in precise terms (either dynamic or historic), but are present as phenomena "in the room", related to the emotional atmosphere of the session.

Normally, though not always, introduced by the patient, and subsequently developed and transformed with the analyst's narrative contribution, the character becomes like a "hologram", a three-dimensional image that is brought to life in the inter-subject space and whose changes in shape, colour and movement express what is happening on the plane of deep emotional exchange between the patient and analyst.

This viewpoint presumes a natural need for communication and affective contact that pushes the two minds to try and tell each other about their encounter, compatibly with each one's anxieties and defenses. The patient acts as the "better colleague" in this monitoring act, sending signals that the analyst must catch and recognise, before interpreting them - if that turns out to be necessary. This is especially true when we sense that they come from vertices we cannot see, and might cast precious light on the inevitable blind areas in our vision of the field.

I find this model particularly useful for dealing with problems I encounter when working with the "psychotic parts" of a personality, where it is necessary to weave a fabric of shared "alphabetization" of the emotional experience, before any further work of interpretation in the classic sense.

The status of the character, as a "functional aggregate", is similar to that of a couple's dream production; it corresponds to a first level of symbolization shared on the analytical field, a transitional dimension that leaves unanswered the question of what comes from who in the couple. The specific transformative value is clear in clinical work when these figures in the dialogue emerge from a period of emotional turbulence, or an impasse; they form an unsaturated core of significance around which the patient and analyst can jointly compose a new text/story, collecting up all the emotional elements that were fragmented and dispersed and could not be otherwise contained or communicated.

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