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# The relationship between literature and psychoanalysis: reflections on object relations theory, researcher's subjectivity, and transference in psychoanalytic literary criticism

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## ABSTRACT

From its beginning, psychoanalysis has taken an interest in literature – as a field to study and seek inspiration. How can literature and psychoanalysis enrich and illuminate each other? This text discusses methods and theory in psychoanalytic literary criticism. Contributions from object relations theory, the significance of the researcher's subjectivity, and issues of transference are emphasized. The difference between the literary and the clinical on the one hand and the challenge of reductionism on the other are imminent concerns, and as such are elaborated. Abundant access to theory and methods, awareness of the researcher's subjective involvement in the research process, and a determination to ensure articulation of meaning as it springs from the texts are emphasized as ways to counteract reductionism. Examples from psychoanalytic literary criticism and insights of authors on the underpinnings of their creative writing illustrate how literature and psychoanalysis meet in interest for the unconscious as it is embedded in language; how language can capture us in an emotional presence, even when words seem lost or absent.

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## Words that 'wash up on land, on heartland perhaps'

In 1906, Freud, by his colleague Jung, was made aware of an at that time unknown short novel by German author Wilhelm Jensen. Freud's (1907) analysis of *Gradiva* (Jensen, 1903/1918) is considered the first work where literature is studied more systematically from a psychoanalytic perspective (Kaplan & Kloss, 1973), but even earlier, in his letter to Wilhelm Fliess in 1897, Freud wrote about Hamlet and Oedipus Rex. Freud often turned to literature to seek inspiration and knowledge. It is said that he refers to literature and other art in 22 of his works (Segal, 1991, as cited in Kristiansen, 2013). In his analysis of *Gradiva*, he emphasizes how much he admires and values the intuitive knowledge one can gain through reading poetry:

But creative writers are valuable allies, and their evidence is to be prized highly, for they are apt to know a whole host of things between heaven and earth of which our philosophy has not yet let us dream. In their knowledge of the mind, they are far in advance of us everyday people, for they draw upon sources which we have not yet opened to science. (Freud, 1907, p. 8)

Freud was also interested in the dynamic origin of artistic endeavours. In *Creative Writers and Daydreaming* (1908), he compares the writer with the playful child playing with his words:

The writer softens the character of his egoistic daydreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes us by the purely formal – that is, aesthetic – yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies. (p. 153)

Fifty years and two world wars after this publication, the Romanian poet and Holocaust survivor Paul Celan gives his speech on the occasion of receiving the Literature Prize of the city of Bremen:

A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue, can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the – not always greatly hopeful – belief that somewhere and sometime it could wash up on land, on heartland perhaps. Poems in this sense too are underway: they are making toward something.

Toward what? Toward something standing open, occupiable, perhaps toward an addressable Thou, toward an addressable reality. (Celan, 1958/2001, p. 396)

The title of this article – *The relationship between literature and psychoanalysis* – alludes to the mutuality and dialogical aspects of our subject: how can psychoanalysis

and literature enrich and illuminate each other? To get closer to the complexities of this big question, I will take a closer look at the different methods used and how this interdisciplinary field has developed. Contributions from object relations theory, the significance of the researcher's subjectivity, and issues of transference are elaborated. Extracts of a variety of close readings are presented to illustrate how different theoretical approaches produce different interpretations and how diverse the scope of psychoanalytic literary criticism (PLC) is. The difference between the literary and the clinical on the one hand and the challenge of reductionism on the other are imminent concerns, and as such are elaborated. Along the way, we will look at opportunities the researcher has to counteract reductionism.

From a broad perspective, it would be relevant to discuss the epistemological position of psychoanalysis, including its relation to hermeneutics. A satisfactory discussion of these questions is, however, beyond the scope of this article (see e.g., Vetlesen & Stänicke, 1999). The reflections will focus on psychoanalysis as a method for studying literature and how the language of poetry can enrich theoretical understanding. It should also be acknowledged that it is not uncommon for Freud's texts to be close read by literary scholars (e.g., Bloom, 1995; Felman in Sun et al., 2007), though an elaboration of this is beyond the scope of this article.

### The unconscious as it is embedded in language

The Austrian author and Nobel laureate Elfriede Jelinek has said about her writing:

I want to stir around in the untroubled agreement on which our society rests. Just stir a little around in all that's homely and release what is kept below the surface and which remains silent, underground. (Korsström, 1994, my translation)

For Jelinek, writing is an attempt to bring out what is kept underground. In doing so, she attempts to shake us out of what usually protects us from really seeing, out of our social and societal structures. Engelstad (Engelstad & Øverland, 2012) emphasizes that the psychoanalyst and literary researcher meet in a common interest for such hidden and underlying messages, arguing that literature and psychoanalysis are simultaneous projects which in their respective languages provide insight into what is essentially human. Engelstad states that PLC's focus is on psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic pursuit, and especially on how meaning is constructed or lost in language:

This can be fantasies, dreams, slips of the tongue, and metaphors. It can consist of what's hidden in the rhythm of words and timbre; in their flatness and emptiness; in hidden and converted signs and gestures. All this is common ground for the psychoanalyst and the literary researcher. (p. 9, my translation)

Wright (1999) expands Engelstad's reflections when she describes how the underlying message as it is expressed in language, or more specifically in the discrepancy between manifest and latent content, unifies not only psychoanalysis and literary research, but all efforts to discover something more than the obvious or highly undeniable.

In seeing that meaning was at once always too much and never enough, both supplementary and lacking, deconstruction batted on Freud's repeated linguistic discovery throughout his work, namely that desire cannot name itself without substitution. (p. 13)

Within Freud's theory of the unconscious<sup>1</sup> lies the very premise of any interpretation that moves beyond the obvious, says Wright, and that even deconstruction (e.g., Derrida, 2002), though often presenting itself as independent of psychoanalytic theory, rests on the assumption that there is a latent meaning behind the manifest.

Embedded in the idea of the unconscious lies an assumption about the function of language: In its essence, language hides, obscures or denies meaning as often as it serves to express true feelings and thoughts. Historically, psychoanalysis also consists of a linguistic discourse, more specifically of the patient's spoken and unspoken word. Language is the link between the experience and what the other perceives of this experience. Both psychoanalysts and literary scholars use language as their paths to insight, as their way of finding subtexts within the text. The hidden or underlying is not something that lies outside language; rather, the unconscious is embedded in the text. Freud was a true empiricist, as he emphasized that every interpretation both begins and ends in observation (Gullestad & Killingmo, 2020). What is manifest is what we must go through and dialogue with when we want to explore latent meanings.

### Literature as directed towards 'an addressable thou, an addressable reality'

Another basic idea in psychoanalytic thinking is that language is always directed to another, inner or outer, consciously or unconsciously. Affects and experiences might be translated into something else through words, but an underlying motive is to reach out and communicate.

Literature can also be viewed in this way; as a communicative act with the inner other in mind (Wright, 1999).

In the novel *So You Don't Get Lost in the Neighborhood*, another Nobel laureate, Patrick Modiano (2015), writes about an aging author living alone who has deliberately cut himself off from close relationships. Gradually, Modiano reveals his protagonist Daragne's past as an abandoned and emotionally deprived little boy. Daragne is fundamentally ambivalent to all potential encounters with other people but still longs for a woman who for a brief period during his childhood served as a maternal substitute. Here are the protagonist's thoughts about the underpinnings of his writing:

He had written this book only in the hope that she might get in touch with him. Writing a book, for him, was also a way of beaming a searchlight or sending out coded signals to certain people with whom he had lost touch. It was enough to scatter their names at random through the pages and wait until they finally produced news of themselves. (p. 72)

The metaphors 'beaming a searchlight' and 'sending out coded signals to certain people' are forceful depictions of how literature can be understood as a communicative act. Of course, creative writing and literature cannot be reduced to such coded signals to significant others from the past; it is at once and always, both aesthetically and ethically, much more, but it can also be just that: words that reach out, an act of language that hopes for an answer or that wants to tell and at the same time escapes the answer from the other. Perhaps it is the ambivalence and commuting between these two poles that makes writing such a captivating and almost addictive exercise, as many authors describe it?

Felman (Felman & Laub, 1992) expands the idea of literature as a communicative act in her work on texts written in the aftermath of World War II. In her essay on Camus' *The Plague* (1947/1991) she elaborates on the novel's underpinnings as an allegory for the Holocaust. Her emphasis is on the protagonist and how he is captured within the traumatic experience as both participant and healer, and how he is transformed through the act of bearing witness. Felman reflects on the trauma of survival as well as on the historical and clinical dimensions of testimony. Testimonial literature (as it refers to the new area of literature after the wars) can be understood as directed towards creating an address for experiences that were so traumatic that they could not be experienced in the first place. Felman elaborates on Celan's (1958/2001) Bremen speech, where he (as you might remember from the introduction in this text) stated that poems as a 'manifestation of language and

thus essentially dialogue' can be seen as directed towards 'an addressable Thou, an addressable reality' or in Felman's (1992) words:

As an event directed towards the recreation of a "thou", poetry becomes, precisely, the event of creating an address for the specificity of a historical experience which annihilated any possibility of address. (p. 38)

### Reductionism as always imminent

One of the main issues that have been discussed as interdisciplinary research between psychoanalysis and literature developed is what should guide the reading of a text: psychoanalysis or literary science. Or to put the question another way: do the aesthetic and the clinical speak different languages, or can poetry speak for both? (Wright, 1999). Psychoanalytic contributions to poetry have by some literary researchers been accused of being reductionist (e.g., Johnston 1989, as cited in Kittang, 1990). Kittang (1990) describes the position of psychoanalytic literary interpretation in Norway and sees a historic tendency for literary scholars to infer sceptical simplifications of psychoanalysis' contribution. One reason for this scepticism, he says, has been that the interpretive paradigm of psychoanalysis made it appear authoritarian in the sense that it claimed to know something about literature that the writers themselves did not. Kittang describes this as a problem not limited to psychoanalytic interpretations, but as a challenge for all hermeneutic approaches to the esthetical:

Our need for interpretation, for making sense out of what appears as enigmatic or meaningless, can only be satisfied by a reduction of what makes literature a literary art. In other words, it is perhaps not psychoanalysis that is intrinsically reductionist, but any interpretive or hermeneutic approach to art, psychoanalysis included. (p. 107)

I might also add that the problem of reductionism is not limited to hermeneutics. Kerr (2020) for example, has identified 'conceptual and theoretical frameworks that dominate empirical findings' as one of five common weaknesses in her paper about validity and coherence in qualitative research within the social sciences.

As Gadamer (1960/1998) and other philosophers of hermeneutics have taught us,<sup>2</sup> the proneness to find what one already knows will always be a challenge. Gadamer even suggested using hyphens in the word prejudice because all knowledge is woven into and dependent upon a pre-understanding. To understand, one has to have some sort of foundation one relies on; none of us are blank sheets. It is also worth mentioning that saying that something is reductive is already an

interpretation. As Ogden (2016) elaborates in his analysis of therapeutic discourses, therapist and patient attempt to access those aspects of the patient's life he or she has not yet been able to experience. As such, what seems to be reductive could sometimes be, for example, a conclusion of a kind of working through during which the interpreter has experienced something precisely unknown.<sup>3</sup> For what does one hope to know at all if one does not dare to seek understanding based on what is fundamentally both known and unknown?

### Abundant access to methods and theory

Literary historian Aarseth (1979) sees a growing interest in psychoanalytic theory in literary research in the period after World War II. He attributes this mainly to two factors. First, post-war literary scholars have increasingly oriented themselves away from the historical biographical analysis of authorship,<sup>4</sup> which is largely based on a positivist research tradition, towards text analysis based on various hermeneutic principles. Second, psychoanalysis has gained a broader theoretical scope.

Felman's interpretation of the Henry James short novel *The Turn of the Screw* (1898/2011) has been described as a redefinition of what it meant to read literature psychoanalytically (Felman, 1978/2007 in Sun et al., 2007). Here Felman shifted the focus from author-oriented analysis to a dynamic model where the reader is shown to be an effect of the linguistic structures of the text. She reflects on how the text's strong impact on readers (including previous attempts to analyse it within PLC) can be linked to how it invites us into a particular relationship or mode of understanding: *The Turn of the Screw* has a way of luring us into interpretations: 'To demystify the governess [the novel's protagonist, my comment] is only possible on one condition: the condition of repeating the governess's very gesture' (p. 36). That is, sharing with her the illusion of 'having understood all' (p. 37).

Skura (1981) has done extensive work in showing how PLC methods can include the full range of clinical knowledge in terms of specific and targeted listening:

The single question that dominated early psychoanalytic inquiry was, "What infantile wishes do the material fulfill in the patient?" But analysts nowadays ask an awkward, but more appropriate question: "What is the patient, as who, saying to the analyst, as whom and from when—and why?" (p. 178)

As Killingmo (1990) also emphasizes, the various contributions from object relations theory<sup>5</sup> infer that the literary researcher, as well as the clinician, must expand their listening perspective. The researcher must pay

attention not only to hidden messages but also to the lack of meaning; for example, where there is nothing specific to hide away due to lack of strategic self-representation. An example of how this development in psychoanalytic theory has affected PLC can be found in the understanding of Hamlet's conflict. It can, as Freud (1897) did, be understood based on repressed impulses to destroy father in the competition for mother's love, but also as determined by Hamlet's submissive attachment to an idealized father (Kris, 1952/1977).

In Lacan's thinking (1985) 'the unconscious is structured like a language.' Language is the foundation for psychoanalysis as for anything at all.<sup>6</sup> Meanings can thus be sought in the text's structural intention, the way it has constructed itself, which cuts across the distinction of latent and manifest content (Wright, 1999). Gallop (1984) argues that a close reading which is supposed to be Lacanian needs to attend to those aspects of transference between reader and text that relate to the desire of the interpreter: the opposition between the duality of the sick and the healer, of someone who knows and someone who does not (Lacan, 1966; 1977, as cited in Gallop, 1984). 'Any reading that loses the literality of the text (it's dialectic) in favor of fascination with its hidden significations would not be Lacanian' (Gallop, 1984, p. 304).

An example of a close reading inspired by Lacan is found in Felman's readings, as already mentioned. Another example is Wright's (1999) analysis of Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher* (1983/1989). Here Wright asks the question: 'What happens when a writer takes a clinical case as her subject, thus producing a virtual clinical case?' (p. 154). She reflects on how the text's structure proclaims the dialectic that produces the protagonist's pathology: 'a rigid cultural ideal versus the stubborn materiality of life' (p. 155). According to Wright, this conflict is a central formal element in the text, all-embracing the speech and thoughts of its individual characters. She gives an example of how this manifests in Jelinek's language, when mother and/or the narrator (that seems ambiguous) at one point mentions the protagonist and her daughter Erika as a 'meadow flower' while in the next writes: 'Then upon seeing the lump of clay that shot out of her body, she [mother, my comment] promptly began to mold it relentlessly in order to keep it pure and fine' (Jelinek, 1983/1989, p. 23–24). Wright also focuses on the text's constant ironic comments when it comes to established conventions, and reflects on this formal element as an expression of the 'rejection of the

signifier of the Law' (p. 164). According to Wright, the overall goal of the text is, in Lacanian terms, to attack the symbolic order.

These extensions of psychoanalytic theory and methods as described above might be summed up in something that seems quite specific for a psychoanalytic approach to literature. In Skura's (1981) words:

What the analyst adds is the understanding that not only does communication have several aspects, but it is hard to separate plain, truthful communication from the transference, and that all aspects of an exchange might be influenced by unconscious processes which interact with conscious ones in unpredictable ways. (p. 178)

I would claim that this extension not only offers new interpretive possibilities for PLC but can also work to counteract reductionism. In support of this view, Tracy (2010) has created a conceptualization of common markers that aim to provide a common language for the evaluation of qualitative research in general. Here, she argues that abundant access to methods and theory is a key means to promote quality by increasing the probability that research findings are understood on their own terms and not used primarily to illustrate theory or fit with the methods one already is familiar with.

### **A language that demands presence and captures the absence**

I am tempted to split the issue of mutual illumination between psychoanalysis and literature in two: what is the value of literature for psychoanalysis, and what is the value of psychoanalysis for literature? As already described, our subject is too complex and entangled to fit such a strictly directed script, but for structural means it may still serve a purpose.

We saw that Freud (1907) emphasized how creative writers inhabit an intuitive knowledge of what is essentially human. Thus, the value of literature for psychoanalysis may lie precisely in the nature of its phenomenology. Literature provides language that grips and captures us in a psychological presence, as opposed to a theoretical presentation where it is easier to ward oneself off emotionally.<sup>7</sup> Some clinical phenomena are also more challenging to 'grasp' psychologically than others. Within object relations theory, for example, finding words for preverbal processes from the child's early development has been challenging (e.g., Ogden, 2016).

By telling about traumatic experiences more indirectly and in surprising ways, literature makes it easier to relate to such experiences in oneself and others. Caruth (2016) describes it as literature opening a window to

traumatic experiences, a window that usually remains closed. She argues that the temporality of trauma – an experience which cannot be grasped while it is going on but which continues to haunt the survivor in its aftermath – is an element that makes literature and other artistic channels both drawn towards and particularly suitable for conveying the complexity of such experiences. In Caruth's (2016) analysis of the script of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (Duras, 1960/1975), she shows, among other things, how Duras' work illuminates how telling can feel absolutely vital and like betraying the truth at the same time, or as Duras writes in her synopsis of the manuscript, 'Impossible de parler de Hiroshima. Tout ce qu'on peut faire c'est de parler de l'impossibilité de parler de Hiroshima' (Duras, 1975, p. 10).

In her close reading of *Lol Valerie Stein* (Duras, 1991), Kristiansen (2010) shows how Duras' novel can deepen our understanding of psychic pain. She elaborates on how the protagonist Lol handles a traumatic separation from her lover, how she moves from denial of what happened via staging the traumatic content through triangulation in the present and, eventually, shows an increased ability to symbolize her pain. Kristiansen writes:

In Duras' works, we find ourselves in the tension between searching for the absence-word, which may fill the void created by separation and absence, and the acknowledgment of the impossibility of doing so. To believe in the power of word and language as meaningful signs and acts of communication, when confronted with states "beyond", is, in this regard, not so different from the practice of psychoanalysis. (p. 94)

Might literature's ability to capture the reader in an emotional presence also be one of the forces that motivate psychoanalytic literary interpretations in the first place? In her paper on *Hägring 38* (Westö, 2013), Lunn (2019) exemplifies<sup>8</sup> how the need to work through emotions evoked by reading literature can be an underpinning, also for scholarly writing:

(...) you are quite emotionally shocked after reading the book, as if a fatal tragedy has been projected on to you, a tragedy one could be inclined to put aside, to dismiss or, alternatively, to work with, for instance by writing a paper. (p. 23)

### **Roads to the enigmatic**

Aarseth (1979) emphasizes that a psychoanalytic interpretation proves useful for the literary researcher to the extent that it can enlighten the connection between elements of the text, explain the course of action or

what motivates a person's behaviour, actions, thoughts or feelings. In line with this, many contributions in PLC have illuminated parts of the text that have been difficult to understand.

Interpretations of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* (1884/2000) exemplify both how a riddle becomes the starting point for psychoanalytic literary interpretation and how literature can stimulate theoretical discussions. What has been a puzzle is Hedvig's suicide. Numerous contributions have elaborated on the underpinnings of her fatal act, and disagreement about how it should be interpreted has been prominent, even among Ibsen scholars (Høst, 1990, as cited in Killingmo, 1994). Let me first give a brief introduction to Ibsen's drama. In the attic of Hedvig's family home lived an injured wild duck that was very precious to her. Despite her affection for it, she was determined to kill the duck to prove unconditional love for her father, Hjalmar. The father–daughter relationship was under pressure since Hjalmar recently received information indicating that Hedvig was not his biological daughter. While Hedvig is in the attic, Hjalmar talks to his friend (and her potential half-brother) Gregor, hinting to him that his daughter does not genuinely care about him and would not be willing to sacrifice life for him (her own life or that of the wild duck, it appears ambiguous). That is when we, the audience, hear the shot, and Ibsen's play ends most tragically with a young girl's death. Why does Hedvig end up shooting herself instead of the wild duck?

Killingmo's (1994) close reading elaborates on the lacks in Hedvig's personality development and how she functions as a container of guilt and internal conflict within the family complex instead of receiving what is essential for every child and adolescent: care and confirmation from her caregivers. 'Psychologically she is designated to be something for them all' (p. 151). She seems to exist solely as a means for other people and their needs (especially those of her immature and self-absorbed father), has no real self and nothing for herself, except for the wild duck, whom she identifies with and cares for. When she overhears Hjalmar's conversation with Gregor, she becomes utterly confused. She no longer only identifies with the wild duck, but becomes the wild duck. The reason for this confusion, Killingmo argues, is the already mentioned lack in Hedvig's development of ego and object relational functions; distorted internalization processes that interfere with her capacity for reality testing, which in turn becomes crucial in a situation of trauma and distress. 'No longer is Hedvig only like the wild duck. In psychic reality, she becomes the wild duck. It is in this state of mind she enters the attic with the pistol' (p. 153).

While Killingmo reads *The Wild Duck* as a drama of unconscious destiny, Hartmann's (2016) focus is on Hedvig as a juvenile at risk of committing suicide. She elaborates on Hedvig's circumstances as a teenager living under conditions which recent psychological research has shown increase the risk of suicide: isolated from peers, insecure parents, deprived of schooling, and with an enmeshed, almost incestuous relationship with her father Hjalmar. When Hedvig is in the attic overhearing her father's doubt of her unconditional love, Hedvig's whole world breaks down. It is the strength of this psychic pain, not distorted reality testing, that drives Hedvig to suicide.

### The literary and the clinical

We have seen how literary research and psychoanalysis meet in the interest of the unconscious as it is embedded in language: how literature can capture us in presence, even when words seem lost or absent. Simultaneously, we must acknowledge that a literary text is fundamentally different from clinical material derived in a therapeutic setting. The literary character has not asked for analysis and has no way of providing feedback to their analyst on whether the interpretations are perceived as meaningful or not. The analyst also loses valuable information, usually gained by paying attention to the transference and non-verbal communication such as body language, intonation and eye contact (Killingmo, 1990). The basis of observation is thus not the same as in therapy; when studying literature, we can rely solely on the words, structures and rhetoric within the specific text we have at hand. One might therefore ask: can literature be treated as a form of clinical material?

According to Engelstad (1990), a prerequisite for psychoanalytic reading of literature is that we are willing to read mental operations into fictional characters. A basic premise is that a literary character can have experiences, thoughts, feelings and motives that we want to better understand. If one accepts this prerequisite, another question arises: to whom do these operations belong: the author, the reader or the person described in the text itself? (Holland, 1993). The object of interpretation becomes difficult to define when we want to study the mental operations of a literary character.

We saw how psychoanalytic literary research has moved away from the biographical analysis of authorship. Another approach often used in combination with the methods already mentioned is 'influence analysis' (Hareide, 1988), where one studies where the author got his or her ideas and thoughts from. For example, the excerpt at the beginning of this text, where Jelinek says that her writings are attempts to bring out the hidden, could be interpreted as inspired by

various philosophical and theoretical contributions about the unconscious. Gullestad's (1985) close reading of Hoel's *Meeting at the Milestone* (1947/2001) provides further illustrations of this method. The protagonist and narrator of Hoel's novel (who was nicknamed 'the spotless one' by the resistance movement) tries to understand how close friends could end up as supporters of Nazism. Gullestad shows how this search leads 'the spotless one' to an inner struggle marked by anxiety and resistance when he instead seeks to understand the unembellished version of his betrayals; as a youth of his pregnant girlfriend Kari, and later when withdrawing from his wife and family. Gullestad believes that the text's deepest concern is: 'The spotless person's search for self-knowledge, to understand the underlying pattern in his own life' (p. 111, my translation). Gullestad reads Hoel's confrontation with his betrayal as a tribute to the psychoanalytic attitude of unsentimentally searching for self-knowledge, and thus also of the moral and ethical intrinsic value of such efforts.

In Holland's approach (1968, 1993) the focus of PLC has shifted to that of the reader's reactions. Holland believes literary criticism has a tendency to become too theoretical and abstract and thus serve as an avoidance of the personal field in which it intends to illuminate. When we read, we are governed by the same psychodynamic motivational forces as elsewhere in life, he says. The reader projects himself and his present and previous psychological themes into the text. According to Holland, the reader's emotional response should be included in psychoanalytic literary criticism because this also solves the problem of the text's lack of response; literature is not a person, and we need a person to engage in psychoanalytic literary criticism. Holland wants to open up literature through our shared human interactions with it. In this way, he believes a new bridge can be built between psychoanalysis and literary criticism. 'A bridge consisting of actual people engaging in actual literary transactions' (Holland, 1993, p. 20). Holland mentions that even Freud had embarked on a similar journey in that he, in his letter to Fliess, related his interpretation to the audience response: 'If this is so, we can understand the gripping power of Oedipus Rex' (Freud, 1897, p. 272).

Holland (1993) uses different interpretations of one of Emily Dickinson's poems to illustrate his viewpoint:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,

One clover, and a bee.

And revery.

The revery alone will do,

If bees are few.

(Dickinson, 1830–1866/2010)

He summarizes the reading response from two of his students as a way of understanding Dickinson's poems in the following:

I can read the poem through Jean's scientific questions about sexuality and use Dickinson's poem to contrast different kinds of imagination or revery, one scientific, factual, demanding over and over again, Why, Why, Why, and it's aggressive, even destructive side.

I can read the poem through Min's exotic associations and contrast the immateriality of Dickinson's imaginings with the all-too-materialistic imaginings of this man from a poor Third World country and, indeed, the all-too-materialistic imaginings of modern American 'automobile culture.' There is Eastern wisdom in Dickinson's ability to 'do' with just revery, a wisdom Min's culture has lost and we, perhaps, never had. (p. 19–20)

An objection to Holland's approach might, in my view, be that it does not sufficiently consider that the literary text is an artistic expression and therefore in itself an interpretation. One might argue that excluding reading response supports research where different theories of the mind (as expressed through literature and psychoanalysis) are discussed and elaborated, and that including the reading response means adding empirical material to the theoretical, which of course might be an advantage, but should not undermine the value of thoughtful and thoroughly prepared contributions. Furthermore, Freud's statement to Fliess might not have had such concrete implications as Holland has in mind, but instead point towards an awareness of transference as such. A few sentences after the one quoted above, Freud (1897), elaborates on 'the gripping power of Oedipus Rex': 'But the Greek legend seizes upon a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he senses its existence within himself' (p. 272). Kittang (1985) argues that such a method based solely on the reader's psychology ultimately becomes nothing more than an autobiography and a variant of the biographical analysis of authorship. As I read Holland, however, it is not necessarily a focus solely on the reader response he is suggesting, but rather an eclectic approach, where the reader as well as the researcher's subjectivity might also be included, as I will elaborate on below.

### Some reflections on transference and subjectivity

It seems safe to say that there will always be a mutual influence between the close reading process and the interpreter's understanding of a given text. From a psychoanalytic perspective, we may then assume that interpretations of literature subject to the same dynamics as is found in psychoanalytic therapy: the dialectic between transference and countertransference.



This could, for example, have the effect of the researcher selectively avoiding certain parts of a text that represent parts she cannot bear to relate to in herself. The researcher might also read meanings into the text that do not exist because they fit with what she knows (or does not know) about her own psychological issues or what she already believes in or wants to have confirmed theoretically.

Kittang (1985) says that a common need when reading literature seems to be to find a fixed point of view from which to read the text, and that this can amplify the tendency to rely on theories one already knows and feels comfortable with. Here we are also reminded of Lacan's view of transference and the desire of the interpreter. Gallop (1984) says that we need to 'question the illusions structuring the authority of the psychoanalytic critic' (p. 306); the duality of someone who knows and someone who does not. In line with this, Felman (in Sun et al., 2007), whose close readings have been presented several times in this text, reflects on how psychoanalysis might be tempted to take over the stage and disregard the knowledge of literature because of the desire of psychoanalytic theory 'for recognition; exercising its authority and power over the literary field, holding a discourse of masterly competence' (p. 214).

As psychoanalysts know, working with transference and countertransference is no longer seen only as an obstacle in clinical work, but also as an opportunity to deepen clinical knowledge (Gullestad & Killingmo, 2020). Through awareness of our own feelings, we can potentially learn something about what the other person is experiencing. When we study literature, however, it becomes more difficult (than in therapy) to use transference as information about the 'unconscious of the text' because again, the text does not reply.

How might we assess the credibility of interpretations when we cannot test these against the patient's reactions and transference as we can in therapy? Might it help to see the problem from a wider epistemological perspective? Gadamer (1960/1998) emphasizes that thoughtful human sciences should be based on a recognition of the distinctive features of what is being studied. One's subject has a meaning, it is an expression of an intention and it is conditioned by the historical and social context of which it is a part. In humanities, knowledge is then also, to a larger degree than in natural science, dependent on the researcher's awareness of his or her involvement in the process of meaning construction. A person trying to understand a text should be 'sensitive to the text's alterity'; 'prepared for it to tell him something', says Gadamer (1960/1998),

and that: 'The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings' (p. 269).

In clinical settings, we work towards making ourselves conscious of countertransference reactions; through therapy, self-observation, and supervision we are constantly hoping to improve at separating what is ours from what belongs to the other. When we know, it is easier to stop and reflect, to provide valuable feedback and interpretations, to empathize, and to resist the temptation of acting out towards the person who sought our help. I am sure some of the same things happen in academic settings when researchers reflect upon their work and give feedback to each other and their students. I would also guess that this results in less likelihood of personal emotionality, theoretical fads or potential outbursts interference in research processes as well as in the writing of academic texts. Perhaps there is even greater potential for using transference and countertransference more actively in the academic study of literary texts. I must emphasize that what I have in mind here is a more implicit awareness than the one Holland (1968) describes in his approach, where he includes reading response (although that might also be interesting). An awareness of subjectivity that is not necessarily made explicit in the text analysis itself, but that is part of the researcher's pre-understanding and work preparation. I must also emphasize that neither implicit nor explicit self-reflection on transference excludes its impact; elements of the interpreters' psychological and theoretical background will be found in their analysis, for better or worse. As in therapy, no miracle cure eliminates the consideration of countertransference as a phenomenon (Gullestad & Killingmo, 2020).

When we move from observation to interpretation, it requires us to make interpretive leaps to find something other than what is already there. This leap means, as we have seen before, that we are in danger of becoming reductionist. We are in danger of finding in the text what we already know (or what we want to know) in theory. However, all observation takes place from a preferred starting point, it is woven into our pre-understanding as the philosophers of hermeneutics have taught us. The interpretations should follow general principles of hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1960/1998) and, to the extent possible,<sup>9</sup> be tested against the text they originate from. The researcher should strive to clarify how the text forms the basis for his or her interpretations. In line with this, Felman (in Sun et al., 2007) makes the analogy that interpreters should take the role of both patient and analyst in relation to literature:

(...) the text has for us authority – the very type of authority by which Jacques Lacan indeed defines the role of the psychoanalyst in the structure of the transference. Like the psychoanalyst viewed by the patient, the text is viewed by us as a “subject presumed to know” – as the very place where meaning and *knowledge* of meaning reside. With respect to the text, the literary critic opposes thus at once the place of psychoanalyst (in relation of interpretation) and the place of the patient (in the relation of transference). (p. 215)

When theory is closely linked to text and subjectivity, it might also be easier for the reader of academic literature to autonomously evaluate and make up their mind about the interpretational efforts offered.

### How can literature and psychoanalysis enrich and illuminate each other?

I realize that by posing this question I already implied an answer about the interrelation and dialogue required. I even considered asking: how can literature and psychoanalysis mutually enrich and illuminate each other?

A sketch of an abundant and complex field of humanities has been drawn: an interdisciplinary field where the interest in language per se, in meaning lost, absent and rediscovered through words, takes the lead in the search for meaning and knowledge. Seeking knowledge in this way, through stories, and communicated in a language that both captures absence and demands presence, probably is more likely to, in Celan’s (1958/2001) words; ‘wash up on land, on heartland perhaps.’

When and whenever we seek to understand a phenomenon, reductionism seems always imminent. Abundant access to theory and methods, an awareness of the researcher’s subjective involvement in the research process, and a determination to ensure articulation of meaning as it springs from the texts have been emphasized as ways to counteract reductionism. A conscious reflection on and application of methods and theory, and further research concerned with developing methods for psychoanalytic literary criticism, might offer even further opportunities for enrichment between literature and psychoanalysis.

### Notes

1. Freud’s (e.g., 1915) discovery of the unconscious is in a broad sense the discovery of the variety of ways we become aware of ourselves and our world and the ways that we represent both (Skura, 1981). For a discussion of Lacan’s position regarding a heterogeneous level of the unconscious, and how this builds on the Freudian concept of the unconscious, see Gammelgaard, 2018.

2. For a discussion on hermeneutic philosophy and its different contributions in dialogue with psychoanalytic theory, see Vetlesen & Stånicke, 1999.
3. Here we are also reminded of the difference between the literary and the clinical, which is discussed later.
4. Analysis of authorship combined biographical documentation, especially from the author’s childhood, with text interpretation techniques inferred primarily from dream interpretation (for a discussion, see Skura, 1981). However, this has been considered problematic, also on an ethical level, and especially for clinicians, as the writer’s psychology in principle is inaccessible to us unless the writer decides to go into analysis (Kittang, 2003).
5. One main tendency in the development of psychoanalytic thinking is that object relational needs appear as motives in their own right and are no longer seen as derived from sexual and aggressive impulses. For an outline of the many contributions from object relations theory as well as the historical development of psychoanalytic theory, see Mitchell and Black (2016).
6. A simplification of Lacan’s extensive thinking for sure, but it has to do for our purpose.
7. The idea that presence can enrich theory has been extensively elaborated within phenomenology, for example in Gumbrecht’s *Production of Presence: What meaning cannot convey* (2004), where he discusses how literary research can benefit from a more experience- and affect-oriented approach.
8. Lunn’s reading also exemplifies how different modes of understanding and theory can work together in PLC.
9. Such a distinction between the theoretical and the empirical can be said to be utopian, as all description involves a form of interpretation, an abstraction.

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