

## Psychoanalytic Criticism—has it got beyond a joke?

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An impoverished individual borrowed 25 florins from a prosperous acquaintance, with many assertions of his necessitous circumstances. The very same day, his benefactor met him again in a restaurant with a plate of salmon mayonnaise in front of him. The benefactor reproached him:

‘What? You borrow money from me and then order yourself salmon mayonnaise? Is *that* what you have used my money for?’

‘I don’t understand you’, replied the object of the attack. ‘If I don’t have any money, I *can’t* eat salmon mayonnaise, and if I have some money, I *mustn’t* eat salmon mayonnaise. Well, then, when *am* I to eat salmon mayonnaise?’<sup>1</sup>

A joke: a trap: castration: sexuality: identity: language: meaning: nonsense: a joke.

### I

I begin with a characteristic insight from psychoanalytic criticism:

Coleridge strengthens the concept of the phallic mother by his use of the symbolism of the snake. By its behaviour and by its relation to food and protection the Albatross is the mother, but in one line in the poem is identified as ‘him’. To Coleridge, the father was a feminine giving male; the mother a masculine, rejecting female. The Marines at first sight despised the snakes; the child attempted to fight off the dangerous phallus, to deny his passive impulses; but it was a hopeless struggle. The Mariner must submit.<sup>2</sup>

David Beres’ interpretation of Coleridge’s ‘Ancient Mariner’ in terms of an identification of the albatross with a phallic mother provides a good example of the kind of criticism that has for a long time produces laughter amongst academics and non-academics alike—thus earning the right to be called a joke. In spite of the achievements of psychoanalytic criticism at its best—the work of Maud Bodkin or Kenneth Burke for instance—there were good reasons why, by the 1960s, its credentials were at an all-time low. It was accused, for the most part quite rightly, of a crude application of psychoanalytic theory, of a reductive pursuit of phallic and excremental symbolism in literature, always interpreted in a predictable way; at the

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<sup>1</sup> *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Pelican Freud Library 6 (Harmondsworth, 1976), 86.

Further page references will be cited in the text.

<sup>2</sup> ‘A Dream, a Vision, and a Poem’, *Yearbook of Psychoanalysis* 8, ed. S. Lorand (New York, 1952); cited by D.W. Harding, ‘The Theme of “The Ancient Mariner” ’ in *Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (Englewood Cliffs, 1967), 61.

same time, it was felt that it missed out entirely every quality that made literature literature. If in some sense psychoanalytic criticism, was a kind of grotesque caricature of the tendency to reduce literature to a set of ethical prescriptions about 'life', the charge that it neglected literature's linguistic texture was still a just one. To put it another way, phallic mothers did not succeed in 'explaining' literature, only in creating an unintentionally humorous form of criticism. It was in this situation in the sixties, when the early excitements of psychoanalytic criticism had given way to a limited and repetitive critical mode, that 'French Freud' arrived and virtually rehabilitated psychoanalytic criticism overnight.

In England it came via Christian Metz, Althusser and the *New Left Review*; in the States it was pioneered in particular by several issues of *Yale French Studies*: Jacques Ehrmann's 'Structuralism' (1966), Jeffrey Mehlman's famous *YFS* ('French Freud: Structural Studies in Psychoanalysis', 1972), and Shoshana Felman's 'Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise' of 1977. Lacan's appearance at the Johns Hopkins Symposium of 1966, the proceedings of which were published as *The Structuralist Controversy*, was obviously also critical in introducing French Freud to America, literally bringing them together with his famous remarks 'the best image to sum up the unconscious is Baltimore in the early morning'. Two years later followed Wilden's *The Language of the Self* (1968). The emergence of this new version of psychoanalysis went hand in hand with its use in Marxism, anthropology, and semiology; in literature, it seemed to initiate a new phase for a psychoanalytic criticism that would no longer be concerned with self-affirming, reductive readings of literary texts as symptoms or case histories of their authors.

Typical of this sense of a new start was Shoshana Felman's influential introduction to *YFS* 55/56: 'We mean indeed to suggest that ... the very relationship between literature and psychoanalysis—the way in which they inform each other—has in itself to be reinvented'.<sup>3</sup> What she objected to about the past was the way in which the notion of psychoanalytic criticism implied a mastering body of knowledge, never itself questioned, being brought in as a kind of grid upon which to read off and interpret literature. The relation between the two disciplines instead of being one of coordination implied subordination:

a relation in which literature is submitted to the authority, to the prestige of psychoanalysis. While literature is considered as a body of *language*—to be *interpreted*—psychoanalysis is considered as a body of *knowledge*, whose competence is called upon to *interpret*. Psychoanalysis, in other words, occupies the place of a *subject*, literature that of an *object*; the relation of interpretation is structured as a relation of master to slave. (5)

As she points out, however, if literature seems to fall within the realm of psychoanalysis, psychoanalysis equally finds itself within the realm of literature, where it discovers not only a field for external verification and hypothesis testing, but also 'the constitutive

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<sup>3</sup> 'To Open the Question', *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977), 5. Further page references will be cited in the text.

texture of its *conceptual* framework, of its theoretical body. The key concepts of psychoanalysis are references to literature... [which] is the language psychoanalysis uses in order to *speak of itself*, in order to *name itself* (9). This means at the very least, she argues, that the old notion of *application* has to give way to one of *implication*, of exploring the ways in which the two implicate each other. Felman's reappraisal of the relation between literature and psychoanalysis, her stress on 'interimplication', has been extraordinarily influential, not only with Lacanians but with ego psychologists too.<sup>4</sup> But what was striking when the volume was republished recently as a book was the way in which what had five years earlier seemed like a harbinger of a whole new mode of criticism, a rehabilitation of psychoanalytic criticism as a serious critical mode, seemed in 1982 like the apex of a movement which since then had been on the wane. Although one can point to certain books of interest that have appeared since 1977, the new psychoanalytic criticism has failed to establish itself with a sustained body of work. Why?

There are, I think, two main reasons for this. The first is a purely conceptual one. As the title of *YFS 55/56*—'Literature and Psychoanalysis'—suggests, as soon as you reject the notion of psychoanalysis as a masterful body of knowledge being brought to bear upon literature then the notion of a psychoanalytic criticism as such must be rejected also, for it precisely implies the use of psychoanalysis as a perspective that is being brought to bear upon literature, in the same way as with Marxist criticism. Ironically, then, Felman's reinvention of the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis had the effect not just of superseding the standing joke of vulgar psychoanalytic criticism but of superseding any notion of a psychoanalytic criticism at all.

My second reason could be described as internal: it derives from a particular effect that occurs during the act of analysis itself. To demonstrate the way in which it works I will tell three stories where critics and analysts find themselves at the wrong end of a joke, as 'jokees' to use the old word for a joke-victim. My three jokees are Felman, Freud, and Jeffrey Mehlman, all of whom when faced with literary and psychoanalytic phenomena cannot, rather literally, get beyond a joke, that is, to its other side. This also points to a certain impossibility factored into the whole enterprise of psychoanalytic criticism and indeed of theory itself. The problem comes with the very attempt at comprehension of the incomprehensible—the fundamental project of psychoanalysis itself.

## II

In Felman's equally influential essay on James's *Turn of the Screw*, she shows that the history of critical debate about the story is, as she puts it,

a *repetition* of the scene dramatised in the text. The critical interpretation, in other words, not only elucidates the text but also reproduces it dramatically, unwittingly *participates in it*. As a reading effect, this inadvertent 'acting out' is

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., Meredith Anne Skura, *The Literary Use of the Psychoanalytic Process* (New Haven, 1981); C. Barry Chabot, *Freud on Shreber: Psychoanalytic Theory and the Critical Act* (Amherst, 1982).

indeed uncanny: whichever way the reader turns, he can but be turned by the text, he can but *perform* it by *repeating* it.<sup>5</sup>

This strange phenomenon, Felman speculates, is the trap of which James speaks in his Preface when he describes the story as ‘an *amusette* to catch those not easily caught’. She then demonstrates very clearly how the uncanny trapping power of the story manages to catch both naive and sophisticated readers alike in an inescapable reading-effect.

James’ little jokelet, his ‘*amusette*’, turns out to ensnare through the question of meaning. Faced with the story’s ambiguity, Edmund Wilson literalised its phallic metaphors and offered an answer to its riddle with a solution: namely, the governess’s sexual desire for the Master. Since ‘the story won’t tell ... in any literal, vulgar way’ as Douglas remarks to the narrator, Wilson tells instead, offering sexuality as the hidden key. However, as Felman points out, it is, paradoxically, sexuality, which in Freud disallows any such simple, literal solutions, for ‘sexuality is precisely *what rules out simplicity as such*’ (111). This has also been demonstrated critically, for, as is well know, Wilson’s essay has engendered an endless conflict of interpretations about the text among its critics. The struggle for the text between Wilson’s adherents and his critics exactly parallels and continues that for the children between the governess and the servants.

If the meaning of the story never comes off, then James’s joke certainly does, operating in the same way as the ‘extreme example’ of the joke—the nonsense joke. Freud writes:

These extreme examples have an effect because they rouse the expectation of a joke, so that one tries to find a concealed sense behind the nonsense. But one finds none; they really are nonsense (*Jokes*, 190)

To avoid the vulgar Freudian reading, it seems, the critic has to avoid trying to make sense of nonsense—because if he or she does try to provide a meaning then the text makes a nonsense of the critic’s sense. In any effort to suppress the text’s conflictual forces, its ambiguity of meaning, the critic becomes trapped within them himself and forced to act out a process that recalls the identificatory yet divisive structure of the constitution of the subject and its sexual positioning: as with sexuality, the critic is obliged to take sides.

So in James’s tale of ‘exquisite mystification’ the attempt to demystify the story only turns out to involve a critic in further mystification. As Felman puts it:

‘We could very well wonder,’ writes Lacan of Poe’s ‘Purloined Letter’ but in terms equally applicable to *The Turn of the Screw*, ‘whether it is not precisely the fact that *everyone is fooled* which constitutes here the source of our pleasure’. If the literary mystification is, in James’s terms, ‘exquisite,’ it is indeed because it constitutes a source of pleasure. The mystification is a game, a joke; to play is to be played; to comprehend mystification is to be comprehended *in* it; entering into the game, we ourselves become fair game for the very ‘joke’ of *meaning*. The joke is that, by meaning, everyone is fooled (202-2).

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Turning the Screw of Interpretation’, *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977), 101. Further page references will be cited in the text.

The joke, as Felman comments at the end of her essay, is indeed on us. But how do we avoid being taken in? If meaning turns out to be a joke, what can the critic do to avoid being inscribed in the antagonistic forces of the text? Can we make sense of non-sense?

I will return later to a consideration of Felman's own suggestion of how we should read such an unreadable story. For the moment let us leave *The Turn of the Screw* bearing two things in mind. In the first place, meaning in the tale, far from being its substance as one would normally expect, seems to be merely a facade, its rhetoric, while a certain rhetorical play and effect normally taken to be the inessential exterior of a story, reveals itself as the story's inner nucleus—a structure which, as we shall see, happens to be the same as that which Freud analyses in the joke. Secondly, the attempt to get outside the story, to constitute it as an object for criticism, far from creating an object of knowledge turns out to be the lure by which the critic is most effectively drawn in to the conflictual processes of the text. Paradoxically, the affirmation of mastery, of an unambiguous meaning, putting the phallus in its place, so to speak, turns out to be self-castrating, positioning the critic on the one side or the other of the very division he or she seeks to eliminate.<sup>6</sup>

This acting out of textual division, of semantic equivocality, is by no means, however, confined to the luckless critics of *The Turn of the Screw*. Samuel Weber, following Lacan, has recently suggested in *The Legend of Freud* that Freud's psychoanalytic theory also participates in the very processes that it seeks to describe and analyse. Weber asks:

Can psychoanalytic thinking itself escape the effects of what it endeavours to think? Can the disruptive distortions of unconscious processes be simply recognised, theoretically, as an object, or must they not leave their imprint on the process of theoretical objectification itself? Must not psychoanalytical thinking itself partake of—repeat—the dislocations it seeks to describe?<sup>7</sup>

Of all Freud's writings, 'The Uncanny' is generally accepted as the text in which he most thoroughly finds himself caught up in the very processes which he seeks to comprehend, to the extent that, as has been pointed out, his own analytical essay itself becomes uncanny: an uncanniness to which I now turn.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> As Felman puts it: 'In attempting to escape the reading-error constitutive of rhetoric, in attempting to escape the rhetorical error constitutive of literature, in attempting to master literature in order not to be its dupe, psychoanalysis, in reality, is doubly duped: unaware of its own inescapable participation in literature and in the errors and the traps of rhetoric, it is blind to the fact that it itself exemplifies no less than the blind spot of rhetoricity, the spot where any affirmation of mastery in effect amounts to a self-subversion and to a self-castration' (199-200).

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud* (Minneapolis, 1982), xvi. Weber's discussion of the 'Aufsitzer' first alerted me to the ubiquitous operation of the 'taking in'; I am also particularly indebted to his reading of Freud on jokes.

<sup>8</sup> Recent work on 'The Uncanny' includes Hélène Cixous, 'Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche', *NLH* 7 (1976), 525-48; Neil Hertz, 'Freud and the Sandman', in *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josué V. Harari (London, 1980), 296-321; Sarah Kofman, 'Le Double e(s)t le diable', *Quatre romans analytiques* (Paris, 1974); Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris, 1970); Samuel Weber, 'The Sideshow, or: Remarks on A Canny Moment', *MLN* (1973), 1102-33.

## III

The more closely you look at a word the more distantly it looks back.

Karl Kraus

The word ‘*heimlich*’ is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which without being contradictory, are yet very different.

Concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it, withheld from others... to do something *heimlich*, i.e. behind someone’s back ... to look on with *heimlich* pleasure at someone’s discomfiture ... secretive ... deceitful... The *heimlich* art (magic)... My *heimlich* pranks ... unscrupulously... To discover, disclose, betray someone’s *Heimlichkeiten*.... To veil the divine... *Heimlich* places in the human body ... him to whom secrets are revealed... *Heimlich*, as used of knowledge—mystic ... a *heimlich* meaning, *mysticus*, *devinus*, *occultus*, *figuratus*.... *Heimlich* in a different sense, as withdrawn from knowledge, unconscious ... obscure, inaccessible to knowledge.... *The notion of something hidden and dangerous ... so that heimlich comes to have the meaning usually ascribed to unheimlich.*<sup>9</sup>

A trap?

Freud’s famous wander through the dictionary shows that far from enabling him to define the uncanny objectively, the definitions draw him into its own ambiguous effects. The uncanny, Freud complains, is not a word always used in a clearly definable sense. He looks for its intrinsic quality—which turns out to have nothing to do with meaning as such, for meaning is, as he puts it, only ‘attached to the word “uncanny” in the course of its history’ (220). His pursuit of the uncanny through its meanings in the dictionary finds not a semantic core but an ambivalence, a constitutive division, ‘a *heimlich* meaning’: the secret knowledge of that which resists knowledge, a secret meaning which resists meaning. In its shifts of exclusions and reversals, *heimlich* begins in opposition to *unheimlich* but ends by including it, except that, by then, it no longer means *heimlich*—it becomes estranged from itself—the *unheimlich* par excellence. To be estranged from oneself: to bear the other within.

In all the innumerable goings-on of this little mystery tale, I want to look at the resistance of the uncanny to Freud’s explanation, his theoretical solution of ‘castration’ comparable to Wilson’s self-castrating solution of ‘sex’ to *The Turn of the Screw*. In this renitence, literature plays a decisive role in dispossessing Freud of his solution and in producing the effect of self-castration to his assertion of mastery.

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<sup>9</sup> ‘The Uncanny’, in The Standard Edition of *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London, 1953-73), vol. XVII, 224, 223-6. Further page references will be cited in the text.

Freud begins with a cunning gesture: he addresses the only previous paper on the topic and characteristically denies the validity and priority of his precursor without himself making ‘any claim to priority’. He announces that ‘the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to something long known to us, once familiar’; Jentsch is criticised because he did not get beyond the

relation of the uncanny to the novel and unfamiliar. He ascribes the essential factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness to *intellectual uncertainty*; so that the uncanny would always, as it were, be something one does not know one’s way about in (221, emphasis added).

If Jentsch’s analysis doesn’t go far enough, Freud nevertheless begins in the same place, with Hoffmann’s *The Sandman*. He cites Jentsch—‘in telling a story, one of the most successful devices for creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty’ (227)—in order to contradict him: ‘Jentsch’s point of an intellectual uncertainty *has nothing to do* with the effect’ (230, emphasis added). It is the fear of being robbed of one’s eyes that creates the feeling of the uncanny. Freud concludes:

There is no question, therefore, of any intellectual uncertainty here: we know now that we are not supposed to be looking on at the products of a madman’s imagination, behind which we, with the superiority of rational minds, are able to detect the sober truth; and yet this knowledge does not lessen the impression of uncanniness in the least degree. The theory of intellectual uncertainty is thus incapable of explaining that impression (230-1).

Freud is so certain that it is not intellectual uncertainty. He refuses to be taken in by the mere artifice of incertitude that Hoffmann creates and proceeds to assert his own truth or solution of the mystery: the real secret of the uncanny is the fear of castration. If, however, the uncanny effect can be said to be derived from the fear of castration, then we might note that castration itself tells the story of the dislocation of the subject, the basis of uncertainty about identity and sexuality.

In spite of his disavowals Freud, as is well known, continues in a state of uncertainty for the whole essay which comes more and more to resemble his own risqué story of getting lost in an Italian town and repeatedly finding himself in the red-light district. Although he provides a concluding definitive summary of his findings at the end of Part II, Part III begins with an admission that the reader nevertheless ‘will have felt certain doubts arising his mind’. After discussing a number of proliferating problems Freud finally asks:

And are we after all justified in entirely ignoring intellectual uncertainty as a factor, seeing that we have admitted its importance in relation to death? (247)

It is at this point that Freud re-introduces the question of literature:

One point ... may help us to resolve these uncertainties: nearly all the instances which contradict our hypothesis are taken from the realm of fiction, of imaginative writing (247).

Although he had made no distinction in his earlier concluding summary, this leads Freud to differentiate between literature and ‘real life’. Literature is blamed for producing the uncertainties. In reality people can avoid being taken in, but the uncanny in literature is so cunning that it is now seen to demand a separate discussion:

Above all, it is a much more fertile province than the uncanny in real life, for it contains the whole of the latter and something more besides (24).

Literature, then, is the supplement that refutes Freud's hypothesis, denying his analysis of the uncanny's origin and cause in infantile experience, turning it back into a trick, an artifice, in which the writer produces its effect by taking us in:

In doing this he is in a sense betraying us to the superstitiousness which we have ostensibly surmounted; he deceives us by promising to give us the sober truth, and then after all oversteps the bounds of possibility. We react to his inventions as we would have reacted to real experiences; by the time we have seen through this trick it is already too late and the author has achieved his object. But it must be added that his success is not unalloyed. We retain a *feeling of dissatisfaction*, a kind of *grudge against the attempted deceit* (250-1, emphasis added).

The production of the uncanny in literature has exactly the same effect as the nonsense joke: a feeling of displeasure in the victim, a vexation that is all the more pertinent in this case when we remember that it is literature that has made a nonsense of Freud's attempted solution of the mystery of the uncanny. The writer 'cunningly and ingeniously' creates this effect against our will: you have to be canny to bring about the trick of the uncanny.

At the end of this diffuse, repetitive essay literature, which includes Freud's theories and something more, turns out to be a joker that uses trickery in order to practise its deceptions. The uncanny itself appears as a kind of trap into which Freud has drifted 'half involuntarily' through 'the temptation to explain certain instances' which contradicted his theory of the causes of the uncanny (251). And at the realisation that the uncanny has, after all, taken him in, Freud retires baffled, and cuts the essay off abruptly. At the beginning of his investigation, he was invulnerable: 'It is long since he has experienced or heard of anything which has given him an uncanny impression' (220). Here literature's power is implicitly denied. Soon we discover, however, that literature not only can't be taken in by Freud's theory, but takes him in, takes him for a ride, back to the *heimlich* places. Literature disallows certainty of meaning, makes sense into nonsense, plays a cunning joke on its reader. As with *The Turn of the Screw*, with every explanation the analyst of the uncanny finds that a *heimlich* meaning turns into a *heimlich* prank: 'To look on with *heimlich* pleasure at someone's discomfiture'.

This last citation from the dictionary could almost describe the analytic situation, particularly the position of mastery which Freud adopts with his patient Irma:

I at once took her on one side, as though to answer her letter and to reproach her for not having accepted my 'solution' yet.... I took her to the window and looked down her throat, and she showed signs of recalcitrance, like women with artificial dentures. I thought to myself that there was really no need for her to do that.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> 'Analysis of the Specimen Dream', *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Pelican Freud Library 4 (Harmondsworth, 1976), 182. Further page references will be cited in the text. In the dream analysis Freud reveals that Irma's recalcitrance is itself the displacement of a further frustrated seduction: 'The way in which Irma stood by the window suddenly reminded me of another experience. Irma had an intimate woman friend of whom I had a very high opinion... I now recollected that I had often played with the idea

In ‘The Uncanny’ the reader’s resistance to the artifice of the writer is portrayed in the same terms: ‘The writer has one more means which he can use in order to avoid our recalcitrance and at the same time to improve his chances of success’ (251). Both the writer and Freud have to adopt devices to overcome the resistance of their reader or patient. Success for both is measured in exactly the same way as for the joke—with the production of an effect. Just as the joke-teller produces the effect of laughter, or displeasure, in the listener, so the writer produces uncanny effects in the reader, and so Freud’s analysis creates the effect of a cure in his patient when the symptom disappears:

It was my view at that time (though I have since recognised it as a wrong one) that my task was fulfilled when I had informed a patient of the hidden meaning of his symptoms: I considered that I was not responsible for whether he accepted the solution or not—though this was what success depended on (184).

#### IV

My book on *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* was a side-issue directly derived from *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The only friend of mine who was at that time interested in my work remarked to me that my interpretations of dreams often impressed him as being like jokes.<sup>11</sup>

Third story: third resistance to a solution: third joke: whose? No doubt at any rate that it is, in the first instance, Irma’s ‘discomfiture’. She gets the injection—with a dirty needle to boot.

Mehlman’s essay on the dream of Irma’s injection also emphasises the traces in Freud’s theories of the very effects he was trying to analyse.<sup>12</sup> Before ‘plunging into the dream itself’ Mehlman draws attention to the well known 1925 footnote to Chapter VI of the dream book in which Freud criticises analysts for overlooking the distinction between the latent dream-thoughts and the dream-work. Freud writes:

At bottom, dreams are nothing other than a particular *form* of thinking, made possible by the conditions of sleep. It is the dream work which creates that form, and it alone is the essence of dreaming—the explanation of its peculiar nature.(650)

The specimen dream turns out to be about a comparable mistake: Freud obstinately clings to his explanation of the symptoms of Irma’s illness to the extent that his friend Otto literally injects the ‘solution’ into her in the dream. But it turns out to do her no good. In the analysis, Freud identifies the error of his therapeutic method at that time which the dream uncannily points to: his technique was simply to confront the patient

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that she too might ask me to relieve her of her symptoms. I myself, however, had thought this unlikely, since she was of a very reserved nature. She was recalcitrant, as was shown in the dream’ (186).

<sup>11</sup> Freud, *An Autobiographical Study*, Pelican Freud Library 15 (Harmondsworth 1976, 250).

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Mehlman, ‘Trimethylamin: Notes on Freud’s Specimen Dream’, *Diacritics* 6 (1976), 42-5; reprinted in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (London, 1981), 177-87.

with his solution of the hidden meaning of the symptoms. That theory, as Mehlman notes, gave way to a structure of the transference—the process of the acting out of unconscious desire in the analytic situation: not a question of finding the hidden key to the analysand's secret but of producing unconscious fantasies reprojected onto the analyst. As with dreams, instead of a hidden meaning, a telling, we get a form of thinking—the structure of a showing. The 'essence of dreams', what is 'peculiar to dream-life and characteristic of it' is the dream work, the process of disfiguration of distorted dream thoughts. The desire to produce a hidden meaning turns out to be nothing less than the repressive wish of the ego acting in its own self-defence.<sup>13</sup>

Freud identifies the meaning of the dream as the wish to escape assaults on his professional integrity. But this discovery of a single meaning in fact works in collusion with the repressive function of what he significantly calls elsewhere 'a distortionless dream'.<sup>14</sup> Rather than accept the threatening implication that Freud's solution for Irma's complaint was wrong, the dream invents a whole series of explanations for it:

1. it was an organic illness
2. it was Irma's widowhood
3. it was Otto's injection of an unsuitable drug
4. anyway the needle had been dirty

As Freud notes, while all these interpretations of Irma's illness agree in exculpating him they are inconsistent with each other, and indeed are mutually exclusive:

The whole plea—for the dream was nothing else—reminded one vividly of the defence put forward by the man who was charged by one of his neighbours with having given him back a borrowed kettle in a damaged condition. The defendant asserted first, that he had given it back undamaged; secondly, that the kettle had a hole in it when he borrowed it; and thirdly, that he had never borrowed a kettle from his neighbour at all. (197)

So eager is Freud to substantiate the meaning that he has found for the dream that he ignores the ridiculousness of the explanations. Instead of seeing it as a joke—and the example would reappear as one several times in the joke book—he takes the whole thing seriously:

So much the better: if only a single one of these three lines of defence were to be accepted as valid, the man would have to be acquitted.

The fact that the four excuses in the dream, or the three in the story, are mutually contradictory would normally suggest that taken together they are all unconvincing. It precisely wouldn't work in a court of law. As Mehlman shows, instead of identifying any unconscious wish that the dream might have shown, Freud's analysis continues and colludes with the repressive stabilising wish that wards off any threat to the ego: far from being a work of analysis of the repressed 'originary' wish of the dream, the analysis that Freud offers is merely a further instance of secondary elaboration. Weber calls attention

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<sup>13</sup> Weber explores the implications of Freud's insight that systematic thought in general operates in exactly the same way as the expectation of a coherent meaning for the dream: both denote 'the reaction of an ego seeking to defend its conflict-ridden cohesion' (13).

<sup>14</sup> *Interpretation of Dreams*, 683. The other distortionless dream' is the dream of burning child (652-4), discussed by Weber 69-74.

to the way in which Freud describes secondary elaboration as ‘a kind of joke played by the unconscious against, or at the expense of, consciousness’ in the following account later in the dream book:

If I look around for something with which to compare the final form assumed by a dream as it appears after normal thought has made its contribution, I can think of nothing better than the enigmatic inscriptions with which *Fliegende Blätter* [*Drifting Leaves*, a humorous magazine] has for so long entertained its readers. They are intended to make the reader believe that a certain sentence—for the sake of contrast, a sentence in dialect and as scurrilous as possible—is a Latin inscription. For this purpose the letters contained in the words are torn out of their combination into syllables and arranged in a new order. Here and there a genuine Latin word appears: at other points we seem to see abbreviations of Latin words before us; at still other points in the inscription we may allow ourselves to be deceived into overlooking the senselessness of isolated letters by parts of the inscription seeming to be defaced or showing lacunae. *If we are to avoid being taken in by the joke*, we must disregard everything that makes it seem like an inscription, look firmly at the letters, pay no attention to their ostensible arrangement, and so combine them into words belonging to our own mother-tongue (642-3, cited by Weber 11, my emphasis).

In the dream of Irma’s injection Freud is taken in by the trick and reads the inscription as it is presented to him: the meaning that he finds is simply a joke played on him by the unconscious.

If this is the case, then we must revise the whole of the *Interpretation of Dreams* which is founded on the discovery in this specimen dream that the ‘key’ to the secret of dreams is that their meaning is a wish-fulfilment. Instead, it seems that this meaning is something of a joke.

As it happens, it is not only the dream’s meaning that involves a trick played by the unconscious on the conscious, for the analysis is also something of a trick played by Freud on his reader. If we take the standard Freudian practice of observing any parapraxis carefully, we may note that on page 187 of the Penguin edition he gives the wrong date for this first paper on cocaine. It is well known that there are many residues of Freud’s disastrous dealings with cocaine in this dream so tellingly named the dream of Irma’s *Injection*.<sup>15</sup> It repeats a whole series of failures and assaults on his mastery much more serious than the simple case of Irma. In the light of this Freud’s innocent interpretation of his dream can be seen as something of a hoax, almost a bad joke that deliberately deludes the reader. This takes us back to Freud’s own example of the man with the damaged kettle and its implicit likening of the processes of the dream to the structure of a joke, a

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<sup>15</sup> M. Schur, ‘Some Additional “Day Residues” of “The Specimen Dream” of Psychoanalysis’, in *Psycho-Analysis: A General Psychology*, eds. R. Loewenstein, L. Newman, M. Schur, and A. Solnit (New York, 1966), 45-85; cf. also M. Schur, *Freud: Living and Dying* (New York, 1972). A brilliant reading of Freud’s Specimen Dream utilizing this and other material was given by Cynthia Chase in a paper entitled ‘Anecdotes for Fathers: Wordsworth’s, Freud’s’, presented to the eighth IAPL Conference, Stony Brook, 6 May 1983.

relationship he makes explicit elsewhere in a detailed comparison between the dream work and the joke work. Freud notes that it is often ‘far from easy to decide whether what we are dealing with is a joke or a dream’.<sup>16</sup> What is most remarkable, however, is that he goes on to compare the dream work to a bad joke:

The unintended ‘dream-joke’ brings none of the yield of pleasure of a true joke. You can learn why if you go more deeply into the study of jokes. A ‘dream-joke’ strikes us as a bad joke: it does not make us laugh, it leaves us cold.

If we turn from this feeling of displeasure to Freud’s theory of the joke we find that, once again as with dreams, he regards the essence of the joke not as its meaning but its form. Samuel Weber’s correction of Strachey’s normalising translation shows that the point Freud strives to make is ‘that “the most substantial thoughts”, products of conscious intentionality, are used by the unconscious as a foil, “envelope”, or guise, to disguise and conceal its operation’ (89). Weber points to the paradox that because of his attempt ‘to construct the joke as a proper, meaningful object of theory’, for Freud ‘the essence of joke resides in the manner in which meaning is placed in the service of play’ (94). This is the basis on which Freud makes the distinction between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ joke: in the good joke resemblance is accompanied by a meaningful relation, whereas in the bad joke a superficial link is the whole point of the joke (*Jokes*, 169). If a bad joke is by no means bad as a joke—that is, unsuitable for producing pleasure—then it can’t be as bad as the dream-joke which does ‘not make us laugh, it leaves us cold’.

The reason why dreams need special interpretation is because they are, literally, nonsense: this kind of joke is the subject of a footnote added to the end of chapter 5 where it becomes clear that there are good and bad versions here too. In normal nonsense jokes, there is a sense lurking behind the nonsense—and it is that this makes it into a joke. As Freud notes, joking nonsense makes an excellent joke. But in an addendum added to the footnote in 1912 Freud admitted an even more extreme version which Weber rightly characterises as a shaggy-dog story:

A number of productions resembling jokes can be classed alongside of nonsense jokes. There is no appropriate name for them, but they might well be described as ‘idiocy masquerading as a joke’. There are countless numbers of them, and I will only select two samples:

‘A man at the dinner table who was being handed fish dipped his two hands twice in the mayonnaise and then ran them through his hair. When his neighbour looked at him in astonishment, he seemed to notice his mistake and apologised: “I’m so sorry, I thought it was spinach.”’

Or: ‘ “Life is a suspension bridge”, said one man.—“Why is that?” asked the other.—“How should I know?” was the reply.’

These extreme examples have an effect because they rouse the expectation of a joke, so that one tries to find a concealed sense behind the nonsense. But one finds none: they really are nonsense. The pretence makes it possible for a moment to liberate the pleasure in nonsense. They jokes are not entirely without a

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<sup>16</sup> *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Pelican Freud Library 1 (Harmondsworth, 1974), 273. Cf. *Jokes*, 61-2.

purpose; they are a 'take-in', and give the person who tells them a certain amount of pleasure in misleading and annoying his hearer. The latter then damps down his annoyance by determining to tell them himself later on. (190)

The nonsense joke produces a simulacrum of nonsense that conceals an essence of sense, whereas the extreme nonsense joke implies that it is going to provide a simulacrum of nonsense that conceals an essence of sense only to reveal that the joke is in fact a kind of confidence trick—for what it provides is totally senseless, and the laugh is on the listener. It really is nonsense. It is with the joke of the joke that we find the displeasure of the dream-joke which leaves us cold—precisely because it refuses the intersubjective nature of the joke's effect and turns the person who expects to be told a meaningful joke into a dupe.

I suggested that the *Interpretation of Dreams* is structured like a joke. If so, what kind of a joke? Freud's analysis of Irma's injection, his promise of meaning and a solution to the riddle of the secret of dreams, seems to be like a good joke, offering a simulacrum of nonsense, the dream, which he will show contains an essence of sense. But Mehlman shows us something that is more like the worst joke of all—the duping of the analyst by the dream and the reader by the dream and its analysis. The dream in fact has as much meaning as the kettle joke, merely giving 'the appearance of logic which is characteristic of a piece of sophistry and which is intended to conceal the faulty reasoning' (*Jokes*, 100). The discovery of the *Interpretation of Dreams*, I would suggest, is that dreams really are, as everyone has always supposed, nonsense—and that psychoanalysis, as everyone has more maliciously suspected, is founded on a joke, or rather the joke of a joke. Having been duped, Freud takes up the only option when he realises he's been 'had' and begins to tell another story—the story of the interpretation of dreams, and of psychoanalysis in general.

In each case that we have examined, the analyst who uses psychoanalysis has come up against the realisation that the material that he or she has been analysing has in fact taken him or her in. James's story, the uncanny, Freud's dream of Irma's injection, have all held out a lure of sense and meaning, but always as a kind of joke 'played by the unconscious against, or at the expense of, consciousness'. Each time it seems that psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic criticism find that they can't get beyond a joke. This is the general impasse, I would suggest, that has led to the abandonment of psychoanalytic criticism as such.

## V

Nobody, after all, likes to be on the wrong end of a joke. But can we avoid being taken in—or do we always really want to?

It seems to me that there are two areas of criticism at least which have good reasons for being taken in, and which, paradoxically, have taken psychoanalysis in too. Where does that leave psychoanalytic criticism? There. It has not disappeared: it has merely been displaced, to deconstruction and feminism.

Although there has been to date, as far as I am aware, no sustained examination of the relation of Derrida's work to psychoanalysis, it is obvious that the influence is very pervasive, and specifically that the notion of castration has clear links to that of dissemination, which might be described as castration's rhetoric, its conceptually ungovernable linguistic effect. It is significant, in this respect, that the essay 'The Double Session' is described by Derrida as a rereading of 'The Uncanny'.

In *The Uncanny*, Freud—here more than ever attentive to undecidable ambivalence, to the play of the double, to the endless exchange between the fantastic and the real, the 'symbolized' and the 'symbolizer', to the process of interminable substitution—can, without contradicting this play, have recourse both to castration anxiety, behind which no deeper secret, no other meaning, would lie hidden, and to the substitutive relation itself.<sup>17</sup>

The story of castration involves both the initiation and the denial of meaning and sexual identity, creating them but at the same time disallowing them. Its double fantasy involves a process by which the subject is inscribed in a system of forces of which it is no longer master and in which it is assigned a position which it has to take up but which doesn't exactly fit. Sexuality and meaning are held at the balancing point of the fixity and slippage of each other. In rendering meaning, identity, and sexuality uncertain at the very moment that it instigates them the castration complex could be characterised as a sort of bad joke—indeed one could argue with some justification that the castration complex is the unkindest cut of all. The shaggy-dog story, which holds out the lure of sense but effectively negates meaning and truth, rehearses the structure of castration and leads one to wonder whether the experience of the bad joke, which leaves us cold, is pleasureless because it casts the joke-victim within castration's empty and anxious locus.

Castration initiates and disperses meaning and identity. 'Dissemination', as Derrida puts it, 'mutilates the unity of the signifier, that is, of the phallus', and enacts a semantic dispersal and proliferation.<sup>18</sup> In each of the three texts which we have examined, the joke of decipherability played at the analyst's expense leaves him or her with no option but to renounce the hermeneutic quest for the discovery of meaning. In Felman's analysis of *The Turn of the Screw* her answer to the question of how to read a story which seems to resist all solutions by converting them into further symptoms, is to discard the notion of a soluble meaning all together in favour of an understanding of the rhetorical functioning that produces the text's ambiguity. She concludes:

The question underlying such a reading is not '*what* does the story mean?' but rather '*how* does the story mean?' How does the meaning of the story, whatever it is, rhetorically *take place* through permanent displacement, textually take shape and effect; *take flight*? (119).

This description of a new kind of reading is hardly distinguishable from 'deconstruction', nor probably thinkable without it. Indeed in showing the powerlessness of

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago, 1981), 268.

<sup>18</sup> 'The Purveyor of Truth', *Yale French Studies* 52 (1975), 66.

psychoanalysis in the face of rhetoric, and in advocating a rhetorical reading of textual division, one begins to suspect that the unnamed Master to whom Felman, like the Governess, seems to be forbidden to write a letter is none other than Jacques Derrida. Deconstruction, I would argue, is the new form of psychoanalytical criticism. Where the psyche was, there language shall be. Which is not to say that that is all that deconstruction is—or isn't. It succeeds where psychoanalysis fails because instead of attempting to provide theoretical explanations it reproduces and reworks the fictions and figurations that it analyses.

## VI

In all this discussion of jokes I have so far excluded from consideration those whom the joke puts in a somewhat worse position than mere displeasure, namely women, whom jokes exclude, or more precisely erase. All jokes are structurally dependent on the elimination of woman, who in that sense can hardly be said to be 'taken in' by them: indeed it is woman's very refusal to be taken in, to be seduced, that leads to the development of the joke in the first place.

In so far as jokes are a 'taking in' they are a form of seduction, a leading astray; they develop as a joke when a first seduction is frustrated:

The ideal case of a resistance of this kind on the woman's part occurs if another man is present at the same time—a third person—for in that case an immediate surrender by the woman is as good as out of the question. This third person soon acquires the greatest importance in the development of the dirty joke (*Jokes*, 143).

The third person comes to replace the woman as the addressee of the joke so that gradually

in place of the woman, the onlooker, now the listener, becomes the person to whom the dirty joke is addressed, and owing to this transformation it is already near to assuming the character of a joke (143).

In this sense, the dirty joke provides the origin and structural paradigm of all joke telling. It is constituted by the 'simultaneous presence, and interference of a third person', an intersubjective structure which reproduces the structure of the oedipal triangle, leading Weber to wonder whether this implies that the Oedipus complex is simply a dirty joke. The joke book was written in fact at the same time as the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*: Ernest Jones tells us that Freud kept the two manuscripts on adjoining tables and added to one or the other according to his disposition—no doubt according to whether he was in a good or a bad mood. One can't help wondering whether sometimes he might have mistakenly added a paragraph to the wrong manuscript.

The link between intersubjective structure of the joke and the castration that provides the grand finale to the Oedipus complex leads to a further consideration of the relation of woman to the joke, and of the relation of woman to the critical phenomena that I have been analysing. The action of being 'taken in' by the Oedipus complex involves nothing less than the construction of subjectivity through a process which produces the

positionality—and uncertainty—of the subject and its sexual identity. In Lacan's formulation, the constitution of the subject repeats the structure of the joke even more exactly, viz. in the exclusion of woman. As Jacqueline Rose puts it, the status of the phallus in human sexuality 'enjoins on the woman a definition in which she is simultaneously symptom and myth':

In so far as it is the order of language which structures sexuality around the male term, or the privileging of that term which shows sexuality to be constructed within language, so this raises the issue of women's relationship to that language and that sexuality simultaneously.<sup>19</sup>

As Rose makes clear, uncertainty of meaning and uncertainty of sexual identity both occur in relation to the arbitrary symbolisation of the phallus as difference and division.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that the locus of non-meaning, the refusal of the phallus's imposture, of phallogocentrism as such, which we have encountered in the texts that have been discussed, must be of interest to the criticism that calls itself feminist. The relations between such an interest and those of deconstruction are well known from the alliance of feminism and deconstruction in the work of such critics as Jane Gallop, Penny Kamuf and Gayatri Spivak. Indeed, to judge by the *Diacritics* Feminist issue Derrida himself seems to be virtually regarded by feminists as an honorary woman.

If, as Shoshana Felman suggests, 'the one characteristic by which a "Freudian reading" is generally recognised is its insistence on sexuality, on its crucial place and role in the text' then in an important sense a feminist reading is the truest Freudian reading, and the appropriation of psychoanalysis by feminism, is entirely correct. I offer no prescriptions, however, merely a description of what it seems to me has occurred relatively recently: the appropriation of psychoanalysis by feminism. It is no coincidence that the latest translation of Lacan is presented as a book on feminine sexuality: the exposure of the constant difficulty of subjection to the law by which 'individuals must line up according to an opposition (having or not having the phallus)' constitutes part of the same project for psychoanalysis and for feminism (28-9). More recently in *Feminist Review*, asking whether psychoanalysis is a new orthodoxy for feminism, Rose makes a claim for the political effectivity of their conjunction while also warning of the potential backwater that can occur when an institutionally marginalised discourse appropriates another institutionally marginalised one:

Psychoanalysis finally remains one of the few places in our culture where our experience of femininity can be spoken as a problem that is something other than the problem which the protests of women are posing for an increasingly

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Lacan and the *École freudienne*, *Feminine Sexuality*, eds. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, trans. Jacqueline Rose (London, 1982), 57, 54. Further references will be cited in the text.

<sup>20</sup> Rose points out that 'the question then becomes not so much the 'difficulty' of the feminine sexuality consequent on phallic division, as what it means, given that division, to speak of the 'woman' at all ... As the place onto which lack is projected, and through which it is simultaneously disavowed, woman is a 'symptom' for the man. Defined as such, reduced to being nothing other than this fantasmatic place, the woman does not exist' (48). At the same time insofar as woman is exalted into the place of the Other and made to stand in for its truth, she is simply a means of closing off uncertainty, of guaranteeing the semblance of meaning and the consistency of the phallus.

conservative political world. I would argue that this is one of the reasons why it has not been released into the public domain.<sup>21</sup>

If deconstruction and feminism are the substitutive places for psychoanalysis now that psychoanalytic criticism as such as become impossible, we might end by asking whether their taking in psychoanalysis prevents *them* from being taken in according to the kinds of ways that have here been described. Have they taken the joke out of the joke, or at least turned it on its teller? Feminism, as with all politics, is no laughing matter, and it is no laughing matter to be taken in, inscribed in the process of subjectivity as a woman. The worry of Mitchell, Rose, and of Jane Gallop, seems to be focused on the continuing refusal of women to be taken in—seduced—by psychoanalysis: a recalcitrance which perpetuates the whole structure as it stands. Rose argues that the feminist opposition to Lacan that claims an originary femininity rather than an instituted fictional difference is a repetition of the trap of a notion of a primordial femininity, relegating women outside of language and history, that had already occurred as a reaction to, and repression of, Freud in the so-called ‘great debate’ of the twenties and thirties. It was this version of femininity that Lacan argued against in his plea for a return to Freud.

And deconstruction? It certainly appreciates jokes, and likes to share a joke with a text and tell it to a reader, a strategy that leads jokee-critics to complain uncomprehendingly of its frivolity. Yet there are also lots of traps in deconstruction, and not only for its critics. It is significant, I think, that for all the brilliance of Weber’s reading of Freud it is one from which the engagement with the question of feminine sexuality has entirely disappeared. And when sexuality disappears, no doubt to take the form of substitution, one is very decidedly back within the realm of the joke, the dirty joke in fact, a kind of joke of which Freud discreetly gives no examples—no doubt fearing that they might not come off. However, just to affirm that, though I may be beyond a joke, I am not beyond telling a joke, and to show that I too am reluctant to get beyond a joke, I end with the following from the jokes book, which, after the spinach joke, which is my favourite, and the salmon-mayonnaise joke, which is clearly Freud’s, is still not quite as good a joke as most psychoanalytic theory:

A gentleman entered a pastry-cook’s shop and ordered a cake; but he soon brought it back and asked for a glass of liqueur instead. He drank it and began to leave without having paid. The proprietor detained him.

‘What do you want?’ asked the customer.

‘You’ve not paid for the liqueur’.

‘But I gave you a cake in exchange for it’.

‘You didn’t pay for that either’.

‘But I hadn’t eaten it’.

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<sup>21</sup> Jacqueline Rose, ‘Femininity and Its Discontents’, *Feminist Review* 14 (1983), 19.

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