

FROM STRUCTURALIST TO POSTSTRUCTURALIST PSYCHOANALYSIS

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Abstract

In structuralist times, Levi-Strauss forwarded the notion of a structural (obviously) unconscious, functioning according to simple, formal laws of organisation and being akin to what Paul Ricoeur called a “Kantian unconscious”, to a “compartmentalised system without any reference to a thinking subject”. In the wake of structuralism, psychoanalysis seems to fall back, yet again, on the biological input which constituted, for that matter, its primordial inspiration (Freudism has often been indicted for biologizing excesses (Laplanche) or even dismissed as a (crypto)biologism (Sulloway)). If the structuralist psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan shoved the unconscious into the abstract tiers of language, enouncing the principle according to which the unconscious is “structured as a language,” poststructuralist representatives of psychoanalysis, such as Didier Anzieu, for example, make a decisive swerve back to corporeality and, implicitly, to Freud. I argue that the instruments provided by the poststructuralist psychoanalysis allow for a more permissive analysis, which no longer remains steeped in the rigid confines of a “system” and does no longer have to pay its dues to structure, considered by structuralists to have been inherent in things.

Keywords: Poststructuralist psychoanalysis, *moi-peau*, psychotic enclave, mechanism of defence, inner coherence.

1. Introduction

In structuralist times, Levi-Strauss forwarded the notion of a structural (obviously) unconscious, functioning according to simple, formal laws of organisation and being akin to what Paul Ricoeur called a “Kantian unconscious”, to a “compartmentalised system without any reference to a thinking subject”.

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If the structuralist psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan shoved the unconscious into the abstract tiers of language, enouncing the principle according to which the unconscious is “structured as a language,” (Lacan 15) poststructuralist representatives of psychoanalysis, such as Didier Anzieu, for example, make a decisive swerve back to corporeality and, implicitly, to Freud.

Here's how Anzieu himself states his approach:

I attach a great deal of importance to the body, to the biological root of psychic life, to the relations between the psychic *Moi* and the corporeal *Moi*, to their limits and to the latter's fluctuations and to all the material of primary sensations which will be articulated, subsequently, to the drives, and will organise themselves into phantasms and conflicts. (Anzieu, *Une peau* 48 (translation mine))

2. Objectives

Yet this Freudian traditionalism is cautiously exercised and there is, apparently, as I set out to demonstrate, no decisive positioning into the consideration of body as the cause of knowledge and of psychical life. Rather, it is postulated as being only the material and natural condition of their activity:

Si le psychisme s'ancre dans le biologique, qui en est le support, il se situe néanmoins à un niveau d'organisation bien différent où s'effectue une mise en sens. (Assoun & Zafiroopoulos 34)

On their quest for “new metaphors”, certain psychoanalysts, borrowing concepts developed recently in physics and in biology, even talk of self-organisation, indeterminacy, discontinuity, arbitrariness, in genuine poststructuralist vein.

3. Discussion

Bearing this poststructuralist synopsis in mind, I should hopefully be able to forge the next link in my argumentative chain, namely that the unconscious, regardless of its definitional framework, is fundamental in cultural elaboration (and I shall identify illustrations of it in Clifford Geertz’s description of the Balinese cockfight). It appears, therefore, in close connection (and opposition) with the conscious. As announced by the anthropologist, the Balinese ritual is not merely a shallow, convulsive surge of animal hatred. It goes deeper than that: “Balinese see in fighting roosters – themselves, their social order, abstract hatred, masculinity, demonic power,” (Geertz 442) and secondarily, but not less importantly: “[T]hey also see the *archetype* of status virtue, the arrogant, resolute, honour-mad player with real fire.” (idem)

The uneasiness accompanies, therefore, the spectacle of a repressed reality which quits its recesses and steps to the foreground. The unnerving and unsettling quality of this “mock war of selves” translates, moreover, the unsettling quality of the unconscious itself, which is “played out”, by transfer, under the guise, and through the mediation of this cultural formation.

In acting as a mirror for the unknown within, the cockfight is both “symmetrical” to the reflected image (an invisible one, which is allowed visibility) and reversed, at the same time, as any mirror reflection, undergoing consequently a process of *lateralisation* – as Gerard Pommier calls it:

The lateralisation of the human being is imposed with necessity, because the relation between the image and the mirror is necessarily reversed, and because this image constitutes our “true” psychical body, firstly alienated in the Other. In the act we perform with a view to appropriating this body, we must submit to the constraints of this symmetry and as a result, we become ourselves lateralised. Our body will be, therefore, “psychically” divided by the repression, cleft in the aftermath of the spatial organisation involved in it. (Pommier 330-1)

In other words, the Balinese doesn’t *find* himself in this mirror, rather, he *discovers* himself: “In the cockfight, then, the Balinese forms and discovers his temperament and his society’s temper at the same time” (Geertz 451) – whereof the disquietful feeling which accompanies the playing-out of his “inside”, which inherently preserves the strange imprint of the repressed signification. The idea is implicit in the attributes Clifford Geertz ascribes to roosters engaged in the fight. They are “surrogates of their owners’ personalities”, “animal mirrors of psychic form”.

The repression follows a trajectory which ends, as I said, in reversal, in “lateralisation”: The “inside” can be successfully forced into the “outside” with the provision that the “inside” has a repressed status. Once the repressed reality is forced into resurfacing, the expectations that someone must make good on the promise of visibility and of translation, could be met with even in an oblique manner: by assigning it a warm, camouflaged “underneath” to the “outside”, away from immediate recognition:

The slaughter in the rooster ring is not a depiction of how things literally are among men, but what is almost worse, of how, from a particular angle, they imaginatively are. (Geertz 416)

Does the subject gain something from appropriating, in a Hegelian manner, what he rejects and represses? No. He gains nothing. But it is this nothing that will turn into the good awaiting at the end of this void operation, which, moreover, ensures his/her psychic survival.

Lacan thought that the aim of psychoanalysis was that of urging and guiding people in realising (read accomplish, fulfil) their repressed desires, thus decreeing that desire was the only important element, regardless of its nature. The post-Lacanian Didier Anzieu opposes his forerunner (and master, for that matter), arguing that the liberation of desire, savage by nature, is a dangerous act, to the point of jeopardizing the very life of the subject.

In our case, Anzieu’s reservations with regard to the liberation of the repressed desire may be said to have been confirmed – judging from a psychoanalytical point of view.

I dare say, at this point, that the cockfight gives vent in a vicarious and thus, harmless manner, to repressed desires which, if actualised, would result in a bloodbath. The cockfight is, consequently, a reflection of a pre-existing sensibility analogically represented, a sensibility which is transferentially played out, enacted and thus rendered harmful. Briefly, it annihilates a “psychotic enclave.” (Dolto 34) We witness how the environment assumes, surprisingly, a function of defence.

Hans Loewald, another representative of what today stands in for and “amends” the Lacanian psychoanalysis, namely the poststructuralist psychoanalysis, has some interesting remarks on this relation between the subject and the outward reality – remarks which might prove illuminating for the proceedings of my analysis. Meditating upon this relationship (with reference to primary narcissism) he says that there is a stage, in the subject’s organisational development, when there is no distinction between the “interior” and the “exterior”, and this happens when the “inside” and the “outside” do not exist yet. (Loewald 17) He forwards the idea of a “primary reality”, where the subject exists only through its relationship with the “environment”. This “primary reality”, which is set in clear-cut opposition to the “psychical” reality is, as Loewald defines it, “une organisation spécifique au service d’une importante fonction de défense.” (Loewald 29) By means of it, its theoretician is capable of sidestepping the structural dichotomy subject/object, which did not allow for an exchange of defensive roles, and lures the process onto more permissive (poststructurally permissive) grounds. (Bass 313)

We can, thereby, conceive the cockfight as one such “primary reality”, which abandons the status of a distant, impervious “object” (-reality) and takes upon itself a function of defence, warding off, through the oblique discharge of repressed desires, the perils accompanying their blunt enactment.

One can imagine the risks involved in such a transfer, and the brittleness of this “primary reality” which acts like a vaccine, activating the virus in order to annihilate it. (Chodorow 901) Yet they are worth taking. Geertz ascertains to the risk presumption:

Fighting roosters is like playing with fire only not getting burned. You activate village and kingroup rivalries and hostilities, but in “play” form, coming dangerously close to the expression of open and direct interpersonal and intergroup aggression (something which, again, almost never happens in the normal course of ordinary life), but not quite, because, after all, it is only a cockfight. (Geertz 440)

The psychical self is a wounded one, we might say. Moreover, as Juillerat proposes, it is both closed and open, that is, both autonomous – and capable of constituting an independent identity – and dependable, constituting itself in and through the relation with an other. (13) In other words, it is an autonomous “subject”, as well as an applicant to the service of an “object” – to draw on the previous Loewaldian concepts, which prove to come in handy.

One cannot help but notice, in Geertz’s cockfight, the close connection between Balinese men and their roosters, which become, thus, almost extensions of their owners’ personality. Moreover, as Geertz remarks, they often refer to the roosters in terms of “I fought So-and-So.” (Geertz 422)

The contact with the other – in our case, the rooster – (pertaining to that “object” “primary reality”, the cockfight) is not entirely established on abstract bases. Didier Anzieu, who equates the unconscious itself with the body, would perceive this engagement with the other at the level of *skin*¹.

For Anzieu, the skin is the pivotal concept of his theoretical scaffolding:

La peau c’est *l’interface* (emphasis added) qui marque la limite avec le dehors et maintient celui-ci à l’extérieur, c’est la barrière qui protège de la pénétration par les avidités et les agressions en provenance des autres, êtres ou objets. La peau est un lieu et un moyen primaire de communication avec autrui, d’établissements des relations signifiants et de plus, une surface d’inscription des traces laissées par ceux-ci. (Anzieu *Le Moi-peau*, 45)

Anzieu goes so far as to coin a new psychoanalytic concept, which is meant to mobilise – and here I shall take over Valéry’s phrasing² – the profundity in us, which is our surface, namely the concept of *Moi-peau*.

This is the moment when the psychical *moi* differentiates itself from the corporeal *moi*, at the operational level, remaining identical with it, nevertheless, at the figurative level.

The risks of depersonalization are, as Anzieu remarks, pervasive in the image of a punctured envelope and equally, in the anxiety that all the vital substance leaks through the perpetrated breaches. Contextualizing Anzieu’s theorems to my analysis, I should say that the rooster – functioning, as I established, as a prosthesis of its owner’s imago – is transferentially assigned the role of saving the integrity of the *Moi-peau*, of the bodily envelope.

¹Didier Anzieu. *Une peau pour les pensées* : “je crois être profondément freudien, tout en étant modérément orthodoxe par rapport aux théories psychanalytiques régnantes, à la formule “l’inconscient est structuré comme un langage”, j’opposerai une formule implicite chez Freud : ‘l’inconscient c’est le corps’ le corps source des premières expériences sensori-motrices, des premières communications”, 89.

²Paul Valéry: *La Pléiade*, tome 2: “Ce qu’il y a de plus profond dans l’homme, c’est la peau”. “Et puis moelle, cerveau, tout ce qu’il faut pour sentir, pârir, penser...être profond [...], ce sont des inventions de la peau ! Nous avons beau creuser, docteur, nous sommes...ectoderme”, 215-6.

The responsibility may prove, nevertheless, a little too difficult, since the fighting roosters have spurs attached to their legs, in order to “hack each other to pieces.” (Geertz 422) We can understand why the Balinese are so intent on preserving the bodily integrity of their roosters, preventing, as much as possible, the blood drainage.

The puncturing, the tearing of the bodily envelope gets unconsciously associated with an impossibility of “containing” the psychical processes, which henceforth are perceived as disseminated. Breaching the container involves, consequently, it’s inevitable malfunctioning and, implicitly, the impossibility of keeping up the barrier it raised against the outside (the skin could have been perceived as a physical mechanism of defence). The spur attached to the opponent’s leg becomes, in all likelihood, a marker of a potential aggressiveness on the part of the other, liable to rip apart one’s psychical envelope, which would jeopardise one’s inner coherence, the very continuity of one’s self.

Such an act of aggressiveness would be, in Geertz’s terms, an instantiation of the “powers of darkness”, or of that “lumber room” which, for Lacan, designated the unconscious: “In identifying with his rooster, the Balinese man is identifying with what he most fears, hates – ‘The Powers of Darkness.’” (Geertz 420).

4. Conclusions

Retracing my steps, with self-reflexive and assessing intentness, I would conclude that the instruments provided by the poststructuralist psychoanalysis allow for a more permissive analysis, which no longer remains steeped in the rigid confines of a “system” and does no longer have to pay its dues to structure, considered by structuralists to have been inherent in things – rather, I would say, structure was in the mind.

Yet this analytic permissiveness works its wiles in ambivalent ways. Concepts such as indeterminacy, free play – glossed upon in previous chapters – contaminate the status of the analysis itself, which is downsized and downplayed to the status of mere interpretation which, according to Gadamer, the hermeneut, is “infinite”.

In fact, a psychoanalytic investigation cannot be other than tentative, conducted as it is on a reality which remains concealed, namely the reality of the *psyche*, with its array of representations and unconscious desires.

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