

THE PSYCHIC TRUTH OF FICTION: PSYCHOANALYTIC INTERPRETATION OF DRAMA AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Review article

Rustin, M and Rustin, M (2001) **Narratives of love and loss: Studies in modern children's fiction**. (2nd ed). London: Karnac (1987). ISBN: 1855752697. Pages 298.

Rustin, M and Rustin, M (2002) **Mirror to nature: Drama, psychoanalysis and society**. London: Karnac. ISBN: 1855752980. Pages 289.

Gavin Ivey
Department of Psychology
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg
Email: Iveyg@umthombo.wits.ac.za

Despite the seductive flicker of satellite television and the instantly accessible visual entertainment of computer games and DVD movies, people continue to read fiction and go the theatre. The fulfilment derived from immersion in the fictional worlds of books and the physicality of dramatic action endures, despite the technological onslaught of instant electronic gratification.

What needs are met through the relatively demanding engagement with literary fiction and the confines of theatrical space? Wherever people are emotionally invested in some or other entertainment activity there are theorists speculating on the activity's meaning and attraction, using various social or more narrowly psychological frames of reference. Often it is new experiences, states of mind, or patterns of relating made possible by technological innovation that become the focus of scrutiny. But the enduring allure of reading and watching theatre has always captured the attention of social theorists and psychologists, ensuring a steady flow of intellectual analysis of these fictional creations' influence on us.

Freud, of course, named the Oedipus complex after the tragic hero in a famous classical drama, and used his emergent psychoanalytic theory to interpret the latent meaning of myths, Shakespearian tragedies, and other literary works. A branch of literary theory based on the systematic application of psychoanalytic theory to the interpretation of fiction soon emerged. But the relationship between psychoanalysis -

the exemplary “hermeneutics of suspicion” - and creative literature has always been a mutually suspicious one. Freud contended that the mind aflame with creative genius was essentially no different from the minds of those less gifted, its symbolic expressions no less imbued with unconscious conflict than the dreams and domestic narratives of ordinary neurotics. The unconscious is a great leveller, and if our mundane expressions are saturated with unconscious residues, so too are fictional worlds, no matter how artfully and imaginatively constructed. Whether poem, novel or play, luminous traces of the author’s unconscious will be discernable to the psychoanalytic gaze.

What made this stance problematic, from the perspective of author and literary critic alike, was the risk of reducing an aesthetic endeavour to the purported unconscious conflicts of its author. No wonder much early psychoanalytic interpretation of creative literature met with suspicion and hostility. The celebrated contemporary literary theorist, Harold Bloom, is scathing in his evaluation of Freud’s interpretations of Lear, Macbeth, and Hamlet, dismissing Freudian literary criticism of Shakespeare as “a celestial joke” (1995). From Bloom’s perspective Freud is a “prose-poet of the post-Shakespearean”, crudely systematizing insights into the human condition that Shakespeare had observed centuries before. Responding to Freud’s assertion that Hamlet suffered from an Oedipus complex, Bloom (1995:376) contends that Freud “had a Hamlet complex, and perhaps psychoanalysis is a Shakespeare complex!”. In Freud’s reductive interpretation of Hamlet the most complex Shakespearean hero, who taught “the world the lesson of ambivalence”, is “reduced to a case for analytic treatment” (ibid:385). One need not agree with Bloom’s analysis of Freud as suffering from Shakespeare envy to appreciate his difficulties with Freud’s wild analysis of Shakespeare’s characters.

We may protest that psychoanalytic criticism has moved on since Freud, becoming more sophisticated and refined. Bloom (1995:371), however, has not only Freud, but all psychoanalytic criticism in his sights when he argues: “Whether you believe that the unconscious is an internal combustion engine (American Freudians), or a structure of phonemes (French Freudians), or an ancient metaphor (as I do), you will not interpret Shakespeare any more usefully by applying Freud’s map of the mind or his analytical system to the plays”.

What Bloom omits from his bilious taxonomy is a strand of psychoanalytic literary analysis informed by Melanie Klein’s and Wilfred Bion’s post-Freudian object relations theory. I doubt whether Shakespeare’s chief defender would look any more kindly upon the interpretive efforts of these analysts, but they certainly bring a fresh perspective to our attempts to understand the imaginative worlds of fiction and drama, and shed some light on their appeal for us.

Two recent books, written by the same British authors, illustrate this contemporary engagement. Michael Rustin, a sociologist, and Margaret Rustin, a psychoanalytic child therapist, have approached different literary genres, namely drama and children’s fiction, from a perspective informed by a productive collaboration of social and psychoanalytic theory. The convergence of traditionally disparate disciplines on the playgrounds of drama and children’s literature is an intriguing prospect. The domain of

psychoanalysis is private space, the structuring of intrapsychic life that occurs when embryonic subjectivity is coaxed into specific developmental trajectory by particular family constellations and interactions, itself a sort of domestic drama. The domain of sociology is public space, the historically contingent social environment of institutions, relations, ideologies and practices. Any number of human phenomena could demonstrate the necessary intersection of these domains, but for the Rustins it is the creative genres of children's fantasy literature and those dramatic works marked by "a passion for truth".

It should be noted that fifteen years separate the original publication of **Narratives of love and loss: Studies in modern children's fiction** (1987), from **Mirror to nature: Drama, psychoanalysis and society** (2002). They are worth reviewing together, not simply for the related literary foci, but because a revised edition of **Narratives** was published in 2001. This new edition is testimony to the impact of Rowling's **Harry Potter** series on public interest in children's fiction, and the authors have included a postscript discussion of Harry Potter. Read together, these two books offer a unique perspective on the unconscious psychological appeal of imagined worlds, both adult and childhood.

Before discussing these books the object relations psychoanalytic frame of reference requires a brief introduction, as it informs all of the Rustins' work. Object relations theory represents an elaboration and radicalization of Freud's model of intrapsychic life. Object relations refer to internalized relationships with significant others felt to be installed as significant presences (mental objects) inside us in the course of our psychological development. From this perspective the internal world and the birth of selfhood are interpersonal accomplishments originating when the rudimentary infantile ego defensively evacuates distressing primitive feeling states by means of projective phantasy¹, locating these still meaningless experiences in its mother. The mother provides a container for these evacuated embryonic "bits of self", emotionally processing the feelings induced in her in the interactions with her infant. The infant then reintjects its processed projections along with a mother, or maternal object, capable of mindfully entertaining and thinking about the feelings induced in her. Internalization of this maternal object via unconscious phantasies of oral incorporation simultaneously gives rise to a metaphorical mental space or internal world in which experience "happens", and a concretely felt sense of a benign maternal presence inhabiting this internal space.

Identification with this good internal object gives rise to an evolving sense of self capable of tolerating, mentalizing (symbolizing and later thinking) about experience. The infant will not only have good maternal - and later paternal - experiences, however. Inevitably frustrating interactions with care givers, coloured too by the infant's projection of aggressive instinctual impulses onto them, results in the internalization of "bad" objects. These bad objects, which are also identified with, are felt to be persecutory and a threat to the survival of the good internal objects and the self's well-being. These bad

¹ Phantasy in Kleinian literature refers to unconscious mental activity, as distinguished from fantasy, which refers to conscious day-dreaming.

internal objects and the parts of the self identified with them are defensively split off and evacuated in phantasy, thereby protecting the good inside at the expense of creating an external world felt to be hostile and dangerous.

These repeated cycles of introjection and projection of experiences with others elaborate the internal world, resulting in a relatively integrated experience of self in which emotionally charged interactions with a number of internal objects occurs, is tolerated, and represented in the form of personified images and symbols. Psychological well-being depends on the state of this internal world and the self's capacity to integrate good and bad object experience, a developmental accomplishment that gives rise to rich, nuanced, and tolerably complex experiences of self and others.

However, in some cases our internal world is felt to be, intermittently or constantly, a war-like space in which our good internal objects are perpetually threatened by invading bad objects and parts of self identified with these objects. In this situation primitive defences based on the splitting off and projective evacuation of bad objects impoverishes the internal world and leads to the perception of the external world as malevolent and persecutory. Important to note is that the internal world is created and maintained by means of interaction between instinctually structured unconscious phantasies and realistic experiences of others in the external world. This means that the private intrapsychic world is simultaneously social, both informed by and influencing the public world of interpersonal engagements.

The Kleinian analysis of fictional works began with Klein herself (1955), with a detailed interpretation of a satanic pact in a novel, **If I were you**, by Julian Green (1950). Klein had no explicit intention of discussing the application of her theory to literature, but instead, uses the protagonist Fabian to demonstrate the related phenomena of introjection and projective identification - the processes whereby the infant constructs and consolidates a personal identity. She notes (1955:152) that the author of the story "has deep insight into the unconscious mind ... My interest in Fabian's personality and adventures, illustrating, as they do, some of the complex and still obscure problems of projective identification, led me to attempt the analysis of this rich material almost as if he were a patient". Joan Riviere (1955a,b) similarly uses poetry and material from plays to illustrate the nature of the internal object world. The characters in a play, she argues, are projected internal objects, disguised and dramatized.

In the case of Klein and Riviere literary art is simply enlisted to provide vignettes and case studies corroborating psychoanalytic theory, without regard for the formal properties or aesthetics of the work as literature. In this sense they do not add significantly to the Freudian work on literature, other than providing an alternative perspective on the postulated internal world of fictional characters. The same cannot be said of Hanna Segal (1955), arguably the most influential Kleinian author writing about literature. Unlike Klein and Riviere she is interested in understanding the psychodynamics of literary creation and reader/listener reception, as well as what distinguishes good from bad literature. For Segal creativity and the capacity to use symbols is bound up with painful experiences of infantile loss and mourning, occasioned

by the phantasy that one's good internal objects have been killed off by one's own destructive impulses. This loss need not involve the actual death or permanent disappearance of the infant's mother, but may involve the loss of the breast in weaning, or the micro-losses experienced when mother is elsewhere and not instantly responsive to her baby's cries.

To cope with this experience of loss and mourning the infant installs (assimilates) and restores – through reparative phantasy - the concretely felt image of the mother as an internal object in the self. The external object or situation is thus lost and mourned, but is compensated by the experience of an internal object, repaired and revived by loving feelings directed toward it. This successful work of mourning allows the lost object, now internalized, to be symbolized in dream images, visual art, or literary creations. In Segal's (1955:397) words, "I suggest that such an assimilated object becomes a symbol within the ego. Every aspect of the object, every situation that has to be given up in the process of growing, gives rise to symbol formation. In this view symbol formation is the outcome of loss, it is a creative act involving the pain and the whole work of mourning".

The creative use of symbolism in any artistic creation is thus, unconsciously, a reparative act, imbued with the emotional significance of loss and the desire to represent in some medium (poetry, prose, visual art, etc.) a restored and revived internal world. In her 1955 paper Segal gives us one of the most beautiful passages ever written by a psychoanalyst: "I have quoted Proust at length because he reveals such an acute awareness of what I believe is present in the unconscious of all artists: namely, that all creation is really a re-creation of a once loved and once whole, but now lost and ruined object, a ruined internal world and self. It is when the world within us is destroyed, when it is dead and loveless, when our loved ones are in fragments, and we ourselves in helpless despair – it is then that we must re-create our world anew, reassemble the pieces, infuse life into dead fragments, re-create life" (p390).

If these are the dynamics of artistic creation, as Segal claims, then what elicits a sense of aesthetic appreciation or fulfilment in the spectator or reader? This inheres, she claims, in a dual unconscious identification - with the author/artist's experience of creating the work, and with the work as a representation of the creator's internal world. Using the example of a classical tragedy, where the fated consequences of a hero's actions are complete destruction, Segal imagines the reader's response: "The author has, in his hatred, destroyed all his loved objects just as I have done, and like me he felt death and desolation inside him. Yet he can face it and he can make me face it, and despite the ruin and devastation we and the world around us survive. What is more, his objects, which have become evil and were destroyed have been made alive again and have become immortal by his art. Out of all the chaos and destruction he has created a world which is whole, complete and unified" (Segal, 1955:399-400).

Readers are thus deeply moved when the play invites them to re-experience their own early anxieties, to mourn the fate of their own internal objects, symbolized by the dramatic characters, and to re-establish these objects by means of identification with the author's creative expression. The above summary of the internal world, as Kleinian

object relations theorists understand it, provides the context for the argument of **Narratives of love and loss**. The authors do not set this theoretical context themselves, although I think it can be assumed.

The title suggests two primary childhood concerns thematically dominant in children's fiction, namely the loving attachments and dependency relations that children form with adult care givers, and the fear, or experience of, losing these. With these universals in mind the authors' focus is on "the imaginative and emotional aspects of children's experience" as this is symbolically portrayed in British post-war children's fantasy fiction. The stories chosen are those depicting "states of mind and feeling, and also sometimes experiences of the social world, which have a representative and truth-bearing quality in relation to their intended readerships" (2001:2).

From the outset it can be seen how this project differs from traditional psychoanalytic literary criticism. Firstly, the focus is not on great works of adult fiction, but on the relatively ignored (by literary critics, anyway) world of children's stories. Secondly, the authors' psychology is not the focus of investigation, and the aim is thus not to interpret the authors' presumed unconscious motives and conflicts projected into fictional characters. The emphasis, rather, is on the stories as "symbolic equivalents or containers" for the states of mind of young readers or listeners. Children's fiction at its best is captivating, not simply because it is entertaining, but because it resonates symbolically with core conflicts and anxieties of the child's internal world, and provides a narrative structure for metaphorically expressing and containing these. Children thus identify powerfully with the fictional characters, whose circumstances, struggles, and feelings echo their own.

What is consistent with traditional psychoanalytic literary criticism is the fact that these characters are discussed "as though they possessed all the complex and interrelated feelings of actual people". This calls to mind Bloom's denunciation of Freud for regarding Hamlet as just another oedipal case study. The Rustins are mindful of the problems of making psychoanalytic inferences "in a fictional context in which such speculations can have no actual referent". They justify this, however, by arguing that the authors of good stories have peopled their fictional worlds with characters imagined to be real, and that these characters' "realness" derives from the authors' psychological intuition of the way people "thus imagined are or would be". This is interesting because, while Freud regarded authors as neurotics and analysed their unconscious conflicts in their creative texts, the Rustins regard gifted authors as being more akin to analysts, displaying an unusual, though theoretically unschooled, understanding of children's thoughts and feelings. This psychological grasp of children's internal worlds parallels the general insights of child psychoanalysis, and gives imagined characters a texture, depth, and emotional resonance. This permits both children's identification with them and analytical interpretation of them as psychologically real people.

No psychoanalytic book on children's fiction can escape comparison with Bettelheim's seminal work on fairy tales, **The uses of enchantment: The meaning and importance of fairy tales** (1978). The Rustins discuss the similarities and differences between their

work and Bettelheim's. One obvious commonality is that fairy tales, like modern fantasy fiction, can be interpreted as "condensed metaphors of unconscious conflict". But, the authors note, the classic fairy tale world is a much more violent, physically dangerous world than the settings in modern children's fiction. This is an interesting point, one the Rustins account for in sociological terms. Classical fairy tales were written at a time in European history when disease, scarcity, social conflict and the comparative absence of human rights made the world a realistically more frightening place. Moreover, childhood was not recognized and protected as a developmental stage free from adult responsibilities and anxieties. These historical circumstances found expression in frequently terrifying fairy tale scenarios, characters and events, to which only magical solutions could be envisaged. More favourable social circumstances and the contemporary emphasis on childhood as a privileged and protected developmental phase has produced literature in which the challenges and adversities faced, and the solutions sought, are less extreme, referring more to internal difficulties and resources in generally safer social environments. As the authors' put it: "Since real life-and-death tragedies are a less common experience of childhood than they once were, it seems understandable that they should figure less directly as the subject-matter of writing for modern children, and can leave more space for the exploration of the child's inner world whose joys and terrors may correspond less directly to externally-perceived reality" (2001:21).

This is a valid point, but South African readers will be struck by how grimly discrepant the worlds of our children are from those of the first world children the book refers to. In contemporary Africa and other 'developing' societies, Aids, child rape, physical abuse, exploitation, starvation, and war ensure that the horrifying world of classical fairy tales is far more recognizable than the sheltered world portrayed in European children's fiction.

Thus far I have presented **Narratives'** analytical perspective, without saying anything about the literature that is its focus. The work of ten authors is discussed, each in a separate chapter. The range is wide, from Philippa Pearce's story, **Tom's midnight garden** to C S Lewis' **Chronicles of Narnia**, and Lynne Reid Banks' **The Indian in the cupboard**. All these authors, as the Rustins demonstrate, ably portray various aspects of their child audience's internal and social worlds in a way that is emotionally rich and evocative. However, it is the postscript of the new edition of **Narratives** that will be of particular interest to many readers, as it is an almost thirty-page discussion of G K Rowling's **Harry Potter** series. So popular has Harry Potter become, that the fourth book in the series, **Harry Potter and the goblet of fire**, became the fastest selling title of any kind in history (Newsweek, July 17, 2000). Psychoanalytic authors, of course, have responded to the series' success with various analyses of Harry (Noel-Smith, 2001; Lake, 2003).

Rowling, argue the Rustins, has reinvented the fantasy genre by means of a skilful melding of traditional fantasy elements (fairy tale references, magic spells) with those of other genres (gothic novels, thrillers, and science fiction) and contemporary technology. These aspects, together with an acute awareness of the relationship and identity issues confronting children, allow her readers "to recognize themselves again as the special

subjects of their own fiction". Rowling's stories are not merely entertaining adventures because she understands and speaks to children's unconscious emotional life.

Harry is an orphan who is adopted by cruel and neglectful relatives (the Dursleys), who privilege their own son (Dudley) over him. This evokes the common childhood fantasy that one's loving real parents have been replaced by bad surrogates, a defensive solution to the reality that parents are typically "whole objects", combining good and bad qualities. The splitting of good from bad announces "a world of absolutes. This is the world of a child who is not yet able to think in more complex and subtle ways about himself and others. There is only good and bad, and both are extreme – only victim, persecutor, heroic rescuer" (2001:274). The special child Harry, in the course of growing up, is faced with the reality that emotional development means acknowledging that the bad outside reflects the bad inside oneself, and that true moral awareness proceeds from confronting and reconciling internal contradictions. What makes this difficult is the possibility, or worse, the reality, of loss. Integral to Harry's psychology is the terrible experience of early loss – the murder of his beloved parents by the evil Voldemort.

Harry straddles two worlds, the mundane world of everyday reality (the Muggle world), and the magic world. The latter is "the world beneath the surface, the unconscious, the difficult to integrate elements in human nature and experience" (2001:276). This world is not only exciting and imaginative, defying the rules of conscious reality, but also dangerous and disturbing. It inserts itself into the cracks of consciousness, demanding acknowledgement. The terror and avoidance of this unconscious world is represented by Mr. Dursley, who is deeply disturbed by the awareness that there is "something in this world which does not fit the way he has organized his perception of reality. His obsessional efforts to disregard any disturbing observation ... are motivated to by the need to control the panic that surges up whenever any questioning of his assumptions is prompted" (pp274-275).

Self-awareness and growth, of course, require the capacity to challenge one's assumptions and tolerate the inevitable destabilization of one's taken-for-granted self, not knowing what emotional reconfiguration will result. Harry's leaving for the boarding school of Hogwarts embodies such a departure from the familiar. Once at Hogwarts, Harry is confronted, not only with the discipline of refining and applying his magical powers, but with finding out the truth of his origins and the circumstances of his parents' death and his escape from the Voldemort. Much of the appeal of the Potter series lies in its portrayal of the ongoing battle between good and evil. Evil, as Rowling intuitively understands, resides internally, despite its symbolic depiction in the form of frightening external figures. The Rustins' discussion of evil in psychoanalytic terms is perhaps the highlight of this chapter. Voldemort is "the outer representation of the forces of death (hatred, destructive envy, a world turned upside down), and the struggle between him and Harry is also the struggle within Harry to side with his better self" (p287). In Harry, as is the case with all of us, is an internal division. Part of us is identified with our good internal objects, while another part, associated with our destructive impulses, is identified with the bad. The projected bad assumes terrifying external manifestations. For example, there are the Dementors, "black-robed hooded creatures with rotting limbs

... sucking life and hope from all who encounter them” (p280). Harry, particularly vulnerable to the Dementors owing to the early loss of his parents, must learn to defend himself against them. This involves learning to “keep in touch with his memory of his mother and father – his good internal objects, we might say. It is this that gives him the strength to resist the depression and despair that draws him perversely to the Dementors” (p280).

The personification of evil, though, is Voldemort, whom Harry fears but simultaneously feels connected to. Voldemort was abandoned by his father as a baby and is now preoccupied with “tearing families apart”. He thus reveals the “deep identifications that underlie the compulsion to destroy – to become the destroyer as a way of escaping the fear of annihilation” (p288). Voldemort finds a perverse solution to the experience of abandonment within his family, creating a criminal gang, the Death Eaters, which functions as a destructive substitute for the family that failed to meet his infantile needs: “He will make for himself a perverse version of what life has denied him. The infant in the midst of a family devoted to him out of love is replaced by the monster in the midst of his gang who are compelled to serve him out of fear – a fascist reordering of the basis of human existence, in truth” (2001:289).

This solution represents the antithesis of the creative work of mourning that Segal describes. By attacking families Voldemort attacks the creative intercourse that produces new life. He, in short, represents the death instinct, which forms such a central role in Kleinian psychoanalysis. Interestingly, the Rustins make reference to destructiveness but not to the death instinct, perhaps because this controversial concept does not sit well with them. Whether or not one embraces the concept of the death instinct, the presence of a destructive force operating in the psyche is widely accepted. Because this threatens our good internal objects it is the source of much anxiety and guilt. Harry’s uncomfortable connection to Voldemort is based on his awareness of a destructive part of him; a part he irrationally suspects was implicated in his mother’s death.

These omnipotent destructive phantasies are part of normal development, and are moderated by maternal containment and our awareness of counterpoising reparative loving feelings. In Harry’s case, however, his destructive phantasies appear to have had devastating consequences as his parents were indeed killed. Actual loss of parental figures thus places an additional mental burden on a child, giving reality to phantasy and evoking sometimes unbearable guilt and depressive feeling: “His nightmare after the visit to the forest when he sees the death of the Unicorn is one in which the white and innocent animal, linked to infantile memories of his mother’s beloved body, cannot be saved from the ‘hooded figure dripping with blood’. This is a dream vision relating to his memories of his mother’s death and his unbearably painful anxiety that he failed to save her. The throbbing scar represents his confused thoughts – was he the one who bit her and injured her mortally? The baby’s fury at the mother who weans him, who in Harry’s case leaves him by dying, has not been differentiated from the external attack that killed her” (2001:279).

What allows Harry to stand up to Voldemort's evil power is his strong connection with his good internal objects and his good relationships with mentoring and protective teachers. Harry's mental scales are tipped in favour of good, but not in a way that negates awareness of the bad and the spectre of loss that accompanies it: "Death is to be part of Harry's world as it has been since his early loss. He is the boy who lives and also the boy who knows about death" (p290). In an interview, Rowling gives a moving report of reading an extract in her own work in which Harry sees his dead parents: "Not until I'd reread what I'd written did I realize that that had been taken entirely from how I felt about my mother's death" (**Newsweek**, July 17, 2000, pp44-45). This statement lends support to Segal's theory of literary creativity, discussed earlier, a theory that implicitly informs the Rustins' analysis.

I have discussed their reading of Harry Potter in detail to capture something of the rigour and verve of their interpretation of this modern child hero and his widespread appeal. This chapter of **Narratives** is not exceptional in this regard. The authors know and love the fiction they examine, and their psychoanalytic understanding of it is both credible and passionate. There is an ideological slant to their interpretation, which is hardly surprising given that socialist politics has strongly informed Michael Rustin's previous work. In the chapter on Harry Potter the wizard world is "a representation of a non-materialist life-style devoted to understanding and the imagination", and Hogwarts is described as a "hotbed of a kind of counterculture" (p268). At another point the authors' politics is more overt: "Perhaps when the child audiences of these unexpectedly revolutionary (if tongue-in-cheek) works of art grow to maturity, an adult utopian politics will be reborn!" This rousing aside is not typical of the Rustins' writing, but it does emphasise the fact that they approach the interpretation of children's stories with a keen sensitivity to the fiction's social and ideological significance. Their own ideological position is also compatible with the psychoanalytic interpretive framework they employ. Contrary to allegations that psychoanalysis is intrinsically conservative and elitist, it has long been allied with progressive politics and the theorisation of social oppression. In Terry Eagleton's (1983:192) words, psychoanalysis is "a theory at the service of a transformative practice, and to that extent has parallels with radical politics".

Ironically, despite Margaret Rustin's status as a child psychotherapist, the sections comparing the transformative practice of child psychotherapy with the emotional transformation effected by fictional narrative are weak. Psychoanalytic psychotherapy is probably the uncontested exemplar of theoretically informed pursuit of one's emotional truth. The parallel drawn between children's fiction and the interpretations of children's play in an analytic setting – they both disclose and communicate deep psychological truths about the child's internal world - is thus a bold one. In fact, contend the Rustins, fiction has the edge on psychoanalysis, not in the production of truth but in truth's poetic rendering. These children's stories metaphorically articulate emotional truth, but in a manner owing "nothing to more deductive or scientific procedures. They generate equally truthful and usually more compelling descriptions of the world, in their imaginary mode" (2001:16).

The psychotherapist's perceptions of the child patient's unconscious emotional truths are conveyed by means of direct interpretive statements about the hidden thoughts and feelings that emerge indirectly in the context of spontaneous therapeutic play, and how the patient avoids thinking about and experiencing these. In children's literature the same thoughts and feelings are expressed, but indirectly, "through metaphor and allegory – symbolic forms which can carry depths of reference and meaning within deliberately simplified systems of natural objects, persons, and actions" (2001:18). The child reader/listener's own imaginative resonance or identification with the characters' situations and actions is spontaneously elicited and contained by the story structure, without any knowing adult interpreting the identifications or explaining the parallels with the child's life.

Entering the world of stories, in other words, can be healing, or at least, containing, without the child gaining conscious insight into how the fiction is animated by his or her projections. Precisely what makes this possible is not explicitly stated, nor is anecdotal evidence for this assertion provided. The authors are enchanted with the psychologically facilitating function of fiction, but clear explanations of what possibly happens in the child's mind when reading or listening to stories are not provided. Identification, of course, does occur, but, as Hanna Segal (1955:399) points out, the satisfaction arising from identification with specific fictional situations or characters "can be derived from bad as well as from good art". How is it precisely that the good fiction the Rustins are concerned with exerts its psychological influence? The work of Christopher Bollas is suggestive in this regard. In **Being a character** (1992), he argues that we need a theory of unconscious reception to complement the theory of repression and to extend our notion of unconscious processes. Whereas repression – and projection, I would add – function to avoid conscious judgment, reception facilitates unconscious development by avoiding conscious *intrusion*. He writes: "Thus with reception the ego understands that unconscious work is necessary to develop a part of the personality, to elaborate a phantasy, to allow for the evolution of a nascent emotional experience, and ideas or feelings and words sent to the system unconscious, not to be banished but to be given a mental space for development which is not possible in consciousness. Like the repressed idea, these ideas, words, images, experiences, affects, etc., constellate into mental areas and then begin to scan the world of experience for phenomena related to such inner work. Indeed, they may possibly seek precise experiences in order to nourish such unconscious constellations" (Bollas, 1992:74).

Perhaps something akin to Bollas' theory of reception is necessary to account for how fiction operates upon intrapsychic life.

While on the topic of how fiction is experienced, the authors also do not address the fact that children can become emotionally disturbed by stories, the characters entering their nightmares and the fictional scenarios provoking anxiety responses. The unconscious is, by definition, not a friendly territory, and whether or not the characters' overcome their difficulties or integrate the estranged parts of them, child readers'/listeners' responses may not necessarily be positive or containable by the story structure. The

intuitive interventions of an understanding adult may be necessary to help the child deal with the evoked anxieties.

This raises further questions concerning the narrative containment afforded by fiction compared with that provided by child psychoanalytic therapy. The authors do not suggest that fiction may replace psychotherapy in the case of disturbed children, but they fail to discuss what psychotherapy offers that reading cannot, namely the containment and theoretically informed understanding of another person in a structured, neutral setting.

I would also have liked to see more systematic discussion of the psychoanalytic theory informing the Rustins' analysis, specifically in relation to the body of psychoanalytic literary criticism. Rather than alienating those readers lacking a thorough grounding in psychoanalytic theory, a clear account of how psychoanalysis has tended to engage with literature, and how the Rustins' approach differs from this, might have proved useful. In the end, though, these criticisms do not detract from the fact that **Narratives** is a significant achievement and deserves a place next to Bettelheim's **The uses of enchantment** as one of the best psychoanalytic interpretations of children's literature available.

Fifteen years after **Narratives** was first published the Rustins' sustained interest in applying psychoanalytic theory to creative literature sees them exploring another genre, namely Western drama. **Mirror to nature** (2002) (the title derives from a quotation from **Hamlet**) begins by observing the striking overlap of the themes common to classical Western drama and psychoanalytic inquiry, namely familial and gender relationships, the generational tensions between parents and children, and the gendered tensions between men and women.

The object relations psychoanalytic framework is a particularly useful one to employ in this context. As Bollas (1999) notes, this way of listening "discovered a rich theatre". Comparing it to a Freudian listening stance, he writes: "The object-relational way of listening to the same material transforms the sequence of ideas into characters – treated as parts of the self or parts of the object – who constitute the theatre of transference" (p178). He is referring to the analytic patient's free associations, but one can see why such an interpretive language lends itself so well to the analysis of drama.

The authors' dramatic scope is broad, from Euripides to Shakespeare, to Beckett and Pinter. While drawing on a large body of dramatic commentary and criticism, the Rustins' psychoanalytic insights introduce an original perspective that emphasises the intrapsychic drama of the characters and the internal environments they inhabit.

Drama functions as a public symbolic space for the recognition and exploration of gendered and generational truths, bound up in universal familial configurations, while psychoanalysis pursues the same through the unconsciously scripted and idiosyncratic enactments of the therapeutic relationship. Linking the sociological interest in "drama as an expression of social conflicts with a psychoanalytic interest in it as an exploration of

primary relationships of sex and generation is the way in which such relationships are repeatedly represented in drama as crucial indicators of societal well-being or malaise” (2001:17).

Family relations are, of course, crucial to social continuity but, argue the authors, they are also “among the most sensitive barometers of societies’ capacities to care for their members”. Sexual relations, too, are essential for producing new generations, and thus their dramatic prominence, from a sociological perspective, is not surprising. However, despite women’s subordinate status to men in dramatic history, the nature and quality of male-female relationships is recognized as being essential to a society’s health. For example, destructive relationships with women contribute to the destruction of many tragic Shakespearean heroes, with devastating social consequences. This thesis is substantiated in the book’s close examination of marital interactions. **Macbeth**, an interesting case in point, is presented as a “tragedy of modern marriage”. This sounds simplistic, but the Rustins’ detailed examination of the destructive alliance between Macbeth and his wife corroborates the argument that what transpires in the institution of companionate marriage both reflects and shapes the fate of society: “Although marriage is a tragic failure in Macbeth, it is in fact the main positive point of reference in the play. We could see the play as a meditation on this emerging new form of modern life and intimacy, and the great pressures upon it in a world dominated by considerations of male violence and unrestrained conflict” (p84)

Drama presupposes an audience and leads to the question of what audience needs are satisfied by theatrical performance. The Rustins argue that because drama typically involves family relationships, “the imagined relationships of family members provide a natural point of identification and a powerful metaphor for reflecting on whatever anxieties there might be about their social conditions” (p19). The theatre space, in other words, is not simply an entertainment space, but something akin to a therapeutic space in which audience members encounter and engage with aspects of their own familial dramas by identifying with the characters and processing their subsequent emotional reactions. What we experience on stage involves an encounter with our actualized projections – parts of ourselves and internalized others based on our familial and social histories. The changing nature and social status of characters in the history of western drama (from royalty to middle class professionals and marginalized outcasts with indistinct identities) extends the therapeutic possibilities inherent in watching good drama while making more or deeper emotional demands on the audience. Identification with Beckett’s or Pinter’s characters “requires more universal and inclusive human sympathies, both with victims of violence, terror, and abuse and with its perpetrators, if audiences are to make use of drama to explore such unrecognized and unwanted aspects of themselves” (p24).

While cautious to avoid using characters to make speculative psychoanalytic inferences about the playwrights who created them, the authors’ ethical stance is visible in the implicit claim that the creation and dramatic elaboration of fictional people carries psychological responsibility. Thus, commenting on the despairingly closed, collusive, and sadomasochistic world of Pinter’s plays, they argue that he “seems to have found it

easier to create a seductive and perverse mental universe than to identify any believable way out of it. Pinter's imagination may itself have been impoverished as a consequence of recycled visions of deprivation and depravity, which can be addictive and enslaving in their impact on the mind" (p271). They are suggesting that Pinter has succumbed to the degenerative gravity of his own imaginative creations, thereby disabling his capacity to entertain more hopeful and healthy possibilities for them. The playwright's mind, in other words, has become a product of his characters, rather than vice versa. This interesting, though questionable, hypothesis carries a moral judgement. Why should Pinter's characters be redeemable? Why should their perversion be mitigated by concern or some capacity for more healthy relatedness? The danger here is that normative psychoanalytic criteria of psychic health – moral responsibility, self-reflection, creative interpersonal engagement, etc. – become the grounds for aesthetic judgement. We might wish that Pinter's characters were less perversely enslaved, but this says more about us than it does either about the characters or their creator. I'm reminded of a passage in the authors' first book, **Narratives of love and loss**, where they write that is "because these books are written for children, and with children as their central figures, that their authors are so reluctant to leave their readers without hope that life might at any rate be different in the future" (p21). Perhaps the Rustins, aware of the child aspects ever present in the adult reader/theatre-goer, and indeed themselves as critics, wish for a more hopeful ending than Pinter offers.

Reference to the theatre-goer brings to mind a difficulty concerning the Rustins' approach to drama, namely that theatre, unlike fiction, is performed. We cannot read a play without anticipating its enactment. This is not the same as imagining the characters and action in a novel; in drama words point to an awaited or remembered spectacle, a dramatization over which we have no control and which informs our hearing and experience of the dialogue. The physical space of the theatre, the casting, the actors' energy and delivery on the night, the director's interpretation – all these elements coalesce and collide with the internal worlds of each audience member to spontaneously reinvent the play with each performance. Some consideration of this would have enriched the Rustins' account of why and how drama moves us. In this regard a purely thematic discussion is necessarily limited.

The bringing together of sociological and psychoanalytic analysis is a strength but, sometimes, also a weakness of the book. The strength lies in contextualising intrapsychic processes with reference to the socio-historical events and ideologies often neglected by psychoanalytic authors. The weakness arises from the fact that the dual emphasis on intrapsychic and social factors sometimes results in a dispersal of focus and, sometimes, a lack of attention to the psychological. We see this, for example, in the chapter on Beckett. **Waiting for Godot** portrays characters "trapped in their own mental states". Beckett wrote the play shortly after the end of the 2nd World War and despite the lack of orienting clues as to who these characters are and where they come from, the Rustins' provide convincing evidence for the claim that **Godot** is Beckett's response to the unthinkable horrors of war: "The strangeness of these Beckett characters, the surreal quality of the scene and the dialogue, evoke the impossibility of

reaching an understanding of catastrophic events such as those of war, persecution, and torture” (p225).

Vladimir says at one point, “What is terrible is to have thoughts”, and it is clear that Beckett’s characters manifest psychotic states of mind. This is the internal landscape that the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion mapped so well, demonstrating how, to the psychotic part of the personality, thinking is a hateful activity that is evaded by means of primitive defences and mutilating attacks on one’s own mental apparatus. The Rustins’ mention the intolerance of reality and Bion’s concept, ‘nameless dread’, but not in a sustained or systematic manner that would allow readers to really understand psychotic states of mind. One is left with the impression that the characters’ psychic reality is simply an echo or response to a social catastrophe. This account does not do justice to the complexity of Bion’s thought or the states of mind he sought to understand. The decontextualised reference to difficult concepts such as nameless dread, without defining or explaining these with reference to Bion’s model of mind, projective identification, and the container-contained relationship between mother and infant, does not allow readers to understand Bion’s theory or consider its application in the Rustins’ analysis. Readers unfamiliar with Bion’s work will not understand what his theory is and how it is used; readers who are familiar with it will be irked by the explanatory “thinness” and lack of conceptual rigour in using Bion’s theory as an interpretive framework.

At other times, however, the posited relationship between the psychological and sociological is rich and convincing, especially when family dynamics are the authors’ focus. Take, for example, the following observation on Arthur Miller’s **Death of a salesman**: “The profound links explored by Freud between the compulsion to repeat in human life and the destructive forces within us are exemplified in this drama of failed mourning, manic denial, false selves, and failure of development. The intensity of the text does not fade with renewed study – indeed, if anything, the agony of it seems increased as one gets closer to the intolerable world the family all inhabit. The knitting-together of a psychologically credible intergenerational family nightmare and a picture of an atomized and harshly individualistic social fabric, which renders people even more vulnerable to the destructive forces within them, is Miller’s achievement. It is little surprise that this play also became a powerful film, achieving Miller’s aim to use drama to present modern society’s tragedies to its people as the Athenians did in their amphitheatres” (pp209-210).

While disappointed by the lack of psychoanalytic rigour and a clear account of the psychoanalytic framework employed, I am left with the overriding impression that this is a bold, passionate, and timely book. Beckett, state the Rustins, did not believe that the question of what his plays are about was a productive one as it “threatens to lead one away from the plays themselves”. Many other playwrights, I imagine, would feel similarly. In the case of **Mirror to nature**, though, the analysis is animated by respect and appreciation for the cultural gift of Western drama, and readers are more likely to find themselves inspired to read or re-read the plays discussed. Ronald Britton, another psychoanalytic lover of literature, made the following observation: “Since the decline of religion, art has assumed a more significant role as the provider of a shared area,

outside of the self, for the symbolic representation of those forever unseen unconscious phantasies that are the bedrock of psychic reality – the psychic counterpart to Kant’s noumena, the unknowable *things in themselves*. In my opinion, literature and the arts, at their best, are attempting to realise what is most profoundly internal in the external” (1998:119).

In both **Narratives** and **Mirror to nature** the Rustins have undoubtedly succeeded in demonstrating the psychic truth of fiction, and the role of object relations psychoanalytic theory in comprehending the symbolic representations of our internal worlds in drama and children’s literature.

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