

# Literature and Psychoanalysis: two lenses upon the primary scene\*

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## Abstract

Literature, as well as mythology, is not only an object of inquiry, but also a fundamental source of knowledge for psychoanalysis. In this paper, I will observe the primary scene through two different lenses, that of literature and that of psychoanalysis. In the context of an analytic group therapy, a primary scene acquires new meanings in the *après coup*. The primary scene is thus a fundamental riddle that inhibits or stimulates our search for knowledge and our epistemophilic impulse. In the literary theory debate, some authors draw a distinction between two constitutive elements of a story, the *fabula* and the *syuzhet*. The former is the series of events in their reciprocal and internal relations, whereas the latter is the literary structure or distribution of events in the story. On the basis of the assessment of some clinical material, I will consider whether the primary scene could be conceived as a *fabula* that expands itself each time according to the different ways of the *syuzhet*.

**Keywords:** literature; psychoanalysis; *fabula*; primary scene; *syuzhet*

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Literature, as well as mythology, is not only an object of inquiry, but also a fundamental source of knowledge for psychoanalysis. In fact, psychoanalytic knowledge swings not only between natural sciences and human or social sciences, but also between theoretical and poetical speculation.

It is a matter of fact that literature has always made an important contribution to the understanding of the deepest parts of the human mind. Thus, the question here is the following one: could the references from literature (as well as from other arts) be an essential part of the psychoanalyst's tools?

Sigmund Freud argued that psychoanalysts probably refer to the same sources and work on the same object as writers and other artists. He also added that the convergence of results seems to guarantee the correctness and the validity of the work carried out by psychoanalysts and artists.

In this paper, I will observe the primary scene through two different lenses, that of literature and that of psychoanalysis. In the context of analytic group therapy, a primary scene acquires new meanings in the *après coup*.

As to the primary scene (but also other recurrent scenes from childhood), Sigmund Freud swung between an ontogenetic thesis and a certain number of phylogenetic hypotheses. The child elaborates the scene of his or her parents' sexual intercourse in a phantasmal way, whether or not he or she was really there or only inferred it from some cues. For this reason, such a scene represents a psychoanalytic object that transcends the problem of its truth or falsity.

The primary scene takes form as the fundamental enigma that inhibits or stimulates our search for knowledge and our epistemophilic impulse.

"Oh, doctor, my child is 9 years old and he sleeps with my husband and me in our bed every night."

"And how long do you want him in your bed, until the beginning of university?"

The previous tit for tat was between Françoise Dolto and a mother who sought expert advice for her child's problems. We would have liked to give Paola the same reply as that of Françoise Dolto when, during a psychodrama session, she said she was not able to make her son sleep in his bedroom. But, in spite of its efficacy, we did not use a similar response. This is because it could not have worked in our context. But let's take a brief look at such a context.

Paola is a young lady who turns to us to solve an inhibition: she wishes to have a second child but, because her first pregnancy was particularly difficult, she is not able to take a clear decision. In the first trimester she suffered from 'hyperemesis gravidarum' and the risk of abortion, which forced her to a long period of rest. Apart from these physical sufferings, it was the story of her postpartum that left us quite puzzled. In fact, in spite of our many questions, such a story was limited to few words: "After his birth I could not breastfeed my child because I was really

tired for a long time. I was not able to do anything, I cried but I don't remember why. For two or three months I stayed in bed, I can't remember very well, it's a sort of memory lapse of three months."

In the first part of her therapy, Paola talked to the psychodrama group about her relationship with her parents. She said she was the eldest sibling and had always had the sensation of being neglected by her parents and mistreated by her father, especially after the birth of her sister. In fact, after this birth, the parents excluded her by sending her to the countryside to live with the grandparents. Paola often said she was jealous of her sister (the favourite of her parents) and she expressed her feelings of being excluded from the family. Furthermore, throughout a series of sessions, she talked of the problem of the relationship with her parents (who were also her employers) and she wondered about her inhibition in front of her father, even when the injustices she was subjected to were clearly evident.

During one of these sessions, the representation of a brief scene was proposed. In the scene, Paola is cooking something on the burner, her mother shows the food and her father sells this food and receives money and praise for his products. The construction of the scene is quite demanding. In the end, Paola is able to put her workbench in a corner of stage. In another corner there is a bench where her parents work. The father is the leading actor. Thus the brief presentation begins in which Paola, who was only supposed to intervene in the ongoing discussion a few times, as she was cooking, is not only unable to speak but, in a compulsive manner, she is also unable to turn her back on her parents. Sometimes she seems to turn to them to say something, but she is blocked and stares at them throughout the whole play.

Following the psychodrama scene, the discussion is on the reason why Paola was not able to look away from her parents and on her feeling of being excluded from the parental couple, which resulted from her cooking while turning her back on them.

In this situation, Paola is relieved by the intervention of another patient who talks about her difficulties with her child. This patient says she feels so sorry to see her child alone during the night that she cannot close the doors of the bedrooms. For this reason, every time she wants to make love to her husband, she is not relaxed at all.

It is only after the scene, and the other patient's words (perhaps as a consequence of them), that Paola is able to report on her ritual: "I feel a bit ashamed to admit it, but I think I do something worse than this because my son never sleeps in his bedroom. We are always all together in our bed, and to make love with my husband I have to wait for my son to fall asleep. Then I take him to his bedroom and, after making love, I go and fetch him and put him in our bed again. Of course, all this sequence takes place in absolute silence. I think I make a fool of myself."

Finally, in a session that took place some time later, Paola went back to speaking about the reason why she decided to start therapy, that is to say, her inhibition or

indecision as to whether to have another child. She tells of her jealousy of her sister, she fantasizes the possible jealousy of her son and she reports a case she had heard about, that of a child that became dumb after the birth of his brother. She says she was lucky when her sister was born: her grandparents were very devoted to her and they behaved as 'parents.' She stayed in her grandparents' home for many years because the first attempts of re-integration in her family failed due to a strong form of anorexia that only stopped when she went back in the countryside and her grandparents could feed her.

Paola often hinted at the 'primary scene' when she talked of her inhibition and her anger towards her parents. Such a scene comes into view when Paola is blocked and stares at her father and mother working together. However, we can face the problem only by starting from another point of view, that of Paola who is unable to exclude her son from her relationship with her husband. In the emergence of a deep identification with her son (who cannot be left out of the bed), the past traumatic experiences related to the primary scene re-surface. Paola cannot exclude her son because this exclusion represents a re-enactment of her trauma; the arrangement of a defined genealogical order would necessarily give Paola a precise role (as daughter on the one hand and as mother and a wife on the other hand), and thus a clear role in the family structure.

But the deepest meaning of the primary scene, which always comes too early or too late, is to represent the encounter with the real and thus with something that goes beyond the control of the subject.

We can say that Paola has lived two traumatic situations: the first was when her mother's second pregnancy excluded her from the parental couple and forced her to choose an old parental couple represented by her grandparents. She felt that her grandparents could feed and take care of her without the risk of being excluded. The second traumatic situation came from her work in the family-run business, where she was excluded from her parents' joint management.

In the play, only her stare allowed Paola to be in a relationship with her parents, but only in a voyeur position or in a position of bystander in a trance, who is unable to look away or say a word. But history repeats itself: in the present family context an obsessive ritualistic behaviour helps Paola to tolerate her difficulty in separating from her son. Françoise Dolto would have probably commented by saying: "Until the beginning of university?"

In a game of "to and fro" full of secrets and worries, Paola not only allows her son to take part in the husband and wife relationship, but also makes a troublesome pleasure come in within the obsessive ritualistic behaviour.

Finally, the new elaboration that occurs during the session marks another encounter. Now this encounter finally occurs in absentia or in effigie.

Now let's turn to themes that seem to be distant from our main issue.

In the theory of literature, some authors draw a distinction between two elements that make up a story, the fabula and the syuzhet. The fabula makes up a number of mutually connected facts that originate from each other.<sup>1</sup> The set of events in their mutual internal relationships represent what is called the fabula. In fact, it is just material for the development of the syuzhet.<sup>2</sup> The syuzhet is the distribution and the literary structure of the events in the story. The fabula is a set of themes in their logical and causal-temporal relationship, whereas the syuzhet is the set of the same themes in the sequence and in the relationship in which they are presented in the story.

In this context we will not consider how the modern novel evolved beyond the distinction between fabula and syuzhet. Rather, we will assess whether the primary scene could be considered as a fabula whose syuzhet is played in different ways every time.

Let's briefly examine a common example of fabula: the love story in classical literature. He loves her but his love is not returned, then, after various incidents, she falls in love with him but he has forgotten the love he had for her, and so on. Of course, from Boccaccio's *Decameron* on all the possible combinations have been already written. However, many generations of writers (from Boiardo on) have used the love story their own way in storytelling and according to infinite possibilities of syuzhet. Thus we can consider Boiardo's *Orlando in Love*, Ariosto's *The Frenzy of Orlando*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* or Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (to name just some famous examples) as evolutions and remakes of a love syuzhet. In this sense, the syuzhet of *Orlando in Love* is not "a Novel about Rinaldo and Angelica": it is the handling of a fabula, through digressions that interrupt it various times.

Let's go back to the issue of the primary scene. I would like to recall the primary scene described by Sir Laurence Sterne<sup>3</sup> at the beginning of the biography of Tristram Shandy. Here the making of the syuzhet recalls a pattern similar to that adopted by Sancho Panza in *Don Quixote*. According to this pattern, the solution of a riddle is presented before the riddle itself.<sup>4</sup> If, at a first glance, this way of proceeding does not seem to have any sense (what's the point of a riddle whose solution is already known?), at a deep level it is clear that the already known solution takes on great importance and a new sense precisely after the presentation of the riddle.

But the practice of the riddle, which goes way beyond this effect, and it is as old as the mankind, is based upon the existence of at least two solutions. Further, the person who proposes the riddle uses the listener's awkwardness and his possibility of error. In the same way, psychotherapy starts with the presentation of a series of

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<sup>1</sup> Tomaševski (1978).

<sup>2</sup> Shklovsky (1991).

<sup>3</sup> Sterne (2003, p. 9).

<sup>4</sup> Shklovsky (2007).

symptoms: the person knows nothing of these symptoms and thus she goes to a therapist asking to reconstruct and discover what they could mean. These symptoms often sink into oblivion for some time, for some months in Paola's case, for some pages in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. After this time, these symptoms come to the fore again, precisely in the emergence and in the expression of the underlying question.

If we take a look at Fenichel's treatise<sup>5</sup> on neuroses and psychoses, it clearly establishes the link between a symptom and the underlying question, which is why it was so dear to us students. However, doing so, Fenichel's treatise probably excludes what it is known as the plurality of meanings. In view of this plurality, the reconstructive work on the itineraries of the underlying question is what really binds the treatment and leads the therapist to abstain from giving explanations that are true and wrong at the same time. An example of this explanation is what a kleptomaniac patient told her therapist during a session:<sup>6</sup> "Oh doctor, the other doctor told me that I steal things without realizing it because I want to steal the penis. What does it mean?"

Rather, the effort of a therapeutic work consists in a diligent editing, because only editing allows things that are distant from each other to be joined, permitting an unexpected reinterpretation. The film editing, as Sergej Ėjzenštejn conceived it, has provided a clear example of the possibilities of an unexpected change of meaning. According to Eisenstein,<sup>7</sup> the film editing is not only the joining of two pieces, because two pieces can be edited in many ways (for examples, on the basis of the movement or of the light or of the meaning or of the contour of the filmed object). This is the plurality of meanings.

But let's come back to the primary scene represented in the *Tristram Shandy*. The main character begins his autobiography from his own conception by means, of course, of his parents.

"Pray, my dear, – said my mother, – have you not forgotten to wind up the clock?

– Good G! – cried my father, making an exclamation (...), – Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?

– Pray, what was your father saying? –

– Nothing."

After few pages, the solution of the riddle comes. My father "(...) had made it a rule for many years of his life, on the first Sunday night of every month throughout

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<sup>5</sup> Fenichel (1950).

<sup>6</sup> Croce (1985).

<sup>7</sup> Ėjzenštejn (1981).

the whole year, as certain as ever the Sunday night came, to wind up a large house-clock (...) with his own hands. (...) And (...), at the time I have been speaking of, he had likewise gradually brought some other little family concerns to the same period, in order (...) to get them all out of the way at one time (...). It was attended but with one misfortune; (...) namely, that, from an unhappy association of ideas which have no connection in nature, it so fell out at length, that my poor mother could never hear the said clock wound up, but the thoughts of some other things unavoidably popped into her head, (...)." As we can see, the effect of this literary procedure is to make one laugh and is based on postponing situations that occurred previously and on mocking at the father's obsessive traits.

Let's compare the two primary scenes here presented: of course they are different both in context and time. But both are the object of a story. It is certainly true that a novel and a report told in an analysis are not the same thing; however, both our examples consist in a new version of a primary scene fabula according to different ways of syuzhet. In fact, after having stressed very much her inhibition in front of her parents and after the psychodrama representation and the following associations, Paola rediscovers the primary scene. In this sense, the whole story takes on a new meaning for Paola and for us and thus it is possible to cast a new light on the primary scene as Paola's phantasm.

In a famous 1964 essay,<sup>8</sup> Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis investigated the origins of the phantasm and the existence of a mental place represented by the real upon which the subject herself or himself depends upon.

Paola recalls the trauma of the effect of the primary scene, that is to say, the real overwhelming the development of the subject. It will take some time before all this material could be organized and presented in a more or less objective narrative.

*Tristram Shandy* proposes a parody of an autobiography by starting from the most problematic issue. Because he was witness only as a subject in fieri (namely, in progress), he avoids the trauma of a pleasure from which he is excluded by definition by annulling the pleasure itself through an obsessive ritualistic behaviour. We have seen above that this is exactly what Paola does in her analytic report. Once again, it is not the course of events that makes the difference, but the editing in the construction of the syuzhet.

Maybe we can go as far as saying that, even if the primary scenes are all the same, every single primary scene differs from another in the effect that it can have on the story of the subject. The relevance of the primary scene in psychoanalytic clinical practice is due to the analysis of the role of phantasm in the development of the relationship between the subject and the real. Such an analysis can take place only through the infinite possibilities of rewriting a fabula that is now part of the common domain of psychoanalytic knowledge according to new ways of syuzhet. This is clearly evident in the description of the primary scene in Sterne's novel. In this

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<sup>8</sup> Laplanche, Pontalis (1964, p. 215).

work, the literary procedure of parody allows the construction of the syuzhet's to be revealed by using an event without specificity as material for an autobiography. In fact, why should we say we have been conceived naturally to describe ourselves?

The dynamics of the syuzhet is the constructive factor of a piece of prose. Such a dynamic is the essential principal of the construction of a piece, that is to say, it tends to reach its highest stage of development in the pieces having a "minimal fabula". The development of a syuzhet can be called "plot construction" and, although it is separated from the fabula, it is its starting point.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout the analytic treatment the patient often returns to past events. But, every time she does it, she always gives different versions of these events and experiences different emotions in the transference. Also in literature and in all the other arts, a continuative reworking of the same material is the mark of an author's artistic path. Thus, this means that a single author in many different works continuously recalls and transforms the same material. In seeking to realise a project, the artist gradually gets carried away, and in one way or another, the project no longer corresponds to what was intended at the beginning. Not exactly! As Viktor Šklovskij pointed out in a book he wrote when he was 80-year-old, in her attempt to correct the way its work has taken, the author gains from this error. Thus, the possibility to write new works and to create new syuzhet follows from a gap between the artist's desire and the way this desire takes place in the artwork.

As Jacques Lacan pointed out many times, there is a gap between the subject's desire and the question she is going to express: analysis has its place in this gap. When a subject recalls the crucial phases of his life, he re-experiences in the transference certain traumatic events, including the need to formulate a demand on the basis of which his desire can be fulfilled. Thus, it is possible that a desire can be fulfilled but not be completely satisfied, because of unbridgeable gap between the total desire and the request for something. Part of the desire always passes through the demand: every time the subject in analysis modifies what is told, he proposing one's phantasms and experiences in the attempt to satisfy an ever elusive desire.

In the 1920s in an experimental theatre of Moscow, Majakovskij and his circle<sup>10</sup> would begin a show in this way:

"All's well that begins well!" "Ends!" someone once said from the audience. "Oh no, sir! Here there is no end, we shall go on..."

However, every writer knows very well that it is not possible to go on forever introducing new characters in a novel and that there comes a time when a syuzhet reaches its limit. This is the time to pass another level. "The journeys of Odysseus are countless. The epic suggests an end to the journeys. Odysseus is carrying an oar on his shoulder. He meets a man who asks him: Why are you carrying a spade

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<sup>9</sup> Tynjanov (1968).

<sup>10</sup> Šklovskij (1972).



on your shoulder? The oar is mistaken for a spade. They hadn't seen an oar before. Here, in these places, nobody goes on journeys."<sup>11</sup> We go into another mythology.

If at the end of her psychotherapy a child draws herself and a bicycle, this means that it is time to conclude the therapeutic work. The child will get on the bicycle and continue on his own,<sup>12</sup> and enter another scene where a new syuzhet can be created.

As conclusive questions we can ask: Is psychoanalysis similar to a syuzhet, in the sense that it proposes an intertwined construction of a person's story? And thus, are the single interview and the single session similar to syuzhets? Maybe, maybe not. Perhaps even the psychoanalytic psychodrama (by allowing the subject to represent a scene they have already experienced with other characters and under different conditions) is a syuzhet whose peculiarity consists in the application of the constructive factor to the material. That is to say, to the 'formation' or substantially, to the 'deformation' of the material.

And what about the material? Perhaps it is a primary scene that always acquires new meanings in the après coup.

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<sup>11</sup> Šklovskij (1981).

<sup>12</sup> Dolto (1984).

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