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‘ACTING OUT’ IN *DANIEL DERONDA*

By Toni Griffiths

This short paper illustrates the way in which psychoanalytic perspectives can help us to understand the effect which a complex literary text like *Daniel Deronda* has on the reader. The two psychoanalytic perspectives used are Freud’s insights into the way dreams work, and Melanie Klein’s exploration of the nature and importance of the unconscious phantasies of very early childhood and her discovery of the early developmental ‘positions’.¹ These insights help to explain how what may appear puzzling and difficult in a novel nevertheless holds and moves its readers.

Freud’s insights into the meaning and form of dreams² suggest that they operate at the same time on two levels: the ‘story’ of the dream, and the underlying dream-thoughts. The underlying dream-thoughts derive from unconscious feelings of great strength based often on the earliest impressions of childhood. They are turned by a process that Freud called ‘dreamwork’ into the surface story of the dream. The underlying dream-thoughts are suggested most strongly at the places where they disrupt the surface story. Freud observed nodal points and symptomatic places characterized, for instance, by distortion, ambiguity or absence in the surface story, and condensation, displacement and ‘secondary revision’. So a dream has both a ‘manifest text’, the story of the dream as the dreamer might recount it on waking up, and a ‘latent text’ containing the underlying dream-thoughts. These two texts are not different stories; they are the same story read in different ways.

These characteristics of dreamwork may also be seen as characteristics of a kind of *literary* dreamwork. As in a dream, the condensation of latent thoughts, memories and phantasies can be seen in textual strategies, key words, nodal places, symbolization, absences. Looking at these points in the narrative as instances of ‘literary dreamwork’ can reveal a ‘latent text’ beneath the ‘manifest text’ of *Daniel Deronda* and can illuminate the text at work on the reader in ways of which neither the author nor the reader may generally be aware.

The textual narrative may in this way be seen to be at work in relation to its own ‘latent text’ in a way analogous to how the surface content of a dream relates to underlying dream thoughts. George Eliot’s novels in this sense provide what Wilfrid Bion thought of as a ‘container’³ of inner experience, the intensity of which might otherwise be unbearable. ‘We should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence’,⁴ wrote George Eliot in *Middlemarch*.

The depth of creativity in a great novelist which can invoke and bear the extreme vicissitudes of early, unconscious emotional life results in a ‘latent text’ where those vicissitudes are recognized at some level by the reader. This helps to account for the power of the ‘manifest text’, the narrative. Matthew Arnold well described this ‘recognition’:

A bolt is shot back somewhere in our breast,
And a lost pulse of feeling stirs again.⁵

Whereas the formal structure of Freud’s dream theory suggests a corresponding aesthetic *structure* in the literary text, with Kleinian theory the focus is rather on the insight which it offers into the *nature* of the latent text. A form of literary dreamwork provides access to a

disguised, latent text and Kleinian understanding of the vicissitudes of the internal world – its unconscious phantasies, configurations, splittings, projections, its love, hate, idealization, envy and grief – is crucial in understanding the strength of affect which may be attached in different ways to the manifest text, whether at its narrative heart or at its margins – or where, as in *Daniel Deronda*, it is disturbed and, I suggest, ‘acts out’.

Importantly, it is therefore the internal world of *everyman* which is apprehended at some level by the reader – not the internal world of the author, as such, nor the supposed internal world of the characters, as such. For example, this is clearly not a question of mechanically interpreting that Gwendolen, for example, has inadequately managed the vicissitudes of the Kleinian developmental ‘positions’. It is rather to suggest that the whole of the manifest content will, as with dream content, carry another, latent level wherein is read the narrative of the internal world which, for every individual, will involve managing – or not managing – dread and desire, hatred and love of a nature which may be overwhelming.

Melanie Klein was, in Julia Kristeva’s view, ‘the boldest reformer in the history of psychoanalysis’.⁶ Her work is deeply unrelenting and indeed literal in its picture of the origins of love and hate and of knowledge of life and death and in its theoretical formulations which arise directly from her clinical practice. Her understanding of mental states as ‘positions’ emphasizes the persecutory and defensive feelings of the very young infant in the ‘paranoid-schizoid’ position where people and events are experienced at extremes, wonderfully ‘good’ or terribly ‘bad’. In the ‘depressive’ position, a more balanced if ambivalent relationship prevails in favourable conditions. Remorse and guilt for harm felt to have been inflicted on loved ones surfaces, as does the wish to make reparation.

Klein saw that the early ‘depressive position’ is never fully worked through, that anxieties relating to ambivalence and guilt, as well as situations of loss, which reawaken depressive experiences, remain throughout life. She described how good ‘external objects’ in adult life symbolize and contain aspects of the primary ‘good object’, internal and external, so that any loss in later life re-awakens the anxiety of losing the good internal object and, with this anxiety, all the anxieties experienced originally in the depressive position when the infant has to cope with intense feelings of hatred and love and the difficulty and pain of managing their co-existence in the self and in the other. In her late paper, ‘On the state of loneliness’, Klein wrote, ‘The feeling that [the mother] is lost is equivalent to the fear of her death’⁷ and the authorial voice in ‘The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton’ tells us that, ‘In every parting there is an image of death’.⁸

What may be thought of as a ‘psychoanalytic aesthetic’ will thus be expressed not only through individual characters but in the overall configuration of the manifest text. For example, in *Daniel Deronda*, the fear of sexual love, the sense of love as phantasy, the forlornness and the loneliness of ‘no-love’ and the impossibility of love and ‘nameless dread’⁹ are present in the manifest text in various forms and characterizations and in symbolic ways – not simply as characterological representation of psychic meaning. The sharing of the mother’s bed, the idealization of the mother, the search for a ‘new’ mother are just some of the ways in which this is textualized in *Daniel Deronda*.

The creativity with which the text is formed suggests an engagement with this internal world,

an unconscious acknowledgement of what is most feared or hated as well as most loved. Hanna Segal points out that, 'there are no truly beautiful surfaces without dreadful depths'.¹⁰ This suggests that, in the latent text, pain – fear of death, 'nameless dread', the phantasy that separation means death – will be present and will, through literary dreamwork, be represented or symbolized in the manifest text. This is recognized *at some level* by the reader as a reworking of the struggles of infantile experience and it is important in contributing to the strength of affect which a 'psychoanalytic aesthetic' embodies. The vicissitudes of this 'unmapped country within us', as George Eliot put it in *Daniel Deronda*,¹¹ are the battlefield of every individual and the return to the earliest pleasure and pain of the reader's own early, unconscious life is closely related to aesthetic effect and affect.

I have elsewhere¹² traced a number of themes arising from Kleinian theory in the interaction of the manifest and latent text of *Daniel Deronda*, including 'mothers and fathers', 'dread', 'love, knowledge and death', 'gaze'. Here, I refer only to 'acting out' in the text of *Daniel Deronda*.

F. R. Leavis famously proposed the splitting of *Daniel Deronda* into *Gwendolen Harleth* and a 'bad part' concerned with Daniel's mission to the East. Leavis's extreme reaction relates to disturbance in a text which has been subject to different views and assertions since the moment of its publication. I suggest that this disturbance is a form of textual 'acting out' which has its roots in a latent text of unconscious phantasy.

'Acting out' in psychoanalytic terms means the carrying out or adoption of actions and attitudes which relate to unconscious phantasies and conflicts. When acting out takes place, the *meaning* of the action taken in the external world is rooted in the unconscious phantasy or conflict – and it is not always easy to see this.¹³

Thus it is that the 'other half' of *Daniel Deronda* contains different genres of awkwardness or tension, as though the realist conventions of the 'Gwendolen' narrative are insufficient for the range and strength of the literary dreamwork involved. For example, the Mordecai-related¹⁴ discussions and dialogue often appear stylized and artificial (Mordecai's fervent rhetoric 'almost unmercifully taxes the reader's sympathy',¹⁵ says Deirdre David), Daniel's mission to the East appears unconvincing, the characterization can be thin. There is a change in mood and tone in the 'Eastern' text as though the authorial voice is too close. There is an exhaustion of detail, an accumulation of knowledge gained and a wealth of symbolism – rings, journeys, discoveries, coincidences, enlightenments, 'Revelations', secrets unturned, mysteries unfolded, visions revealed, futures secured. There is a determined setting out of spaces: idealized family scenes overflowing with generosity and warmth (the Meyricks), the Cohen family scenes, the humour and tenderness of which Leavis described as 'painfully trying',¹⁶ rehearsal of 'homeland' arguments in the 'Hand and Banner' (which come across as laboured and unspontaneous, 'perhaps the worst chapter in the book', said Laurence Lerner)¹⁷ and ubiquitous anxiety-resolving revelations and coincidences. Daniel is mystified about his origins and apparently does not know that he is a Jew,¹⁸ discovering his origins after creating the conditions for them in his union with Mordecai. The incidents and actions which 'border on impossibility', the expectation of coincidences (which Coleridge discussed in *Biographia Literaria*)¹⁹ and their prevalence in the manifest text of *Daniel Deronda* should, taking the burden of the present argument, derive from the presence, the insistence of the latent text and

its unconscious thoughts and phantasies. It is the presence of the latent text which generates an expectation of the coincidences which in the manifest text work in the manner of dream content or narrative. The epigraph structure, part of the textual containment, reinforces this: the epigraph to Bk VI, Ch. 41, says,

This, too, is probable, according to that saying of Agathon: 'It is a part of probability that many improbable things will happen.'²⁰

Several issues emerge which relate to unconscious phantasies and thoughts (the domain of the latent text). Related and intertwined, they include: the internal mother, new territory, the forsaken one, the death of the father, the figure of Moses, the Messiah, the second coming, the promised land. The textual container for this dense latent text is partly provided by the authorial notion of 'sympathy'.

For Daniel,

The desire to know his own mother, or to know about her, was constantly haunted with dread. (Bk III, Ch. 19)

The manifest text of *Daniel Deronda* glitteringly covers the 'nameless dread'²¹ of being cast out, forsaken – or given up, as Daniel's real mother eventually and devastatingly tells him he actually was. The latent text contains, as counteraction to this 'nameless dread', an idealized relation of oneness with a phantasized mother from whom separation is never required.

The 'dreamworked' result in the manifest text is seen in acted out, idealized relationships with others and the lifelessness and unsexuality of the picture of Mirah, the faultless heroine with a dead mother. Maternal absence relates to maternal idealization and the sentimentalizing of Mirah reflects Daniel's idealizing; they are parts of the same phantasy.

No real mother can match the mother of unconscious phantasy, a mother draped in 'the symbols of sacredness',²² as George Eliot puts it. The depth of splitting involved in keeping the feared and idealized mothers apart is apparent when the narrative provides a necessarily brief glimpse of the figure of Alcharisi. This electrifying 'mother and son' scene in the manifest text – not the reunion of daydream – is often regarded as the assertion of a woman's struggle to retain and develop her own self but this neglects the extent to which it is the most bizarre and crushing expression of the unconscious phantasy of the latent text of being given up, forsaken, cast out: the nameless dread that signifies death, the dread of being made nothing.²³ The covering phantasy (the internal, idealized mother) of eternal unity is too weak to prevent the eruption in the manifest text, as in a dream, of the deeper 'nameless dread'.

Daniel's mother erupts into the text and the text is necessarily affected, so much so that she must immediately be eliminated from it. This is a very strong illustration of the dreamwork process whereby latent thoughts erupt in the text and produce disturbance. Rapidly, Mirah is to be married, the East is to be stormed, the state of Israel created, identity is to be seized – an acting out of the latent text phantasy of finding a 'new mother' to replace the real one, something phantasized as more bearable than remembering, experiencing, bearing pain: the real mother may be ejected but this is more bearable than the dread of being cast out, the dread of the self rendered nothing. What is described as Daniel's guarded 'suppressing', his

'plenteous, flexible sympathy', 'that bird's eye reasonableness which soars to avoid preference',²⁴ is no longer sufficient to bind dread. In the whirlwind towards the East, the reader is troubled by the thinness of the human components, the abstractions – but these textual puzzles of the manifest text have full meaning (and resonance for the reader) in the latent text where the words, 'I was glad to be freed from you',²⁵ speak of death.

Whereas this acting out and the turbulence it brings to the manifest text is consistent with the *strength* of the unconscious phantasy of the latent text, Klein's observations on the unconscious idea of a 'new mother' are significant in understanding the hold which the turbulent text has upon the reader. The 'breast' which is lost stands for a whole world and in the manifest text Daniel seeks a new world. Klein wrote that, 'In the explorer's unconscious mind, a new territory stands for a new mother, one that will replace the loss of the real mother ... We have already seen that fear of the death of the most loved person leads to the child's turning away from her to some extent; but at the same time it also drives him to re-create her and to find her again in whatever he undertakes.'²⁶

Daniel's actions take place in an atmosphere of 'second coming' and this critical or nodal point also contains the latent text sense of *the mother will come again and I am not forsaken*. In acting out the latent text phantasy of the ideal mother who *would never* abandon, the manifest text both describes and enacts the seeking of the 'promised land' – the 'land flowing with milk and honey'. It is thus consistent with the idea of a *psychoanalytic* aesthetic that Daniel should become a seeker of the 'promised land', seeking a new territory (a new mother) to replace loss, the dread of emptiness and to suggest a 'second coming' which signifies that there is, after all, no abandonment, no forsaking. That this is acted out with such turbulence arises from the psychic shock of also acting out the phantasy of the rejecting mother, the one against whom the phantasy of the ideal mother is meant to protect. Thus, there are many versions of mother and, chorus-like, in the manifest text of *Daniel Deronda* is the epigraph refrain that life is a 'various mother'.²⁷

In relation to authorial agency, I suggest that George Eliot was neither omniscient on the one hand nor blind on the other in relation to what was going on in her text. In a very real sense, 'she meant everything in the book to be related to everything else there'.²⁸ In freeing her creativity, she was able so to engage with her internal world as to produce not a 'silly novel'²⁹ but a text which crucially possesses its own latent text or unconscious – and this is what engages the reader. By the same token, the manifest text expresses – as a dream expresses its dream-thoughts – both a narrative and from time to time a subversion of the narrative. Such subversion may be found in displacements and coincidences, in oddnesses and absences and, as I have suggested, in textual acting out. At the level of the manifest text, 'sympathy' may be the chief good sought and resorted to; yet there is plenty in the text to suggest unconscious or latent contradiction and, as has been widely noted, the suffering and desiring Gwendolen is certainly punished. There is thus a very thin veil separating sympathy from its opposite, punishment, and this is consistent with the idea of a manifest-latent text in which dreamworked contradiction is a textual strategy which connects the look of things – the tale told – to the unconscious life which imbues them with meaning and, of course, disturbance. These contradictions are not boldly defined; rather, they are suggested and they are configured. Close to the figure of the most wanted baby is the cast out baby, close to the figure of the loving

mother is the rejecting mother, omnipotence is the other side of powerlessness. One unconscious phantasy may be created to defend against another and idealization avoids coming to terms with reality. Such diads work within the manifest-latent text and, as in a dream, form the material of its literary dreamwork.

[This article is a summarized version of a paper presented to an interdisciplinary conference organized by the University of Bristol School of Humanities, August-September 2007.]

Notes

- 1 For the 'paranoid-schizoid' position and the 'depressive' position, see Melanie Klein, 'A contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States' [1935], and 'Mourning and its relation to manic-depressive states' [1940], in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and other works 1921-1945* (London: Vintage, 1998).
- 2 Sigmund Freud, 'The Interpretation of Dreams' [published 1899 but dated 1900], *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1950-74; reprinted London: Vintage, 2001), vols 4 and 5.
- 3 W. R. Bion, *Learning from Experience* [1962] (London: Karnac, 1984), p. 90.
- 4 George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 194.
- 5 Matthew Arnold, 'The Buried Life', lines 84-85.
- 6 Julia Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 16.
- 7 Melanie Klein, 'On the Sense of Loneliness' [1963], in *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963* (London: Vintage, 1977), p. 304.
- 8 George Eliot, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton', *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. David Lodge (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 114.
- 9 W. R. Bion, 'A Theory of Thinking' [1962], in *Second Thoughts* (London: Karnac, 1987) p. 116.
- 10 Hanna Segal, 'Art and the depressive position', in *Dream, Phantasy and Art* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 93.
- 11 George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Terence Cave (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 277.
- 12 Toni Griffiths, 'A Psychoanalytic Aesthetic: Klein, *Daniel Deronda* and the work of the text', University of London, 2006.
- 13 Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working-through' [1914], *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols (London: Vintage, 2001), vol. 12, pp. 150-1. Discussing 'acting out' in psychoanalysis, Freud wrote: 'The greater the resistance, the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering. [...] we may say that the patient does not *remember* anything of what he

has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it.' 'Textual acting out' has, I suggest, the similar effect of keeping at bay unconscious phantasies of the latent text while at the same time signalling a request for knowledge.

- 14 The spiritual weight which Mordecai carries is part of the strain of the manifest text. George Eliot's immersion in the works of Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) and the great poet and philosopher of mediaeval Spain, Jehuda ben Halevi (c1075-c1141), was very influential. William Baker refers to the strong physical and spiritual affinities between Heine, Halevi and Mordecai – and, indeed, Spinoza. William Baker, *George Eliot and Judaism* (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1975), pp. 44-5.
- 15 Deirdre David, *Fictions of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), p.136.
- 16 F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948; Peregrine Books, 1983), p. 103.
- 17 Laurence Lerner, 'Daniel Deronda: George Eliot's Struggle with Realism', in *Daniel Deronda: A Centenary Symposium*, ed. Alice Shalvi (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Academic Press, 1976), p. 109.
- 18 Presumably, therefore, Daniel is uncircumcised, although it has been suggested that this cannot have been so and that he *must* have known that he was circumcised and a Jew – a dreamworked contradiction or at least confusion – but Steven Marcus discusses, in a footnote, this reference made by one of his graduate students, Lennard Davis, to the question of Daniel's circumcision and its relevance to the 'plot': Steven Marcus, 'Literature and Social Theory: Starting In with George Eliot', *Representations: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 212. However, Deirdre David contends, also in a footnote, that the text upholds an understanding that Alcharisi refused to have Daniel circumcised: 'I said you should not know you were a Jew' (ch. 51): Deirdre David, *Fictions of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 174-5.
- 19 S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (Menston: The Scolar Press, 1971), vol. 2, p. 267.
- 20 A reference to Aristotle's *Poetics* concerning probability and improbability in tragedy and epic: 'This is probable, however, only in Agathon's sense, when he speaks of the probability of even improbabilities coming to pass.' Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, trans. Bywater, Ingram (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962).
- 21 Bion, 'A Theory of Thinking', p. 115.
- 22 *Daniel Deronda*, p. 660.
- 23 In the manifest text, 'all the woman lacking in her' is now perforce 'present in him': *Daniel Deronda*, p. 660.
- 24 *Daniel Deronda*, pp. 364 and 745.

- 25 *Daniel Deronda*, p. 628.
- 26 Melanie Klein, 'Love, Guilt and Reparation' [1937], in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 334.
- 27 Life is a various mother: now she dons
Her plumes and brilliants, climbs the marble stairs
With head aloft, nor ever turns her eyes
On lackeys who attend her; now she dwells
Grim-clad up darksome alleys, breathes hot gin,
And screams in pauper riot.
But to these
She came a frugal matron, neat and deft,
With cheerful morning thoughts and quick device
To find the much in little.
(Epigraph to Bk II, ch. 18, of *Daniel Deronda*).
- 28 Letter to Barbara Bodichon, 2 October 1856. *The George Eliot Letters*. ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954-1978), VI, 290.
- 29 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', *Westminster Review*, October 1856.