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Reading through the mirror stage

Abstract:

Beginning with Lacan's mirror-stage theory, this paper suggests an analogous link between psychoanalytic subject development and literary subjectivity – particularly *readerly subjectivity*. It does so by taking up one of the key tenets of Lacan's theory, the notion of the other, and suggesting that in order to enter into the symbolic order of the text the reader must likewise undergo a process of othering. For Lacan, this process must be ratified by a person of importance for it to have any formative consequences in the development of a stable identity – a role typically ascribed to one or both of the child's parents. In this paper, I draw from Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation to show the way in which the author can be said to ratify the conception of the reader's subjectivity.

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Keywords:

Lacan – psychoanalysis – interpellation – authoriality

Introduction

Addressing an audience at the Sixteenth International Congress of Psychoanalysis in 1949, Jacques Lacan delivered the paper that would go on to become one of his most popular and well-known theories. The reworking of an address made thirteen years earlier, ‘The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience’ was an attempt to combine Freudian notions of ego development with ideas to have emerged in the fields of linguistics and anthropology, particularly those of Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss (Evans 1996). Effectively, what Lacan’s findings came to symbolise were the shift from Freud’s enlightenment worldviews to those consistent with structuralist, and later poststructuralist, theory (Stockholder 1998: 361). The main departure points being the replacement of the “individual” for the “subject” and, subsequently, an increased awareness of the role of language in the development of this subject – Lacan’s famous ‘linguistic turn’ (Rabaté 2003: xii), as it is often called.

The mirror stage theory is based on the observation that at some point between the age of six months and eighteen months a child will encounter its reflection in the mirror and, ‘in a flutter of jubilant activity’ (Lacan 2006: 76), come to recognise that it bears an immediate relation to this *imago*. With the right encouragement, the child will capitalise upon this early recognition, putting the image to work in establishing ‘a self/other dichotomy, where previously [it] had known “other” but not “self”’ (Klages 2007: 81). In other words, the child will come to affix an ego to this image. Where previously the child only knew of itself in fragmented form – a flailing arm sweeping across its face, or an uncoordinated leg coming into view in its periphery – the mirror stage helps concretise the child’s perception of itself as a complete subject by providing it with a sort of anchor point in the swirling sea of language that forms the world around it.

The problem, however, as Lorraine Markotic reminds us, is that ‘[t]he jubilation accompanying the recognition of oneself as an intact being is...tainted by the fact that this sense of self is a false one, the recognition of a misrecognition’ (2001: 814). Put simply, the image in the mirror *is not* the child. Indeed, it is an other. While the ramifications of this misrecognition cannot be understated – to a large degree, they give rise to the need for psychoanalysis as a clinical practice in the first place – they are not the immediate focus of this paper. Here, I am more interested in seeing how Lacan’s schema can be used to tell us something about the notion of literary subjectivity, particularly *readerly subjectivity*.

Contrary to what its title suggests, the mirror stage need not involve any mirrors at all. As Markotic once again explains, ‘[w]hether the infant perceives itself reflected in the gaze of the (m)other or in a mirror, it recognizes itself as a whole being...[and] this recognition is a joyful one’ (2001: 815). Such malleability has allowed proponents of the theory to counter quite literal rebuttals, such as the question of how blind children might come to form a sense of self (Nobus 1998: 120), while also ensuring Lacan’s relevance to those working outside the immediate field of psychology. If the mirror can be read as a metaphor for, say, the mother’s gaze, then perhaps the child too can be read as a metaphor, and the mother, and so on and so forth until we arrive at a

situation where Lacan's ideas have serious applications to fields as diverse as game theory, gender studies and, of course, literary studies.

More than this though, what Markotic's explanation also introduces to this literary discussion is the role of the other in the formation of the child's symbolic identity. As psychoanalyst and academic Bruce Fink insists, the image in the mirror 'does not become formative of the ego, of a sense of self, unless it is *ratified* by a person of importance to the child' (Fink 1999: 88). It is in seeking this endorsement that the child will come to see itself from the perspective of that person of importance, 'as if she were the parental Other...as if she were another person' (Fink 2004: 108). This provides us with two important rules that can be carried over into the present discussion on literary subjectivity: (1) the subject must come to identify himself as an other, both from the vantage point of the maternal other and as an image outside of his actual self; and (2) this identification must be ratified by a figure of importance for it to have any formative consequences in the development of a stable readerly identity.

With this in mind, I argue that the conception of such an identity is dependent, first of all, on the reader recognising himself as an other in what might be thought of as the symbolic order of the text; and secondly, that for this to take place, a sense of authorial ratification is not only important but necessary. In making these claims, I come to align the figure of the reader with the child in Lacan's theory, and the figure of the author with the maternal other. The aim of this paper is thus two-fold. In the first half, I will argue that in order to become an active participant in the text's symbolic order, the reader must be reduced to a function of the text in an act of castration not unlike that spoken of by Lacan. Following this, I will draw from the work of Louis Althusser to suggest that this reduction is ratified by the author through a series of interpellative gestures (often narratological).

The letter kills

For Lacan, becoming a subject means entering into language. It is a process of socialisation, a shift from passive inertness, *naivety* even, to active participation. But it is also an act of alienation, or to hark back to that most Freudian of terms, *castration*. To enter into the social symbolic order, the subject must give up a piece of himself. Language destroys one's potential to exist as a real being, forcing one into a compensatory state ex-sistence – a term Lacan borrows from Heidegger, for whom it refers to an 'incessantly expropriated, dispossessed relation not only to death but also to life, from birth' (Kisiel 2002: 184). It is through symbolic castration that the social subject emerges, or as Lacan puts it, '[t]he subject is born in so far as the signifier emerges in the field of the Other. But, by this very fact, this subject—which, was previously nothing if not a subject coming into being—solidifies into a signifier' (Lacan 1998: 199). In simpler terms, what this means is that the egos or identities we acquire through symbolic castration cut us off us from our real selves. They are pre-existing subject positions within a pre-existing symbolic order, that is, positions waiting to be occupied. We ex-sist in the world of language before we exist in the flesh; our parents make sure, ascribing countless signifiers before ever meeting us in the flesh.

I suggest that this bears an analogous relation to the conception of the readerly subject, whose position with order of the text is marked out well in advance of his actual arrival on the scene. Like the child in Lacan's teachings, a place is made ready for the reader ahead of his metaphorical birth. In fact, it can be said that the text's reader exists well before the act of reading ever commences, which is to say, while the reader is still but a signifier emerging in the field of the authorial other. This is not a particularly new idea. Literary theory provides numerous titles for such "place holders", from Booth's 'postulated reader', to Prince's '*lecteur ideal*', to Schmid's 'fictive addressee', to Iser's 'implied reader' (a term he borrows from Booth), to Link's 'intended reader', and so on and so forth (see Hühn 2015). In each of these cases, we are dealing with an image of the reader that precedes the actual corporeal reader. An image that originates in the mind of an other. An idealised image that the author carves out during the construction of the text.

Returning then to the first rule laid down in the introduction of this paper: the subject must come to identify himself as an other, both from the vantage point of the maternal other and as an image outside of himself. A different way of putting it is to say that even from his earliest interactions with a given text, the reader is already being primed to play out a particular role, to assume a particular identity. Umberto Eco pushes this point to its utmost when he writes: 'You cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it' (Eco 1984: 9). This idea of the text *constructing* its reader, rather than the other way around, serves a useful counterargument to common misinterpretations of Roland Barthes's "death of the author" theory, whereby the removal of the author-God can seem a tempting invitation to a usurping reader-God-in-waiting. The problem with Eco's suggestion, however, is that it risks imbuing the text with a degree of autonomy, a *power* even, that simultaneously deprives it of one of its chief *raison d'être* – its communicative function (that is, as a message shared between addresser and addressee). Cesare Segre highlights the importance of viewing the text first and foremost as a mode of communication between author and reader when he writes:

Considering a text as a message is the only way to make its function totally clear. The series of words and the signs of punctuation of which the text materially consists could be, even with a very slight probability, the result of chance. But it is not a result of chance because a writer existed; not a result of chance because a writer in his turn put himself into a communicative relationship with respect to the reader... (1979: 273).

In drawing attention to Segre's argument here, I am not dismissing Eco's claim, but rather attempting to put a new slant on it. Looked at through a strictly communicative lens, saying you can only read the text in the way it wants you to read it starts to sound something more like, 'you can only read the text in the way the author wants you to read it', since the text is taken as a concrete manifestation of the message from author to reader. Yet, we suspect this to be an problematic supposition, since even in the simplest day-to-day acts of communication, the idea of a perfect or incorruptible exchange between sender and recipient relies upon so great a number of shared codices that a perfect alignment between the two parties remains a virtual impossibility.

So, what is left to cling to? If meaning is always unstable like this, then on what grounds can we ever really talk about an actual communicative exchange between author and reader? I would suggest that what remains is the *idea* of a perfect communicative exchange. The idea that there *could* be some reader out there who is capable of receiving the author's message exactly as it was meant to be received may be enough to cultivate an actual readerly identity where previously there was none.

I will explain this in more detail as I go, but at this stage it is enough to suggest that the author envisages an ideal reader at the time of writing the text, just as the reader envisages an ideal reader at the time of reading. The difference between the ideal figure conjured into existence by the author and the reader himself sets the reader in a fictional direction, which, appropriating a passage from Lacan's mirror-stage paper, 'will forever remain irreducible for any single individual, or, rather, that will only asymptotically approach the subject's becoming, no matter how successful the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve, as *I*, his discordance with his own reality' (2006: 76). In other words, the reader will "come into being" through his attempt to fill the space marked out by the author. Wayne Booth makes a similar point when he insists it is not 'only an image of himself the author creates. Every stroke implying his second self will help to mold the reader into the kind of person suited to appreciate such a character and the book he is writing' (1983: 89).

Readerly imago

In attempting to align himself with the text's ideal reader, the actual reader hinges part of his identity on an image outside of himself, thereby going some way towards becoming the other spoken of in the introduction of this paper. But to bring this even further into line with Lacan's thinking, it is necessary to move beyond this quite obvious dichotomy by introducing a third figure: the idealised image the reader projects into the fray (I say obvious because common sense is enough to tell us that the reader and ideal reader are never perfect reflections of one another). This then provides us with two kinds of "ideal" reader: the one that exists in the mind of the author at the time of writing, and the one that exists in the mind of the reader at the time of reading. I call this second idealised form *readerly imago* and equate it with the image encountered at the mirror stage.

To differentiate between the readerly imago and those other idealised forms spoken of a moment ago – implied reader, postulated reader, *lecteur ideal*, etc. – is in no way to discount the value of those preliminary constructions, nor the role played by their creator, the text's author. After all, the imago is constructed with the author very much in mind. It represents the reader's best effort at gaging the author's desires. It is the reader's sincerest interpretation of the author's ideal reader, however wayward it may prove. According to psychoanalysis, it does not take long for a child to realise that it is not the sole object of its mother's desires. The consequence of this realisation is that the child must then invest serious time and effort into trying to determine just who or what its mother does desire so that it might transform itself into this object. On the one level, the process of othering involves the child trying to become something it is not; on the other, it involves attempting to see the world through the eyes of an

other (its mother) in the hope of discovering the cause of her desire. In order to understand what she wants, the child must effectively take up her position (Fink 1997: 54).

Needless to say, the child's project is doomed from the outset. If for no other reason than the fact that the mother herself has no idea of what it is she actually desires (she is, after all, just a former child herself). I would suggest that the failure of the child's attempt to align its own desire with its mother's resonates with the reader's failed attempt to construct an image of the text's ideal reader that is perfectly aligned with the author's version. So, not only does the reader fail to become the text's ideal reader, he fails to determine who or what that ideal reader even is. While the author may imbue the text with certain interpretable clues as to what her ideal reader looks like, an inevitable distance remains between the two. As I say, however, this does not rob the attempt of its value, since it is only in failing to become the other's ideal reader that one becomes any kind of reader at all. Every reading of a text is thus a sort of failure – or perhaps, more optimistically, a sort of compromise between the way the reader would really like to read the text and the way the author would really like one to read it.

Interpellating readers as concrete subjects

I mentioned earlier that there are two stipulations that can be taken from Lacan's schema. The first was this idea that the reader must come to see himself as an other, which he does by: (1) attempting to align his vision of the ideal reader with the vision he believes the author to have; (2) attempting to then become this vision. The second stipulation was that successful identification relies on ratification from a person of significance, in this case the author.

In Lacan's schema, ratification can be as simple as the mother standing behind the child and pointing to the reflection in the mirror, exclaiming something to the effect of, 'Look, it's you – it's baby!' But things are rarely this clear in the world of literature. Just what is the textual equivalent of this encouraging parent, then? Of this mother who stands there insisting the child is on the right track, "identifying" as it should be?

One way of answering this question is to employ Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation, which he formulates with assistance from Lacan's mirror stage. In his well-known essay, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', Althusser states that '*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*, by the functioning of the category of subject [original italics]' (2004: 699). What Althusser is getting at here is the way in which ideology – or for our purposes, all dominant modes of discourse, such as the discourse of the Other – is capable of taking concrete, otherwise-real beings and reducing them to players in those ideological frameworks. The example he follows with is that of a policeman shouting 'Hey, you there!' on the street. Inevitably, the person to whom the address was intended will recognise himself as the recipient and turn around. In doing so, he goes from being a concrete individual on the street to a concrete subject in the discourse of, say, the law: he becomes a

person of suspicion, or a person in danger, or a witness, or whatever it was the policeman had in mind when he addressed him as the subjective *you*.

Literary texts interpellate their readers in not too dissimilar ways, turning them from concrete beings into concrete subjects. In his 1970 book, *With Respect to Readers*, Walter Slatoff starts by writing:

One feels a little foolish having to begin by insisting that works of literature exist, in part, at least, in order to be read, that we do in fact read them, and that it is worth thinking about what happens when we do...[E]ven those who most insisted on the autonomy of literary works and the irrelevance of the readers' responses, themselves do read books and respond to them (1970: 3).

Admittedly, it is somewhat ironic that Slatoff's call for pragmatism should be used to invoke a Lacanian-style response such as the one being offered here. But Slatoff's concerns are of a similar ilk to my own. He is arguing against the kind of theorising that would do away with readers and authors in favour of an entirely textual mode of analysis. The fact is, readers *do* exist, and the question of what happens when they read books *does* deserve serious critical attention. Making use of Althusser's model, I would respond to Slatoff's query by suggesting that texts reduce their concrete beings (actual readers) to concrete subjects by means of interpellation.

Interpellation in practice

Perhaps the most explicit examples of interpellation come in the form of second person addresses, such as the opening line of *Don Quixote*: 'Idle reader: I don't have to swear any oaths to persuade you that I should like this book, since it is the son of my brain...' (Cervantes 2003: 11); or *The Catcher in the Rye*: 'If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth' (Salinger 1958: 5). In both examples, the text addresses the reader in terms relatable to the policeman on the street. It is a literal address, the interpellative 'you' in both cases being forceful enough to provide encouragement to even the most doubtful readers that they are on the right track and should keep reading this book – since they are, in fact, just the kind of reader whose attention the author was hoping to catch.

The opening To *The Catcher in the Rye* serves as a particularly good example here because it executes a kind of double bluff. It begins by explicitly (albeit misleadingly) assuming the reader to be the kind who wants to hear about such things as where the narrator was born, and who his parents were and so on. It then sharply withholds this information because, thankfully, this is not going to be that kind of book. The effect it produces in the reader (who naturally does not want to hear any of that David Copperfield kind of crap either) is one of heightened interpellation: 'Now, I may not be the kind of reader you were expecting, but I am exactly the kind of reader you really want!'

On top of this, by affecting the tone of an interpellated subject himself, the narrator manages to disguise the interpellation that is really taking place in the opening line. ‘If you really want to hear about it...’ sounds more like the response or reaction to an interpellative hail than the other way around. It makes the reader feel as though he represents the ideological force in this communicative exchange; it is the reader who summonsed Holden Caulfield to begin telling his story, rather than Holden Caulfield who implores the reader to listen to his story. In less than a sentence, the reader is made aware of his own desires; simply, he does want to hear the narrator’s life story. Of course, this is role ascribed to him at the time of writing: it is the author who wants the reader to desire his narrative, his character’s life story. By imbuing the reader with his own desire, the author ratifies the interpellative othering found in the narrative itself; the reader now shares the author’s desire. The disdain with which the young narrator is compelled to oblige both author and reader in this instance is but a clever narratological technique for disguising the text’s ideological agenda, that is, its symbolic function.

Admittedly such addresses are uncommon, particularly in contemporary literature where we tend to be confronted with works that either: (1) go out of their way to ignore the reader as a discrete being for the sake of verisimilitude; or (2) explicitly set out to remind the reader of their status as a discrete being, not to mention the text’s status as a constructed artefact. Of course, being clever enough to recognise the text’s aim in these cases – to arm its readers with the knowledge to resist subjectification through verisimilitude – effectively still means becoming the kind of reader the text wants you to be, an informed reader, or an insightful reader, a postmodern reader, etc. Thus, a similar outcome is produced: the person reading the text fills the subject position of reader.

The classic example here must surely be Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveller*, which begins:

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveller*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, “No I don’t want to watch TV!” (1981: 9).

From here, the author employs (or else, invents) just about every metafictional technique there is to ensure the reader does not for one second fail to remember just who he is and what relation he bears to the text. But, of course, it is the image of self-awareness that Calvino’s readers are expected to “conform” to in the first place. In this instance, the ideal reader is precisely the kind of reader who would mock the idea of an ideal reader.

No doubt there are many more techniques for convincing the reader that the image he has constructed of himself inside the text, the one that allows him to enter into its system of signifiers as a participating subject, is one worth investing in. The communion that exists between reader and author, one that allows literature to go on propagating itself, depends on as much. While it is not within the scope of this paper to pursue this train of thought, I would suggest just briefly that the conception of strong readerly identity be understood as just a part of an ongoing move toward

authoriality. The idea being that the readers who eventually become authors in their own right may prove to be those most disenfranchised by this experience of failing to be the ideal reader – or, at least, those most acutely aware of the split between himself and the author.

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