

It's All on the Surface: Paranoid vs. Reparative Reading

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Abstract

Reading encourages readers to analyze the complexity of the actual expression in the text. Therefore, it is a skeptical suggestion to selectively explore the uniqueness of the text instead of imposing a pandemic. The definition of reading is completely opposite to paranoid reading, but it seems impossible to completely correct paranoid reading. Instead, a combination of bias and restoration practice is needed to read the different complexities of the text.

Keywords

Superficial Reading; Paranoid Reading; Literature.

1. Introduction

As a reaction against the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Ricoeur) that had dominated the field of literary criticism prior, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s proposal for a more *reparative* approach to reading texts acted as an attempt to diversify institutional reading practices and pay closer attention to the idiosyncrasies of individual texts. Positioned in direct opposition to suspicious reading, or “paranoid reading” as Sedgwick labels it in her work ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re so Paranoid, You Probably Think this Essay is About You’, reparative reading signified a freeing from the aggressive, destructive tendencies of paranoid reading, although not a complete departure from them. Sedgwick’s work, however, lacks a clear, affirmative definition of reparative reading, seeming to define it more by what it is not, rather than what it is. Extending Sedgwick’s ideological framework, Best and Marcus offer surface reading as the methodological culmination of reparative reading. Instead of focusing on what is hidden, missing or latent in the text (depth hermeneutics), surface readers prioritise a reading of what is evident and readily available in a given text, attempting to “get closer” to the meaning rather than to see through it (Latour, 231). Not only does surface reading encourage the reader to analyse the complexities of what is actually manifest in the text, it also, therefore, encourages an exploration of the uniqueness of an individual text, as opposed to the imposition of grand narratives that is characteristic of a hermeneutics of suspicion. It similarly allows the reader to approach the text from a position of love and curiosity and as Heather Love asserts, humbles the authority of the critic who is open to the possibility that knowledge may be present in the text, not something that needs to be enforced upon it. Some uncertainty does, however, surround the exact definition of what constitutes the ‘surface’ of a text and to what point this differs from the ‘depth’, as well as whether it is ever really possible to approach a text without some pre-existing biases or expectations. In the same way, although reparative reading (and by extension surface reading) defines solely in opposition to paranoid reading, it seems it is impossible to dismiss paranoid reading completely. Instead what is needed is a combination of both paranoid and reparative reading practices in order to cover the diverse complexities of individual texts.

2. Paranoid vs. Reparative Reading

Sedgwick's articulation of a reparative style of reading was a direct attempt to disrupt the oppressive singular domination of paranoid reading in the literary field which was "perhaps by now nearly synonymous with criticism itself" (Sedgwick, 124). Taking issue with the presumptuous, contagious and over-generalised nature of what she labelled "paranoid reading", "reparative reading" was a necessary progression in order to 'repair' the damage done by paranoid practices. For Sontag, paranoid reading and the hermeneutics of suspicion are "often prompted not by piety toward the troublesome text... but by an open aggressiveness, an overt contempt for appearances" (6). This style of reading "excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs "behind" the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one" (6). Sontag's inflammatory rhetoric characterises paranoid reading as a destructive practice that is ultimately unable to recognise or respect the value of a given text. Instead she accuses paranoid readers of "dissatisfaction (conscious or unconscious) with the work, a wish to replace it by something else" (10), highlighting the antagonistic approach that many paranoid readers appear to take to their object of inquiry. Borrowing terms from the work of psychologist Melanie Klein of the "paranoid position" and the "reparative position" in psychic child development, Sedgwick similarly situates these two reading practices as "positions" or orientations towards a work, reflective of the critic's own psychology and intentions. In the same way, Felski labels these reading practices as "thought styles" (2), different modes of approaching a text. It is not only "a matter of method but of a certain sensibility – or... 'Critical mood'" (Felski, 6). Where paranoid readers tend to be "overly suspicious and agenda-driven" (Straub, 140) and "predictable... blotting out any sense of possibility of alternative ways of understanding or things to understand" (Weed, 96) reparative reading is characterised in opposition as being open to surprise and diversity, that is, lacking grand narratives to oppose on texts. As a "weak theory" (Sedgwick) reparative reading strives to stay local to the text, preferring "acts of noticing, being affected, taking joy and making whole" (Love, 238, Truth and Consequences). It attempts to restore the individual and consciousness to the centre of inquiry after it was displaced by the rise of interpretive practices that focused solely on structures of language, desire and economic capital (Love, 372, Close but Not Deep). As Love explains, for Sedgwick reparative reading is "primarily an ethical category" (382, Close But Not Deep), an ideological framework for approaching a text, rather than a concrete methodology. Not only does this relieve the critic from their 'heroic' – and perhaps egotistical – duties of demystification, reparative reading gives voice to experiences and modes of consciousness that are excluded from previous dominant forms of critique borrowed largely from Marxism and psychoanalysis, namely queer and other marginalised identities. It reflects the disillusionment that many critics have felt towards the repetitiveness of "those "gotcha" moments when the text is caught out as conducing to somebody's oppression, as well as... those moments when the text subverts that oppression" (Straub, 140). As such, reparative reading can be understood as a practice concerned primarily with diversity, surprise and love in response to the hegemony of paranoid reading.

As a further development of Sedgwick's conceptual framework for reparative reading, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus offer surface reading as a culmination of the reaction against the depth hermeneutics of paranoid reading. Surface reading privileges a mode of critique that is interested in the manifest content of a text, "what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible... what is neither hidden nor hiding" (Best and Marcus, 9). Rather than referring to the physical surface of the text, the 'surface' in surface reading "pertains more to what we do with texts than the texts themselves" (Straub, 139) indicating an interest in engaging with what is present and available in the text itself. Perhaps most importantly, surface reading regards the surface as something the needs to be "looked *at* rather than what we must see *through*" (Best and Marcus, 9). This approach differs significantly from paranoid reading practices that generally tend to

disregard the surface of the text as superficial, deceptive and almost unworthy of attention. In fact, Sontag characterises suspicious interpretive practices as being prompted by “an open aggressiveness, an overt contempt for appearances” (6) that consider the surface of the text as something that has “no meaning without interpretation” (7). As such, to paranoid readers, texts do not possess meaning but rather, meaning is something that is ascribed to texts in the critical process. As opposed to searching for meaning through what is missing from the text, surface reading accounts to the unique complexities that are already present and visible in the details, “it considers what texts do say, rather than what they don’t or can’t... it is a form of close reading that does not presume depth” (Love, 383, *Close but Not Deep*). Similarly, Gallop insists that “the detail is... the best safeguard against projection” for it is in “notic[ing] surprising or insistent details...that [one is] most likely to break free of their preconceptions of what should be in the text” (16). While remaining equally as rich and analytical as reading for depth, surface reading prefers to stay local to the text instead of drawing on external ideologies borrowed from Marx and Freud among others to create meaning. Love labels this style of reading “close but not deep”, indicating that, while it looks closely and critically at the text, it does not fall into a precarious interpretation of the ‘depth’ behind the surface, producing “close readings that do not seek hidden meanings” (Best and Marcus, 10).

In fact, surface reading encourages a descriptive form of critique as opposed to the (over-) interpretation of depth hermeneutics. As Best and Marcus articulate, “description sees no need to translate the text into a theoretical or historical metalanguage in order to make the text meaningful” (11). To surface readers, the text remains meaningful, interesting and abundant without needing to be modified by external ideologies. In this sense, surface readers give a sense of depth to the surface, claiming that the ‘depth’ of the text is always readily available on the surface, not something that needs to be uncovered beneath or outside the text (Best and Marcus, 11). Similarly, Love argues that good descriptions are, in themselves, rich and, without “adding anything “extra”... they account for the real variety that is already there” (Love, 377, *Close but Not Deep*). She does, however, indicate that it is impossible to entirely separate description from interpretation, as “there is no such thing as a “pure” description, since every description entails an interpretation of some kind” (380). Hence, in surface reading, the project of the critic is to deal entirely with what is available in the text itself through the rich description of the surface, in an attempt to “get closer to [the facts]” rather than see through them (Latour, 231). Not only does it respond to the growing malaise towards depth hermeneutics but also remedies the aggressive position that many critics took in relation to their object by replacing it with a more loving position: “equally valuable would be acts of criticism which would supply a really accurate, sharp, loving description of the appearance of a work of art.... Reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it” (Sontag, 13). Here, Sontag equates description with taking an ethical position of love towards a text, following the reparative ideology that was present in Sedgwick’s work. According to Sontag, descriptive practices such as those promoted by surface reading have the added benefit of recovering the senses (14). As Love similarly notes, interpretive practices have “displaced the individual and consciousness from the centre of enquiry” (372, *Close But Not Deep*) in favour of metanarratives. Descriptive practices by contrast allow the critic to “*see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more” in the process of “cut[ting] back content so that we can see the thing at all” (Sontag, 14). As such, surface reading encourages an engagement with the affective qualities of a given text and returns the human to the ‘centre of inquiry’, aligning with Sedgwick’s original reparative ethics through description. Although surface reading and descriptive practices actively remedy many of the flaws that Sedgwick identified in paranoid reading, it does however have a tendency to ‘read with the grain’. Compared to the aggressively political demystification practices of paranoid reading that “places its faith in exposure” (Sedgwick), the lack of political agenda in surface reading renders it relatively passive. In the act of looking closely at the surface of the text and disregarding the

larger dialogues that may potentially be at play 'behind' the text, surface reading ignores any kind of political commentary in favour of placing the entire focus on the text itself. As Reilly speculates, this "politically quietist" approach to literary criticism may have "less to do with methodological dissatisfaction than with political disappointment" (629), and may perhaps merely be a desire to resign from politics altogether. In the interest of critical integrity and combatting the 'egotistical' nature of the paranoid reader, surface readers appear to ignore how texts function in the external environment in the interest of remaining local to the text. As Best and Marcus state however, "the disasters and triumphs of the last decade have shown that literary criticism alone is not sufficient to effect change" (2), revealing a seeming disenchantment with political literary criticism. Although to require all forms of literary criticism to subscribe to the same political activism "closes off other paths as "insufficiently critical"" (Felski, 9) and it should not be necessary for all criticisms to do all things, at all times. Similarly, the tenuous definition of what exactly constitutes the 'surface' of the text and at what point the 'surface' of the text becomes the 'depth' reveals an inherent gap in the logic of surface reading. In the attempt to remain local, unbiased and deal only with what is "evident, perceptible [and] apprehensible in texts" (Best and Marcus, 9) Best and Marcus refuse to account for the wide variations in reading among different critics. What may seem to be 'evident, perceptible and apprehensible' to one critic may seem to be hidden to another and vice versa. Surface reading does not acknowledge these potential discrepancies and does not seem to recognise the elusiveness of the terms 'surface' and 'depth'.

Critics of Sedgwick and reparative styles of reading have similarly criticised Sedgwick's inability to escape from paranoid/ suspicious modes of thought even in her own writing. Sedgwick's inquiry into the practices of paranoid reading in her work 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay is About You' engages with many of the elements of paranoid reading that she seems to be trying to distance herself from. As Weed points out, it is interesting "that Sedgwick deploys such a strong theory to make her argument" (98) against strong theories that over-generalise the complexities of individual texts. Sedgwick hyperbolically reduces all criticism that engages with the works of figures such as Freud and Marx under the same label of 'paranoid reading' and does not fully acknowledge any insight that may be gained from this style of reading. For these reasons Hanson states, "Sedgwick's essay on reparative reading would seem to inveigh against a hermeneutics of suspicion, but it cannot help rehearsing it" (106). As such, it seems that it is impossible to separate reparative reading from its paranoid counterpart. The two styles of reading cannot exist except in relation to one another and therefore seem to be inextricably linked. As Sedgwick herself explains in her essay, paranoid reading (and therefore also reparative reading) remains only "possibility among other possibilities" (125) that "knows some things well and others poorly" (130). In this way, Sedgwick does not dismiss paranoid reading entirely and perhaps recognises its necessity in some cases. Weed argues, "allowing weak theories to interact with the strong could produce a rich reading practice" (97) and therefore suggests that a combination of paranoia and reparation could mutually strengthen each practice. In the same way, Straub aims for a reading methodology that "balance[s] suspicion with surprise" (141), allowing the critic to approach the text with their own agendas – political or otherwise – as long as they "allow the collection of evidence to gather its own momentum and force" and take them to "unexpected places" (142). Combining elements of paranoid and reparative reading, critics can open themselves to the possibility of "[having their] suspicions expanded rather than confirmed" (Straub, 143), remedying one of Sedgwick's criticisms of paranoia that it is too predictable and biased. This pluralistic method of reading reflects Sherman's assertion that "all of us are pluralists in practice" for the modes of reading are "so numerous, so complex, so concurrent" that there is never a singular way that an individual reads (133). This also reflects Best and Marcus's warning that "the 'way' of [The

Way we Read Now] should not be construed as a unitary mode or a pilgrimage to a single point, but as a road branching in multiple directions” (3). In this sense, perhaps reparative and surface reading were never offered up in order to *replace* paranoid reading but rather as a necessary injunction on the domination of the hermeneutics of suspicion up until this point.

3. Conclusion

The promotion of a reparative style of surface reading by Best and Marcus can be seen as an essential disruption of the monopolising hold of paranoid reading in literary studies, but not its replacement. Taking issue with the agenda-driven style of “militant reading” (Felski, 1) characterised by the hermeneutics of suspicion, surface reading by contrast strives to take into account the details that are present within the text in favour of a more loving, descriptive style of criticism. Surface reading takes a more modest approach to criticism, recognising that “different methods are needed for the many aims of criticism, and there is no one-size-fits-all form of thing that can fulfil all these aims simultaneously” (Felski, 9), drawing attention to surface reading’s disengagement with political activism. Instead, a combination of both paranoid and reparative reading styles is necessary to create a rich, pluralistic new mode of literary criticism.

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