The Principle of Convergence  
and  
The Theme of Disempowerment  

Patrick Brady  

University of Tennessee  

In this paper, I propose to present interpretations of six works by French artists, three painters (Watteau, Delacroix, and Manet) and three novelists (Zola, Proust, and Camus), and to report on the unexpected discovery (if it deserves to be called such) that these disparate works have certain principles of structuring in common.

Let us eliminate from the outset a possible source of distraction: these studies are interdisciplinary in character, but that seems to have nothing to do with the discoveries made.

One way to throw light on the meaning of a novel or a painting is to view it in the light of a concept drawn from another discipline. Thus the various modes of structuralism borrowed from structural linguistics, either directly (e.g. via certain seminal works of Roman Jakobson, such as his famous essay on metaphor and metonymy) or indirectly (e.g. as mediated by the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss). Such is the nature of interdisciplinary research. It is especially appropriate and valuable when a key element or a central aspect of a text has manifestly not given up its secrets to any of the traditional or conventional modes of analysis.

In analyzing these works, I have had recourse to psychology, psychoanalysis, transactional analysis, group behaviour theory, feminism and control theory. However, the discovery I am presenting does not appear to depend in any way on the
interdisciplinary character of the perspectives used. Rather, it depends on the plausibility of the interpretation and the central character of the aspects of the work being interpreted.

Complexity in *L’Embarquement pour Cythere*. — The rococo is generally thought of as being highly decorative. This is more or less true, for example, of the interior of a rococo church, as anyone who has visited them in Bavaria well knows. However, the exterior of such churches is sober, even austere. This seems paradoxical until we recall that the loss of orders of columns on the facades of rococo churches, like the loss of the baroque cupola, parallels other significant losses that occur at this time. In literature, for example, the loss of the tragic, the comic, the epic, the lyrical, and so on. The hedonistic character of the other side of the rococo then takes on a look of compensation — compensation for some existential Angst. This new thesis as to the true nature of the rococo, seen as combining metonymic reduction and hedonistic euphemization inspired a paper I read in 1974 entitled “The Mask of Pleasure and the Muting of Pain”.

This twofold nature of the rococo converged on the notion of metonymy, which is further manifested in the fact that the exquisitely subtle decoration and licentious hedonism that compensated for this loss was very *bas de plafond*: no transcendence there either.

We thus have, firstly, metonymy as the key to the rococo, both its loss and its austerity, on the one hand, and its euphemization through the cult of pleasure and luxury on the other. Secondly, a masterpiece like Watteau’s *L’Embarquement pour Cythère* is paradigmatic in combining these two opposite thrusts of the rococo: the descending leftward movement is negative but its seductive, dance-like character provides a euphemization that distracts us from its disturbing message; the ectomorphic
canon of the figures suggests a pathetic fragility, but the dimpled, Celtic face evokes gaiety, amusement, mischief; the exclusion of noble, serious themes is reductive, but the allusive evocation of the mythology of love provides considerable compensation; an air of detachment that characterizes several of the figures is countered by other figures seemingly happy to escape to utopia; any sense of blasé, decadent sophistication is softened by a contrary, paradoxically concomitant feeling of youthful innocence and naivety, as in Marivaux.

Castration in La Mort de Sardanapale. In this well-known painting, there is a literal text and a symbolic subtext.

The literal text shows a man watching the slaughter of naked women and horses, the two traditional symbols of sex, and he appears to be quite unmoved by the spectacle. This indifference is not normal: such apathy suggests that the Emperor is incapable of being sexually aroused. Why then did he order this slaughter? One possibility is that he wanted to exorcise a fear of impotence (this could be an example of what Freud called the fear of the repressed: for Freud, unlike most Freudian critics, a successful writer, such as Wilhelm Jensen, the author of Gradiva, has control of the repressed, whereas Freud’s patients did not).

The symbolic subtext conveys the same message. In the foreground group at the left, focussing on the black slave, the horse, symbols of impotence and castration are again manifest, and compensated partly again by the vision of an erect female nude, representing the phallus, but primarily by the pathological eruption of sadistic violence committed by males against females and against those other essential symbols of sexuality, horses...disempowerment through fear of impotence and castration compensatory empowerment through sadistic violence.
The Medusa myth in *Olympia*: The concept of compensation then engendered a new, more complex understanding of the role of the themes of petrification and decapitation in the analysis of Manet’s *Olympia*. In the Medusa myth, Medusa is decapitated (decapitation, or indeed any type of mutilation, symbolizes castration, the ultimate disempowerment) and the viewer is turned to stone — not necessarily in that order, since her gaze is operative even after her head is cut off. Freud claims that for the male spectator (he doesn’t consider a female one) “becoming rigid (“like stone”) signifies an erection, which is life-giving and compensates for the disempowerment of castration. This is not very convincing: for one thing, this male rigidity is nowhere in evidence in the painting; for another, when Medusa turned people to stone in the myth it was not life-giving but death-giving.

A better Freudian interpretation than Freud’s would focus not on the hypothetical “petrifying” effect on a putative viewer but on the fact that the naked woman is shown sitting up rigidly erect (symbolizing the phallus) and in this way supports the thesis that the Medusa myth compensates for impotence and castration by visible erection. The petrifying gaze may also be transposed from that of Olympia/Medusa to that of the viewer, re-empowered by being able to run his eyes with impunity over the exposed nudity of Olympia (whose rigid pose suggests that she is “petrified” at this prospect) — a second re-empowerment after the castration —symbolism of her severed head.

castration symbolized by decapitation/mutilation

re-empowerment through viewer’s petrifying gaze
L’Oeuvre : In L’Oeuvre, the painter protagonist first represents his impotence (hated and tormented chastity, artist’s block) in Plein-Air by a reclining nude woman (limp penis); later he attempts to compensate for his impotence (deliberate choice of celibacy, further artist’s block, erotomania) by painting an upright female nude (erect phallus) in La Cité de Paris as a means of giving himself sexual excitement and, through it, artistic inspiration.

disempowerment through no-love script and womb-envy,

re-empowerment by undifferentiated group ego mass

A la recherche du temps perdu : In A la recherche du temps perdu, the disempowerment is not sexual but emotional (co-dependence) and it is compensated for by an uncanny ability to fuse with the whole of reality in a seamless web of spiritual interpenetration and understanding

In the case of the Proustian text, translated by Scott Moncrieff (somewhat too statically) as Remembrance of Things Past, such a principle of explanation explains two essential features that had not been seen to be related. The first is the symbiotic relationship of the little boy with his mother. The second is his fascination with the sight of the three bell-towers of Martinville and Vieuxvicq, which inspire the only passage of literary transposition in the text set off by quotation marks and referred to at intervals throughout the three thousand pages of the novel.

disempowerment through the codependency of symbiosis

interpenetration with indwelling spirit of the cosmos

L’Etranger : The double functioning of the principle of thanatos which takes the form of (a) the protagonist’s indifference to life (love, marriage, promotion) and (b) the fact that his general inertness is relieved only by lyrical celebrations of death.
disempowering identification of Eros with Thanatos
compensatory glorification/celebration of Thanatos

To conclude. Firstly, In the case of each of the works I am discussing, it has turned out that the perspective used has explained not one but two aspects of the work in question. This is what I have termed the principle of convergence. The principle of convergence states that a principle of explanation is much more than twice as powerfully validated if it explains two essential characteristics of a work of literature rather than only one. Such convergence was first noted in the earliest of the essays on which this paper is based (that devoted to *L’Etranger* in 1974), in the double functioning of the principle of thanatos, both anti-life and pro-death. However the recurrence of such convergence in all these works was unexpected and only emerged (was only realized) gradually.

Secondly, a feature of this convergence that also emerged gradually is the fact that in all these works its dual nature seems invariably to involve disempowerment followed by a re-empowerment that is essentially compensatory in nature.

The discovery of a single principle of interpretation that explains not one but two aspects of a work, both being centrally important for its exegesis, very often without any obvious link between these two features having been noticed previously, is unexpected, both for the art critic and the literary critic. Equally intriguing is the discovery that each of the works we have examined here leads the viewer/reader through a two-part drama of disempowerment and re-empowerment that takes very different forms but in its essence recurs over and over again. As far as I know, this has never even been suspected by any critic or historian.
It would be very interesting to know just how many great works of art and literature can be better understood in the light of such concepts or clusters of concepts as those used here.

When we have noted that all these works appear to represent variations on one and the same drama, we are left with an intriguing question that remains to be answered: do they all have the same function?