

Assumptions and Translations: Janet Malcolm's Freudian Rhetoric

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Janet Malcolm was a newswriter for the *New Yorker* whose style was often proclaimed to be a little overly pretentious. This ability to talk down to her readers was seldom a problem until she ran into a person who did not want to be told what to do.

Arbitrarily, our story begins in 1981 with Jeffrey Masson. He had just been dismissed by the Freud Archives for publicly challenging the theories of Sigmund Freud. He claimed that political pressure had led Freud to change his findings regarding the desires of young women to be raped by their fathers.

Shortly after his dismissal, Masson agreed to be interviewed by the *New Yorker's* psychological writer Janet Malcolm. They had numerous conversations which spanned over forty hours of taped interviews and included walks on the beach and a visit by Masson and a girlfriend at Malcolm's house.

Eventually, Malcolm assembled and published the results of her interviews. The result, printed in the *New Yorker* in two parts in December of 1983, displayed Jeffrey Masson as a self-centered, arrogant and libidinous person. Not surprisingly, these articles led to a lawsuit.

In this court case, Masson, the plaintiff, claimed that in Malcolm's book about him she changed his words around and misquoted him. The actual conflict would seem to be over rather cut and dry issues. Neither person is claiming that the words Malcolm located between quotation marks are actually the exact ones uttered by Masson. Malcolm admitted that she had altered some of Masson's statements. However, her initial defense was she had to alter some of his wording because "this thing called speech is sloppy, redundant, repetitious, full of uhs and ahs" (Quindlen p.21A). Because of the lack of clarity found in language, then, Malcolm felt justified in "translating" Masson. Henry reported that "she felt entitled, she testified, because 'translation' is needed to render spoken language readable: 'You can do it if you don't change the meaning'" (p.58).

It is over the propriety of this "translation" that the problems began. There is some degree of confusion over what is meant by translation and how liberal one (especially if that one is a reporter) may be in translating. Malcolm admitted to changing the wording, but she argued that her rewriting of Masson preserved the original meaning. How one preserves meaning is an interesting question, but one which is currently subservient to the problem of determining what meaning is. For example, Henry noted that "Masson claims that on occasion she went way beyond translation, substituting colorfully phrased inferences for his actual words and putting them inbetween quotation marks nonetheless" (p.58). In this case, then, Masson claims that the meaning of his statement is altered by the "colorfulness" of the language used

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in the “translation.”

In the most egregious example of “translation,” Malcolm actually portrayed several different conversations as a single one. Henry claimed that “she also combined remarks made months apart, in different circumstances, into a single monologue – which is not common practice at all” (p.58). Again, in this case, there is no doubt that the quotes are created, the question is the truthfulness of the creation.

To make matters worse, it seems as though there is now no way of determining exactly what was said during some of the interviews. Henry reported that “usually Malcolm recorded conversations with Masson, sometimes she didn’t. In some cases she didn’t even retain notes, just summaries typed later” (p.59).

It might be argued, on the basis of her writing and note-taking, that Malcolm was showing a cavalier disregard for the truth. Perhaps she viewed herself as a storyteller more than a reporter. Such a claim would not be unsubstantiated. Malcolm even wrote in another book (*The Journalist and the Murderer*) that “there is no such thing as a work of pure factuality, any more than there is one of pure fictitiousness” (Quindlen p.21A). Despite such claims, the painting of Malcolm’s work as a conscious fiction is unlikely to be the resolution of this case. Because of the use of quotation marks, which “all parties agree, [make] a special claim to be objective, unfiltered fact” (Henry p.59), the controversy will remain centered on the fidelity of Malcolm’s portrayal. Indeed, First Amendment lawyer Floyd Abrams contended, “this is not a case about a mistake. Someone is lying” (Henry p.59).

Further complicating the issue for Malcolm is a second article she published during the long and arduous trial process: “*The Journalist and the Murderer*.” In this two part article, which she later published as a book, Malcolm detailed the experiences of a journalist, Joe McGinnis, covering the story of a murderer, Jeffrey MacDonald. Throughout the article, Malcolm scathingly attacked Joe McGinnis for deceiving MacDonald. Among his journalistic crimes: McGinnis lived in MacDonald’s home for a short period of time and treated MacDonald as a friend.

Given the presumed friendship between Masson and Malcolm as well as his stay at her house, some observers presumed that the article about McGinnis was in some way an article about Malcolm. To some, then, Malcolm’s *The Journalist and the Murderer* represented an act of contrition. The book even prompted Masson to publicly accuse her of admitting guilt – perhaps she had sublimated her guilt and it was starting to emerge into her behavior. This sort of psychoanalytic guessing should not have been surprising. Malcolm was writing about a person who had been dismissed from the Freud Archives. She had also written a book titled *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession* and her father had been a Freudian psychoanalyst.

In an attempt to answer such criticism, Malcolm appended an afterword to the publication of the book about McGinnis and MacDonald. Despite the attempts at answering criticism, however, the general perception was that she was not only guilty, but that she had missed much of the point of her critics. William Henry, for example, contended that “if Malcolm wins, it will be despite her readiness to alter facts in service of her vision of truth” (p.58).

More biting was the overall condemnation of Malcolm delivered by John Taylor. His portrayal of Malcolm was that of a person with only a tenuous grasp of reality.

This is a stunning failure to grasp the man she was writing about. It's in keeping with her tendency toward the apparently illuminating but in fact quite flawed insight, toward interpretations of the sort that lawyers like to call "creative but without merit." It is the literary weakness. The literary perception, floating alone in all its majesty on the printed page, need not be connected to any reality; it need only give that impression. The journalistic perception that seems clever, even brilliant, but is not empirically grounded can prove disastrous. Malcolm, absorbed in her otherworldly way in the literary nature of her enterprise, never stopped to consider that. And now she may have to pay (p.29.)

These public commentaries added up to a vehement rejection of Malcolm's claims. Clearly, she did not succeed in communicating her message. There are several possible reasons for this. Initially, it could be that she was rhetorically insensitive. Perhaps she did not have the skill to craft an effective response. This is highly unlikely. Henry, for example, argued that "like many a talented non-fiction writer, Malcolm has come to think of herself as an artist. Her narratives proclaim her a story-teller, not just a fact gatherer" (p.59).

A second possibility is that Malcolm is wrong. There seems to be some evidence for this answer. A 1993 jury did find that Malcolm had libeled Masson. Additionally, Malcolm's afterword was riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies.

In one example, Malcolm began by arguing that libel trials bring out a sort of brooding and self-aggrandizement that seldom survives careful reflection.

The rhetoric of advocacy law is the rhetoric of the late-night vengeful brooding which in life rarely survives the skeptical light of morning but in a lawsuit becomes inscribed, as if in stone, in the bellicose documents that accrue while the lawsuit takes its course, and proclaims with every sentence "I am right! I am right! I am right!" (p.147-8.)

Yet, just three scant pages later she writes (in apparent disregard for careful self-reflection):

I would like to say in the congenial shade of this footnote that I consider the accusation that I fabricated notes and invented quotations ludicrous beyond belief [I am right!], that I utterly deny it [I am right!], and that there is no evidence for it [I am right!] (p.151.) [brackets mine]

And finally, in her conclusion, Malcolm proclaimed that journalists ("like herself" we may now be led to wonder) who proclaim that they have no problems with or have solved the problems of reporter-client relationships are fools.

There is an infinite variety of ways in which journalists struggle with the moral impasse that is the subject of this book. The wisest know that the best they can do--and most practitioners easily avoid the crude and gratuitous two-facedness of the MacDonald-McGinnis case--is still not good enough. The not so wise, in their accustomed manner, choose to believe that there is not problem and that they have solved it (p.162.)

In another example, Malcolm described the personal investment she makes in her characters – the people who may sue her for libel.

Being sued by a person who inhabit the pages of a book you have written is not, after all, the same as being sued by someone who exists only in life. You know you adversary more intimately than you know most merely real people – not only because you have

had occasion to study him more closely than one studies the people one does not write about, but because you have put a great deal of yourself into him (149.)

Indeed, she continued to argue that the people she wrote about expressed facets of her own wants, fears, and desires.

The characters of nonfiction, no less than those of fiction, derive from the writer's most idiosyncratic desires and deepest anxieties; they are what the writer wishes he was and worries that he is. *Masson, c'est moi.*

Again, just a few pages later, she contradicts herself. While setting out the differences between a writer of fiction and a writer of non-fiction, Malcolm claimed that authors of fiction are willing to expose themselves in the works they write (and, presumably, the characters they create) whereas writers of non-fiction carefully avoid such self disclosure.

The dominant and most deep dyed trait of the journalist is his timorousness. Where the novelist fearlessly plunges into the water of self-exposure, the journalist stands trembling on the shore in his beach robe. Not for him the strenuous athleticism--which is the novelist's daily task--of laying out his deepest griefs and shames before the world. The journalist confines himself to the clean, gentlemanly work of exposing the griefs and shames of others.

One might easily ask: where else does the author of fiction expose his wants, needs, and desires but in the form of the characters created?

Why would a professional writer — a person paid to produce clear, coherent articles generate such inconsistencies and draw such ire from her fellow reporters? The answer, I think, may lie in the psychoanalytic tradition that has served as a backdrop for the entire Masson-Malcolm controversy: Freudian psychology. Indeed, it is my belief that Malcolm has her own working theory of rhetoric which is based primarily in Freud's view of the mind.

Three important tenets of Freud's thinking are relevant here. The first is the process of diagnosis and treatment. Gray noted that:

Freud regularly sounds like a detective who solves a crime before interviewing the first witness: "The principle is that I should guess the secret and tell it to the patient straight out." Once Freud had made a diagnosis, the case, as far as he was concerned, was closed, although the treatment continued: "We must not be led astray by initial denials. If we keep firmly to what we have inferred, we shall in the end conquer every resistance by emphasizing the unshakable nature of our convictions (p.49.)

The second concept from Freud which is applicable is that of the relationship between the artist and the subconscious. Noland explained that:

Freud's structural theory changed psychoanalytic criticism. Its emphasis on ego defense and adaptation allowed critics to rethink the nature of the artist. Instead of being dominated by the unconscious, the artist was understood as endowed with an ability to use unconscious material for artistic purposes (p.231.)

If we examine these statements as part of a foundation for a rhetoric, it becomes clear that Freud's conception of invention is rather limited. The rhetor (artist/psychotherapist) discerns the truth and then tells it to the audience (patient). This suggests the third critical element of Freud's view: There is an objectively knowable truth which the psychoanalyst is

privy to.

Taken together, these tenets suggest a few corollaries which would operate in Freud's rhetorical program. Initially, subjects are the property of the rhetor. By this I mean that the psychoanalyst/artist, because he/she is capable of discerning the truth about the subject which the subject cannot, is given the power to make the final determination of what dreams (or words) mean.

Second, the rhetor as artist/psychoanalyst is objective and outside of the process. The only way that the rhetor can gain an understanding which the subject cannot is through detachment. The artist as artist is allowed to work with the unconscious rather than being shaped by it.

Third, (and perhaps a corollary of the second) is that the "I" and "me" of psychoanalyst are different people. In other words, the analytic "I" may analyze the subject "me." This may sound somewhat convoluted, but I think it can be easily explained. When Freud engaged in self-analysis, he was (in theory) operating as two different people. He was both Dr. Freud, the psychoanalyst, and Sigmund, the patient. This may not seem important to note, but because people may often talk about themselves it is important to recognize that they can also be characters in their narratives.

Fourth, the "true" patient of the rhetor is not the subject, but the audience. The rhetor is using the subject as an example to attempt to convince the audience of its own unconscious motivations. The most troubling result of this swapping of patient and audience is that the suggested method of treatment is continued repetition. Any dissent from the audience is to be treated as confirmation of the neurosis.

While this laying out of the possible framework of Freud's rhetoric may seem amusing, the question of how it applies to Janet Malcolm still remains. The easiest answer might be that as a psychoanalytic writer, Malcolm must have spent considerable energy analyzing her subjects. Further, many newspaper writers have adopted an "omniscient speaker" persona which closely resembles Freud's artist/psychoanalyst. Gibson, for example lamented that:

Any random sampling of Time's pages will show this omniscient speaker at work. Such a speaker can, for example, know what is going on inside the minds of other people--a privilege open to the fictitious narrator alone... He can know the true significance of the events he describes... He can be in possession of the most vivid details concerning events no human could possibly know... He can temptingly throw out details about a character he is introducing, as if the reader already knew whom he was talking about -- the suspense building technique of the story-teller (p.204)

Clearly, then, it seems easy enough to say that it would not be unreasonable to assume that Malcolm could allow Freudian psychoanalysis to influence her view of rhetoric and persuasion.

Second, it may be equally important to establish a link between Malcolm and Freud. As noted earlier, Malcolm had done some research on psychoanalysis as evidenced by her book *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession*. In addition, Taylor contended that Malcolm was "the daughter of a devoted Freudian psychiatrist" (p.29). Henry went further to contend that Malcolm, herself, was "a defender of traditional Freudian analysis" (p.59). It would be fairly

reasonable to assume, then, that Malcolm had at least some knowledge of Freudian theory.

There are, in addition, clear resonances within her writing as well. Initially, she obviously diagnosed Masson as a person who suffered from a need to experience the self-aggrandizement of a court case. She commented that, “evidently not ready to terminate his law therapy, Masson appealed the summary judgment” (p.149n). She also evidenced a strong belief that she knew the “true” Jeffrey Masson. This is clear in her statements about her investment in the character of Masson in her book. More importantly, she makes an interesting slip when talking about who Masson is. She contended that she knew him better than most people because she had written about him—become part of him. The fears and desires of Janet Malcolm had become part of the living, breathing Jeffrey Masson. In a very real sense, she found the neurosis within him and was still trying to convince him (or rather the new patient – the audience) that his neurosis was real.

Indeed, it becomes increasingly clear over the course of the afterword, that the real patient was not Masson but other journalists and those who attacked her. She begins by identifying the problems suffered by those who assumed that she would profess guilt in the story about McGinnis and MacDonald.

That some readers were nevertheless able to think of the present book as being veiled autobiography (and thus found my text incomplete, even devious, because it did not mention the Masson lawsuit) derives, I have come to think, from a misconception about the identity of the character called “I” in a work of journalism (p.158.)

Having isolated the neurosis, she then explained the meaning of it to her “patients.” She continued by describing what the “I” represents.

The journalistic “I” is an overreliable narrator, a functionary to whom crucial tasks of narration and argument and tone have been entrusted, an ad hoc creation, like the chorus of Greek tragedy, which exists only for the occasion it has been summoned for and has no history or life of its own. He is an emblematic figure, and embodiment of the idea of the dispassionate observer of life (p.159.)

It is appropriate to pause for a moment to note the similarity between Malcolm’s “journalistic ‘I’” and Freud’s psychoanalyst. The “I” is objective and removed from the process. It has no history or life – and, as a result, no neurosis.

The general reading public were not the only patients Malcolm directed her afterword to. She also chose to scold her fellow journalists for their misplaced morality.

Colleagues have said to me, “I would never do what McGinnis did. I’m not that kind of writer. It would pain me to cause a subject distress” – as if what we write is the issue.

The moral ambiguity of journalism lies not in its texts but in the relationships that are invariably and inescapably lopsided (p.161.)

Again, Malcolm rooted out the neurosis and treated any disconfirming response as further proof of its existence. Being the artist, she had the ability to discern the truth and work with the unconscious rather than be its puppet. She further evidenced her belief in the existence of some external measure of truth when she argued that fiction was more real than non-fiction.

Although it [the world of non-fiction] is a world by no means as coherent as the world

of fiction, and is peopled by characters by no means as lifelike as the characters in fiction, the reader accepts it without complaint (p.153.)

What, one might wonder makes the world of fiction more real than the world on non-fiction for Malcolm. Well, for one thing there are none of the annoying problems of "bizarre syntax, the hesitations, the circumlocutions, the repetitions, the contradictions, the lacunae in almost every non-sentence we speak" (p.155.)

She demonstrated her belief in the artist's ability to find the true meaning when she added that the reporter's ear is often more accurate than the tape recorder.

Texts containing dialogue and monologue derived from a tape – however well edited the transcript may be – always retain some trace of their origin (almost a kind of metallic flavor) and lack the atmosphere of truthfulness present in work where it is the writer's own ear that has caught the drift of the subject's thought (p.157.)

Malcolm also typified the four corollaries of a "Freudian" system of rhetoric. She clearly treated Masson as though he were her character – her property. One may get a sense of this ownership from her dismay at the way other journalists have treated Masson.

The feeling of sympathy for Masson that had been aroused in me by the summary judgment was reawakened by the spectacle of him giving interviews to reporters whose sole interest in him was his usefulness as an agent for the development for their "story behind the story"; once they had used him, they dumped him. The vivid, impudent, complex man who had appeared in my book was sadly diminished in his new literary surroundings (p.150-1.)

Had she dumped Masson or kept him around? Had she had any interest in him besides his usefulness as an agent for the "story behind the story?" One senses that the true regret felt by Malcolm was that her nice, neat thematic Masson was being unbundled and put into different nice, neat themes by other writers.

Malcolm's belief in the objective, independent observer is clearly shown in her discussion of the "journalistic 'I.'" This "embodiment of the idea of the dispassionate observer of life" is a clear parallel to the abstracted artist/psychoanalyst. Similarly, I feel that the contradictions and inconsistencies which appear in her work only serve to demonstrate the differences between the "I" and the "me." While her subjective "me" boldly proclaims victory and basks in self-aggrandizing glory, the objective "I" looks on from above recognizing the foolhardiness of either sensing victory or praising the self. This may be further typified by the absence of the character "I" when the observer "I" is talking. When Malcolm is being subjective, she appears in the text as a character saying things like "I would like" and "my book," whereas the observer "I" speaks only in the third person.

Finally, Malcolm evidenced one of the great weaknesses of Freudian psychoanalytic criticism – its reduction of works (or people) to simple themes. Noland noted that "psychoanalytic criticism has always had critics who have accused it of reducing literary texts to two or three unconscious, usually infantile, themes" (p.322).

Echoing this feeling, Taylor argued that Malcolm reduced Masson to simple themes, making her sound statements sound like those found in a high school book report.

First of all, he [Masson] represented a number of "themes" to her. In describing these

themes on the witness stand, Malcolm sounded not unlike an English student giving a book report. She talked about the theme of injustice, the theme of the iconoclast in conflict with institutions, the theme of disappointment, the theme of sexuality, and in the end, she said, "there was the theme of a kind of nihilism."

Clearly, then, Malcolm's rhetoric mirrored, if it did not replicate, Freud's views on psychoanalytic persuasion. The difficulties this caused her should become clear. Like the patient rejecting the repeated badgering of a psychoanalyst, the audience/patient refused to accept Malcolm's proposal. Unfortunately, her view of rhetoric did not include ways to invent new lines of discourse on the basis of audience response. Hence, even though she may have recognized the disgruntled mumblings of her fellow journalists and her readers, it may not have entered her mind that she could have been wrong. Her "working theory" of rhetoric did not allow for the risk of self-evaluation — except of the self as a character.

The lessons for other rhetors may be as simple as the admonition to doubt everything. Because her view of the subject and the audience did not allow them to be fully participating members in the discourse, they shut her out. Eventually, she would become known as a "tainted" journalist. Too often, it would seem rhetors assume that what they know to be "true" must be persuasive in and of itself. "Rightness" must equate with believability. As Malcolm (and, indeed, given his current troubles, Freud) demonstrate, the rhetor cut off from the audience can be rejected by it. They risk being labeled the deviant and ignored.

Further, stripped of their Freudian label, many of these tenets seem quite reasonable. The speaker should attempt to use examples to persuade the audience. People are complex and to understand them we need to simplify them to themes we can relate to. What is frightening is the unquestioned power such assumptions have. A more important question to be addressed may be the pervasiveness of Freudian thinking in communication studies.

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