

On doing ‘being a misfit’: towards a constrastive grammar of ordinariness

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims at exploring the shaping of normality, in the hegemonial patterns which constitute the difference between the performances of social failure and success, by presenting the methodology and some key results of an extensive ongoing research project about the representation of misfits in Western literature. Through the analysis of the literary representation of a variety of interactions between misfits and ‘normals’, my work aims to investigate the primordial shaping of normative constructs in a number of apparently benign forms of social exchange such as conversation. Beyond its thematological framework, stemming from a traditional comparative setting, my research project aims at a comprehensive analysis of the repressive thrust of normality and of the various socially relevant meanings which can be expressed through the literary representation of its imperfect performance, from the cautionary tale to the return of the repressed.

KEYWORDS: misfits in literature; normality as performance; Harvey Sacks, “On doing ‘being ordinary’”; queer theory.

1. HARVEY SACKS’S THEORY OF NORMALITY AS PERFORMANCE

The questioning of the ontological stability of identity and normality, through the reduction of their apparent consistency to the mere iteration of performances, are central premises of queer theory.¹ In this paper I would like to present some preliminary findings of a project, very much in progress, whose aim is to flesh out this starting point through an analysis of the concrete ways performances of normality and of deviance are constructed in the literary representation of social interaction.

Misfits are a popular figure in poetry, narrative and drama of all ages, but they appear ever more frequently, for reasons that will be not dealt with in this paper, in literary texts from the beginning of the XIXth century onwards. Beyond their obvious relevance to literature, I have chosen to focus my inquiry on the literary construction of misfits not only

¹ Butler herself, in her 1999 “Preface” to *Gender Trouble*, acknowledges the central role of performativity in her own work and in that of other queer theorists (BUTLER 1999 [1990]: xiv).

because of the intrinsic affinity of queer theory with antinormativity, but chiefly because the normal, as the unmarked, only becomes perceptible and accessible to analysis when juxtaposed with its differential opposites. The purpose of my inquiry is to delineate and work out the most basic aspects of the performance of normality, which are also the most apparently anodyne and least perceptually salient: this has led me to focus on the mildest and most benign forms of deviance: not madmen or rebels but characters who display a minimal ineptitude to social relations, who can believe in good faith that their performance of normality is adequate, but who are singled out as incompetent by their consistently poor results and their permanently defective integration. Through their incompetence and the malfunctioning of the social situations they happen to be involved in, misfits enable the observer to become conscious of details, and to infer from them regularities, that would remain unperceived in faultlessly performed social scripts.

My choice of topic has mandated the use of an eclectic hermeneutic toolbox, from literary theory to linguistics, from psychology to anthropology to cultural studies. All these perspectives allow to throw light on the huge relevance of literary representation to an analysis of relational dynamics. Because literature does not merely reproduce or mirror social reality, its technique of representation is in itself analytical; therefore literary portrayals of misfits (as of any other category or phenomenon) already include their own theories of social ineptitude, which are not less complete or enlightening for being encoded in a different language from the metadiscourse of the social sciences. The defamiliarization which is the hallmark of literary discourse makes it possible to reflect analytically on situations and processes which are invisible in direct social experience.

My most important theoretical reference framework is the work of American sociologist Harvey Sacks (1935-1975). Sacks is renowned as the founder of conversation analysis; but his brilliant intuitions range well beyond pragmatics. As far as queer studies are concerned, Sacks is to be credited with describing the performative nature of identity over twenty years earlier than Judith Butler (1990), and in considerably greater detail. In what follows I will refer chiefly to a posthumously published paper edited by his student Gail Jefferson assembling parts of several lectures held between 1969 and 1971 (SACKS 1984). The title of the paper, “On doing ‘being ordinary’”, already shows that Sacks’s approach anticipates queer theory’s

basic tenet of identity as performance. The main claim of the paper is that “being ordinary” is not, in fact, a mode of being but a form of *work*:

Whatever you may think about what it is to be an ordinary person in the world, an initial shift is not think of “an ordinary person” as some person, but as somebody having as one’s job, as one’s constant preoccupation, doing “being ordinary”. It is not that somebody is ordinary; it is perhaps that that is what one’s business is, and it takes work, as any other business does. If you just extend the analogy of what you obviously think of as work – as whatever it is that takes analytic, intellectual, emotional energy – then you will be able to see that all sorts of nominalized things, for example, personal characteristics and the like, are jobs that are done, that took some kind of effort, training, and so on.

So I am not going to be talking about an ordinary person as this or that person, or as some average; that is, as a nonexceptional person on some statistical basis, but as something that is the way somebody constitutes oneself, and, in effect, a job that persons and the people around them may be coordinatively engaged in, to achieve that each of them, together, are ordinary persons (SACKS 1984: 414-415).

In order to carry out this work, a number of conditions are necessary. The two basic ones, Sacks points out, are *competence* and the *availability of resources*: whoever performs normality must first of all *know* what the ordinary behavior in the social situation she is currently involved in consists of:

Now, the trick is to see that it is not that it *happens* that you are doing what lots of ordinary people are doing, but that you know that the way to do “having a usual evening”, for anybody, is to do that. It is not that you happen to decide, gee, I’ll watch TV tonight, but that you are making a job of, and finding an answer to, how to do “being ordinary” tonight. (And some people, as a matter of kicks, could say, “Let’s do ‘being ordinary’ tonight. We’ll watch TV, eat popcorn”, etc. Something they know is being done at the same time by millions of others around.)

So one part of the job is that you have to know what anybody/ everybody is doing; doing ordinarily (SACKS 1984: 415; emphasis in original).

The person doing ‘being ordinary’ must moreover have access to the resources which allow her to perform that behavior correctly (a prisoner in a cell without a TV set cannot spend an “ordinary evening” watching TV, *ibid.*).

Another important assumption about the performance of normality is that normality is specifically bound to social situations. There is no absolute

notion of ‘normal’, but only an acknowledged set of behaviors which are perceived as such in a given situation: a professor of history is entitled to intersperse her discourse with pieces of historical erudition without disrupting the ordinariness of a social interaction – provided that her identity as a professor of history is relevant to the situation. The same professor of history would not be performing ordinariness should she display the same erudition to a total stranger sitting next to her in a bus.

The original context of Sacks’s remarks on the performance of ordinariness was a wider study aimed at understanding how storytelling is organised in conversation.² This is why most of his observations refer to the techniques that regulate how events are reported in dialogue. In fact, most regularities Sacks observes in the pragmatics of ordinary conversation deliver precious information on the social construction of experience and the ways people find to cut down even the most unusual events to ordinary shareable information.

In the example Sacks analyzes on p. 424, a woman tells a friend during a phone conversation of a car crash she witnessed on her way home. Her direct involvement in the event makes the teller entitled to report her experience and convey her emotional response to it: “the teller owns rights to tell this story, and they give their credentials for their rights to tell the story by offering such things as that they saw it, and that they suffered by it” (*ibid.*). But these credentials, as the involvement in the event on which they rest, are non-transferable:

For example, you might, on seeing an automobile accident and people lying there, feel awful, cry, have the rest of your day ruined. The question is, is the recipient of this story entitled to feel as you do? I think the facts are, plainly, no. That is to say, if you call up a friend of yours, unaffiliated with the event you are reporting, that is, someone who does not turn out to be the cousin of, the aunt of, the person who was killed in the accident, but just a somebody you call up and tell about an awful experience, then, if the recipient becomes as disturbed as you, or more, something peculiar is going on, and you might even feel wronged – although that might seem to be an odd thing to feel (SACKS 1984: 425).

² “[I]n this course I will be taking stories offered in conversation and subjecting them to a type of analysis that is concerned, roughly, to see whether it is possible to subject the details of actual events to formal investigation, informatively. The gross aim of the work I am doing is to see how finely the details of actual, naturally occurring conversation can be subjected to analysis that will yield the technology of conversation” (SACKS 1984: 413).

At the same time, the urge to share experienced events may even exceed the need for experience in itself:

[...] you have experienced being in scenes the virtue of which was that, as you were in them, you could see what it was you could later tell people had transpired.

There are presumably lots of things that, at least at some point in people's lives, are done just for that; that is, it seems fair to suppose that there is a time, when kids do "kissing and telling", that they are doing the kissing in order to have something to tell, and not that they happen to do kissing and happen to do telling, or that they want to do kissing and happen to do telling, but that a way to get them to like the kissing is via the fact that they like the telling (SACKS 1984: 417).

This leads, according to Sacks, to the general propensity to adapt lived experience to ordinary knowledge in order to meet the requirements of discursive exchange. Sacks's analyses of storytelling highlight a general paradoxical tendency in the approach of social subjects to reality: while looking constantly for events that are worth reporting – that are, to use Sacks's words, "storyable" –, people nonetheless register only those aspects that correspond to a shared notion of ordinariness (*ibid.*):

So it seems plain enough that people monitor the scenes they are in for their storyable characteristics. And yet the awesome, overwhelming fact is that they come away with *no* storyable characteristics. Presumably, any of us with any wit could make of this half-hour, or of the next, a rather large array of things to say. But there is the job of being an ordinary person, and that job includes attending the world, yourself, others, objects, so as to see how it is that it is a usual scene. And when offering what transpired, you present it in its usual fashion: "Nothing much", and whatever variants of banal characterizations you might happen to use [...].

Beyond the advantages of membership and social inclusion,³ ordinariness has a major gnoseological benefit: that of providing an ontological foundation of reality that is rooted in intersubjective consistency, and that therefore protects the subject from the danger of solipsism.

³ Sacks, like Garfinkel and Parsons before him, uses 'Member' to refer to a full-fledged member of a social group. It is important to note that the condition of membership is not a given but a form of privilege; Sacks devotes considerable theoretical acumen to elucidating the workings of what he calls "boundary categories" (see for instance SACKS 1992: I, 69-71), that is, of categorization devices which question and limit the rights of some social subjects to be recognized as Members.

2. THE NEUTRALIZATION OF SALIENCE

Sacks's observations allow to conclude that the most basic discursive strategy for the performance of normality is the removal or *neutralization of salience*. Whatever exceeds or contradicts normality, first of all perceptually, must be normalized, that is, perceived, represented, and talked about as if it were normal. The reason is that, in order for Members to feel that they can competently deal with reality through the resources that the culture makes available to them as normal individuals, their normality must be assumed to be adequate to dealing with any state of the world, and this is only possible if the descriptive resources of normality can be shown to be up to the task of describing the world in any of its states. But since, of course, the world vastly exceeds what any culture models as normal (and thus the ability of most Members to deal competently with quite a few of its states), everything that exceeds the normal must be cut down to size, in both perception and discourse. As a consequence, a number of perceptual and discursive strategies are available for reducing the salient to the non-noticeable, the non-normal to the normal.

Sacks only analyzes a couple of concrete examples without drawing any general conclusions. I believe that his analysis can be shown to point to two main forms of neutralization, *reduction* and *distancing*, each of which is implemented through several strategies. *Reduction* consists in the elimination of salient aspects, cutting down the marked experience to ordinariness. This takes place in most cases through an elision of specific or atypical traits: the marked experience is stripped of its salient details so as to be made to conform to an abstract and interchangeable version of itself. Sacks quotes as an example the account of somebody talking about a man she met the night before:

He's just a real, dear, nice guy. Just a real, real nice guy. So we were really talking up a storm, and having a real good time, had a few drinks and so forth, and he's real easygoing. He's intelligent, and he's uh, not handsome, but he's nice looking, and uh, just real real nice, personable, very personable, very sweet (SACKS 1984: 416).

Intensifiers like “real” are all the more necessary the less specific the data about the date's positive qualities are. But this lack in specificity (the “guy” is just “nice”) is a necessary requirement of the social sharing of experience.

And it is crucial to note that here too the need to tell the story as ordinary affects the very *perception* of the event:

I think it is not that you might make such observations but not include them in the story, but it is that the cast of mind of doing "being ordinary" is essentially that your business in life is only to see and report the usual aspects of any possibly usual scene. That is to say, what you *look* for is to see how any scene you are in can be made an ordinary scene, a usual scene, and that is what that scene is (*ibid.*, emphasis in original).

It is worth noting that according to Sacks the analytic recording of details is a specific 'professional' competence of artists:

There are, of course, people whose job it is to make such observations. If you were to pick up the notebooks of writers, poets, novelists, you would be likely to find elaborated studies of small, real objects. For example, in the notebooks of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, there are extended naturalistic observations of a detailed sort, of cloud formations, or what a leaf looks like, looking up at it under varying types of light, and so on. And some novelists' notebooks have extended and detailed observations of character and appearance (*ibid.*).

This is particularly relevant to my research, which deals with the literary representation of the extra-ordinary as a disruption of some shared notion of ordinariness: literature is in itself, according to Sacks, the business of particularly keen observers who make it their job to register details that would be out of place in the context of normal social exchange.

Allocating a habit of peculiar perception to a specific set of social subjects makes it easy to understand how perceptive salience can be neutralized through *distancing*. Distancing itself can be thought of as a particular case of reduction, since it is nothing but a reduction of closeness and involvement; it hinges on the discursive acknowledgment of salience, which is however kept *separate* from shared ordinary experience through a number of strategies. The first of these is *specialization*, whereby salient data are contained within a kind of specialist competence, and therefore circumscribed to professional discourse so that they cannot interfere with the content and rules of ordinary social exchange.

Specialization is a particular case of 'proxy'. Proxy is the tolerance which the rules of ordinary interaction show towards some categories who, *as*

such, are allowed to exceed the limits of ordinary discourse. Among these categories are not only poets and artists in general, public figures and stars, as Sacks himself points out (SACKS 1984: 419), but children, intellectuals, mystics and so on; the point is that the salience of a given behavior or discourse is normalized on the basis of the ‘special identity’ involved in it (one can think of the freedom of speech and action enjoyed by the fool at a king’s court). The delimitation of subgroups with whom salience is associated *a priori* makes it possible to neutralize salience by considering it a specific property of those social categories; this is why this kind of salience does not need to be understood or explained;⁴ most important: it never interferes with, or questions, the rules of ordinary discourse.

The prime example of ‘proxy discourse’ is, of course, literature, which is free to display the most salient content as long as it does not trespass beyond its definition as a clearly delimited ‘secondary reality’; the result otherwise is an aberrant situation like that of Don Quijote or Madame Bovary, against which people are constantly warned by ordinary knowledge. The border between primary reality, which must be ordinary, and secondary reality, where markedness is allowed to exist, cannot be questioned.

The point is that *normality*, as we will see below in greater detail,⁵ is *at the same time descriptive and prescriptive*. Since the shared and socially compulsory discourse of ordinariness is assumed to be adequate to the description of reality, it necessarily follows that whatever transcends it (such as salience) *cannot be real*. This suggests once again that ontology is a fundamental part of the definition of normality: the normal is what

⁴ According to Sacks, social categories are devices for storing and making available information about social groups which make it possible to perceive social reality as ordered and rational, and thus as ultimately comprehensible. Among the information necessarily and essentially connected to social categories is the attribution to specific categories of certain activities, which are accordingly labelled “category-bound activities”: “Let’s introduce a term, which I’m going to call ‘category-bound activities’. What I mean by that is, there are a great many activities which Members take it are done by some particular category of persons, or several categories of persons [...]” (SACKS 1992: I, 241); “The way things work is something like the following. We have our category-bound activities, where, for some activity occurring, we have a rule of relevance which says, ‘look first to see whether the person who did it is a member of the category to which the activity is bound’. [...] And of course, using that procedure for finding the category, you may never come across occasions for seeing that it’s ‘incorrect’ [...]. Now, one consequence of that procedure’s use is, if it turns out that someone is a member of some category, then what you have is an explanation. [...] One importance of these statements, then, is that they make some large class of activities immediately understandable, needing no further explanation. The statements are then to be seen as, heavily, ‘explanations’” (SACKS 1992: I, 337).

⁵ See par. 4.

we are entitled to experience and what our language describes without exceeding the limits or disrupting the performance of ordinary social exchange: deviations from it are only possible on a *secondary* level of experience, which can be 'bracketed' and dealt with as an ordinary package of extra-ordinary information – in Sacks's terminology, a non-transferrable 'experience' converted into ordinary shareable 'knowledge'. To name but an example: if I tell a story about an acquaintance of mine who has had experiences of demonic possession, this can arouse the interest of my audience without preventing the exchange from being normally performed; on the other hand, if I start telling my interlocutor that I was *myself* the object of demonic possession, this would lead to forms of unease that would easily derail the conversation and prevent it from 'being ordinary'.

3. THE PHATIC-EPIDEICTIC DIMENSION OF DISCOURSE

Ordinary social exchange – idle, apparently relaxed and unfocused conversation – is the crucial moment where ordinariness is created and where it is imperceptibly transformed into normality and normativity. Sacks's analyses show how the urge to tell and share experience is at the root of its reduction to unmarked quanta of information. In order to see more precisely in what terms this reduction has to be understood, it will be useful to refer to Bronisław Malinowski's concept of 'phatic communion'.⁶

According to Malinowski, who in this anticipates a foundational premise of pragmatics, the purpose of language is not exclusively to convey information (symbolic, propositional meaning) but to act as an instrument of social exchange; Malinowski points out in particular that in many situations language is used only in order to display the speakers' availability for social contact.

There can be no doubt that we have here a new type of linguistic use – phatic communion I am tempted to call it, actuated by the demon of terminological invention – a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words (MALINOWSKI 1923: 315).

I have found it necessary to rework this concept to include an important

⁶ The word 'phatic' was first introduced by B. Malinowski (1923) to qualify a specific variety of discourse; later on, R. Jakobson (1960) borrowed it to designate, in a quite different perspective, one of the basic functions of language, the one concerning contact between sender and receiver.

caveat. More precisely, I would like to question Malinowski's view that in phatic communion content (the words' symbolical, propositional meaning) is irrelevant:

Let us look at it from the special point of view with which we are here concerned; let us ask what light it throws on the function or nature of language. *Are words in Phatic Communion used primarily to convey meaning, the meaning which is symbolically theirs? Certainly not!* They fulfill a social function and that is their principal aim, but they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener. Once again we may say that language does not function here as a means of transmission of thought (*ibid.*, emphasis mine).

I maintain that, on the contrary, propositional meaning is deeply relevant, since phatic communion is the locus where socially shared knowledge about the world is *ritually rehearsed* and socially transmitted. This is why I have chosen to replace Malinowski's concept of "phatic communion" with that of a "phatic-epideictic dimension" of discourse. In Western rhetorical tradition "epideictic" designates a kind of speech which is aimed not at persuading the audience but at rehearsing already shared beliefs. However, such a rehearsing is only apparently neutral, since it shapes the socially shared sense of reality; therefore what may appear as idle and benign, actually conceals a powerful repressive thrust against any and all deviations from the norm, as is apparent, for instance, in the social function of gossip.

Positing a phatic-epideictic dimension of discourse makes it possible to understand on which level Sacks and Malinowski's positions converge: words in phatic communion, where "they are neither the result of intellectual reflection, nor do they necessarily arouse reflection in the listener", are easily shown to correspond to Sacks's notion of ordinary content. If the participants' priority is to show availability for social contact, this is achieved in a way that is easier the more usual and insignificant is the information conveyed, since the idleness of propositional content emphasizes the underlying pragmatic dimension of the exchange. On one hand, Sacks's observation that storyable content is paradoxically reduced in conversation to inconspicuous, ordinary experience, can be clarified through Malinowski's idea that words convey social attitudes beyond propositional meaning: the attitude to be conveyed, and in most cases actually being

conveyed, is exactly that very availability for social contact which is at the root of phatic communion. In other words, we could assume that phatic communion is a major factor in all conversations analyzed by Sacks in his work on ordinariness, since it explains how renouncing salient experience can help reach the pragmatic goal of achieving social closeness. On the other hand, Sacks's theory of ordinariness explains Malinowski's mistake that propositional meaning in phatic communion is irrelevant; Malinowski is led to believe this because he finds that the contents of phatic speech are utterly mundane; in doing this, however, he fails to realize that this very banality is not a drawback but an asset which is systematically pursued as the most suited to the end of establishing and fostering social exchange.

4. NORMALITY AS DOUBLE ENCODING AND AS INITIATORY PROCESS

The concept "phatic-epideictic" also highlights the double nature of discursive exchange: on one side statements have a 'propositional' meaning, which depends on the information they convey; but on the other side they also display a 'positional' alignment of participants, highlighting their taking sides in a number of actions and positions which arise in social exchange.⁷

The relationship, and above all the conflict, between the propositional meaning of discourse and the positions which arise from the actions of the participants yield an important insight into the performance of normality, since they allow us to realize that *the social incompetence of misfits is mostly a consequence of their inability to manage interactions on two parallel levels*. Misfits tend to adhere to the propositional level of explicit discourse, which is to them the only relevant dimension, whereas the level of habit-ingrained action, which situational pragmatics points to only indirectly and implicitly, is more or less opaque to them.

I would like to illustrate this dichotomy through the analysis of an

⁷ The concept of 'position', first introduced by HOLLWAY 1984 and further developed in HARRÉ and VAN LANGENHOVE 1999, is defined as "a complex cluster of generic personal attributes, structured in various ways, which impinges on the possibilities of interpersonal, intergroup and even intrapersonal action through some assignment of such rights, duties and obligations to an individual as are sustained by the cluster" (HARRÉ and VAN LANGENHOVE 1999: 1); as such, it offers "a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of role. Talking about positions instead of roles fits within the framework of an emerging body of new ideas about the ontology of social phenomena" (HARRÉ and VAN LANGENHOVE 1999: 14). Positions arise and exist in interaction; more specifically, they are negotiated and emergent properties of verbal interactions: "discourses make available positions for subjects to take up. These positions are in relation to other people" (HOLLWAY 1984, quoted in VAN LANGENHOVE and HARRÉ 1999: 16).

excerpt from an Italian film of the late Seventies, *Ratataplan* by Maurizio Nichetti (1979); here, the comparison between the behavior of a misfit and that of a community of normals clearly reveals another important facet of these interactions: their initiatory character.

We shall focus on the film's first scene:⁸ a clearly atypical engineer (long hair, loose clothes, puzzled childish expression) takes part in a selection process for a job in a corporate company. All participants are requested to perform a very simple task: drawing a tree. Whereas all the protagonist's more typical competitors struggle with black pens and pencils only to hand in hilariously primitive sketches, the film's hero sets happily to work with a number of colored pencils he surprisingly produces from his pockets. The tree he manages to draw is luxuriant and colourful, quite the opposite of the skeletal figures drawn by the other candidates. So, when he is the only one to be singled out and escorted out of the room by the selection assistant, we are induced to think he is the only winner of the game, that he got the only position available. On the contrary: with an unexpected, comic reversal, he is shown out of the building while all the other candidates are congratulated on getting the job. "We are sorry, but we have no need of you here", says the selection assistant on taking leave from him.

Some observations: here the misfit's behavior in relation to a social context can obviously be modeled as a rite of passage, more specifically as an initiation ritual aimed at getting access to normality as a privileged condition;⁹ it can therefore be analyzed with the tools of anthropology from van Gennep (1909) onwards. The normal person is co-opted within the community of her peers, while the misfit is expelled as a scapegoat; this event strengthens the bond among the normals (again, anthropological tools are useful here, starting from René Girard's scapegoat theory: GIRARD 1972; 1982). The misunderstanding which arises around the admission test reveals that *the real initiation test consists in the ability to deal with the ambiguity of the demand*: it is quite obvious that the demand "draw a tree" ("design a tree", in the broken English of the Italian selection assistant) has two different meanings: 1. on the surface (that is: literally, *propositionally*) it must be taken as a request to accomplish the task in the best possible way with regard to the verb "draw"; in this respect, "drawing well" is better

⁸ The scene is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Mj6OM9j7cY> (retrieved August 30th, 2017).

⁹ That it, as a requirement for Membership: see above, n. 3.

than “drawing badly”; 2. implicitly (that is: pragmatically, *positionally*), it must be taken as a request to display (through the way the task is carried out) one’s positioning in relation to the implicit traits which are the really relevant ones in the social frame of cooptation.¹⁰

Beyond the paradoxical and comic thrust of the sequence, what clearly emerges is that the real purpose of the admission test is to organize a positional response which displays the ability to completely disregard the propositional dimension of discourse: the real engineer reveals his aptitude for an engineer’s job by his positioning himself as indifferent to the aesthetic dimension of experience and to nature. An engineer who is able to draw a tree well is not a real engineer – at least he does not fit the profile stereotypically ascribed to engineers, and is therefore incompatible with the patterns of ordinary social exchange, which can only be carried out by stereotypical actors.

In order to pass the test it is necessary to show *through one’s behaviour and not through words* that one understands what is important on the level of unwritten laws (that is, to behave as an ‘ordinary’ engineer by positioning oneself as alien to aesthetics and nature; let me point out here that this is also a good instance of the vicious circle set off by the repressive thrust of ordinariness as epideictic rehearsal of shared notions: discarding those who do not conform to the stereotype, we only get to confirm the assumption that engineers can *never* be imaginative; hence the loop: assumptions of ordinariness guide social action, and social action results in more evidence of the truth of the ordinary assumption).

Whoever adheres to the explicit conditions of the task, and shows herself unable to detach herself from the propositional content of discourse, fails the test. *I believe that the ability to dissociate the positional and the propositional aspects is the defining trait of normal behavior, as well as the measure against which anomalies can be assessed.* To put it more bluntly, this is tantamount to saying that hypocrisy, which is often deplored as a dysfunction in normal social relations, *is not at all a dysfunction but, on the contrary, a necessary condition*: without a penchant for hypocritical dissociation, one cannot be – or at least one cannot function or be recognized as – perfectly normal.

To summarize: we have seen that normality, the condition of social exchange within an ordinary frame, is not a neutral starting point but the

¹⁰ For the use of the concept ‘frame’ see GOFFMAN 1974.

result of a number of social actions, a formalized condition to be achieved through work.

This implies a number of important corollaries:

1. access to the prerogatives of normality is a selective procedure, organized according to the script of initiation rites: normality is conquered after an admission test;
2. because of this selectivity, normality is constructed as an object of desire (normality as fetish);¹¹
3. normality as an object of desire can be analyzed according to Girard's theory of mimetic desire,¹² through concepts like the fetishization of the object (see above) to indiscriminate competition, to the expulsion of the scapegoat (as in *Ratataplan*);
4. the existence of a number of procedures through which Members are selected and maintain their status creates a *space of control* in which the machinery of domination is at work.¹³

5. NORMALITY AS SELF-SACRIFICE

Another important corollary of conceptualizing the access to normality as an initiation test is that this definition implies a *sacrifice*. Sacks's analyses show that the performance of ordinariness depends on an ever-vigilant readiness to cut down salience in order to shape easily shareable pieces of information.

I believe that *the sacrifice required by the cooptation into the ranks of the normals is the belief in the binding value of the propositional dimension of language*. Whoever continues to ascribe a binding propositional value to words, whoever continues to treat discourses as having the power to determine choices and actions, is unable to function socially, since social

¹¹ Useful insights on the process of fetishization in FUSILLO 2012.

¹² GIRARD 1961 – a seminal work who opened up new horizons in the understanding of social processes as well as of their literary representations.

¹³ This connection between dominion and the knowledge of procedures needed to implement a state of social order is clearly to be related to Foucault's notion of 'pouvoir-savoir', relocating power from the hands of a few privileged subjects to the network of all the subjects involved in social practices: "Ces rapports de 'pouvoir-savoir' ne sont donc pas à analyser à partir d'un sujet de connaissance qui serait libre ou non par rapport au système du pouvoir; mais il faut considérer au contraire que le sujet qui connaît, les objets à connaître et les modalités de connaissance sont autant d'effets de ces implications fondamentales du pouvoir-savoir et de leurs transformations historiques. En bref, ce n'est pas l'activité du sujet de connaissance qui produirait un savoir, utile ou rétif au pouvoir, mais le pouvoir-savoir, les processus et les luttes qui le traversent et dont il est constitué, qui déterminent les formes et les domaines possibles de la connaissance", FOUCAULT 1975: 32).

discourse works on the assumption that the positional, implicit dimension of social exchange invariably trumps the explicit propositional one.

The attention to the propositional meaning of utterances is a feature of most literary representation of misfits. From the narrow-minded peasant of ancient Greek comedy¹⁴ to the moronic dimwit of folk-tale,¹⁵ up to the more sophisticated non-neurotypical misfits of contemporary TV series,¹⁶ sticking to the literal meaning of language is the hallmark of a mild, generally benign, ineptitude which disrupts normal social exchange and exposes the use of implicitness and indirect speech to convey a meaning that is never totally transparent. The fourth chapter of G.K. Chesterton's *The Club of Queer Trades* (1905) brilliantly articulates this substantial philosophical question: the short story's main character is Lieutenant Keith, an eccentric officer who is suspected of a crime. When the police try to find him at the address he gave them, "The Elms, Buxton Common, near Purley, Surrey" (CHESTERTON 1987 [1905]: 73), they suspect they have been fooled since they can't see any house on Buxton Common. But the main character of the book, Basil Grant, a retired judge and a philosophical eccentric himself, easily leads the searching party to Keith, who actually lives in an "arboreal villa", an egg-shaped cabin spectacularly located up in the elm's branches. To their utter astonishment, Basil provides his companions with the following "two facts":

"The first is that though when you are guessing about any one who is sane, the sanest thing is the most likely; when you are guessing about any one who is, like our host, insane, the maddest thing is the most likely. The second is to remember that very plain literal fact always seems fantastic. If Keith had taken a little brick box of a house in Clapham with nothing but railings in front of it and had written 'The Elms' over it, you wouldn't have thought there was anything fantastic about that. Simply because it was a great blaring, swaggering lie you would have believed it" (CHESTERTON 1987 [1905]: 83-84).

Through the brilliant paradox ("very plain literal fact always seems fantastic") Chesterton's protagonist warns the reader of the dangers of ordinary

¹⁴ I am referring to the protagonist of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, the old Attic farmer Strepsiades, who proves unfit for philosophical education, among other things, because of his stubborn attachment to literal propositional meaning (ARISTOFANE 2001 [423-418 BCE]: 178-197).

¹⁵ Just one example from a high-brow version of a traditional folktale: *Vardiello*, in BASILE 1986 [1634-1636]: 94-107.

¹⁶ Here, too, iconic examples range from the physicist Sheldon Cooper in Chuck LORRE and Bill PRADYS's *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-) to the young Sam in Robia RASHID's *Atypical* (2017-).

discourse, where exact meaning has been replaced by the fuzziness of habit and usage. Once again, the artist proves a talented theorist: Chesterton's *caveat* concurs with Sacks's view that the need for ordinary content cannot but cloud the very perception of reality, leading prepackaged and commonly shared notions to prevail upon the most salient perceptions. More specifically, the metaphoric dimension of language is seen as evidence of man's proneness to hypocrisy and mystification: naming a house after a tree is not, in this character's view, a simple metonymy or an innocent instance of wishful thinking, but is a "great blaring, swaggering lie" that strives to conceal the oppressiveness of "a little brick box of a house" behind the pretentious appeal of a false designation.

Chesterton's plea for a return to the unexpected madness of literal truth is only one particularly astute critique of the dullness of normality. But its taking sides with the insane is not a unique event. One aspect which remains constant through the considerable, occasionally bewildering, variety of my corpus is that the implied audience of artistic texts is invariably assumed to empathize with the misfit. Through the portrayal of this kind of character, literature seems to react against a social practice in which the words, the propositional value of statements, the *logos*, are deprived of power in favor of considerations of habit and opportunity. But why should literature always take the misfit's side, empathizing with her adherence to the literal value of statements against any tempering considerations of context, position and opportunity?

One reason may be that literature itself as a discourse has no context which may condition its reception and frame its meaning, and therefore has no positional value; what value it does possess, what hope it has to be taken seriously, depends only on its propositional content. *Literature therefore is the embodiment, made permanent and super-personal, of the misfit's discourse.* In literature, what is socially repressed in the misfit returns¹⁷ as the organizing principle of a form of discourse which is central to the self-definition and to the continuity of the culture.

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¹⁷ I am referring to Francesco Orlando's well known theory of literature as the "return of the repressed" (ORLANDO 1999 [1965]).

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