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Desire and the Other in Richard Yates's Revolutionary Road

"The thirst of desire is never filled, nor fully satisfied." – Marcus Tullius Cicero

"Tell yourselves that it is in order – to be Other at last. One can be satisfied with being Other like everyone else, after a lifetime spent being it in spite of the Law." – Jacques Lacan

Richard Yates's novel Revolutionary Road did not receive much academic attention despite the fact that it is an exceptionally refined and capturing piece of fiction. It was critically acclaimed following its publication in 1961, nominated for the National Book Award in 1962 and then forgotten. Not surprisingly, the novel was "rediscovered" once a movie adaptation was made in 2008. Revolutionary Road is typically read – quite expectedly – as a story of suburban malaise and a critique of the American (suburban) life in the 1950s. However, in an interview, published in Ploughshares in 1972, Yates stated that although he intended the novel to be an indictment of American life in the 1950s because of a general lust for conformity (DeWitt and Clark 66), he never planned the novel to be anti-suburban in any way. On the contrary, he hoped to make it implicit in the text that he is writing about a particular couple, the Wheelers, and what turns out to be specifically "their delusion, their problem" (DeWitt and Clark 66). In that sense, the novel should be read as a psychological exploration of the universal issues of human desire and the relationship of the individual to the pre-established (social) system in which he or she lives. Consequently, it becomes clear that Yates's novel hardly represents an indictment of a way of life, but quite the opposite: an indictment of the individual unable to adapt to the demands of the Other. In Lacanian terms, Revolutionary Road is a story about the unattainable desire to create one's identity regardless or in spite of the socially constructed Symbolic order.

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As opposed to the usual definitions of the Other as one different or distinct from the one or ones first implied, or the member of the out-group, whose identity is considered to be lacking and may be subject to discrimination by the in-group (Staszak 43), the Other, according to Lacan, is the place into which the subject is born, the dominating cultural or social context, or as Lacan calls it, the Symbolic order. The subject and the self are socially produced/culturally constructed by the Symbolic as the subject becomes integrated into its environment, that is the Symbolic order, by learning the language and establishing one's position in the social life. The Other thus constitutes the subject making the subject dependent on it (Homer 44-45).

In forming his concept of desire "Lacan recalls the loss of wings in Plato" (Butler 379) and echoes Plato's claim that desire is in fact an impossible desire to return to our origin.[1] In his The Symposium, Plato, using Aristophanes' voice, tells the story of human nature, revealing that once there were three genders and that each individual was "a rounded whole" (26), composed of two people. Being strong, vigorous and ambitious, the humans attacked the gods, for which Zeus, unwilling to wipe out the human race, but aware of the necessity to punish them for their rebellion, decided to punish them in such a way that "human beings could still exist but be too weak to carry on their wild behaviour" (27): he cut them into two. Ever since this mythological or ontological separation, people have been longing for their other half. In other words, desire that is at the very core of our being is inextricably tied to lack (Homer 72) – the "primordial" lack caused by the fact that people were no longer their perfect, round self, which provoked in them an insatiable desire for closeness with another human being in order to feel complete again (Symposium 28-29). Moving away from mythology and toward biology (or medical science), Lacan uses a different example to present the same idea of desire occurring at the moment when the subject realizes that he or she is not a part of the object with which he or she previously identified himself/herself. More precisely, Lacan poses the example of the mother and the child in her womb as a representation of a self-contained, ideal unity in the sense that the child is one with the mother and can have all its needs satisfied. After the separation from the mother, however, we start to yearn for the self-containment that has been lost and can never be regained. In other words, we lack because we are not self-sufficient and because "The satisfaction of human desire is possible only when mediated by the other's desire and labor" (Lacan 98). As we adapt to the system around us, the desire of the

society, of the Other, becomes our own desire. It is unconscious and culturally determined;[2] it is "'outside' rather than 'within' us – or rather it exists 'between' us, as our relationships do" (Eagleton 173). Our desire is a result of our interaction with the Other and it arises only because the world of the Other generates it (Eagleton 174). According to Lacan, we desire what others, for example our parents, unconsciously desire for us, again echoing Plato's idea that the human body is not moved by or of itself, as it appears to be, but rather through a reaction to the Other (Phaedrus 245c-246a).

The very fact that "the law is what constitutes both desire and the lack on which it is predicated" (Foucault 81), in other words that desire arises as we become immersed into the Symbolic, explains its close tie with language. Foucault asserted that desire has become a preoccupation of discourse (18-20), but Butler points out that it is unclear what exactly this discourse might be, since "language is always less than 'clarifying' when it comes to desire. Quite contrary, desire will cause language to become opaque, since it becomes implicated in that which it seems to clarify" (369). The metaphorical nature of language results from the fact that language itself is a substitution for "some direct, wordless possession of the object itself" (Eagleton 166). Human language, therefore, depends on lack as its fundamental principle – the absence of a "real" signified referred to by the signifier – and so does human desire. Consequently, to enter language is to become a prey to desire, since words have meaning only by virtue of exclusion of others. So, in their desire to articulate themselves through the only means they have at their disposal – language– people continuously move from one signifier to another, desiring the impossible self-identity and self-completion which they knew in the imaginary. However, since language is "slippery and ambiguous," people can never mean precisely what they say, nor say precisely what they mean. The "truth" cannot be articulated in a "pure", unmediated way, since verbalized meaning is always an "approximation" (Eagleton 166-169).

Consequently, "the first thing in the novel that Frank thinks of saying to April is something that he does not say. ... In his thoughts Frank dramatises a life more satisfactory than the one he has" (Mullan 1). The very beginning of the novel, Frank's reaction to April's theatrical failure, is suggestive of how there is never a full overlap between what is meant and what is being articulated by words, which, in the Wheelers' case, causes friction between partners and leaves Frank

wondering about what “would have been a better thing to say” (Yates 15) to his wife. The fact that the speaker always means more than his or her words can express explains why lack and desire are inherent not only to human lives but also to the words uttered or written by the subject. Since language is a pre-established structure that belongs to the Other, one can never fully control its meaning or articulate one’s desire. It is ironic, then, that Frank and April Wheeler keep insisting on “talking” things through in order to define themselves, which they will never be able to do. In accordance with Lacan’s premise that our being is constituted through language, the Wheelers try to constitute their desired existence through incessant discussions. Language is an access to what is lacking and what is desired, however, the meaning of language, of what is being uttered, can never be fully controlled or grasped, and so they cannot mould their ideal selves through speech. What we are – our essence – always remains untold, and continues to haunt us.

For this reason, the reader is allowed into Frank’s head by means of his “imaginary dialogues: exchanges that only take place in Frank’s head. We see the unravelling of the marriage largely from his point of view (though we are not required to sympathise with him) and hear the conversations that he imagines, quoted as if direct speech” (Mullan 1). If he had uttered what he meant, the meaning would have been lost forever, contaminated and transformed in the process of reception, which is why Revolutionary Road is a story of things untold. By allowing access to Frank’s thoughts, Yates symbolically offers the reader “pure” meaning – undiluted ideas the meaning of which can ideally be “fully” comprehended. Similarly to psychoanalysts “listening” to what the patient is not saying, the reader finds out what Frank thinks, but never says out loud, since what he is trying to hide or is unable to utter, represents the key to their problems.

Yates’s novel begins with a description of the dress rehearsal for a play in which the female protagonist, April Wheeler, plays the leading role. Staging a play symbolizes the need to be recognized and accepted by others: the actors need the approval of their audience in order for the acting experience to be complete and satisfying, whereas the audience expects a great performance, proving the inevitable dependence of the individual on the Other. The play is also an important symbol because the Wheelers are putting on a similar act in their life, pretending to be better – different – than the rest, and asking the others for approval and admiration.

Throughout Revolutionary Road, Frank and April are constantly watching themselves, gauging their lives against ideals from the movies or the newspapers. And how do other people see them? Are they beautiful and handsome enough? Do they have the right friends? There's a self-consciousness, an anxiety of not being quite right or knowing precisely how to behave that undermines all their scoffing at conformity. It's as if they're playing at their roles of man and woman, husband and wife, mother and father, terrified they'll blow their lines. (O'Nan 1)

Because it is crucial for them to impress others, they both place great importance on the success of the amateur play and April as the leading actress.

However, the play ultimately fails which disappoints and agitates Frank who has already envisioned himself basking in the glory of April's success. His fantasy of having laughs and drinks with the "admiring" friends (Yates 13) and of coming home to "swing his children laughing in the air" is shattered and instead of comforting April, he turns into a man in need of comforting himself (Yates 13). He is, as Lytal puts it, "a victim of his own hubris, an unexceptional man who wants to be a Romantic hero" (1), but not thanks to his own feats. He relies on April to help him seem special, because he knows he cannot be admired or envied for his own achievements. The same behavioral pattern existed even before Frank married April. He never wanted to meet a "soul mate", that is someone he can fall in love with, but someone who would make him seem successful. He wanted a partner who would serve as a testimony to his greatness. "It nagged him, in particular, that none of the girls he'd known so far had given him a sense of unalloyed triumph" (Yates 22). He needed "a first-rate girl" (Yates 22) to make him seem worthy of having such a partner, and, finally, he found April to be such a girl because of her shining hair and splendid legs (Yates 23). More precisely, what he wanted was to "conquer" a woman who was desirable to others, one who could be his trophy, proving that his desire was marked only by what he believed other men desired, and lacked any kind of affective impulse. Frank, it seems, suffers from what Lacan argued to be "the fundamental illusion to which man is a slave … the passion of being a man" (153). This passion, or even madness, of a man's soul to prove himself perfect and self-contained, which is in fact narcissism, imposes itself on all his desires (Lacan 153). Frank is indeed tormented by his narcissism and his desire to be recognized as a Man. Consequently, all his decisions originate from the fact that he persistently "deludes himself into believing that someday,

through some unforeseen mechanism, he might really achieve his dreams and become this other, more accomplished person" (O'Nan 1). Frank believed that marrying April was a sure way to prove that he is a real man, but in an ironic twist, it later turns out that April is the one who repeatedly tells him he is no man at all, crushing his fantasies about himself: "'You're disgusting. … 'Oh, you poor, self-deluded – Look at you! Look at you, and tell me how by any stretch' – she tossed her head, and the grin of her teeth glistened white in the moonlight – 'by any stretch of the imagination you can call yourself a man!" (Yates 27-28).

Their mutual drama begins as April gets pregnant during their affair. Even though Frank claims he dreads suburban lifestyle, because he is different and deserves something better, he nevertheless forces April to marry him and keep the baby, despite her wishes, provoking in her a constant feeling of entrapment. Her wish to have an abortion enrages Frank, not because he loves her or wants to have a child with her – "he didn't want a baby any more than she did" (Yates 51), but because it hurts his ego to realize that "she had made a decision and made all inquires about the procedure all on her own, in secret" (Yates 49). The idea of abortion was "more than a little attractive to him" (Yates 49), but he still insists on keeping the baby, because the moment of coercing her into marrying him made him feel like a man: "no single moment of his life had ever contained a better proof of manhood than that… holding that tamed, submissive girl and saying 'Oh, my lovely; oh, my lovely,' while she promised she would bear his child" (Yates 50).

Their irrational behavior, Frank's insistence on getting married and the fact that April "had allowed herself to be dissuaded" (Yates 50) might be ascribed to what Lacan refers to as "man's cultural subordination" (96): the individual cannot control his/her genital libido because it goes beyond the individual for the sake of the species. This would mean that unconsciously, the two of them desired exactly what the Other desired of them. O'Nan asserted that the Wheelers' desires are to some extent shared by the rest of humanity and although they seem to be very scornful of the ideals of the culture, at heart they aspire to the same "bland" successes (1). It is ironic, then, that their belief of how suburban lifestyle is horrific and mind-numbing is based on the idea that they are better than the rest and so they desire (and deserve) different, better things. Of course, what these "things" are is never clearly verbalized either by Frank or by April, because they in fact do not desire anything more than what suburban life has to offer. This is not surprising, as it results from

one of the myths of the Western cultural narrative according to which the traditional nuclear family is a definite, prescribed structure which should be perpetuated and from which every individual should ideally originate.[3] For centuries, the nuclear family has represented (and for the most part still represents) the accepted paradigm according to which all people should live, or in other words, "the proper" way to organize one's life. Therefore, upon reaching a certain state of maturity (determined by age, behavior or social and cultural expectations) every person is expected to construct a family of his or her own in order to perpetuate the established order (what Lacan would refer to as Law).

Frank's view of the world and his unconscious attitude toward "regular" family life become quite clear when he attempts to psychoanalyze April. He explains to his wife that her dissatisfaction and neurosis have origins in the fact that she, because her mother had left her, never had a proper role model whom she could emulate and do what women are supposed to do: "attract a man, establish a home, have children" (Yates 232). In this very instance, Frank describes the "rules" of the Symbolic Order – social expectations, which turn out to be his own expectations as well. His mock psychoanalysis of his wife results in the discovery that his desire is identical to the desire of the Other, despite his constant effort to prove himself different. What is more, they constantly compare themselves to others and are anxious to find out whether they're beautiful, smart and successful enough. This persistent anxiety about what to do and what to say undermines their disdain for conformity and proves they are just like everyone else. "They work around the house and tend to their children, seething with dissatisfaction yet hopeful that 'The gathering disorder of their lives might still be sorted out and made to fit these rooms'" (O'Nan 1).

Even so, they are still unwilling to accept themselves as a part of the Other. Their scorn for the Symbolic is perhaps most obvious in their dinners with the Campbells; Frank laments about the state of the world, that is suburbia: "Nobody thinks or feels or cares anymore; nobody gets excited or believes in anything except their own comfortable little God damn mediocrity" (Yates 60) implying that "they alone, the four of them, were painfully alive in a drugged and dying culture" (Yates 60). This is an illusion that they all seem to enjoy, but Frank and April seem desperate to truly believe it. Frank is unconcerned with reality to the extent that he is willing to say whatever will make him seem manly or give him a sense of a (false) accomplishment. By way of illustration,

Frank ends one fight, as Lytal reminds us, stating that April should have aborted the first baby instead of having married him, not because that is what he truly believes, but because this was "the perfect exit line" (1).

However, the actual cause of their dissatisfaction is not the suburban lifestyle, but their failure to adapt to it – to the world of the Other. Their refusal to accept both reality and themselves for who they are will prove not only detrimental to their marriage and social life but will also put April's life at stake. Seal is right to claim that "Revolutionary Road is not so much a tragedy of suburban alienation as it is a very early example of the arrested development narrative so common in contemporary films and novels" (1). The Wheelers' actions and conversations show that they wish to live like children: in a carefree, beautiful world where a myriad of choices lies before them – choices they are not yet expected to make, because they still have time to enjoy the pleasant suspense of what the future has in store for them. Quite similarly, Hibbs concludes that "the characters' dreams never transcend the realm of adolescent fantasy" (1). Despite the fact that they have long ago grown up and now have children of their own, April and Frank have not matured. They are still not willing to admit to themselves that they lead the kind of life that most people do, and what is more, that this life they lead is not a sign of weakness or a flaw in their character, but of their inability to deal with reality.

Instead of facing up to real life, Frank attempts to construct an ideal self through discourse and pretense – by believing whatever suited him, whereas April tries to construct hers by insisting on what even she knows is a lie – that she married a special man:

> *'You're the most valuable and wonderful thing in the world. You're a man.' And of all the capitulations in his life, this was the one that seemed most like a victory. … He had taken command of the universe because he was a man, and because the marvelous creature who opened and moved for him, tender and strong, was a woman. (Yates 115)*

Their tragedy lies precisely in this agreed self-deception (and mutual deception) which made them believe they ought to live some kind of a different life, a life they themselves could not define in any other way but by negatively defining the life they currently lead. They have no dreams, and they had none when they were young, which makes it hard for them to strive toward a particular goal.

Their lives are indeed pointless in a way, but not because of the fact that they are living the kind of life that most Americans did at the time. Family life is not the reason why they are unhappy, but, because of its complexity, merely a catalyst which reveals them to be unable and unwilling to become mature. Their immaturity is obvious in their inability to tolerate temporary "unpleasure" and see it as a step on the road to pleasure (Beyond the Pleasure Principle 7). April and Frank cannot be responsible and loving parents, because they never show genuine affection for their two children and never truly accept their parental roles. Instead of giving love and support, they simply want it for themselves. Consequently, their children represent a threat to their imagined or imaginary lives, because to function as parents they must abandon the role of a child. As Hibbs points out, "the presence of children punctures the world of perpetual adolescent fantasy to which the main characters are devoted" (1). Instead of learning to live within the given social context, they question their place within the symbolic order and do not know (or refuse to admit to) what they desire. They yearn for a "different" kind of life, even though they can never say what that means precisely. Their dissatisfaction with their life, their inability to cope with reality, and to fit into the social system is frustrating them and causes them to become hysteric.

Hysteria ensues when a subject begins to question or feel dissatisfied with his or her symbolic identity, which is historically determined and dependent upon the ideological context (Žižek 35). A hysteric obsessively questions his/her identity, because he/she is unsure of who he or she is and the desire for identification ("I am") is transformed into a question ("Am I?"). This results in "a self-consciousness that prevents Frank from relaxing or ever thinking clearly" (Lytal 1). He is nervous and "always seeing himself in mirrors" (Lytal 1), as if he is constantly checking who he is. The Wheelers desperately need to talk things out, to try to understand and define themselves through conversations, to construct an alternative reality for themselves through language. The hysteria can only be cured when the subject accepts himself/herself as well as their place within the Symbolic, which does not happen in the Wheelers' case, because they cannot admit to their dependence on the Other.

April's idea of going to Europe is not merely an attempt to make a fresh start in a less stifling environment, but a symbolic attempt to run away from the Other. Europe is a promise of a "different" life, one in which they'd be happy: she would work and her husband would get the

chance to become “what he really is”. Of course, her idea – the desire to escape – is doomed from the start, not only because Frank does not want to discover his true self – he has, in fact, spent his whole life hiding and masking it, but also because the dream of going to Europe represents the elusive desire for completeness which can never become true. They cannot run away from the Symbolic, or “beat the system”, because they depend on it. The idea that living abroad will make it possible for them to “find themselves” and appease the hysteric within is a childish illusion, because finding themselves is by no means a question of place. Frank fakes enthusiasm, but is terrified with April’s idea, because – even though he would never admit it – he knows that he himself is a fake. While April sees the move to Europe as a chance to start over and find herself (even though, in the habit of deceiving each other, she persistently suggests that it is on behalf of Frank that she wants to go), Frank is afraid that the move will reveal he is not the intellectual he pretends to be, so, once again, he uses the fact that April got pregnant as a reason to force her to do what he wants, that is to stay put. John Givings, a mathematician suffering from a mental illness, pinpoints Frank’s cowardice by saying: “’I wouldn't be surprised if you knocked her up on purpose, just so you could spend the rest of your life hiding behind that maternity dress’” (Yates 287). John’s remark has the effect of an epiphany on April because it reminds her of how Frank used her first pregnancy as an excuse to marry her and start a family life, even though she did not want it and even though he claimed, and still claims, how he detests the suburban lifestyle and (declaratively) desires “something else.” It is at this moment that April decides she must make the most drastic move of all, because she realizes that Frank is exactly where he wants to be. In other words, the realization “of the widening gap between their idea of themselves as special people and the reality of being like everyone else makes them take drastic steps, with tragic results” (O’Nan 1). This is not surprising, since, as Freud asserted in Civilization and Its Discontents, anyone who decides to think up their own utopia, that is invent a world in which unbearable features of reality are eliminated and replaced by ones that are in conformity with one’s own wishes, will as a rule attain nothing, because it is impossible to find someone willing to live out this delusion with them (31).

April’s decision to abort the unwanted third baby at home is doubtlessly a suicide attempt. Her letter to Frank, in which she asks him not to blame himself, is both a suicide note and her attempt

to reclaim her sense of dignity. April realizes that their idea of themselves as special people (or their desire to be such) is unfounded and that she had voluntarily spent her whole life supporting the illusions of a man adamant in avoiding reality. She accepts the blame for having lied to herself all these years (Yates 304) and decides to finally do something she believes in, even if the only thing left for her to do is take her own life. By committing suicide she actually constitutes her world (Lacan 101) and paradoxically takes charge of her own life by ending it of her own volition. Because death is the absolute Master for the fractured man, suicide is, according to Lacan, a form of self-punishing neurosis with hysterical symptoms in a modern man who suffers in social hell because he never measures up to the fraternity (100-101). In simpler terms, after becoming aware that lying to herself and to her husband did not bring either of them any good, April finds the cure for her hysteria, that is for the uncertainty about her identity in suicide as the only truthful thing she has ever done. April's death leaves Frank with a painful realization that he is a complete failure and can no longer do anything to hide it.

To conclude, Yates's novel about life in American suburbia has a more universal meaning: it is most of all a story about the interior life, about the (failed) process of growing up and adapting to the adult world. Lacan suggests that by the very fact of our being born into this world, which is the Other, we become the Other ourselves. Any struggle to be different from the Other is in essence a futile one, the Wheelers' being a case in point. People need the Other to define themselves, since people, as Eagleton explains, arrive at a sense of an "I" by means of having that "I" reflected back to themselves by some other object or person (164). By rejecting the Other, they in fact reject themselves. Their tragedy lies in the fact that they refused to adapt to the socially constructed reality, mistaking their own misrecognition of themselves – and the expectations that arise from the misrecognition – for an illusionary idea that they are "better" and different from the rest. Frank and April's failure to adapt to the conventions of suburban life serves as a reaffirmation of the social order, rather than a critique, proving them unable to cope with the demands of the Other, as well as to cause any significant change in the symbolic order. Controversially, but with a cruel logic, Lacan suggests that an average individual must be satisfied with being (a part of) the Other, like everyone else.

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[1] While it should be noted that Lacan was influenced by many thinkers other than Plato, the scope and aim of this paper does not allow a detailed analysis of all his influences (be that Hegel's notion of Begierde introduced in the Phenomenology of Spirit, Kojeve's later reading of Hegel from which Lacan derived the concept of the Other, Saussure's structural linguistics, Heidegger's idea of temporality, and so on), but focuses on the primary Platonic idea of desire as arising from some sort of primary separation.

[2] We strive to be the part of the Other and live in harmony with our environment. For this reason, people who feel that they are “outside” of the Symbolic Order (even though this seems to be, in fact, impossible as we, according to Lacan, become immersed in it upon acquiring language and passing through the Mirror Stage) desperately try to be acknowledged and included in it, which is a direct cause for most “equal rights” movements. While the desire of specific “out-groups” to be recognized and accepted may seem as their struggle to be accepted in their diversity, it is in fact their struggle to fit into the mainstream, instead of constantly being the opposition. The process of inclusion of the other into the Other goes both ways: those who are not within the system, desire to become a part of it and the system, too, wants to „swallow“ and contain them in order to have control over them and thus dispense with them (Dolar 19). Lacan supports the idea that we need to conform to the order, because it enables a much more comfortable existence. This opens up a question of social change, which is not the immediate subject of this paper, but deserves to be briefly commented on. A critical mass of people can cause a change within the order itself transforming it thus into a structure people want to participate in and perpetuate as such. The title of Yates’s novel refers to the name of the street the Wheelers live in and is an ironic comment on the fact that the Wheelers are not revolutionaries at all, that they are not the kind of people who can instigate change. It can also be said to suggest that a “revolution” must occur in the Symbolic (social, cultural) order so that certain changes can take place.

[3] Broken families, orphaned children and any “damage” to the standard nuclear family model have long been considered a deviation from norm (which influences family members, especially children, in a negative way, and consequently has negative effects for the society), rather than accepted as a natural/possible occurrence in a human life.



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