

LITERATURE AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

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Summary

Psychoanalysis is a discipline devoted to the study of psychic life (*Seelenleben*), aiming to cure diseases of the soul (*seelische Leiden*); from its earliest developments, however, it has had a broader vocation. Its founder, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), placed it among the sciences of mind (*Geisteswissenschaften*): psychoanalysis is not simply a branch of medicine or psychology; it helps understand philosophy, culture, religion, and first and foremost literature. Freud is a great reader; he is familiar with the great works of universal literature, as well as of the works of his contemporaries. He also has an acute sense of language and style. The present article aims to break off from the oversimplifications which Freud himself dreaded, and which stem from a second-hand (or even more distant) knowledge of his writings. It brings out the central place given to imagination in Freud's works (where poets are considered as the best allies, and indeed the pioneers of psychoanalysis), and the similarities between his approach and that of comparative literature, which likewise rests on processes of translation, comparison, and interpretation of fine details. We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, act 4, scene 1. But creative writers are valuable allies and their evidence is to be prized highly, for they are apt to know a whole host of things between heaven and earth of which our philosophy has not yet let us dream. [...] among them [individual writers] we are accustomed to honour as the deepest observers of the human mind. Freud, *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's 'Gradiva'* (1907), *Standard Edition*, vol. 9.

1. Introduction

Psychoanalysis was born out of the self-analysis undertaken by Freud in 1897. His friend Wilhelm Fliess, a physician, was an indispensable partner for Freud in his exploration of the self. In the course of their intense epistolary exchange, Wilhelm Fliess did not simply help Freud by playing the role of a first reader of the theories he was developing, helping him focus his thoughts a widespread form of collaboration between scholars. Rather, Fliess was the indispensable partner upon whom the founder

of psychoanalysis projected his desire to understand the affects with which he was grappling. Put differently, their relationship epitomized a process that Freud was soon to theorize under the name of *transfer*. Freud's correspondence with Fliess, which was published only after Freud's death, affords us precious insights into the elaboration of the main concepts of the new science, which he sets out in their full-fledged form in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899): the unconscious; censorship; transfer. Freud later distanced himself from Fliess, as he realized that their orientations actually differed considerably. In the meantime, however, this *other self*, about whom he had been mistaken, and who was to some extent his antagonist, had played a decisive role: the progress of science required a human mediation. Without *transfer*, there could be no such thing as psychoanalysis.

To Freud and the analysts who followed him, any form of analysis should be grounded in the personal experience of psychoanalytical cure, which involves in-depth questioning of oneself, going far beyond the sphere of intellectual knowledge. This essential fact should be kept in mind at every stage. Freud himself, however, made constant efforts to set out the main notions of his doctrine to the 'layman' (i.e. to those who have not themselves undertaken an analysis), in the belief that such explanations were legitimate and necessary. This can be taken as an encouragement for the present attempt, by a 'layman', to trace the eminent part played by literature (and by art generally) since the earliest stages of Freud's reflections.

Psychoanalysis, born out of Freud's rigorous attempt at elucidating his own dreams, is a universal instrument for understanding the human psyche, and a form of therapy. A physician, Freud was also a man of culture; in his voyage towards regions which he had not originally meant to explore, and which he actually recoiled from exploring, literature and the arts offered him more than a field of experimentation: they offered themselves as a language and a support. Freud freely admitted that poets had preceded him in the understanding of man. The unconscious clearly does not lend itself to an approach based on the methods commonly used in the medical sciences, or in the human sciences. The very term of 'unconscious' sounds like an insult to reason: how could one talk about what escapes the laws of consciousness and reason? Physicians did not fail to object to psychoanalysis on the ground that it became entrapped in such contradictions, e.g. talking about masculine hysteria appears as a contradiction in terms, since hysteria is, by etymology, a disease linked to a female organ, the uterus.

At the point where medicine, along with the majority of his contemporaries, only proffered defiance and rejection, Freud opened a path that is neither that of medicine nor that of ordinary psychology. He intended to found a *metapsychology*. His discoveries built on his familiarity with a broad range of languages: German and Yiddish, English and French, as well as Italian (which he read and spoke fluently), not to mention Latin and Ancient Greek. Dreams and fantasies appeared to him as a language to translate and interpret. He had a passion for archeology, a discipline that reconstructs past civilizations on the basis of excavated fragments. Freud's approach to the human mind entertained strong links with his passion for Egyptian, Greek and Latin antiques, impressively reflected in the collections that surrounded him in his own house. Literature also played a role at the point where Freud was reproached with the role he attributed to sexuality in the individual's psychic evolution. He took universal literature

as testimony to the truth of his insights, drawing support from great European writers, Sophocles and Virgil, Shakespeare, Goethe and Heine (the list is by no means exhaustive). He borrowed from Greek culture the name of Œdipus to name the all-important crisis that any boy undergoes when his loving desire draws him towards his mother and meets the interdiction of the fatherly law. The epigraph to his great book of 1899, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, is a verse from Virgil that boldly underlines the originality of his approach: *Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo* [If I do not succeed in swaying the gods, I shall cross the Acheron]. Like Æneas who, despairing of swaying the gods, attempted an impossible voyage down into hell, Freud, arrested by no fear, explored the obscure regions of the self.

Among a multitude of testimonies to the central place occupied by literature and the arts in Freud's thought, one appears especially worthy of attention: Freud's congratulations to Arthur Schnitzler on his 60th birthday. Schnitzler was the author of extensive literary works; like Freud, he was a physician, Jewish, and Viennese; like Freud, he faced the dogged opposition of the *polite society*. Freud, who until then had not dared to get in touch with him, told him of his admiration for his writings (novels, short stories and plays): whereas he had to go through the painstaking observation of medical cases to find out about the unconscious and the instincts that govern us, Schnitzler had leapt to a comparable discovery at one go, by virtue of his poetic and literary genius.

This similarity perceived by Freud himself between artistic creation and psychoanalysis is extremely instructive for the study of literature. Far from using literature as an instrument, Freud proposed a refined understanding of what is at stake in literature. Up to a point, the artist is akin to the patient and the madman with the considerable difference that the artist's quest for beauty amounts to a victory. The artist partakes in our humanity, and provides it with a language. Freud raises anew the question of the artist's place in the city, as he envisages from a new point of view the liberating phenomenon that Aristotle, in his poetics, designated as *catharsis*.

Freud remarks that his clinical cases read like novels. His conferences, his essays, his theoretical works all bear witness to a clarity, a patience and a desire to convince rarely found elsewhere though Freud himself is keenly aware of the limitations of a rational approach, which does not suffice to overcome the resistances rooted in the audience's unconscious. No one described analysis better than Freud himself; there would be no point in trying to substitute a commentary for his works. The present pages simply aim at pointing out some salient strands in his works, and at suggesting how Freud's liberty and rigor, which owes much to literature, may in turn serve an in-depth understanding of literature.

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