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Ellen Oliensis

Excerpt

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Introduction: Psychoanalysis and Latin poetry

Why psychoanalysis?

This book is a self-conscious exercise in practical psychoanalysis, what might be called psychotextual criticism. It takes as its focus three poets who have been much on my mind over the last decade: Catullus, Virgil, and Ovid. Far from surveying psychoanalytic theory and critical practice, it constitutes my own idiosyncratic contribution, more Freudian than Lacanian and more literary than cultural, to the variegated tradition of psychoanalytically informed work within Classics.¹ The challenge I have set myself is to engage with psychoanalysis in all its seductive and rebarbative specificity while refraining from making myself too much at home in it – to embrace the discourse without defensive irony, but also without the fortifying passion of certainty. Accordingly, instead of mounting an all-out defense of psychoanalysis, I have chosen to confront theoretical issues as they present themselves in the course of reading. This book could also be described, then, as it were from the other side, as a trio of essays on Latin poetry interlaced with an ongoing assessment of the value of psychoanalysis for literary studies. Naturally, I believe that it does have value. The short answer to the question, “Why psychoanalysis?,” an answer I hope subsequent chapters will substantiate, is: because I believe psychoanalysis still has something to

¹ Those seeking such an overview may turn to Wright (1998) and (for psychoanalysis within Classics, with a sample reading of *Antigone*) Griffith (2005). For a historicizing critique, engaged rather than dismissive, see duBois (1988). Good appreciations of Lacan in Janan (1994) 1–36; Porter and Buchan (2004a).

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give to the practice of reading poetry; because I believe that it can provide news about poems, that it can make poems read differently – and this is always, for me, what matters the most.

Yet I need to acknowledge, here at the outset, that the question also carries, to my anxious ears at least, something of the urgency of a challenge or even a rebuke. Really now, in heaven's name, why would someone working with Latin poetry take up psychoanalysis of all things? For the truth is that psychoanalysis has always had a checkered reception within the discipline of Classics. On the one hand, this reception is part of the larger history (something of a tragicomedy, for those most directly involved on either side) of the contentious introduction of "foreign" ideas and practices, from New Criticism to New Historicism and beyond, into classical philology. Thirty years ago, no one would have dreamed that reputable classicists would one day be citing Foucault with Fraenkel or Lacan with Norden, but so it is; in our ever more comfortably eclectic world, the new hat and the old seem to go very well together. Certainly it seems safe to say, given the flood of psychoanalytic scholarship on the Latin side over the past decade, taking in Roman history, material culture, and philosophy as well as literature, that psychoanalysis has been absorbed into the mainstream of Roman studies. The best evidence for this absorption is that psychoanalysis can now be deployed not just as a master-discourse (as in Micaela Janan's programmatically Lacanian studies of Latin love poetry) but as one discourse in communication with others (as in Philip Hardie's recent work on Ovid, or Ellen O'Gorman's on the idea of Carthage).² Contemporary scholarship is dotted with the language of lack, desire, and repression, and terms of art such as the unconscious, the Real, and even *objet a* are beginning to sound (almost) familiar.

On the other hand, despite the warm welcome accorded psychoanalysis in so many quarters, the resistance continues almost as vigorous as ever. The problem is that psychoanalysis, unlike other approaches currently on offer, seems to depend on the critic's buying into the theory – not just thinking with the terms, but believing in the transhistorical

² Janan (1994), Janan (2001); Hardie (2002); O'Gorman (2004); more examples in Fredrick (2002) (the "Roman gaze"). A pair of Freudian examples: Mitchell-Boyask (1996) (on Virgil); Schiesaro (2003) (on Seneca). Absorption from the other direction: Galvagno (1995) (Lacan via Ovid).

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validity of the stories from which they are culled. Thus interest in psychoanalysis has proceeded *pari passu* with the historicizing critique of Freudian theory.³ In his 2002 handbook of theory for classicists, Thomas Schmitz puts the issue this way: “If Freud’s theories really lack a scientific basis” – and Schmitz presumes they do – “any interpretation of literary texts or cultural phenomena inspired by these theories cannot claim any form of authority; concepts derived from psychoanalysis such as ‘Oedipal’ or ‘phallic’ would be mere metaphors without any validity.”⁴ “Repression, unconscious, desire, lack, other: with what stringency are these terms being used?,” Denis Feeney likewise inquired in 1995. Used stringently, the terms carry, for most readers, too much baggage to carry conviction; used loosely, they devolve into figurality, leaving one “wondering,” as Feeney puts it, “what the power of the model really is.”⁵

The issue seems the more pressing for those who incline to Freud. How many scholars are prepared to stand up and be counted when (say) “penis envy” is on the agenda? Then again, how much meaning does the concept retain once domesticated as woman’s envy of the prerogatives enjoyed by men in a patriarchal society? Lacanian theory is rendered more palatable by its structural and semiotic emphasis, to just the degree that the phallus as the primordial figure of signification (Lacan once playfully identified it with the bar in the Saussurean formula for the sign) is easier to take than the all-too-bodily penis. And yet the quasi-prophetic opacity of Lacan’s writings, with their riddling pronouncements and elaborate mathematical formulae, provokes its own peculiarly intense forms of devotion and outrage and tends to produce an even harder division between believers and nonbelievers.

I raise the problem here at the outset, not because I hope to solve it to the satisfaction of anyone for whom it *is* a problem, but because I want to object to the way it is formulated. I don’t agree that psychoanalytic reading is invalidated if its scientific basis is impugned – let me even say, for the sake of argument, now that its scientific basis has been exploded.

³ Prominent examples include Vernant ([1967]1988) and Price (1990).

⁴ Schmitz (2007) 197 (orig. publ. 2002 in German), in the course of an admirably forthright discussion of his reservations.

⁵ Feeney (1995) 309, 310.

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I don't believe that one must believe in the Oedipus complex, or any other complex, to find value in a psychoanalytic approach. What makes psychoanalysis psychoanalytic, in the end, is not any particular set of claims but a general orientation toward the unconscious and (in the largest sense) sexuality.⁶ For a student of literature at least, sexuality is not something that compels or rebuffs belief. One may focus on incestuous desire or the construction of virility in a text without committing oneself to the proposition that it is sexuality that drives the psyche. But it is otherwise with the unconscious, and I will confess that there is a minimalist credo underlying this study, which could be articulated as follows: discourse regularly outruns the designs of the one deploying it; and this excess is structured and interpretable. In other words, I believe in the unconscious.

The admission will not, I hope, alienate too many of my readers, even those constitutionally hostile to psychoanalysis. Who does not believe as much? I take heart from the Freudian argument Feeney advances, no doubt quite self-consciously, immediately after registering his skepticism: "Whatever models we employ, we have to acknowledge that there is no use pretending that we are not employing them, and we also have to acknowledge that we will often be employing them unconsciously (they will be 'employing' *us*)."⁷ One might argue that Feeney's use of "unconsciously" ought not to be assimilated to the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious. Yet Freud's understanding of the effects of the unconscious was itself capacious, encompassing trivial social blunders as well as neurotic symptoms. Though gesturing toward the secret navel of the dream and the hidden springs of the joke, his endlessly proliferating local interpretations revel in the shallows, not the depths. It is thus entirely appropriate to speak of "Freudian slips" in ancient texts, whether feigned (as when Cicero refers to Clodius as Clodia's husband and then makes a show of correcting himself: "her brother I meant to say; I always make that mistake," *Cael.* 32) or staged as authentic (as when the hapless Lysidamus of Plautus' *Casina* keeps

⁶ An oft-repeated claim; see, e.g., Lacan ([1953] 2006) 204. The most lucid and compelling account of psychoanalytic sexuality I have read is that of Laplanche (1976) 8–47.

⁷ Feeney (1995) 310.

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giving words to the desire he is laboring to conceal).⁸ It may seem strange to invoke the unconscious here, given that Cicero and Lysidamus are both, albeit in different ways, “in the know.” Yet the essential thing, for connoisseurs of the unconscious, is just the impression of alien interference, what Lacan calls “the sense of impediment”: “In the dream, in the parapraxis, in the flash of wit – what is it that strikes one first? It is the sense of impediment to be found in all of them. Impediment, failure, split. In a spoken or written sentence something stumbles ... and it is there that [Freud] seeks the unconscious.”⁹ And this unconscious may be lurking just beneath the surface – or even in the next stanza.

Listening for the unconscious does not mean deauthorizing or discounting the artistry of the poetry. To the contrary, it means engaging strenuously and lovingly with its highly wrought texture.

Whose unconscious?

Whose unconscious is it, then, that one is listening for?

Every answer presents its share of problems. (And the following review of these problems is not meant to suggest that this book will rise above them; to the contrary, it will remain enmeshed in them throughout.) Once upon a time, the normal default-answer was “the author’s.” But while many scholars are still willing to assign intentions to their authors, very few are prepared to set about uncovering their secret desires or buried memories; such psychobiographical speculations seem not just profitless but presumptuous, not to say hubristic. Another solution, one that has proven especially productive in recent years, is to focus on the “unconscious” of the culture at large. Most will agree that there are (linguistic, discursive, psychological, ideological) forces at work in textual production that exceed any individual author’s control; no speech or writing could take place otherwise. Yet the idea of a “Roman unconscious” (vel sim.) only displaces the issue of the critic’s superiority to the next level (the critic knows what the author unwittingly

⁸ On the theoretical implications of Cicero’s “Freudian slip,” see Farrell (2005) 109–10; for the Plautine examples, Feldman (1962).

⁹ Lacan ([1964] 1981) 25. I concede that this “sense of impediment” is susceptible to various interpretations; see, e.g., the robust polemic of Timpanaro (1976) (deploying textual criticism to refute Freud’s analyses of slips).

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communicates that the culture cannot fully express ...).¹⁰ At the other end of the communicative circuit, we are offered the reader's unconscious as the site of a transferential relation to the text, one that uncannily enacts and so produces the textual unconscious it purports to plumb.¹¹ Again, this solution strikes me as little more than a variation on the authorial unconscious, preferable from the standpoint of theoretical correctness perhaps, but without discernible consequences for reading. Surely the least fraught answer is the most traditional: the literary unconscious is a property of literary characters. As the example of Lysidamus suggests, the playwright's art readily extends to the creation of a character-unconscious; indeed, any characterized speaker, including the courtroom persona of a Cicero, may be so equipped. (The figure of self-correction, common to both examples, is a good index to this species of unconscious.) But even on the stage, of course, the issue is rarely this transparent. After all, characters are fabrications of language and their psychic depth is a mirage – a sort of verbal equivalent of the *trompe l'oeil* scenery they inhabit. And the instant we abandon the stage for nondramatic forms such as lyric and epic, the picture gets messier, as the boundaries around characters lose their rigidity, letting the unconscious seep out, as it were, into the surrounding text.

This seepage does not bother me, however. To the contrary, as I hope to demonstrate in the course of this book, psychoanalysis only gets more interesting as the outlines bleed. What I am listening for is an unconscious that tends to wander at will, taking up residence now with a character, now with the narrator, now with the impersonal narration, and sometimes flirting with an authorial or cultural address. Far from rejecting the answers outlined above, then, my solution, such as it is, is to embrace all of them. My shorthand term for this unanchored force is the “textual unconscious”: “textual,” because not (simply) personal, and also because it is in the very texture of the text, its slips, tics, strange emphases, and stray details, that one discovers it at work.¹² This may

¹⁰ “Declamation offers insights into the Roman unconscious” (Gunderson (2003) 115); “elegiac discourse offers a privileged vantage point for observing the production of [a] split in the Roman subject” (Miller (2004) 26).

¹¹ Culler (1984).

¹² For the history of the term, see, conveniently, Mellard (2006) 13–17. My version overlaps with that of Riffaterre (1987) (though eschewing his emphasis on precision

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sound like an evasion, and indeed it is. The textual unconscious is an enabling postulate, nothing more – though for my purposes, that is more than enough. I really don't mind bracketing unanswerable questions if that lets interpretation proceed. All I need to know for sure is that something is coming through, even if I can't pin down just where it is coming from.

An example or two may help explain why. My first is drawn from an essay by Emily Gowers on Horace *Satires* 1.7, a comic anecdote about a trial staged before the tyrannicide Brutus in Asia Minor; the dramatic setting of the satire thus falls in between the assassination of Julius Caesar and the defeat and suicide of the chief conspirators two years later. Gowers reads the satire (which dates from the subsequent decade) as an exploration of “the larger issues of the Revolution” (“tyranny, proscription, throat-cutting, silencing”), an exploration that both exploits and occludes Horace's own problematic involvement in that history, in particular “his participation on the wrong side” – Brutus' side – “at the battle of Philippi in 42 BCE.” The evidence Gowers submits runs the gamut from the incontestable (“*Proscripti*, one can hardly avoid noticing, is the first word of Horace's poem”) to what she acknowledges some will find “improbable”: the recurrence of the word *lippus*, which she takes, along with conjunctions such as *Rupili pus* and *pila lippis*, as “a way of saying ‘Philippi’ ... without quite saying it.” Whose way? Though Gowers nowhere commits herself (and there is no reason she should), my sense is that, if pressed, she would claim that it is Horace's way: that the quasi-communication (“deliberately opaque,” she suggests) is his. This would mean taking the poem as a knowing exercise in self-censorship, which it may well be; we will never know. But I for one would rather take these strange partial articulations as a kind of symptomatic stutter: an irruption of memory breaking through what Gowers at one point terms the “textual ‘amnesia’” affecting Horace's writing of “the central trauma of his life.”¹³ Indeed, I would argue, it is precisely as a stutter, not as part of the overarching, explicit thematics of

and totalizability), but I am more in sympathy with Orlando (1978) (on the “return of the repressed” at the level of both form and content), and most in sympathy with Shoptaw (2000) (a capacious theorization, abundantly illustrated, of the interpretability of fragmentary and semi-intended textual phenonema).

¹³ Gowers (2002); the citations are drawn from 146–52. In effect I am proposing to treat *Philippi* as what Shoptaw (2000) calls a “crypt word.”

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throat-cutting, that the effect takes on its full value as the just-audible index of an internalized censorship.

Is this then an authorial “slip,” betraying the pressure of a history Horace seems intent on keeping under wraps? Have we found the author out? Possibly. Yet there are other solutions. Partisans of authorial control may prefer to argue that the irruption is designed to characterize the satiric persona as someone who can’t (quite) keep his mouth shut, and/or his revolutionary times as inimical to the candor of Republican *libertas*. And intertextualists may choose to depersonalize the whole affair by locating “Philippi” in the discursive repertoire centered on Brutus, as if the very mention of Brutus sufficed to bring these deeply relevant phonemes into play. Yet what counts for me is less where the unconscious abides than what it does. The concept of the textual unconscious is meant to leave space for all possible locations while insisting on the interpretability of its effects. Moreover – and this is a crucial point – this interpretability is not just incidentally but essentially conditioned by the symptomatic incompleteness that attends it. The meaning dug up is never exhumed whole. Horace’s satire does not mean “Philippi,” or rather, it means it *and* does not. The goal of reading is not to replace a false surface with a true depth (“Philippi,” after all, does reach the surface or Gowers would not be discussing it), but to bring into focus the energetic play of repression and circuitous expression that constitutes textuality.

In my second example the battle lines are drawn more sharply. Recently David Wray has taken issue with Paul Allen Miller’s Lacanian reading of the Tibullan “dream text.” The argument centers on the opening lines of Tibullus’ first elegy and heats up with the fourth, almost untranslatable couplet (Tib. 1.1.7–8):

ipse seram teneras maturo tempore vites
rusticus et facili grandia poma manu.

Myself the farmer, I will sow the delicate vines when the time is ripe,
and with easy hand the large fruits.

Miller’s interpretation zeroes in on the strange adjective *facilis*: in what sense is a hand, and above all the hard-working hand of a farmer, appropriately described as “easy”?¹⁴ The strangeness is compounded

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by the “double displacement” produced by the illogical adjectives *maturo* and *grandia*, both denoting ripeness, hence redolent not of planting but of the harvest. The result, Miller argues, is an extraordinary condensation, “the presentation of the entire agricultural cycle ... in a single couplet.”¹⁵ The hand is “easy,” one might say, because the farmer’s labor, in this dreamy wish fulfillment, has been magically elided, along with the potentially treacherous months between sowing and reaping: the gratification is instantaneous. Yet as Miller stresses, in the Tibullan dream “the contradictory nature of our desires is represented but not transcended”; the dream is only a dream, a fragile bulwark erected against the pressure of the Real.¹⁶

In his Freudian theory of interpretation, Francesco Orlando rejects the noncommunicative model of the dream in favor of the pointed intentionality of the joke, a form of discourse that means to be understood.¹⁷ What Wray finds problematic in Miller’s “dream text” is likewise the displacement of communicative intention that it entails. For Miller, Tibullan “incoherence” is “symptomatic of the changing realm of the Real in post-civil-war Rome.” For Wray, it is symptomatic rather of the critic’s failure to work hard enough at resolving apparent incoherence into “a discursively intelligible poetic utterance.”¹⁸ Wray’s solution here is to demonstrate that *facilis* is not merely unproblematic but ideally suited to its Tibullan context, a veritable *mot juste*: “by a calque on the Greek [ποιεῖν = *facere* “to make”], the speaker is describing his own hand neither as deft and masterful, nor as performing its work with effortless ease, but rather as ποιητικός: ‘makerly’ and so ‘poetic.’” Thus in place of Miller’s fable of the traumatic Real, Wray finds in these lines “a statement of poetic program, an *ars poetica*,” one he shows to be deeply and widely rooted in ancient poetry and poetics.¹⁹

The opposition that emerges is perfectly exemplary. On one side, a dreaming poet subject to the forces of History; on the other, a

¹⁵ Miller (2004) 116, 117. ¹⁶ Miller (2004) 129.

¹⁷ E.g., Orlando (1978) 5–6, 162–3; this dichotomy is complicated in his subsequent discussion of literature’s “figural rate” (163–70), a sliding scale from communicative transparency to noncommunicative opacity.

¹⁸ Miller (2004) 129; Wray (2003) 221, reiterated at 246. (Wray is responding, much more appreciatively than my streamlined account suggests, to an earlier article version of Miller’s (2004) book chapter.)

¹⁹ Wray (2003) 232.

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craftsman-poet in full command of all the resources of his tradition. The alternatives may seem irreconcilable. And yet, while I find Wray's discussion persuasive, it does not impel me to jettison Miller's account of the poem. Wray begins his essay on "easy hands" with the witty pronouncement "Tibullus is not an easy poet," and the issue of ease (and "difficulty") is everywhere folded into the argument: the critic (Wray seems wryly to tell us) has to labor so hard to solve the difficulty of the poet's "ease"!²⁰ The curious thing about Wray's solution, however, is that it requires reading *facilis*, not just as a calque on ποιητικός, but *only* as such a calque; the solution depends on subtracting out the ordinary sense of *facilis* (= "easy, yielding," etc.).²¹ It depends on this, because the ordinary sense cuts across the antithesis of self-conscious craft ("making") vs. unconscious inspiration ("dreaming") that is pivotal to Wray's argument. After all (as Wray is aware), what the poets of craft harp on is not the ease but the *difficulty* of their art – the painful necessity of long hours of study, revision, and pruning, followed by a prolonged period of ripening (nine years, according to Horace!); "ease" is for inspired hacks – or for dreamers. Thus if *facilis* names the "poetic" art, it is only by repressing the lack of "easiness" at its heart.²² It is this dimension of repression that Wray neglects and Miller captures.

Still, I remain sympathetic to the philological impulse underlying Wray's critique. Though I admire Miller's reading of the symptomatic complexity of the Tibullan couplet, I am less interested in his overarching Lacanian–Jamesonian story about the Real of History. Certainly it is not by chance that my favorite moment (and chapter) in Miller's book is this his most Freudian. I am not sure why it is so, but it seems to be true that Lacanian readers, though attending to the symptomatic surface of the text, tend on the whole to move away from that surface toward the abstractions (desire, Woman, the Symbolic, the split subject, etc.) they find reflected in it. This is a hallowed mode of interpretation, one shaped

²⁰ Wray (2003) 217 (on the critic's "difficulty," 221, 227).

²¹ Wray (2003) 234–5. The production of *facilis* "makerly" via the repression of *facilis* "easy" exemplifies the workings of the Riffaterrean "intertextual unconscious," whereby "literary signs point to the unconscious inasmuch as they repress a meaning in the process of conveying one" (Riffaterre (1987) 213–14).

²² Here as elsewhere psychoanalysis converges with deconstruction, a reading practice programmatically attuned to the textual unconscious (and much engaged with Freud's writings); see, e.g., Derrida (1987).