

Introduction

It was primarily due to the traditional humanist education he received at the Sperl *Gymnasium* in Vienna that Sigmund Freud was so steeped in classical European literature. Here he was exposed to Homer and Sophocles, Shakespeare and Milton, and, of course, Goethe and Schiller, amongst many others. An equally important factor, though, was his own life-long passion for books. He was reading Goethe and even Shakespeare well before he went to secondary school, and his veneration of these authors was certainly more intense than that of most of his contemporaries who enjoyed a similar education. Although on leaving school he chose a career as a scientist, this by no means indicates that his literary interests had somehow waned. Not only was he fond of claiming that his inspiration to study medicine came from the public reading of an – albeit apocryphal – Goethe essay, ‘Nature’, his most enduring role models were men who, like Goethe and Leonardo da Vinci, excelled in both scientific and artistic fields of endeavour.

Freud certainly began his medical career as a strict materialist and empiricist, and he never relinquished his faith in nineteenth-century scientific values. It would be easy to surmise that the stern discipline of his medical training, received under the aegis of the pioneering ‘Helmholtzian’ Ernst von Brücke, stifled his youthful literary interests and thwarted forever his ambitions to emulate the Renaissance men he so admired. There is, however, a broad consensus amongst critics – the pioneers include Lionel Trilling, Philip Rieff, and Paul Ricoeur – that nothing quite so straightforward occurred.¹ Indeed, of the Freud commentators writing today, those concerned with the scientific or therapeutic credentials of psychoanalysis tend to be far less interesting than those who concentrate on the literary dimensions of Freud’s texts, for example postmodernist critics such as Harold Bloom and those influenced by Jacques Lacan.² Whilst Freud would no doubt be aggrieved at this fundamental shift in the reception of his works, it does amount to a recognition of what he occasionally admitted were secret

life-long aspirations. By various means – some overt, some surreptitious – Freud managed to reconcile his passion for literature with his scientific ambitions, and the result was a ‘science’ which simply cannot be properly understood or appreciated without reference to its creator’s literary culture.

In the popular imagination, at least, Freud is more commonly viewed as a representative product of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, or as a typically Jewish thinker. When his writing is analysed more carefully, however, it becomes evident that he is far more deeply rooted in the tradition of European literature than in, say, contemporary Austrian culture or any specifically Jewish tradition. Indeed, he is typical of the bourgeoisie of his era primarily because of his highly literary German education and culture; and, similarly, he is most typically Jewish, if such a designation means anything at all, in that this *Bildung* – personified in the towering figures of Goethe and Schiller – represented something of an *ersatz* religion to so many liberal, secularized German Jews. Freud’s intimate acquaintance with classical literature is fundamental not only to his make-up as a writer, but to his very sense of his own identity, and a detailed study of his literary culture promises to shed more light on his work than any other socio-historical factor.

There is certainly no shortage of studies devoted to examining the various interfaces between psychoanalysis and literature. An analysis of Freud’s own literary background, however, is already quite distinct from the vast majority of such studies, which tend to treat psychoanalysis as a static, *a priori* body of insights and techniques to be – more or less judiciously – applied to literary texts.³ Whilst a number of critics, such as Gunnar Brandell and Steven Marcus, have addressed the very different question of humanist influences on Freudian theory itself,⁴ few attempt to synthesize what is known about Freud’s literary culture into a coherent account of its role in the development of psychoanalysis, and even fewer try to integrate the whole range of Freud’s texts into such a framework. It should be borne in mind that Freud wrote a great variety of psychoanalytical works. Many are essentially clinical, such as his case histories and his guides to conducting therapeutic sessions; others concentrate on non-pathological objects of interpretation, most famously dreams, parapraxes, and jokes. Quite distinct again are Freud’s various theoretical works, tackling such meta-psychological questions as the structure of the human psyche and the nature of the instincts; furthermore, he wrote many works of ‘applied’ analysis, addressing cultural phenomena ranging from religion to

works of art and literature. Although Freud critics tend to emphasize a particular text or group of texts in their attempt to define the nature of his undertaking, my own central hypothesis – concerning the pervasive and dynamic nature of his literary influences – encompasses the entire range of his works.

The most obvious clue that Freud's literary interests penetrate the whole range of his written output is the fact that, regardless of their subject matter, his texts are replete with allusions to European literature. Whilst critics have drawn attention to individual quotations used by Freud, none has attempted to produce an account of their various functions within his texts. This is unfortunate as these allusions raise a crucial question, namely the possibility of 'unconscious' literary influences on Freud's actual formulation of theory. His gradually evolving theory of the instincts is a particularly germane area in this respect. My attempt at a coherent historical account of its development, structured entirely in terms of Freud's use of literary references, reveals much that is new about his susceptibility to sources of literary influence, not least the fact that these seem to acquire particular resonance during the periodic crises from which were born his most fundamental revisions of theory.

It is more difficult to make an original contribution regarding Freud's pieces of literary criticism. The emotional ambivalence which governs his writings on literature is widely acknowledged by critics such as Sarah Kofman.⁵ Nevertheless, its subtle shifts and manoeuvres within his texts tend to be oversimplified by even the most careful of them, and this complex issue is often treated as nothing more than evidence of Freud's putative lack of literary sensitivity and his 'reductionism'. This is regrettable, for Freud was possessed of a sophisticated – not to mention, drastically original – understanding of literary meaning, as well as a healthy respect for *Dichter*⁶ as pioneering psychoanalysts. The vehemence of his ambivalence points, rather, to the emotional intensity of his relations with poets, and the mercurial oscillations in his attitude to them, which shape his literary-critical texts, can be appreciated only in this dynamic context.

The question of Freud's competence as a literary critic bears on issues much more fundamental than just that of psychoanalytical literary criticism. With my third hypothesis I seek to re-evaluate Freud's entire hermeneutic – that is, his mode of interpreting dreams, symptoms, jokes, slips, screen memories, and so on – and I do this by viewing his interpretation of these 'texts' as the substitute gratification, so to

speak, of a frustrated literary critic. I examine the traces this covert paradigm of literary response leaves on his attempts to *read* meaning in an unprecedented variety of psychic phenomena, with a view to shedding new light on the dynamic nature of this literary source of influence. The hypothesis of a 'repressed' literary-critical paradigm then proves particularly helpful in elucidating the relationship between psychoanalysis and postmodernist criticism.

My parallel argument, that Freud can also usefully be viewed as something of a thwarted *Dichter*, has been anticipated by a handful of critics, most notably Patrick Mahony.⁷ Nevertheless, my own approach to this question is quite distinct in that I base my analysis on Freud's own conception of the process of literary creation. He considers literary narratives to be fantastical, essentially aesthetic, but also self-analytical and even therapeutic reworkings of what is, fundamentally, the author's own autobiography. Thus I read some of Freud's more problematical texts as psychoanalytical 'novels', quasi-literary attempts to work through and achieve critical and aesthetic distance from his own most personal conflicts.

Despite the radical nature of this re-evaluation of Freud – as a 'repressed' literary critic, even a *Dichter*, in the thrall, both intellectually and emotionally, of his literary forebears – I do not intend to question (or advocate) the truth value of psychoanalytical doctrine itself. My principal aim is to resituate Freud's work in the context of various literary traditions, and to demonstrate the active role these play within his texts. Far from denigrating Freud's achievements, this should allow for a more nuanced appreciation of his contribution to twentieth-century culture. Although critics are still as fascinated as ever by the overlap between psychoanalysis and literature, most seem to underestimate the sheer scale of the literary dimensions of psychoanalysis itself. Conversely, however, it would be a mistake to overemphasize these literary aspects. Many of the most important critics attempt to reclaim Freud for some or other discipline: Frank Sulloway sees Freud essentially as a biologist, Paul Ricoeur reads him as a philosopher, whilst Harold Bloom describes him as nothing less (or more) than a 'strong' poet. Yet it is precisely the cross-fertilization between scientific and literary cultures which makes of Freud a writer *sui generis*, undermining all such attempts to categorize his work. He is certainly more than a nineteenth-century mechanist, but, equally, he is not merely an unwitting philosopher, a deconstructionist *manqué*, or an anxious poet. Such contradictory readings can be reconciled, often in unexpected and intriguing ways, when his works are

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viewed in their proper literary context. Admittedly, Freud's own sustained hostility towards any suggestion of non-scientific influences on his work usually causes him to attempt to screen off this context, but on closer analysis his literary culture clearly emerges as a sufficiently rich and subtle source of influence to illuminate many of the confusions, enigmas, and paradoxes of psychoanalysis.

CHAPTER ONE

*The unconscious of psychoanalysis:
 Freud's literary allusions*

FUNCTION AND FORM

In a letter written in 1906 Freud answers a publisher's request to name ten 'good' books. As he openly declares he has deliberately excluded books of purely aesthetic value, the list offers only a limited insight into his literary tastes. He cannot, however, resist mentioning some works he would have included in a list of the very greatest works of literature: Sophocles' tragedies, Goethe's *Faust*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.¹ Anyone familiar with Freud's own writings will immediately recognize that these are, by far, the works to which he most commonly alludes. The author he most frequently refers to is undoubtedly Goethe. Although over half of these references are to *Faust*, only one is to the second part of that tragedy, and this – the epigraph to *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* – was suggested by his friend Fliess. (Freud did not usually need such prompting; indeed, Fliess had to dissuade him from using a Goethe quotation as the epigraph to *The Interpretation of Dreams*.) Only Shakespeare comes close to Goethe as a source of allusions, and, although Freud refers to about fifteen of his plays, again half of the references are to one work, *Hamlet*. Mainly due to *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Heine is the next most quoted author, followed very closely by Schiller. Goethe, Heine, and Schiller apart, though, Freud is more likely to refer to classical Greek and Roman literature than to any other German author. Most of these references are again to a single play, this time Sophocles' *Oedipus*. Even this brief survey reveals that there is nothing eccentric about the kind of works to which Freud tends to allude; they are all absolutely central to the literary canon of his age.

When referring to works by Goethe, Shakespeare, and so on, Freud rarely identifies the source. Nor does he tend to give German translations of passages quoted in English, French, Italian, Latin, and even Greek. He clearly assumes his reader shares his own highly literary

Bildung and can automatically understand quotations and place allusions. To an important extent, his literary culture was the common property of the well-educated German bourgeoisie of his age. It is often remarked that his tastes were far more conservative than his literary criticism, but the question of 'taste' is less significant here than the consideration that Freud was influenced most powerfully by the canonical works on which he was raised in *childhood*. For example, the intriguing discrepancy between the number of allusions to the two parts of *Faust* may simply be the result of his having read the first part at a more impressionable age. In relaxed letters he clearly enjoys referring to *Faust II*; it is just that he never does so during the intensely creative bursts in which he produced his psychoanalytical texts.

Although his tastes were conditioned by social factors, above all his classical German *Bildung*, the extent to which he was imbued with literature was also the result of certain idiosyncratic character traits. From the age of seven, books were Freud's passion and his only indulgence. His appetite for reading remained voracious and extended far beyond his clinical field. Furthermore, it was in his youth that his extraordinary powers of memory were at their height: he could quote verbatim long passages from books he had only skimmed through (VI, 135).² Of course, Freud read a great deal of contemporary literature, and the fact that he rarely mentions it in his own texts indicates a strong personal inclination towards classical literature. By alluding to the classics in the context of his scientific theories he can suggest a universality and a timelessness which modern literature would fail to evoke. His tendency to reach back to works from his childhood may be 'preconscious', then, but it is also most expedient.

Even in non-literary analyses Freud makes allusions with the same unerring frequency. Clearly literature is more than just an object of analysis for him, it is a key feature of his thought processes. He wrote at great speed, intensely and erratically, and the presence of small inaccuracies in some of his quotations indicates not a lack of sensitivity, but rather the immediacy with which the lines suggest themselves to him. Of course, many quotations are the result of some deliberation. A letter to his fiancée, Martha Bernays, reveals how methodically he developed his literary cultivation: he tells her of a play he has seen in Paris which he despises because it contains 'hardly a word anyone would want to commit to memory'.³ Nevertheless, his predilection for quoting the works he first explored in his youth suggests that his allusions are drawn from sources beyond his conscious control. He imputes a special degree

of 'truth' to these works, and again this may be attributed to the impressionable age at which he encountered them. They were received by a mind still evolving from what Freud himself calls a 'primary' mode of thinking, in which there is little or no distinction between truth and emotionally charged fiction. Such assertions are rather speculative, but there can be no doubt that an analysis of Freud's use of allusions would offer an excellent initial orientation in a study of his literary culture.

Freud integrates quotations from his favourite works of literature into his own texts with great ease; indeed, his use of certain allusions seems to be almost automatic. Not surprisingly, then, many of these are used with little regard for their literary context or their specifically aesthetic qualities. Freud often simply takes advantage of his rich literary culture to express his own ideas more impressively. The very first literary allusion in his psychological works appears in the *Studies on Hysteria*, published in 1895, where he claims phobias commonly involve 'all the vermin of which Mephistopheles boasted himself master' (II, 87). Clearly this allusion to *Faust* is little more than an ornate circumlocution. And yet even the most cursory analysis reveals that Freud's literary references serve a wide variety of important functions. One more substantial use he makes of certain literary passages is to provide an analogy to some aspect of his theory, as in *The Interpretation of Dreams* when he claims that absurdity in a dream often signifies a disdainful judgement in the dream-thoughts. The dream, then, is parodying the absurdity of whoever is targeted by this criticism, and as an analogy of this mode of expression Freud quotes four lines of poetry in which Heine heightens his mockery of King Ludwig's dreadful poetry by expressing it in even poorer verse (V, 435n.). Here the use of a quotation is really more felicitous than Freud's original idea. The presence of intractable absurdity in dreams is perfectly understandable as the result of highly complex processes of condensation, displacement, and so on. Freud's need to view it as a deliberate, self-contained, and coherent expression such as is found in conscious thought seems to be related to a mania for interpretation which was no doubt an element of his genius but which could also lead him astray. It could be argued that the parallel between an absurd dream and the work of a poet as sophisticated and self-conscious as Heine is singularly inappropriate, but it is so cleverly drawn that it helps suspend potential criticism. This is reminiscent of the mechanism Freud describes in his theory of 'harmless' wit, whereby a weak idea can be made to seem inherently impressive solely by virtue of its witty formulation. In *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* he claims: 'The thought

seeks to wrap itself in a joke . . . because this wrapping bribes our powers of criticism and confuses them' (VIII, 132). Something analogous is clearly at work in some of Freud's wittier uses of literary quotation. To support the same theory about absurd dreams he goes on to quote from *Hamlet*, tempting us to surmise that he is more likely to have recourse to this kind of literary stratagem when he needs to shore up a more vulnerable piece of theory.

Such references are used by Freud largely independently of their literary context, but many of his more interesting allusions seem to invoke the texts from which they are taken. In 1923 Freud, enthusiastic about applying the nomenclature established in *The Ego and the Id* to clinical observation, writes in a passage in his very next paper, 'Neurosis and Psychosis':

Such an application of the hypothesis might also bring with it a profitable return from grey theory to the perpetual green of experience. (XIX, 149)

This allusion to Mephistopheles' advice to the student in *Faust* demands, by its very indirectness, some work on the part of the reader to place it. This helps establish a deeper literary communion between Freud and his reader, no doubt enhancing the effectiveness of an allusion whatever its function is intended to be. Some quotations, moreover, seem to evoke important subtexts independently of Freud's conscious rhetorical intent. To exemplify the concept of ambivalence, for example, Freud often quotes Brutus' famous speech from *Julius Caesar* in which he justifies killing the friend he loved. This would seem to be an inaccurate analogy: in Brutus both emotions are fully conscious and rationally justified, that is, they modify rather than contradict each other. However, there is little doubt that Freud's choice of Brutus to illustrate ambivalence is overdetermined by a deeply personal factor. At the age of fourteen he gave a performance of the Brutus–Caesar dialogue from Schiller's first version of *The Robbers*, and the part of Caesar was played by his nephew John. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud admits that the most deeply ambivalent of his adult friendships were modelled on John, 'this first figure who "früh sich einst dem trüben Blick gezeigt" (long since appeared before my troubled gaze)' (V, 483).⁴ Brutus' ambivalent feelings, then, are Freud's own towards his nephew – his quotation from the Dedication of *Faust* here only confirms the depths to which this identification can be traced in him.

This well-documented example of the personal determinants of an apparently superficial reference provides some justification for looking at the literary context of other allusions. At one point in his paper on the

'demonological' neurosis Freud admits that this text will not convince non-analysts, and he claims this does not concern him. The only proof which he believes is necessary is the fact that psychoanalysis alone can improve the condition of neurotic patients, and, with Odysseus in Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, he claims: "'These shafts can conquer Troy, these shafts alone'" (XIX, 84). This quotation appears to be used in a superficial and merely tendentious fashion; however, if the character of Philoctetes is considered more carefully, then a deeper determinant begins to reveal itself. Due to his terrible wound Philoctetes aroused such revulsion that his Greek comrades forced him to live on an uninhabited island. His wretched isolation there continued for ten years until it was revealed that only he possessed the invincible arrows needed to take Troy. In his own 'splendid isolation' – which he claimed lasted ten years – it is not unlikely that Freud identified himself with this classical hero, a man who suffered at the hands of his intolerant comrades, but who was ultimately vindicated when the power which he alone possessed was recognized for its unique practical value. Such speculation may be idle, but it is at least clear, if only from the many literary 'free associations' in the analyses of his own dreams, that characters and situations from literature exercised a deep influence on Freud independently of his conscious awareness.

With this reflection in mind, one of the most intriguing aspects of Freud's literary allusions is the fact that most of his quotations from *Faust* can be traced back to the character of Mephistopheles. This can, in part, be attributed to a certain carelessness, as in *The Interpretation of Dreams* when, regarding distortion in dreams, he offers one of his favourite quotations:

Das Beste, was du wissen kannst,
darfst du den Buben doch nicht sagen.

(After all, the best of what you know
may not be told to boys.) IV, 142

Freud claims this complaint is made by 'the poet', whereas it is, strictly speaking, made by Goethe's devil, Mephistopheles. Occasionally, this imprecision works against Freud, as in his Dora analysis when, apologizing for the long duration of a psychoanalysis, he quotes the following lines:

Nicht Kunst und Wissenschaft allein,
Geduld will bei dem Werke sein!

(Not Art and Science serve, alone;
Patience must in the work be shown.) VII, 16