Introduction: Why psychoanalysis matters

In the field of literary studies, to say that psychoanalysis has had bad press is an understatement. Even if it remains strong at the field's margins, in film studies, in contemporary art history seminars, in queer studies, in trauma studies, in discussions of the Holocaust, in feminist and post-feminist approaches, in cultural critique and ideology critique following Lacanians such as Slavoj Žižek or neo-Marxist philosophers such as Alain Badiou or Jacques Rancière, when it comes to literature as literature, the invocation of Freud and disciples such as Marie Bonaparte, Oskar Pfister, Otto Rank, or Erich Fromm is most of the time a pretext for a good laugh before serious work begins.

Vladimir Nabokov has represented this tendency most forcefully, and he managed to summarize what he called the charlatanism of Freudians in just two quotes in *Pale Fire*: at one point, the mad commentator Kinbote quotes Oskar Pfister, who discussed the case of a young man who was unable to stop picking his nose, adding that he was obviously overcome by lust and knew no limits to his fantasies; he also quotes Erich Fromm who wrote that Little Red Riding Hood's cap of red velvet was an obvious symbol of menstruation.[1] It took a critic close to psychoanalysis such as Jeffrey Berman to point out that these observations were not as absurd in their original context.[2] However, when we see such flat-footed systems of equivalences, we can only laugh.

Nabokov was the most outspoken critic of a type of Freudianism that dominated in the United States just after World War II.[3] Then Freudianism was the rage in Hollywood; a mixture of Surrealism (mediated by Dalí) and second-generation Freudianism (Fromm is a good representative of this wave) had

[1] Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, New York, Putnam, 1962, p. 271. Kinbote wonders whether these "clowns" believe what they teach, while he is, of course, psychotic and delusional.

[2] See Jeffrey Berman, *The Talking Cure: Literary Representations of Psychoanalysis*, New York, New York University Press, 1987, pp. 220–223. Berman points out that Pfister's *Psychoanalytic Method* discusses the case of a teenager's irrepressible tic betraying anxiety facing masturbation, whereas Fromm's *Forgotten Language* approaches the fairy tale as a story of coming of age teeming with signs of sexuality. Even if they do not offer ground-breaking interpretations, there is nothing absurd or scandalous in these readings.

[3] See Frederick John Hofman, *Freudianism and the Literary Mind*, New York, Grove Press, 1957, and Edmund Bergler, *The Writer and Psychoanalysis*, Garden City, Doubleday, 1950.

transformed literary criticism into a hunting ground for loose symbols, indiscriminate projections, and wild allegorizations. Nabokov was entirely correct in denouncing this practice as a return to medieval allegorism. In almost all his novels, memoirs, and lectures on literature, he repeats similar accusations: "I reject completely the vulgar, shabby, fundamentally medieval world of Freud, with its crankish quest for sexual symbols (something like searching for Baconian acrostics in Shakespeare's works) and its bitter little embryos spying, from their natural nooks, upon the love life of their parents."[4] Yet, if Nabokov impugns readings that pounce on random images to turn them into phallic symbols and sexual obsessions, why is *Lolita*, his most famous novel, the story of the passion of an adult for a twelve-year-old American girl? Why is *Ada* – the great, long novel of his maturity – a convoluted and fanciful tale of brother-sister incest?

Nabokov's rants conceal the deeper joke that the plot of *Lolita* literalizes the syntagm of "the child therapist" by transforming it into "the rapist." Humbert Humbert reminisces about the shortcomings of "the child therapist" in him who can casually regurgitate "neo-Freudian hash," yet "Lol" appears closer to the truth when she threatens him after they have sex: "I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me."[5] Proving perversely that Lolita is less of a child than Humbert Humbert, Nabokov betrays a troubling proximity to psychoanalysis. His repeated denunciations end up sounding more symptomatic than seriously accusatory. Still, his severe critique remains valid – most applications of psychoanalysis to literature have been either quite bad, or at least in bad taste.

One could believe that psychoanalysts are bad readers because they read too little – or mention glibly books they have not read. The situation is different in Europe, where psychoanalysts from Jacques Lacan to Adam Philips are intellectuals who intervene on cultural issues with relevance. I will turn to someone who is French and who happens to be both a professor of literature and a psychoanalyst. Surprisingly, his assessment is not very positive.

Apply here!

Like Nabokov, Pierre Bayard worries over the evolution of psychoanalytic literary criticism, and his book, *Can One Apply Literature to Psychoanalysis?*,[6] testifies to a certain crisis. Bayard, the praised author of *How to Talk about Books*

[4] Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory*, rev. ed., New York, Putnam, 1966, p. 20.
[5] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, New York, Vintage, 1997, pp. 124 and 141.
[6] Pierre Bayard, *Peut-on appliquer la littérature à la psychanalyse?* Paris, Minuit, 2004. Hereafter abbreviated as PALP and page number.

You Haven't Read[7] – a freewheeling meditation on literary charlatanism and critical fabulation – here inverts the Freudian idea of applied psychoanalysis: when it comes to literature, he argues, one should reverse the classical paradigm and apply literature to psychoanalysis. The result is not as paradoxical as it seems, because a similar reversal had been anticipated by Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Nicholas Royle, among others, yet it refutes Freud's belief that psychoanalysis could be applied to literature.

Bayard's ironical inversion is not entirely antagonistic to Freud. Indeed, Freud recommended a similar strategy when he listed literature as one of the fields that a psychoanalyst should master to be trained. This is clear in *The Question of Lay Analysis*, where Freud opposes medical training as a prerequisite for psychoanalysts and promotes the humanities: "[T]he analytical curriculum would include subjects which are far removed from medicine and which a doctor would never require in his practice: the history of civilization, mythology, the psychology of religion, and literature. Unless he is well oriented in these fields, the analyst will be unable to bring understanding to bear upon much of his material."[8] Freud is not simply alluding to a knowledge provided by personal contact with poems, novels, and plays with the term *Literaturwissenschaft*.[9] This word conflates personal literary expertise and something like the "science" of literature, which may include criticism. Thus, literature is an essential component of the training of a competent analyst. Freud, whose main distinction during his lifetime was a literary prize – the Goethe Prize awarded to him in 1936 – was extremely cultured. His essays are peppered with quotes from Goethe, Shakespeare, and Heine. Freud's library held more novels and plays and books about literature, mythology, and religion than treatises about psychiatric issues.

For Freud, the "science of literature" would encompass the idea of interpretation. There would be a general hermeneutics moving from the literary field to sexuality with its inexhaustible lore of examples, characters, situations, and even jokes that will refine individual diagnoses, dig more deeply into the complex dramas of the patients' lives, and finally look to the immemorial chronicles of gods, heroes, and mythical paradigms that will attest to the impact of transgenerational dramas. In Freud's view, literature is not a token of familiarity with great novels or a sign of cultural distinction, for the term implies knowledge, it informs a sense of pedagogy, and finally it underpins a training

[7] Pierre Bayard, *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, New York, Bloomsbury, 2007.
[8] Sigmund Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis*, trans. Nancy Procter-Gregg, New York, Norton, 1950, p. 118.
[9] Sigmund Freud, *Die Frage der Laienanalyse* in *Schriften zur Behandlungstechnik*, Frankfurt, Fischer, 1982, p. 337.

bridging the gap between medical studies and the humanities. One might say that literature offers a privileged mode of entrance to "culture," a term that combines personal engagement with formalized modes of fiction (*Bildung*) with a compendium of the values defining a whole civilization (*Kultur*). Therefore, as Freud states, no psychoanalyst can ignore the benefits of its acquisition and subsequent mastery.

Is this what Bayard has in mind with his provocative title that postulates a reversal of "applied psychoanalysis"? In fact, he questions the usual critical methods elaborated in the name of psychoanalysis by simply "applying" psychoanalytic terms to literature. Like Nabokov, he criticizes the assumptions of standard psychoanalytic criticism. He agrees with the academic consensus that most schools of psychoanalytic criticism are obsolete today. It would be hard for any candidate to a good American graduate program to be accepted with a plan to study Hamlet's unconscious inhibitions or to assess the consequences of the castration complex in Dostoyevsky. Indeed, if we consider the overtones of the term "application" with Bergson's concept of laughter in mind, the idea of an "applied" discourse cannot but carry an ironical ring. There lurks a mechanical element in the very notion of something that has been *plaqué* – that is, mechanically applied – to literary interpretation. A knowing smirk is likely to greet "applications" of Oedipal patterns to literary works. Bayard is nevertheless more critical than sarcastic when he surveys how psychoanalysis has been applied to literature in the past.

Going back to excellent canonical Freudian explorations such as Sarah Kofman's book on Freud and art[10] or Jean Bellemin-Noël's exploration of a textual unconscious,[11] Bayard points out that Freud's theory always implied the preeminence of creative writers. Writers and artists were credited with having hit on Freud's concepts before he did. However, any awareness of the process was denied to them. Freud was surprised by the fact that if they had discovered the truth, it was without their knowing. Writers and artists did not know what they were doing when they were creating, thus they needed psychoanalytic interpretations to make full sense of brilliant intuitions. Whether these interpretations rely on psychobiography as practiced by Marie Bonaparte or Charles Mauron, or try to avoid it as Bellemin-Noël did when he presupposed a textual unconscious not identical with that of the author, Bayard remains equally critical. He does not spare Lacan, whose position is often modified: "Lacan does not seem to innovate on that issue, alternating critical texts in which the author is taken into account – as for Gide or Joyce – and texts in

[10] Sarah Kofman, *The Childhood of Art, An Interpretation of Freud's Aesthetics*, trans. Winfred Woodhull, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988.
[11] Jean Bellemin-Noël, *Vers l'inconscient du texte*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1979.

which the readings are not founded in any privileged manner on the life of the author, as with *Hamlet*" (PALP, p. 37). Lacan criticized biographical readings of Poe, to which we will return, apparently advocating the practice of "applying literature," yet he was a structuralist at heart and denied any agency or power to subjectivity. Lacan then returned to psychobiography when dealing with Gide and Joyce. In all these cases, the psychoanalytic schools, whether psychobiographical, structuralist, or textualist, reveal a belief in the superiority of psychoanalysis facing literature.

All psychoanalytical interpretations rely on a hermeneutics of suspicion deemed powerful enough to disentangle the hidden meanings lurking in the works. But this very power generates problems. Because these meanings are by definition unconscious, the author cannot control or even know anything of the dark forces that made the work happen. Hence the problem is that these readings yield only results that will conform to the initial theory and remain within the category of teleological interpretations. They function like religious readings: what is found in literary texts is less a product of the investigation than of its origins and of its presuppositions. Such a worry had been well expressed by Tzvetan Todorov regarding Biblical interpretations. Todorov noted that religious readings presuppose that the Bible can be made to confirm Christian doctrine. In the same way, canonical psychoanalytical readings only confirm the truth of psychoanalysis about the Oedipus complex, archaic fantasies, the primal scene, castration, childhood memories, and so on. This does not mean that the results are false. Simply, and more damagingly, they are entirely predictable. It is such a repetitiveness and predictability that has ended up generating boredom, finally leading to theoretical sterility.

To avoid this sterilization, Bayard suggests that psychoanalysis should be able to learn from literature, which entails a need to read literature differently, in such a way that it can be applied to psychoanalysis. One should meditate more comprehensively on the way literary texts reflect (on) psychic phenomena. Applied literature should focus on moments of emergence, on a new knowledge to be shared by the reader. However, this strategy will not convince psychoanalysts who will feel contested by it or critics from other schools who have no patience with psychoanalysis as such. As if to confirm these misgivings, the examples Bayard provided are not satisfactory. The plays or novels adduced, in which one recognizes his usual canon, Laclos, Proust, Maupassant, Agatha Christie, and Shakespeare, merely prove that literature "thinks" and is capable of staging complex psychological problems.

However, one has not waited for psychoanalysts to tell readers that literature "thinks." What do we gain from discovering that anger has been truly and deeply depicted by Homer in the *Iliad*? We may readily accept the idea that the

invention of psychology has paralleled the developments of literature, just as it seems clear that Ibsen, Maupassant, Stevenson, and Nietzsche somehow anticipated Freud, which confirms that something like the *Zeitgeist* is operative and hardly qualifies as news. A more relevant position would entail a systematic historicization of these efforts. One might want to point out, for instance, the importance of the links between *Madame Bovary* and the invention of hysteria by French medical discourse, which culminated in Charcot's theories. Bayard notes that literature became a field of predilection for psychoanalysis at the time when psychoanalysis was being invented. Freud, Rank, Ferenczi, Jung, Bion, and others wanted to test their hypotheses by applying them to culture and thus to literature in general. Now that this discourse has been oversystematized, the issue is how to keep being inventive.

Given its riches, its diversity, and its subversive potentialities, literature would signal the disappearance of psychoanalysis as an interpretive paradigm, which makes one question its utility. Thus, the only chance of success of "applied literature" would be to acknowledge the paranoid side of all critical systems and to refuse to speak in the name of a method. Finally, a psychoanalyst reading literature should never say "we" but account for why she or he needs to speak in the first person. Are we not abandoning Freud's notion of a *Literaturwissenschaft* and throwing out the baby of culture with the dirty water of tainted hermeneutics? The debate about psychoanalysis and literature has not been satisfactorily resolved, because it has led Bayard to paint himself in a subjectivist corner, as the last paragraph of the book suggests. Bayard ends by evoking his reading habits, praising the ideal solitude inspired by Montaigne's famous library:

> It is not true indeed that literature, once it has once and for all delivered it knowledge about psychology, would have nothing to teach to ourselves.… It is wrong above all to imagine that my wish to listen to it would be destroyed by my own criticism, even when – for I keep my own reserve nevertheless – I have discovered a way that would allow me to be taught by books, in the tranquility found at last of the absence of dialogue, alone at last." (PALP, p. 173)

On the contrary, I will argue that once we have begun splicing literature and psychoanalysis, we cannot be left in contemplative peace; we will not continue to putter around the stacks in the meditative solace of a walled-in library. To promote a new restlessness linking literary theory and practice, we will have to review Freud's own program and show that his actual practice of reading cannot be reduced to "applied psychoanalysis."

My contention is that one can and will learn directly from Freud and that the "lessons" he provides rebound and resound when reading literature. This

is not just to say that Freud is always a stimulating read, although this is undeniable. We need both to historicize Freud as a man of the nineteenth century, defined by a specific Jewish and Viennese cultural moment, and to seize on the multiple new insights that are disseminated in his books and essays. I will return in my Conclusion to Freud's library and to the specific space that he had constructed for psychoanalysis and, now, will just allude to his answer to the request that he should name ten "good novels." Freud wrote his response in November 1906; his letter was published in 1907, along with the responses of Peter Altenberg, Hermann Bahr, Hermann Hesse, Ernst Mach, Arthur Schnitzler, and a few others. Freud's response is deliberate, thoughtful, innovative, but also surprising in its choices. He lists his ten favorite books:

Multatuli, *Letters and Works*
Kipling, *Jungle Book*
Anatole France, *Sur la Pierre Blanche*
Zola, *Fécondité*
Merezhkovsky, *Leonardo da Vinci*
G. Keller, *Leute von Seldwyla*
C. F. Meyer, *Huttens letzte Tage*
Macaulay, *Essays*
Gomperz, *Griechische Denker*
Mark Twain, *Sketches*[12]

It is likely that none of these books will evoke anything in today's readers, save Kipling's *Jungle Book*. I can only refer to the meticulous glosses and summaries detailing the content of these ten books by Alexander Grinstein.[13] His compilation is a labor of love, and it is indeed crucial to know what Freud was reading in 1907, and why he chose these books. A recurrent feature in these books is their social, political, and humanistic side. For instance, Multatuli's work was made up of novels and letters that denounced the cruelty of the colonial system in Indonesia. Good books should teach a lesson, Freud states, and boldly tackle current issues such as anti-Semitism, colonial repression, and religious intolerance, as we see with demonized witches, also present in the *Leonardo da Vinci* book.

[12] Sigmund Freud, "Contribution to a Questionnaire on Reading" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1906–1908)*, London, Hogarth Press, 1907, pp. 245–247.
[13] Alexander Grinstein, *Freud at the Crossroads*, Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1990. See especially pp. 303–564.

At the same time, Freud insists that he is not listing the "ten best books ever" that he knows. If he was asked this, he adds, he would include Homer, the tragedies of Sophocles, Goethe's *Faust*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. And if he had been asked to list the ten "most significant books," he would have named scientific books such as those of Copernicus, Johann Weier on the belief in witches, and Darwin's *Descent of Man*. Thus the terms that he uses to present his "ten good books" are revealing: they must be like "good friends"; these are books

> to which one stands in rather the same relationship as to "good" friends, to whom one owes a part of one's knowledge of life and view of the world – books which one has enjoyed oneself and gladly commends to others, but in connection with which the element of timid reverence, the feeling of one's own smallness in the face of their greatness, is not particularly prominent.[14]

Freud adds that he is interested by the possibility of throwing light "on the relation between the author and his work," which betrays the biographical bias often observed in applied psychoanalysis, to which I will return in the next chapters.

Freud's curiosity for history explains the mention of Dmitri Merezkhovsky's *The Romance of Leonardo da Vinci*. The novel became the model for Freud's "historical novels" and would give him the key to Leonardo's life and career – the political struggle between religion and paganism, Catholic intolerance, and Renaissance enlightenment, the iconoclastic rabble of Florence in the fifteenth century, and the elite groups admiring eternal beauty modeled on Greek artists provide couples of opposites that serve to frame the central enigma of Leonardo's *libido*. It is from this book that Freud derived the central image of a "vulture," introducing his tail into Leonardo's mouth that would underpin his 1910 *Childhood Memory of Leonardo da Vinci* and his connection between Leonardo and Machiavelli.

In what concerns Zola, Freud added that he could equally have chosen *Docteur Pascal*, and then he made a more surprising admission: "Genuinely creative writing of purely poetical value has been excluded from this list, probably because your charge – good books – did not seem exactly aimed at such."[15] Freud took the question literally: it was not about "aesthetic enjoyment" but about what "good books" can bring, hence about books that generate "edification." However, these ten books are not all badly written – some are, to be sure, but this cannot be said of Emile Zola, Anatole France,

[14] Freud, "Contribution to a Questionnaire on Reading," p. 247.
[15] Ibid.

Mark Twain, or Macaulay. The aesthetic quality comes after, even if it is not negligible. Literature therefore always occupies a certain function for Freud, and in this case, it is ethical and political. This is based on the fact that the practice of reading and of writing is never to be dissociated from a transferential movement. We will see this movement emerge in the conception of literature that Freud devises and refines in an exchange of letters with a close friend of his youth.

Freud's Spanish academy and "cynical" literature

There is no better place to observe the mastery of language and languages acquired by the young Freud than his ten-year correspondence with childhood friend, Eduard Silberstein. These letters were sent when Freud was between fifteen and twenty-five years old. What is curious is that entire sections of these letters were written in Spanish, bad Spanish indeed, but fluent enough – a Spanish replete with silly jokes, personal allusions, and grandiose schemes. Freud and Silberstein had read together Miguel de Cervantes's "El coloquio de los perros" (The Dialogue of the Dogs) in a primer of Spanish literature. This story was published in 1613 in *Exemplary Stories* (ES). Their juvenile enthusiasm for the text led Freud and his friend to invent an amusing "Spanish Academy" often abbreviated as "A. E." for "Academia Española." Neither had learned Spanish well, let alone owned a dictionary. This did not prevent them from writing to each other in garbled and fanciful Castillan. In his letters, because we have only his part of the correspondence, Freud keeps mentioning Seville and not Valladolid, where the dialogue is situated, which suggests that he never read the whole text. However, most of the adventures narrated by Berganza to Scipion occur in Seville, including a dreamlike section with a witch. In their exchange, Freud chose for his part the persona of Scipion and left to Silberstein the other dog, Berganza. From the start, Freud planned that he and his friend should enter into an epistolary pact and arrange weekly confessions:

> Hence my proposal amounts to stipulating that every Sunday each of us, the two sole luminaries of the A. E., send the other a letter that is nothing short of an entire encyclopedia of the past week and that with total veracity reports all our doings, commissions and omissions, and those of all strangers we encounter, in addition to all outstanding thoughts and observations and at least an adumbration, as it were, of the unavoidable emotions. In that way, each of us may come to know the surroundings and condition of his friend most precisely, perhaps more

> precisely than was possible even at the time when we could meet in the same city. Our letters, which, when the year had passed, may constitute the ornament of the A. E. archives, will then be as diverse as our very lives. In our letters we shall transmute the six prosaic and unrelenting working days of the week into the pure gold of poetry and may perhaps find that there is enough of interest within us, and in what remains and changes around us, if only we learn to pay attention.[16]

Curiously, Freud wanted their regular exchange to remain "in the spirit of romanticism" but double as a sort of "journal" that would require the "strict observance of the form" (LSFES, p. 58). Freud sweeps away the objection that they may not have enough time, insisting that it is worth sacrificing two hours a week if this time is used to examine how they live. And, above all, the result should be entertaining: "[O]ne should not question in advance one's ability to keep a critical diary and spice it with a bit of humor" (LSFES, p. 58).

Indeed, Freud was following a Romantic tradition marked by a mixture of humor, fantasy, and poetry, whose main predecessor was none other than E. T. A. Hoffmann, whose tale of "The Sandman" would become the main literary evidence for a definition of the Uncanny, as we will see later. Hoffmann published "News from the Most Recent Fate of the Dog Berganza"[17] in 1814 in his groundbreaking *Fantasy Pieces in the Manner of Callot*. This collection of stories was introduced by Jean Paul (Richter), a Romantic writer who is mentioned in Freud's letters.[18] Jean Paul and Hoffmann provided obvious stylistic models for the younger Freud.

In Hoffmann's version, the first-person narrator listens to Berganza who continues the narrative of his fanciful adventures. Berganza had lived in a hospital and met witches as in Cervantes's tale, and in this spirited sequel, he learns music with a composer, he becomes a poet and an actor, and he rails against the foibles of society ladies who opt for bad marriages. At the end, he nevertheless turns back into a dog. It is a Romantic "portrait of the artist as young dog," *avant la lettre*. Freud's letters are written in the spirit of Jean Paul and Hoffmann, as they are self-consciously humorous and critical at the same time. To these combined influences one can add that of the humorist Lichtenberg – a letter from 1874 quotes him at length. Freud, who had recently been reading his works and the famous aphorisms, copies Lichtenberg directly to enlighten and amuse Silberstein. He gives a catalogue of imaginary objects mentioning

[16] *The Letters of Sigmund Freud to Eduard Silberstein, 1871–1881*, ed. Walter Boehlich, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990, pp. 57–58. Hereafter abbreviated as LSFES and page number.

[17] E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Fantasiestücke*, Frankfurt, Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2006, pp. 101–177.

[18] Freud suggests that they can do like Siebenkäs and Leibgeber, two characters of a novel by Jean Paul, who at some point exchange their names (LSFES, p. 118).