



REVIEWS



Domesticating Psychoanalysis: A Review of Modernism and the European Unconscious

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In their Preface to *Modernism and the European Unconscious*, Peter Collier and Judy Davies describe the central aim of their collection of essays as that of remedying a gap. "[T]here has not yet been a single study that examines the impact of psychoanalytic, and allied, theories of the unconscious on European literature and art as a whole" they suggest, and propose to remedy this "through a study of the convergence of two forces, the Modernist revolution in form, and the emergence of new models of mind". In doing this they wish to take a distance from "ambitious theories of writing that take into account the relation of language to the unconscious" in the belief that "the definition of a cultural complex should arise out of the detailed comparison and collation of individual case studies, rather than be theorized in advance."

Given this orientation, it comes as no surprise to see that the essayists of *Modernism and the European Unconscious* are deeply sceptical concerning the explanatory value for literary criticism of any particular version of psychoanalytic theory - Freudian, Jungian or Lacanian; and that comparative assessment is preferred to the common use of psychoanalysis as an authoritative and authoritarian metalanguage. In too many psychoanalytic readings, beginning with Freud's own odd and often admittedly speculative essays on art and literature (all too often the most reductionist of Freud's works, and all too often the only works which literary critics have read), the literary or visual text is reduced to the status of an example of the truths of psycho-analytic theory. The text is either read as the symptom of the author's neurosis, in a psycho-biographical reading (as in Marie Bonaparte's classic study of Poe); or is seen as evidence for the existence of structures of the mind posited by psychoanalytic theory - as in Lacan's readings of Hamlet or Joyce.¹

Malcolm Bowie, in an elegant and informed essay on music and psychoanalysis, draws away from this use of psychoanalysis as a metalanguage and urges: "There is no general reason why those who wish to adopt a 'Freudian' approach to modern art should employ Freudian terminology at all ... nor why their explorations of desire at work and at play in texts, pictures and musical compositions should be expected to vindicate any one psychoanalytic paradigm ... the psychoanalytic or psychanalyt

critic needs to speak resourcefully, specifying, the language of the art-forms on which he or she chooses to dwell ... In the course of such critical activity, the language of psychoanalysis offers clues but not solutions, calls to action for the interpreter but not interpretations" (p. 16). Rather than see psychoanalysis as providing a clue to the interpretation of Mahler's music, Bowie sees Mahler and Freud engaged in a common modernist mixing of high and low cultural forms, high and low forms of consciousness.

Most of the essayists adopt a similar strategy of comparative assessment and refuse to lend psychoanalysis any unquestioned explanatory authority. David Midgley, in an essay on Musil and Döblin, notes how each of their literary strategies is "very different, but each seeks in its way to protect an awareness of the irrational dimension from precipitate conceptualization" (p.129) as he believes it suffers in Freud; while Robin Mackenzie, in her account of a Proustian dream, writes "A passage like this makes it tempting to reorder the narrator's descriptions of dreams within the framework of Freud's dream-work... [b]ut in spite of the economy and analytic power of Freud's paradigm of the primary processes of the unconscious, it can lead us to neglect the specific emphases of the Proustian vision, which has its own oneiric rhetoric" (p.161). Of course, the problem of comparative assessment is that it leaves the interpreter with little to do but to register differences and can easily end in banality and bathos, as in Mackenzie's judgement: "a comparative study of Freud and Proust on unconscious (and other) mental processes reveals many interesting convergences (and divergences) in areas like dream, desire and memory" (p.151). In fact, the most striking feature of these accounts of the "impact" of psychoanalysis is the lack of fit between psychoanalytic theory proper and the terms of its reception and representation. The case of André Breton's surrealism - which made the grandest claims for its adhesion to psychoanalysis - is striking. As Collier notes: "although Breton constantly pays lip-service to procedures of condensation and displacement; he more often assumes that the text is equivalent to the dream, which is equivalent to the Unconscious, which is equivalent to the image..." (p.29) and in such an equivalency writing as such is lost; while Elizabeth Wright refers to a Freud's letter to Breton in 1932 where he writes that he "could not understand why the Surrealists were so interested in psychoanalysis...[he] felt that one could not analyse the productions of the Surrealists because the analytic practice cannot take place in public. The psychoanalytic process of so-called "free-association" is not like automatic writing, for instance, because there is not some pure truth which can emerge undisguised and unsullied from the unconscious. The freedom of free-association is not to be understood as an absence of determination, but rather as ruling out the voluntary selection of thought" (pp.265-66). Such a misapprehension of psychoanalysis is even more apparent in the 1926 film *Secrets of the Soul*, despite its intentions to present a "serious" view of psychoanalysis to the public.² Here, as Sally MacDonald notes, the film "makes no explicit acknowledgement of [the] crucial difficulty of transference

nor, by extension, of a tragic dimension inherent in psychoanalysis. This omission, quite apart from the film's attitude towards infantile sexuality, lays it open to charges of bowdlerizing Freud" (p.209).

All of which suggests that the term "impact", which the collection uses to describe the "influence" of psychoanalysis, assumes far too monolithic a view of psychoanalytic theory; and suggests rather the necessity for understanding the mediations between psychoanalysis and culture, the conceptual play that exists between the available representations of psychoanalytic theory and their deployment in cultural practice and cultural theory. In this regard, it is striking that there is no single essay which deals directly with the work of Freud (or Jung). Surely such an essay on the earliest representations of psychoanalytic theory - in Freud's own work, or in the popularising work of followers such as Jones and Putnam - would have been valuable here? In this sense, the collection as a whole raises a question it does not seek to answer: the question of the selective representation by which the complex and often contradictory elements of psychoanalytic theory come to be resolved into an apparently unitary body of thought - a "Freudianism" or a "Jungism".³ The focus on the impact of psychoanalysis might be better shifted to a focus on the mediation of psychoanalytic theory in and through artistic representation, and in the discourses of social understanding including anthropology, sociology and politics, which are themselves important components of a cultural modernism which goes beyond the literary.

Interesting in this regard is Anne Fernihough's careful assessment of Lawrence's apparent rejection of Freudian psychoanalysis. Fernihough acknowledges Lawrence's criticism of Freudianism in works such as *Fantasia of the Unconscious*; but then argues there is more common ground than this criticism might suggest, before concluding that "Although the aesthetics of Lawrence and Freud ... can be seen to coincide at several important junctures, Freud remains for Lawrence a Gerald Crich of the psyche, engaged in psychic subjugation" (p.61). In other words, Lawrence questions a Freudianism which is in part his own creation, with ideas which are themselves, to the unbiased observer, distinctly Freudian.

How does the collection as a whole work in relation to its stated aims? We have already seen that the terms of impact and comparative assessment are not entirely satisfactory. Moreover while the essays in *Modernism* certainly are a collection of individual case studies, they are a collation only in the sense that they are brought together within the covers of one book. This does not make them the 'single study' which is proposed. At best, some of the materials for such a single study are available here. But others are absent: notably such now familiar themes and questions as the role and status of language in psychoanalysis; its conception of the human subject; the relations between psychoanalysis and other social, linguistic, philosophical or political theories. Where is there any consideration of the relations between psychoanalysis and Wittgenstein's philosophy (usually trivialised and misunderstood); or between psychoanalysis and Marxism (usually inflated and misunderstood)? In the

end, for all their claims to the contrary, the version of what constitutes a "cultural complex" for Collier and Davies is restricted, in familiar fashion, to the literary and the aesthetic. Thus for all their appeal to the work of the late Raymond Williams, the collection of essays remains safely within the narrow boundaries of a literary studies which Williams himself did much to contest.

Indeed Collier and Davies seem to consciously keep at a distance the kind of conceptual framework necessary for such a task, rejecting from the outset those "ambitious theories of writing that take into account the relation of language to the unconscious" (p.xiii). In this sense this very Cambridge book ("Many of the ideas developed here have been aired and debated in student seminars or lectures in Cambridge") is itself an interesting historical document, marking a particular phase in the university's relations to both modernism and psychoanalysis, a particular moment of mediation, and perhaps even containment.

For the seventies had seen an extraordinarily fruitful convergence of work on psychoanalysis and modernism in Cambridge, chiefly under the influence of just those "ambitious theories of writing" which this collection wishes to ward off. In the work of younger scholars such as Colin MacCabe and Stephen Heath, and graduate students such as Alan Durant, the connections between psychoanalysis and modernism were pursued in a pioneering and exploratory fashion.⁴ That there is no explicit mention of this work in *Modernism and the European Unconscious* perhaps reveals the workings of what Raymond Williams meant by a "selective tradition". In any event, in excluding discussion of language and the unconscious, while this collection may escape some of the polemical excesses of the seventies, it is at the expense of a certain risk-taking intellectual vitality. Somehow both modernism and psychoanalysis come through as safely domesticated forces in this collection of essays.

Notes and References

1. For a good overall survey of psychoanalysis and literature, see Elizabeth Wright's **Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice** (London: Methuen, 1984). A section of Bonaparte's classic study is available in **The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading** edited by J.P. Muller and W. J. Richardson (London and Baltimore: Johns Hopkins 1988) pp. 101-132 as well as a number of interesting essays on the classic Lacan-Derrida dispute regarding the interpretation of Poe's tale. For Lacan on Hamlet see his essay "*Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet*" in **Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise** edited by S. Fehman (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins 1982) pp. 11-52; on Joyce, see **Joyce avec Lacan** (Paris: Navarin Editeur, 1987) edited by Jacques Aubert.
2. For an interesting comparative assessment of the treatment of

- psychoanalysis in American films of the forties and fifties, see Marc Vernet's essay "*Freud: effets speciaux - Mise en Scene: U.S.A.*", in *Communications* 23 (1975) pp. 223-234. Vernet finds that American cinema forces psychoanalytic insights to conform to the dominant codes of cinematic plot and narration. Most strikingly, psychoanalysis's insistence on the word and the transference relation is shifted to the image and the love interest between the protagonists, as, for instance, in Hitchcock's *Spellbound*.
3. For some of the dangers of this selective representation on the work of Raymond Williams, one of the century's foremost cultural thinkers, see my essay "A Missed Encounter: Raymond Williams and Psychoanalysis" in *Journal of Literary Studies* Vol 6 Nos 1-2, June 1990 pp. 62-76.
 4. See, for example, Colin MacCabe's *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (London: Macmillan, 1979), Alan Durant's *Ezra Pound: Identity in Crisis* (Brighton: Harvester 1986), and Stephen Heath "Writing for Silence: Dorothy Richardson and the Novel" in *Teaching the Text* edited by S. Kappeler and N. Bryson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983). Some of the strains which this work generated in Cambridge in the seventies are discussed in David Simpson's essay on the "MacCabe Affair", "New Brooms at Fawcety Towers: Colin MacCabe and Cambridge English", in *Intellectuals: Aesthetics, Politics, Academics* edited by Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990) pp. 245-272.