

### **‘FREUDSCAPING’ TEXTS: RE-READING THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE**

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Freudian psychology has influenced and enriched literature more than many other methods of psychological schools/movements through the centuries. This was, however, in no way a one-way process, because Freud was undoubtedly as much influenced by literature, as literature itself was influenced by him.

It is difficult to pinpoint the particular literary influences on Freud, because the works of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, both of whom predated him and anticipated many of his ideas, were not read by him until much after he had formulated his own theories. Thus it was only a question of *Zeitgeist*, or the spirit of time, because psychoanalysis was one of the culminations of nineteenth century Romanticist literature. It may appear ironical at first sight that a science should evolve from a literature which considered itself inimical, but this contradiction gets resolved when we know that nineteenth century literature was itself scientific in the sense that it was devoted to a research into the self.

The connection between Freud and the Romanticist tradition goes as far back as 1762 with Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew*. Many great minds of the century—Goethe, Marx, Shaw and Freud himself—were much impressed by this ‘little’ work. The dialogue takes place between the author Diderot, and Rameau the protagonist. The latter is a rogue, an outcast, who is nevertheless, endowed with a good amount of wit. He is the ‘disintegrated consciousness’ who breaks down all the normal social values and makes new combinations with the pieces. Diderot, the ‘honest consciousness’, is reasonable, but dull. Thus we have here the perception of the hidden element of human nature and of the opposition between the hidden and the visible, anticipating Freud's Id-Ego connection—Diderot being the ego, and Rameau, the id. This idea of the hidden entity became one of the most dominant ideas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although it took many forms for various writers. With all this came the conviction that “we may not judge a man by any single moment in his life without taking into account the determining past and the expiating and fulfilling future”.

More literary affinities to Freud can be found in the sexual revolution demanded by Shelley, Schlegel and Ibsen, the belief in the sexual origin of art by Schopenhauer, the investigation of sexual maladjustment by Stendhal, the fascination with the horrible in Shelley, Poe and Baudelaire, as well as the pre-occupation with the death wish and dreams that characterized many of the works of that period. These are undoubtedly the components of the *zeitgeist* from which Freud himself developed.

How has Freud influenced literature? Freudian psychology had its earliest effects on biography, but was used mainly to limit the meaning of texts. However, literary criticism, which was alive to the refinements and complexities of psycho analysis, produced works of great value with its interest in the latent and ambiguous meanings of works, and which, more importantly, had a corrective effect on the idea of literary biography. The motive of the biographer's interpretation now changed, as he was more preoccupied with finding grounds for sympathy with the writer and increasing the possible meaning of the work. Many a creative writer were influenced directly by Freud's theories—Kafka with his interest in guilt and punishment, Thomas Mann with his theories of myth and magic, James Joyce with his preoccupation regarding the numerous states of the receding consciousness –being a few among them.

Freud's affinities with the anti nationalist element of the Romanticist tradition induced Mann into thinking that the rationalistic side of Freud's psycho analysis was only an accident and definitely secondary to the 'night side' of life which Freud had written about. Mann portrayed Freud as the legitimizer of the myth and the dark, irrational ways of the mind.

Much as Freud admired writers and literature, he would view art only as a 'substitute gratification'. To him, art is illusion, and therefore, harmless and often even beneficent. Its chief function is to serve as a narcotic because it shares the characteristics of a dream, and the artist is a narcotic who 'belongs to a race of beings whose realm is not of this world'. To Freud, reality implies what is there, while illusion is a pejorative term which implies what is totally absent. The mind, for both good and bad, helps create its own reality by a process of selection and evaluation. In this view, reality is malleable and subject to creation. The reality of social life and of value, conceived and maintained by the human mind and will, is thus a 'taken' reality and not a 'given' one. Therefore love, morality, honour, esteem--all become the key components of a created reality.

Lionel Trilling, a critic of Freud, argues that although dream, neurosis and art have some common elements in that all these employ unconscious processes, there is also a vital difference that exists among them. The poet is in perfect command of his fantasy, while the neurotic is possessed by it. Moreover, unlike the neurotic, the poet brings his illusion of art to serve the purpose of a closer and truer relation with reality. Trilling nonetheless admires Freud for highlighting the therapeutic effect of art – for its ability to release mental stress and promote the social sharing of highly valued emotional experiences—although he condemns Freud for most of the other conceptions on art as being inadequate and untrue.

Freud himself appeared quite aware of the limitations of psycho analysis, especially of its inability to elucidate the nature of artistic technique, the means by which the artist works. Besides, psycho analysis, while asserting that the sense of beauty probably derives from sexual feeling, had nothing to say about beauty per se. Freud himself confessed to a theoretical indifference to form, restricting himself to its content. Further he did not consider aspects like tone, style and technique that are integral to the beauty of a work of art.

If we cannot accept Freud's conception of the place of art in life and his analytic method, what then, has he contributed to the understanding of art?

One of Freud's most significant contributions to art is the higher position he assigned to poetry, believing as he did, that poetry is indigenous to the very constitution of the mind, thereby correcting the commonly held view that poetry is a kind of 'beneficent aberration' of the mind's course. Although he often tried to show that poetry as a method of thought is unreliable and ineffective for conquering reality, he himself was forced to use it in the very shaping of his science. He discovered how, in a scientific age, we can still feel and think in figurative formations and so defined psycho analysis as a science of tropes, metaphors and its variants like synecdoche and metonymy, like when he uses metaphors of space relationships to describe 'the topography of the mind'.

Freud also revealed how the mind, in one of its parts, could work without logic. His signal contribution to art rests in his theories that supplement and modify Aristotle's concept of catharsis. Freud's pleasure principle that so largely conditioned his theory of art maintained that dreams are wish fulfillments. But this was seriously challenged by the cases of war neurosis, where the patient recurred to the terrible initiatory situation with great literalness. Besides, the psychic behavior of children also caused him to assume that there is a repetition-compulsion which goes beyond the pleasure principle. The dream, he stated, is an effort to reconstruct the negative/bad situation in order that the failure to meet it may be recouped; it is an attempt to meet the situation and to make new efforts to control.

This theory of traumatic neurosis modifies Aristotle's cathartic theory of tragedy—the mithridatic function by which tragedy is used as the homoeopathic administration of pain to inure ourselves to the greater pain which life will force on us. But such a conception of the function of tragedy appears too negative and pessimistic. Freud also gives assent to the idea that there is a human drive which considers death the final and desired goal.

Like every great critic of human nature, Freud too found in human pride the ultimate cause of human wretchedness. Man is not simply good; he has somewhere a kind of evil within, from which rise perennially the impulses that threaten his civilization. This principle does not narrow and simplify the human world for the artist, but on the contrary, opens and complicates it.

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