

*A Concise Companion to*

# PSYCHOANALYSIS, LITERATURE, AND CULTURE

*Edited by Laura Marcus and Ankhi Mukherjee*



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A Concise Companion to  
Psychoanalysis, Literature,  
and Culture

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Laura Marcus  
Ankhi Mukherjee



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# Introduction: Psychoanalysis at the Margins

Laura Marcus

The essays in this volume represent the variety of new ways of taking up the legacy of psychoanalytic thought and theory, reaching forward to us from the close of the nineteenth century. The continuities between then and now are revealed in the focus on sexualities, on the form of the case history, on the place of vision and the specular, and on the role of language as manifestation of unconscious processes. There are also marked discontinuities, however, not only from the original texts of psychoanalysis but from many of their later twentieth-century reformulations. Most notable, perhaps, is the near-total absence of any direct discussion of the Oedipal, the “complex” which for Freud founded human identity, sexual organization, and his new science. The Oedipal and Oedipalization were central topics, to take one example, in Maud Ellmann’s excellent collection of essays, *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism* (1994). Two decades later, our contributors continue to be preoccupied with questions of sexuality and psychic life, but their frameworks are substantially those of queer and postcolonial theory, cultural criticism, translation in its many senses, models of time and temporality, and the human–animal interface.

In Part I of the volume, “Histories,” Stephen Frosh offers the fullest account of the place of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century – a

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long twentieth century, since the processes he describes seem to persist into the second decade of the current century. He mentions in passing the neglect of psychoanalytic theory by psychologists and stresses the conjunction of “the slow and rather dull work of clinicians” and “a more flamboyant and speculative use of psychoanalysis as a key to cultural knowledge.”

whatever one might think of the validity or efficacy of psychoanalysis, it has come to define a very widespread form of cultural experience and to be indispensable to ways of living in, as well as understanding, that cultural form. ... the human subject reflexively deploys psychoanalytic understanding in the construction of selfhood; psychoanalysis itself is reflexively embodied in the cultural processes to which it has partially given rise.

The other paradox Frosh identifies is the place of rationality in psychoanalytic theory: committed to scientific rationalism while “enacting the irrational otherness it is striving to theorize.” He mentions in particular the uneasy relationship between psychoanalysis and telepathy, parapsychology, and so on – the topic which is at the center of Carolyn Burdett’s chapter discussed below – but his main focus is on a similarly tense relationship, with reflection on colonial and gender relations. In both cases, what initially looks like a disaster area, shaped by Freud’s analysis of the “primitive” on the one hand and the masculinist and heteronormative associations of the explanatory models he developed on the other, contributes to some of the most powerful and influential work in postcolonial and feminist theory.

Andrew Webber’s analysis of the “case study” – a term which he points out was not used by Freud – is one of several chapters which bring out the notorious difficulties of Freud translation. The case study is, however, “the foundational mode of representation for psychoanalysis ... a form of study that psychoanalysis adapts from established conventions of medical and other scientific or disciplinary writing, but also adapts to its own purposes.” Freud does use the term *Krankengeschichte* which, as Webber points out, “modulates between the historical account of the analysand’s illness and that of the treatment of the illness in question.” As Webber shows in detail in Freud’s discussion of Wilhelm Jensen’s novella “Gradiva,” the relations between *Fall* (case), and *Anfall*, *Unfall*, *Zufall*, and so forth inevitably get lost in translation.

Burdett, as noted above, addresses the question of the occult and paranormal which “were not the marginal interests of cranks but

rather phenomena studied and investigated by figures otherwise engaged in uncontentiously respectable scientific pursuits and intellectual enquiries." Freud, she suggests, despite Ernest Jones' attempts to play down this area of his interests, was one of these, and the early reception of Freudian theory in the English-speaking world was mediated by Frederic Myers, who had been one of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research. Gothic novels, the New Woman, and the Oscar Wilde affair all formed part of the background to more specifically psychological reflection on the nature of desire.

Both Laurence Rickels and Daniel Steuer engage in their essays with Adorno's thought – in Rickels' case as a prologue (to borrow the title of Adorno's essay on television, which he discusses in some detail) to an analysis of psychoanalytic theories of adolescence, notably by Winnicott. The end of conscription and mass warfare, together with improved techniques of contraception, meant for Winnicott that "Adolescence now has to contain itself . . . in a way it has never done before."

Steuer engages with the broader issue of the relationship of psychoanalysis, as mediated by Freud and Cavell, to theorization of the political as well as of literary production. Both Adorno and Cavell, he suggests, uphold a radical conception of psychoanalysis as a "threshold science," transcending the opposition between positivism and a more speculative approach, foregrounding Adorno's central theme of "natural history" (*Naturgeschichte*) and deploying "a specifically psychoanalytic sensitivity."

Freud confronts case histories and other anthropological material with metapsychological constructions; in Adorno, philosophical reflection is endlessly answerable to cultural artifacts, be they philosophy, music, or literature; and in Cavell the reporting on the process of readings is itself the message.

As Adorno put it, addressing a reproach frequently made to psychoanalysis, "The critique of the superego ought to become the critique of the society which produced it; if it falls silent before this, then it becomes subservient to the prevailing social norm."

In turning to the question of literature, we encounter one of the key problems and paradoxes of psychoanalytic criticism and theory. Literature is threaded through psychoanalytic thought and theory. On the occasion of his seventieth birthday Freud was greeted as the "discoverer of the unconscious," but he corrected the speaker: "The poets

and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious. What I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied" (quoted in Trilling 1981, 95). He drew his fundamental concepts from literary works, among them Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *King Lear*, E.T. Hoffman's *The Sand Man*, Jensen's "Gradiva." Yet the "application" of psychoanalytic theories to literary texts in the work of Freud's followers has frequently been seen as the least satisfactory dimension of psychoanalytic thought, in large part due to an unease with the "treatment" of the writer or the work as if he, she, or it were the patient on the analytic couch.

Nonetheless, there is a persistent desire, as Peter Brooks has pointed out, for "a convergence of psychoanalysis and literary criticism." For Brooks, this dream stems from an apprehension of a structural homology between literature and psychic life:

We sense that there ought to be, that there must be, some correspondence between literary and psychic process, that aesthetic structure and form, including literary tropes, must somehow coincide with the psychic structures and operations they both evoke and appeal to.

(Brooks 1987, 4)

The wish for this convergence of psychoanalysis and literary criticism was continuous across the twentieth century, though it was conceived in very different ways. The earliest modes of psychoanalytic literary criticism were primarily focused on author and character, following on from Freud's analyses of the literary work as a symptom of the artist, and of the work of art as a kind of dream-text. This gave way to a greater focus on the reader, with the development in the middle decades of the twentieth century of psychoanalytic reader-response criticism, exploring subjective responses and the forms of identification readers make with literary texts. The latter decades of the century saw a shift of focus to texts and textual processes, including transference, narrative transmission, and the subversion of authority. The work of psychoanalytic, deconstructive, and feminist critics following Jacques Lacan was described thus by Shoshana Felman, writing in the 1980s:

The history of reading has accustomed us to the assumption ... that reading is finding meaning ... Lacan's analysis of the signifier opens up a radically new assumption, an assumption that is nonetheless nothing but an insightful logical and methodological consequence of Freud's discovery: that what *can* be read (and perhaps what *should* be read) is not

just meaning, but the lack of meaning; that significance lies not just in consciousness, but, specifically, in its disruption; that the signifier can be analyzed in its effects without its signified being known; that the lack of meaning – the discontinuity in conscious understanding – can and should be interpreted as such, without necessarily being transformed into meaning ... Thus, for Lacan, what is analytical par excellence is not (as is the case for [Marie] Bonaparte) the *readable* but the *unreadable*, and the *effects* of the unreadable. What calls for analysis is the insistence of the unreadable in the text.

(Felman 1988, 149)

The essays in Part II of the volume, "Literatures," both take up and transform a number of these preoccupations. Jean-Michel Rabaté opens with a key question: "Should one apply psychoanalysis to literature? Can one do this without having it unravel?" He argues rather that psychoanalysis must learn from literature, which becomes, in his readings, an "ambassador." The lines of connection in Rabaté's essay begin with Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, whose use of anamorphosis to conceal and simultaneously reveal the image of the skull (and of a relationship between death and writing), was explored extensively by Lacan. The furnishings represented in Holbein's painting appear to have been a model for Freud's study and consulting-room, in which the antique rug, the couch, and the antique statues acted as "dream-catching machines." The theme of "the ambassadors" is pursued by Rabaté through Henry James' novel of that title, which presents us, "like all novels and paintings," with the model of "a knowledge about ourselves that we had without knowing it." Rabaté's models of weaving and unweaving function as a counter and corrective to an outmoded conception of "applying" psychoanalysis to literature: the continuous "unfolding" of images is the appropriate way of proceeding, and it is one which "transgresses its limits as soon as they appear." The most significant and the most difficult question for psychoanalytic theory is, then, that of how "process" is to become "method."

Nicholas Royle, writing on "Freud's Double," finds "the double" to be at the heart of the literary, relationships between literature and psychoanalysis, and the interweavings of literature and life. The figure of the double, inextricably linked to Freud's understandings of "the uncanny," points to death and existence beyond this world; to the mirror-world of language itself; to the very strangeness of being in the world. Royle extends the argument for a suspension of, or resistance to, meaning, arguing that Freud's writing should be seen as "a kind of event, a work of strange energies that are not ... within his control or restricted to 'what Freud meant'." He finds in Freud a form of "writing

double" that is also constitutive of literature in all its strangeness; it takes us inside the movement of consciousness and thought while simultaneously placing us in a position outside, or "extimate" to, it.

Dreams, "the royal road to the unconscious," have been the most significant of all phenomena for psychoanalysis. They share with Royle's model of literary doubleness or duplicity the quality of being both part of and external to us, appearing at once to rise up from our perceptions, memories, and desires and to be unbidden visitors. Nicolette Zeeman explores the place of dreams and dreaming in medieval literature and culture, noting the continuities between medieval writers' focus on the visual dimension of dreams, the role of interpretation and "retelling," and the complex origins of dreams with those of psychoanalytic theory, and in particular the models of dreams explored by Freud and Lacan. Zeeman also points to the relationship between representations of desire in medieval writings (such as those of Chaucer and of Guillaume de Lorris, author of the *Roman de la rose*) and Lacan's account of "courtly love."

"Courtly love" is also addressed, in a very different context, in Tim Dean's discussion of Thom Gunn's poem sequence "Troubadour," written in part in the voice of the serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. These suggest that, Dean proposes, "although [Dahmer's] desires were beyond-the-pale abhorrent, his desires may be recognizably familiar when read in light of the Western lyric tradition." Bringing together Lacan's writings on desire with those of Michel Foucault, Dean explores the significance of queer theory for psychoanalytic literary criticism and understandings of literary subjectivity. Returning to "Troubadour," he shows that "rather than 'othering' Dahmer as monstrous, Gunn brings Dahmer closer by allowing him to inhabit the lyric 'I' and then couching his voice in the idioms of a distinguished poetic tradition." In this way, Gunn suggests that "Dahmer's desire, far from monstrous, may be familiar. It is precisely the excessiveness of his desire that makes him human; or, to put it another way, the inhuman dimension of Dahmer's desire is not his alone." For Dean, Gunn's way of proceeding is "at once psychoanalytic and profoundly ethical."

Pam Thurschwell also takes up the importance of queer theory for psychoanalysis in her account of adolescence as a category and "case." Recent writings on queer temporality, such as those of Lee Edelman, have argued for an identification of homosexuality with the death drive, in a refusal of teleologies and futurities which are tied to the figure of the child, as the product and emblem of "heteronormative" and procreative sexualities. For Thurschwell, the overlooked category

of “the adolescent” represents a more intransigent and more interesting refusal of “development” and an alternative version of atemporality. This was recognized by Freud, who, for all his trouble with adolescents (paramount among them “Dora,” the subject of one of his fullest case histories), recognized their right “to linger at certain stages of development.” Adolescent “resistance” is represented in striking ways not only in psychoanalytic writings, including case histories (those of Freud and of his child-analyst daughter Anna), but in the literary text which Thurschwell explores in detail: Willa Cather’s 1905 story “Paul’s Case,” published in the same year as Freud’s “Fragment of a Case of Analysis” (“Dora”).

The essays in Part III of the volume, “Visual Cultures,” explore a wide range of contemporary images and visual narratives through the lens of psychoanalytic theory. The approaches included here point to the profound influence of the psychoanalytic feminist theories inaugurated in the 1970s (paramount among them Laura Mulvey’s manifesto “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” with its formulations of a gendered “gaze theory”) while marking the new turns taken by more recent psychoanalytically inflected approaches to visual culture. Frances Restuccia gives a close account of Pedro Almodóvar’s film *Volver*, using an account of “intimacy” and “intimate revolt” drawn from the writings of Julia Kristeva to explore the film’s arousal of the senses as well as its psychological dynamics (which revolve around incest, trauma, and mothering.) Where Laura Mulvey created a polarization between the subversive, anti-narrative representations of the filmic avant-garde and Hollywood “narrative cinema” (with what she defined as its rigid visual and psychical structures of male regard and female spectacle), Restuccia argues that *Volver* “sets up a clash between delicate psychic life and the commodification of that life in the society of the spectacle.”

Spectacle as commodity in late capitalism is the subject of Catherine Liu’s essay, “Psychoanalysis, Popular and Unpopular,” in which Liu addresses the rise and fall of psychoanalysis in US popular culture, with the initial enthusiasm in Hollywood and New York in the 1920s and 1930s waning in the 1970s and 1980s, just as it became more solidly established in the academy and notably in film studies, in North America as in Europe. “Psychoanalytic terms like ‘id’ were common currency in the Hollywood of the 1950s: long before 1970s film theorists embraced sexual difference, the gaze, and fetishism as keys to understanding film form, spectatorship, and the ideological apparatus.” In the longer term, however, “psychoanalysis appeared exotic and foreign

while self-help and mind-cure were allied to American traditions and folk cures. . . . popular representations of psychic life would be reshaped and rearranged by post-war self-help movements, and the rise of new forms of popular culture and an advice industry that married self-hypnosis, self-help, the power of positive thinking, and business motivation." This is linked, she suggests, to the focus on identity in the thought and politics of advanced capitalism, where feminism and film theory developed in tandem and often formed important alliances, adopting and developing psychoanalytic theory. "Feminist filmmakers and activists looked for new ways of working and intervening in the art world, in the film industry, and in academia."

Ankhi Mukherjee pursues the question of psychoanalysis as represented in popular culture, focusing on prime-time TV and, in particular, the series *In Treatment* (2008) which depicts, in Mukherjee's words, "three neurotics who represent different facets of the great American excluded," seeking treatment from the analyst Paul (Gabriel Byrne). The chapter explores not only the ways in which popular cultural representation and reception engage with the practices and processes of psychoanalysis and the figure of the analyst but also the forms of (gendered) fantasy and dreaming involved in the production and consumption of the televisual.

Patricia Gherovici's essay, which focuses on transsexuality and transsexual memoirs, takes a different critical turn in relation to "visual culture." The visibility of transsexual symptoms (as an embodying of unconscious phenomena) becomes of less significance in Gherovici's account than acts of writing, exemplified in transsexual memoirs. These frequently represent "the experience of slipping in and out of the body" (a slipping away which Gherovici also finds in Joyce's representations of his fictional alter ego Stephen Dedalus and which she explores in part through Lacan's readings of Joyce's texts). The conundrum (the title adopted by the writer Jan Morris in her autobiographical account of transsexualism and sex change) of sexual difference confounds the binary of sex and gender (the first conventionally understood as biologically given [body] and the second as culturally constructed [symbol and representation]). Transsexual memoirs reveal the crucial place of writing in the procedures of bodily transformation: "Writing a sex change memoir aims not just at passing from one side to the other; it has the function of tying together body and text . . . the writing of the memoir can bring the author home to the body transformed."

Todd McGowan's "The Desert of the Real" returns us to the cinema, and the forms of "imaginary plenitude" offered to the cinema spectator.



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