

*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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*Editorial Offices*

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA  
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK  
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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# Notes on Contributors

**Isobel Armstrong** is a fellow of the British Academy, Senior Research Fellow of the Institute of English Studies, and Professor Emeritus of what is now the Geoffrey Tillotson Chair. During her time at Birkbeck, continuing the powerful tradition of nineteenth-century studies established by Geoffrey Tillotson, Barbara Hardy, and Michael Slater, she founded the London Seminar for Nineteenth-Century Studies and the Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies (of whose committee she is still a member). She has published widely on nineteenth-century studies (in particular *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*, 1996) and theory (see *The Radical Aesthetic*, 2000). Her latest book, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination* (2008), won the Modern Language Association's James Russell Lowell Prize in 2009. She gave the British Academy Warton Lecture on Poetry in 2011. She is working on a study of the nineteenth-century novel and the democratic imagination. During retirement she has taught at Harvard and Johns Hopkins universities and spoken at international conferences. She is a published poet.

**Carolyn Burdett** is Senior Lecturer in English and Victorian Studies in the Department of English at Birkbeck, University of London. Her research interests have focused on the literature, culture, and politics of the period 1880–1920. She has written a monograph titled *Olive Schreiner and the Progress of Feminism: Evolution, Gender, Empire* (2001). She co-edited a special issue on 'Eugenics Old and New' for the journal *New Formations* in 2007 and has also co-edited a collection of essays on

*The Victorian Supernatural* (2004). She is currently researching a book about the emergence of the term “empathy” at the beginning of the twentieth century, with particular focus on how cultural forms in the nineteenth century helped to shape the ways emotional life was conceived and discussed.

**Tim Dean** is Professor of English at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He is the author of *Gary Snyder and the American Unconscious* (1991), *Beyond Sexuality* (2000), *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (2009), and *What Is Psychoanalytic Thinking?* (forthcoming).

**Maud Ellmann** is Randy L. and Melvin R. Berlin Professor of the Development of the Novel in English in the Department of English at the University of Chicago. Her research and teaching interests focus on British and European modernism and critical theory, particularly psychoanalysis and feminism. Her monographs include *The Poetics of Impersonality: T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound*; *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment*; and *The Nets of Modernism*. Her recent journal articles have been on Irish fiction in English, the British psychoanalyst Marion Milner, the author of several luminous and idiosyncratic works on creativity, and the burgeoning new field of animal studies. Currently she is working on several projects, including World War II writing in Britain, the British novelist and poet Sylvia Townsend Warner, and fantasies of bodily disintegration in modernism, ranging from Melanie Klein to Samuel Beckett.

**Stephen Frosh** is Pro-Vice-Master and Professor in the Department of Psychosocial Studies at Birkbeck College, University of London. He is the author of many books and papers on psychosocial studies and on psychoanalysis, including *Psychoanalysis Outside the Clinic* (2010), *Hate and the Jewish Science: Anti-Semitism, Nazism and Psychoanalysis* (2005), *For and Against Psychoanalysis* (2006), *After Words* (2002), and *The Politics of Psychoanalysis* (1999). His most recent books are *Hauntings: Psychoanalysis and Ghostly Transmissions* (2013), *A Brief Introduction to Psychoanalytic Theory* (2012), and *Feelings* (2011).

**Patricia Gherovici** PhD is a licensed psychoanalyst and analytic supervisor practicing in Philadelphia and New York. She is an award-winning author, who has published nationally and internationally. Most recently she wrote the foreword to *Erotic Anger: A User's Manual* (2001) and contributed to *The Dreams of Interpretation: A Century Down*

*the Royal Road* (2007). Her book *The Puerto Rican Syndrome* (2003) won the Gradiwa Award and the Boyer Prize of the American Anthropological Association. Her latest book is *Please Select Your Gender: From the Invention of Hysteria to the Democratizing of Transgenderism* (2010).

**Martin Hägglund** is Professor of Comparative Literature and Humanities at Yale University. He is the author of *Dying for Time: Proust, Woolf, Nabokov* (2012); *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (2008); and *Kronofobi: Essäer om tid och ändlighet* (2002).

**Ranjana Khanna** is Margaret Taylor Smith Director of Women's Studies and Professor of English, Women's Studies, and the Literature Program at Duke University. She works on anglophone and francophone postcolonial theory and literature, art, and film, psychoanalysis, and feminist theory. She is the author of *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (2003) and *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation 1830 to the Present* (2008). She has published in journals including *Differences*, *Signs*, *Third Text*, *Diacritics*, *Screen*, *Art History*, *positions*, *SAQ*, *Feminist Theory*, and *Public Culture*. Her current books in progress are titled *Asylum: The Concept and the Practice* and *Technologies of Unbelonging*.

**Anna Kornbluh** is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Illinois, Chicago, where her research centers on Victorian literature, critical theory, and cinema. She is the author of *Realizing Capital*, and is currently at work on *The Order of Forms* (a prehistory of structuralism), and *Marxism* (for the Bloomsbury Film Theory in Practice series).

**Catherine Liu** is Professor of Film and Media Studies and Visual Studies at the University of California Irvine. She is the author of *American Idyll: Anti-Elitism as Cultural Critique* (2011) and *Copying Machines: Taking Notes for the Automaton*. Kaya Press recently reissued her 1997 novel *Oriental Girls Desire Romance*. She has published on higher education theory and policy, the Frankfurt School, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism. She is at work on a book titled *Higher Education and Austerity: A Look at MOOCs*.

**Laura Marcus** is Goldsmiths' Professor of English Literature at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of the British Academy. She was previously Regius Professor of Rhetoric and Literature at the University of Edinburgh. Her research and teaching interests are in nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century literature and culture, with a particular focus on modernism, Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury culture, life writing, literature and film, the history of psychoanalysis, and contemporary fiction. She is the author of several books, including *The*

*Tenth Muse: Writing about Cinema in the Modernist Period* (2007) (winner of the James Russell Lowell prize of the Modern Languages Association) and the forthcoming books *Dreams of Modernity: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Cinema* (2014) and *Autobiography: A Very Short Introduction* (2014).

**Todd McGowan** teaches theory and film at the University of Vermont. He is the author of *Enjoying What We Don't Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis* (2013), *Rupture: On the Emergence of the Political* (with Paul Eisenstein; 2012), *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema* (2011), and other works.

**Ankhi Mukherjee** is CUF Lecturer (Associate Professor) in the Faculty of English Language and Literature at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of Wadham College. Her key areas of specialism are Victorian literature and culture, modern British and anglophone literature, postcolonial studies, critical theory, and intellectual history. She has published widely in international peer-reviewed journals such as *PMLA*, *Modern Language Quarterly*, *Paragraph*, *Parallax*, and *Contemporary Literature*. Her first book, *Aesthetic Hysteria: The Great Neurosis in Victorian Melodrama and Contemporary Fiction*, was published in 2007. Her second monograph, *What Is a Classic? Postcolonial Rewriting and Invention of the Canon*, was published in 2013 by Stanford University Press in its prestigious Cultural Memory in the Present series.

**Jean-Michel Rabaté** is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, a curator of the Slought Foundation, an editor of the *Journal of Modern Literature*, and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He has authored or edited more than thirty books and collections on modernism, psychoanalysis, and philosophy. His forthcoming books are *An Introduction to Literature and Psychoanalysis*, *A Companion to 1922*, and *Crimes of the Future*.

**Frances L. Restuccia** is an English Professor at Boston College, where she teaches contemporary theory, modernism, the world novel, and film theory. Her publications include *James Joyce and the Law of the Father* (1989); *Melancholics in Love: Representing Women's Depression and Domestic Abuse* (2000); *Amorous Acts: Lacanian Ethics in Modernism, Film, and Queer Theory* (2006); and *The Blue Box: Kristevan/Lacanian Readings of Contemporary Film* (2012). She has published numerous articles in journals such as *Raritan*, *Contemporary Literature*, *Novel*, *Genre*, *Genders*, *American Imago*, *Lacanian Ink*, *Film-Philosophy*, and *Semplotkē*. A chapter titled "Sebastian's Skull: Establishing 'the Society of the Icon'" is part of the recently published volume *Kristeva's Fiction* (2013), and an essay on

Don Quixote, love, and messianism in Agamben appeared in *Philosophy Today* (2012). She is co-chair of the Psychoanalytic Practices seminar at Harvard's Humanities Center.

**Laurence A. Rickels** is Professor at the Academy of Fine Arts, Karlsruhe (Staatliche Akademie der Bildenden Künste Karlsruhe). He is also the Sigmund Freud Chair at the European Graduate School. Since 1990 he has been teaching at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He teaches in the Comparative Literature Department as well as the Germanic, Slavic, and Semitic Studies Department, and has also been affiliated to Art, Film and Media Studies departments. He divides his time his time between California and Europe, notably Germany and Switzerland. His interests are in the intersections between psychoanalysis, technology, and Nazis. Strongly influenced by psychoanalytic theory, Professor Rickels' work is formed in the interrelationships of psychoanalysis, the Frankfurt School of critical theory, and deconstruction. His numerous works include *Aberrations of Mourning: Writing on German Crypts* (1988); *Der unbetrauerbare Tod* (1990); *The Case of California* (1991); *The Vampire Lectures* (1999); *Nazi Psychoanalysis* (2002); *Ulrike Ottinger: The Autobiography of Art Cinema* (2008); *The Devil Notebooks* (2008); and *I Think I Am: Philip K. Dick* (2010).

**Nicholas Royle** is Professor of English at the University of Sussex. He has published many essays and is the author of numerous books, including *Veering: A Theory of Literature* (2011); *In Memory of Jacques Derrida* (2009); *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (with Andrew Bennett; 4th edn. 2009); *How to Read Shakespeare* (2005); *The Uncanny* (2003); *After Derrida* (1995); and *Telepathy and Literature: Essays on the Reading Mind* (1990). He is also an editor of the *Oxford Literary Review*. Besides critical and theoretical writings, Professor Royle has also published numerous works of short fiction and a novel, *Quilt* (2010).

**Naomi Segal** is Professorial Fellow at Birkbeck, University of London. She has published twelve books, most recently *Consensuality* (2009), *Indeterminate Bodies* (2003), *Le Désir à l'œuvre* (2000), and *André Gide: Pederasty & Pedagogy* (1998).

**Daniel Steuer** worked at various British and Irish universities between 1989 and 2013. His research interests include literature and philosophy, and social and political theory, and he has published on figures including Goethe, Büchner, Musil, Bernhard, Wittgenstein, Sebald, and Adorno. He is co-editor of *Wittgenstein Reading* (2013), a volume of essays investigating the influence of literary authors on Wittgenstein.

**Pamela Thurschwell** is a Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Sussex and the author of *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880–1920* (2001) and *Sigmund Freud* (2000; 2nd edition, 2009) and the co-editor, with Leah Price, of *Literary Secretaries/Secretarial Culture* (2005), and with Nicola Bown and Carolyn Burdett of *The Victorian Supernatural* (2004). She is currently working on a study on modern adolescence and anachronism.

**Andrew Webber** is Professor of Modern German and Comparative Culture in the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Churchill College. He has published widely on relationships between psychoanalysis, literature, and other cultural forms. His works include *The Doppelgänger: Double Visions in German Literature* (1996); a translation of the “Schreber case” for the new Penguin edition of the works of Freud; and *The European Avant-Garde 1900–1940* (2004). His most recent work has been concerned with urban space, and in particular Berlin. From 2004 to 2007 he held a Major Research Fellowship from the Leverhulme Trust to work on the city, and the resulting book, *Berlin in the Twentieth Century: A Cultural Topography*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2008.

**Robert J.C. Young** is a postcolonial theorist, cultural critic, and historian. He has taught at the universities of Southampton and Oxford and is currently the Silver Professor of English and Comparative Literature in the Department of English at New York University. His publications include *The Idea of English Ethnicity* (2008); *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (2003); *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (2001); *Torn Halves: Political Conflict in Literary and Cultural Theory* (1996); *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Culture, Theory and Race* (1995); and *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990). He is the general editor of *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*

**Nicolette Zeeman** teaches at King’s College, Cambridge, and in the English Faculty of the University of Cambridge. She is the author of *Piers Plowman and the Medieval Discourse of Desire* (2006), and has written on *Piers Plowman*, Chaucer, song, scholasticism, devotional literature, medieval literary theory, and ideas of image use and idolatry. An interest in psychoanalysis has shaped her work on *Piers Plowman*, Chaucer, and a forthcoming essay on the will in spiritual writing. She is currently finishing a study titled *Arts of Disruption: Conflict and Contradiction in Medieval Allegory*, and editing, with Jean Michel Massing, a volume on the chapel of King’s College.

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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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