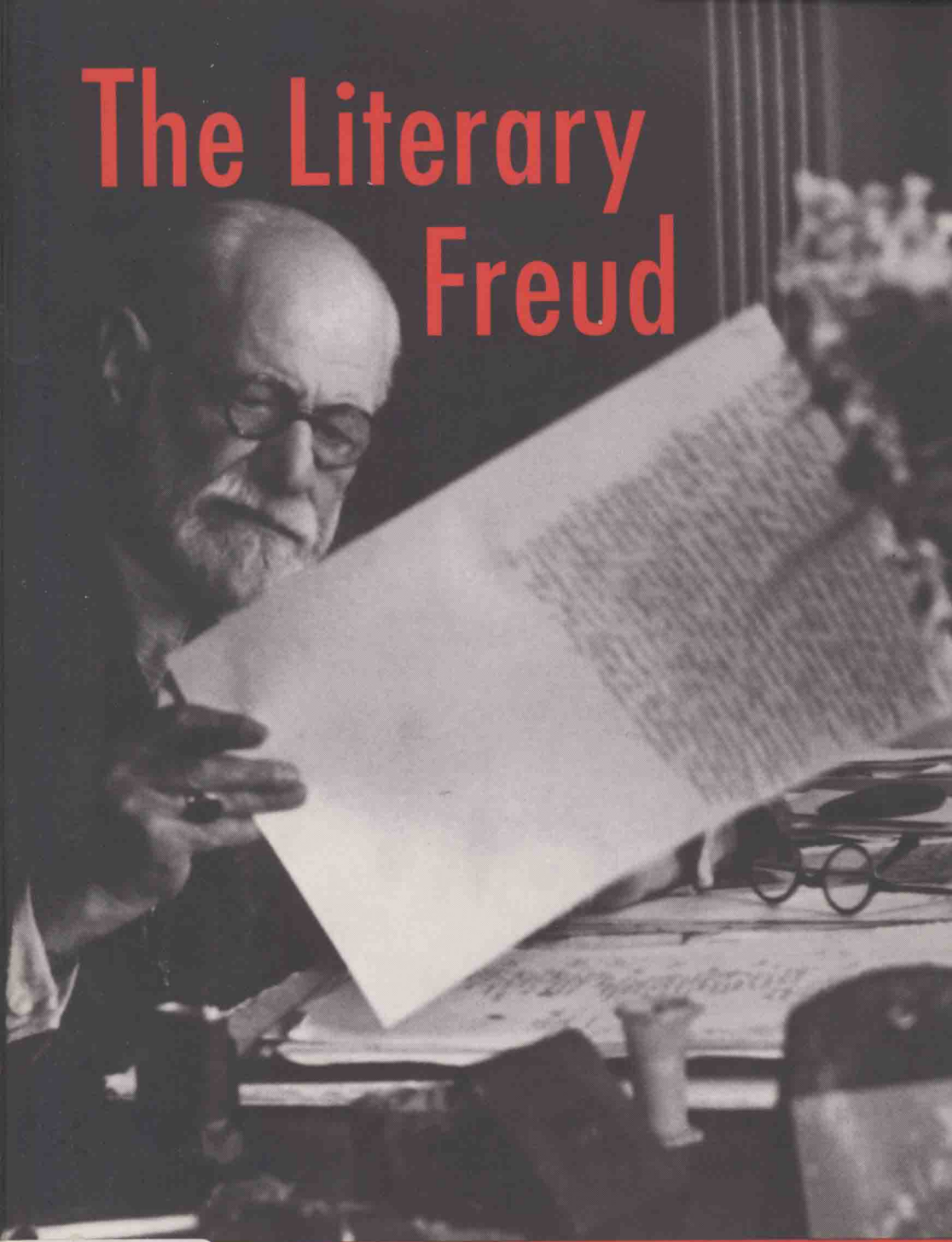
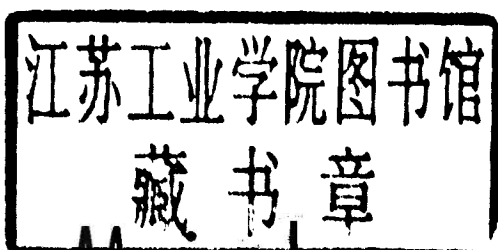


The Literary Freud

A black and white photograph of Sigmund Freud, an elderly man with a white beard and glasses, looking down at a large, open document he is holding. The document is filled with dense, handwritten text. On the desk in front of him, there are several other papers, a pair of round-rimmed glasses, and a small cup. The background is dark and out of focus.

Perry Meisel

The Literary Freud



Perry Meisel

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
New York London

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
270 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10016

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
2 Park Square
Milton Park, Abingdon
Oxon OX14 4RN

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Routledge is an imprint of Taylor & Francis Group, an Informa business

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

International Standard Book Number-10: 0-415-98145-X (Softcover) 0-415-98144-1 (Hardcover)
International Standard Book Number-13: 978-0-415-98145-3 (Softcover) 978-0-415-98144-6 (Hardcover)

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The canon of Freud's work is large and complex, and the tradition of humane letters is patently not to be encompassed in any formulation of its nature. I must therefore be hopelessly crude and summary in an attempt to suggest the connection between the two. Literature is not a unitary thing, and there is probably no such single entity as *the* literary mind. But I shall assume that literature is what it actually is not, a unity, and I shall deal with it in those of its aspects in which that assumption does not immediately appear to be absurd, in which it is not wholly impossible to say that literature "is" or "does" this or that.

—Lionel Trilling (1955)

Textual note

All references and citations to Freud are from *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1953–74). All references to Ernest Jones, unless otherwise indicated, are from *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, 3 vols. (New York: Basic Books, 1953–57). All other sources are provided in the list of works cited.

Preface

This book is a study of Freud's work, his reception, his sources, and his influence. It argues that Freud's texts are literary, and in a particular way. Freud's writing doubles the psychical mechanisms that it describes. One is always being asked to keep the psychoanalytic system coherent as one reads—this is Freud's tantamount demand upon his reader—just as the mind, as Freud describes it, tries to stay coherent despite the overdetermined systems that govern it. Chief among its mechanisms are the same self-dialogue and revision by means of which Freud's texts, and the arc of his career as a whole, are themselves constructed.

After an introductory reception history of Freud as literature, my reading of Freud's own career makes up the book's second chapter, a series of close readings of his major texts that takes psychical and literary representation as its principal focus. It is also Freud's own focus as he tries to represent the way the mind represents the world to itself. Like Freud's system, the psychical apparatus is designed to absorb stimulation by representing it. Representation is defensive. This is the surprising ground of continuity between early Freud and late, a continuity that I will trace in some detail from the *Project* and *The Interpretation of Dreams*, through the crucial metapsychology, and into the late phase, particularly in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *The Ego and the Id*. The work of representation is central to the work of the psyche itself, as it is to the work of literature.

Inevitably, Freud's relation to literary and cultural history is also reflexive, and is the next topic the book addresses. As for Freud's "sources," Freud wins his originality in a daunting field of overdetermined prior discourses—literature, science, philosophy—the structure of which also resembles that of both his writing and the psychological subject. I take up this story in a historical chapter on psychoanalysis and aestheticism. This includes a look at Freud and nineteenth-century science and philosophical psychology, a motif which I introduce in Chapter 2 with a section on Freud's confident redaction of Henri Bergson in the *Project*, and which continues in Chapter 3 with a look at Freud's less sanguine relation to Gustav Fechner in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Chapter 4 traces the histories of brain science and empiricist philosophy, particularly Hume, in the long eighteenth century, and the way in which they converge in the work of David Hartley in a startling anticipation of psychoanalysis and neuroscience alike.

As for Freud's influence on others, it, too, is structured like a literary history. Here follow chapters on Freud's influence on modernism: Strachey's *Standard Edition* (once again the subject of debate with the Penguin retranslations), and Freud's influence on Michel Foucault, a provocative but repressed relationship. Strachey and Foucault present very different but symptomatically very acute examples of Freudian influence. In the chapter on Strachey, I will begin by taking up psychoanalytic history as literary history, from Jung to Abraham and Klein, Lacan, and the French feminists. With Foucault, I will show how his criticism of Freud is in fact based on his own silent use of Freud's second model of mind to revise his first, a sleight-of-hand which allows Foucault to turn Freud—as Freud himself always does—against himself.

Last is the question—the return of the repressed, as it were—of Freud *and* literature. Does an understanding of how Freud himself writes and influences help us to read literature and influence anew? Here, a chapter on reading fiction shows how the strategies discovered in the chapter on Freud's own texts are also at work in novels. Like Freud, novels encourage their readers to disagree with them. They do so, as Freud does, in order to procure the very illusions that readers resist. Mansfield, James, and Hardy are the particular focus. A chapter on biography and literary history tests the usefulness of Freud's own dialectical way of handling influence in the case of other writers, including Conrad, Hardy, and Woolf.

A penultimate chapter meditates on the pornographic image. This is, I think, a vivid way of returning to the central literary question with which the book begins: What is representation in—and for—Freud himself? The status of the image in pornography returns us to this question with a quickened force. It will prompt another close reading of Freud's texts in order to assess both psychical and literary representation more fully than before, and also prompt an overt return to the dominant literary key of the book's earlier chapters in its final one. Here, in Chapter 10, in my discussion of Freud and Bakhtin, a satisfactory way of describing representation in Freud will, I think, emerge most clearly. Psychical identifications—a key issue throughout the book—become instances of what Bakhtin calls “stylization.” These “stylizations” or “identifications” derive not only from adult social experience but from the infant's earliest experience with the parents, particularly the mother. With Bakhtin's help, the lessons of “On Narcissism” will become manifestly narratological ones. They are also social ones. Experience and its representations, even imaginary ones, or “object-relations,” are one and the same thing. This is the particular terrain of fiction. The book's neurological assumptions will have already argued that life and literature—the nervous system and the novel, for example, in Chapter 7—are a continuous material field. Literature is indeed an imitation of life, but as an instance of it rather than as its copy or rendering. Psychoanalysis becomes a way of describing and assessing this

material field and the dialogism that constitutes it both socially and biologically. Bakhtin will also lead us, however inadvertently, to Shakespeare, Freud's principal literary precursor, and to the ways in which even Shakespeare is treated to a Freudian measure of defensive representation.

The environment of Freud studies encourages both neural and social perspectives in any contemporary reading of psychoanalysis, literary or not. Nor are these perspectives at odds. What is ironic, however, is that it is a literary or aesthetic category that makes them continuous—representation. Representation is their common modality—identification in the social sphere, the interpretation and processing of stimulation in the neural. The distinctions taken for granted by the Freud Warriors—medicine vs. hermeneutics, brain vs. mind—well reflect their lack of sympathy for Freudian thought, which apprehends both the neural and the psychological as systems of signs. Anyone who has read A.R. Luria's *The Working Brain* (1973) will see how compatible the assumptions of a neuropsychology are with Freud's own. Luria's view of the brain as a grid of memory traces protecting the organism against stimulation shows that the brain is a motivated language with clearly defensive aims. Propped on this realm of somatic need, to use Jacques Lacan's terms, is the realm of desire—the unconscious proper, and its more familiar systems of psychological representation. They replicate at higher levels of functioning the more elementary defense mechanisms at work in the tissues. Anyone who has read Lacan will see that these psychological representations are intersubjective. Like the circuits of the brain, they make the mind dependent on its systematic connection to signification presumably “outside” itself, particularly the world of others. Whether this is because of language, or because of histology, the mind's privacy is no longer a foregone conclusion—as though it ever were in psychoanalysis.

This is also, I should stress, a study of Freud in English. It is English Freud, as I shall describe it in my chapter on Strachey, that has brought Freud his influence. It is also English Freud—the *Standard Edition*—that has raised questions about “faithfulness” in Freud's translation. To ask such questions is to make assumptions about representation that Freud—and Strachey—do not make. Patrick J. Mahony's view of translation—*Übersetzung*—is that it is something that the psyche also does (1987, vii). This is a fine way of making a quick point about the doubling effects in Freud, but an insufficient view of both translation and of Freud himself. Translation in this sense rests on a mimetic assumption—that there is something latent to be made manifest, that there is indeed something to be translated, whether on the page or in—“in”—the psyche. My argument throughout is that Freud's is not a mimetic project. His career as a whole is a careful campaign to undo precisely this ancient and problematic view of how both texts and the psyche actually work.

Such a view of Freud, however, is only a byproduct of my principal concern throughout these pages, which is simply to read Freud carefully, and to follow his reception closely. The new Freudian environment does, however, raise the stakes for the persuasiveness of a literary reading of Freud. What can it add to our reading of Freud as a whole? To situate and reevaluate representation in Freud's texts, as I propose to do, is critical to Freud's own durability, not just for literature, but also for the social and neural sciences. Other, more familiar issues are also near. What can a close reading of Freud do for a reexamination of a number of classic topoi in psychoanalytic criticism, including reader-response and the relation of biography to literary history? What can it do for an examination of less familiar topoi such as pornography that question, as psychoanalysis does, the very stability of the categories that organize them? Psychoanalysis has always surprised us. Perhaps it can do so again.

Acknowledgments

A shorter version of Chapter 2, "'Sensations' and 'Ideas,'" first appeared in *October* as "Freud's Reflexive Realism" (28, Spring 1984). A shorter version of Chapter 3, "Psychoanalysis and Aestheticism," first appeared in *American Imago* (58:4, Winter 2001). A shorter version of Chapter 4, "A Supplement to the History of Psychoanalysis and Modernism," first appeared as "Psychology" in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, eds. David Bradshaw and Kevin J.H. Dettmar (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

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Reception history

The critical tradition

The writings of Sigmund Freud have become so decisive a factor in our culture, particularly in America, that it is more difficult than ever to attribute to them the stance of a dispassionate science that simply narrates those unconscious processes of mind discovered by its founder. It is probably more accurate to say that Freud's work has itself become an example of those unconscious determinations that influence us when we least suspect it. Surely the contemporary status of psychoanalytic thinking as ideological reflex or instinct of reason should alert us to the fact that psychoanalysis no longer speaks to us so much as for us, no longer answers or confirms our condition so much as it produces it from the start. Psychoanalysis looks so like the foregone truth about life that it is easy to forget that what truth it has belongs, in the final instance, to the written achievement of Sigmund Freud himself.

Eloquent testimony to Freud's success as a lawgiver in his own right, the unconscious sway of psychoanalysis as an arbiter of modern thought and a staple of therapeutic practice represents the consummate kind of success any mythological system or set of imaginative texts can have. If it is the highest art to conceal art, to make fiction masquerade as a simulacrum of revealed or natural truth, then Freud succeeded more completely than most, more completely, probably, than any writers save Shakespeare—his principal single influence—and those earlier lawgivers who wrote the Old Testament, and who are, as the late *Moses and Monotheism* attests, the only conceivable rivals so far as Freud himself is concerned.

The burden of the present volume, then, is not to present Freud as a doctrinal figure from the point of view of either science or philosophy, nor is it to present him as a system-maker whose theories can be useful to an applied literary criticism. Rather, it is to situate Freud's achievement as a properly literary one in its

own right, and one that casts Freud as both a theoretician of literature and a practitioner of it in exact and specific ways. Lionel Trilling in particular (1940) emphasizes that Freud's principal literary speculations are not to be found in the familiar psychosexual reductions that tend to characterize his own overt attempts at the psychoanalysis of art. They lie instead in his notion that the very mechanism of the mental agencies he describes are themselves the mechanisms of language. The emphasis on language should remind us of the technical as well as the thematic continuity of psychoanalysis and literature: They share the same medium. They also share the same history of determination in Romanticism, and in the Enlightenment philosophy that prepared the way for Romanticism in the long eighteenth century.

Freud's affinities with Romanticism in its naturalistic mode are what first swept him to popularity. D.H. Lawrence is Freud's most persuasive spokesman in this vein. Lawrence's enthusiasm both spearheads and formalizes Freud's dissemination through the Jazz Age demimondes of London, Paris, and New York. Bohemia gives psychoanalysis its naughty and glamorous legitimacy on a wide scale in both Europe and the United States. The nature of the continuity between psychoanalysis and Romantic thinking soon shifts, however—Freud himself has changed his theories—to a new focus on Freud's linguistic rather than vitalistic side, a change that begins with Thomas Mann's more dialectical estimate of Freud in the decade before World War II. The psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan in France has played a large part in the accommodation of Freud to this point of view in the last twenty-five years, accenting as it does the discursive complexion of both the analytic session and the Freudian unconscious. But literary history is surprisingly clear about one fact: The linguistic insights attributed to Freud by the French are well anticipated—and far more plainly articulated—in the analysis of Freud by principal American critics such as Kenneth Burke and Lionel Trilling working only a few years after Mann in the decade before World War II. Despite Lacan's *contretemps* with American psychoanalysis in the 1950s and 1960s, this long American reception is conceptually continuous with the more familiar French one, and predates it.

What follows in this chapter is a narrative history that charts the unfolding of literature's incremental understanding of Freud's work as literary, too, as it moves, step by step, from Lawrence's and Mann's very different early attempts to understand Freud's affinities with Romanticism to Burke's and Trilling's more elaborate ones. The change that Mann represents in Freud's literary reception is the kind of change that will define the history of modern criticism as a whole. Jacques Derrida and Harold Bloom only complete what Mann begins, aided by Burke and Trilling: a wholesale denaturalization of psychoanalysis, and a revision of Lawrence's vitalism, and our own. This denaturing proceeds by means of a closer attentiveness to the material in which Freud works as writer and analyst

alike, language itself. If there is a central preoccupation that organizes this critical history and gives it a particular shape, it is to be found in literature's increasing understanding of why Freud's characteristic trope or figure, the unconscious, is itself a literary rather than a thaumaturgic, scientific, or even a philosophical achievement. The movement that begins with Lawrence's notion of the Freudian unconscious as a reservoir of instinctual energy is corrected and reversed by Mann, Burke, and Trilling—they will have some help from W.H. Auden—as they prepare us for the rereading of the Freudian unconscious in Derrida and Bloom that transforms Freud's theory of the psyche into a theory of language, literary language in particular, and that transforms Freud's own rhetoric into a demonstrably poetic one.

The artistic tradition

Behind this very systematic reception is the wider history of Freud's reception by writers and artists. It is one caught in well-known testaments—H.D.'s *Tribute to Freud* (1956) or Lou Andreas-Salomé's *Freud Journal* (1958) are good examples—and in remarks made by the way. "I consider you the culmination of Austrian literature," wrote Arnold Zweig to Freud in 1934 (E. Freud 1970, 16). As early as 1896, the reviewer of *Studies on Hysteria* for the Vienna *Neue Freie Presse*, the poet Alfred von Berger, had prophetically concluded that Freud's work is "nothing but the kind of psychology used by poets" (quoted in Jones 1:253; see also Sulloway 1979, 522). Even Arnold Schnitzler had reviewed one of Freud's early papers, in 1895 (Ellenberger 1970, 471). Freud himself had strategically apologized for the extent to which the case histories in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) sounded like tales of the imagination—"it strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science"—even though it is finally to literature that Freud appeals without embarrassment as the passage concludes: "Local diagnosis and electrical reaction lead nowhere in the study of hysteria, whereas a detailed description of mental processes such as we are accustomed to find in the works of imaginative writers enables me, with the use of a few psychological formulas, to obtain at least some kind of insight into the course of that affection" (2:160–61).

"It was, of course, Freud's remarkable literary ability," wrote Alfred Kazin in 1961, "that gave currency to his once difficult and 'bestial' ideas; it was the insight he showed into the concrete human problems, the discoveries whose force is revealed to us in a language as supple, dramatic, and charged with the excitement of Freud's mission as a 'conquistador' into realms hitherto closed to scientific inquiry, that excited and persuaded so many readers of his books" (382–83). In

the hands of Freud's immediate disciples, however, or as practiced by subsequent generations of intellectuals, or by the culture at large, the Freudian method of explanation becomes, as Kazin puts it, sheer punditry. Freud's own writing, by contrast, enlists the devil's party as well as the dogmatist's, and so dramatizes not just a doctrinal clash between consciousness and the unconscious that Freudian pundits simply ventriloquize, but also the struggle within Freud himself between an empirical and an imaginative rationale for the psychoanalytic project as a whole. Certain tendencies in literature such as the spontaneous aesthetic of the Beats may even be explained, according to Kazin, as literal or reductive responses to Freud that share with the pundits a failure to distinguish literature from dogma, whether in Freud himself or in their own work.

No wonder literary and artistic enthusiasm for Freud changes when Freud begins to change in the decade following 1910. He is no longer a simple champion of instinct and sexuality; the psychoanalytic movement as a whole has become a rather more complex affair. Freud is revising his own assumptions; Jung, chief among the disciples, will soon defect. Like his critical reception, Freud's reception among creative writers accordingly shifts, leaving some, like Lawrence, moored to Freud's early work, and requiring others, like T.S. Eliot and even Joyce and Virginia Woolf, to grow more defensive. Such responses remind us that Freud early on inspired the greatest tribute of all, the tribute of anxiety on the part of his literary generation's first rank. Woolf had already identified Freudian punditry in 1920 among practitioners of what she called "Freudian fiction," writers who treat psychoanalysis as though it were, in Woolf's words, "a patent key that opens every door" (1965, 154); those who mistake, to borrow Trilling's terms, the instrument of Freud's thought—his language—for its transparent vehicle. Clive Bell (1914) and Roger Fry (1924) lambasted Freud when the opportunities arose, despite the fact that Leonard Woolf had decided to become Freud's English publisher in 1922, and Lytton Strachey's younger brother, James, his chief translator.

In Paris, backlash also accompanied the enthusiasm. Freud was an excuse for Surrealism. He was also a source of creative stress. "As for psychoanalysis," quipped Joyce to Djuna Barnes in 1922, breaking his customary silence on the subject of Freud, "it's neither more nor less than blackmail" (quoted in Read 1967, 214). By 1931, Gide was declaring Freud simply superfluous, and for undeniably self-protective reasons: "How embarrassing Freud is. And how readily we should have discovered his America without him" (1931, 304). Freud himself claims not to have read Nietzsche or Schopenhauer until late in life in order to keep from being influenced by their anticipations of psychoanalysis. Surely it is the same kind of anxiety that disturbs Woolf, Joyce, and Gide in their relation to Freud himself. "Had I not known Dostoevsky or Nietzsche or Freud," says a disingenuous Gide, "I should have thought just as I did" (1931, 306). The

defensiveness was contagious. “It is shrewd and yet stupid,” wrote an overtly scornful Eliot of Freud’s *Future of an Illusion* in 1928, complaining in particular of Freud’s “inability to reason” (1928, 350). In kindred outrage, Aldous Huxley found the “dangerous and disgusting mythology” of “psychoanalytic theory” so full of “inexact” and “unsupported” claims that reading about the unconscious is, as he put it, “like reading a fairy story” (1925, 313–20). Huxley echoed the sexologist Krafft-Ebing, one of Freud’s teachers, who had greeted an early paper by his former student in 1896 with the celebrated remark, “It sounds like a scientific fairy tale” (quoted in Jones 1:263).

The cooler heads, however, balance the picture. Leonard Woolf had found psychoanalysis full chiefly of literary value, this despite his wife’s epistemological reservations. It was Freud’s writing that made the difference. Reviewing Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* in 1914 for *The New English Weekly* (Freud’s 1901 two-part monograph had only just been translated by A.A. Brill, his first English translator), Woolf thought even this largely expository work “eminently readable,” and for a particular reason. Although Freud is “a most difficult and elusive writer and thinker,” says Woolf, what saves the day—indeed, what makes it—is that “whether one believes in his theories or not, one is forced to admit that he writes with great subtlety of mind,” and, what is more, with “a broad and sweeping imagination more characteristic of the poet than the scientist or the medical practitioner.”

For John Crowe Ransom in America ten years later, in 1924, Freud’s work crosses over into poetry because of its understanding of the symbolic practices that unify life and fill it with meaning. Ransom’s is a wide view of psychoanalysis. It predicts the course of the reading of Freud to come, particularly the more complex reception afforded Freud by Mann. Ransom’s response to Freud is neither rote enthusiasm nor mythic reduction. Knowledge of the “biological” is really, says Ransom, a knowledge of the “ghosts that haunt within us” (1924, 161). These “ghosts” are for Freud myth, custom, and religion. Such symbolic practices represent the “biological” because they protect us against it. We deduce the passions from them. The bonds of particular communities are what count. They make our psychical worlds. Ransom’s stance is agrarian, but it is different from the kind of agrarian conservatism with which it is customarily allied, particularly T.S. Eliot’s. Ransom’s pastoral is less Edenic than Virgilian. Labor is involved. The customs and beliefs that make up a community and its unconscious express themselves for Ransom not in universal myths but in specific mythologies of a national or regional kind. Like Cather’s, this is a secular rather than a theological agrarianism, local and historical in its purposes rather than global and transcendental. It shares with psychoanalysis an emphasis on the poetry of the mind as it goes about its daily tasks.