The Freudian Body

Psychoanalysis and Art

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THE FREUDIAN BODY

In memory of
Michel Foucault

Contents

Introduction

How has Freud profited—or suffered—from all the attention lavished on him, in America and in Europe, during the past fifteen or twenty years? The Freudian text has become both a privileged object of what is rather loosely known in literary studies as deconstructive criticism, and, at least in France, even a renewed source of conceptual inspiration for the psychoanalytic community.[1] In one sense, it has obviously been to Freud's advantage to have all these textual detectives closing in on his work, even when they relentlessly dismantle his explicit intentions and major arguments. Against the tendency—inspired by the countercultural politics of the sixties—to bury Freudianism as a reactionary ideology hostile to all but the most respectable versions of human pleasure and the most effectively disciplined forms of human community, the prestige of psychoanalysis has been enhanced by the discovery of a remarkably dense—even remarkably "troubled"—textuality in its founder. As an antidote to the denunciation of psychoanalysis as the most sophisticated modern technique for the definition and control of desire, a horde of philosophers, psychoanalysts, and literary critics have convincingly made it seem very naive to take what might be called the

official Freud literally, to assume he is saying what, for the most part, he obviously thought he was saying.

My own sympathy with a problematic view of the nature and "place" of meaning in human discourse will soon enough be clear. But what has perhaps been most interesting about the frequently brilliant analytic surgery recently practiced on the Freudian text is a certain ambiguity about its status as a cultural strategy. What are the cultural assumptions and implications of the view of textuality to which I have just referred? Is Freud's authority reinforced by his textual density? For those followers of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan who lean on the Freudian Master-Text in order to legitimize their own algebraic fantasies and diagrammatic knots, the answer is obviously yes, while other, perhaps more philosophically inspired readings of his work have brought to light tensions and omissions perilously close to comic muddlement.

Or, to adopt another perspective, has an exceptional sensitivity to what have been called moments of textual embarrassment in Freud (moments when he appears to be resisting the pressures of an argument he does not make, *will not* make) made us more aware of politically radical currents in his thought? Have the demonstrations of his disturbed textuality helped us to see him as a more "liberating" thinker about human desire than might have been suspected from a more literal reading of his views on the normative development of desire? Or, on the contrary, have the very complexity and even obscurity of some recent "returns to Freud" (as Lacan characterized his own work) served to make those views more intellectually respectable, and therefore left intact, for example, the phallocentrism of the sexual norm in Freud, the very category of "neurosis," and, as a result, the confident practice of psychotherapy in the service of a presumably nonneurotic norm of psychosexual development? How have all the new readings of Freud affected our sense of psychoanalysis as a practice, as an institution *beyond the text*?

I will not be answering these questions, and in a sense they belong to the introduction to another book. I ask them here, nonetheless, in order to anticipate questions and objections which

may legitimately be raised concerning my own operations on the Freudian text. I want to celebrate a certain type of failure in Freud's thought. The word "celebrate" is crucial: I will be arguing that the psychoanalytical authenticity of Freud's work *depends on* a process of theoretical collapse. For the most part, we will be documenting the subversion of what Freud explicitly presents as his principal argument in several texts: the opposition between the individual and civilization in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the teleological perspective on stages of infantile sexuality in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, the defense of a biologically grounded dualism (of life and death drives) in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and the topological presentation of the psyche in *The Ego and the Id*. Each of those arguments has the effect of a certain normalizing of psychoanalytic thought itself and, as the principal component of that normalization, the erasure or at least the domestication of a psychoanalytic perspective on sexuality. The collapse of the argument is, as we shall see, a function of its own development. It is also, in each case, a reinstatement of the psychoanalytic definition of the sexual—that is, a reaffirmation of what I take to be the greatest originality of Freud's thought. Finally, the normalizing intention within the Freudian text corresponds to an extratextual ambition crucial both to Freud's own career and to the entire history of psychoanalysis: the ambition of elaborating a clinically viable theory. The particular type of textual density which will interest us can therefore be defined as a tension between certain radical speculative movements and the wish to practice and even to institutionalize the speculative process itself.

In the history of philosophy, and especially in the history of political philosophy, that ambition is a familiar one. In the modern period, for example, the evolution of Marxism could be described in terms of a tumultuous, frequently antagonistic relation between theory and political practice—or, more fundamentally, between consciousness and praxis. And yet, if psychoanalysis has been still another version of that antagonism, Freud should also have taught us to redefine its terms. The tensions in his work which I will be examining should help us to see the relation just referred to as expressing something stranger, something far less familiar, than the

always necessary adjustments of theory to empirical constraints. I refer to pressures inherent in consciousness itself, pressures which are in fact the object of psychoanalytic reflection. Psychoanalysis is an unprecedented attempt to give a theoretical account of precisely those forces which obstruct, undermine, play havoc with theoretical accounts themselves. From this perspective, oppositions between theory and practice, and between the thinker and history, are false—or, at the very least, secondary—oppositions. Or, in psychoanalytic terms, they are symptomatic oppositions which both reveal and disguise an antagonism internal to thought itself. In other words, they betray strategic moves *within* consciousness by which a threatened rationality formulates the process of its own inevitable collapse as a perhaps historically tragic but ontologically reassuring conflict between imagination and reality, or between the subject and the object, or, in the broadest possible terms, between the individual and civilization.

In Freud's own work, we shall see both the strategic advantages and the dangers of that symptomatic opposition in our reading of *Civilization and Its Discontents*. For the moment, I wish to emphasize the ambiguity of the clinical imperative in Freud's thought. Officially, the practice of psychoanalysis is the only valid means of testing the theory; but the move from theory to practice can also be thought of as a flight from a specifically psychoanalytic type of thought. The presumed verification of psychoanalytic speculation by its empirical application functions as a kind of corrective to the dysfunctioning of the speculative consciousness itself, as a defense against those forces which render the Freudian text almost theoretically inoperative (and yet, by virtue of this very collapse, psychoanalytically effective). We shall see this with particular clarity when we discuss the stages of infantile sexuality in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. The first theoretical elaboration of these stages seems to have been only marginally connected to the clinical observation of children. In the *Three Essays*, they serve as a kind of resistance to, or denial of, the work's *failure* to define sexuality; they provide human sexuality with a coherent historical narrative which helps to obscure the nearly unintelligible, ahistorical and perhaps

clinically nonviable nature of sexual pleasure which Freud simultaneously argues for and "forgets" within the very text of the *Three Essays*.

What kind of a discipline is psychoanalysis? Is it a discipline? To what extent does the Freudian text ruin the very notion of disciplines of knowledge at the very moment that it anxiously seeks to become one itself? Finally, is a psychoanalytic reflection on desire—a reflection at once paralyzed, madly excessive, and irreducibly paradoxical—compatible with the practice of discipline, with a reeducation of human desire?

These, it seems to me, are the larger questions—questions which constitute what I referred to earlier as the cultural strategy—of my own readings of Freud. Our doubts about the epistemological status of psychoanalysis will be all the more pronounced as we realize the necessity of reading the Freudian text as if it were a work of art. I will have much to say about this; I should, however, emphasize at the very start that neither my critical procedures with Freud nor my references to literature and the visual arts are meant to shift the Freudian text from one cultural area to another. Rather, they are intended to evoke a type of reflexiveness—a type of blocked thought, of speculative repetition—to which the notions of areas and of boundaries are profoundly alien. The artefacts of art are material metaphors for moves of consciousness which do not intrinsically "belong" to any particular cultural domain but rather transversely cross, as it were, the entire range of cultural expression. I will be speaking of the estheticizing of the Freudian text. I will mean by this not that it thereby enters a different cultural category but rather that it moves away from, or "back from" the very capacity to institute the categorical as a relevant mode of differentiating and structuring our experience of reality. Psychoanalysis is an attempt to account theoretically for that move, a move which the vicissitudes of Freudian theory itself cannot help but reenact. Freud's text is "estheticized" to the extent that, like the other works of art we will be considering, it problematizes its own formalizing and structuralizing aspirations. Or, in other terms, it defeats the strategies which, as we shall see, it never tires of inventing in order to persuade

itself—and us—that the activity of speculating on unconscious desire and on the mechanisms of sexuality need not disturb such aspirations.

If, finally, the most radical originality of psychoanalysis (and this, I will suggest, is equally true of art) has to do with a *disabled* consciousness, the *uses* to which psychoanalysis (again, like art) can legitimately be put are of course severely called into question. I have said that the difficulties of Freud's work are not primarily those of a painfully scrupulous adjustment of speculative thought to the lessons of therapeutic practice, but are rather the consequences of the *work of thought* itself. If this is so, the adjustments to practice inevitably involve a certain repudiation of what might be called the operations of a psychoanalytic textuality in consciousness itself. And yet, if Freudian thought is, and must be, a reflection on (and of) an ontologically grounded equivalence between our most intense pleasures and a potentially catastrophic failure to adapt, then the therapeutic intention in psychoanalysis can hardly be written off as a merely evasive tactic. Or, more exactly, the evasiveness itself constitutes an important moment in the history of human efforts to resist, or at least to control, the devastating pleasures of an eroticized (and, as we shall see, inherently dysfunctional) consciousness. It would therefore be a question not so much of repudiating the very idea of therapy in psychoanalysis, but rather a form of therapy which has itself repudiated the basis of the maladjustments which it claims to treat. Those of us who cling to the idea of the practice of psychoanalysis can therefore be consoled by the thought that we would not have the opportunity to reinvent psychoanalytic treatment (a reinvention which I happily leave to the practitioners) if we had not first of all demonstrated its impossibility.

CHAPTER ONE

Theory and Violence

Moran—the "hero" in the second part of Beckett's *Molloy*—tells us that during his long crawl home after his fruitless search for Molloy, he was bizarrely preoccupied with such theological questions as: "Did Mary conceive through the ear, as Augustine and Adobard assert"? "Is one to approve of the Italian cobbler Lovat who, having cut off his testicles, crucified himself"?, and "What was God doing with himself before the creation"? (In the French version: "Que foutait Dieu avant la creation"?)[1] Thus, toward the end of Beckett's novel we are threatened with the alarming prospect of the work of art making room for speculative thought, of its perhaps even making certain theoretical statements. If I call that prospect "alarming," and if I refer to it as a "threat," it is because, well before Moran lists his topics of obsessive speculation, Beckett has already trained us to view intellection as an inevitability at once sickening and inconceivable. In ambiguous homage to the ceaselessly repeated massacre of thought in Beckett's work, I will use him as a kind of terminal prologue to that collapse of theory which I wish to consider as a constitutive fact of both Freudian theory and esthetic practice.

Who thinks? What thinks? The question of who, or perhaps what, could possibly be making a theoretical formulation always

has, in Beckett, ontological priority over the substance of any such formulation. The subject of theory is dissolved in a crankily ironic theory of the human subject. Where *is* the aphasiac Molloy in the articulate, acidly witty, even erudite account which he gives us of his reptilian wanderings? Furthermore, both Molloy and Moran write, which in Beckett means that they hear voices—voices which we might at first be tempted to identify with that, or those, of the novelist but which, as *part of* that which is perhaps being dictated, can really be nothing more than one of the episodes of the act of writing rather than its commanding origin. A character hears a story about his hearing stories. It is as if the analogy between the author and those off-stage tyrannical voices were suggested in order to be invalidated; authorial authority is dissipated by the very move which reminds us of it. Beckett's narrative *cannot be attributed*; it takes place between the names of characters and the name of an author. No one is speaking in this oddly garrulous work, neither the author nor the characters nor an identifiable narrator.

The Beckettian fiction is, however, by no means the product of a disembodied consciousness. If it moves in the interstices between identities at once wholly problematic and merely conventional, Beckett always locates those movements within a body. The play of mind in Beckett is at once impersonal and highly particularized; thought is psychoanalytically inexpressive, but it suffers the constraints of being imprisoned within a body. On the one hand, Beckettian thought seeks to reduce its dependence on the body by reducing the latter's movements. Beckett's art of impoverishment is in part an attempt to save consciousness from the contingencies and the temptations of novelistic invention inherent in mobility. The best position for pure thought is the reptilian one, with its severe restrictions of point of view; reptation is the mode of mobility most congenial to pure intellectuality. On the other hand, thought in Beckett is irresistibly drawn to that part of the body which seems most accurately to reflect its own dilemma. I refer of course to the anus which, like the mind, expels from the body substances which the body both produces and treats like waste. Thought, far from providing a guarantee of being in this radically non-Cartesian world, is the

excrement of being. Anonymous and limitless, it passes through a mind which, however, can resist the fluency of the thought which it receives, block its passage, by an almost pedagogical demonstration of mind's affinity with the body. All the attacks of constipated thought in Beckett are the result of the mental machine's failure to process the stream of verbal thought mysteriously poured into it. A myth of authentic existence as prelinguistic both entraps Beckett in a more and more exasperated recognition that only language can vouch for that authenticity (even while it logically cannot do so), *and* allows him to demystify the claim to truth of any logical discourse. The forms of rationality are constantly being "dis-formulated" by the corruptive power of what might be called a carnal irony.

A similar irony could of course be said to characterize the Freudian model of the relation between thought and the body, although in Freud a theory of desire allows for a more or less viable mentalizing of the body's sensations. The decrepit, nondesiring creatures (or "unnamables") of Beckett's fictions produce neither symptoms nor sublimations; their bodies enter their discursive blather only as a kind of interrogative stupor, never as the syntactic or rhetorical violence by which desiring fantasy shatters discursive structures and discursive logic. And yet certain recent readings of Freud—readings which we might be inclined to define, rather vaguely, as a "literary" approach to Freud—have produced a Beckettian consciousness of psychoanalytic thought. By that I mean the consciousness of a fundamental failure in the operations of that thought—a failure we should understand not as a consequence of empirically untested speculation in Freud's work which a more rigorous scientific methodology will correct or reject, but rather as the constitutive sign of psychoanalytic thinking itself.

The readings I have in mind have evoked considerable suspicion in the psychoanalytic and literary establishments. This has been particularly true in the United States, where the problematizing of the Freudian text was not initiated—as it was in France—by the readings of a few psychoanalysts themselves, and where the appropriation, or the invasion, of Freudian theory by literary critics seems all the more reprehensible to the professional Freudians *and* to lit-

erary professionals by virtue of its connivance with the perennially suspect extravagances of Gallic theorizing. The Freud most stimulating to many of us today is, to the guardians of the empirical in the American Psychoanalytic Association, the most scientifically unreliable and intellectually irresponsible one. And to their counterparts in the Modern Language Association, the reading strategies deployed in all those crazy analyses of the cases of Dora and of Dr. Schreber, and of "The Uncanny" look of course very much like those strategies which, in recent years, have put into question not only the objectivity of the literary text but also, in even more extreme fashion, its very aptitude for making statements and its accessibility to interpretations.

I should say nevertheless that I perversely find a certain obtuse resistance to the kind of work I will be speaking of both useful and plausible. Useful to the extent that it drives us to recognize, in a possibly salutary way, the insignificance of our own enterprise, and to avoid those discursive ambitions which, as we shall see in a moment, Freud himself both indulges and sacrifices in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Plausible in that we cannot, after all, help but recognize that the texts of Freud which have seemed most worthy of recent critical attention have indeed tended to be his most theoretically unstable texts. I will not, for example, seek to "rehabilitate" *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, but will rather retrace the steps by which that text loses its strength. It is as if the reading habits developed in the work some of us have done with poems, novels, and plays made us incapable of responding to theory except when theory is fractured, incomplete, self-contradictory. Our interest in Freud even suggests that we are drawn to theoretical texts to the extent that *their theoretical positions fail to be formulated*.

What does this mean? I wish to suggest that the moments of theoretical collapse in Freud are inseparable from what I will risk calling psychoanalytic truth. For the truth of a theory of desire cannot be dissociated from some recklessly self-defeating moves in the performance of the theory. Thus the question of Freud's "scientific value" will be eluded as a matter of epistemological necessity. The concern for the scientific validity of Freudian theory is

perhaps not—contrary to claims originating with Freud himself—inherent in the theoretical activity itself; rather, that concern is an aspect of the political history of the psychoanalytic movement. It is, in other terms, a function of considerable investments of power in answers to questions about who is and is not qualified "to speak (for) psychoanalysis," investments most visible in medicine and in law, and traceable, ultimately, to the dual status of psychoanalysis as a theory and a therapy. Perhaps only in the light of such investments can we understand the favoring, in the history of psychoanalysis, of a stable theory amenable to what I will call the domesticating clarities of narrative orders over those theoretical instabilities which constitute psychoanalysis's only possible mode of adherence to its subject. I will speak frequently of the triumph of those narrative orders in Freud's work. For the moment I wish to suggest that the approach to theory of which I will be offering several models should put into question not only the ideology of psychoanalytic expertise, but also the very possibility of "applied" theory—whether it be in areas of cultural study (psychohistory, Freudian criticism, legal psychiatry), or in psychoanalytic treatment itself. Can psychoanalysis be practiced? Is therapy compatible with a continously failing theoretical model, a failing which, as we shall see, is crucial to Freud's definition of sexuality itself?

But why do I describe an attention to certain types of textual collapse as a literary reading? The relevance of psychoanalysis to literature has nothing to do with the discovery of the literary work's secret content, and if I will be speaking of literature psychoanalytically, I will certainly not be doing psychoanalytic criticism *of* literature.[2] That relevance is rather to be sought in a certain relation between meaning and movement in discourse, a relation which characterizes literary language and which is a (frequently repudiated) subject of psychoanalytic speculation. Writing may begin to operate as the activity we call literature when, by a particular kind of replicative insistence which I shall try to define, it erodes its own statements and thereby blocks interpretation. I will, however, speak of this estheticizing movement not only as a "coming-into-form" but also as a subversion of forms, indeed even as a kind of political