



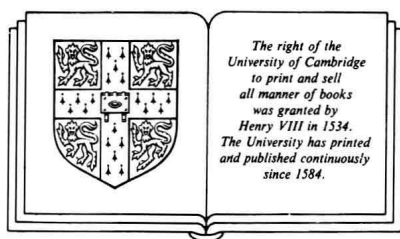
# Freud, Proust and Lacan: theory as fiction

Malcolm  
Bowie

# FREUD, PROUST AND LACAN

*Theory as fiction*

MALCOLM BOWIE



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## Notes on texts and translations

### FREUD

My quotations are taken from *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey, 24 vols, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74), although in the case of certain problematic terms and expressions Freud's original German is also given (from *Gesammelte Werke*, edited by Anna Freud and others, 18 vols, London, Imago Publishing, 1940-52 (Vols 1-17) and Frankfurt am Main, Fischer Verlag, 1968 (Vol. 18)). Volume and page references to the Standard Edition are given in my main text. References in the main text and notes to the *Gesammelte Werke* are preceded by the initials *GW*.

The quality of the translations in the Standard Edition is nowadays a topic for vigorous discussion among Freud scholars, and an entirely new translation is regularly called for. Readers of Freud in English wishing to acquaint themselves with the main deficiencies alleged against the Standard Edition are referred to Peter Gay's *Freud, Jews and Other Germans*, Bruno Bettelheim's *Freud and Man's Soul* and Samuel Weber's *The Legend of Freud*. For Gay, the English translators have made Freud 'both more prolix and more genteel than he really was' (41 n.); for Bettelheim, they have given Freud's writing a false veneer of positivistic science, and an unfortunate remoteness from ordinary usage, by their choice of such words as *id*, *ego*, *superego*, *cathexis* and *parapraxis* to translate readily comprehensible German terms and by their removal of the word 'soul' (*Seele*) and its cognates from Freud's accounts of the inward life of human beings; for Weber, they have gone to work with the familiar normalising assumption that Freud's 'original' text knew what it was talking about, whereas the German texts of Freud are 'a privileged theater in which the questions and struggles of psychoanalytical thinking play themselves out' (xvii). Invaluable guidance for those wishing to pursue Freud's technical terms in their passage from German to English, French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese is to be found in Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*.

## Freud, Proust and Lacan

The following works are referred to in text and notes in the abbreviated form given in brackets: *Letters of Sigmund Freud, 1873-1939*, ed. Ernst L. Freud (*Letters*); *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887-1904*, trans. and ed. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Freud/Fliess); *The Origins of Psycho-Analysis. Letters to Wilhelm Fliess*, ed. Marie Bonaparte, Anna Freud, Ernst Kris (*Origins*); Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud. Life and Work* (J + volume number).

### PROUST

I have used the Pléiade edition of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (3 vols edited by Pierre Clarac and André Ferré, Gallimard, 1954) and refer to it by volume number and page in my main text, except where repeated reference to the third volume is made – in which cases the volume number is omitted. An English translation of each quoted passage will be found in the Notes. These translations have been taken from the C.K. Scott Moncrieff version, *Remembrance of Things Past*, as revised by Terence Kilmartin (3 vols, Chatto and Windus, 1981). Page references are provided after each English extract; volume numbers are as for the Pléiade edition.

### LACAN

Page numbers appearing without other indication in my main text refer to *Écrits* (Seuil, 1966). Quotations from the five volumes of Lacan's *Séminaire* that have appeared so far are identified by volume number and page, and those from his other works by short title and page. An English translation of each quoted passage will be found in the Notes. These translations have been taken from Alan Sheridan's *Écrits. A Selection* (Tavistock Publications, 1977) and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977), and from Jeffrey Mehlman's 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"', in *French Freud: Structural Studies in Psychoanalysis* (Yale French Studies, No. 48, ed. Mehlman, 1972). Where no other indication is given, page references for Lacan in English are to *Écrits. A Selection*. Translations not followed by a page reference are my own.

Other works by Proust, Freud and Lacan, and works by other authors, are referred to by short title in my main text and notes. Fuller details are to be found in my List of Works Cited.

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# *Introduction*

*Nous vivions une lutte mortelle en échafaudant des théories*

Luis Buñuel: *Mon dernier soupir*

We lived through a life-and-death struggle constructing theories

*My Last Breath*

BEETHOVEN ends the first movement of his Opus 127 quartet with bold simplicity, by handing a single phrase from voice to voice. The phrase has by now contributed fully to a condensed sonata argument and nothing further need be expected of it. Yet in Beethoven's coda the phrase finds a rapturous afterlife. It becomes at last identical to itself, reiterative of itself, and leaves behind all but an attenuated echo of the thematic material with which it had previously been contrasted. After the pleasures of discussion, the still keener pleasures of self-repetition. I have often found myself wishing that repetition in the human sciences were as gratifying and as intellectually stringent as these closing bars, and that our learned institutions, as they handed phrases from voice to voice – across continents and across oceans –, could find Beethovenian ways of placing repetition in the service of the public good. But no. We have no Beethoven to compose us or to rescue the discourse of our human scientists from redundancy and babble.

My own unease in writing about Freud, Proust and Lacan springs not just from a chronic sense of the already-said but from an acute sense that features of their work with which I have been especially concerned have already been well described and well analysed. In what follows I shall speak about theory and about desire; about theories of desire and the desires of theorists; about theories held to be fictions and about a work of fiction thus classified by libraries and bookshops – Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* – that has as a main theme the pains and pleasures of the theorising mind. But 'desire', 'theory' and 'fiction', with or without their defensive quotation marks, turn to dullness even as I outline my agenda.

Powerful confluential currents within European and American culture have made 'desire' in particular into a major conceptual nostrum of the age, a terminological tribute paid by the bourgeoisie to its own purportedly new and self-aware sexuality. One current, which could be called that of 'high' desire, runs from Hegel through Kierkegaard, Darwin and Nietzsche to Sartre, Foucault and Deleuze/Guattari. The other, 'low' in that it more plainly concerns itself with the solicitations of the lower body but 'high' in its turn in so far as it abstractly schematises and taxonomises upon human sexual conduct, runs from Sade through Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis and Weininger to Kinsey and

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Masters/Johnson. Desire as it is now often described is the cosmological principle of our secular age. It is our *natura naturans*: it moves the stars in their courses, plumps the hazel shells, causes tumescence in mammalian sexual organs and, thanks to its inexhaustible capacity for displacement and sublimation, is the vitalising agent in art, science, religion, business, economics, politics and international relations. Under earlier metaphysical dispensations, desire had many names: it was eros and agape; it was love, lust, appetite, gluttony, cupidity, concupiscence, covetousness, ambition; it was need, wish, urge, impulse; it was hankering, longing, yearning, yen. The names of desire changed as its objects changed, and desires directed towards objects of a suprapersonal or supraterrrestrial kind were distinguished by a special nomenclature from mere instinctual agitations. Nowadays this untidy multitude of forces is often perceived as a single force, and the welter of names is often casually condensed into a single name.

Although this picture of a unitary Desire bears little resemblance to any one of Freud's successive pictures of the instinctual life, it is psychoanalysis above all other conceptual systems of the century that has made the new cosmology possible. For Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) were the first text of importance to belong equally to the two traditions that I have sketched: here was desire both high and low under discussion by a writer who was by turns systematist and dialectician in the organisation of his observational data; and here, beyond mere differences of theoretical style, was the incipient spectacle of the desiring One, the all-pervading and all-propelling energy of the human world, the force that infiltrated and activated the structures of analytic intellect no less completely than those of erectile tissue. Freud himself always drew back from this vision in building his theories of instinct: after a few oceanic moments of release, the psychologist had no choice but to return to classifying science and responsible citizenship, both of which required that there should be more instincts than one. Desire was of necessity subdivisible, and Freud in many of his moral pronouncements readily sided with its upper, socialised division against its lower, merely self-gratifying one: the very etymology of the term 'sublimation', he told his curiosity-seeking hearers in the *Introductory Lectures*,<sup>1</sup> offered support, as he himself did, to this generally accepted valuation (xvi, 345). But, despite Freud's disclaimers, his seeming lesson to a numerous following of libido-liberators and campus

orgasmicists was that desire was indeed all we could ever know on earth and the answer, already perfectly available to us, to all unanswered questions. And as is usual for any thinker of monumental stature, Freud has had an empowering effect not only upon these simplifying publicists and upon his creative successors but upon generations of brilliant adversaries. For many of these adversaries the 'question of desire' that Freud asked is still the crucial question of the century, Freud's deficiency being merely that he mis-posed and mis-answered it.

Let us remember briefly three celebrated recent cases. Deleuze and Guattari in their double diatribe on 'capitalism and schizophrenia' – *L'Anti-Édipe* and *Mille Plateaux* – grant psychoanalysis extraordinary privileges: it is the necessary enemy, anathematised over a thousand exuberant pages; its allegedly unilinear logic of explanation is that without which their own multilinear, 'rhizomatic' logic cannot be, and cannot be understood; its enslaving unconscious is their own potentiating unconscious waiting to be born. Foucault, in his *Histoire de la sexualité*, historicises psychoanalysis, criticises what he claims to be its notion of an invariant 'sexuality' subject only to a changing array of repressive mechanisms in its passage through history, and uses psychoanalytic concepts only in extreme dilution.<sup>2</sup> Yet he plots the vicissitudes of the sexual instincts within culture in ways that Freud alone had made thinkable: it was by way of Freud's *Three Essays* that sexuality as combined cultural process and product became available to historical reconstruction of the kind that Foucault attempts. Feminism, in its central attacks on the phallographic idiom of much psychoanalytic thought, insistently repeats the questions that such thought presents itself as having solved – is desire one or many? is sexual difference indelibly inscribed in nature? what are the moral and political consequences of dedifferentiating or redistributing sexual kinds? – as if the rehearsal of these questions were an inescapable prelude to the creation and execution of a coherent political programme.<sup>3</sup> In each of these cases, compellingly original work has been done, fuelled by Freud or by the rejection of Freud. But such work, ritualised in the writings of innumerable opportunistic imitators, has given desire a wider currency than any one concept is ever likely to deserve. The imitators have turned a once provocative set of insights into an obliging semi-theoretical *ritornello* and, removing their study of human instinct more readily than Freud ever did from the sphere of social and political

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actuality, have discovered in 'desire' a readily marketable meta-physical gadget.

The recent fortunes of 'theory' and 'fiction' have been somewhat more encouraging. For although yesterday's scientific paradigms and historical certitudes are nowadays perhaps too rapidly – and with perhaps too much unthinking post-Nietzschean glee – shown to be insubstantial wish-fulfilments after all ('mere' theory, 'mere' fiction), both concepts have prompted a great deal of innovative thinking in the human sciences. Describing the internal organisation or the rhetorical substructure of an existing theory, or organising hypotheses of one's own into a theory of one's own, is in any case a more exacting business than catching on the wing a specimen of ubiquitous desire – as is the perception and articulation of the narrative or discursive logic of fictions. But even here over-production has gone on at an extravagant rate, and much undoubtedly strenuous labour within the 'structuralist', 'post-structuralist', 'deconstructionist' and 'narratological' conventions has had a low intellectual yield. For years, the realms of 'theory' and 'fiction' have exerted upon each other a strong attractive force, and nowhere more plainly than in the academic study of imaginative literature. Many critics, it seems, are willing to grant seriousness and coherence to a given social or psychological theory only if they are able to show that theory to be pre-eminently applicable to novels, plays or poems. It is only after an ordeal by literature that the theory merits professional accreditation – although, as ordeals go, the process is not a particularly arduous one. There is no need for the critic to feel exhausted or forlorn as he reaches the end of his Lacanised *Wuthering Heights*, his Foucauldian *Jane Eyre* or his Derridified *Villette*. Other perfectly compliant vehicles for his chosen methodology remain: *Agnes Grey*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* . . . and *bien d'autres encor!* Comparably urgent appropriative energy has been directed by the theorists themselves towards literary texts, especially in France. And although few of them would claim that a theoretical statement has also to be a 'text' or to contain an implied poetics in order to establish its authority, their theories have certainly gained prestige in some quarters – and ridicule in others – from their self-dramatising search for 'literary' effect. From whichever side of the increasingly dilapidated partition between 'theory' and 'fiction' such efforts of annexation begin, the result is to create a wide terrain of near-synonymy between the two terms. 'Theory' and

'fiction' are, after all, alternative names for the verbal productions of those who indulge in 'as if' thinking about the world,<sup>4</sup> and further would-be synonyms may easily be enlisted for short or long spells of duty: myth, model, analogy, metaphor, paradigm, schema, construction. Where *can* one begin in this world of semantic overlap and redundancy?

Before I answer this question and so bring the present fragment of complaining autobiography to its close, I shall describe one way in which I am helped and simultaneously not helped by my three authors themselves. Each of them has an extraordinarily keen perception of the human mind as the fabricator and refurbisher of wishful constructions, and each of them willingly occupies for long stretches of his writing the middle realm in which theories and fictions are only fitfully distinguishable. The problem is not that no criterion exists by which to distinguish them. Indeed for Freud and Proust the criterion is plain and beyond dispute: a theory conduces to truth, a fiction to more fiction. But in the daily world of speculative exertion that each author inhabits this criterion is prevented from producing a series of reliable practical tests by a salient quality that the materials being speculated and theorised upon possess. These materials are fictions. Proust's narrator enquires of Albertine's pronouncements, one by one: 'what sort of construction is this – lie, half-lie, alibi, well-intentioned whimsy, camouflaged truth?' Freud and Lacan ask of their patients: 'what are you really telling me when you tell me all this, when you clothe the fiction of your dreams and phantasies in the secondary fiction of your consulting-room narratives?' For all three writers the panoramic spectacle of fiction in human affairs creates both an extreme scepticism about their own constructs – 'why are my own pronouncements any less mendacious than Albertine's? why are my interpretations any less delusional than my patients' stories?' – and an extreme appetite for styles of awareness and philosophical vantage points that would allow the notion of veracity to be rescued and rehabilitated. At the end of *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud used the term *theoretical fiction* ('theoretische Fiktion')<sup>5</sup> (v, 603; *GW*, III, 609) to describe a state of affairs that a given theory seemed to require or predict but for which no supporting evidence could be found. Among epistemological categories the 'theoretical fiction' was a sorry amphibian with a low chance of survival, but its sturdy-looking neighbours – theories proper – were themselves constantly threatened by predatory invaders entering science from the worlds of fairytale and romance.

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Lacan's answer to the problem of being both 'for' and 'against' fiction, both inside and outside its province, both enslaved and liberated by it, sounds at first more radical than anything in Proust or Freud. Speaking of 'The Purloined Letter' and of his reasons for attaching a precise psychoanalytic importance to Poe's tale, he writes: 'la vérité y révèle son ordonnance de fiction' (17).<sup>6</sup> He does not suggest, here or elsewhere in *Écrits*, simply that the path to truth lies by way of fiction, nor even that a willing self-immersion in fiction is a necessary initiatory rite for students of the unconscious mental life. What Poe's tale says to Lacan, and Lacan to us, is that whoever is immersed in fiction yet in pursuit of truth – desiring it – has already reached his destination. Seek and you have already found. Truth about the human mind and about human speech is fiction accepted and espoused at its unstemmable unconscious source. Proust and Freud do not protest in this way and are both too fastidious as problem-solvers to offer peremptory solve-all formulae of this kind. Yet each of them attends tirelessly to fictions held to be fictions, to the fabricatedness and mediatedness of speech and to the wishful mental underworld that speech reveals. Each of them, that is to say, while having a powerful urge towards Truth, is prepared to suspend that urge for indefinite periods during which the mere verbalised wishes of the self and others are lingeringly sketched and compared – as if the truth-seeker who dwelt knowingly among fictions were indeed already at his journey's end.

All this knowingness is helpful to the commentator on Proust, Freud and Lacan as portraitists of the mental life in that his terms of reference have already been expertly prepared and inflected before his enquiry begins, but unhelpful in that he can easily feel that his writers have left him with nothing to prophesy about their works but that which their works have already plainly declared. In writing the essays that follow and in making a book of them, I have of course tried to resist the pre-emptive power of the writers I discuss – sometimes by reading them against the grain of the reading methods that they themselves recommend and sometimes by reading them jointly rather than singly. I have also tried to suggest why it is that the combined role of theorist and fictionalist as played by Proust, Freud and Lacan may be thought to be a peculiarly exciting and disconcerting one, and why the *inter-mundium* between theory and fiction still offers a crucial area of study to scientist and 'human scientist' alike. (I do not, however, suggest that the three writers form an exclusive cross-cultural club



– how could I, when Plato, Montaigne, Goethe, Kierkegaard, Musil and Sartre among many others – and to speak only of the European tradition – play comparable combined roles quite as instructively?) Two aspects of my approach to these goals are perhaps worth declaring here, if only to warn my reader of what not to look for in the following pages. I have often chosen (i) to present the relationships between the three writers tangentially and (ii) to discuss the theoretical positions of each writer in their relatively inchoate, indecisive or self-defeating versions. (And from the copious works of each writer I have selected a restricted range of topics and examples and make no claim to have been exhaustive even in my discussion of these.<sup>7</sup>)

The special virtues that I ascribe to tangentiality in matters of critical comparison will become plain if I quote briefly from a number of writers whose work I admire and who have, mostly briefly, brought psychoanalytic theory into contact with *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Harold Bloom ends his essay ‘Freud and the Sublime’ on a global comparison of Freud and Proust:

Freud has more in common with Proust and Montaigne than with biological scientists, because his interpretations of life and death are mediated always by texts, first by the literary texts of others, and then by his own earlier texts, until at last the Sublime mediation of otherness begins to be performed by his text-in-process. In the *Essays* of Montaigne or Proust’s vast novel, this ongoing mediation is clearer than it is in Freud’s almost perpetual self-revision, because Freud wrote no definitive, single text; but the canon of Freud’s writings shows an increasingly uneasy sense that he had become his own precursor, and that he had begun to defend himself against himself by deliberately audacious arrivals at final positions. (117–18)

In Richard Wollheim’s *The Thread of Life*, rapid cross-references between Freud and Proust help to organise much of the argument. Here is Wollheim’s comparative style in its most laconic form:

... such is the nature of these mental states [those which show the surviving influences of past events] that they can have the effect of modifying or refashioning the dispositions that they manifest as well as the more standard effect of reinforcing them. They can impinge not only on the strength of the dispositions, or the way in which they bind the energies of the person, but also on their content or intentionality. And they can bring about these changes through their mere occurrence if the circumstances are propitious – Proust’s ‘involuntary’ memories, Freud’s ‘abreaction’ are examples – or through their deliberate exploitation in conditions cunningly organized – the confessional or the transference. The feedback from mental state to mental disposition is an essential element in the way in which we try to control the lives that we lead. (99–100)