

Freud Revisited

Psychoanalytic Themes in the Postmodern Age

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palgrave

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
1 Introduction	1
Modernism and postmodernism	3
Against Freud	4
Organization of the book	6
2 Freud, Modernism and Postmodernism	8
Freud and modern thought	10
Postmodernism	16
Features of postmodernism	18
The turn to Freud	20
3 Truth, Knowledge and Subjectivity	23
Anti-empiricism	28
Empiricism	30
Psychoanalysis and science	34
Freud's journey	37
4 The Unconscious	39
Justification for the unconscious	43
Identity	45
Another being?	46
The alien	47
Repression	49
Ego and the unconscious	51
Death and the unconscious	51
Not knowing	53
5 Forgetting, Repeating and Remembering	56
Transference	57
Repetition	58
Mourning	61
Identification	62
Healing	64
<i>Nachträglichkeit</i>	65
Time, repetition and the unconscious	69

6 Story-telling	71
Literature and psychoanalysis	74
Sub-texts	77
Reality and rhetoric	79
Interpreting texts	81
Language	82
7 Instincts and Environment	85
The Other	87
Drives/objects	88
Neurosis	92
Introduction of the object to the Freudian model	94
A duality in Western philosophy	97
8 Dialectics in the Psyche	100
Mourning	101
Projection	105
Transference	107
9 Contradictions in Sexuality	111
Substantive issues	113
A radical model?	115
Bodily desire	118
Oedipal traumas	120
Eros	122
Gender and sexuality	123
10 Femininity, Feminism and Psychoanalysis	126
The spectral mother	132
Little Hans	133
Feminine space	135
Feminism	135
11 Dreams, Jokes and Films	141
The child of night	142
Wish-fulfilment	144
Interpretation	145
The dreamer	146
Poetry or prose?	147
Jokes	148
Jokes and dreams	152
Films and psychoanalysis	154
Spectator and image	157

12 Revisions and Criticisms	160
Post-Freudian revisions	161
A multiple shift	168
Freud and Jung	170
Polarities	173
13 Conclusions	178
Applied psychoanalysis	180
Which Freud?	182
<i>Notes</i>	183
<i>Index</i>	193

1

Introduction

Freud revolutionized modern thought with his conception and development of depth psychology. The word ‘depth’ is critical here, for Freud postulated a fundamental incoherence in the human being, a division between the surface and what lies underneath – the unconscious.

The notion of the unconscious is perhaps one of the most important concepts of the modern age, for it introduces into the human self-image a fundamental gap, or what Lacan calls a ‘heteronomy’.¹ Just as Darwin shattered human complacency through the historicization of the human being itself – found to have an origin in animal evolution, not in heaven – so Freud shattered any idea that human beings are homogeneous and rational. Whereas Christianity had conceived of a fundamental flaw introduced into humanity through the fall from grace, Freud showed us a fundamental split at the heart of the individual that is derived from our conception of ourselves as selves. That is, the fundamental conflict between ego and id – between the conscious and the unconscious, between the repressing force and the repressed – is said to lie at the heart of being a human self. We can no more remove this conflict than we can, in the Christian ethic, will our own state of grace. What we can do, however, in the Freudian schema, is to become more aware of our inner conflicts.

But this is only the beginning. The unconscious is the apex of Freud’s achievements: underneath it lies an Everest of discoveries, postulates, theoretical schemes, empirical observations. Furthermore, Freud carried on reworking his ideas until his death. This partly makes his work difficult to summarize, since it never ceased to evolve – but also gives it an intellectual density that is unique.

I have not written this book as a technical introduction to psychoanalysis, nor as a popularized account of Freud’s ideas. In fact, I feel that

such books, which dutifully present us with the Oedipus complex, the unconscious, dream interpretation, and so on, give a rather one-dimensional picture of Freud. He was a remarkably fertile thinker and writer, who developed some ideas at length, but left others in a rather undeveloped state. For example, Freud points out that the unconscious seems to be a timeless zone of the psyche, but he does not elaborate on this fascinating idea, which seems to have many reverberations and connections with his ideas about time, memory and repetition.² There are many such contributions in Freud's writings, and it is often striking how later developments in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy were anticipated by him. In this book, I have tried to provide a representative overview of some of these topics.

Freud also invented psychoanalysis as a practical form of psychotherapy. This has massive importance, for Freud's theoretical work – impressive as it is in its own right – fuels the ongoing development of techniques used in the treatment of patients. In other words, Freud was a practical researcher. He did not have his head in the clouds, but was constantly immersed in the concrete work with people's psyches. His theories about dreams are used in dream interpretation; the postulate of the Oedipus complex becomes of vital importance in the analysis of neuroses; the notion of infantile sexuality is linked to the essentially determinist approach of psychoanalysis: that the past is repeated in the present, even if in a garbled form. To put it more dramatically: those who do not remember the past are compelled to repeat it. Consequently, the only way out of this trap is to 'remember', that is, to trace one's present feelings and actions to their infantile roots.

It is fashionable to cite Freud's intellectual ancestry. Other figures had discussed the unconscious, infantile sexuality, Oedipal jealousy, and so on.³ But this is a trivial observation, surely there is no researcher in any field who does not stand on the shoulders of many others. But Freud was a brilliant synthesizer: he brought together ideas from disparate fields, such as neurology, hypnosis, cathartic therapy, sexology, psychiatry, and amalgamated them into a theoretically coherent whole. But there was a fundamental restlessness about the man – he continually worked over his ideas, changed them, recast them, introduced completely new theoretical concepts. Thus in the posthumously published *Outline of Psychoanalysis*, written at the age of 82, we find Freud calmly discussing the 'splitting of the ego', found not only in fetishism, but in many other psychological mechanisms.⁴ This concept is generally associated with later analysts such as Melanie Klein, but it is characteristic of Freud that he was able, shortly before his death, to introduce radical new ideas.

It would be negligent to carry out a kind of empiricist review of Freud – that is, merely listing his ideas or carrying out a taxonomy of them – for Freud was an anti-empiricist, who spurned the superficial and the apparent, and strove to penetrate to the murky depths, where a deeper reality and truth might lie. Freud said that we are ‘lived by unknown and uncontrollable forces’,⁵ and this is a deeply shocking idea, which conflicts with all notions of human will, dignity and rationality. Freud dethroned reason and showed us the irrational depths that lie within us all, and yet, curiously, provided a kind of road to freedom. If I can borrow Marx’s dictum ‘Freedom is the recognition of necessity’, it can be applied to the Freudian project of the integration of the unknown into the known, for the ‘unknown’ – by which I mean the unconscious – is an objective fact (a kind of ‘necessity’) that must be recognized as such if we are to achieve inner stability and a relative freedom. This is a paradoxical project, for one can never become free from the psyche itself, just as one cannot become free from the body. Similarly, we cannot become free from inner conflicts, but we can achieve a certain freedom in the acceptance of them.

Modernism and postmodernism

Freud is one of a handful of thinkers whose ideas dominated the twentieth century. Darwin, Marx, Einstein – one characteristic of these figures is that their ideas have not only been important in their own disciplines, but have spread far and wide, both among the intelligentsia and among the population at large.

One example of this in relation to Freud can be found in Hollywood, which for a period in the 1940s and 1950s produced many films which referred to psychoanalysis, and some which have it as their central theme – Hitchcock’s *Spellbound*, for example. Similarly, certain psychoanalytic ideas, albeit in a popularized or vulgarized form, have become common currency – for example, the ‘Freudian slip’.

But these are rather superficial manifestations of Freud’s influence: it is possible to argue that Freudianism has been an important part of both modernity and modernism. By this I mean that psychoanalysis represents a culmination of the Enlightenment ideals of rationality and progress; yet at the same time, Freud’s ideas are part of the twentieth-century modernist movement which began to break up the stable forms found in art, music, literature, and so on. Freud presents us with a fragmented picture of the individual, divided into warring factions – ego, id and super-ego – and this image seems commensurate with those

artistic movements such as Cubism which also broke up traditional stable forms into disparate images.

One can also point to an interesting relationship between psychoanalytic ideas and postmodernism – that while postmodern critics have tended to attack psychoanalysis as a ‘grand narrative’ which in the guise of liberating the individual produced yet another form of coercion, at the same time there seem to be connections between depth psychology and certain postmodern ideas. For example, Freud invents the psychoanalytic space in which two people have a dialogue – in a sense, Freud invents a discursive space, and later analysts such as Lacan, who have been influential in the postmodern movement, have argued that psychoanalysis is a thoroughly linguistic event. There is also a sense of fragmentation and dissimulation in Freud’s model of the psyche which seems sympathetic to postmodernism: the hypothesis of the unconscious suggests that we can never be sure about our motives. Freud also lays stress on the irrational and fantastic nature of our mental life: and this seems to match the postmodern emphasis on the representation of things rather than things themselves.

Also relevant here is the way in which psychoanalytic ideas have fertilized many other disciplines, such as literary criticism, film criticism, feminism, anthropology, and so on. In this book I have therefore attempted to map out some of the interesting ways in which Freud’s thought represents a climax in modernity; is also part of the modernist movement; and can be said to anticipate certain postmodern ideas whilst at the same time falling foul of a fundamental postmodern critique.

Against Freud

The 1980s and 1990s have seen another, more complex testament to Freud’s influence. A number of journalists, writers and academics have launched a series of fierce assaults on Freud, in terms of both his personal morality and his scientific credentials.⁶ They have argued that his ideas are a *pot pourri* of unverifiable fantasies, and that Freud himself manipulated his patients and colleagues shamelessly and corruptly. However, this extensive spate of ‘Freud-bashing’ is a kind of ironic testament to his enduring influence, for who would bother to make such ferocious attacks on a figure who was unimportant or to whom we felt indifferent? None the less, these attacks have sharpened the debates over the value of psychotherapy and Freud’s own contribution, and I certainly do not intend to idealize Freud’s work in this book.

I frequently find myself disagreeing with Freud's conclusions, but also find that the routes he took to get there – the tools he used – are very productive. In fact, the psychoanalytic method offers one of the most complex, dialectical and sophisticated means of analysis and interpretation available in Western knowledge. Its only rival is Marxism, with which it bears some surprising similarities, for example, a stress on contradictions making up wholes.

There is also an excitement in discovering Freud – for example, I remember the first time I read his statement that criminals do not feel guilt because they are criminal, but become criminal because they already feel guilty.⁷ With such ideas, Freud took commonplace associations, turned them upside down, or showed how if one thing is true, this does not prevent its opposite being true also. In this sense, Freud overturned many liberal and Christian shibboleths. There is almost a kind of rage in him towards such 'ethical' systems – see, for example, his discussion of the Christian commandment 'Love thy neighbour', which he describes with characteristic irony as: 'a commandment which is really justified by the fact that nothing else runs so strongly counter to the original nature of man'.⁸

It would be difficult to arrive at an overall estimate of Freud's influence in the twentieth century simply from a perusal of his writings, the growth of psychoanalysis, its influence on other disciplines, important as these factors are. For what is left out of this account is the prophet-like status which Freud acquired. In other words, Freud has become a kind of mythical figure. What does this mean? That he has become one of those figures who acquire a transpersonal significance for us, seen as imparting truths that are beyond the ordinary and conventional. It is interesting that Jung has also become such a figure, although probably within a narrower circle. But Freud is known very widely, and Freud's ideas, albeit in a popularized form, have been disseminated in all kinds of areas – they have influenced painting, cinema, literature and other cultural forms.

I think this partly explains the great hostility to Freud that is found amongst some writers, academics and others. For such mythical figures tend to arouse adulation and obloquy in equal amounts. If some want to put Freud on a pedestal or a throne, then others will strive to pull him off. The prophet is unconsciously seen as close to God, and granting to human beings certain truths which are God-given, rather as Moses brought down the tablets from the mountain.

It is, of course, extremely ironic that Freud, that most vehement of polemicists against religion, should himself be seen as a prophet or a seer. Yet the irony conceals a paradoxical truth, which Jung grasped –

that Freud's driving passion has a quasi-religious side to it, and the foundation and development of psychoanalysis have more than a passing resemblance to a religious cult. Of course, some critics have seized on these parallels and argued that they invalidate psychoanalysis.⁹ I find this argument bizarre, just as the analogous argument that Marxism, which became, in some of its forms at least, another quasi-religious cult, is thereby discredited, also strikes me as illegitimate. Indeed, one might argue that there is an inherent tendency for all human groupings to move towards such semi-religious characteristics. Why this should be so is beyond the scope of this book to ponder – although I might mention that Jung discussed this phenomenon frequently.¹⁰

I have been a psychotherapist for twenty years, and I am sure that my debt to Freud's ideas outstrips any others. I mean this in a practical sense – I value Freud above all as a practical thinker, whose ideas have an immediate impact on our understanding of people. Take, for example, Freud's ideas about guilt, which were never developed at length or in a particularly coherent manner, yet which none the less offer many brilliant insights and are of great practical value in helping people who suffer from guilt – and in Western culture, I am sure that there are many such people!

Freud describes how afraid of success many people are; how they are determined to sabotage themselves; how they may commit crimes in a desperate wish to be punished; how the progress of therapy itself can be ruined by their fear and hatred of success. These ideas provide us with a very fertile base from which contemporary theories of human guilt can be developed.¹¹

Let me cite one more example: Freud's brief description of mourning, part of which, he claims, involves the incorporation of the mourned person into the self.¹² Again, this idea has spurred much research not only into mourning itself, but into the complex and rich phenomena of identification, projection, introjection, and so on. But there are many such insights in Freud, some of which he developed at length, or which he turned into core concepts at the heart of psychoanalysis; others of which seem to be peripheral issues for Freud, but which have been developed later. In this sense, I am sure there is much more that remains to be discovered in his writings.

Organization of the book

This book has four chief aims: first, to provide a brief commentary on Freud's relationship with modernity, modernism and postmodernism;

second, to examine in greater detail some of the key ideas in psychoanalysis, especially those which have been influential outside the world of psychotherapy; third, to show how psychoanalysis has been employed in a variety of other disciplines as both a descriptive and explanatory tool; and fourth, to present some of the criticisms that have been made of Freud's fundamental ideas and procedures.

Chapters 2–4 consider the intellectual background to psychoanalysis. Chapter 2 considers the relationship between Freud's work and modernism, and the interaction it has had with postmodernism. Chapter 3 considers the revolutionary implications of Freud's work for our understanding of human knowledge and how knowledge is obtained. Chapter 4 examines the central concept of the unconscious.

I have selected five key topics in Freud's work, which give some idea of the driving forces in his work. Chapters 5 and 6 look at the notions of forgetting, remembering and repeating, and the way in which psychotherapy can be seen as a form of story-telling. Chapter 7 considers the important issue of the role of the instincts as against the environment, and chapter 8 the dialectical structure of Freud's model of the psyche. Chapter 9 examines the revolutionary aspects of Freud's theory of human sexuality.

Chapters 10 and 11 examine two areas of 'applied' psychoanalysis: in chapter 10, the way in which feminism has made a rapprochement with Freud's ideas. In chapter 11, I have demonstrated briefly how analytic ideas throw light on cultural fields such as film.

Finally, chapter 12 looks at some of the revisions and criticisms that have been made of Freud's work.

2

Freud, Modernism and Postmodernism

The huge influence of Freudian thought in the twentieth century cannot simply be ascribed to Freud's technical contributions to psychoanalysis. Rather, one must take a wider perspective and consider the historical context in which Freud's ideas were being developed. In the first place, along with Marxism and Darwinism, Freudianism has represented one of the climactic movements in modernity, that is, post-Renaissance thought. This has been characterized by the development of rationality and scientific methodology, and what might be called 'objectivism': the separation of the thinking subject from the object of enquiry. T. S. Eliot, in a famous remark, refers to this as a 'dissociation of sensibility', whereby thought and feeling become split from each other.¹ This can be placed within the historical development of Cartesian thought – Descartes' separation of mind and body separates feelings from the mind, since feelings often seem to be experienced as physical sensations.²

There is an enormous paradox in psychoanalytic thought, since a rational system of enquiry is brought to bear on the irrational – on the impulses stemming from the unconscious, whose expression is found in dreams, neurotic symptoms and in many life-events. Thus, Freud can be said to have made sense of nonsense, or to have imposed a rational method of interpretation upon the fragmented and mutilated messages from the unconscious.

At all times, Freud claimed that psychoanalysis could be ranked as part of modern science and was annoyed that its scientific credentials should be questioned: 'I have always felt it as a gross injustice that people have refused to treat psychoanalysis like any other science.'³ What has continued to trouble Freud's critics is the idea that one can construct a scientific description of mental events, which are not observable but

must be inferred. This is clearly not 'scientific' in the sense in which the 'hard' sciences such as physics and chemistry are scientific. Perhaps Freud was unwilling to see that psychoanalysis is not 'like any other science' at all, and that if it is a science, it sets out new parameters for our understanding of science. However, at the end of the twentieth century, we find that challenges to the 'hardness' and objectivity of science were being mounted within science itself, and linear, cause-and-effect models have given ground to field theory and chaos models.⁴ In this sense, psychoanalysis does not seem as anomalous as formerly.

Second, Freud's ideas contributed to 'modernism', that is, the movement from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries which involved an artistic and philosophical revolution. This movement was characterized by a tremendous restlessness, a fragmentation of traditional forms, a favouring of the irrational and the subjective. Some of the tendencies in modern art – particularly Surrealism – were directly influenced by Freud but many movements were haunted by what Peter Nicholls, in his book *Modernisms*, describes as 'a deeper recognition of some fissure in the self which Freud would later formulate in terms of the conscious and unconscious'.⁵

Third, the movement known as 'postmodernism' has certain features which can be found in Freud – for example, the 'deconstruction' of the stable human subject and the dethroning of rationality. At the same time, many postmodern thinkers have criticized psychoanalysis for its tendency to globalization – Freud employed a number of transhistorical categories such as the Oedipus complex. There is also the criticism that psychoanalysis is too rationalistic, too influenced by the medical model of the human being, and that ultimately it does not lead to personal liberation, but only to a further kind of imprisonment within the psychoanalytic 'power-trip'. In a discussion of Freud and Marx, the literary critic Patricia Waugh argues that:

The focus of much postmodern writing has been to dismantle the basic assumptions of their writing to lay bare an epistemology and methodology which, it is argued, is at one with an oppressive and authoritarian rationalism which has produced terror in place of emancipation and disguised its will to power as a disinterested 'scientific' desire for truth.⁶

Clearly, the position of the Freudian project in the history of ideas in the West is a complex and controversial one. In this chapter I would like to highlight some of the key philosophical tendencies in psychoanalysis

which seem to link it with, and at times separate it from, modernity, modernism and postmodernism.

Freud and modern thought

1. Against theism

First, one must allude to the 'modern' abandonment of theistic assumptions and the placing of the human being at the centre of enquiry. For the last 500 years, there has been a gradual – and sometimes not so gradual – erosion of religious ideas and an acceptance that we live in a materialist universe and that human beings are as much a part of that universe as stars, rocks, trees or other animals. Freud himself cited the figures of Copernicus and Darwin as intellectual giants with whom he would like to be compared.⁷ The choice is significant: Copernicus demolished the view that the earth was the centre of the universe; and Darwin argued that human beings are part of a continually developing evolutionary chain. In other words, as against the claims of many religions, there is nothing special about human beings within the whole context of matter and life. One does not need the hypothesis of God to explain our existence.

Freud argues that these scientific discoveries produced shattering blows to 'human megalomania', and that psychoanalysis can be ranked with them, since it 'seeks to prove to the ego that it is not even master in its own house'.⁸

Freud's anti-religious views are patently clear throughout his writings, but the principles of psychoanalysis are relevant here. In Freud we find an appeal not to supernatural forces, but to human understanding, a belief in psychic determinism and the possibility of alleviating suffering without recourse to divine help. Indeed, Freud describes religion as an 'enemy', which provides false explanations of reality and offers false comforts to those who are suffering.⁹

2. Self and Other

Second, as a corollary to the abandonment of God or the 'death of God', post-Renaissance human culture has become obsessed with the self and what has been called 'self-experience'.¹⁰ Previously in Western culture, and in most other cultures, culture had been dominated by the relationship with some kind of mystical Other, whether spirit, fetish or God. But modernity is predicated on the human self in isolation from God, and sometimes in isolation from other selves.

Psychoanalysis offers a view of the human being as containing its own demons and angels in the unconscious. All the projected contents of the psyche are withdrawn from heaven and hell: one no longer grapples with the angel of God or with the devil, but with one's own desires, fears and hatreds.

Freud's work, therefore, can be said to continue the study of the individual which was begun during and after the Renaissance by those thinkers who enquired into the nature of the self – figures such as Montaigne, Descartes and Rousseau. The analyst Masud Khan places Freud's work in a direct line of descent from them:

If Montaigne was his own witness, Descartes his own creator, Rousseau the apostle of his own feelings, and the Romantics the exorcists of their sensibility, then Freud's genius and courage lay in becoming his own patient.¹¹

Yet Khan points out that Freud's 'self-analysis' involved a very close intimacy with his friend Wilhelm Fliess, and that this relationship in many ways foreshadowed the strange intimacy of psychoanalysis itself: 'It is only with Freud that self-experience finds its true instrumentality through the other for reflective introspection and discovery.'¹²

One can suggest, then, that the modern (post-Renaissance) individual, deprived of its relationship with the mystic or transcendent other, experiences great loneliness or even anguish at its apparent isolation in the universe. Different cultural forms – for example, romantic love, art and music, the use of alcohol and recreational drugs – arise to fill this huge abyss, so that the need for the other is to some extent satisfied outside of religious experience – yet these forms perhaps also have a quasi-religious quality to them. Psychoanalysis fills the gap in another way, by bringing the self into contact with a mysterious Other – the analyst – who remains an almost anonymous figure, yet who, like the priest, promises attention and some kind of absolution.

Is this a cynical view of psychoanalysis? I would say it was not at all cynical, but places the growth of psychotherapy as a whole within an historical context in which human beings have suffered a massive loss in the decay of religion, and have had to search for compensations for that loss. If God was once my witness, now my witness is my therapist.

3. Rationality and irrationality

I have already commented on Freud's highly paradoxical attitude to rationality: on the one hand, he prides himself on demonstrating how

the apparently bizarre productions of the unconscious, for example in dreams, have a sense which can be deciphered. In this, Freudianism is a highly rational theory of the mind. In particular, Freud pins his colours to the mast of strict determinism and claims that psychic events, no less than physical ones, are never due to chance. In a discussion of 'parapraxes', that is, slips of the tongue, forgetting of names and other mistakes, Freud imagines a critic who argues that these are indeed coincidental:

What does the fellow mean by this? Is he maintaining that there are occurrences, however small, which drop out of the universal concatenation of events – occurrences which might just as well not happen as happen? If anyone makes a breach of this kind in the determinism of natural events at a single point, it means that he has thrown overboard the whole *Weltanschauung* of science.¹³

Of course, Freud also argues that the causes of parapraxes and other psychic revelations are often unconscious, as for example with many slips of the tongue, which may reveal hidden feelings of hostility, and so on.

The principle of determinism is perhaps not as controversial as the use made of it by Freud and later psychoanalysts. Here the interaction between the objective and the subjective becomes highly contentious, in that the analyst claims to be able to detect the determining factors in the patient's dreams, behaviour, symptoms, speech, and so on. Here is the crux, not just for psychoanalysis, but for psychotherapy as a whole: does the analyst/therapist have special access to the 'determinism of natural events' in relation to the psyche? Can the patient acquire a proficiency in these matters?

As against this pronounced rationalist emphasis in Freud's work, his theory of the unconscious, and his insistence that the ego is not master in its own house, give us a decidedly post-Enlightenment portrait of human beings, who are beset by 'unknown and uncontrollable forces'. It is not surprising that Freud has been criticized for being too rationalistic but also for being too irrational, since arguably he subverts reason whilst giving it a high priority.

Freud's turn to the irrational is best illustrated by his emphasis on the dream as the 'royal road to a knowledge of the activities of the unconscious mind'.¹⁴ Western science has tended to disparage dreaming as a means of acquiring knowledge. It seemed symptomatic of more 'primitive' cultures which interpreted dreams much as they might consult the

witch-doctor or looked for premonitions in chickens' entrails. Freud comments that 'to concern oneself with dreams is not merely unpractical and uncalled-for, it is positively disgraceful. It brings with it the odium of being unscientific and rouses the suspicion of a personal inclination to mysticism.'¹⁵

In fact, in my experience it is this area of psychotherapy which causes most concern to new patients, especially those who are strongly intellectual. With such patients, any talk of dreams, or symbols, or the unconscious itself causes suspicion and fear. Such a way of looking at human life is quite alien to them, used as they are to thinking rationally. None the less, they have often come to therapy because a split-off, irrational part of their personality is beginning to make trouble.

One might see this as a paradigm of the Western individual: trapped inside the prison of the intellect, yet beset on all sides by desires, fears, needs and hatreds which have been kept at bay during a life-time, yet which also threaten to erupt into daily life. Freud uses a very powerful metaphor to describe this process:

These wishes in our unconscious, ever on the alert, and so to say, immortal, remind one of the legendary Titans, weighed down since primaeval ages by the massive bulk of the mountains which were once hurled upon them by the victorious gods and which are still shaken from time to time by the convulsions of their limbs.¹⁶

This is a rather awesome image, and conveys some of Freud's attitude to the unconscious. Yet the Titans must be encouraged to speak, or at least the communications which emanate from them must be deciphered if the individual is to find some relief from the 'convulsions' which beset him or her.

4. Subjectivity

Psychoanalysis and the psychotherapies that it has spawned are subjective methods of work. How does analysis work as a technique? Through an intense and self-reflexive relationship. How does psychotherapy ascertain what is best for a particular patient? By helping the patient to decide what he or she wants.

Freud also focuses on desire itself, on what people want, or rather what they want without knowing it. Again, this marks a shift from the principles of reason, which emphasize what we know. Thus Freudianism is part of an epistemological break from the Enlightenment landmarks of reason and knowledge, towards a metapsychology of desire and

hatred, or Eros and death. To put it extremely, Freudianism argues that much philosophy is a neurotic sublimation of depression, and that the answers to the questions found in philosophy cannot be discovered philosophically, but only through the concrete examination of one's motives, wishes and prohibitions.

Freud's pessimism is expressed in his opposition between the wishes of the individual and the demands of the culture, which enforces the repression of those wishes: 'on the one hand, love comes into opposition to the interests of civilization; on the other, civilization threatens love with substantial restrictions'.¹⁷ Psychoanalysis steps in, therefore, to help the individual, if not to enact the wishes that still lurk in the repressed unconscious, then at least to permit them conscious expression. Hence it can be linked with Romanticism in its rescue of the alienated individual from the imprisoning coils of a repressive culture.

5. Fragmentation

Freud's model of the mind is characterized by its decentring and fragmentation. The central concept of repression introduces the basic split between the repressing force and the repressed forces. Lacan was to point out the inherent incoherence which this produces: 'this ego, whose strength our theorists now define by its capacity to bear frustration, is frustration in its essence.'¹⁸ I feel that Lacan takes a more extreme and pessimistic view of human frustration and the impossibility of fulfilment than Freud, but one cannot deny that Lacan is not turning Freud upside down, but merely drawing out some of the logical conclusions from the Freudian schema.

According to Freud, many of our most intense desires must be repressed if we are to live in a civilized culture, yet they still exist in the unconscious, from where they exert a powerful influence. Thus at the same time they are part of our identity, yet not part of it. Freud expresses this very starkly in relation to his theory of dreams: 'the dreamer *does* know what his dream means: *only he does not know that he knows it, and for that reason thinks he does not know it*' (original emphasis).¹⁹

This perception of deep fissures in the self can be related to developments in the whole of Western culture. For example, we see in twentieth-century painting the abandonment of figurative art and the turn to abstraction, Cubism, Surrealism, and so on. Modern painters begin to pull reality to pieces and demonstrate the subjectivity of experience, for example in the Impressionist school.

This huge shift in art has been described as follows, in relation to Cubism:

Cubism stood out as the most revolutionary movement to appear in figurative painting since the 15th century. In fact, it broke away from all the conventions of optic realism and completely discarded 'traditional' perspective, modelling and verisimilitude of light effects, not because it was indifferent to objects, but because it wanted to analyze them more closely and try to give a more total representation of them. The cubists were the first to realize fully that by choosing a single viewpoint, the Renaissance had introduced a certain order in the picture, but at the same time it had condemned itself to giving only a partial view of things, that seen by a motionless observer.²⁰

Pre-Freudian psychology can be compared with 'figurative painting', in the sense that it gave an essentially empiricist view of the human being, which conveys the appearances of things. For example, Freud's crucial shift in relation to hysteria lay in his belief that the symptoms of hysterics were not simply a bizarre set of behaviours, but were meaningful and could be decoded. Freud makes a distinction between his work and that of others, such as the French psychologist Janet:

According to Janet's view a hysterical woman was a wretched creature who, on account of a constitutional weakness, was unable to hold her mental acts together, and it was for that reason that she fell victim to a splitting of her mind, and to a restriction of the field of her consciousness. The outcome of psychoanalytic investigations, on the other hand, showed that these phenomena were the result of dynamic factors – of mental conflict and repression.²¹

Thus while Janet had seen hysteria as the outcome of a 'splitting' in the mind, this was seen as caused by non-mental factors ('a constitutional weakness'), whereas psychoanalysis proposed that the conflict was properly a psychological one, should be treated accordingly and eventually could be understood.

Going back to the remarks cited above about Cubism, the comment about the 'single viewpoint' can be compared with Freud's dismantling of the individual into various components: ego, id and superego in his 1920s formulations.²² Each of these components has its own 'viewpoint', which is often quite antithetical to the others. As against this multiple view, the pre-Freudian view of human personality could be described as giving a 'partial view of things'.

It is clear that psychoanalysis has a very complex and paradoxical role within both modern thought and modernism. It seems simultaneously

to assert and negate rationality, notions of the self, ideas of progress, and so on. Freud could be said to be one of the last great figures of post-Enlightenment rationalism, yet he also subverts any rational basis for understanding human motivation; he places great emphasis on the individual, yet also deconstructs the self into warring factions; he holds out the promise of a kind of 'remission of sins' yet also takes a rather pessimistic attitude towards therapeutic success – 'I am not a therapeutic enthusiast,' he stated in 1932. And added with characteristic irony: 'I do not think our cures can compete with those of Lourdes.'²³

Psychoanalysis seems to be full of contradictions – along with Marxism, it is one of the last great flourishes of modern thought, yet also anticipates postmodern scepticism and the sense of disintegration and unease that characterized the twentieth century. Freud believed fervently in the scientific status of his work, yet affirmed the crucial role of subjectivity and irrationality in human self-knowledge. He believed that a partial self-knowledge could be won, but also showed how often it is illusory and fragmented. His sense of irony and absurdity seem very contemporary.

Psychoanalysis is a critical voice within modernity – it is in fact a *voice of crisis*. It articulates a fracture in human awareness – that what I think I am may turn out to be only part of the truth, or even the opposite of the truth. As against the lucid Cartesian assertion, 'I think, therefore I am', and the Romantic aphorism of Rousseau, 'I feel, therefore I am', it seems to propose a more uncertain truth: 'I dream, therefore I am not what I thought.'

Postmodernism

If the position of Freud within modernity is an ambivalent one, since he both emphasizes reason while pointing out how much of human existence is not governed by it, this seems to anticipate some postmodernist ideas. Again, Freud's ideas are Janus-faced: part of the movement towards the postmodern, whilst also falling foul of some of its judgements.

Postmodernist thought can certainly be seen as antithetical to psychoanalysis, since it offers a resistance to notions of 'truth', 'depth' or any kind of discourse being privileged. In other words, postmodernism offers us a kind of relativism – there are no absolute truths, there are no 'grand narratives', but rather a number of 'little stories':

The mutation of culture into postmodernity spells serious trouble for traditional psychoanalytic notions, for a thorough postmodernist will

distrust metaphors of depth. There is no self or internal experience to be recovered from the patient's past; there is no past to be taken forward for self-understanding, and there is no narrative, scientific or otherwise, that could be privileged over any other.²⁴

However, psychoanalysis has also proved amenable to postmodernist deconstruction – figures such as Lacan have noted that analysis itself is a totally linguistic series of events, especially if the unconscious itself is construed as a kind of linguistic organ.²⁵ Psychotherapy can therefore be understood, not as a search for a mythical 'self' or 'truth', but as a set of discourses which overlap and interpenetrate, and continually refer to themselves. Psychoanalysis has the merit of being sensitive to its own discourses and their interrelations: in other words, the analyst and the patient are able in the end to ask the compelling question: 'Why are we talking about this?', and even the question: 'Who is talking?' Analysis has a meta-discursive element at its heart.

But are these ideas absolutely *post*-Freudian? I would suggest that Freud has a more sophisticated and relativist view of 'truth', 'depth', and so on, than he is sometimes given credit for. For example, Freud is very hesitant about claiming that analysis discovers a single unambiguous sense of a dream or a symptom. His use of the term 'over-determined' – meaning that a neurotic symptom has several causative factors – can be found in his early collaborative work with Breuer in the 1890s.²⁶

Granted, Freud's use of archaeological metaphors suggests that the past lies buried in the psyche, intact and awaiting discovery. But Freud's account of what 'remembering' is, and how the process of reconstruction goes on in analysis, is complex and sophisticated. For example, in his discussion of how patients fall in love with their analysts, Freud states at first that 'the outbreak of a passionate demand for love is largely the work of resistance' – in other words, the patient falls in love in order to 'hinder the continuation of the treatment'. But later in the same discussion, Freud points out that this does not mean that the patient's love is unreal: 'the resistance did not, after all, *create* this love; it finds it ready to hand, makes use of it, and aggravates its manifestations.'²⁷ Freud is therefore making a complex and dialectical statement here: that 'transference love' is both real and unreal, both of the present and of the past, both authentic and also a device intended to obfuscate the analysis.

Furthermore, Freud definitely does not claim that the unconscious or the id contains an absolute truth lying hidden beneath the inauthentic

repressions wrought by the ego. If this were correct, then the task of therapy would be to liberate the unconscious in action! But this is never stated to be the analytic task: rather, therapist and patient set out to become more aware of the desires hidden in the unconscious, not necessarily with the aim of fulfilling them, but to restore choice to the individual. In fact, Freud talks about replacing repression with condemnation – by which he means that in the majority of cases, one will choose not to act on a desire in the id.²⁸ But of course, one has the choice, whereas previously repression ensured that there was none. But in terms of ‘truth’, one cannot simply say that the unconscious contains a kind of sublime or distilled truth, since the individual has to balance between those forces in the unconscious and the forces which exist in the culture, which are antithetical to the repressed desires. The ‘truth’ therefore consists of the management of conflicts in the individual.

Features of postmodernism

In the Introduction to the anthology *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, the philosopher Lawrence Cahoon argues that postmodernism is centrally interested in the representation of things rather than things themselves, or even denies that ‘things’ exist; that it denies the possibility of returning to the origin of something; it breaks down the unity of something into a plurality; it denies that there are transcendent norms, such as ‘justice’ or ‘truth’, removed from the social processes involved; and is interested in the margins or the peripheries of things.²⁹

If psychoanalysis is examined against this background of ideas, a variegated picture emerges. Psychoanalysis also attempts to break down phenomena into opposites or fragments – so the psyche itself is broken into id, ego, superego, and the unconscious itself is seen as consisting of an aggregate of unrelated fragments. In this sense, Freud’s model is a pluralist one. Freud is also concerned to take apparently transcendent categories such as love and describe them in terms of the instinctual processes going on within the individual. One might also argue that the ‘representational’ motif is found in psychoanalysis in Freud’s assertion that fantasies about events are as important as events themselves, or even more interestingly, that in the unconscious, there is no distinction between such categories.

On the other hand, one might conclude that psychoanalysis is not postmodern in spirit, in that it does pursue origins, in the sense of tracking down the infantile events or fantasies which are being repeated in adult life; it does postulate certain primitive entities such as instincts;

it does hypothesize about universal tendencies in human motivation and behaviour; and in some of its manifestations, it seems to adopt an ethos of 'expertise' that goes distinctly against the grain of the post-modern.

In short, one can conclude that certain aspects of Freud's thought lend themselves to postmodern deconstructionism; while other aspects seem quite antithetical to it. It is striking how those contemporary disciplines which incorporate psychoanalytic insights tend to reject certain areas of Freudian psychology, while embracing others. For example, it is possible for a contemporary feminist to reject Freud's 'phallogocentric' views on women and female sexuality while at the same time claiming the right to employ Freudian notions of the unconscious, repression, infantile sexuality, and so on. In such a case we can see the Janus-faced character of Freudianism vis-à-vis modernism and postmodernism. Psychoanalysis is attacked by postmodernism as one of the key 'foundational' disciplines of the twentieth century; yet analytical insights and techniques may also be used by postmodernism writers. Here the role of Lacan seems crucial, for in his emphasis on language, desire and 'lack', Lacan arguably transformed psychoanalysis from a modernist to a post-modernist discipline.

Lacan famously denies the possibility of our desires ever being fulfilled, for they are created by lack, in fact by a lack which has no possible object as its fruition.³⁰ If one relates this very radical notion to Freud's own thinking, one can argue that it both carries on the logic of Freud, while at the same time transforming it into a claim which Freud would himself have rejected. For Freud also speaks about the hallucinatory quality of our desires and the impossibility of satisfying them. But at the same time, he grants that some people are able to make compromises in life, which while not bringing them absolute happiness, give them a sense of well-being.³¹

This tension no doubt stems in part from the historical context in which Freud lived, straddling as he does both the great philosophical outpouring of German thought in the nineteenth century – Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche – and the disintegration of German society in the 1930s. Freud came at the end of the Enlightenment, but was sufficiently part of it to partake of its trumpeting of rationalism and its hope of human progress, while at the same time he was part of the post-Enlightenment movements which came to prize incoherence, irrationality and rejected all thoughts of progress. Freud contains both strands of thought: at times, this makes his thought seem contradictory; but at its best, the tension produces a great richness and dialectical insight.

Freud's sense of humour is relevant here, for he delighted in describing some of the absurdities of human thought – the ways in which we fool ourselves about our motives, for example – in a way which seems more relevant to postmodernism than the high seriousness of the nineteenth century. For example, Freud delighted in pointing out the contradictions to be found in the great religions, especially Christianity, which, he claimed, espoused universal love, but did not practise it:

When once the Apostle Paul had posited universal love between men as the foundation of his Christian community, extreme intolerance on the part of Christendom towards those who remained outside it became the inevitable consequence.³²

Postmodernism may also be of great benefit to psychoanalysis, in the sense that it can be brought out of the blinkered closet into which it had retreated – it can form part of a multiplicity of discourses concerning the human self. We can see this enlargement of psychoanalysis in writers such as Adam Phillips, Christopher Bollas and Stephen Frosch, where we find that psychoanalysis is not seen as a monolithic set of truths which stand alone, but is connected to other disciplines. In other words, there is a kind of cultural leavening and broadening out so that the suffocating atmosphere of some narrow versions of psychoanalysis is removed. One can also see this in the rapprochements that are being made between formerly hostile psychological camps: it no longer seems shocking or exceptional that Freudians should refer to Jung, and vice versa.

The turn to Freud

The 1980s and 1990s saw some remarkable shifts in opinion towards Freud. There has been a barrage of fierce attacks on him, and on psychoanalysis. Freud was called an intellectual and scientific fraud, an emotional coward, a purveyor of mumbo-jumbo dressed up in scientific clothes, and so on. This attack mainly emanated from America. But other developments have gone on in relation to the status of Freud's ideas. A number of disciplines have turned more and more to Freud as a source of fertile and innovative ideas. For example, in place of the rather crude psychobiography which often used to go on under the name of 'psychoanalytic literary criticism', a number of critics have pointed out the importance of the text in psychoanalysis, and have suggested that psychoanalysis is a 'narratology' like literary criticism. That is, analysis

or therapy is very much concerned with the story told by the patient, and the therapist is concerned to help the patient tell that story, sometimes providing links where are gaps. In effect, there are several stories going on – the patient's, the therapist's, and perhaps a jointly constructed one. This transforms the relationship between psychoanalysis and criticism. Whereas formerly the analyst attempted to decode the underlying meaning of literary texts, now critics are able to point out the textual structures in analysis.³³

Other critics have made some brilliant observations on literature using psychoanalytic ideas. For example, feminist critics have been able to indicate how the repressed nature of women and femininity in literature has some unexpected expressions. For example, in relation to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* a number of critics have suggested that the 'madwoman in the attic' may represent the unconscious feelings of Jane Eyre herself, particular feelings of rage and sexuality. Bertha (Rochester's mad wife) appears whenever Jane has an emotional crisis – she tries to burn Rochester in his bed, her cries are often heard by Jane as she wanders through the house, finally, of course, she burns down the house and is killed.³⁴

Another example of the repressed feminine finding an underground expression can be found in Jane Austen's *Emma*, in which the heroine denies her own emotional and sexual needs, and tries to organize other people's amorous affairs. Thus the novel begins as Emma is fantasizing that she arranged the marriage of her friend and governess, Mrs Weston. Then she begins to look for a suitable suitor for her protégée Harriet Smith, and begins to fantasize about other characters, such as Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax. This projected sexuality is comical to the reader, who is aware that Emma is destined to be Mr Knightley's wife – but Emma is unaware of this, or at least denies it. Instead, her denied sexuality is projected onto others with disastrous and comic effects.

One can also point to the use of psychoanalytic ideas in film criticism – particularly with regard to the voyeuristic aspect of cinema and the role of women as 'images of castration'.³⁵ Feminism itself, after showing considerable hostility to Freud in the 1960s, began to find his ideas indispensable in the attempt to theorize about gender and sexuality.

One can also talk of a 'turn to Freud' within the world of psychotherapy itself. In the 1960s and 1970s the so-called 'New Therapies' began to arise in opposition to the perceived intellectuality and aridity of psychoanalysis. The cry was 'Against Freud' and there was much talk of 'emotional catharsis', turning to the neglected body, the spiritual dimension of therapy, and so on.

But the last decade has seen the reverse movement: many of these non-analytical therapies, such as gestalt, humanistic therapy, bodywork, and so on, have begun to look to psychoanalysis for certain important ideas. Many non-analytical training courses now demand considerable study by their students of Freudian and post-Freudian themes. One could argue that the anti-intellectual revolution ran out of steam, as people began to realize that one cannot simply throw Freud out of the window, since it was Freud who invented the window!

It is remarkable, therefore, that Freud's writings, which he began over a century ago, still arouse strong feelings of admiration and antipathy, and that his ideas are seen as indispensable by so many different disciplines. Some unexpected reconciliations have taken place – particularly that between feminism and psychoanalysis, and between Humanistic therapy and analysis.

Indeed, without being hagiographical, it is possible to make the claim that Freud is the most important thinker and the most important writer of the twentieth century. I have separated out these two aspects of Freud, for it strikes me that while Freud's ideas have been hugely influential, one also has to grapple with Freud the writer, who poured out a constant stream of theoretical schemata and revisions, clinical observations, cultural analyses, and so on. This written *oeuvre* was unique in the twentieth century. The only figures from the nineteenth century who are comparable in influence are Marx and Darwin, both of whose ideas also still arouse considerable passion. Freud would have been pleased and proud to be linked with Darwin, perhaps less so with Marx. Yet perhaps it is Marx who is the only comparable figure: both men invented systems of thought which have changed the way we think, and who continue to inspire some and appal others with their ideas.