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People as Artifacts in Freud or Rhetorical Weapons Fire Back

*Freud was obsessed with the ancient myth of Oedipus, mainly with the episode of Oedipus' encounter with the Sphinx. He surrounded himself with ancient artifacts representing the hybrid, and consequently monstrous being whose enigma he tried to answer all his life. Reading critically fragments from Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* I will try to analyze his rhetorical strategies, on the one hand, and the way in which they have been received by his commentators, on the other, in order to demonstrate that he was closer to a literary critic than to a scientific researcher. His major "discoveries" such as the interpretation of dreams, the theory of the Oedipal complex and infantile sexuality, the inquiry of the unconscious, use literature to substantiate his interpretations. I will also examine contradictions of his text and I will record its most authoritative critiques.*

Key words: *myth, the hybrid, the Oedipal complex, dreams, the unconscious*

Freud's work has caused contradictory reactions: it was acclaimed for what was considered to be revolutionary and it was blamed for its lack of scientific methods. In both cases, however, part of the focus was on Freud's interpretative language. Interestingly enough, Freud's style resembles his contemporary literary critics' style more than contemporary medical language. This may be explained by the fact that, before deciding to become a neurologist, he considered the idea of becoming a writer and/or a literary scholar. His reading was undoubtedly extensive. Nonetheless, his biographers, reviewers, and disciples have largely overstated his knowledge of ancient Greek and Latin, which came mainly from secondary sources. His major "discoveries" such as the interpretation of dreams, the theory of the Oedipal complex and infantile sexuality, the inquiry of the unconscious, use literature to substantiate his interpretations. By using literary examples he transforms both peculiarity of reality into logical development, and the uniqueness of each case into a continuous line of literary tradition, insinuating that there is a universal pattern which functions in literature as well as in real life. Juxtaposing real cases and literary characters, Freud mixed the registers of literary interpretation with the objective description of data. An analysis of fragments from Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* will put into evidence his rhetorical strategies and the way in which they have been received by other commentators. Cross-reading Freud's texts and his critics' remarks may lead to a potential meaning of his text, which might have been never intended, but which, as Freud himself might have said, might lay behind its textual manifestation.

1. The Interpretation of Dreams and its Climax

Published in 1900, *The Interpretation of Dreams* solidifies Freud's hermeneutic technique. Opening his book with "*Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo,*" a quotation from Virgil's *Aeneid*, which sounds like an ultimatum for mankind: "If I cannot bend the powers above my will, I will stir up Hades,"¹ Freud succeeded in creating contradictory expectations for something spectacular. Fully aware of the *suspense* generated by his quote,² he does not recontextualize its meaning in his work immediately. At the beginning of the second chapter, "The Method of Dream Interpretation," he explains the epigraph as an indication of his "conception of the dream:" "I am proposing to show that dreams are capable of interpretation; and any contributions to the solution of the problem which have already been discussed will emerge only as possible by-products in the accomplishment of my special task" (8). Having challenged his contemporaries' viewpoints, he continues:

... we have one of those not frequent cases where an ancient and stubbornly retained popular belief seems to have come nearer to the truth of the matter than the opinion of modern science. I must insist that the dream actually possess a meaning, and that a scientific method of dream-interpretation is possible (12).

In this context, the "ancient belief" becomes non-debatable since there is no dead-end irrespective of the path chosen: if one path may be closed, the other still remains possible. Like in Pascal's wager, there is nothing to lose. A secondary implication of using a famous, ancient motto refers to literature itself, which is indirectly, yet firmly, promoted to the level of uncontestable truth, identifiable with "tradition" and with an exhaustible reservoir of essential meanings. Literature becomes equal to experience and its unleashed imaginary powers similar to "undesired ideas." In order to explain the mechanism of "uncritical self-observation" he compares it to the "withdrawal of the watchers from the gates of intellect" in the process of literary creation that was described by Schiller in one of his letters to Körner from December 1788. The same way intellect imposes restrictions upon imagination, the same way resistance suppresses "undesired ideas." Irrespective of how extreme or insignificant they may appear initially, by connecting them, ideas may get surprising significance. At the superior level of interpretation, the psychoanalyst has to make ideas emerge from behind each segment of the dream and then he has to "conceive the dream from the outset, as something built up" (16). The reader deals with two almost complete overlaps: the first one between the writer and the dreamer who has to release his imagination, respectively his "thoughts behind" or "undesired ideas;" the second one between the writer

¹ In a more literal translation: "And if Heaven be inflexible, / Hell shall be unleashed," *The Aeneid*: Book 7, Line 312.

² Freud quoted Virgil from Georg Brandes who had quoted Virgil in his biography of Ferdinand Lassale.

and the psychoanalyst who has to make connections between ideas, which means to put them into a coherent creation.

The question is which instance corresponds to which at a final evaluation. When can the unity of the writer be transferred from the dreamer to the psychoanalyst? Is there a continuum between the last two? The result is that the dream, while “created” is simultaneously interpreted; it has been estranged from its initiator. The next step is to inquire to what extent is the interpreted dream a collaborative result and if the two parts have participated in its creation equally. To answer this question one should go back to Freud’s text:

“... he [the patient] is unable, as a rule, to fix upon anything in his psychic field of vision. I must first dissect the dream for him. ... it [the psychoanalyst’s interpretation] conceives the dream, from the outset, as something built up, as a conglomerate of psychic formations” (16).

Even the fact that the psychoanalyst has to compare his patients’ dreams with his own in order to have a stable exemplar is another deforming contribution of the external factor to the initial dream. The patient’s contribution is minimized drastically, while the psychoanalyst takes the lead and produces most of it.

In *Conversations 1943*, Wittgenstein places the psychoanalyst’s contribution to the patient’s dream at the level of coherent framing: “When a dream is interpreted we might say that it is fitted into a context in which it ceases to be puzzling. In a sense the dreamer re-dreams his dream in surroundings such that its aspect changes.” (13) He considers the interpretation to be a recontextualization and consequently an alteration of the original to the extent to which it is clarified. By clarification, Wittgenstein does not mean that the interpretation is correct, but that it is a hypothesis which might or might not be confirmed. The whole theory about interpretation is “a powerful mythology,” according to Wittgenstein.

Taking into account this premise, it is obvious that literature represents the main source of potential meanings when it comes to interpreting dreams. Freud constantly throws bits and pieces of literary allusions, references, quotes, but it is Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* which is the most important and extensive analysis of a literary work not only in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, but also in his entire oeuvre.

2. Freud’s *Oedipus*

Freud needed a universal argument for his theory of infantile sexuality according to which falling in love with the parent of opposite sex may be, in certain cases, a basis of subsequent neurosis. That is the turning point of his book where he changes his strategy; he does not use literature to back up his theory, but he tries to validate his theory to prove that the myth of Oedipus is universal so that afterwards he may go further and provide other very famous literary examples such as *Timon of Athens*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*. All these dramas are illustrations of typical anxiety-dreams. The typical anxiety-dreams allow him to define the father-son relationships from the point of view of the adult son, insinuating, however, that they are the result of the exposure to abnormal infantile sexuality. Moreover, he considers that the plot of the ancient tragedy can still move the public because it represents “the fulfillment of the wish of our childhood:

„It may be that we were all destined to direct out first sexual impulses towards our mothers, and our first impulses of hatred and violence towards our fathers; our dreams convince us that we were. ... We recoil from the person for whom this primitive wish of our childhood has been fulfilled with all the force of the repression which these wishes have undergone in our minds since childhood. AS the poet brings the guilt of Oedipus to light by his investigations, he forces us to become aware of our own inner selves, in which the same impulses are still extant, even though they are repressed” (161).

Several layers of identification are meant to form an all-inclusive group of refined people who, because they are knowledgeable of their natural limitations and take them as they are, can face their destiny by listening to their “inner voice” (maybe the equivalent of Platonic *daimon* or the “instinctual drive”):

1. modern public may identify with the Greek public since they have been moved by the same “conflict between fate and human will” (161).

2. every person may identify with Oedipus since the latter fulfilled “*our* wishes of *our* childhood;” *nota bene*: Freud uses the inclusive form of the first person pronoun to suggest that there is a general pattern of collective reactions, desires, and dreams, and there is no other way out but that professed by him. The text recalls the medieval allegory of *Everyman* in which abstract concepts are represented as characters; his Oedipus is such an allegory of *Everyman*, who represents everybody’s repressed desires allegorically as a memento that everybody may re-enact the tragedy.

3. Freud the psychoanalyst identifies with Freud the boy whose memory the first Freud recovered as the result of self-analysis; Freud identifies with everybody who identifies with Oedipus, and finally identifies with modern and Greek public.

It is not excessive to presume that Freud considered himself a Sophocles of his age who succeeded in revealing deep incidents covered by repression. The 1906 episode narrated by Jones in *Sigmund Freud. Life and Work* corroborates this assumption. When Freud was presented with the medallion whose obverse showed Oedipus solving the riddle of the sphinx around which the following line from Sophocles’ tragedy was inscribed: “Who resolved the dark enigma, noblest champion and most wise,” he might have shared one of his daydreams in which the very words on the pendant were inscribed on his bust exhibited at the University of Vienna. As this episode points out, for Freud there is no distinction between reality and myth, patients and fictional characters, probability and existence. In this way, he eliminated the distinctions between individuals (mankind becomes a homogeneous group), and implicitly between their different symbolic languages. He also eliminated the deontological problem of asking for patients’ consent to have their unconscious revealed.

The tragedy of ironical fate is another aspect of life and concurrent with it. What Freud did not explain is why only therapists are able to interpret his dreams, while the others are not. As Philip Rieff writes in his study, “The Tactics of Interpretation,” “Nobody psychoanalyzed the first psychoanalyst” (52). Rieff draws attention to the contradiction that, in spite of the fact that Freud justified his theory by defining symbolism of dreams as part of the unconscious, he still considered that he was right when he claimed that he submerged into his own unconscious. Another contradiction is how Freud could reconstruct the most profound and authentic layer of memory from repressed thoughts, generic symbols, irrational emotions, lack of logic without denaturing them by subduing them to an external logic, a schematic interpretation suitable for everybody. Paradoxically, although he did not include

himself in the same homogenous group who did not have access to their unconscious, he still considered himself similar to the others enough to choose his own experiences as an exemplar relevant for the rest. He created an arbitrary language whose dictionary was solely in his hands. *Oedipus Rex* from the *Interpretation of Dreams* is Freud's own tragedy about the originally impure ontology of being in which the germs of the would-be psychoneurotics are stored without eventually becoming actual in each single case.

3. Critiques of Freud's Interpretation

Robert Wilcocks in "Oedipus Meets the Sphinx: the 'Discovery' and the Case of 'Dora'" underlines Freud's "rhetorical triumph" (183). As Rieff did previously when he disclosed Freud's "hermeneutical skills," Wilcocks focuses alternatively on language norms and Freud's alterations in order to demonstrate its unsoundness. He also scrutinizes two positive critiques by Michel Foucault and Marthe Robert to see what part of Freud's text echoed in their own. For Foucault, the key words were "the discovery of the Oedipus complex" and "[the] uncovering of Dora's desire," while for Robert, "an infallible method of understanding the enigma of every individual life." Both authors refer back to the *Interpretation of Dreams* appreciatively and this stirred Wilcocks curiosity to look for their reasons of admiration, others than rhetoric. He peruses the letters between Freud and Fliess, which contain important information about the preliminary stages of the work and its process of documentation. One of them (letter from October 1897) is particularly interesting because of the word-choice. Freud preferred the Latin terms to the more prosaic German for "mother" and "naked" to distinguish his discourse from Fliess' report about his son. Freud's text, although part of a letter sounds more "scientific" because of the Latin and still preserves the confessional tone through which he mimicked past memories and, at the same time, enumerated, coincidentally (sic!), all the relevant details from Fliess' letter: "my libido to *matrem* was awakened, namely, on the occasion of a journey with her from Leipzig to Vienna, during which ... there might have been an opportunity of seeing her *nudam*" (185). Freud based his theory on what Wilcocks calls "neurologically impossible notions:" erection of a male infant as result of sexual fantasies, a dream quotient similar to Oedipus' story, and infantile amnesia as a result of repression. Wilcocks is impressed with Freud's ability of manipulating language and of creating evidence for his theory as a "priceless example of the triumph of the literary over the scientific" (198).

Deconstructing Freud's text, Wilcocks asks how much and how accurately *Oedipus Rex* was involved in his theory. As there is no mention of *Oedipus Rex*, the play, in any of the letters exchanged by Fliess and Freud, he supposes that when he was conceiving and writing *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud did not see any of the performances staged at that time in Vienna. In spite of the fact that Wilcocks is often very perceptive, he also usually overstates his points. He, for example, makes the same mistake Freud did when he assumes that Freud did not have fresh knowledge about Oedipus because he did not see the play. Wilcocks is also selective when he quotes from the Freud-Fliess correspondence and omits the one from March 1898 in which Freud admitted that he needed a closer look at the Oedipus myth: "Comments on *Oedipus the King*, the talisman folk tale, and possibly *Hamlet*, will find their place. I must read up on the Oedipus legend – do not know yet where".

A parenthesis should be open to entangle the intricate textual fabric woven around Freud's text. The previous quote comes from Robin Mitchell-Boyask's article, "Freud's Reading Classical Literature." Boyask replaced Mason's translation of "fairy tale" with "folk tale" and "Oedipus Rex" with "Oedipus the King" considering that the first one would meet Freud's intentions, and that the second one would be the correct translation of the German version of the title used by Freud. Besides these modifications, Boyask draws attention to Mason's note where he mentions the fact that Freud owned a copy of Leopold Constans' *La Légende d'Oedipe: Étudiée dans l'antiquité, au moyen âge et dans les temps modernes en particulier dans le Roman de Thèbes*.³ More inclined to take Freud's side as regards his intellectual coverage and deep understanding of the philological aspects, Boyask digs into the psychoanalyst's library and draws an intertextual map of his readings. Closing the parenthesis, one has to recognize that in spite of the lack of real clinical experiments Freud was well read. Books mentioned during the period when he worked on the *Interpretation of Dreams* are: Jakob Burckhardt's *History of Greek Civilization*, Theodor Gomperz' *Griechische Denker der Antiken Philosophien*, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Mollendorf's *Hisotry of Classical Scholarship*, Paul Friedlander's *Die Antike*, to mention only the most important and closest to Oedipus.

In addition to the Oedipus myth, Wilcocks analyzes Dora's case and underlines Freud's "narrative powers" (204), more obvious in the sections which precede and follow the above-analyzed part.

4. Lacan's Reading

"Of the Subject of Certainty" reconsiders Freud's "hermeneutical skills" positively; nonetheless, Lacan's reading, surprisingly, supports Wilcocks' conclusions. Starting from a different premise, Lacan defines the unconscious as pre-ontological and unrealized, meaning that it is not yet actual. What was unacceptable from Wilcocks' point of view becomes an astute insight into the "lower world" (59) for Lacan. Desire is the key concept for Lacan; it is the "indestructible desire" which resists time and may lead to the unconscious. Interpreting the Latin motto of the *Interpretation of Dreams* completely unexpectedly, Lacan himself uses "hermeneutical skills" to score against the non-Freudians. According to Lacan, the goal of Freud was not to solve any psychological puzzle, but to bring doubt about any possible solution. Unlike the other critics of Freud, Lacan thinks that the psychoanalyst was aware of the inconsistency of his theory about father-son relationships and their representations in dreams:

The father, the Name-of-the-Father, sustains the structure of desire with the structure of the law – but the inheritance of the father of that which Kierkegaard designates for us, namely, his sin. ... Everything is within reach, emerging, in this example that Freud places here in order to indicate in some way that he does not exploit it, that he appreciates it, that he weighs it, savours it. It is

³ The book was published in Paris by Maissonneuve in 1881. The volume has multiple passages marked by Freud, among which those referring to Oedipus' name, Greek sources of the myth, prophecies, the riddle of the Sphinx, Jocasta's age, and Laius' homosexual problems.

from this most fascinating point that he deflects our attention, and embarks on a discussion concerning the forgetting of the dream, and the value of its transmission by the subject (63).

Approaching the matter from a Cartesian perspective, according to which Freud was not trying to establish what was truth, but what was certainty. Lacan twists the whole context of the son's dream about burning into a sophistic demonstration whose conclusion is that the only certain thing is to be doubtful: "*I am not sure, I doubt*" (64).

5. The Final Stroke: Cioffi

The most consistent attack against Freud comes from Frank Cioffi, mainly from his volume *Freud and the Question of Pseudoscience*. He summarizes critiques which have demystified Freud's pretensions of scientific research. Regarding *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Cioffi raises the same question about "Freudian hermeneutics" (51). He makes a critique of the Freudian critique and looks for breaks not only in Freud's theory but also in his commentators' arguments. David Sachs is one of the many whose reading of Freud is minutely examined. Although Sachs admits that the interpretation of symbols recurrent in dreams was not gathered from clinical data, but from literature, he still considers them valid. Cioffi does not allow either the enticing text of Freud or the persuasive metatext of Sachs to make him lose his focus. He attacks Freud with his own weapons by quoting Freud who said that sometimes a cigar is simply a cigar, immediately after he provided Freud's interpretation of Oedipus blindness as a symbol of castration. Pursuing Freud's technique of quoting from literature, Cioffi, in his turn, encloses several examples as counterarguments; his excerpts come from Thomas Mann, George Orwell, Italo Svevo, and Aldous Huxley.

In the same vein, Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen in "Self-Seduced," one of his contributions to the collective volume *Unauthorized Freud* notices the alluring power of the mythical name and story from which Freud benefited a lot: "the Oedipal complex is a hypnotic myth, superimposed on the no less hypnotic myth of 'infantile seduction,' and it serves no purpose whatsoever to oppose one myth to the other, for they are intrinsically bound together" (53). Paradoxically, the most famous of Freud's complexes fascinated Freud equally. As Borch-Jacobsen showed in his study, Freud conceived his "theory" both for explaining his patients' and also for "excusing the method that had provoked them."

There is no doubt that Freud indulged himself in identifying with the wisest character of world literature, Oedipus, even if that meant to expose himself to the same treatment his patients had to take and to trap himself in his own web.

6. Sphinxes on the Table *versus* the Oedipus Complex

In the years after the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* he started collecting archeological relics. By the time he started working on *Three Essays on The Theory of Sex* in 1905, Freud's desk had already been filled up with statues which, according to Hilda Doolittle's memoirs, "helped stabilize the evanescent idea, or kept it from escaping altogether" (175). There were several representations of the Sphinx around when he was

writing *The Study of Infantile Sexuality* in which one of the sections is entitled “The Riddle of the Sphinx.” He collected them on the occasion of his trip to Greece in the summer of 1904. Janine Burke, in her biographically informed book *The Sphinx on the Table*, appreciated that by acquiring different artifacts representing the same mythical character, Freud tried to “explore various meanings” (203). Two terracotta Sphinxes, one amulet, and one Athenian vase depicting Oedipus facing the Sphinx continuously actualized the dilemmatic nature of the Sphinx. Partially rewriting the myth to fit his purpose, he transformed the question about the ages of man into the inquiry about the spring of human life and infant sexuality:

The menace to the conditions of his existence through the actual or expected arrival of a new child, the fear of losing care and love which is connected with this event, cause the child to become thoughtful and sagacious. Corresponding with the history of this awakening, the first problem with which it occupies itself is not the question as to the difference between sexes, but the riddle: Where do children come from? In a distorted form, which can easily be unraveled. This is the same riddle which was proposed by the Theban Sphinx. The fact of the two sexes is usually first accepted by the child without struggle and hesitation. It is quite natural for the male child to presuppose in all persons it knows a genital like his own, and to find it impossible to harmonize the lack of it with his conception of others (54-55).

His writings became more a reflection of the immobile but permanently staring statues on his desk than a scientific investigation of the fluctuant series of patients or their substantially inconsistent confessions which did not provide him the expected coherence.

Before leaving Vienna for London in 1938, his collection counted about 2500 pieces. In spite of the fact that he could not take his entire collection and library when he had to move to London and he was forced to sell or give up some of his valuable items, Freud never separated from his favorite Greek pieces, among which the Sphinx was the most important. Tens of little statuettes were always surrounding him while writing (see Max Pollak’s portrait of Freud). This claustrophobic environment challenged him visually and intellectually whenever he raised his eyes from the paper. He did not allow himself to have another option but resting his thoughts on these antique artifacts.

Opening the gates of Hell while promising Heaven, Freud rewrote the lives of his patients, and finally tried to control them as if they were voiceless and powerless containers of unshared desires, repressed thoughts, and perverse dreams. As Rohde and Nietzsche destroyed the preconceived idea that the Greek culture represented the perfect and harmonious world by adding the Dionysian element as a counterbalance, Freud destroyed the endless complexity of individuals reducing them to his own obsessions. Mirroring himself into the others so skillfully, he “infested” the world with his fictitious, but nevertheless intriguing image.

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Max Pollak, **Sigmund Freud at his desk**, 1914, the Freud Museum, London

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