

## FROM RHETORIC TO DECONSTRUCTION

### Lecture Fifteen: The Psychological Approach (1)

Literature is, by definition, “psychological”; the most influential psychologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., Freud, Jung and Lacan, aware of this and use it to demonstrate their doctrines.

For context: interest in psychology intensified by crisis of liberalism, culminating in Britain and United States in 1930s. Intellectual and spiritual disorientation to be countered, liberal values to be salvaged with the help of Marxism and Freudianism (perceived as interpretations of the social and the personal, respectively). Adopted by many as substitute religions.

#### Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)

Study of personality as it is shaped by the interplay of instincts/drives and experience. Basic concepts: **id**, **ego**, **super-ego**.

**Id**: lawless, driven by desire to have its needs gratified without restrictions.

**Ego**: “the coherent organization of the mental processes”; adjusts, by repression, what is desired to what is possible; conscious and unconscious domains of the mind; part of the ego belongs to the unconscious, which is the domain of repressed desires.

**Super-ego** (ego ideal): guardian of norms (conscience: a sense of guilt over violations of rules) and ideals.

Repression: almost always sexual in nature; it occurs when sexual energies are misdirected or denied a natural outlet. The “sexual drive,” the libido of the individual, is either expended in sexual activity or turned into ego-libido to find useful applications in areas of life other than the sexual, such as artistic creation. Libidinal energies channelled into non-sexual activities: sublimation.

Neurosis: nervous and mental disorders (ranging from slips of the tongue to pathological fixations: hysteria, hallucinations, etc.) are traceable to unsuccessful or incomplete repression. Psychoanalysis explores neurotic person’s unconscious (jealousy & hatred in familial relations; death-wish; incestuous desire: the Oedipus complex; castration fear & penis envy), uncovers the causes of neurosis, presents apparently irrational behaviour in rational terms and proposes therapy.

Dreams: a shortcut to the unconscious; seen as wish-fulfilment; object of repression enacted; dream-thoughts taking visual form. Images turned into symbols: “the dream makes use of such symbolizations as are to be found ready-made in unconscious thinking”; symbols in dreams not subject to the censorship of the ego. Like literary symbols, they may have the same meaning whenever they occur or may be put to variable uses, depending on the context. Wish-fulfilment like this occurs in the waking life as well.

Typical symbols in dreams: people in positions of authority may represent one’s parents or may function as father figures; elongated objects (sticks, tree-trunks, umbrellas, knives, daggers, etc.) stand for the male, small boxes, chests, ovens, for the female sexual organ; buildings, stairs and shafts have erotic associations—a male patient’s dream of moving in an upholstered staircase was translated by Freud into a representation of the sexual act itself. Persons signify the male, landscapes—a valley, for example—the female genitals.

#### Freud and literature:

(a) Freudian insights anticipated/borne out in the work of Classical, proto-modern and modern writers. *Oedipus the King*, *Hamlet* (the Oedipus complex)—discussed by Freud himself; Melville’s fiction (*Moby-Dick*, “The Tartarus of Maids,” *Billy Budd*), on account of scenes involving slippery, pulpy material, treated by Freudians as proof of the author’s homoerotic tendencies; open expressions of male friendship in Whitman’s “Calamus” poems taken for evidence of homoeroticism; deliberate (?) use of Oedipal element in D. H. Lawrence (*Sons and Lovers*); the mapping of consciousness by Joyce (*Ulysses*) and Woolf (*Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*). NB. The relevance of William James (stream of consciousness).

Henry James’s “The Turn of the Screw” (1899) and Joseph Conrad’s “The Secret Sharer” (1910) as case studies of Freudian reading of literature.

(b) the use of the Freudian theory in biographies: Gustav Morf on *Joseph Conrad*; Leon Edel on *Henry James*; Quentin Bell on *Virginia Woolf*.

For further particulars, go to *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900); *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* (1905); *The Ego and the Id* (1923); *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930).

**Carl Gustav Jung** (1875-1961)

A disciple of Freud, but split away from him. Freud's psychology is medical, of the person; Jung's is impersonal.

Conscious and unconscious part of the psyche = the self; unconscious processes reveal themselves in the conscious domain through dreams. The conscious personality or persona (a make-believe individuality, a role) is an arbitrary segment of the collective psyche; the latter expresses itself through the persona. Personal and collective unconscious.

The collective unconscious: absolute, lies deep underneath the personal unconscious, is untouched by personal experience→supra-individual psychic activity. Preserves patterns inherited from the earliest ages of evolution, which contain all our "ancestral experience," are timeless, instinctual and common to all human beings and, maybe, even to animals→archetypes. Archetypes are activated when a situation arises to which they correspond (demonstrated for Jung by revival of archaic, pre-Christian symbolism, mass hysteria, etc. in interwar Italy and Germany). Animus: the male element in the collective unconscious of women; anima: the female element in collective unconscious of men. (Relate it to male and female use of language in writing as described by V. Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*.)

For Jung (see his "Psychology and Literature" [1932]) literature is

- (a) psychological, as, for instance, well-written, psychologically accurate novels. "Considered as a self-contained whole, such a novel explains itself" (= has no interest for the psychologist);
- (b) visionary, that is, "[a]n exciting narrative that is quite devoid of psychological intentions is just what interests the psychologist most"; the second part of *Faust* or *Moby-Dick*, "the greatest American novel."

The value of vision: its object lies beyond the conscious experience but is no less real than the conscious experience. "[I]t cannot be doubted that the vision is a genuine primordial experience, no matter what the rationalists may say." But it is amorphous; the poet gives it form by turning to myth, "a body of lore concerning the things that lie beyond man's earthly existence and of wise rules of conduct." "[W]hat appears in the vision is the collective unconscious." "Great poetry draws its strength from the life of mankind"→"[w]henver the collective unconscious becomes a living experience and is brought to bear upon the conscious outlook of an age, this event is a creative act which is of importance for a whole epoch. A work of art is produced that may truthfully be called a message to generations of men."

Jung's view of history and of the function of literature rests on Romantic foundations. Consider:

- great literature: vision and as such an instrument in overcoming the limitations of its age;
- the writer, by letting the collective unconscious speak through him, "lends expression to the unspoken desire of his times and shows the way, by word or deed, to its fulfilment";
- the artist is one of the personifications of the heroic ideal: he "is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purposes through him."

Archetypal criticism springing up under the influence of Jung. Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination* (1934); Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957); in third essay "Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths" establishes "four narrative pregeneric elements of literature" called "mythoi or generic plots," associated these with the cycles of the seasons (spring: comedy, summer: romance, autumn: tragedy, winter: irony and satire).

For more, see "The Structure of the Psyche" (1928); "'Ulysses': A Monologue" (1932); "The Concept of the Collective Unconscious" (1936).

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For comparison, this is how, in 1868, Walter Pater described the Mona Lisa of Leonardo (in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* [1873]) as representing the spirit of its age (Hegel's Zeitgeist, der Geist der Zeit):

like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands. The fancy of a perpetual life sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea.