

FREUDIAN TEXT AS A CHALLENGE FOR EMPIRICAL STUDY OF LITERATURE

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There is no doubt that Freud's attention is directed to study the characters' psychological contents and mechanism hidden in their background, nearly giving up to interpret the relationship between the form and meaning. *"I have often observed that the subject-matter of works of art has a stronger attraction for me than their formal and technical qualities, though to the artist their value lies first and foremost in these latter. I am unable rightly to appreciate many of methods used and the effect obtained in art "* (Freud, 253, -1914-). For Freud the work of art is only life modell-based, and not text- or picture modell based. Its referential or mimetic role is of primary importance. But we do not forget that even the works of art are interwoven with human references thoroughly which according to their programs do not mirror the nature. They also have some cognitive value. (see Lamarque és Olsen, 1994:438).

Freud considers the art rather a confession than an expression and from that point of view there is no difference as compared to the average man's symptoms (vö.Rieff, 1959:132). *"But just as all neurotic symptoms, and, for that matter, dreams, are capable of being 'over-interpreted' and indeed need to be, if they are to be fully understood, so all genuine creative writings are the product of more than a single motive and more than a single impulse in the poet's mind, and are open more than a single interpretation"* (Freud, 368, -1900-). If Freud intention is to show a way for a more flexible, multilevelled interpretation than it has been usual, its significance is obvious. It is liberating and inspirative to see that the manifest meaning is full of latent meanings and you can reach them by analyzing symbols, displacements and condensations caused by repression. But this does not mean that everything becomes only interpretation, that is a prey of the interpreter's guesses. From that point of view the psychologist has to be exceptionally cautious. To find at any price the unexpectedly expected interpretations Freud's effect can arouse arbitrariness, at the same time schematism.

As a matter of fact, the relativization of interpretation is foreign to Freud's nature. While on the one hand he is presenting his idea of 'over-interpretation', on the other hand he expresses

that the seemingly inexhaustible abundance of the problems and situations described by the artist can be reduced to very limited number of "*ancestral motives*" coming from the repressed experiences of childhood (Zweig, 1993:115, - Freud, 1926-). And by the way of Hamlet Freud put down even more categorically: "*I have followed the literature of psychoanalysis closely, and I accept its claim that it was not until the material of tragedy had been traced back to the Oedipus theme that the mystery of its effect was at last explained. But before this was done, what a mass of differing and contradictory interpretative attempts, what a variety of opinions about the hero's character and the dramatist's intentions! (...) And how many of these interpretations leave us cold! – so cold that they do nothing to explain the effect of the play (...)*" (Freud, 255, - 1914-).

Thus Freud says that only his interpretation is correct and any former ones have been misleading. That is why further on it is useless to try any different, non-psychoanalytical interpretations, as one thing is certain about them, namely, they will not be able to help us to understand a work of art. In a paradox way Freud thinks of the interpretation of the multilevelled psychological structure, of the different strata of the ego leading into one direction. This is guarantee of disclosing *the* meaning. In this respect Freud is categorically dogmatic although his idea is radically new, and the form of the Freudian text itself in which among others he has presented his related ideas is far from being categorical. Its peculiarity is an intermediate – if you wish, postmodern – state mostly within the same text which increases the Freudian challenge for empirical study of literature.

In postmodern literature (and in postmodern philosophy and perhaps in some sciences) and in postmodern taste, too, the borderlines between fictitious and nonfictitious are blurred, as a sign of changes in social thought (Geertz, 1983). My standpoint is that some pieces or parts of Freud's works basically strive to satisfy the criteria of a scientific product in so far as they are special texts built on contradiction-free abstract conceptual-logical thinking to grasp universally valid, general connections (rules, trends, mechanisms) as much as it is possible under the given circumstances of scientific knowledge. At the same time other pieces or parts are, however, much closer to literary fictions, if the stress is on creating a good, interesting, believable and illuminating story, on portraying individual forms, situations and events. They are vividly dramatic, they want to go to the generalizable, literally in an exemplary: example-giving and allusive way.

While some scholars in the humanities are rather tolerant towards Freud's unusual position between arts and science, fiction and nonfiction, narration and nonnarration, and are inclined to highly appreciate it, some others consider it totally unacceptable. Certainly, if we wish to know the extent to which we can speak of Freudianism's effect, and especially its literary-artistic related areas beyond the circle of experts whose work it is to set forth their own standpoints, some empirical study is necessary.

Now I am presenting a part of such a study in which I have investigated the understanding of Freud's illustrious work on Leonardo. In the opposition with Freud's first case studies there is another kind in which the protagonist is world famous (artist) for some centuries and so the raw material is well-known. How can you prepare a case study which is completely different from all the former writings when you talk about the subject of such a case? That was Freud's problem in connection with Leonardo. And he solved it in a fascinating way building his whole narration upon Leonardo's extraordinarily early childhood memory about a vulture poking his lip by her tail again and again. Although I would be inclined to follow Freud and analyze how he exploits the insufficiencies in reliable data of Leonardo's life to presenting an astonishingly original story with deeply dramatic turns, now is enough to say that his study starts from Leonardo's phantasy which gives a good opportunity for rather a free Freudian phantasy-work, nevertheless one of the best Leonardo's experts admits some of Freud's "superb intuitions" and highly appreciates some of his painting interpretations, "either it is true or not" (Clark, 1976). There is also a real Freudian specialty as at the end of his work, the author of a literary narrative fiction becomes an author of a nonliterary nonnarrative nonfiction, that is, of a scientific text, clarifying precisely why Leonardo cannot be considered a neurotic and indicating the serious limits of psychoanalysis when explaining artistic talent.

In Freud's *Leonardo* the key component is Leonardo's relationship with his mother. Freud put on record that he used a "discovery" in Mereshkovsky's biographical novel (1912), namely that the latter's identification of a certain Katherine as Leonardo's mother. Although Freud (1985a:197) mentioned that according to an expert this person was only a maid-servant, he took his lead from the Russian writer, having said that the novelist's interpretation "*cannot be put to the proof, but it can claim so much inner probability*" that it could be accepted "*as correct*".

Therefore, for comparison, I have used some parts of Freud's text and some parts of Mereshkovsky's of similar subject-matter and length (about 1700-1700 words, i.e. I could now check the effect of relatively long texts). Each deals with two themes. The first is Leonardo and Mona Lisa, the second Leonardo as a researcher-inventor. Narratologically, however, the differences between the texts are significant. At the beginning Freud presents a short narrative taken from Leonardo himself; then Freud comments in a narrative form on the relationship between the baby Leonardo and his mother, preparing the way for the painting of a Freudian story about *Mona Lisa* and *St Anne with Two Others* (the Madonna and child). The reader's attention is directed either to Leonardo, or to Mona Lisa, or to *Mona Lisa*, then to *St Anne...*, or to Leonardo's mother, or rather to his two mothers, i.e., to the interaction between Leonardo and the others. Finally, the interpretation of the enigmatic smile follows, a surprising but convincing explanation embedded in a story instead of a long description and speculation. The second part deals with the interaction between Leonardo and his father to explain Leonardo's infantilism, playfulness and instinct for discovery. The text has 13 passages; each is a tiny narrative and its hero is always Leonardo. This part of the text is less spectacular and less rich in happenings than the first. The narrator's hypotheses and commentaries appear more obviously. With rare exceptions the whole text is presented in the 3rd person singular by an omniscient narrator.

In the opposition to this, in the first part of Mereshkovsky's text the happenings take place from the point of view of Leonardo's student, briefly interrupted by Leonardo's inner speech; then only Leonardo and Mona Lisa remain on the scene. In their dialogues Leonardo's point of view is dominant, reflecting their relationship and his situation. In the second part Leonardo's point of view determines how he reacts, either in the first or third person singular, to his student's delirious words: the latter had moratally injured himself having tested a half-ready flying apparatus.

69 well-motivated secondary-school students yet to take their school matriculation examinations (average age 17 1/2; 23 males, 27 females) took part in the study.

The texts were unfamiliar for the subjects. Half of the subjects read one, the other half the other text. After a thorough reading of the first part, the subjects judged on seven-point scales the degree to which the Leonardo in the text was good-bad, enchanting-repulsive, emotionally rich-emotionally impoverished; the degree to which they gained insight into

Leonardo's feeling and thinking, the degree to which had they been Leonardo, they would have behaved as he behaved, the degree to which they felt admiration for Leonardo, the degree to which they felt pity towards him, the degree to which they were surprised by the text; and the degree to which the content of the text was nonfiction-fiction; and the degree to which the text was readable-unreadable.

Then following the second part they replied to the same questions again, and decided whether the full text was of "one genre" or of "two or more genres." According to the instructions, a text was of one genre if it fitted into just one given category, for instance into drama and nothing else. A text was of two or more genres if it consisted of a combination of a minimum two genres, for instance drama and report. When the subjects underlined either one genre or two or more genres, they could choose drama, essay, novel, dissertation, report, or short story, depending on their earlier responses: the one given category or a composite of two or more categories.

The order of the texts, the questionnaires and even the items were at random, except the last questionnaire in which only the order of the items was at random.

Here I am only concentrating on the results of the categorisation. With Freud's text essay and dissertation were correct out of the alternatives based on a narrow (rigid) categorization. In case of one genre the frequencies of responses between correct and incorrect categories did not differ significantly (Table 1, see below). But based on a wider categorization, novel and short story were acceptable as well. In case of one genre the frequencies of responses between correct and incorrect categories differed significantly ($p < .05$). The correct responses were in the majority. Based on a narrow categorization in case of two or more genres, the correct and incorrect categories did not differ significantly between the frequencies of responses; based on a wider categorization the difference was strikingly significant ($p < .001$). The correct responses were in the majority. And, the proportion of narrative and expository texts did not differ significantly.

With Mereshkovsky's texts, short story and novel categories were acceptable. In case of one genre the frequencies of responses between correct and incorrect categories were significant ($p < .001$). The correct responses were in a striking majority. In case of two or more genres the correct and incorrect categories between the frequencies of responses were not significant, but computing all the correct and incorrect responses, the difference was

significant. The correct responses were in the majority ($p < .05$). The proportion of narrative categories was decisive as compared to that of the others.

The total frequency of responses could not be shown by any difference between the two texts, but the inner proportions were strikingly different. With Freud's text, short story and novel amounted to 41 per cent, with Mereshkovsky's 71 per cent of the total frequency; the proportion of dissertation and essay was 54 per cent as compared to 19 per cent.

Table 1

Frequencies of categories

Freud's text

	One genre	Two or more genres	Total
Novel	0	4	4
Short story	3	20	23
Dissertation	5	17	22
Essay	1	12	13
Report	1	1	2
Drama	0	1	1
Total	10	55	65

Mereshkovsky's text

	One genre	Two or more genres	Total
Novel	7	11	18
Short story	8	15	23
Dissertation	0	6	6
Essay	0	5	5
Report	0	1	1
Drama	0	5	5
Total	15	43	58

The task of categorization with Freud's text was more difficult than that with Mereshkovsky's. Freud's text was of two or more genres. While with Mereshkovsky's text the frequency of the responses which categorized it as an expository text as opposed to a literary narrative was relatively small, with Freud's text the frequency of expository genre categorization was much greater, although the proportion of narrative genre categorization was not lower. In spite of the fact that Mereshkovsky's text was identified as a literary narrative by its readers to a greater extent than the Freudian text by its readers, the readers of Freud's text also saw it as a literary narrative to a significant degree. That is, without any hint they perceived that Freud's text was a mixed type which satisfied the demands of various genres not usually fitting in with each other. It cannot be said that the subjects who read Freud's text categorized it incorrectly to a greater extent than did the readers of the Mereshkovsky text.

At the end of his *Leonardo* Freud remarked: "*If in making these statements I have provoked the criticism, even from friends of psychoanalysis and from those who are experts in it, that I have merely written a psychoanalytical novel, I shall reply that I am far from overestimating the certainty of these results*" (Freud, 1985a:228). As a matter of fact, our results showed that not only the friends/experts judged his work to be a literary narrative, but that our naive readers were also able to see his work an expository-scientific text. Maybe Freud would not be dissatisfied by these findings.

Freud's life-theme, motivation and cognitive style all contributed to establish the only psychological system which in its complexity, significance and tragic content could compete with the psychological knowledge accumulated in literature (Trilling, 1953). It is quite clear why Popper (1963) is not enchanted by these features and considers the lack of falsification unacceptable. However, a theory cannot be rejected merely on the criteria of falsification, but only if it is unable to promote further academic discussion (Cosin, Freeman and Freeman, 1982). From this point of view Freud is inexhaustible: his ability to stimulate is closely connected with his full and irrefutable power of portrayal in his own way he described Man as a being beset by conflicts just as Shakespeare or Dostoevsky did. No matter how, the Freudian text sets his/her reader before an almost impossible task: as it is usual with a nonliterary (non)narrative nonfiction his/her reader's attitude to be an easy believer should be eliminated, only by accepting that is verified, at the same time, simultaneously as it is usual with a literary narrative fiction his/her disbelief should be willingly suspended.

The study is a part of a project about the comparative study on literary and Freudian text processing. See Halász, L. Freud: Between fiction and nonfiction. In F. Pereira (ed.), *Literature and Psychoanalysis*. Lisbon: Instituto Superior de Psicologia Aplicada. 1992. 15-23; Freudian text – historical text. In F. Pereira (ed.), *Literature and Psychoanalysis*. Lisbon: Instituto Superior de Psicologia Aplicada. 1996. 11-17; Psychoanalysis and literature, as seen by undergraduates. In F. Pereira (ed.), *Literature and Psychoanalysis*. Lisbon: Instituto Superior de Psicologia Aplicada. 1999. 245-260; Reception of different ‘genres’ of Freudian texts. In F. Pereira (ed.), *Literature and Psychoanalysis*. Lisbon: Instituto Superior de Psicologia Aplicada. 2001. 13-26; A comparative study on literary and Freudian text processing. In F. Pereira (ed.), *Literature and Psychoanalysis*. Lisbon: Instituto Superior de Psicologia Aplicada. 2002. 3-28.

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