

# Introduction: Speculations of the Unconscious: Encounters between Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Literature and the Arts

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The unconscious (*das Unbewusste*; etymologically, that which is unknown) is a relatively modern concept that naturalized areas of the unknown previously explored by literature, mythology, and metaphysics. Each in their own domain, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche, the three ‘masters of suspicion’ (according to Paul Ricoeur), debunked the hubristic claims of modern rational consciousness, exposing its social, existential and psychological grey zones.<sup>1</sup> Inspired by, yet critiquing humanity’s confidence in the power of reason, their acknowledgement of the limits of the Enlightenment is emblemized in Freud’s charting of the conflictual relations between the orderly ego and the unruly id.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud characterized the unconscious as ‘inaccessible’ and ‘incomprehensible’.<sup>2</sup> Building on Freud’s structural topology, several strands of psychoanalysis derived from Freud’s structural topology have sought to expand on his discovery of the psyche’s unconscious dimension, from Anna Freud, Melanie Klein and Didier Anzieu, to Jacques Lacan, Jean Laplanche, Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, or Slavoj Žižek, among others. The impact of Freud’s discovery has also been registered in trauma theory, by scholars such as Dori Laub, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dominick LaCapra, as well as in literary and film theorists of various persuasions.<sup>3</sup> In the wake of Shoshana Felman’s epoch-making 1977 issue of *Yale French Studies* titled ‘Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading Otherwise’,<sup>4</sup> there have been many attempts to keep up the critical spirit of an alternative ‘analysis’ of literary texts.

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<sup>1</sup> We use here Paul Ricoeur’s phrase from *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977 [1965]), where he identified Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as the three ‘masters of suspicion’ (32).

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ (1920), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 18 (London: Hogarth, 1955), 7; 15.

<sup>3</sup> For a presentation of the way in which critical theory used and engaged with psychoanalysis, see Jon Mills and Daniel Burston’s edited collection *Critical Theory and Psychoanalysis: From the Frankfurt School to Contemporary Critique* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> See Shoshana Felman, ‘To Open the Question’, *Yale French Studies* 55-6: ‘Literature and Psychoanalysis. The Question of Reading: Otherwise’ (1977): 5-10.

In tune with our times, Suzanne Dow and Colin Wright's edited issue 'Psychoanalysis and the Posthuman' for *Paragraph* (2010) has also made readers aware of 'a psychoanalytic reading of the Posthuman'.<sup>5</sup> Dow and Wright's psychoanalytic reading of the posthuman can be situated within the framework of Critical Posthumanism, which 'sees science and technology not as mere instruments of change in the hands of human agents, but rather as part of a much wider and more complex cultural shift traversing also the humanities and arts wherein the subject is re-conceived as ever more decentered'.<sup>6</sup> This framework is still inherited from Freud, since for him, 'as for critical posthumanists, "posthuman" is something we have indeed always been, but the significant prosthesis is neither technology nor the body, but rather the libido-driven unconscious.'<sup>7</sup>

Elissa Marder's edited fortieth anniversary special issue on 'Literature and Psychoanalysis: Open Questions', also for *Paragraph* (2017), aimed to reassess the importance of the liberal arts, and of literature in particular, in higher education. Echoing the earlier title, the volume readdressed the issue: trauma, testimony, affect theory, neuro-psychoanalysis, performance studies, with literature and psychoanalysis sharing a primary concern with the unconscious that we can never master. For Elissa Marder, 'in contrast to a world that has become increasingly enamoured with modes of knowledge production that respond to demands for quantifiable verification (the science of the brain), transparent communication and programmatic applicability', literature and psychoanalysis remain grounded in 'what cannot be brought into the realm of conscious knowledge', and is still characterised by 'contradiction, ambiguity, over-determination, ambivalence and failure of expression'.<sup>8</sup> Shoshana Felman's contribution, 'Preface (To Reopen the Question)', compared 'then' (1977) to 'now' (2017), and remarked that while in 1977 'people knew what literature was, but very few had knowledge of French psychoanalysis', forty years later psychoanalysis was 'much better known', but people had 'fundamentally forgotten' what literature was, 'in its distinctive textual specificity'.<sup>9</sup> She then added a reflection that is worth quoting in full:

Today it seems to me that psychoanalysis has found its undisputed place in our collective (educated, academic) consciousness, but literature – and what it means – has dropped out of the field of consciousness. Literature itself has become, today, our academic 'Purloined Letter' – a purloined letter, I would emphasize, both in its literary sense, ingeniously invented

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<sup>5</sup> Suzanne Dow and Colin Wright, 'Introduction: Towards a Psychoanalytic Reading of the Posthuman', *Paragraph* 33.3: 'Toward a Psychoanalytic Reading of the Posthuman' (2010): 299-317.

<sup>6</sup> Dow and Wright, 301.

<sup>7</sup> Dow and Wright, 305. For new approaches to the unconscious, see also Pascal Sauvayre and David Braucher's edited collection *Contemporary Refractions in Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), which explores 'Freud's initial forays [...] refracted, like white light shot through a prism', which brought about new theories, especially through the way in which 'the presence of the "other"' is 'conceived in different ways, from the metaphysical, to the socio-political, and the linguistic' (2). See also Luca M. Possati's *Unconscious Networks Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Artificial Intelligence* (New York and London: Routledge, 2023) for a new interpretation of Freud's works, in which the author claims 'that Freudian psychoanalysis is a natural science based on a specific experimental method, such as biology or physics, the goal of which is to obtain knowledge of the human unconscious' (2).

<sup>8</sup> Elissa Marder, 'Introduction: Open Questions, Opaque Transmissions', *Paragraph* 40.3: 'Literature and Psychoanalysis: Open Questions' (2017), ed. Elissa Marder: 258.

<sup>9</sup> Shoshana Felman, 'Preface (To Reopen the Question)', *Paragraph* 40.3: 'Literature and Psychoanalysis: Open Questions' (2017): x.

as a symbol by Edgar Allan Poe, and in its sophisticated, interpretive psychoanalytic sense, as highlighted later by Lacan in the wake of Poe.<sup>10</sup>

Drawing on Felman's provocative signposting of the hermeneutic rapport between psychoanalysis and literature, Mieke Bal, in her 'Introduction: Delimiting Psychopoetics' published in special issues of both *Poetics* and *Style* (1984), has demarcated a new sub-field concerned with investigating in what ways poetics is informed by psychoanalysis, with its 'possible theory, from which a method, a taxonomy, an axiology, a hermeneutics and indeed, a critical method can be drawn'.<sup>11</sup> Offering a new take on the psychoanalytic interpretation of poetics, psychopoetics uncovers the latter's own epistemological or socio-cultural unconscious. Yet this approach need not fall solely within the purview of literary studies but rather it can be applied likewise to visual and film studies, as well as to a range of other aesthetic practices that call for interpretive suspicion of conscious motivations in what has often been labelled the 'textual unconscious'. Be that as it may, using a foundational psychoanalytic concept such as the unconscious as the speculative cornerstone of a broader polylogue involving philosophy, literature and the (visual) arts, past, present and future, strangely remains a hitherto relatively uncharted territory.

*The Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'speculation' (from Latin *specere*: to look (at), observe; *speculum*: mirror) as 'the faculty or power of seeing; sight, vision' or 'the exercise of the faculty of sight; the action, or an act, of seeing, viewing, or looking on or at; examination or observation'.<sup>12</sup> Taking into account the intimate connection between the mental/ideal and visual/physical facets of 'speculation', the aim of this issue is thus to invite reflections on/of the mutually fertilizing encounters between philosophy, psychoanalysis, literature and the arts, exploring in this ongoing exchange new angles and ways of looking into the (textual, visual, philosophical, psychoanalytic) unconscious.

The essays included in the present issue attempt to answer several of the following questions: What do various media, intermedia/transmedia and remediation practices teach us about the unconscious as well as the relation between unconscious and conscious processes? How do alternate 'reality narratives' explore the unconscious across multiverses/pluriverses?<sup>13</sup> How did emergent reimaginings of the unconscious develop across different aesthetic platforms? How do neuro/bio/technologies of our present and future respond to the unconscious? How do gender and race constructions of the unconscious and its drives developed? How does the unconscious fit within posthumanism and Apocalyptic fantasies of extinction? And finally, how is the unconscious correlated notions and/or critical concepts like acting out versus working through, mourning and melancholy, negation, repression or foreclosure, as they were explored in fiction, cinema and visual arts?

Whilst Felman felt the necessity to reopen the question of psychoanalysis and literature in the 2017 issue of *Paragraph*, in the present issue, Mieke Bal investigates how

<sup>10</sup> Felman, x.

<sup>11</sup> Mieke Bal, 'Introduction', *Poetics* 13.4-5: 'Psychopoetics-Theory', ed. Mieke Bal (1984): i-ii, 279-98; Mieke Bal, 'Introduction', *Style* 18.3: 'Psychopoetics at Work', ed. Mieke Bal (1984): 242.

<sup>12</sup> s.v. 'speculation', in *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (CD-ROM, version 4.0.0.2, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> 'Reality narratives' is a term we coin, based on the concept of 'reality literature' which Nicholas Royle develops in the eponymous 'Afterword' to his novel *Quilt* (Brighton: Myriad Editions, 2010, 151-9). 'Reality literature' lives on the duplicity between "literary reality and literature of reality" (158) Royle's categorization is possibly the most appropriate way of defining contemporary literature, with its 'spectral' vivacity: 'it knows that the dead speak and that without the completely unexpected openings generated out of mourning there would be no future.' (158)

the notion of ‘psychopoetics’ that she coined in 1984 operates nowadays. For Bal, the keyword that defines the relation between psychoanalysis, philosophy, literature and the arts today is ‘encounter’, hence our choice of the word for the subtitle of this issue since ‘encounters’ have provided the guiding principle for grouping the various contributions: Visual Encounters, Literary Encounters, Philosophical Encounters and Biographical Encounters.

In the first section, devoted to ‘Visual Encounters’, Bal demonstrates that the notion connotes plurality, connection and process (16). Moreover, ‘[t]his encounter of different appearances of “less than conscious” is not necessarily (only) the solidly theorized Freudian unconscious but something more fluid.’ (16) For Bal, ‘[m]aking and encountering’ represents ‘the current stake of this special issue’ (16).

We are living in an age not only of ‘speculative realism’ but also speculative fiction and speculative arts, which are emerging as new trends in philosophical enquiry and aesthetic experimentation. This is reflected in the contributors proposing a polilogue on ‘speculation’ and ‘reflection’, variously construed across the philosophical, critical and aesthetic spectrums, in relation to ‘unconscious productions’ understood in the broadest possible sense. Ruben Borg’s essay ‘Darwin, Marker, Deleuze: The Expression of the Emotions and the Filmic Unconscious’ sets up this dialogue as an encounter between several philosophers and theorists – Charles Darwin with his work on emotional expression, Henri Bergson with his work on perception and memory, Gilles Deleuze with his conceptualization on affectivity in film – in order to trace a speculative history of the unconscious. The practical analysis engages with Chris Marker’s films *La Jetée* (1963), *Le Mystère Koumiko* (1965), *Level Five* (1997), *Junkopia* (1981), *Sans Soleil* (1982) and his essays, especially *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*, that engage with the ways in which ‘the unconscious corresponds to a pure past that conditions habit and memory; not a past represented in the image but a passivity that takes hold of it.’ (52)

The second section, on ‘Literary Encounters’, brings together contributions which engage with contemporary literature. In ‘The Biological Unconscious, Memory and Identity in Charles Fernyhough’s *A Box of Birds*’, Maria Margaroni addresses the following questions: how do we remember / how do we forget nowadays? Engaging with the unconscious and/in Memory Studies, Margaroni tackles ‘the old, “tired” question of subjectivity from a twenty-first century perspective’ (57). With these aims in mind, she reads Charles Fernyhough’s *A Box of Birds* (2012) as an experiment with contemporary discourses of neuro-subjectivity, since his novel’s characters are neuroscientists in a university. In her attempt to ‘trac[e] a richer, more dynamic relation among mind, brain, and body’ (57), Margaroni is interested in the event setting the suspense of the plot which launches a chase after Gareth and the stolen brain-mapping data, and can be interpreted as an encounter between philosophy and literature, namely ‘a reenactment of the Platonic quest to “possess” knowledge’ (60).

Zengjing Li’s ‘Teletechnologies of Death and Mourning in Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist* and Nicholas Royle’s *Quilt*’ analyses a key critical concept related to the unconscious and telepathy, the Uncanny, to which Freud dedicated a famous essay on which several other contributors (especially Shuli Barzilai and Simona Mitroiu) also focus. Li considers that what Don DeLillo’s *The Body Artist* and Nicholas Royle’s *Quilt* have in common is the conception of teletechnology as a possible tool through which we cope with loss and grief. Whilst in DeLillo’s case, the radio seems to be portrayed ‘as an uncanny harbinger of death’ (73), in Royle’s *Quilt* the experience of loss and mourning is relayed as a ‘(failed) telephonic communication’ (83). This is the way in which the

Uncanny, to which Royle dedicated a whole monograph as well as an edited issue, manifests itself in contemporary literature, a ‘reality literature’ which calls (on) us continuously.<sup>14</sup>

In the third section, ‘Philosophical Encounters’, Zihao Liu’s and Washington Morales-Maciel’s essays, dealing with interdisciplinary approaches to psychoanalysis, literature and philosophy, are informed by Theodor W. Adorno’s aesthetics and Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology respectively. In ‘Aesthetic Uses of Psychoanalysis in Theodor W. Adorno’s “Notes on Kafka”’, Morales-Maciel takes Adorno’s ‘Notes on Kafka’ as a showcase for ‘the relevance of some specific literature to metacritics’ (94), and shows how for Adorno ‘psychoanalysis illuminates the nature of literary interpretation’ (93). Liu’s ‘*Pnin*’s Unforgettable Digressions: Towards a Nabokovian Approach to the Unconscious’ uses the Husserlian definition of the unconscious to investigate Vladimir Nabokov’s understanding of literature ‘as the art of language that imposes lived experiences on readers’ (106).

The final section, on ‘Biographical Encounters’, is made up of two essays that read lives through a psychoanalytic lens. Shuli Barzilai’s ‘Freud and the Topos of the Wandering Jew’ endeavours to understand Sigmund Freud’s ‘near-fatal immovability’ which prevented him from leaving Vienna during the years before and, then, the days after the Nazi annexation and invasion of Austria in March 1938.<sup>15</sup> Speculating on this biographical detail, Barzilai draws two possible ‘connections’ (rather than encounters): ‘the convoluted folktale, legend, or chronicle of the Wandering Jew’, and Freud’s theoretical thinking about and personal experience of journeys, which she calls ‘Freud’s train connections’ (121). Anna Balestrieri’s essay ‘Veynshal: Exploring the Interplay of Autobiography and Psychoanalysis’ focuses on Zionist Revisionist journalist and Hebrew writer Yakov Veynshal’s memoirs and journalistic work, especially his childhood trip to Palestine as a symbolic ‘bar mitzvah’ that transformed him from a Jewish man in Russia into a Zionist. Exploring various essays he wrote in the Parisian émigré newspaper *Rassvet*, Balestrieri investigates various collective identity and cultural memory patterns.

The last section of our issue includes three review articles on recent scholarship in the field of psychoanalysis: Edward Waysband’s ‘Psychoanalytic Readings in Troubled Times: Review of Camden Vera J. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Psychoanalysis*’, Darin Tenev’s ‘The Labyrinth of Kristeva’s Modernisms: A Review of Maria Margaroni (ed.), *Understanding Kristeva, Understanding Modernism*’, and Simona Mitroiu’s ‘A Dialogue in the Realm of Afterthought: Review of Judy Gammelgaard’s *Psychoanalysis After Freud: Memory, Mourning and Repetition*’.

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<sup>14</sup> See Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), and the whole special issue of *Oxford Literary Review* 42.2 (2020), especially the rationale of the volume in Royle’s “‘We Ourselves Speak a Language that Is Foreign’: One Hundred Years of Freud’s Uncanny”, v-vii. For the play-on-words ‘reality literature calling’ and more on Royle’s proposal of an alternative literature ‘in our epoch dominated by reality TV and its sensational treatment of news’, namely ‘reality literature’, see Arleen Ionescu, “‘Novel’ Reality Calling and Telepathy in Nicholas Royle’s *Quilt*”, *Word and Text – A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 4.1 (2014): 98-115.

<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to note that a similar question and incomprehension is voiced by Hélène Cixous, also of Jewish origin, in connection with some of her past relatives, some of whom were deported and perished in Nazi camps. See Laurent Milesi, ‘Enacting Postmemory in Hélène Cixous’s “Jewish Family Romance”’, *Parallax* 29.2: ‘Holocaust Narratives in the Post-Testimonial Era’, ed. Arleen Ionescu and Simona Mitroiu (forthcoming December 2023).

NB: This issue started and ended in troubled times. The call for papers was written just as the war in Ukraine began in February 2022. Two of the editors went through the ‘Shanghai’s COVID lockdown nightmare’ from April to June 2022.<sup>16</sup> In 2023 the other editor, who had experienced the tragedy of the country in which he was born, Ukraine, wrote his review article and edited final versions of the essays from his home in Tel Aviv, after Hamas attacked Israel on 7 October 2023. An issue partly finished in times of war is, as Virginia Woolf put it in her diary, ‘psychoanalytic therapy’.<sup>17</sup> We propose to our readers a form of academic writing as psychoanalytic therapy, to which Barzilai’s dedication at the beginning of her essay and Waysband’s ending of his review article testify.

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<sup>16</sup> This is the phrase Cissy Zhou, Lauly Li, Cheng Ting-Fang and Ck Tan used in their article ‘Inside Shanghai’s COVID Lockdown Nightmare: China’s Zero-COVID Policy Devastated the Commercial Capital’, *Nikkei Asia*, 22 June 2022; available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/The-Big-Story/Inside-Shanghai-s-COVID-lockdown-nightmare> [accessed 20 October 2022].

<sup>17</sup> Virginia Woolf was aware that she was performing this form of therapy while working on her late, autobiographical piece ‘A Sketch of the Past’. See Yael S. Feldman, ‘From Essentialism to Constructivism? The Gender of Peace and War – Gilman, Woolf, Freud’, *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 2.1 (2004): especially 132-3 for a thought-provoking discussion on Woolf’s autobiographical piece ‘A Sketch of the Past’ and her 1940 essay ‘Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid’ which ‘sounds like a conscious inversion of Freud’s title “Thoughts for the Time on War and Death”’ (132).

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