

**Psychoanalytic Readings in Troubled Times: Review of
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Abstract

This is a review article of Vera J. Camden's edited *Cambridge Companion to Literature and Psychoanalysis*, which engages critically with the contributors' main ideas and connects this volume with contemporary events.

Keywords: *literature, psychoanalysis, the unconscious, memory studies, Vera J. Camden, shared crisis*

In her introduction, 'Reading to Recover: Literature and Psychoanalysis', the editor of the volume, Vera J. Camden, writes that its essays were gathered in a period of quarantine – what we now call 'Covid Time' – and its contributors' correspondence coincided with 'losses, spoken and unspoken, with grief and uncertainty both professionally and personally' (3). In this 'shared crisis', 'what can a companion volume on literature and psychoanalysis offer us?' (3) Camden asks and proposes as an answer the Anglo-American Puritans' concept of 'a companionate marriage, in this case not between two minds, but between two mentalities, two languages of human meaning.' (3) Drawing on this guiding metaphor, the volume goes against the trend, prevalent in clinical psychoanalytic discussions, of downplaying literature's ability to produce knowledge. Putting literature into the centre of psychoanalytic thought, Camden reminds us that their 'bond' goes back to Freud's *re*-discovery of literature as a wellspring for his theory of the unconscious (4). The contributors of this collection revive the initial imbrication of psychoanalysis and literature, which extends likewise to the reconnection of psychoanalytical practice and literary creativity. Referring to Adam Phillips' view of Freud as a 'poet-analyst', Camden sets up 'a father figure' – for the contributors to emulate Freud's 'admiration and utilization of the truths of creative writing.' (5) Throughout the volume, the re-enactment of a psychoanalytical master-myth, 'Oedipus complex', takes the form of picking up the directions of thought and methods of analysis that Freud initiated or foresaw but was reluctant or unable to pursue. Among these directions was Freud's reaching out to 'popular' literature as a no less legitimate way of engagement with the psychoanalytical thought than 'high' literature. Accordingly, while

rooted in literary history, the volume branches out into contemporary literacies, media, and creative social practices.

The volume is divided into sections: 'In History', 'In Society', 'In Sight', and 'In Theory', often conceptually overlapping. The first section goes back to the literary and psychoanalytical 'classics', probing the longevity of the traditional ways of alliance of storytelling with psychoanalysis. In the opening essay 'Varieties of Psychoanalytic Experience', Madelon Sprengnether returns to Freud's analysis of the Dora case, showing how early psychoanalytic practices rested on literary structures of narrative interpretation. Sprengnether notes that the process of further developing and revising Freud's initial insights sometimes revealed Freud's personal biases and shortcomings. Thus, his concept of 'transference', initially perceived as crucial for the dynamic of the doctor/patient relationship, was eventually criticized as incomplete, if not fallible, and was replaced by the concept of 'countertransference' that underlines the analyst's awareness and self-inquiry of his/her own unconscious history brought into the treatment (23-5). This parallels the move in literary studies from an emphasis on the authority of the interpreter to the recognition of his/her subjective position and cultural background. The article also dwells on the shift from Oedipal to pre-Oedipal concerns, opening up research into mother/infant relationships and the influence of the child's early environment on further development. This shift is associated with the questioning of early psychoanalysis' patriarchal underpinnings and elevating the subject of mothers and daughters to the status of legitimate social, literary, and psychoanalytic concerns.

In her 'Recognitions: Shakespeare, Freud, and the Story of Psychoanalysis', Catherine Bates shows how the literary 'anxiety of influence' was extrapolated to the attitude of psychoanalysis to its literary precursors.¹ Bates provides a subtle literary analysis of how Freud's Oedipal relation with his 'father/brother' Shakespeare are variously refracted in *Hamlet* itself (44). Masterfully navigating between literary and metaliterary analysis, Bates points out that the importance of *Hamlet* for psychoanalysis extends beyond the play's foregrounding of the Oedipus complex – to such issues as mourning and melancholia, the uncanny, the return of the repressed, the death drive, the mirror-stage, the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

Margaret Ann Fitzpatrick Hanly's 'Rivalry and the Favorite Child in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*' analyses the price that a preferred child (this time a daughter) pays for the unconditional affection of her father. Always perfect in her father's eyes, Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice* develops a narcissistic blindness to unflattering realities. Yet, conversely, the resilience of her character that prompts her capacity for painful self-understanding and growth is partly due to her father's love and admiration. Like Elizabeth, Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* is 'bewitched' as 'a favorite child' of the possessive Lady Russell and must learn to separate from her. In *Persuasion*, this situation is exacerbated by the Elliot sisters' failed mourning for their real mother, which precipitates their regression to infantile wishful fantasies.

In 'Encountering Invisible Presence: Virginia Woolf and Julia Duckworth Stephen', Katherine Dalsimer continues the discussion of a daughter's mourning for her mother who died prematurely. She shows how the 'invisible presence' of Julia Duckworth Stephen, who died when Virginia was thirteen years old, evolved throughout her

¹ Allusion to Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997 [1973]). For a thought-provoking account on how this anxiety (in the receiver) meant 'losing the supremacy of the self or the condition of creative narcissism', see Sanford Budick, 'The Emergence of Oedipus's Blessing: Evoking Wolfgang Iser', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 7.1 (January 2009): 66.

daughter's life and was formative for Woolf's input in the feminist pre-oedipal turn outlined in *A Room of One's Own*: 'We think back through our mothers if we are women.'² (see 78, 86) In particular, Dalsimer reads *To the Lighthouse* as Woolf's literary work of mourning that had to deal with a hereditary component of her bipolar disorder. This reading is confirmed by Woolf's referring in her memoirs to the writing of the book as 'what psychoanalysts do for their patients.'³ (see 73, 78, 87)

Jean Wyatt's 'Dislocating the Reader: Slave Motherhood and the Disrupted Temporality of Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*' explores Morrison's narrative techniques as the literary analogy to Jean Laplanche's revisionary model of Freud's notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (translated as 'afterwardness' and 'après-coup'), a psychological structure of belated response to trauma. In *Beloved*, Morrison dramatizes *Nachträglichkeit* in a narrative suspension of the awareness of infanticide, forcing the reader to feel surprised and shocked after long readerly acquaintance with Sethe's caring mothering and the belated news that she murdered her child. Wyatt juxtaposes a traditional novel, exemplified by George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, with its 'direct moral exhortation' (95), and Morrison's modernistic *Beloved* that suggests moral judgement through the workings of narrative structure alone.

The section 'In Society' opens with two essays that extend the 'companionate marriage' of literature and psychoanalysis announced in the Introduction both conceptually and geo-culturally, dealing with non-Anglophone literary responses to major historical traumas, in South Asia and Latin America. In 'Remembering Violence and Possibilities of Mourning: Psychoanalysis, Partition Literature, and the Writings of Sa'adat Hasan Manto', Zehra Mehdi shows how Manto's piercing short stories about the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 perform the psychoanalytical role of remembering the genocidal violence whose memories were repressed by the official narrative of Partition. Beatriz L. Botero's 'Latin American Violence Novels: Pain and the Gaze of Narrative' presents a somewhat reductive reading of Latin American violence novels as an internalization of the sadomasochistic tension between Eros and Thanatos. Regrettably, in the volume, only these two essays are devoted to non-Anglophone literature's engagement with psychoanalysis, which appears as a shortcoming of this otherwise exquisite interdisciplinary enterprise of leading psychoanalytic theory beyond traditional sources.

While epitomizing intellectually sophisticated, aesthetically enjoyable, and mutually respectful cooperation of literature and psychoanalysis, Adele Tutter's 'A Man and His Things: Bruce Chatwin's *Utz*', offers a new interdisciplinary perspective, including contemporary thinking about things. Tutter shows that the eponymous protagonist's, and by extension his author's, replacement of human relations with precious things reveals their emotional deficiency. Settled in the totalitarian Czechoslovakia, *Utz* might suggest that the shadow of 'the short twentieth century' with its political extremism forced Utz to steer clear of a deep human involvement.⁴ If

² Katherine Dalsimer's mentionings of the 'invisible presence' throughout the essay are somewhat vague. She refers to the 'invisible presence' of Woolf's mother that made her write *To the Lighthouse* and she indicates that the phrase appeared in 'the memoir she began at fifty-seven' (78). Then she quotes a fragment from this memoir in which Woolf explained how the presence of her mother obsessed her, without footnoting it. The phrase appears in the following sentence: 'She was one of the invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life.' [Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 80]

³ Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 81.

⁴ For more on the 'short twentieth century' and 'the age of catastrophe', see Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Abacus, 1995), passim.

porcelain figures stand for the fragility of human life, Utz's avoidance of deep emotional involvement might suggest not only his emotional deficiency but also his (over)reaction to (sub)conscious awareness of the 'extreme' fragility of the 'real' objects of his possible emotional involvement. Nevertheless, Tutter masterfully reveals that Utz's finding in porcelain figures a compensation for mortality leads to aestheticized fetishism.

The final essay of this section, Josie Billington's 'The Uses of Literature and Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Reading Groups', shows how therapeutic reading groups utilize the consolatory power of literature and psychoanalysis in a social space.

The next section, 'In Sight', ushers in a psychoanalytical perspective on visual media that are undoubtedly going to prevail over literature in the ongoing twenty-first century. The first two essays in the section deal with a hybrid genre of comics and children's literature. Emmy Waldman's 'Frames of Mind: Comics and Psychoanalysis in the Visual Field' points to the analogy between the work of trauma and the work of comics: just as trauma bypasses perception and consciousness and falls directly into psyche (in Geoffrey Hartman's words), in 'comics, too, images seem to sear themselves directly onto the mental retina' (193). In Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* and *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*, this enables the comics panel itself to become a therapeutic container for the symbolic repetition of trauma. Ellen Handler Spitz's 'Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature Spotlighting the Dialogue' reminds us that the phenomenon of children's literature, by which she means literature written about as well as for children, is predominantly modern. Children's cognitive, emotional, and social experience suffered centuries of neglect. Only by a century did children's literature precede the rise of psychoanalysis, based predominantly on childhood memories and fantasies reported by Freud's adult patients. Subsequently, his colleagues and followers in the twentieth century took the next step from the research of these adult projections backward in time to the scrutiny of 'the luminous, intricate, sometimes terrifying landscapes and dreamscapes that comprise children's inner worlds' (208). Spitz analyses the history of the three-way dialogue between psychoanalysis and children's literature. The first direction is the psychoanalytical interpretation of the literature. Here Spitz attempts to separate the wheat from the chaff by rehabilitating Bruno Bettelheim's award-winning yet highly controversial book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1976), frequently criticized for psychoanalytical dogmatism. Spitz, however, appreciates his belief that exposure to the darker aspects of the fairy tales can enable children to work through their anxieties and promote emotional growth. Bettelheim's approach serves her as a bulwark against contemporary educational tendencies 'to sanitize' children's cultural lives in order 'to protect' them from less agreeable sides of existence and their own psyche (209). She shows that such 'politically correct' tendencies in contemporary adaptations of fairy tales lead to their trivialization (210). This aesthetic debilitation also undermines the tales' propaedeutic significance in helping children develop awareness of menaces and mysteries of human existence. No less interesting is the reverse direction – when psychoanalysis plays 'the muse to authors and artists of children's books.' (206) Spitz showcases Maurice Sendak's picture book *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963),⁵ reminding us that before and during the composition of this book, Sendak was undergoing psychoanalytic treatment. This experience, she claims, informed his pictorial and narrative means in penetrating childhood subjectivity.

⁵ Her analysis can lend support to Francis Spufford's observation that this book makes 'an entirely deliberate and beautiful use of the psychoanalytic story of anger'. Francis Spufford, *The Child That Books Built: A Life of Reading* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 60.

The third – most ambiguous – form of interdisciplinary dialogue is tentatively defined as how psychoanalysis can learn from children’s literature. Drawing on Beatrix Potter’s *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* (1902) and Elena Ferrante’s *The Beach at Night* (2016), Spitz suggests that psychoanalysis might re-focus its gaze on environmental issues and expand its purview to auspicious aspects of childhood. As Spitz rightly concludes, ‘the complexity of human life cannot be understood only from the perspective of trauma and dysfunction’ (219).

In the last essay of this section, ‘Reflection on Psychoanalysis and Class: Andrea Arnold and Donald Winnicott’, Vicky Lebeau follows Joanna Ryan’s *Class and Psychoanalysis: Landscapes and Inequality* (2017), arguing that the psychic life of the working class remains a lacuna in psychoanalysis, whose practitioners belong predominantly to middle and upper classes. Are class issues in psychoanalysis repressed by its gatekeepers, just as the Id is repressed by our ego? Arnold’s short film *Wasp* (2003), about the predicament of an impoverished single mother, thus appears to be a provocative breakthrough both in the cinematic perception of a woman and in related psychoanalytical studies, refocusing Winnicott’s theorization about ‘the good enough mother.’ (13)

The reader’s sense of a conceptual interaction between the texts included in this edited book is confirmed by the last section, ‘In Theory’, which deliberately (judging by Camden’s Introduction) inserts a polemic strand. While Jeremy Tambling’s ‘Why Literature? Why Psychoanalysis?’ and Lisa Ruddick’s ‘Beyond the Fragmented Subject’ do not directly refer to one another, they definitely enter a polemic concerning the history of the conceptualization of the human subjectivity in psychoanalysis, with a fundamental postmodernist dilemma at its core. Tambling’s article stands for the post-structuralist scepticism about stable boundaries of self in contemporary psychoanalytical thought. He surveys feminist contributions to psychoanalysis, starting with Melanie Klein’s refocusing from the Oedipus complex to an infant pre-Oedipal fixation on its mother’s breast. He refers to Luce Irigaray’s, Catherine Clément’s, and Hélène Cixous’s works, stating that in spite of going beyond Lacan, ‘their work remains Lacanian in its sense of language.’ (249) For Tambling, Klein, with her subversion of the patriarchal domination in early psychoanalysis, nevertheless shared its Enlightenment assumptions about its reparatory and socially accommodative potentials. This mindset perceived in literature a corresponding agenda of sublimating sexual desire, with its inherent aggressivity, in the name of normalizing psychological and ideological tendencies. The next generation of psychoanalytical thinkers and literary critics questioned these normalizing tendencies, and in this sense, in our edited issue, Maria Margaroni’s article ‘The Biological Unconscious, Memory and Identity in Charles Fernyhough’s *A Box of Birds*’ responds to this tendency, drawing on contemporary neuroscientific theory and going beyond Lacanian psychoanalysis.⁶ New psychoanalytical studies recognized the human selfhood as incomplete and resisting its interpretative ‘stabilization’, yet Lisa Ruddick contends that these postmodernist destabilizing tendencies had themselves turned into a contemporary ideological episteme with its own politics of shaming. Basing its premises on the Lacanian vision that the integrated sense of self is a mere bundle of Imaginary identifications, the ‘high’ theory of antihumanism promotes the notion of a ‘decentered’ or ‘fragmented’ subjectivity. Those who dare ‘to protect’ the alternative vision of a

⁶ See Maria Margaroni, ‘The Biological Unconscious, Memory and Identity in Charles Fernyhough’s *A Box of Birds*’, *Word and Text – A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 13 (2023): 57-72, especially for her discussion on how Julia Kristeva unpacked ‘a neglected aspect of the materiality of the Lacanian signifier, i.e. its porosity and susceptibility to bodily sensation’, through her concepts such as ‘the semiotic’, ‘semanalysis’ and ‘signifiante’.

cohesive selfhood would be immediately accused of ‘political conservatism’, as such selfhood is perceived as an illusionary product of Western modernity (257). Ruddick differentiates, however, between postmodern literary criticism with its radical dismissal of the coherent subjectivity and contemporary psychoanalysts who do not so easily do away with it, as this would practically amount to the analysand’s being diagnosed with borderline personality disorder – a condition that even a radical literary critic would hardly wish for herself or those close to her. Whatever the outcome of this antihumanist competition between literary criticism and psychoanalysis, Ruddick argues that the idea of a ‘fragmented’ subjectivity ‘rests on a false binary’ (262). She turns ‘high’ theory’s deconstructive method against its own proponents who define an utter dissolution of selfhood as the only viable alternative to ‘a fantastically rigidified sense of self-coherence’ (263). Opposing this dichotomized thinking, Ruddick offers a middle ground – considering human self-experience in terms not of a singular self but of multiple ‘self-states’ (266). Instead of pitting its ‘sovereign’ against its ‘fragmented’ poles, Ruddick sees human subjectivity as the dynamic tension between centripetal and centrifugal processes of these ‘self-states’ (266). In going beyond the ‘high’ theory’s false dichotomic choices, she draws upon the moral support of the father figure of this volume, reminding us that Freud ‘could articulate his findings only by violating many of the taboos of his intellectual milieu’ (270).

Mari Ruti’s essay, ‘Queering Melancholia: Bad Feelings in *Giovanni’s Room*’, starts with an acknowledgement of the ambivalent relations between psychoanalysis and queer theory. While its emergence in the 1990s was steeped in psychoanalysis, queer theory critiqued psychoanalysis for its history of pathologizing homosexuality. This complicated ‘family romance’ reached a resolution, arguably, in the last two decades, as queer theory seemed to find a politically attuned, queer-friendly alternative to psychoanalysis in affect theory. If psychoanalysis tends to depoliticize trauma, tracing its origin to individualized childhood experience, affect theory draws connections between trauma and oppressive social forces such as poverty, racism, sexism and homophobia. Social amendments of these structural inequalities should dissipate the ‘bad feelings’ that queer theory aligns with queerness – shame, abjection, loneliness and mortification (see especially the discussion on 277-85). The emphasis on social activism in affect theory has a limited applicability, however, to melancholia which, according to many theorists, is characteristic of queer subjectivity. Indeed, defeatism and asociality associated with melancholia impede assertion of agency for social self-enhancement. Ruti practically rehabilitates the applicability of psychoanalysis to queer studies through a fine-tuned conceptual apparatus. Ruti also returns to the classics, in this case, of course, to Freud’s ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1917), as well as James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) that thematizes ‘queer melancholy.’ Moreover, as Ruti convincingly shows, Baldwin’s novel universalizes melancholia, which is displayed by the straight characters as well. This confirms psychoanalytic theory’s conclusion that there is no human condition without a hue of melancholia. The queer characters of the novel intensify this understanding. While psychoanalysis as well as affect theory reproach melancholia for its ‘bad feelings’, Ruti is interested in ‘anything redeemable about melancholia’ – as long as we agree about its ubiquity (285). Ruti reminds us about melancholia’s constitutive role in human creativity. This connection is known in literature since antiquity, but Ruti significantly expands the positive view of melancholia. In particular, she points to ethical aspects of the melancholic’s refusal to relinquish her lost objects. If in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, Freud prioritizes ‘mourning’ as a ‘healthy’ way to overcome our losses, so that our emotional survival succeeds at the expense of the lost object that should be

banished from our psychic life, according to Ruti, the melancholic's obstinate holding onto her cherished, if lost, object – however 'unhealthy' and 'asocial' it might be – is 'an ethical gesture of rebellion against our society's demand to overcome our losses.' (286) Moreover, this rejection of our society's reality principle aligns the melancholic with the utopian thinker who is concerned 'with how things could be rather than with how they are' (286).

The prolific and highly original specialist in psychoanalytic and gender studies, Mari Ruti, was diagnosed with stage-four breast cancer in 2018. She died from cancer-related complications in June 2023, at the age of 59. In this context, the essay under discussion ought to be read as her intellectual testament, along with her last books that are yet to be published posthumously. Ruti's insights about ethical and utopian aspects of melancholia confirm Freud's observation that a melancholic, with her acutely realistic assessment of the general plight of human beings, has 'a keener eye for the truth than other people.'⁷

I have been reading this 'Covid Time' volume and writing this review in 'post-Covid Time', in October 2023. While doing this, in the midst of the war in Ukraine, where I was born, and in the midst of the horrendous news of the massacre in the south of Israel on October 7, while sheltering from Hamas' rocket attacks in my Tel Aviv apartment 'secure' room, with heartache over Hamas' cynical use of hostages and human shields in Gaza, I kept returning to Vera Camden's question in her 'Introduction': 'In such troubled times, what can a companion volume on literature and psychoanalysis offer us' (3)? The question remains open, but the very open-endedness of possible answers, as in 'A Thousand and One Nights', offers a therapeutic option of physical and mental survival.

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⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. 14 (London: Hogarth, 1953-1974), 246.