



Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism: A Defense

Alan G. Gross

University of Minnesota-Twin Cities
agross@umn.edu

Abstract

Literary critic Frederick Crews is self-deceived in asserting that psychoanalysis is a pseudoscience; philosopher of science Adolf Grünbaum is self-deceived in arguing that it is a failed natural science. Because both have made a category mistake, because, as Jürgen Habermas and Paul Ricoeur contend, psychoanalysis is in essence a hermeneutic practice, the arguments of Crews and Grünbaum can have no legitimate impact on the practice of literary criticism. Once these arguments have been successfully demolished, no literary scholar need exhibit any trepidation whatever in using psychoanalysis as a framework for criticism.

To cite as

Gross, A.G., 2017, 'Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism, *PsyArt* 21, pp. 69–85.

For Melvin Bornstein, M.D.

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

W.B. Yeats

Psychoanalysis is founded on the principle that an apparently unrecoverable past, hidden in our unconscious, can cast its malevolent shadow on our present, the source of both the pain and of the creativity to which Yeats refers. One of the manifestations of this unconscious is communication that obediently follows the contours of a damaged past, a past that, in the absence of therapy, is beyond the reach of a self that can dispute and dissipate its force. With the assistance of the analyst, however, analysands can employ this systematically distorted communication against itself. By means of free associations and dream analysis, they can travel back in time; they can “work through” stubborn and malevolent residues, mirrored in their interchanges with analyst. They can bring an unmanageable past into a manageable present. Thus analysands can free themselves from some of the burdens childhood dependency has imposed on them. Philip Larkin is eloquent on this last point:

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

At the center of this sea-change in our new vision of childhood and maturity is one man, Sigmund Freud, to this day equally an object of adulation and vilification, a great man or a great charlatan. Did Freud earn our eternal gratitude by founding a science of the mind or did he establish a cult of squabbling followers who collect their fees by systematically misleading themselves and those they purport to cure? In his praise, W. H. Auden tells us that

he wasn't clever at all: he merely told
the unhappy Present to recite the Past
like a poetry lesson till sooner
or later it faltered at the line where

long ago the accusations had begun,
and suddenly knew by whom it had been judged,
how rich life had been and how silly,
and was life-forgiven and more humble,

able to approach the Future as a friend
without a wardrobe of excuses, without
a set mask of rectitude or an
embarrassing over-familiar gesture.

These three poetic manifestations of Freud's influence attest to his cultural ubiquity. But cultural ubiquity does not mean current credibility. Our physical

health is no longer under the control of Galen's four humors. For philosopher of science Adolph Grünbaum and literary critic Frederick Crews, psychoanalysis is like Galenic medicine. For Crews, it is a simply false; for Grünbaum, it is still an unproven hypothesis. To both, psychoanalysts are self-deceived when they believe they have evidence for its efficacy; literary critics who employ it are self-deceived in believing that their work is founded on the way the mind works. In his practice and promotion of Freud as a high road to literary criticism, Crews believes he was self-deceived. Grünbaum believes Freud was self-deceived when he thought he had evidence that psychoanalysis counted as a natural science, evidence that was ready to hand from the analytic session.

It is the arguments of Crews and Grünbaum that I wish to challenge. I want to claim that both scholars were self-deceived in viewing as a failed natural science an enterprise that was not a natural science at all, that was never, despite Freud's advocacy, a natural science and never could be. A proponent of Freud's position that psychoanalysis is a natural science, albeit one that for nearly a century has failed to deliver on its promises, Grünbaum, a distinguished philosopher of science, well-versed in Freud, is an obvious target of my animadversions. He is, after all, the choice of Paul Robinson, David Sachs, and Richard Wollheim, three critics who focus exclusively on his work on Freud. All ignore Crews. This omission is, I believe, a mistake. While Grünbaum is a master of obfuscation, Crews is eloquent, a polemicist with verve. A frequent contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, the leading intellectual bi-weekly with a circulation of 135, 000, he is as deeply versed in Freud as Grünbaum and as intelligent. Surprisingly, he was once a Freudian tout court.

I believe that Sachs and Wollheim also err in ignoring the work of Jürgen Habermas and Paul Ricoeur. To these two distinguished philosophers, psychoanalysis is not a natural science, never was, and never will be; it is a hermeneutic enterprise devoted to the exegesis of the analytic dialogue. Given that these two philosophers are the subject of the first quarter of Grünbaum's full-bore attack, *The Foundations of Psychoanalysis*, Sachs's and Wollheim's is omission is odd indeed, as the rationale for this initial prominence is clear: "Grünbaum plans to argue that psychoanalysis does not meet the standards of proof expected in the natural sciences—an enterprise Habermas and Ricoeur threaten to undermine from the start by getting Freud off the evidential hook." The words are Paul Robinson's in his *Freud and His Critics* (1993, 185). Although Robinson discusses these two philosophers, he does not think they succeed in making their case. Were they to succeed, of course, Grünbaum's and Crews's own case would collapse. Having met these formidable critics head-on, and refuted their arguments, psychoanalytic literary criticism could proceed unhampered by the deep shadows they purport to cast.

Crews's Freud

Frederick Crews exhibited a precocious talent for literary criticism. His Yale senior thesis was published by the Press as *The Tragedy of Manners: Moral Drama in the Later Novels of Henry James*. A second publication followed, a version of his doctoral dissertation, published by Princeton as *E. M. Forster: The Perils of Humanism*. Four years later, Crews, newly an assistant professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, published a third work of literary criticism—the third in nine years—a psychoanalytic study of the novels and short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne. *Sins of Our Fathers* was a bold entry into a crowded field whose only consensus was dissensus. It was designed to re-direct Hawthorne criticism, to escape from interpretations that turned the author into a Christian moralist, a view that ignored the psychological truth “that Hawthorne’s keynote was neither piety nor impiety but ambivalence,” his corpus that “of a self-divided self-tormented man” (1989, 7).

Crews felt that psychoanalytic theory could “incorporate more evidence and follow the logic of the [plot-structures of Hawthorne] more closely” (1989, 22) than could the critical approaches heretofore predominant. The resort to psychoanalysis seemed natural, given Hawthorne’s sex-drenched, guilt-ridden fictions, coupled with his own presages of Freudian views in “The Birthmark” and *The House of Seven Gables*. In “The Birthmark,” Hawthorne remarks that “truth often finds its way to the mind close muffled in the robes of sleep, and then speaks with uncompromising directness of matters in regard to which we practice an unconscious self-deception during our waking moments” (1955, 151). Eight years later, in *The House of Seven Gables* Hawthorne again anticipates *The Interpretation of Dreams*: “The Pyncheons, if all stories are true, were no better than bond-servants to these plebian Maules, on entering the topsy-turvy commonwealth of sleep. Modern psychology, it may be, will endeavor to reduce these alleged necromancies within a system, instead of rejecting them as altogether fabulous” (1851, 30).

Crews’s analysis of two Hawthorne tales, “The Maypole at Merry Mount” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter” employ Freudian concepts, not as blunt instruments, but as surgical probes. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the first tale becomes more powerful; the second, whose power is universally acknowledged, yields some of the secrets of that power. On its surface, “Maypole” may easily be read as a moral allegory that pits the frivolous Merry Mounters against their stern Puritan neighbors. But Crews reveals the presence of a sexual sub-structure that turns a moral into a “psychological allegory in which the general mind of man has been fractured into two imperfect tyrannies of indulgence and conscience, neither of which can entirely suppress the other” (1989, 24).

Just as the analyst examines the analysand’s talk for clues about an unmastered past, so Crews examines Hawthorne’s text for evidence supportive of his thesis, instances of words and phrases out of place in a moral allegory, a

phenomenon analogous to the systematically distorted communication that characterizes the psychoanalytic session. The real Merry Mount's sexual license, evident in Hawthorne's sources, has been suppressed in the outer shell of his tale, only to return sotto voce. Hawthorne refers to Merry Mounters as "the crew of Comus," the sexual predator of Milton's famous masque. There is a gathering of debauched citizens "some [of whom are] already transformed to brutes, some midway between man and beast" (1989, 25). Hawthorne's Puritans seem less like the arbiters of conscience and more like sadists. Their leader, Endicott, opines that the maypole "would have served rarely for a whipping post!" adding to his list of punishments "branding and cropping of ears" (1989, 32). Such systematic distortions, which sabotage any interpretation of the tale as a moral allegory, undermine Hawthorne's ending in which the bride and groom at the center of the tale retreat from "real passion" (1989, 27) to a path that leads "heavenward" (1989, 35).

"Rappaccini's Daughter" is a Rorschach blot of a tale:

There has been no general agreement as to the tale's interpretation and there is still no clear emerging consensus yet regarding its meaning. It has aroused a bewildering array of conflicting interpretations. The tale's meaning has been construed to be pro-Transcendental and anti-Transcendental. Beatrice has been regarded as a heavenly angel and a fatal seductress. Giovanni has been characterized as a Puritan and an artist figure. Rappaccini has been deemed both God and Satan. And Baglioni has been seen as an ineffectual Christ and an Iago-like figure. (Stallman, 1995)

Is there any interpretative scheme that can account for the significant features of the tale that work together in the interest of artistic perfection? To Crews:

What Beatrice, Baglioni, Lisabetta, and Rappaccini advise [the hero. Giovanni] to do is essentially what his own conflicting impulses of trusting love, cynical rejection, lewdness, and morbid curiosity are urging upon him. This, I think, is the source of our sense of unity in "Rappaccini's Daughter," for we see the world of this tale through the medium of Giovanni's imagination, not his eyesight (1989, 124)

Indeed, "Both Beatrice and Giovanni, like the Lord and Lady of the May in Merry Mount, cherish the impossible illusion of a child-like unself-conscious love between physically mature adults. The course of the plot may be defined as the gradual dispelling of that illusion" (1989, 131). With this insight in hand, we can readily understand Hawthorne's portrayal of Rappaccini as God's evil twin, creator of an Eden populated by "the monstrous offspring of man's depraved fancy" (1955, 194).

In an introduction to a collection of psychoanalytic criticism by his graduate students, published four years after *Sins*, Crews makes the case for this approach to literature: “whatever its therapeutic or even its conceptual disadvantages, only psychoanalysis has registered the psychic costs involved in man’s prolonged dependency” whose source is buried an unremembered past. Psychoanalytic criticism, of course, is not just about psychoanalysis; it does not slight such literary categories as genre; it insists only that the sources of literary experience lie deeper (1970, 12; 22n). In the bibliographic appendix to this collection, Crews’s judgment of the work of the founder of psychoanalysis is, as might be expected, unequivocally high: “the importance of reading Freud would be difficult to exaggerate. Very few of his collected papers . . . are unenlightening; promiscuous and repeated reading among them is probably the best way of deepening one’s acquaintance with psychoanalytic thought” (1970, 285). This praise extends to Freud’s successors. Crews calls Erik Erickson’s *Childhood and Society*, the best-known work of one of the most distinguished psychoanalysts of his generation, “a readable and important book extending Freud’s developmental theory” (1970, 286). As an exemplary literary critic, Crews singles out Norman Holland, whose Freudian *The Dynamics of Literary Response* he praises as “unmatched [in] clarity and rigor” (1970, vi).

Five years later, Crews reverses these judgments, a complete *volte-face*. He had been self-deceived, he avers, about three key issues: that Freud was a thinker of justifiably towering reputation; that psychoanalysis was a penetrating and largely true view of the mind; that psychoanalytical therapy was a legitimate enterprise. This change of heart could not have come from more careful and discriminating reading. Crews’s admirable “Bibliographical Guide” to his student collection, *Psychoanalysis and Literary Process*, shows that he had already mastered all relevant primary and secondary materials. By way of explanation for so radical a shift, he says that

It gradually sank in on me . . . that Freud had initiated every psychoanalytical malpractice, from chronically lying about his cures to accusing his critics of mental illness to plugging leaks in the theory with such improvisations as “the constitutional factor,” the repetition compulsion, the death instinct, and Larmarkian memory traces of a primal crime. When I could finally bring myself to ask what objective grounds he had produced to warrant acceptance of his system, all I could find was a cloudy tale about a heroic self-analysis; a series of artfully composed case histories about patients who, one could make out, had been browbeaten by the therapist without experiencing lasting relief from their symptoms; and many suave assurances about imminently forthcoming or previously supplied proofs that are nowhere to be found in the record. (1989, 279).

By 1989, the date of this essay's publication, Crews had already dismissed those he had formerly praised so highly. Of Erickson's *Life History and the Historical Moment*, he had already said that "whenever [he] brings himself to the verge of admitting that psychoanalysis has no adequate means of weeding out folklore, we can be sure to find a tepid non sequitur allowing the point to slip vaguely away" (1986, 9). Freud himself had already been characterized as "cowardly, evasive, and criminally negligent" (1986, 51), and psychoanalysis, his invention, as "a speculative cult." Psychoanalytic therapy, Crews, averred, was no more than "a combination of hand-holding, suggestion, sensible practical advice, and authoritative-sounding mystification" (1986, 80-81). Norman Holland had to wait until 2004 to be pilloried as chronically self-deceived concerning the legitimacy of analysis (2006, 62-70).

There are several problems with Crews's conversion. The first is the existence of *Sins*. In his retrospective Afterword to that book, published nearly two decades after the original, he insists that in *Sins* "there was nothing [of real value] that intrinsically demanded to be accounted for in Freudian terms" (1989, 276). It is clear, however, that, were it not for Freud's massive Standard Edition, there would have been no *Sins of the Fathers*, a book that is unimaginable absent Freud's essay on Dostoyevsky's life and novels. Moreover, there is a surprising turn for this now adamant anti-Freudian. Not only did Crews write *The Sins of Our Fathers*; he republished it after his conversion. Given his views of psychoanalytic criticism at that time, his decision is, simply, inexplicable.

Another problem with Crews's *volte-face* concerns the meaning that may be legitimately bestowed upon the conversion itself as a credible psychological event. Crews equates his rejection of psychoanalysis with the rejections of Communism by Arthur Koestler, Richard Wright, Ignazio Silone, and Stephen Spender, recounted in detail in *The God That Failed*. Each of these writers would certainly have agreed with Crews that

every one of Marx's major prophecies—the spread of the northern European model of production throughout the world, the progressive immiseration and radicalization of the proletariat, the decline of nationalism and religious zeal as potent historical factors, the inability of capitalism to swerve from a suicidal course, the aptitude for Communism for improving upon market mechanisms for efficient production and distribution of goods, and the gradual disappearance of the state in collectivist societies—has by now been confuted. (1986, 140)

Nonetheless, the leftward turn of these writers to whom Crews feels a kinship was not based on Marxist fantasies. Rather, "the intellectual attraction of Marxism was that it exploded liberal fallacies—which really were fallacies. It taught the bitter truth that progress is not automatic, that boom and slump are inherent in capitalism, that social injustice and racial discrimination are not

cured merely by the passage of time, and that power politics cannot be ‘abolished’, but only used for good or bad ends” (Crossman, 1963, 5). Stephen Spender puts it well: “no criticism of the Communists removes the arguments against capitalism. The effect of these years of painful experiences has only been to reveal to me that both sides are forces producing oppression, injustice, destruction of liberties, enormous evils” (1963, 265).

While Crews presents his conversion as purely intellectual—“it gradually sank into me”—for the writers in question the abandonment of Marxism was emotionally wrenching. Silone is particularly poignant: “I felt at that time like someone who has had a tremendous blow on the head and keeps on his feet, walking, talking and gesticulating, but without fully realizing what has happened. . . . the day I left the Communist Party was a very sad one for me, it was like a day of deep mourning, the mourning for my lost youth” (1963, 112-13).

A final problem with Crews’s *volte-face* concerns his contention that psychoanalysis is not a science because while “the analyst may overlook a given instance of unconscious projection on his part,” nevertheless, when “left alone with his good intentions and his belief in his own acuteness, he possesses nothing resembling the intersubjective checking whereby genuine sciences bring the individual theorizer to logical and empirical account” (1986, 8). Indeed, because analysts “fail to grasp what is required of an adequate scientific explanation, [they] inhabit a kind of scientific preschool in which no one divulges the grown-up secret that successful causal explanation must be *differential*, establishing the *superiority* of a given hypothesis to all of its extant rivals” (1994; his emphasis). Moreover, rival versions of psychoanalytical therapy cannot be tested for relative efficacy, even under controlled conditions when patients are matched in accord with socioeconomic circumstances and the nature of their complaints: “even then, there would be no way of ascertaining that the concepts and supposed laws themselves, and not some other feature of treatment, had been responsible for the differential results” (2006, 366).

But if psychoanalysis is not a science, if it is a hermeneutic enterprise, Crews has made a category mistake. His arguments have become irrelevant: he is self-deceived in thinking that he was self-deceived. Crews is aware of the challenge a hermeneutic interpretation poses. Of the lengthy attack on Habermas and Ricoeur that begins *The Foundations of Psychoanalysis*, he says: “Grünbaum’s logic . . . is impeccable; the muddle of the hermeneutic position must indeed be exposed if the case against Freudian ‘science’ is to carry its deserved weight” (1986, 82). We now turn to Grünbaum’s exposé of this muddle.

Habermas’s Freud

Grünbaum does not share Crews’s contempt of Freud: he praises his “brilliant theoretical imagination” (1984, 278). Of his clinical findings, he says that

“their potential heuristic merits may be quite substantial” (1984, 234). He praises “the brilliant content” of his arguments” (1984, 93). He allows “that genuinely probative methods of causal inquiry may turn out to vindicate, at least in some cases, Freud’s imputations of unconscious motivations for the commission of parapraxes [slips of the tongue]” (1984, 207). Crews’s summary distorts Grünbaum’s message: “[Grünbaum] scrupulously declines to assert that he has refuted [Freud]; instead, he allows for the infinitesimal chance that they may yet find some justification after ninety years of existence as gratuitous dogma” (1986, 82).

Despite his high praise, Grünbaum is unwavering in his conviction that psychoanalysis is unsuccessful by the only standards appropriate to it, those of a natural science. He has no use for Habermas’s claim that psychoanalysis is not a natural science at all, that it is instead a hermeneutic enterprise, concerned exclusively with the meaning of the exchanges between analyst and analysand. Central to Grünbaum’s counter-argument is the coincidence between psychoanalytic and natural science causation. To Grünbaum, Habermas errs when he relies on a fundamental difference between the two, and claims that successful analysis “dissolves” the causal connection between psychic pathogens and neuroses, an effect impossible in any natural science (1968, 271).

Grünbaum and Habermas agree that such an effect is indeed impossible in the natural sciences. Grünbaum’s example is the law in physics according to which the elongation of metals is directly proportional to the degree of applied heat. Were Habermas’s analysis of causation in psychoanalysis applied to thermal elongation, Grünbaum avers, we would reach the ridiculous conclusion that when the heat is removed, and the metal bar returns to its original length, the causal linkage between heat and elongation has been dissolved. What is nonsense in physics, Grünbaum asserts, is nonsense in psychoanalysis as well. In each case, it is the effect only that is eliminated. In neither case is the causal linkage dissolved; indeed, the elimination of the effect *depends* upon the permanence of a causal linkage.

Despite Grünbaum’s avowal, the cases are not parallel. Repressed memories, the causes of neurosis, do not have a quantitative dimension. Unlike thermal elongation, they cannot be represented by a formula that links cause to effect. Moreover, there is no invariable link: while repression can lead to neurosis, it need not. Furthermore, although repressed memories are embedded in the brain, a material object, they are not accessed by experimentation, but as communication in the analytic session, symbolic action interpreted exegetically. Hermeneutic is the sole epistemic access to any causal chain. Moreover, psychoanalysis claims, not to eliminate the cause, pathogenic memories, by means of exegesis; it claims only to neutralize their pathogenic force. It is this force that is causal and it is to its neutralization that Habermas refers when he says that in psychoanalysis causal links are dissolved. Dissolution is possible, rather than the mere elimination of the effect, because

the cause of neurosis is embedded “in the spontaneously generated invariance of life history,” one that is seamless with a unique past (1968, 271). That each metal bar is unique is, so far as the law of thermal elongation is concerned, entirely irrelevant.

Grünbaum also faults Habermas for asserting that the laws of natural science laws are context free while those of psychoanalysis are not. Although Grünbaum must agree that, typically, a natural science law is, like the law of thermal elongation, context free, there are, he tells us, cases in which in the natural sciences context crucially matters. Of an electrically charged particle “at any space point P, the electrical and magnetic fields at a given time t depend on the position, velocity, an acceleration that the charge had at an earlier time t_0 ” (1984, 17).

While this is clearly an exception to the context-free rule, the history of a particle is not comparable to the history of a person. Anticipating this objection to his equivalence, Grünbaum nevertheless brushes it aside. In doing so, he cavalierly dismisses the distinction between clock time and the experience of time, the experience with which psychoanalysis exclusively deals. No one can experience $t = 0$, the timeless present of the physics experiment; only a “specious present” can be apprehended, an interval of short, indeterminate duration. Moreover, the finite speeds of light and sound mean that this specious present is always in the past, in the case of immediate experience, the immediately preceding past. This “immediate” past we experience directly; our less than immediate past must be reconstructed. The task of analysis is the reconstruction of this less than immediate past. Interpreting this past is clearly a hermeneutic task, one in which time is not by any stretch of the imagination the clock time of physics.

Habermas also makes a novel epistemic claim with which Grünbaum strongly disagrees. In physical illness, the patient’s concurrence with a diagnosis is irrelevant to its truth, and treatment that flows from this diagnosis is irrelevant to its efficacy. But in neurosis, Habermas claims, the analysand *must* concur if analysis is to be effective. What is at stake, after all, is not the truth as in the natural sciences; it is, rather, the *analysand’s* truth. Of course, the efficacy of analysis comes not from intellectual concurrence, but only from the concurrence that is the consequence of overcoming a resistance to a buried past that has up to now exercised its malign powers. It is true, as Grünbaum says, that the concurrence of the analysand is irrelevant to some psychoanalytic truths, those that can be confirmed or disconfirmed outside the analytic context. It is true that “some of Freud’s etiological postulates are potentially disconfirmable by *epidemiological* findings, *without* recourse at all to data from the analytical treatment setting, let alone to the experiences had by patients when their repressions are being undone in that clinical milieu” (1984,38; his emphasis). An example is Freud’s conjecture that paranoia is the result of homosexual repression. If this conjecture is correct, an increase in societal toleration will lead to a decline in paranoia.

Although what Grünbaum says is true, it is irrelevant to the claim Habermas makes. It is Freud himself who makes the necessity of concurrence clear in his “tally” argument: the analysand’s “conflicts,” Freud asserts, “will only be successfully solved and his resistance overcome if the anticipatory ideas he is given tally with what is real in him. Whatever in the doctor’s conjecture is inaccurate drops out in the course of analysis.” (quoted in Grünbaum, 1984, 138). While Grünbaum calls this argument “magnificent” (1984, 141), he feels that it is fatally flawed because of the suggestibility that pervades and therefore undermines analysis as a path to psychic truth. Whether or not the tally argument is sound, however, it represents for Grünbaum Freud’s deepest insight into the analytic process. And it is an argument that fully concurs with Habermas’s view of the epistemic distinctness of psychoanalysis.

Ricoeur’s Freud

John B. Thompson remarks that between Paul Ricoeur’s earlier *Freud* and his last word on the subject (1981, 6-8), he shifts perspective. In the earlier work, he focuses on the structure of psychoanalysis, in the later, on its epistemology, systemizing Habermas’s insights and his own, an exercise that issues in a coherent interpretation. Grünbaum attacks both the earlier and the later Ricoeur. He finds the analysis in earlier Freud “fundamentally incoherent” (1962, 49), an indefensible position arising from a confusion between “(1) the way in which the effect of a cause manifests it and hence can serve epistemically as evidence for its operation, and (2) the manner in which a linguistic symbol represents its referent semantically or designates the latter’s attributes” (1984, 66; his emphasis).

Grünbaum looks to Robert Shope for corroboration for this serious intellectual mistake, the attribution of language to psychic forces. At first glance, the charge seems accurate. According to Ricoeur, the analyst articulates “what the desire would say could it speak without restraint” (1984, 67). Shope points out, correctly, that desires do not speak. Indeed, they do not. The phrase Shope quotes, however, is not meant to be interpreted literally:

The dream as a nocturnal spectacle is unknown to us; it is accessible only through the account of the waking hours. The analyst interprets this account, substituting for it another text which is, in his eyes, the thought-content of desire, i. e. what desire would say could it speak without restraint. (1962, 15)

Wary of such misinterpretation, in his final word on Freud’s epistemology, Ricoeur is careful to stick to the literal: “the interpretive decoding of symptoms and dreams goes beyond a simply philological hermeneutics, in so far as it is the very meaning of the mechanisms distorting the texts that requires explanation” (1981, 260). Importantly, the psyche is not linguistic *simpliciter*;

it must be represented both “as a text to be interpreted and as a system of forces to be manipulated” (1981, 258).

In his last word on psychoanalysis as a theory, Ricoeur posits four elements that, working together, constitute its truth. In analysis, a theory of the mind constrains a hermeneutic designed to recover repressed memories from the stream of analytic talk. The purpose is therapeutic, its aim a return to ordinary living and suffering. Should this therapy prove successful, the pathogenic force of repressed memories will dissolve, permitting the generation of a new life story in which psychic and social reality are more successfully reconciled. This is a process and a goal for which “there is no parallel in an observational science where we speak of ‘cases’ but not of ‘case histories’” (1981, 267). In view of this unique epistemology, psychoanalysis cannot be a natural science.

Grünbaum misrepresents this well-articulated position, a sloppiness uncharacteristic of his work in general. He mentions only two of Ricoeur’s four epistemic criteria. Moreover, although he acknowledges that the four are viewed as “probatively synergistic,” he fails to give us Ricoeur’s attempt at synthesis (1984, 69). While Grünbaum also acknowledges Ricoeur’s skeptical view of his own reconstruction, his considered opinion after years of study that “the proof apparatus of psychoanalysis . . . is . . . highly problematic” (1984, 69; Ricoeur, 1981, 273), this confession, he feels, is ingenuous: the sole reliance on the verbal stream during the analytic session can in no way give us an adequate causal account of neurosis. To reach this astonishing conclusion, Grünbaum must omit Ricoeur’s observation that his is an interpretation in which the psyche is also “a system of forces” (1981, 258).

Grünbaum sees another flaw: Ricoeur’s dismissal as “crude” Grünbaum’s claim that suggestion is an ever-present contaminant to the analytic process, one that could readily lead to “*spurious confirmations*” (Ricoeur 1981, 270; Grünbaum 1984, 68; his emphasis). But Ricoeur calls the objection “crude” simply because it is patently obvious that analysts, having emerged from the rigors of their training analysis, will be aware of the problem of spurious confirmation and will be alert in addressing it. Of course, they will not always succeed. Hartvig Dahl’s example in the next section exemplifies one instance of this failure.

It is true, as Grünbaum contends, that no way has been found to decide experimentally which psychoanalytic theory of neurotic origins is correct; that no way can be found to free analysis from the influence of the analyst as a source of suggestibility. It is true that no claim can be made that a cure would not have occurred without the benefit of therapy, or that some other mode of treatment might have been less lengthy, less expensive and more efficacious. But this is not a criticism of psychoanalysis; it is a description of its limitations. Grünbaum is self-deceived in inferring that, because psychoanalysis fails as a science, it is a failed science.

Psychoanalysis as a Hermeneutic Practice

Psychoanalysts argue over the whether one or another theory of human motivations is correct. Since no evidence that would satisfy a natural science can be brought forward that two major contenders, drive theory or object relations theory, is correct, these differences can never be settled. But, it may be objected, there is evidence that might pass muster, the evidence the analytic session provides. There is indeed. The problem is that both the proponents of the two major theories, drive theory and object relations theory, will construe the evidence as supportive of their view. Roy Shafer makes the essential point: “we may speak of different descriptions of the same action, even though we can work only with the different versions of that action and in principle can never get to *the* action itself” (1992, 46; his emphasis). Despite this necessary caveat, Janet Malcolm opines that the situation is less than dire: “In the writings of the liberals . . . one scarcely sees that they are doing anything different in their sessions from what orthodox analysts are doing in theirs” (1981, 140).

What makes this degree of concurrence possible? Like medicine, psychoanalysis is a practice. What is a practice? It is not an example of knowing what, but of knowing how. A practice is not like a habit, routinely reiterated; rather, it is a succession of actions oriented toward a consciously held goal, actions shaped and re-shaped by experience, continually superintended by intelligence. Mountaineering is a practice:

A mountaineer walking over ice-covered rocks in a high wind in the dark does not move his limbs by blind habit; he thinks what he is doing, he is ready for emergencies, he economizes in effort, he makes tests and experiments; in short he walks with some degree of skill and judgment. He is concomitantly walking and teaching himself to walk in conditions of this sort. It is of the essence of habitual practices that one performance is a replica of its predecessors. It is of the essence of intelligent practices that one performance is modified by its predecessors. The agent is still learning. (Ryle, 1949, 42)

Donald Schön argues that while well-formed problems are open to routinized solutions, those that are ill-formed attract the most alert of investigators: “they deliberately involve themselves in messy but crucially important problems and, when asked to describe their methods of inquiry, they speak of experience, trial and error, intuition, and muddling through” (1983, 430). Schön sees psychoanalysis as a practice that fits this description, in that it routinely grapples with the ill-formed problems of those whose psychic pains are so severe that they have sought professional treatment. His case study is a training analysis, the rigorous apprenticeship to which all psychoanalysts, regardless of persuasion, are subjected. Schön’s subjects are a senior practitioner and his student, Supervisor and Resident.

In Socratic fashion, the Supervisor challenges the Resident concerning his analysis: “You know, I don’t get a sense of what you feel from seeing her. How would you characterize her problems in your own mind,

psychodynamically. . . . We don't know a lot about her, but what does the material suggest?" (1983, 112). While several hypotheses are aired, the Resident is cautioned that nothing he conjectures must go beyond the evidence from session interactions. His is a hermeneutic enterprise, designed to detect systematic distortions in discourse and behavior. Speaking to the Resident, the Supervisor assumes that what the analysand "experiences in her relationships is experienced with you, and that here you have the advantage of looking at how she gets stuck and trying to work it out together" (1983, 123). In other words, transference is assumed as a pathway to a pathogenic past.

Scrutinizing the tapes of actual analytical sessions, researcher and psychoanalyst Hartvig Dahl and linguist Virginia Teller discovered something

familiar to all users of tape recorders, . . . the fact that people who sound all right when you are talking to them are actually speaking in a most peculiar fashion, as a verbatim transcript of their words will disclose. What the tape recorder has revealed about human speech is something like what photographer Eadward Muybridge's motion studies revealed about animal and human locomotion; no one had ever seen the strange positions that Muybridge's camera caught and froze, and no one had ever heard what the tape recorder pointed out about the weirdness and sloppiness of human speech. Dahl, and his colleagues, instead of simply "allowing for" the difference between the spoken word and the transcript, as everyone before them had done, went on to take a closer look at the syntactical peculiarities that the transcript threw into relief, and it dawned on them that these peculiarities were no accident but had a hidden purpose: they were a devious way of expressing unacceptable wishes and feelings. (Malcolm, 1981, 86).

Properly deciphered, this weirdness and sloppiness unearths memories of repressed childhood traumas whose force is malevolent, memories that become available through the transference, in which the analyst "becomes" the "parent," and the analysand, the "child." Of course, counter-transference is also possible, in which the analysis is troubled by means of the analyst's own unresolved pathogenic repressions. The fully capitalized section in this excerpt is an analyst's intervention; the rest is a commentary by Dahl:

"YOU KNOW, THIS IS THE WAY IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN PRESENTED, IN TERMS OF NEGATIVES, YOU KNOW, IT WAS NOT BAD, IT WAS NOT THIS, IT WAS NOT THAT." Consider the phrase ". . . it has always been presented. . . . This is an instance of the agentless passive—a passive-voice sentence with no underlying subject. . . . The analyst could have said, "You have always presented it in terms of negatives," but instead said, "it has always been presented"—a form which makes it impossible to determine who has done the presenting. The analyst has effectively eliminated the patient in a

manner which seems quite inappropriate to the dyadic situation. In short, we seem to uncover psychological murder by syntax. (Malcolm, 1981, 87)

Dahl's analysis is traditionally Freudian, the origin of the remark having its presumed source in Oedipal conflict. A psychoanalyst of the object relations school would find its source elsewhere, in early mother-child relationships. In both cases, we would be virtual witnesses to serious psychic damage originating in early childhood and uncovered by exegesis.

Finally, we can infer that psychoanalysis is a hermeneutic enterprise from a series of dissensions as deep and as bitter as any family quarrel, a phenomenon evident throughout its history. We begin with the bitter divorces between a "betrayed" Freud and two of his "sons," Jung and Adler. These quarrels extend to European psychoanalysis in general, and in particular to the virulent warfare between Anna Freud and Melanie Klein and their disciples. In America, not only are there battles between rival Psychoanalytic Institutes; there is infighting within the Institutes themselves (Mitchell and Black, 1995, p. 60; Fine, 1990, 603; Schwartz, 109, 114-15, 181, 185, 187, 208-11; Malcolm, 1981, 52, 59, 65, 140-44). These quarrels encompass every important issue: the fundamental attitudes analysts should take toward their analysands, the nature of the motive forces behind psychological troubles, and the scope of analysis, whether such outliers as children or psychotics are analyzable.

The nature of this dissension demonstrates that the analogy between psychoanalysis and religion cannot be cavalierly dismissed. In both, a double hermeneutic is at work: the interpretation of the *Standard Edition* and its application to the analytic session parallels the interpretation of the Bible and its application doctrine and pastoral care. Moreover, the schisms that characterize Judaism, Christianity, Islam also characterize psychoanalysis. "Aaron Green," the pseudonym for Janet Malcolm's chief psychoanalytic informant in *The Impossible Profession*, who refers sarcastically to the noted psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut as "the New Messiah," is derisive when describing the audience of one of Kohut's speeches:

people were literally dangling from balconies and wedged together in doorways and on staircases. So finally this slight, white-haired man, dressed in a nondescript gray suit, appeared and talked for forty minutes. He didn't say much, but he betrayed it all in one sentence: "What if man simply not an animal?" (Malcolm, 119-20).

Of course, Greene's description is biased; that is the point. Kohut has disciplines; Green is a disciple in another sect. Still, the analogy with religion is not an equivalence. It is the need to interpret analytic interchanges that makes it appropriate for psychoanalysis to have an epistemology akin to Biblical hermeneutics, not to physics, chemistry, or biology. As Aristotle reminds us,

and as Crews and Grünbaum ought to have remembered, “it is the mark of an educated person to look in each area for only that degree of accuracy that the nature of the subject permits” (2000, 5.)

Conclusion

In science, we can expect that consensus based on observational or experimental evidence will find its way eventually into undergraduate and graduate textbooks. But we cannot expect this movement in psychoanalysis where intellectual arguments are also social quarrels. Aaron Green put it well. In psychoanalysis “each generation has to make the original discoveries afresh! You can’t just say that Freud discovered something and now it will be taught and transmitted as accepted knowledge, the way the findings of physics and biology and chemistry are transmitted. *That doesn’t happen in psychoanalysis*” (Malcolm, 1981, 158; emphasis his).

Frederick Crews is self-deceived in believing that psychoanalysis is a pseudoscience; Adolf Grünbaum is self-deceived in arguing that it is a failed natural science. Because both have made a category mistake, because, as Habermas and Ricoeur contend, psychoanalysis is in essence a hermeneutic practice, Crews’s and Grünbaum’s claims lack probative force. Once the arguments of Crews and Grünbaum have been successfully demolished, no literary scholar need exhibit any trepidation whatever in using psychoanalysis as a framework for criticism.

References

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. and trans. Roger Crisp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Auden, W. H. “In Memory of Sigmund Freud.” https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Auden_Freud_elegy.pdf
- Crews, Frederick. *Follies of the Wise: Dissenting Essays*. Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker Hoard, 2006.
- Crews, Frederick, ed. *Psychoanalysis and Literary Process*. Cambridge, MA: Winthrop, 1970.
- Crews, Frederick (1966). *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne’s Psychological Themes*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.
- Crews, Frederick. *Skeptical Engagements*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Crews, Frederick. “The Unknown Freud: An Exchange.” *New York Review of Books*. <http://www.nybooks.com.ezp1.lib.umn.edu/articles/1994/02/03/the-unknown-freud-an-exchange/>. February 3, 1994.
- Crossman, Richard. *The God That Failed*. New York: Harper and Row, 1963.
- Fine, Reuben. *The History of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Continuum, 1990.
- Grünbaum, Adolf. *The Foundations of Psychoanalysis: A Philosophical Critique*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
- Habermas, Jürgen. (1968). *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. J. J. Shapiro. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.

- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Hawthorne's Short Stories*, ed. Newton Arvin. New York: Vintage Books, 1955.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. (1851). *The House of Seven Gables*. New York: Fine Editions Press, 1956.
- Larkin, Philip. "This be the verse." <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/48419>.
- Malcolm, Janet. *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1981.
- Mitchell, S. A. and M. J. Black. *Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 1995.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. D. Savage. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, trans. J. B. Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Robinson, Paul. *Freud and His Critics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Ryle, Gilbert. *The Concept of Mind*. London: Hutchinson, 1949.
- Sachs, David (1991). "In fairness to Freud: A critical notice of *The Foundations of Psychoanalysis* by Adolph Grünbaum." *The Cambridge Companion to Freud*. Ed. Jerome Neu. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 309-338.
- Schafer, Roy. *Retelling a Life: Narrative and Dialogue in Psychoanalysis*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.
- Schön, Donald. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
- Schwartz, Joseph. *Cassandra's Daughter: A History of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Viking, 1999.
- Stallman, Laura. "Survey of Criticism of "Rappaccini's Daughter" by Nathaniel Hawthorne." <http://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/eng372/rappcrit.htm>. 1995.
- Wollheim, Richard. *The Mind and Its Depths*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Yeats, W. B. (2017). "The Circus Animal's Desertion." <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/43299>.