

condition our lives, and that provide the context in which we have always lived and must continue to live.

The Enlightenment model of the self has been complicated by more recent developments, especially the Freudian idea of the unconscious, but also by feminism and contemporary ethnic politics. Yet in our dealing with the social institutions of representative democracy (courts, parliaments and bureaucracies), our sense of selfhood is constantly falling back on Enlightenment motifs—for example, the tension between the strict sense of the demarcation of one individual from another, and a heightened awareness of the influence society has on us. Indeed, as we will discuss in Chapter 4, Enlightenment ideas are seen by Michel Foucault as trapping us in a selfhood that we convince ourselves is our most precious possession and freedom—our truth, in fact—but that actually functions to imprison us in a set of practices and routines that are determined for, rather than by, us. It is Heidegger who is now seen as the key figurehead of this new orthodoxy, according to which the writings of the Enlightenment define the inherited burden of both abstruse theory and daily life, as well as the attempts we make to shrug off this burden—both what it has meant in our culture to be a subject, and the various ways we imagine rethinking subjectivity.

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2

Freud and the split subject

NO TWENTIETH-CENTURY discussion of what the subject is and where it comes from has been untouched by the theories and vocabulary of Freudian psychoanalysis. Similarly, the whole field of twentieth-century culture—from the shocking disconnections of surrealism to the DIY self-healing manifestoes of pop psychology—exhibits the fundamental insights of Sigmund Freud (1865–1939) and his followers.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Freud burst on to the intellectual scene unanticipated. Nineteenth-century culture bears witness to a gradually intensifying anxiety about the structure of the self and the security of its lodgment in the world. Writers as diverse as Mary Shelley, Robert Louis Stevenson, Hoffmann and Dostoyevsky all in their own way produced images of an interior life that was potentially fractured, of a self prey to irrational impulses that threatened its usual role in the social order, and of a sexuality whose meaning was more psychological than procreative. In short, the nineteenth century, from its suicidal young poets to its booming brothels and wild hysterics, came increasingly to dramatise the self's radical distrust of itself, its fear of isolation, dark desire, hidden madness and easy breakdown—a version of subjectivity that has become ever more commonplace as the modern age has progressed.

Let us quickly review a couple of literary examples—firstly, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and its much imitated story of artificial life born from a combination of artistic and scientific egotism and the flirtation with the occult. One way of interpreting the relationship between Doctor Victor Frankenstein and the monster he creates is as an analogy of the modern self. The scientist,

with his fierce vanity and his over-absorption in the quest for experimental power, is an almost pathological case of excessive involvement in the conscious mind's rational processes. The monster, with his primal innocence, vulnerability to corruption and intense, even malicious physical violence, embodies the dangerous and dark domain of the unconscious. Together, it is as if they form an image of a single mind, liberating its own unconscious energies only to find them uncontrollable and threatening. The only possible destiny for the relationship between scientist and monster—conscious and unconscious—is a shared annihilation. In Robert Louis Stevenson's *Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, a rational scientist experiments on himself until he is completely transformed into his own malicious and amoral double.

What we see in both these examples is not a conscious mind controlling its irrational impulses, but one that is fascinated and eventually consumed by them. In contrast to the eighteenth-century rationalists like Kant, who saw the conscious mind as the defining attribute of the human relationship with the world, nineteenth-century fiction often represents the rational as drawn towards the dark and uncertain impulses it was thought to rule. Now the rational and irrational have become inextricably bound up with one another, and the threat of the former being consumed by the latter is met with a mix of horror and longing. In sum, then, the appearance of Freud's writings at the very end of the nineteenth century and in the first few decades of the twentieth merely systematises a version of the self that had been accumulating for some time. The idea of the split subject was an idea whose time had come.

Freud's achievement was to intuit the understanding of selfhood that was coming to trouble his culture, and to give it a theoretical—even, as he claimed, a scientific—form. Freud stands, therefore, as a significant turning-point in an intellectual culture still committed to Descartes' identification of the self with the rational processes of the conscious mind. Jacques Lacan (see Chapter 3) has argued that the resistance, even mockery, still directed against Freud is not because of his infamous obsession with sex, but because his insistence on the inevitable force of the irrational in human life threatened the idea of a conscious mind always everywhere able to deal with itself. What, then, is Freud's view of the subject? Freud's work spans some thirty volumes and touches on an astonishingly wide range of topics, from the psychology of sex and gender to social anthropology, religion and aesthetics.

Similarly, in a long career, his ideas evolved and modified, producing a range of models and theories that are not easily assimilable with one another. For the purposes of this chapter, I will discuss two crucial versions of Freud's model of subjectivity, because they give the most important insight into its general meaning and because they have been the most centrally discussed in recent controversies in cultural theory. Firstly, what is the unconscious; and secondly, where does it come from?

THE UNCONSCIOUS

We are all familiar from our day-to-day experience with the way that ideas and images constantly pass in and out of our awareness. Usually, if we reflect on this, we assume that our preoccupation with the demands of the present means that our minds simply lack the capacity to be aware of the huge range of impulses, representations, emotions and inspirations that appear in it more or less constantly. On the other hand, we are equally familiar with the sudden irruption into our awareness of things far removed from what we were thinking about or busy with. At times, these flashes are pleasurable, at others menacing, but they are so much a part of our usual practice that, like our equally bizarre dreaming, we rarely bother with them, unless they become dominating, recurrent or uncontrollable.

The existence of ideas on the border of consciousness is hardly a radical idea. Freud, however, puzzled over the variety and the enigmatic nature of these experiences. Some seemed merely the recycling of conscious material from ordinary experience. You could not stop thinking about what you had said the previous day, how anxious you were at a meeting, how much you were looking forward to tonight's party and so on. But much of this material bore no apparent relation to real life. It was bizarre and unfamiliar, even threatening and confusing. The simple commonsense theory that there were ideas on the fringes of our minds that returned there, because of some ordinary, easy process of mental circulation, seemed inadequate to deal with the heart-stopping intervention into normal thought processes of what one could not—perhaps even did not want to—understand. Another mental domain must exist, with its own unfamiliar logic, that was releasing messages, or at least images, into the conscious mind.

These insights of Freud's found their most complete expression in his reflections on the nature of dreams. In fact, Freud's most important early work, and still one of his most read and readable, is *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1904). Freud saw in dreams the existence not only of a part of the mind in the shadow of conscious awareness, but one that was radically different, even opposed to consciousness. So unfamiliar was this domain that it could not enter into consciousness on its own terms, but chose as its costume images and symbols which, on first acquaintance, seemed merely insane, but from which analysis could disentangle some personal significance, if it knew enough about the individual. It was the exotic and chaotic nature of dream material that had allowed it to be traditionally interpreted as either prophecy, fantasy or the more or less accidental and trivial reprocessing of mental material. The first two of these explanations seemed too unscientific to Freud, and the last provided no explanation for the intensity—even terror—dreams could provoke. In short, there were not only vague and leftover thoughts on the periphery of the human mind, there were also strong—even menacing—thoughts that consciousness did not merely ignore, but that it struggled with, tried to push away and suppress.

Dreams, however, were not the only place that such unconscious investments reappeared. Slips of the tongue—still referred to in common speech as Freudian slips, especially when they have some sexual ambiguity—and jokes are common daily occasions when surprising or incongruous material surfaces unexpectedly and without easy explanation in the conscious mind. Most urgently, unconscious material reappears in the symptoms of neurosis, a term with a harder clinical meaning in Freud's time. Neurotic symptoms can be as simple as a peculiar nervous way of scratching your nose, or pushing back your hair. They can be as terrifying as a panic attack, obsessive tidying and washing—even to the point of personal injury—or the appearance of the symptoms of all sorts of diseases and conditions. Such behaviour, if a manifestation of the unconscious, is beyond the control of the individual, who does not fake symptoms, but experiences them as intensely as any other sufferer, only without the same pathology.

All of these events were evidence of an unremitting tension in normal life that was most manifest in the behaviour of clinical patients who presented themselves for therapy. But these experiences and behaviours were not restricted to those whose lives they had made nearly impossible. Dreams are experienced by the least-troubled individuals on an almost daily basis, showing Freud that

the complex structures that neurotic symptoms revealed in an extreme form were merely the universal qualities of human mental life. Neurotic patients were not marginal or idiosyncratic; they were the key to the truth of human subjectivity. Their symptoms were the action of the unconscious in a louder, clearer language, but not one at all foreign to the vagaries of the less urgent experience of those who did not turn up asking for help.

OVERDETERMINATION

One of the most common objections to Freud's work on the unconscious is that it takes the accidental and trivial and turns it into the significant, dramatic, even tragic. This objection brings us to one of the most important ideas in Freudian psychoanalysis, and especially in its use as a theoretical model for the analysis of culture. Analysis of a television program or an ad seems to many people to be an incredible act of forced reading, and must always involve the importing into a small container of a lot of material that is not really there. University seminars are often interrupted by a half-complaining, half-pleading cry: 'But aren't we reading too much into it?' Freudian theory meets this objection head on, by arguing that all psychological (and, by corollary, cultural) material is *over-determined*. This means that even the most trivial behaviours—biting your nails, disgust at the skin on the surface of warm milk, anger and impatience in traffic—are the focus and expression of the most plural and deep psychological complexity. Indeed, so rich is our unconscious life, and so closely do we live with it—so ordinary is it, in fact—that even allowing for its highly charged, even murderous, material, it rarely produces crises. Its only presence in the conscious mind—and its impulse is always to push into the conscious mind—can be in the trivial impulses and surprising disjunctions that we live with every day. It is no surprise, therefore, that the unconscious we do not want to be aware of should appear in trivial things, though the truth may well be the inverse. Perhaps our need to trivialise the obscure material at the root of our minds makes us want to see the surfacing of the unconscious in everyday life as accidental and unimportant, rather than the product of our deepest experiences and investments.

It is clear that we have come a long way from the simple forgetfulness of day-to-day life. When we talk about over-determination, we are seeing the most intense psychological

energies invested in the smallest behavioural space. What Freud presents, therefore, is a subjectivity not of simple presences and absences, but of potentially violent energies and conflicts, where negative feelings do not merely lapse from the conscious mind, but where they are kept in place by a force against which they constantly struggle. In their endeavour to enter the conscious mind and gain expression and fulfilment, unconscious ideas meet the barrier of *repression*. A huge amount of psychological energy is expended on keeping unconscious investments in their place. In fact, so important is this energy in maintaining a semblance of subjective stability that it signals to the therapist the location of the most unstable unconscious material. Resistance, whether it is to an experience in day-to-day life or to a suggestion of the analyst, is a sign of the proximity of something the subject is unable to face.

In sum, if you look at the Freudian version of the subject topographically, we have an interior life split between the socially and culturally integrated processes of the conscious mind, and the threatening or unconfessable impulses of the unconscious, which the conscious hopes to keep in its place by a quantum of mental force called repression. The nature of repressed material is to defy repression and to seek to express itself, either in dreams or in neurotic symptoms, slips of the tongue and so on. Usually, the mind is able to accommodate this. Dreams, in fact, usually function as what Freud called 'wish-fulfilment', allowing repressed material an adequate enough expression so that it need not interrupt the subject's daily practices. In nightmares, the repressed material has proven too strong for the subject. Wish-fulfilment breaks down, and you wake, unable to face the proximity of unconscious material to the conscious life you are struggling to protect. Neurotic symptoms function in the same way—although they are a near-inevitable part of subjective experience, at times the machinery of repression is not strong enough, and clinical help is required. Yet, in the same way that dreams are so similar to nightmares, neurotic patients are never far away from the 'normal'. Indeed, only the success or not of repression and the ease of management of unruly unconscious material in day-to-day life distinguishes psychological illness from health.

THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

Although much Freudian theorising is dedicated to evolving models of the topography of the subject, an equal amount of work goes into explaining how the subject ends up with this particular configuration of identities and energies. The explanation for the derivation of subjectivity—what is generally known as the Oedipus complex—is not only one of the most famous aspects of Freudian theory; it is significant for two other main reasons. Firstly, it argues that the subject is *produced* in conjunction with the specific set of familial and social relations dominant in culture. This idea that subjectivity is neither innate nor inevitable challenges the model of personal or spiritual life as a privileged essence, subsisting well in advance of the historical conditions in which it appears.

Secondly, the Oedipus model understands that the key contributing factors to the production of subjectivity are the gender relations and sexual identifications of the child's environment. Subjects are not born into an undefined world that they then order according to their own priorities. The world we enter is already structured according to cultural traditions and a civil politics laden with significances and imperatives with which we must deal. For example, although the child only has its gender stabilised after the Oedipus complex, it arrives in a world where certain biological attributes are read as naturally and necessarily connected with the particular set of behaviours, feelings and appearances we call gender. Although his theories have been used to argue for the relativity of gender, Freud himself remained loyal to the gender politics of his own society. Thus his theory of subjectivity is firstly a theory of masculinity and a treatment of the development of the boy child. For that reason, my discussion of the Oedipus complex uses the masculine pronoun.

The basic form of the Oedipal drama is well known. Freud's usage is derived from Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, in which a young man, despite attempts to resist the incontrovertible prophecy that has foretold what he will do, unwittingly murders his father and marries his mother. Oedipal theory emphasises the uninterrupted immediacy with which the boy experiences his mother in the earliest stages of his development. In fact, it is as if the separation from the mother's body in birth does not take on a psychological meaning until much later. The boy feels an almost idyllic unity with the mother's body and reality. This idyll cannot last, however, and is interrupted by the recognition of the

masculine principle in the boy's awakened interest in his own genitals. He connects ownership of the penis with the presence of his father, both as an increasingly important influence on his own identity, and also as a complicating factor in his relationship with his mother. The lasting significance of the Oedipal relationship emerges, therefore, as the intimacy with the mother begins to break down.

According to Freud, the boy becomes interested in his penis, and starts to see it as a significant force in his emotional life. Why this happens is not clear. Freud chooses merely to rely on what he reports to be empirical observation. Nevertheless, the penis becomes a preoccupation. Yet this interest attracts negative attention, usually from women, who are the most common carers of young children. The boy is threatened with a range of punishments for his interest in his penis, sometimes with the invocation of the father as the ultimate sanction. These threats are always interpreted by the boy as the danger of castration. His fear that his penis may be taken from him is reinforced by the fact that, 'sooner or later' (Freud 1977, p.318), he sees the genitals of a girl or woman. According to Freud, his response is to see the girl as already castrated. The female body is a site of lack, therefore—a lack that the boy interprets as an ever-present danger for himself. The castration he has been threatened with has, it seems, already been carried out on others.

In sum, then, the boy recognises that there is a difference between genders, and the mark of that difference is the presence or absence of the penis. Ownership of the penis is not permanent. The boy, therefore, is faced with two alternatives: he can either identify with the father who owns the penis and seems to be the policeman of the very principle of penis ownership, and imagine having sex with the mother, as the father does; or he can identify with the mother who has lost the penis, and imagine being the object of the father's sexuality. Freud calls these alternatives the active-masculine and passive-feminine. The problem is that, although one seems to lead to the heterosexual normality Freud was so desperate to promote, both these options remain under the persistent threat of castration. If he chooses the active path, he will be punished for excessive interest in the penis. Similarly, he can only choose the passive path if he has lost the penis already. Neither alternative offers an escape from castration. The boy is presented with a no-win situation. Instead of confronting this dilemma, a whole new zone of the mind is created in which the problem can be installed. The Oedipal material is repressed into the unconscious.

Thus what is considered heterosexual normality is not a fixed and predictable path dictated by nature. It is the result of a complex series of developments within the subject himself, which remain problematic and unresolved. Even the most apparently stable and normal male subject has only a fragile hold on masculine identity. The threat of castration is ever-present, and must be dealt with again and again in adult life. In other words, the Oedipal drama, the resulting fragility of gender roles and anxiety about castration have not been resolved for the male subject, but merely hidden away in a domain that may allow them to be temporarily controlled, but is not strong enough to resist their constant drive towards re-enactment. The man repeatedly projects aspects or fractions of this drama on to his adult world, by seeking parent substitutes or conquering the threat of castration over and over again in the triumphs and competitions that are seen as the most essentially masculine behaviour. Sometimes these identifications and projections are played out within the individual subject himself. For example, when Freud later complicated his model of the subject by splitting the conscious into ego (the part of the subject that organises the self in its day-to-day, hopefully stable relationships in the world) and superego (the higher faculty of moral reflection and judgment), he saw in the latter the danger of the subject internalising the strictest forms of parental authority, and inhibiting the ego by excessive self-critique, guilt and inhibition.

FREUD AND FEMININE SUBJECTIVITY

As I have mentioned several times, the model of subjective development outlined above is specifically for boys. What about feminine subjectivity? Here we encounter one of the most notorious aspects of Freudian theory, and the one at the heart of postmodern revisions of psychoanalysis (see Chapters 5, 7 and 8). According to Freud, the girl also experiences a version of the Oedipal complex. However, her comparison of her own genitals with those of boys makes her feel as if she is already castrated. The fear of future castration does not operate for her, but she does seek a substitute for the lost penis. She progresses 'along the line of a symbolic equation, one might say' (Freud 1977, p.321), replacing the missing penis with a baby, that she imagines she receives from the father. It is this process of substitution that is repressed in the feminine unconscious.

Freud was the first to admit that feminine subjectivity was a mystery to him, though it does seem to have been impossible for him to think of it other than as a variant of the model he had already established for the masculine. This emphasis on the masculine as the standard produces some quite bizarre results. For example, in his 1919 paper on masochism, 'A Child is Being Beaten' (1979), Freud considered himself limited in having a preponderance of female case studies from which to theorise. His impulse was to develop a theory of the male masochist from this material, and then develop his model of female masochism from the male. The idea of developing a female model first does not seem to have been possible for him. In general, the emphasis on the genitals means that, despite the fact that subjectivity is seen as constructed and not innate, the biological differences between the male and female bodies are paramount. In practice, this difference comes down to the ownership or not of the penis. As Freud says, misquoting Napoleon, for psychoanalysis, 'Anatomy is Destiny' (Freud 1977, p.320). Freud recognised that the subject was constructed according to family relations, yet—perhaps because of his ambition to create what could pass for general scientific truth—he universalised the specific social practices not only of his own time, but also of his own city and class, until they stood in his mind as a model of the practices of human families at all times and everywhere. Recognising that gender and sexual identities had been and would be vastly different from those that he knew would have called for a more pluralistic understanding of how subjects develop—a breadth Freud, striving for a universal and trans-historical theory, was reluctant to consider. Ironically, however, as we shall see in later chapters, the very historically specific nature of the parameters Freud chose have allowed more recent feminist theorists, such as Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Grosz and others, to identify his model not with a universally valid truth, but with the structure of the gender values and politics of the West in its modern history. This has opened up a whole tradition of productive debunking that has found means both for critically analysing the politics of our subjectivity, and for defining the huge varieties of possible subjectivities lived in its gaps and shadows.

Given the nature of the material that has been buried in the unconscious, it is no surprise that the pressure exerted on the conscious mind by repressed material carries with it an element of danger, ambiguity and obscurity. The very issues that define and anchor subjectivity in Freudian terms—gender, sexuality, the body,

family relationships—have all proven to be ambiguous, unstable and threatening. At the heart of the boy's subjectivity is the feeling that the masculinity he has inherited from his father, and whose emblem is the male genitals, can easily be taken away from him. He feels as good as castrated, and is locked in a life of desperate compensation and reassurance, seeking everywhere the certainty and stability of gender on which he can ground some sense of capable selfhood. We will see in later chapters how other theorists have seen this anxiety about the fragile presence and easy absence of the phallic defining principle of masculinity as the key to understanding such diverse things as human language (in Lacan, in Chapter 3), or cinema (see the discussion of Laura Mulvey in Chapter 7). Freud's own work saw the Oedipal drama not only as the key to the neurotic symptoms of individual patients, but as explanations for religion, art and the structure of societies from the tribal to the industrial.

FREUD, ART AND TEXTUALITY

What is the implication of Freudian theory for the study of texts? One of the most straightforward adaptations of Freudian theory in aesthetics sees the artwork as analogous to the dream. In the same way as the dream attempts to placate unconscious material by giving it some temporary outlet, and conjuring for it some image of its possible satisfaction, the artwork reprocesses in a disguised form the most troubling Oedipal obsessions of the artist, and indeed of readers, viewers and audiences. This version of psychoanalytic aesthetics is the most simple and primitive. Since Lacan identified the Oedipal drama with the acquisition of language, psychoanalytic textual analysis has become infinitely more supple.

In the high modernist period between the First and Second World Wars, however, there was no shortage of artists interested in using art as a way of exploring their own unconscious. In this way, the idea of the repression of unconscious material took on a significant historical, even political, meaning. In surrealism, the evocation of nightmare as a kind of hidden truth was intended as a direct challenge to the daylight knowledges on which an overly rational and technocratic, decadent and doomed modern world was seen to depend. In a very different way, but to a similar end, a novelist like D.H. Lawrence (1885–1930) read the unconscious as a kind of primeval and authentic animality that needed to be

liberated in all its sexual glory and charisma. Other artists experimented with automatic writing—the rapid spontaneous production of whatever words occurred to the writer. This was understood as providing direct expression of unconscious material. In films like *Un chien andalou* (1928), Luis Buñuel (1900–83) attempted to enact the sort of identifications and transitions that the unconscious used in producing dream material. All these experiments are approximations of Freudian theory, inspired more by its endless metaphoric potential than by its precise doctrines. In a sense, artworks—if they did what dreams did, as Freud himself believed—did not need to be aware of Freudian theory in order to illustrate psychoanalytic truths. But it is important for us to see the widening ripples of Freudian influence if we want to understand twentieth-century culture, even if some of the practices involved are only vaguely connected to the Freudian project, or the finer points of its theory.

There is much we have not said about the work that Freud himself has done. His work on the stages of sexual development (oral, anal and genital) in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, the death drive in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', and the rich range of subjective feelings that are conventionally divided up into religion, art and culture in works as diverse as 'The Uncanny', *Moses and Monotheism*, *Totem and Taboo* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*, are all of significant interest, and are often used as touchstones in analyses of culture and art. All that has been possible above is to sketch out the most general of Freud's theories about the structure of the subject and where it comes from. For the purposes of this book, however, it should be clear that Freud is the most important and influential exponent of what I have called 'subjective' theory. To Freud, the subject has a knowable content, and an analysable structure. In other words, the subject is full to the brim of identifications, emotions and values, separating it from the subjects around it, even though the processes from which this subjectivity is derived are seen to be as good as universal experiences. In Chapter 4, we will begin to look at quite a different understanding of subjectivity in the work of Nietzsche and Foucault, whose theories of the self I have labelled 'anti-subjective'. Here, subjectivity is not fixed and individual, but is a ruse of power. According to these theories, the whole idea of a fixed and knowable, autonomous subjectivity is an hallucination contrived by power in order to isolate and control us in the cage of individuality. In this contrast between a model of subjectivity of which the self-sustaining individual is the goal, and one that views it as

the ultimate prison we can see the outline of the struggle over selfhood that is the hidden yet desperate tension that defines modern and postmodern experience. Firstly, however, I want to turn to Jacques Lacan, whose work is the bridge between Freudian and postmodern psychoanalysis.

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