

Freud As A Writer. Patrick Mahony. New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1982, 227 pages, \$18.50 hard.

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Nearly forty years ago, the American novelist Allan Seager suggested that Freudian psychology affected the attitudes of twentieth century writers almost as much as all other influences combined: "I agree with Freud himself," Seager declared, "in believing that, in time, he will come to be regarded as the great literary figure of Our Time because he composed, on the foundation of an hypothesis completely unprovable physiologically, a body of stories about ourselves that we utterly believed." Certainly Freud's influence upon literature has been colossal. The novel, once virtually by definition committed to the exploration of an entire society, has generally narrowed to a careful study of the protagonist's psychology. Psychological criticism has become one of the basic approaches to literature. Indeed, not only has Freud influenced the creation and criticism of literature, he has himself become a character in fiction: e.g., *The White Hotel* and *The Seven Percent Solution*. The incestuous nature of the relationship between literature and psychology has been frequently noted, and on occasion it has been claimed that literature spawned Freudian psychology: certainly without Freud's strong schooling in the classics, without his love for Dostoevsky, without his studied insight into the tale well told, the history of modern psychology would have been radically different. Is it not strange, then, that literary Freud has not been a more frequent subject of intense study? Perhaps Patrick Mahony's *Freud As A Writer* will be the forerunner of such investigations.

Mahony's book suffers under a number of handicaps, as pioneering studies must. Among the obstacles, of course, is the fact that Freud wrote in German. Mahony writes in English for readers of English, but he does point out some of the problems encountered in translations, as well as some of the literary qualities apparent in the original German but difficult or impossible for translators to convey in English. During the course of a long discussion of Freud's use of the notion of the "uncanny," for example, Mahony examines Freud's attitude toward the female genitalia. According to Freud there is, for men, something uncanny about the female genitals; uncanny in the original is *unheimlich*—allowing Freud to play with the notion of the genitals as "the entrance to the former *Heim* (home) of all human beings." So, "the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, familiar; the prefix 'un' is the token of repression." Without reference to the original German, the reader would miss Freud's punning, and he would miss as well the seriousness that so often underlies the Freudian pun (oddly, James Joyce—so often linked with Freud—has the same love of the pun and the same belief in its potential seriousness). Mahony frequently points to such passages to illustrate how thoroughly Freud's very style was an integral part of the *process* of his developing theories.

Often the process of composition was essential to theoretical formulation—and in

his lectures, Freud's rhetorical strategies tended to make the audience feel a part of the formulation; to participate in discovery, as it were. Mahony's study is given firm foundation by his critical stance: "Literary style is not to be rigidly contradistinguished from content, but is rather the first and last elaboration of meaning." The spectacularly rapid spread and acceptance of Freud's ideas was facilitated by his techniques as a writer: his style was the perfect vehicle for his ideas, just as his ideas were the perfect tenor for the vehicle. Freud achieved a unity of style and content that only the greatest thinkers and writers of the ages manage.

Mahony begins by presenting an overview of Freud the writer in his first chapter. He includes the special significance the act of writing had for Freud, pointing out, for example, that Freud "felt his correspondence impeded" when he once agreed "to a request to write in Latin rather than Gothic script." Mahony mentions the erratic rhythm of Freud's writing: months of nothing, a few days of sparse output, the periods of furious composition. Indeed, the first chapter is replete with wide-ranging but pertinent and enlightening matter: Freud's revelation to Stekel that he wished to become a novelist; the manner in which Freud's writing "*produces* knowledge rather than merely describing it"; a sweeping review of the scholarship devoted to Freud as writer—with close attention to the basic conflict that arises among those who have evaluated Freud the writer, the antithesis between science and aesthetics. Was Freud primarily a scientist who mastered the aesthetics of prose, or was he above all a superb writer for whom science was merely a convenient vehicle? The book makes clear that Mahony believes the ongoing quarrel "in Anglo-American circles, whether psychoanalysis is an art or a science" misses the point, because the division is imposed by his critics, but never by Freud.

In chapter two, Mahony applies literary analysis to two texts from the Freudian canon; he examines *Totem and Taboo* (Part 4) because Freud felt it was his best-written work and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* because it is *Totem's* "polar opposite." These analyses are generally first rate. Mahony is especially adept at explaining Freud's strategies; e.g., merging with the reader, setting the stage in the reader's presence, artfully employing anticipation, calling attention to his own discourse and procedure ("metadiscourse"), "blending the logical and pathetic appeals," purposefully generating a "bilateral" prose, and above all working out an appropriate form, in which "the order constitutes a message." Chapter two is essentially a broad analysis, an examination of the large-scale structural supports of the sample texts.

In chapter three Mahony moves in for a closer examination of Freud's rhetorical strategies—concentrating upon the rhetorical devices employed by Freud to secure a bond with his audience. Mahony declares that "Freud . . . mobilized unconscious processes, filtering them through ego functions bent chiefly on elucidatory rather than obscurantist communication." Whether the reader accepts this declaration or not is probably incidental, because Mahony does demonstrate that Freud, even when the content of his work is obscure, ever worked toward a "simplicity and lucidity" that enabled the reader to absorb his conclusions. Freud's desire to involve the audience is indicated in his insistence that papers presented to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society "be delivered from memory or notes" since reading papers tended to destroy "intimacy with the audience." Scholars who have yawned through conventions composed primarily of paper readers rather than paper deliverers will surely agree.

In what may be the most interesting and incisive chapter of the book, "Proportions of Certainty," Mahony explores the appropriateness of Freud's spurning of exact definitions. He points out that Freud's "ease of expression and his masterfully articulated syntax make his writing appear, at first blush, clear and less ambiguous than it is." In fact, Freud carefully avoided any appearance of apodictic declarations, and he pointed out that "Science has only a few apodictic propositions in its catechism; the

rest are assertions promoted by it to some particular degree of probability." Thus Freud constantly leads his reader (or listener) through various shifts in degree of certainty because "certainty" and "exact definitions" are inappropriate "for describing the vitality of mental events." Examining and evaluating Freud's constant use of qualifiers to arrive at shifting levels of certainty, Mahony is at his best.

Chapter five, "Resources of Figurative Language," is to a degree an amplification of Lionel Trilling's declaration that psychoanalysis is "a science of tropes." As he does so often throughout the book, Mahony uses Freud's own judgments as a yardstick. For example, he quotes Freud on analogy and then proceeds to examine Freud's use of analogy. One of Mahony's most interesting inspections is of Freud's strategy of building a careful extended analogy and then negating it; in this way Freud managed to illustrate a general area of meaning by explaining the various things something is not. Mahony has pursued an extremely difficult path, for as he points out "no metaphor in any scientific context is completely neutral. A vehicle has a rhetorical life of its own; slippage or spillage occurs, enhancing or devaluating the tenor. In fact, the problem is even more complicated and pervasive: scratch practically any word, and you'll find a metaphor." While this idea underlies the entire chapter, this expression occurs only in the notes; it unquestionably belongs in the text. And here is one of the weaknesses of this book. Too much is relegated to the notes, and the notes are far too extensive. A twenty-five page chapter with seventy-three notes signals a serious misjudgment. Surely in a book this important, the writer should integrate such substantive materials into the text. Do the notes suggest that the text itself is insufficient, that Mahony has not done his job? At the very least, it is annoying to refer to the notes every few sentences. Worse, it is an inescapable distraction for the careful reader, because many of the notes are, in fact, pertinent to the discussion. Others, however, are merely reference notes. A book such as this one is a strong argument for the complete elimination of content notes; strong testimony that notes should be for reference purposes only.

Indeed, the notes make it impossible to read Mahony as Mahony argues in chapter six that one should read Freud: by "participating in the text as process." For Mahony declares that Freud is a master of the Baroque *pensée pensante* style (as opposed to the Ciceronian *pensée pensée*). That is, Freud tried "to portray not a thought, but a mind thinking." Ultimately, Freud's style is "psychoanalytic," a style proper to the discipline he founded. This notion is taken to its limits in chapter seven, which may be the book's weakest. That is not to say it is a weak chapter, but merely to point out that the book tails off somewhat from its early craftsmanship—partially because Mahony's argument is blessedly implicit throughout the book, thus making the repeated concluding assertions anticlimatic. Readers who agree with Freud's veneration of the pun, however, will certainly enjoy Mahony's punning final paragraph—ending the text with an apt final word: "corpus."

Generally, then, this is a book that deserves to be read by Freudians and those interested in Freud. Any who wonder whether psychoanalysis is an art or a science should read it, and those who are certain that it is one or the other should be required to read it. The book is not without its faults. Mahony now and again wanders from Freud study to Freudolatry, and his own style quite frequently lapses from the simplicity and lucidity he so admires in the master. And those cursed notes are apt to irritate any reader caught up in one of Mahony's flowing arguments only to be abruptly stopped to seek amplification at chapter's end. But it is a good beginning; it points the way for similar studies that surely must follow.